

Exploring vagueness: Preposition alternation in Spanish<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at showing the relevance of cognitive semantics in the study of linguistic units whose conceptual import tends to be underresearched within formalist frameworks. Specifically, I focus on the alternation between the prepositions *con* 'with' and *de* 'of' in the change-of-state variant of the locative alternation (e.g., *cargar el camión con/de heno*, lit. load the truck with/of hay). I show that although the *con*- and the *de*-constructions share many semantic properties and they can refer to the same conceptual content, experimental-based cognitive semantics offers powerful tools to elucidate subtle shades of meaning that might remain opaque in formal semantic theories.

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## 1. Introduction

Meaning is one of the most mysterious features of human language and it has been embraced by a number of linguistic theories over the decades. Roughly speaking, two main streams have evolved within this research discipline, namely referential/formalist and cognitive/mentalistic theories of meaning. This paper focuses on the importance of cognitive semantics for exploring subtle shades of meaning that tend to remain opaque within formal semantic.

Referential theories assume that meaning is reference to objects/relations in the world (Frege, 1982; Montague, 1970; cf. Partee, 1996). For example, the reference of the common noun *house* is the set of all houses that exist in the world. On the other hand, the meaning of whole sentences is their truth value; in other words, understanding what a (declarative) sentence means implies knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions (or what the world would have to be like) for the sentence to be true (see also Davidson, 1967; Tarski, 1944). Moreover, formal semantics seeks to apprehend meaning by constructing mathematical models of these conditions, which are largely based on formal logic (e.g., lambda calculus).

By contrast, cognitive semantics does not deal with mathematical abstractions, but it takes as its central concern the psychological reality of the meaning, that is, the relationship between meaning and mind (Jackendoff, 1983; Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Talmy, 1988). Focus is placed in these theories on (i) how the world around us is conceptualized by means of words and grammatical constructions, and (ii) how meaning is related to other cognitive capacities such as e.g., visual perception.

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For example, formally-oriented studies have usually regarded case markers as grammatical elements without any semantic contribution to the sentence. Likewise, it has been assumed that Slavic languages include prefixes with a purely aspectual function; e.g., the Russian prefix *na-* combined with the imperfective base verb *pisat'* gives rise to the perfective form *napisat'*. Since the lexical meaning of the base verb (*pisat'*) and its perfective counterpart (*napisat'*) is identical, it has been concluded, within formalist (and traditional structuralist) frameworks, that the prefix is devoid of semantic content beyond indicating perfectiveness (e.g., Borik, 2006). Yet, previous studies show that both case markers and aspectual prefixes do indeed bear meaning and that Cognitive Linguistics provides the appropriate tools for analyzing them (e.g., Janda, 2002, 2006; Janda et al., 2013; Endresen et al., 2012; Sokolova et al., 2012; see also Janda, 1985, 1986, 1988; Lewandowski, 2016, and Lewandowski and Mateu, 2014).

While the importance of cognitive-based theories for the analysis of these kinds of semantically vague elements has already been addressed in the realm of Slavic Linguistics, less attention has been paid to languages from other phylogenetic families. In this paper, I shift my attention to Spanish. Specifically, I offer an analysis of the alternation between the prepositions *con* 'with' and *de* 'from, of' in causative structures such as those in (1).

- (1) a. Juan cargó el carro con heno.  
John loaded.3sg the cart with hay  
'John loaded the cart with hay.'  
b. Juan cargó el carro de heno.  
John loaded.3sg the cart of hay  
'John loaded.3sg the cart with hay.'

It is not controversial (in any framework) that prepositions have a primarily spatial meaning based on topological schemas (Cuyckens and Radden, 2002). However, when used in more abstract contexts, prepositions often bear a rather vague meaning. For example, the Spanish preposition *de* clearly refers to the source of movement in (2); however, it is somehow problematic to elucidate the semantics of *de* in (1b) since this preposition performs a more grammaticalized function here (one could think that it merely introduces the locatum argument). Some authors call these kinds of elements *empty preposition* (*preposiciones vacías*; cf. López García, 2005). Importantly, at first glance, it might be thought that there is no essential semantic difference between (1a) and (1b) since both sentences can refer to the same situation. In the remainder of this paper, I show that while both constructions indeed can describe the same conceptual content, they provide two *different conceptualizations* of this content. I will argue that experimental-based Cognitive Linguistics provides the appropriate theoretical constructs for highlighting these very subtle differences in meaning.

- (2) Juan viene de la escuela.  
John come.3sg from the school.  
'John comes from school.'

This paper has two innovative aspects. First, it shows the importance of experimental Cognitive Linguistics for the study of meaning by showing how the theoretical concepts of cognitively-based semantics can successfully be applied to analyzing linguistic units that at first glance seem semantically vague or synonymous. Second, the empirical foundation of this paper brings new insights into Spanish descriptive grammar. It should be kept in mind that the analysis of Spanish prepositions from the cognitive-based perspective is still an issue hardly touched in Spanish Linguistics some notable exceptions being Cifuentes Honrubia (2003, 2010), López García (2005) and Romo (2016).

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers a general background for this study: first, I offer an overview of the alternation between *con* 'with' and *de* 'from, of' in Spanish causative constructions (section 2.1.), and then, I introduce the theoretical framework (section 2.2.). Section 3 analyzes the differences in meaning between *con* and *de*: I formulate a hypothesis that I test in an empirical study. I describe the study's methodology and report the results. Section 4 presents conclusions.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Causative constructions with *con* and *de*

The Spanish causative constructions associated with the prepositions *con* 'with' and *de* 'from, of' represent the so-called change-of-state variant of the locative alternation. The locative alternation involves two argument structure realizations of the same verb, which are called the change-of-location variant, as in (3a), and the change-of-state variant, as in (3b)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The use of *de* in the change-of-state variant of the locative alternation has also been attested in Catalan (Mateu, 2000), French (Hirschbühler and Labelle, 2009) and Italian (Damonte, 2005).

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