



# Debiasing semantic analysis: the case of the English preposition *to*



Ludovic De Cuyper<sup>\*</sup>

Ghent University, Linguistics Department, General Linguistics, Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 14 December 2011

Received in revised form 21 December 2012

Accepted 21 December 2012

Available online 24 January 2013

### Keywords:

Core meaning

Image schema

Instrumental meaning

Meaning vs. interpretation

Monosemy vs. polysemy

Prepositions

## ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the semantic question how the meaning of prepositions can accurately be distinguished from their interpretation in actual context. Tyler and Evans (2004) argue that 'motion' and 'path' are to be excluded from the core meaning of prepositions because these features are derived from collocating elements and from our general encyclopaedic knowledge of the world. The case is made that the same reasoning applies to the general notion of 'space'. Taking the English preposition *to* as a case study, I raise three arguments against the assumption of a core spatial meaning. First, a corpus based analyses of the uses of *to* in present day English indicates that a spatial reading of *to* is only pertinent when the preposition is combined with other linguistic elements associated with a spatial scene of events. Second, the assumption of a core spatial meaning is not supported by diachronic data, as there is no evidence that the oldest recorded uses of *to* were ever restricted to a spatial configuration. Third, the cognitive underpinnings of the core meaning of *to* are problematic because of two reasons. In the absence of non-linguistic evidence, any semantic analysis based on these image schemas is inevitably circular. Moreover, the hypothesis that linguistic forms are merely tagged onto existing pre-linguistic image schemas is inconsistent with findings on infant cognition and typological data on spatial categories. A semasiological analysis of the *to* is additionally proposed, which examines the 'instrumental' meaning of *to* in comparison with that of *towards*, *at*, *until/till* and *into*. The meaning of *to* is defined as 'establisher of relationship between X and reference point Y'.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Prepositional semantics has since long been a focal topic of research in Cognitive Linguistics. Prepositional meanings seem to accord well with the main tenets of the cognitive enterprise (Tyler and Evans, 2004). In Cognitive Lexical Semantics, prepositions are taken to be polysemous grammatical items, constituting a prototypically ordered category of metaphorically related meanings that are historically derived from one basic, spatial meaning. Prepositional meaning is furthermore conceived as ontologically similar to the meaning of lexical items, with the sole difference being one of degree rather than kind, and with prepositional meaning being more abstract than lexical meaning (Lindstromberg, 1997).

In their paper on the meaning of so-termed 'prepositions of movement' (e.g., *to*, *towards*, *through*, etc.), Tyler and Evans (2004) fully subscribe to the above tenets. They take issue, however, with the predominant cognitive view that considers 'motion' and 'path' to be inherent to the meaning of this particular class of prepositions (Brugman, 1988; Lakoff, 1987; Rice and Kabata, 2007; Smith, 2009). Both semantic features are erroneously derived, according to Tyler and Evans, from the

<sup>\*</sup> Tel.: +32 9 33 129 50.

E-mail address: [Ludovic.DeCuyper@UGent.be](mailto:Ludovic.DeCuyper@UGent.be)

meaning of the cotextual linguistic elements with which prepositions of motion are commonly used and/or from our general encyclopaedic knowledge of the world; the semantic features 'motion' and 'path' would thus mistakenly be projected onto the prepositional meanings.

By way of illustration, consider the fact that *to* is habitually used in relation to a dynamic scene of events, as in (1). This does not necessarily imply, so argue Tyler and Evans (2004), that 'motion' is also an inherent semantic feature of *to*.

(1) She ran to the store.

The sense of 'motion' is here associated with the meaning of the sentence verb *ran* and with our general understanding of the scene of events referred to, according to Tyler and Evans, but not with the proper meaning of the preposition *to* as such.

The same line of reasoning is also said to apply to the trajectory 'above-across', which has been postulated as a particular sense of *over* (Tyler and Evans, 2001). According to Tyler and Evans (2004), this feature is not inherent to the meaning of *over*, but arises 'from the integration of linguistic prompts at the conceptual level, in a way that is maximally coherent with and contingent on our real-world interactions' (Tyler and Evans, 2004, p. 252). Thus, it is not the linguistic meaning of *over* which informs us of the trajectory followed by a cat jumping over a wall in example (2), but our general knowledge about the act of jumping, about cats, and of the force-dynamics of gravity. The trajectory of the jumping cat is therefore irrelevant to the proper semantics of *over*.

(2) The cat jumped over the wall.

The problem that is tackled by Tyler and Evans (2004) pertains to a long standing topic of debate in semantic research. The issue at stake is how to properly delineate between the linguistic meaning of a particular linguistic item – in this case, the meaning of prepositions – and the meaning of its syntagmatic cotext and our general encyclopaedic knowledge of the world (context).

Tyler and Evans propose a twofold adjustment to modify the traditional cognitive methodology so that a more accurate semantic analysis is obtained.

In essence, we argue for carefully articulating the nature of conventional content associated with prepositions, including both spatio-geometric and functional content, and for teasing apart distinct and distinguishable (albeit related) concepts such as orientation, path, trajectory, goal and motion. (Tyler and Evans, 2004, p. 247)

Both adjustments are consistent with Tyler and Evans' moderate polysemy approach, which seeks to constrain the number of different senses associated with a linguistic item by distinguishing between the different *senses* of a linguistic item and its *context dependent uses* (Tyler and Evans, 2001, 2003a,b).

Tyler and Evans' moderate polysemy approach is discussed by Van der Gucht et al. (2007) and will therefore not be dealt with here. The driving question in this paper is whether Tyler and Evans' methodological modifications set better methodological standards for articulating the core conventional content associated with prepositions. I argue that this is not the case.

I share Tyler and Evans' main premise that in order to ensure the accuracy of the semantic analysis of prepositional meaning it is critical to distinguish the proper meaning of a preposition from the co-textual meanings of the linguistic items with which the preposition is used and our encyclopaedic knowledge of the world. In other words, although both the cotext and the context are inevitably involved in the interpretation of the utterance in which the preposition is used, one should avoid projecting this utterance interpretation onto the proper meaning of the preposition. However, I want to argue that Tyler and Evans' (2004) methodological solution to make this distinction remains biased, in particular because of their presumption that the core meaning of prepositions is inherently associated with a spatial configuration. I offer three arguments to make my case.

My first argument pertains to the empirical evidence that Tyler and Evans (2004) adduce in support of their semantic analysis of the core meaning of *to*. The core spatial meaning of *to* is indeed readily borne out by their examples. However, they all refer to a spatial context, which is unrepresentative of the broad spectrum of uses in which *to* can be used. Their data thus simply confirms their assumption of a spatial core meaning.

My second argument challenges the diachronic evidence that is taken to support the assumption of a core spatial meaning. In cognitive semantics, abstract, non-spatial meanings of prepositions are taken to be derived from an original spatial meaning. *To* would thus have evolved from a purely spatial marker indicating a direction to a grammatical marker indicating the recipient of a transfer. However, a close reading the OE use of *to* reveals a much more nuanced picture. Based on a random sample of  $N = 3999$  observations of *to* in OE, I found that the abstract use of *to* was more already the most frequent one form OE onwards. Although *to* was often used as an allative marker in OE, other uses are frequently attested as well, including that of 'addressee', 'purpose', 'time', and, albeit still embryonically, that of 'recipient'. The OE data, then, are not consistent with the hypothesis that the meaning of *to* was ever confined to a purely spatial configuration.

My third and final argument concerns the embodiment approach to prepositional semantics, particularly the association of the core meaning of prepositions with the conceptual image schemas. Recent scholarship on the relationship between language and human spatial cognition has brought to bear two issues on this particular approach to lexical semantics. The first

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7534000>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7534000>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)