

The semantics and pragmatics of "by"

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With this paper I am trying to provide a lexical analysis of the spatial and metaphorical senses of the English preposition *by*. It is well known that all prepositions derive their senses from the relations between their two arguments in space. It is also affected by the way humans function and interact within the spatial reality they find themselves within. Thereby two factors come into play. One of these is the "preconceptual experience", i.e. what Lakoff refers to as the sole physical experience of operating as well as interacting in the spatial environment. The other factor is the "anthropomorphizing", i.e. the structuring of the space and assigning an orientation to objects to comport with the upright position of humans.

The combination of variables is what allows for the different spatial configurations to arise. I believe that certain such configurations take the form of gestalt schemes and are stored as prototypical instances of given prepositions. Such prototypical instances or primitives will lead naturally to either spatial or metaphorical extensions. The complexity of their spatial configurations as well as the intrinsic diversity of the variables will be a likely cause of semantic overlap. The configurations named by one preposition will interfere with the semantic space named by the other preposition. Overlapping of the structures occurs most frequently at the periphery of the semantic space where the influence of a prototype grows weaker. The application of one structure over the other resides in the pragmatic knowledge a speaker/conceptualizer wishes to emphasize. I presume the selection of structures consists in the act of comparison between the pragmatic knowledge and the gestalt configurations stored in the mind of a conceptualizer (Jackendoff, 1985, *Semantics and Cognition*). In the case of prepositions, speakers resort to the use of two variables. They more or less conform to the idea of *figure* and *ground*, where the first is the more prominent variable and the latter stands for the point of reference.

In my account of the preposition *by* I will apply the concept of *trajector* and *landmark* taken from the cognitive grammar. Cognitive grammar has a long tradition of employing pictograms for the explication of both spatial and metaphorical concepts. The idea has proved useful and convenient as it allowed for the preserving of gestalt properties as speakers experienced them in their preconceptual experience (Lakoff, 1987, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*).

The preposition *by* discerns such configurations:

1. The trajector can be one, two, or three dimensional figure.
2. There is no restriction to the “plexity” of the trajector or the size and shape of the landmark.
3. Although predominantly horizontal, the trajector is able to move freely along the vertical axis in relation to the landmark (compare: “*The temperature fell by two degrees*”).
4. The physical contact between the trajector and the landmark is either present or absent.
5. The trajectory between the trajector and the landmark is present, implied or absent.

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