

Pondering over *Over*: A Semantic Analysis

Éva Kovács

1 Introduction

Over, one of the most polysemous words in English, has especially enormous complexity, which is not only semantic but syntactic as well. Consider the following examples (cf *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995: 1177–78)):

- *He looked at himself in the mirror over the table. ...a bridge over the river Danube, ...helicopters flying over the crowd.* (above) (PREP)
- *Mix the ingredients and pour over the mushrooms. He was wearing a light grey suit over a shirt.* (covering) (PREP)
- *I stepped over a broken piece of wood. The policeman jumped over the wall.* (across a barrier, obstacle) (PREP)
- *She ran over the lawn to the gate.*
(across an area, surface, from one side to the other) (PREP)
- *She lived in a house over the road/over the river.*
(on the opposite side of it) (PREP)
- *He fell over. He was knocked over by a bus.*
(towards or onto the ground) (ADV)
- *His car rolled over after a tyre was punctured. He turned over and went back to sleep.*
(its position changes so that the part which was facing upwards is now facing downwards) (ADV)
- *I met George well over a year ago.* (more than) (PREP)
- *Do it over. He played it over a couple of times.* (again) (ADV)
- *The war was over. The bad times were over.*
(completely finished) (ADV)
- *He's never had any influence/power/control over her.*
(control or influence) (PREP)
- *They discussed the problem over breakfast/ a glass of wine.*
(during) (PREP)

As evident from the above examples, *over* is not only polysemous but it can be found in several grammatical categories, i.e. a preposition in a prepositional phrase or an adverb. Besides, it occurs as a prefix in 124 prefixed verbs such as *overpay*, *oversleep*, *overlook*, in 38 prefixed adjectives e.g. *overpopulated*, *overpowering*, in 26 prefixed nouns such as *overdose*, *overtime* (cf *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995)) and as an adverb or a preposition in 111 phrasal verbs in various meanings (cf *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1995)):

- Movement and position: *come over*, *roll over*, *take over*, *turn over*
- Overflowing or overwhelming feelings: *boil over*, *fuss over*, *slop over*, *spill over*
- Falling and attacking: *kick over*, *knock over*, *tope over*, *trip over*
- Covering and hiding: *cloud over*, *film over*, *freeze over*, *skate over*
- Considering and communicating: *brood over*, *chew over*, *look over*, *think over*
- Changing and transforming: *buy over*, *hand over*, *swap over*, *win over*
- Ending and recovering: *blow over*, *get over*, *give over*, *throw over*

On the surface the meanings of *over* mentioned above may seem totally unrelated and its combination with a verb or noun seems to be rather arbitrary. While some linguists (see Kennedy (1920), Wood (1955), Live (1965), Bolinger (1971), Sroka (1972), Fraser (1976)) also consider prepositions/particles/prefixes to be either fully analysable or opaque by stating that they have a literal meaning or no meaning at all, cognitive grammarians (see Lindner (1981), Brugman (1981), Vandeloise (1985), Lakoff (1987), Taylor (1989), Dewell (1994), Morgan (1997), Dirven (2001), Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) and Tyler & Evans (2003)) suggest that the meanings of particles in most verb particle combinations and prefixed verbs are analysable, at least to some degree.

The most important studies on the semantics of *over* to have appeared so far are those of Brugman (1981), Taylor (1989), Lakoff (1987), Dewell (1994) and Tyler & Evans (2003), who provided an analysis of *over* in the cognitive framework. On the basis of these studies, I will make an attempt to show that *over* constitutes a complex network of related meanings, which can be analysed at least to some degree. I will show that it has various central, prototypical meanings, which are the literal meanings, and most of the other meanings depart from these prototypical ones in various ways, typically via metaphorical extensions. It is generally assumed by cognitive grammarians that the basis of a great many metaphorical senses is space and among their most common source domains are containers, journeys (with path and goal) and vertical obstacles. Following the terminology used by

Lindner (1981), Lakoff (1987), Taylor (1989), Dewell (1994) Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) and Tyler & Evans (2003), I will also use the term 'Landmark' (LM) to denote the entity which serves as a reference point, i.e. a background point/container/surface which is located and 'Trajector' (TR) to refer to a moving entity, i.e. an object or a person. What underlies this analysis is that we conceive or characterize an abstract reality in terms of a concrete one and when we talk about our feelings, fears, hopes, suspicions, relations, thoughts, etc. we tend to use concrete images. From this semantic point of view, it is actually not relevant what syntactic function *over* has, whether it is a prefix or a particle in a phrasal or prepositional verb, an adverb or a preposition in a prepositional phrase.

2 The Meaning of *Over* in Modern English

The most important senses of *over* in Modern English are as follows:

2.1 *The Above and Across Sense*

2.1.1 *The Central Sense*

Consider the examples in:

- (1) The plane flew *over*. The plane flew *over* the hill.

In the above sentences the meaning of *fly over* is that of moving overhead. The LM is what the plane is flying over and it is either specified, i.e. the hill, or not. The TR is the plane and there is no contact between the LM and TR.

Some special cases of the *above* and *across* sense are illustrated in the following examples:

- (2) The bird flew *over* the yard. (extended, no contact)
(3) The plane flew *over* the hill. (vertical extended, no contact)
(4) The bird flew *over* the wall. (vertical, no contact)
(5) Sam drove *over* the bridge. (extended, contact)
(6) Sam walked *over* the hill. (vertical, contact)
(7) Sam climbed *over* the wall. (vertical, contact)
(8) Sam lives *over* the hill. (vertical extended, focus on the end point of the path)

As pointed out above, LM is either extended or vertical or both and there is either contact or no contact between the LM and TR. In (8) there is a focus on the end-point of the path. End-point focus means that there is an understood path that goes over the hill, and Sam lives at the end of that path and *over* has the sense of on the other side of as a result of end-point focus (cf Lakoff (1987: 420)).

In addition, there are innumerable examples where we can witness a transfer of the above TR-LM relation from the concrete domain of space to the abstract domain via metaphorical extensions.

2.1.2 *The Metaphorical Extensions of the Above and Across Sense*

Consider the following examples:

- (9) The media *passed over* some of the most disturbing details of the case.
 I noticed that he *skated over* the topic of redundances.
 They *overlooked* each others' faults.
 It's easy to *overlook* a small detail like that.

In the above examples in (9), *over* has the meaning of avoiding discussing a subject or problem or not giving it (enough) attention. The problem(s), the topic can be understood metaphorically as a LM.

In another extended meaning of *over* exemplified below in (10), the LM is a problem, a difficulty, an illness, an unpleasant experience or a feeling. *Over* denotes the path of the TR surmounting an obstacle. The metaphorization is made possible by the fact that that life is often construed as a path, and difficult episodes during one's life as obstacles in the path.

- (10) It took me a very long time to *get over* the shock of her death.
 Harry still has not *got over* his divorce.
 How would they *get over* the problem, he wondered?
 Molly had fought and *overcome* her fear of flying.
 Find a way to *overcome* your difficulties.

The basis of metaphorization in (11) below is that a person's career can be construed as a journey over a vertical extended LM (hill). *He is over the hill* means that he has already reached and passed the peak or high point of his career (journey).

- (11) Peter is *over the hill*.

The end-point focus of the path the trajector follows can also be understood metaphorically as representing the completion of a process, which yields examples as in:

- (12) The lesson is *over*. The bad times were *over*.

2.2 The Above Sense

2.2.1 *The Central Sense*

Consider the meaning of *over* in the sentences in:

- (13) The lamp *hangs over* the table.
 He is *standing over* the entrance to the cave.

Over in (13) has a stative sense, with no path. It is linked to the *above* and *across* sense in that it has the TR above the LM, but it differs from it in two respects: There is no path and no boundaries, in other words, the *across* sense is missing. Second, it does not permit contact between the TR and LM.

2.2.2 The Metaphorical Extensions of the Above Sense

a) *Over* in (14) is used metaphorically to indicate that something or someone threatens or worries you. The TR can be understood as a problem that worries you or a person that threatens you on the path defined by life's journey.

- (14) I had the Open University exam *hanging over* me.
He *held* the Will *over* her like a threat.

b) Another extended meaning of *over* illustrated by (15) is that of control, i.e. supervising someone or being in a position of authority over them. The relationship of TR and LM is one of power, authority. Power relations are typically conceptualized in vertical space. Someone with power (TR metaphorically) is higher than someone without power (LM metaphorically).

- (15) Don't you try to *queen* it *over* me. (act in a way to show that they are better than you)
Do you have to *lord* it *over* us?
The wives took turns to *watch over* the children. (take care of them)
He had *presided over* a seminar for theoretical physicists. (be in charge of it)
Fanny *sat over* her sick brother. (watch them very carefully)
She *stood over* him and made him eat his lunch. (watch him what he is doing)

c) Examples like in (16) show another extended meaning of *over* in this relationship, which is that of considering, examining something carefully from all sides, thinking about or looking at something in a thorough and detailed way where the LM is understood metaphorically as a problem, a question under consideration.

- (16) The more you sit and *brood over* your problems, the bigger they get. (think about it seriously for a period of time)
As I *pondered over* the whole business, an idea struck me. (think carefully and seriously about a problem.)
In discussion we *chew over* problems and work out possible solutions. (think carefully about it)
The meeting was devoted to *hashing over* the past. (discuss it in great detail)

I *mulled* that question *over* for a while. (think about it seriously for a long time.)

I saw an old lady *picking over* a pile of old coats in a corner. (examine them carefully)

Monks *pored over* ancient texts. (look at it and examine it very carefully)

Why travel back in the past and *rake over* old worries? (keep talking about unpleasant events)

I wanted to *think over* one or two business problems. (consider them carefully before making a decision)

I'll *talk it over* with Len tonight. (discuss it)

2.3 The Covering Sense

2.3.1 The Central Sense

There is a group of meanings for *over* that have to do with covering, which means that the TR appears to cover the LM as is evident in the examples in:

(17) *Put* the tablecloth *over* the table.

The sky *clouds over*.

The windscreen's *frosted over*.

You've *grassed over* the back garden.

My eyes *filmed over*.

It is linked to the *above* and *across* sense and in its dynamic interpretation it shares the motion of the TR above and across the LM. In other words, the table/sky/the windscreen/the back garden/eyes i.e. the LM becomes covered with a tablecloth or a layer of cloud/frost/grass/tears, which can be interpreted as the TR, thus there is a covering relationship between the LM and the TR.

2.3.2 The Metaphorical Extensions of the Covering Sense

Some combinations are used metaphorically with the meaning of hiding something, for example a situation, an event, an unpleasant, embarrassing subject, a problem which can be understood as the LM and the TR as an abstract entity as exemplified in:

(18) He *varnished over* the conflict with polite words. (hide unpleasant aspects of it or pretend they do not exist)

They tried to *paper over* the crisis. (hide the difficulty or problem)

2.4 The Reflexive Sense

2.4.1 The Central Sense

Consider examples like in:

(19) The fence *fell over*. He was *knocked over* by a bus.

Here the TR – the initial upright position of the fence – is distinguished from the final position, in which the fence or a person is lying horizontally on the ground, i.e. the LM. These are the cases when: TR=LM. Such a relation between a LM and TR is called reflexive (cf Lindner (1981: 122)).

Some other examples of the reflexive sense are:

(20) John, beside himself with rage, had *kicked over* the table and grabbed at her. (kick it so that it falls to the ground)

He suddenly *keeled over* with a heavily-loaded tray. (fall over sideways)

Be careful you don't *knock* the paint *over*. (push it or hit it so that it falls or turns on its other side.)

The children were *pushing* each other *over* on the sand. (push them so that they fall onto the ground)

We almost *ran over* a fox that was crossing the road. (hit it causing injury)

She *tipped* the pan *over* and a dozen fish fell out. (turn onto its side or upside down)

She *tumbled over* and hit her head on the concrete. (fall down)

In these combinations of *over* the TR, which is upright at the beginning, traces a curved path and falls or is pushed to the ground, which is the LM.

Additional examples of the reflexive sense are given in:

(21) *Roll* the log *over*.

Turn the paper *over*.

He *turned over* and *over* in bed.

His car *rolled over*.

Here the position of an entity, i.e. the log or the car changes so that the part which was facing upwards is now facing downwards. It means that half of the log or the top of the car is acting as LM and the rest as TR. Thus the TR and the LM become identical.

2.4.2 The Metaphorical Extension of the Reflexive Sense

An extended meaning of this spatial *over* is its telic, resultative meaning, which is exemplified by 'removal', 'change', 'cancel' in the definitions of the examples given in (22), where *over* is a prefix. For example, first the

government is in control (metaphorically upright), and afterwards it is not in control (metaphorically it has fallen over):

- (22) *overturn a government* – remove a government from power
overthrow a government/leader – remove from power by force
overhaul a system or machine – make changes or repairs to improve it
override a decision/order – cancel/ignore a decision
overrule a decision/order – change someone's decision/order that you think is wrong

2.5 The Excess Sense

2.5.1 The Central Sense

Over can also indicate excess as illustrated in the sentences in (23). In these instances there must be some fluid in a container, which has vertical sides. The path of overflowing fluid is upright and over the edges of the container. Here the LM is the edge of the container and the TR is the fluid in the container and the path the TR follows is the path of flow. For instance:

- (23) The milk *is boiling over*.
 He splashed wine into Daniel's glass until it *brimmed over* onto the tablecloth.
 Some of the milk *slopped over* onto the floor.
 Rivers and streams have *overflowed* their banks in countless places.

2.5.2 The Metaphorical Extension of the Excess Sense

Excess can be interpreted metaphorically as well, where people, situations, quantities, relations, feelings, states can be seen as entities that go beyond their limits or boundaries as illustrated in (24), (25) and (26). It is confirmed by the fact that the definitions given in the dictionary usually contain words like *very*, *so full of it*. For example:

- (24) The argument *boiled over* into a fight. (become violent)
 Kenneth *overflowed* with friendliness and hospitality.
 (experience it very strongly)
 He was *bubbling over* with enthusiasm. (be so full of it)

In addition, consider also the following examples where the meaning of *over* has another kind of excess meaning, i.e. 'beyond' or 'more than', which is reflected by the comparative form such as *more than*, *more/less important/hotter*, *greater than it really is* etc., in the definitions:

- (25) *overbook* – sell more tickets than they have places for
overpay – pay more than it is necessary
overrun (e.g. *costs*) – they are higher than was planned or expected
overspend – spend more money than you can afford
overshoot (e.g. *budget*) – spend more than it had planned to
overact – exaggerate their emotions and movement
overdo – behave in an exaggerated way
overemphasize – give it more importance than it deserves
overestimate – think it is greater in amount or importance than it is really
overindulge in sg – allow yourself to have more of it than it is good for you
overplay – make it seem more important than it really is
override sg – it is more important than them
overshadow – make someone or something seem less important
oversimplify – make a situation or problem seem less complicated than it really is
overstate – describe it in a way that makes it seem more important or serious than it really is
overstay – stay somewhere longer than you have permission to stay
overuse – use more of it than necessary
overvalue – believe that sg is more valuable or more important than it really is
overwork – work too much or too hard
- (26) He is *over* forty.
 It lasted *over* two hours.
 Cigarettes kill *over* a hundred thousand Britains every year.

2.6 The From One Side to the Other Sense

2.6.1 The Central Sense

We also use *over* in combinations with the meaning of moving or going towards a place or moving something from one place to another where there is a spatial relationship between the LM and the TR, such as in:

- (27) She got up and *went over* to her suitcase. (move towards sg and reach it)
 The woman *took* two full bottles *over* to the group round the big table. (carry them to that place)

I'll take the money and *hand it over* to him. (give it to sy so that they own it)

This spatial meaning of *over* can have several metaphorical extentions where we can witness a transfer of the TR-LM relationship from the spatial domain to some abstract domain.

2.6.2 *The Metaphorical Extensions of the From One Side to the Other Sense*

a) Some combinations with this spatial *over* can also have the extended meaning of giving something to someone, so that the ownership of a thing or the responsibility is transferred to the other person where the TR is represented by ownership or responsibility and the LM by the abstract distance, as in:

(28) Sir John *handed over* to his deputy and left. (give them the responsibility)

You should *make* the business *over* to me. (legally transfer the ownership of it from one person to another)

b) Another variety of this meaning of *over* is that of changing your mind or changing the group that you support. Consider the examples in:

(29) She was not able *to buy* him *over*. (win his support by giving them money)

Local radio stations have done their best to *win over* new audiences. (persuade them to support them or agree with them)

c) Some combinations can also have the meaning of changing the function or use of something for another, as illustrated in:

(30) The automobile industry had to *turn* their production facilities *over* to the creation of weapons. (change its function or use)

Airline and chain-hotel bookings *switched over* to computers. (change from using or doing the first to the second)

As made clear in the above discussion, *over* has diverse meanings which are nonetheless unified in a network of semantic extensions.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the following points are worth mentioning about *over*, which can occur in different syntactic categories in English, i.e. it can be an adverb, a preposition, a prefix or a particle in a phrasal verb and prepositional verb. The focus in this paper, however, has not been on its syntactic properties but on its semantics.

By analysing the meanings of *over*, I hope to have proved that it is a misconception that prepositions, prefixes and particles have either literal

meanings or no meanings at all. By contrast, I have suggested that they can be analysed at least to some degree. I have claimed that while the well-established, concrete/literal meanings of *over*, occurring in a relatively wide range of contexts (*above and across sense, above sense, covering sense, excess sense, reflexive sense, from one side to the other sense*), tend to be the central ones, the other meanings depart from these prototypical meanings in various ways, typically via metaphorization, thus they form a network of interrelated senses.

References

- Bolinger, Dwight. 1971. *The Phrasal Verb in English*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Brugman, C. 1981. *Story of OVER*. M.A. Thesis, Berkeley: University Of California.
- Dewell, Robert B. 1994. *Over* again: Image-schema transformations in semantic analysis. *Cognitive Linguistics* 5–4: 351–380.
- Dirven, R. 2001. The metaphoric in recent cognitive approaches to English phrasal verbs. *Methaphoric. de* 01: 39–54.
- Fraser, B. 1976. *The Verb-Particle Combination in English*. New York: Academic Press.
- Kennedy, A. G. 1920. *The Modern English Verb-Adverb Combination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kovács, Éva. 1998. *The Syntax and Semantics of Phrasal Verbs in English*. Ph.D. diss. Debrecen: KLTE.
- Lakoff, George. 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lindner, Susan J. 1981. *A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of English Verb-Particle Constructions with OUT and UP*. Ph.D. diss. San Diego: University of California.
- Lipka, L. 1972. *Semantic Structure and Word-formation*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- Live, Anna. H. 1965. The discontinuous verb in English. *Word* 21: 428–51.
- Morgan, Pamela. 1997. Figuring out *figure out*: Metaphor and the semantics of English verb-particle constructions. *Cognitive Linguistics* 8–4: 327–57.
- Rudzka-Ostyn, Brygida. 2003. *Word Power: Phrasal Verbs and Compounds A Cognitive Approach*. Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Sinclair, J. 1995. *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*. London: Harper Collins Publisher.

- Sinclair, J. 1995. *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. Harper Collins Publishers.
- Sroka, K. A. 1972. *The Syntax of English Phrasal Verbs*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Taylor, J. R. 1989. *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tyler, Andrea and Vyvian Evans. 2003. Reconsidering prepositional polysemy networks: The case of *over*. *Language* 77: 724–65.
- Vandeloise, C. 1984. *Description of Space in French*. Ph.D. diss. San Diego: University of California.
- Wood, Frederick T. 1955. Verb-adverb combinations: The position of the adverb. *English Language Teaching*. 10: 18–27.