The Semantics of the English Caused-motion Construction: A Dynamic Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract: Opinions differ on the question of polesemy regarding constructional senses. Langacker (1987), who proposed ‘verbal polysemy’ argues that verbs are usually polysemous and the different uses of a verb each have its own semantic structure. He also very much emphasizes that conventional polysemous verb senses have become entrenched in the language user’s knowledge of his language. This view, however, does not give due recognition to the role of cognition, or rather ‘backstage cognition’ and has failed to unveil the cognitive regularities involved in the generation of language structures.

(1) a. The man swam1 to the other side of the river.
b. The fish swam2 to the other side of the river.
c. The man swam, underwater, to the other side of river.

Based on verbal polysemy, it can be said that the verb *swim* in these examples has, in itself, three distinct linguistic senses. However, this view is inconsistent with one of the main tenets of Cognitive Linguistics that ‘language underdetermines meaning’, and thus, imposes more senses on the same verb.

Goldberg (1995), on the other hand, defies verbal polysemy and argues that verbs have one basic sense, while the complement constructions where verbs can occur, are themselves polysemous, having a central sense as well as extended senses, independently of lexical content. Constructional polysemy, as Goldberg favors, in effect, shifts polysemy from verbal to constructional senses and blatantly draws a distinction between a central sense and extended senses, one example being her caused-motion construction.

This paper, therefore, takes a dynamic cognitive position and makes an analysis on the senses of the English caused-motion construction. It holds that there is only one base concept for any lexical entity (verbs, etc.), out of which cognition constructs the appropriate and reflected senses in context. The semantics of the English caused-motion construction accordingly, can be approached and deciphered as follows:

1) Identification of the relation between a base concept and its reflected senses. A base concept is the truly abstract but unified basic concept underlying a lexical item like a verb that characterizes what is truly unpredictable about its meaning; the reflected senses refer to any actualizations of the base concept in the varying contexts. The ‘*swim*’ example above in (1) again serves to demonstrate that cognition pulls out of memory the frame or ICM it has formed of ‘SWIM’ and constructs different reflected senses in relation to the given contexts for the word.

2) Assignment of the oblique complement of a verb in the caused-motion construction as a subpredicate of the verb. Here, the verb and the oblique complement form a complex predicate, with the verb itself head. In other words, the verbal predicate is the ‘profile determinant’ of the complex predicate.

(2) Sam sneezed the napkin off the table.

In line with the above claim, the agent argument role (*Sam*) is explicitly linked to not only the concept underlying the lexical verb (*sneeze*), but also to that underlying the oblique complement (the goal: ‘off the table’), and that its relation with the theme argument (*the napkin*) consists in this complex predicate (*sneeze...off the table*). It is cognition that builds a sense in context for the complex predicate which can come to symbolize a transitive situation when appropriate.

A dynamic cognitive view, which involves the grammatical construction, the base concept underlying the lexical item and the relevant frame-semantic information brought in by the lexical items that ‘fill’ the construction, is undoubtedly, a feasible approach to the semantics of the English caused-motion construction and will provide insights for the deciphering of other English argument structure constructions.

Key words: construction; caused-motion construction; base concept; reflected sense; dynamic cognitive account