

“*At work at university*”: a cognitive semantic study of the polysemy of the preposition *at*

Michelle Weckermann

University of Augsburg, michelle.weckermann@philhist.uni-augsburg.de

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The aim of this paper is to examine the polysemy of the preposition *at* as part of a larger project investigating and comparing a range of English prepositions within a cognitive linguistics framework. Using corpus data, the distinct yet related senses of *at* are determined and this polysemy is modelled with image schemas and semantic networks.

While there is extensive research on the polysemy of prepositions (e.g. Hanazaki, 2005 for *by*; Tyler & Evans, 2003 for *over*), many studies based their analyses on fabricated examples (e.g. Tyler & Evans, 2003; Lakoff, 1987). Moreover, studies have been criticised for relying solely on the researchers' introspective judgments and thus for lacking a methodology for determining and distinguishing senses of a preposition (Sandra & Rice, 1995). Tyler and Evans' (2003) principled polysemy approach to *over* was the first to propose a set of methodological criteria for determining an established sense and the central sense of a preposition.

The present study aims to counter the two aforementioned pieces of criticism by drawing on natural corpus data instead of fabricated examples, and by applying methodological criteria for determining and distinguishing senses. In relation to the first point, the data was gathered from a range of corpora, including a legal corpus (EuroParl) and four novels from different genres (thriller, romance/drama, dystopia/fantasy, and philosophical novels). The data is thus representative of a range of topic areas, which should ideally mirror as many of the different nuances of meaning manifested in the preposition's senses as possible and therefore increase the naturalness of the data.

Concerning the second point of criticism relating to the methodology employed for determining and distinguishing senses, Tyler and Evans' (2003) two criteria state that an established sense has to express a distinct nuance of meaning (e.g. a distinct spatial configuration) from the other, already existing senses, and has to do so independent of context. These two criteria are adopted in the present study but specified with ideas from Cruse's (2000) account of how different types of contexts can influence word meaning and where the line between a conventionalised sense and contextual influences should be drawn.

The analysis of the corpus data and the application of the two methodological criteria resulted in the identification of six distinct yet related senses of *at*, which are of spatial, temporal, and abstract nature. This can be exemplified by a position in (1), where the trajector is construed as occupying a position near to or within the bounds of the landmark. Related to the point-like spatial sense in (1), *at* can also depict a point in time as in (2), and a state as in (3). The other three senses of *at* express aim, manner, and a point on a scale.

- 1) (...) the swing door *at* the back. (Smith, 27)
- 2) He and Daddy watched something on the news *at* lunchtime. (Moyes, 9)
- 3) He was holding a notebook *at* the ready (Cole, 19)

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