A monosemic analysis of the form *through*

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The preposition *through* has been described as a polysemous word (Dirven 1993; Lee 1998, 2001; Hilferty 1999; Tyler & Evans 2003; Evans & Tyler 2004; Benom 2015; Gilquin & McMichael 2018; Dixon 2022). However, it has also been recognized that "not all contextually varying uses of a form constitute distinct senses" (Tyler & Evans 2003:38). Building on that view, in this presentation I will describe an analysis where the distribution of *through* in discourse is explained by positing a single invariant meaning (Novotny 2022). My proposal is grounded in the Columbia School perspective that language is a code consisting of signal-meaning correspondences, which are creatively deployed by human beings for communication (Diver 1975/2012, 1995; Huffman 2001, 2006; Davis 2004; Stern 2019).

I begin with the hypothesis that *through* makes the same semantic contribution in all its uses; it signals SUCCESSION OF POINTS IN A THREE DIMENSIONAL SPACE. All other communicative specifications that are sometimes associated with its use, such as movement, continuity, and extension from an entry point to an exit point, are the result of inferences that language users can make, as appropriate, based on the relevant linguistic and extralinguistic context. For example, in "… the ancient tub with the claw feet and the rust stains running *through* the cracked porcelain, …" [Auster 2017], the rust stains do not move at all but are rather statically deposited in the space of the cracks (and no entry or exit points are involved). In "…she had to step over the sleeping or nursing or snoring bodies scattered *through* her house" [Morrison 2012], not only is there no movement or entry/exit points involved, but there is no continuity either (as evidenced by the use of *scattered*).

My study is based on a corpus of six contemporary American novels, and relies on qualitative and quantitative techniques. As a first step, I provide qualitative explanations for the use of *through* in a variety of contexts, both concrete and abstract. Furthermore, I contrast contexts where *through* is used with comparable contexts in which another form is employed (*along*, *across*, *over*, or *during*).

As a second step, I conduct quantitative analyses to test predictions that certain contextual elements will favor (or disfavor) co-occurrence with *through* as compared to another form. To illustrate, after examining the use of *through* and *over* in pairs such as "and then bit by bit the weight turned inward and was supplanted by horror, horror crawling up *through his body* and humming in his veins" [Auster 2017] vs. "Ferguson could run cool washcloths *over Amy's naked body*" [Auster 2017], I predict that *through* will occur more frequently than *over* in contexts where mention of the body relates to feelings or thoughts, because feelings and thoughts tend to be conceptualized as happening inside the three-dimensional space of the body. This prediction is confirmed, as shown in Table 1.

	through + body		*over* + body	
	N	%	N	%
feelings or thoughts present	8	66.7	4	33.3
feelings or thoughts absent	20	22.7	68	77.3
OR	6.80			

Table 1: Through *and* over *with body parts*

Both qualitative and quantitative findings support the analysis of *through* as a monosemous sign. The hypothesized meaning SUCCESSION OF POINTS IN A THREE DIMENSIONAL SPACE successfully accounts for the distribution of *through* in the corpus, showing that a clear line can be drawn between the stable semantic contribution of the form and its context-dependent interpretations.

Data

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