

The polysemy of *about* – an untypical preposition (and an adverb) – in the eyes of creative producer respondents

Jarno Raukko
University of Helsinki, jarno.raukko@helsinki.fi

Keywords: polysemy, preposition, meaning differentiation, production task, *about*

About is of relatively untypical nature as an English preposition (and adverb). There is no locative central meaning, although locative meanings do exist on the margin; in this sense it differs from non-locative *of*, *for*, and *with*. Therefore, the differentiation of meanings of *about* cannot start from nor be founded on a binary division between ‘concrete’ and ‘metaphorical’ (cf. e.g., analyses of *in*, *on*, and *at* in Rice 1996). Whether metaphorical locativity explains the polysemy of *about* and offers us criteria for a differentiation of meanings, is part of the issue here.

Also, *about* seems to be an underinvestigated preposition, neglected in many studies of English prepositions, e.g., Bennett (1975). Tyler & Evans (2003: 95) only mention it *in passim* as a paraphrase of *over* as in *cry over/about* and *talk over/about*. Even more suspiciously, it is not included in an introductory list of 28 prepositions in such a basic descriptive grammar as Huddleston & Pullum (2005: 127). Biber & al. (1999) do publish minor analytical observations on *about*, e.g., as an approximating adverb (1999: 112). Yet, as *about* turns out to be the 7th most common preposition in the Corpus of Contemporary English, it is surprising that it has not acquired more attention.

The method used here involves respondents in a creative task. When 20 American high school students participated in a differentiation production task where they were asked to produce such examples of *about* that portray different meanings, they came up with 4.15 examples on average. Due to the setting, both prepositional and adverbial uses appear. One respondent produced the following four examples.

- (a) About 3 years ago I was a freshman.
- (b) I don't know what you are talking about.
- (c) She walked about the room nervously.
- (d) I was about to hit him.

The starting assumption is that these examples could represent four hypothetically central meaning types of *about* – perhaps two more central (a and b) and two less central (c and d). The meaning types could be termed

- (a) APPROXIMATIVE
- (b) TOPIC
- (c) CIRCULAR LOCATIVE
- (d) IMMEDIATE FUTURE

The paper presents the methodology and the results in more detail. Besides searching for the collective core of the 20 respondents' creative differentiations, additional observations are directed on perceived centrality, perceived links, and paraphrases used in a paraphrasing task. Tendencies in the responding behavior may correlate with actual frequencies, but the setting also invites the respondent to produce peripheral examples. Additionally, we will juxtapose the division between prepositional meanings with the meanings of *about* as an adverb.

References

- Bennett, David C. 1975. *Spatial and Temporal Uses of English Prepositions. An Essay in Stratificational Semantics*. London: Longman.
- Biber, Douglas; Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad & Edward Finegan 1999. *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum 2005. *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Rice, Sally 1996. Prepositional prototypes. In Pütz, Martin & René Dirven (eds.) 1996. *The construal of space in language and thought*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 135–166.
- Tyler, Andrea & Vyvyan Evans 2003. *The semantics of English prepositions. Spatial scenes, embodied meaning, and cognition*. Cambridge: CUP.