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On the river, on an island, on the street: The semantics of English on- constructions involving “laterality”

*Cliff Goddard**

Abstract: This study analyses a set of highly English-specific *on*-constructions of the form [*on* + NP_{PLACE}], such as: *on the bank of the river, (a house) on the beach, on an island, on the plains, on the street, on a farm*. The analysis is conducted in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework originated by Anna Wierzbicka. Six semantically discrete construction types are identified and each is assigned a semantic schema framed in the metalanguage of semantic primes. All of them, it is argued, include a semantic component involving “laterality” (semantic prime *SIDE*), often in combination with a component involving visibility (*SEE*). These constructions, along with others, constitute a complex network of grammatical polysemy in English.

Keywords: semantics; spatial prepositions; polysemy; natural semantic metalanguage (NSM)

1. Introduction

It is well known that the English preposition *on* exhibits extreme polyfunctionality – fully comparable, in this respect, with the prolific range of uses and functions of the Russian instrumental or Polish dative cases. In the face of such bewildering diversity, many linguists have concluded that it is impossible to identify a finite number of discrete semantic constructions: the only general semantic analysis, they think, must be an extremely abstract one, and to the extent that separate senses can be identified, they must have fuzzy boundaries. The present study, by contrast, is based on the conviction that given a sufficiently painstaking and methodical semantic analysis, the diversity of usages can be resolved into a large array of discrete constructional meanings that are related in a family resemblance fashion. This is the approach pioneered by Anna Wierzbicka (1980, 1986, 2008) in her studies of the Russian instrumental and Polish dative. Broadly speaking, it is consistent with the spirit of construction grammar, as variously developed by Langacker (1987: 86-98, 448-480), Goldberg (1995), Kay and Fillmore (1999), and others.

The semantic analysis is carried out using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach (Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 1994, 2002; Goddard and Wierzbicka in press/2013; Goddard 2011, 2012; Goddard ed., 2008, Peeters ed., 2006; Ye 2007, 2010; Bromhead 2009, 2011; Gladkova 2010; Wong 2005, 2010; Levisen 2012; and other works). The hallmark of this method is that semantic analyses take the form of reductive paraphrases, based on a controlled defining vocabulary of 65 empirically established semantic primes. The semantic primes are tabulated in the Table 1 below, using English exponents. Comparable tables have been drawn up for many languages, including Chinese, Korean, Malay, French, Russian, Spanish, Danish, Amharic, Arabic, Mbula (PNG), Koromu, East Cree, and others.

Table 1: Semantic primes (English exponents), grouped into related categories.

I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BOD	substantives
KIND, PART	relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	actions, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE'S), BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, possession, specification
LIVE, DIE	life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
LIKE~AS~WAY	similarity

Notes: • Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes) • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • They can be formally complex • They can have combinatorial variants or “allolexes” (indicated with ~) • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

A previous NSM study (Goddard 2002) dealt with various *on*-constructions of the form [*on* + NP_{THING}] involving physical contact and part-whole relationships between one thing and another, such as *a fly on the wall*, *ring on her finger*, *handle on the door*, *shadow on the wall*. It was argued that there are four discrete but interrelated constructions, all crucially involving the semantic prime TOUCH, along with other elements. The present study deals with *on*-constructions of the form [*on* + NP_{PLACE}], as in examples such as: *on top of the mountain*, *(a house) on the beach*, *on an island*, *on the plains*, *on the street*, and

on a farm. I argue that there are six discrete constructions of this form, and that all of them involve a semantic component involving “laterality”, i.e. the semantic prime SIDE, often in combination with a component involving visibility. For each construction I propose a semantic schema to capture the shared invariant of meaning found across all uses of the construction. The schemas are intended to be predictive of the possible range of uses and interpretations of each construction, while at the same time ruling out unacceptable uses. As far as I know, the proposal that the semantics of this set of expressions is grounded in “laterality” has no antecedent in the literature.

2. “Pure laterality”: *on this side, on all sides, etc.*

Before proceeding to the main analysis, we must treat a usage of English *on* which, paradoxical as it may sound, is non-meaningful. It concerns the “laterality” semantic prime, which has its English lexical exponent in the word SIDE; and more specifically, in the expression ON (THIS) SIDE (Wierzbicka 1996). As this element is pivotal to the present study, it is useful to spend a little while clarifying its nature. To begin with, it is important to recognise that like the other “orientation” primes – ABOVE and BELOW – the prime SIDE is inherently relational, i.e. it requires a relatum (a “landmark”, in cognitive grammar terminology) [Note 1]. Unlike ABOVE and BELOW, however, the relatum of SIDE must always be accompanied by a specifier. In the NSM metalanguage, one cannot speak of something being simply **on side* of something else: it must be *on one side, on this side, on the same side, on all sides, etc.* This combinatorial property of SIDE is regarded in NSM theory as part of the inherent conceptual grammar of laterality, and as such is expected to manifest itself in all languages. In the Australian language Yankunytjatjara (Goddard 1994, 1996), for example, the exponent of the prime SIDE is the word *kampa* ‘side’. As expected, it combines with specifiers such as *nyanga* THIS, *kutju* ONE, and *kutjupa* OTHER to form phrases such as *kampa nyanga-ngka* [side this-locative] ‘on this side’, *kampa kutju-ngka* [side one-locative] ‘on one side’, *kampa kutjupa-ngka* [side other-locative] ‘on the other side’. As far as we know from studies into the manifestation of semantic primes in diverse languages (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 1994, 2002; Goddard ed., 2008), this combinatorial property of SIDE is universal.

The presence of the preposition *on* in English expressions like *on one side, on this side, etc.*, has an entirely different status. This *on* is a bit of purely language-specific morphology, part of the language-specific “clothing” of the prime SIDE as it manifests

itself in one particular language, i.e. English. Though it may be justifiable to speak of it having a “structure-indexing” function of some kind (cf. Goddard 2002), in this context *on* conveys no paraphrasable semantic content. Correspondingly, exponents of SIDE in other languages cannot be expected to exhibit any equivalent to English *on*, and very often they do not. For example, in the Yankunytjatjara examples just cited the closest counterpart to *on* would be the locative case-marker *-ngka*, but this locative marker is found with locational expressions of all kinds [Note 2]. In the isolating language Lao (Enfield 2002: 225-6), the exponent of SIDE – *bùang*⁴ – forms phrases of the expected kind without any accompanying morphological marking, e.g. *bùang*⁴ *diaw*³*kan*³ (*kap*³ *mung*²) [side same (with 2sg)] ‘on the same side (as you)’.

Returning to English examples, then, the claim is that in examples like those in (1), the *on* is not independently meaningful. Rather, it is simply a language-specific reflex of the English exponent of the semantic prime SIDE.

(1) *on this side, on the other side, on two sides, etc.*

Examples like those in (2a) and (2b) clearly derive from the same source, given that words like *left*, *right*, *north*, *south*, *east*, and *west*, obviously contain SIDE as a pivotal component. Indeed, as shown, it is possible to insert the word *side* into such expressions.

(2a) *on the left (side), on the right (side)*

(2b) *on the north (side), on the south (side), etc.*

With this by way of background, we now proceed to the analysis of semantically more complex expressions, where the presence of SIDE as a semantic component is less obvious.

3. *On the top, on the bank, on the edge*

Words like *top* and *bottom* (sometimes termed “oriented regions”), and words like *bank*, *edge* and *outskirts*, occur in *on*-constructions like those in the examples below.

(3a) *on the top of the mountain, on the top of the list*

(3b) *on the bottom of the sea, on the bottom of the page*

(4) *on the bank of the river, on the edge of the cliff, on the outskirts of town*

These usages can be attributed to the presence of the semantic component ON ONE SIDE in the meanings of *top, bottom, bank, edge*, etc. As shown in schema [A] below, words like these designate a place which is part of some other place; and furthermore, which is construed as “laterally oriented” in respect of this other place, i.e. as being ON ONE SIDE of all the other parts of the main place in question. Depending on the word in question, some further specification is also involved. For example, *the top of a mountain* is the part of a mountain which is above all the other parts; *the bottom of the page* is the part of a page which is below all the other parts.

Explication [A] shows how this works for the expression *on top of the mountain*.

[A] *on_A top of the mountain*:

- a. in a place
- b. this place is part of another place (i.e. the mountain),
this place is on one side of all the other parts of this other place
this place is above all the other parts of this other place

Top and *bottom* are the simplest nouns in the class of “laterally-oriented place-paronyms”. Words like *bank, edge, outskirts*, and so on, are more complex, each in its own way. For example, an expression like *on the bank of the river* implies, roughly speaking, a location which is a zone of demarcation: on one side there is water and on the other side there is land. Likewise, if someone is *on the edge of a cliff*, then on one side there is cliff and on the other side there is thin air. It is not practical here to explicate examples of this class of nouns in greater detail, and hopefully it is not necessary. The main point is that laterality is crucially involved if an *on*-construction is used. It is not enough simply that the noun be a place-paronym, as one can see from expressions like *in the middle* (**on the middle*).

4. *a house on the beach, on the town square, on the river*

In a range of other constructions, the presence of SIDE is still less obvious, because it is disguised by other semantically complex components. Expressions like those in (5) and (6) represent one such construction. Notice that, roughly speaking, the landmark NP must have *sides* – either by virtue of being a clearly delineated area, as in the examples in (5), or by being a “linear” feature such a river, road, or border, as in (6) [Note 3]. Areas which

lack clearly delimited boundaries, such as those in (7), are not acceptable in this construction.

- (5) *They had a house on the beach.*
The cafe was right on the town square.
The playground was on the park.
Sydney is on the coast.
Massive warehouses on the seafront store grains, wine and olive oil.
- (6) *I bought a block of land right on the river.*
Unfortunately the apartment building was on the main highway.
The town was on the border.
- (7) **The house was on the woods.*
**They had a house on the desert.*

Importantly, in this construction the NP being located, i.e. the subject NP, must designate a place. This is confirmed by the ungrammaticality of the examples in (8), which otherwise would seem to designate plausible locational scenarios [Note 4].

- (8) **The car was on the river* [about a car parked right beside the river]
**The meeting was on the park* [about a meeting held next to the park]
**The concert was on the town square* [about a concert held next to the town square]

The construction in question indicates a particular kind of spatial relationship between two places: i.e., it situates one place in relation to another. At a first pass, one can say that being *on the beach (river, etc.)*, in the sense under discussion, indicates close proximity and an easy view of the beach (river, etc.). However, there must be more to it than this, if only to rule out unacceptable examples like **a house on the desert*. Consider schema [B] below. According to component (a), *a house on the beach (river, etc.)* locates the house ON ONE SIDE of the *beach (river, etc.)*. This wording implies that the landmark NP (i.e. *the beach, river, etc.*) designates a kind of place which can be conceptualised in terms of

'sides'. Component (b) specifies nearness. Component (c) specifies mutual visual accessibility.

[B] *(place-X) is on_B place-Y =>*

- a. place-X is near place-Y, on one side of place-Y
- b. because of this, people can think about these two places like this:
"when someone is in one of these places, this someone can see the other place"

The component in (b) implies a construal of "visual accessibility" from either direction. Both possibilities seem to be required, albeit that one or the other may be highlighted depending on the linguistic and non-linguistic context. In relation to a sentence like *Goulburn is on the main highway*, one probably thinks at first of the view from the highway, whereas in *Unfortunately the apartment was on the main highway*, the first image that comes to mind is from the perspective of the apartment. The phrase *a house on the river* seems equally compatible with both perspectives, i.e. from the house looking towards the river or from the river looking towards the house (if, for example, one is boating).

The meaning of this construction has been glossed by other writers as "contact or contiguity" with the "edge of a geographical area" (Herskovits 1986: 148; Lindstromberg 1998: 53), but as Herskovits (1986: 148) herself observes, something about the semantics of the construction makes it different from the expression *on the edge of*. The sentence *The cafe was on the park*, for example, is not identical in meaning to *The cafe was on the edge of the park*, because the former sentence implies that the cafe is just outside the park, whereas the latter is compatible with it being either just inside or just outside the park. Schema [B] makes the correct prediction in this respect, because it would not make sense to say that 'place-X is near place-Y', if place-X is already in place-Y.

It could be objected that schema [B] is inconsistent with the acceptability of sentences like *I'll meet you on the beach*, but in this sentence the phrase *on the beach* has a different meaning, described in the next section. To see this, we only have to observe that *meeting someone on the beach* implies meeting them on the sand, but *a house on the beach* is obviously not on the sand. Notice also that the sense described in this section is not compatible with a deictic adverb, cf. **The house was right there on the beach* (roughly, beside the beach), unlike the meaning described in the next section, cf. *We met right there on the beach*.

5. *on an island, on the beach, on Mars*

A third specialised [*on* + NP_{PLACE}] construction is illustrated in (9)-(11). The essential condition is that the landmark expression must be “visibly delineated”, in a sense which I will specify further in a moment. The set of examples in (9) all involve an area of land bounded by a large area of water (*the sea, a lake, river, etc.*). The waterline clearly and visibly delimits the area involved. Notice that it is not necessary for the landmark to be entirely bounded by water, as shown by phrases such as *on the mainland* or *on a promontory*. An interesting fact to be explained is that even if the landmark is an island, this particular *on*-construction cannot be used unless the island is small enough; compare *on Tikopea* (a small island in the Pacific) vs. **on Tasmania* (the large southern island state of Australia).

- (9) *It's different when you're living on an island.*
It was raining on the mainland.
The lighthouse was situated on the peninsula.
We used to go for holidays on the south coast.
We met on the beach.

The use of *on* in phrases such as *on the Moon, on Mars*, and the other examples in (10), falls into the same construction type—because when we see the Moon or visualise the planets, etc., we see or visualise them sharply outlined against the night sky or against the darkness of space. In both these kinds of examples, the “sharp outline” effect makes the landmark place look a bit like a physical object [Note 5].

- (10) *on the Moon*
on Mars, Venus, etc.
on Earth
on an unknown planet

Though they are applicable to very different real-world situations, the examples in (11) belong to the same construction type. Again, the place in question (i.e. the *road, runway, etc.*) is sharply visibly delineated.

- (11) *on the road*
on the runway
on the tarmac

I would like to propose the schema in [C]. It is intended to capture the notion that we have conventional visual images of certain kinds of places, namely, an image of them being surrounded by something ‘on all sides’. Notice that the phrase ‘on all sides’ is not meant to imply that there are multiple sides involved. It just means that whatever sides there are, they are visibly bounded by something. A *coast* or *mainland*, for example, has only one salient side, which has something (i.e. the sea) all along it; a *peninsula* has two sides with the sea on both of them (presumably *both* = ALL TWO, cf. French *tous les deux* ‘all two’), while a (small) *island* or a *planet* appears fully surrounded.

[C] *X is on_C place-Y =>*

- a. X is in a place, this place is of kind-Y
- b. people can think about places of this kind like this:
 “when someone sees a place like this, this someone can see something on all sides of it”

It is important to emphasise that the critical thing is not the nature of the intended referent in an objective sense, but rather the way in which the referent is being conceptualised or construed. This accounts for the unacceptability (at least to Australians) of phrases such as **on Tasmania* [Note 6]. Some island places, such as *Crete* and *Malta*, are capable of being conceptualised either way: as places, countries or regions (*in Crete, in Malta*) or as islands in the sea (*on Crete, on Malta*). Consider also the expressions *the world* and *Earth*. In contexts such as (12), they could be taken as designating the same real-world referent, but the appropriate prepositional phrases are *on Earth* and *in the world*. Consistent with schema [C], the former expression represents the referent as “bounded” and “contained”, as shown also by the acceptability contrasts in (13a) and (13b).

(12) *By the year 2000, there’ll be 6 billion people on Earth/in the world.*

(13a) *in the whole wide world, in all the world*

(13b) **on the whole wide earth, *on all the earth*

5. *on the plains, on the open seas*

In this construction, the landmark NP designates a broad area of land or water, as in (14) and (15), with the implication that in a place like this one can see far and wide. It is not enough that the NP denote a broad geographical area, even a more-or-less open one, such as a desert (cf. **on the desert*), without the additional implication of sweeping views.

- (14) *on the slopes*
on the plains
on the moors
on the open seas

- (15) *on the prairie*
on the ice cap

In support of the “wide visibility” factor, I would like to adduce some fairly subtle facts. For example, the expression *on the open sea* sounds fine, because the word *open* implies breadth of vision, so to speak. Without the modifier, however, the phrase ?*on the sea* does not sound nearly as natural (in the required reading). Similarly, if one enjoys sailing, it sounds fine to speak of *going out on the bay* or *going out on the harbour*, since a *bay* or *harbour* normally presents unimpeded views in all directions; but phrases such as ?*out on the inlet* and ?*out on the canal* sound peculiar, because the words *inlet* and *canal* suggest a narrow strip of water.

With these considerations in mind, I would suggest [Note 7]:

[D] *X is on_D place-Y =>*

- a. X is in a place, this place is of kind-Y
- b. people can think about places of this kind like this:
“when someone is in a place like this, this someone can see far on all sides”

8. *on the street, on the corner*

In an incident reported in the Australian newspapers back in January 2003, a prominent Islamic cleric was stopped by police for a traffic offence. They wanted to *search him on*

the street, but, fearing the consequences if the search was seen in progress, the mufti told them that he would prefer to be searched *in a side street*. This contrast nicely illustrates a further *on*-construction which involves “easy visibility to onlookers”. (Notice the presence of *on* in the word *onlooker*, and in phrases such as *on view*, *on show*, *on display*, and *on stage*.)

The intriguing thing about this construction is that it is so restricted. Why should this be so, if it were just a matter of easy visibility (roughly, ‘many people can see it’)? In my view, the requirement is not just that something *on a street* or *on a corner* be easily visible, but that it be easily visible from different directions, i.e. from different sides. I would therefore propose the schema in [E].

[E] *X is on_E place-Y =>*

- a. X is in a place, this place is of kind-Y
- b. people can think about places of this kind like this:
“when something is in a place of this kind, people on many sides can see it”

In this connection, notice the contrast between the expressions *on/*in the corner (of the street)* and *in/*on the corner (of the room)*. In the former case, one expects visibility from different sides, while in the latter this is not possible.

There is, plainly, a close resemblance between schemas [D] and [E]. Schema [D] concerns the capacity to see on all sides when in a certain kind of place, whereas [E] concerns the capacity for something in a certain kind of place to be seen, if not from all sides, then at least from multiple different directions.

9. *working on a farm, living on one’s father’s land*

In general terms, the ambit of this *on*-construction is not difficult to characterise. The NP must designate an area which is both very clearly defined and dedicated to a certain kind of human activity. For example, a *farm* is a well-defined area dedicated to cultivating animals or crops; a *building site* is a well-defined area dedicated to construction work; a *campus* is a well-defined area dedicated to higher-level teaching activities. See the examples in (16). The examples in (17) are not exactly the same construction, since they do not involve a full NP capable of being individualised with specifiers and modifiers, but their underlying semantics are similar, in that they designate bounded areas dedicated to specific kinds of activity.

- (16) *on a farm*
on a building site
on the UNE campus
on the estate
on a military base
on a reservation

- (17) *on the set (of a movie)*
on court
on the field (of play)

The acceptability of a seemingly “generic” NP such as *land* might seem to pose problems for my characterisation, as do nouns such as *home ground* and *block*, which apparently do not imply any specific purposes.

- (18) *on his father’s land*
on vacant Crown land

- (19) *The stage is set for a triumph on home ground.*
He’s the new kid on the block.
on American soil

However, I would argue that the word *land* implies some kind of potential usefulness to people, as indicated by the oddity of expressions like **the land in Antarctica* and **the land on the Moon*. As for *home ground* and *block*, although no specific purpose is implied here, they have in common the fact that they are reserved for a certain specific group of people.

Provisionally then, I propose the following schema.

[F] $X \text{ is } on_f \text{ place-}Y \Rightarrow$

- a. X is in a place, this place is of kind-Y
- b. people can think about places of this kind like this:
- c. “there is something on all sides of (= all around) of a place of this kind
- d. when some people are in this place, these people can do things of some kinds they can’t do things like this when they are in other places”

The component in (c) captures the idea of an area which is clearly-defined by a “boundary” of some kind. The wording is vague enough to accommodate a physical boundary, such as a fence, or an abstract boundary, such as a line on a map. Note that the boundary does not have to be clearly visible, as was the case with schema [C]. The components in (d) specify that the area must be reserved or dedicated for a certain people to undertake certain kinds of purposes. Such a component is necessary to account for the fact that this *on*-construction cannot be extended to just any well-bounded area, cf. **on Texas, *on this suburb, *on this precise area.*

This completes the analysis of the six “laterality” *on*-constructions.

10. Comparison with other approaches

The analyses proposed in the present study enable a much better fit to the data and improved predictiveness than previous treatments. To make this point clearer, I will conclude with a brief review of the abstract geometric approach of Herskovits (1986) and the cognitive prototype analysis of Navarro i Ferrando (1998). [Note 8]

Herskovits (1986: 140) adopts the following “ideal meaning” for *on*:

on: for a geometrical construct X to be contiguous with a line or surface Y; if Y is the surface of an object O, and X is the space occupied by another object O_X, for O_Y to support O_X.

Aside from its psychological implausibility and the complex metalanguage, this representation is only weakly predictive of the [*on* + NP_{PLACE}] constructions considered in the present paper. Herskovits (1986: 147-8) tries to accommodate some of them under three specialised “use types” related to locations: “spatial entity located on geographical location” (*on the football field, on a small island, on the next block*), “physical object contiguous with edge of a geographical area” (*on the main square, on the freeway, on Polk Street*), and “physical or geometrical object contiguous with a line” (*on the equator, on the border, on the edge*). The last of these categories seems straightforwardly related to her posited “ideal meaning”, but the same can hardly be said of the other two. In relation to the first, Herskovits offers no explanation as to why *on* should be usable to indicate

“simple location in an area” (p.147), nor any account of why some “geographical locations” are permissible in the construction and others are not.

In relation to her second category, the reference to an “edge” provides some link with the idea of a “line or surface”, but Herskovits offers no explanation as to why certain geographical areas are permissible and others are not. For example, why not **on America*, **on the city*, **on the desert*, **on the suburb*, **on the area*? As for examples such as *on the Moon* and *on the plains*, Herskovits omits these altogether, perhaps regarding them as too “idiomatic” (cf. p.127). Commenting on this style of abstract geometric description, Narravo i Ferrando (1998: 767) rightly remarks: “no one whose native language is not English can rely on this description in order to use these prepositions properly in the majority of contexts”.

Narravo i Ferrando’s (1998) own prototype-with-extensions analysis has the potential for a more fine-grained account, but it is undermined by a casual approach to grouping and a lack of explicitness. For *on* generally, he proposes a primary image-schema involving support, contact, and control, but then he goes on to claim (p.773) that the following list of “more or less fixed collocations” can all be regarded as direct applications this primary schema: (a) “geographical locations like mountains, hills, rocks, ledges, knolls, elevations in general, islands, peninsula, promontories, capes, the coast, etc.” No rationale is offered for this open-ended list (notice the “etc.”). A second list is given as follows: (b) “the ground in general, or words denoting pieces of it: including plain, land, campus, prairie, grass, etc. as well as farm, reservation, property etc., as a piece of land, including also the earth, planets, and other heavenly bodies”.

Both these lists lump together usages which, as shown in the present study, belong to semantically distinct categories. For example, they do not discriminate between *on a mountain* and *on an island*, which are both included in list (a), or between *on the plains* and *on a farm*, which are both included in list (b). Furthermore, because Narravo i Ferrando (1998) regards all these uses as straightforward instantiations of the ‘support, contact and control’ schema, he does not go on to identify their specific semantic content; for example, the roles played by visibility components of various kinds. For this reason, I doubt that his analysis would satisfy his own requirement of enabling a non-native speaker to use preposition *on* properly in a majority of contexts.

As for the paraphrase schemas proposed in the present study, I believe that they can achieve this goal because they can enable second-language learners to take the essential first step which is to understand the meanings encoded these apparently idiosyncratic

usages. If linguistic analyses are to claim to cognitive reality, they ought to be prepared to submit to the “reality check” of pedagogical application. Whether or not the present analysis meets this requirement in practice awaits applied research in the language teaching classroom.

In the meantime, we can conclude that identifying and explicating a number of discrete but interrelated constructions delivers greater detail and clarity, and a much tighter fit on the data, than alternative approaches.

11. Concluding remarks

Six English-specific [*on* + NP_{PLACE}] constructions have been identified and described in this study. It has been shown that all crucially involve the laterality prime SIDE. As far as I know, this is the first time that it has been proposed that this collection of constructions constitutes a semantically coherent network, and the first time that laterality (SIDE) has been identified as the foundational semantic element of the expressions under consideration.

The presence of *on* in these English constructions can be seen as a kind of morphological reflex or “echo” of the SIDE component, given that the English exponent of SIDE canonically occurs in phrasemes formed with *on*, i.e. *on one side*, *on all sides*, etc.

In the larger polysemic network of prepositional *on* in English, it would appear that the laterality constructions described in this study and the physical contact constructions described in Goddard (2002) constitute rather distinct “zones” [Note 9]. Some limited semantic bridging is provided by the visibility prime SEE, which occurs as a secondary component in several of the laterality constructions and in one of the physical contact constructions.

There are now three NSM studies addressing different areas of the English spatial *on* network: the present study, Goddard (2002), and Wierzbicka (1988: 169-236), which includes a treatment of specialised *on*-constructions concerned with contact and effect on the human body, e.g. *a pat on the back*, *a dog bit her on the leg*. Taken together, these three studies describe most, if not all, *on*-constructions connected with contact and/or with location. Though a number of other constructions in the physical and mental realms remain to be treated, e.g. *on a plane*, *on the telephone*, *a talk on semantics*, it is clear that the strategy adopted by these studies is producing results (cf. also Wierzbicka 1993 on temporal *on*-constructions). Gradually the tangled network of polysemy is being

disentangled, and its true structure – as an array of discrete but cross-cutting semantic schemas, revealed.

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Notes

Note 1: This point is sometimes misunderstood on account of the fact that, in addition to the relational expression *on one side (of)*, English (like many, but not all, other languages) also has a noun *side*. The noun *side* essentially refers to a ‘part’ of a thing or place which is ‘on one side’ of that thing or place; i.e. the meaning of the noun *side* is more complex than, and is based upon, the relational meaning ON ONE SIDE.

Note 2: The presence of preposition *on* in English *on this side*, *on the other side*, etc. can be compared with the presence of preposition *in* in the English expression *in this place*. Both are language-specific. In Yankunytjatjara, for example, comparable expressions with *ngura* PLACE, e.g. *ngura nyanga-ngka* ‘in this place’, are formed with the same locative case-marker *-ngka* as found with the laterality prime.

Note 3: The phrases *sun on the horizon*, and *a point on a line* are not examples of this construction. Instead they belong to the “visual resemblance to contact” construction explicated as [D] in Goddard (2002). Notice that for these examples, the located object (*sun*, *point*) must be or appear to be actually touching the reference object (*the horizon*, *the line*), whereas with *on the equator* or *on the border*, it is sufficient to be very near but not exactly coincident.

Note 4: Herskovits (1986: 91) describes this selectional restriction as: “the located objects must be fixed and relatively large”; but it seems clear that words like *house*, *cafe*, and *apartment building* are thought of primarily as designating places (‘somewhere people can live’, etc.), rather than as objects (‘things’). Conversely, *monuments* are indeed large, fixed objects, but one cannot speak of **the monument on the square*, in the sense under consideration.

Note 5: Navarro i Ferrando (1998: 780) also recognises a distinct sense for *on* in relation to the landmarks *street*, *square*, *park*, *lake*, *road*, *river*, *sea*, *bay*, *coast*, *shore*, and *beach*:

“the reason for a new sense is ... the fact that its limits are clearly defined against the background”.

Note 6: The phrases *on the North Island* and *on the South Island*, in relation to New Zealand, sound fine despite the large size of the islands. Perhaps this is just because the names include the word *island*. In any case, I would say that it is a part of my visual image of New Zealand that the main islands have water on all sides, because they are conspicuously located in the middle of a vast ocean.

Note 7: It is not known at present whether the combination ‘see far’ is a viable part of the natural semantic metalanguage, i.e. whether it is possible to combine exponents of the semantic primes see and far in this fashion in all languages. If this proves not to be possible, the component could be re-phrased as follows: ‘this someone can see things on all sides; these things can be far from the place where this someone is’.

Note 8: Although Levinson et al. (2003) includes some coverage of “on constructions”, it would be out of place to review their study here because, due to their referentialist or extensionalist methodology, the authors do not offer cognitive interpretations of the phenomena they describe. In my opinion, moreover, Levinson et al.’s methodology is flawed at the descriptive level by its failure to take sufficient account of lexical polysemy.

Note 9: A third broad class of *on*-constructions, exemplified in phrases like *on a trip*, *on duty*, *on a diet*, (*a talk*) *on semantics*, seems to be based on the duration prime FOR SOME TIME together with some notion of selective focus (e.g. ‘doing this, not doing other things’ ‘thinking about this, not about other things’; ‘saying things about this, not about other things’). In this case, the element FOR SOME TIME is shared with the “*on* of contact” constructions. This topic demands separate treatment.

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