A Cognitive–Semantic Account for English Particles

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1. Introduction

It has been widely accepted that phrasal verbs are multi-word units consisting of a verb followed by an adverbial particle with a spatial or locative meaning (e.g., out, up, down, back, away, etc.). When combined together, they (verb and particle combinations) represent single semantic units with extended meanings that cannot be derived from the individual meanings of the parts. Thus, it can be said that phrasal verbs are one of the most productive patterns (or creative resources) of the English language in that new combinations are easily created by attaching adverbial particles to verbs (e.g., turn down, take off, come across, etc.) to express some new concepts. In this sense, the verb–particle combinations to form different lexical categories should be seen as the creative processes of new ideas. Based on a cognitive–functional approach, this study attempts to demonstrate why a particular set of particles (i.e., out, up, down, off, away, etc.) is often used to combine with a particular verb. It suggests that the frequent use of the limited set of particles is closely related to their cognitively–semantically salient properties.

Cognitive linguistics has focused on the notion of construal and has taken a multifactorial approach involving parameters with structural as well as extralinguistic relevance (e.g., Croft 1991, Hopper and Thomson...
1980, Langacker 1987, 1991, Givón 1995, Taylor 2002). A crucial motivation underlying the cognitive approach is that the grammatical categories of syntactic constructions have both syntactic and semantic attributes. Cognitive linguists claim that the statement of a construction’s formal aspects is linked to a statement of its meaning, which may include information on conditions and context of use. One of major hypotheses of the cognitive linguistic approach, according to Croft and Cruse (2004), is that categories and structures in semantics, syntax, morphology and phonology are built up from our cognition of specific utterances on specific occasions of language use. Cognitive linguists also argue that knowledge of meaning and form is basically conceptual structure. Croft and Cruse (2004: 2) state that “language is the real-time perception and production of a temporal sequence of discrete, structured symbolic units”. In this respect, a central claim of cognitive grammar is that “symbolic units figure in the proper description of grammatical structure, and consequently that all valid grammatical constructs have some kind of conceptual import” (Langacker 2002: 209).

In the cognitive grammar, according to Langacker (1987), the semantic value of an expression is equated with conceptualization (or mental experience) to be explicated in terms of cognitive processing. Meaning is characterized relative to cognitive domains, “where a domain can be any sort of conceptualization: a perceptual experience, a concept, a conceptual complex, an elaborate knowledge system, etc.” (Langacker 1991: 3). In this view, grammar is conceived of as a conceptual structuring system which is fully reducible to symbolic relationships within cognitive domains (Langacker 1987, 1991, 2002, Taylor 1995, Talmy, 2000, 2003). This implies that the cognitive approach views a construction as the pairing of a specification of form with a specification of meaning, making an attempt to seek evidence on how we conceptualize linguistic behaviors and categorize extra-linguistic phenomena through language.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the application of the cognitive framework to the relationship between the high frequency of a limited set of particles in verb–particle constructions and their cognitively motivated meanings. In this study, the terms such as ‘a cognitive