Metonymical object changes: a corpus-oriented study on Dutch and German
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IX. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The present dissertation in a nutshell

Metonymy is not a figure of speech, but rather a cognitive-linguistic mechanism. In chapter II, metonymy was described as a contiguity based figure/ground effect within a frame, which could also be defined as a frame-internal highlighting. This dissertation has shown that this highlighting effect should be analysed semasiologically, shifting meaning or perspective, as well as onomasiologically, shifting the expressions used.

Metonymy is a pervasive mechanism, visible on all linguistic levels. Chapter III disentangled the different metonymical effects and in chapter IV dictionary data were used to illustrate different types of metonymy. This chapter showed that lexicographers and lexicologists were ahead of their time in recognising many grammatical phenomena as metonymy-based. This especially applies to instances of so-called “objectsverwisseling” or “Objektsvertauschung”, i.e. Metonymical Object Changes (MOCs).

Chapters V-VIII analysed this specific type of metonymy. MOCs are metonymical, because they are contiguity-based shifts of a verb’s direct object slot. They are therefore predicative metonymies that affect the direct object slot.

Chapter V discussed a number of general characteristic of MOCs. It was argued that, in line with Dutch and German dictionaries, alternating syntactic patterns such as locative alternations, material-product alternations or logical metonymy should all be considered MOCs. They are all qualitative shifts of the direct object, based upon an underlying contiguity relation. To a large extent, the contiguity relations that were found correspond to Peirsman and Geeraerts’ prototypically structured category of contiguity relations. It was also shown that MOCs occur frequently with particle verbs and especially with those particle verbs that express some separation, because the particle endorses the contiguity relation between the two possible direct objects and their relevance in the verbal context. Apart from single objects and their constituent parts, other frequently occurring contiguity types are, for example, concrete objects and the holes in those objects and fire or objects that are on fire.

Chapter VI showed that MOCs should be analysed as shifts of the direct object slot of a single verb. MOCs must be analysed as contiguity-driven because they are restricted by the contiguity relations of the NPs, and MOCs form a continuum with all kinds of metonymical shifts.

Chapter VI also showed some reasons for using or avoiding MOCs. First of all, MOCs can only be used if both direct objects are equally important in the verbal action. If they are, there may be reasons to select one type of direct object over another. Besides affected objects, results of verbal actions are, for example, often selected as direct objects. This not only explains MATERIAL-PRODUCT MOCs but also some LOCATUM-LOCATION MOCs which often shift to an affected location serving as the goal of the verbal action. Secondly, MOCs are avoided when two comparable gestalts are relevant in the verbal action, as with to pour, schenken and
gießen. These verbs can only be used with a direct object referring to a container if it is clear which container is intended. Thirdly, confusion whether a certain thing is the location or the locatum should also be avoided. This explains why de tafel ruimen / den Tisch räumen cannot be used for de tafel afruimen / den Tisch abräumen and why to remove cannot be used with a location-object.

Chapter VII focussed on eventive MOCs, i.e. logical metonymy. Corpus data revealed that, as is also the case with other MOCs, logical metonymy results from the interaction of verb and direct object. Some categories of concrete objects occur more frequently in phrases exhibiting logical metonymy than others, and the interpretation is dependent on the types of object, which indicates that, in all probability, some metonymical associations are stronger than others.

Chapter VIII showed that MOCs could be considered to be highlighting particular parts of a frame. A verb allowing MOC either involves an embedded activity-element or evokes a general scenario, in which an onomasiological highlighting of a particular participant as a direct object semasiologically specifies the perspective of the VP.

2. MOCs: Object Changes involving Metonymy

This dissertation has demonstrated that the possibility of shifting a direct object depends on the contiguity relation between one direct object and another object, and the relevance of both of them in relation to the verb. In the case of logical metonymy, most scholars do not doubt the fact that contiguity underlies the shift. I have shown that for other shifts contiguity also constrains the possibility of using two types of direct objects. MOCs are only allowed, if both possible direct objects are conceivable as a single gestalt which is relevant to the verbal action, and MOCs cannot always be distinguished from other metonymical shifts (cf. chapter IV, §3.3 and chapter VI, §4.4).

Interestingly, even studies that do not analyse these shifts as involving metonymy describe the close relation between both direct objects. These studies sometimes even mention the exact contiguity patterns.

One of the first studies on the locative alternation, for instance, has the meaningful title The grammar of ‘content’ and ‘container’ (Schwartz-Norman 1976). In her discussion of the locative alternation, Levin refers to ‘locatum’ arguments (things and substances) and ‘location’ arguments (containers and surfaces), thereby implicitly pointing to the relationship between the direct objects (Levin 1993: 50). Dewell describes the contrast between German be-verbs and a morphologically simple verb with a location-DO in terms of a classical part-whole-relationship: He states that the simplex verbs with location-DO present the locatum “like a new component part of the transformed object rather than a set of alien intruders from outside” (2004: 33, emphasis in the original).

I have clarified that the PART-WHOLE relation is not just a matter of presentation, but that it actually applies in a more fundamental way: For instance, a locative alternation with a morphologically simple verb is only possible if the locatum is, or
will become, a real component part of the location. Two entities which are related before the verbal action has been accomplished in particular allow MOC, because the verbal action is conceptualised as applying to a single entity. This also explains why morphologically complex verbs with particles such as *af-*/ *ab-* and *uit-*/ *aus-* occur so frequently in MOCs (cf. chapter V, §6.5).

Mentioning contiguity relations is not the only implicit description of the metonymy involved. Some scholars use terminology that directly fits metonymy research. Dewell implicitly gives a description of the metonymy involved, when he writes about a shift of focal attention in a conceptual frame (2004: 31), which exactly matches Waltereit’s description of figure/ground effect based on contiguity within a verb’s frame (1999: 238).

The analysis presented in chapter VIII, which is supported by FrameNet, follows Waltereit’s analysis, without however adopting Waltereit’s claim that synchronically no metonymy but only verbal polysemy is involved. I have shown that the contiguity relations between the direct objects is still of crucial importance, and that there is no real difference between occasional MOCs and conventionalised ones. Polysemy does not have to be assumed, given that the verb refers to a single action. This is supported by the intransitive use of a verb, by examples with coordinated objects and by the combination of some verbs with their gestalts themselves. Regarding those verbs as polysemous poses difficulties, because it is problematic to know which of its assumed senses a verb is carrying in those examples.

Iwata also rejects the assumption that alternations have to lead to polysemy of the verb itself (Iwata 2005: 361), but he does not directly analyse locative alternations as metonymical. However, Iwata makes use of metonymical terminology: He speaks about gestalt shifts (Iwata 2005: 370) and highlighting effects (Iwata 2005: 381). Since Iwata applies these terms to the combination of verb and DO, his account is substantially agrees with the concept of predicative metonymy (a shift of the DO-slot) as expounded in this thesis. Although he does not explicitly describe the two objects as belonging to one gestalt, the gestalt-like character of the two verb-DO combinations (i.e. the two VPs) implicitly supports my assumption that the two possible objects can be seen as a conceptual unit.

Iwata also recognises the importance of the possible direct objects and the relationship between them. He remarks, for instance, that alternations are “effected by the contribution of NPs and PPs” (Iwata 2008: 20) and that “different configurations” of the objects involved lead to different possibilities for a direct object alternation (Iwata 2008: 72). Brinkmann also explicitly notes that some verbs only occur in alternations with certain types of nouns (cf. Brinkmann 1995: 56). Accounts which purely focus on the semantics of a verb run into problems explaining this.

Iwata notes, furthermore (2005: 370), that in line with his own account, even Pinker speaks about “the ability of a predicate to support this gestalt shift” (Pinker 1989: 79). Since Pinker analyses the locative alternation as a meaning extension of the predicate, he actually makes the paradoxical claim that the basic meaning of the predicate supports a lexical extension of this predicate. If the meaning is more precisely located in the combination of the verb and direct object (as Iwata does) and
not just in the verb, Pinker’s gestalt shift is in line with my analysis: the DO-slot of the verb can be changed based on the fact that both types of direct object form one gestalt (i.e. one conceptual entity) in the frame evoked by the verb.