Metonymical object changes: a corpus-oriented study on Dutch and German

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SUMMARY

Some verbs can be combined with different types of direct objects, even though they refer to a single action. Examples in English are to load goods / a ship; to plant roses / a garden; to clear snow / the pavement; to pluck feathers / a duck; to spin yarn / wool; to continue writing / the book; to enjoy reading / the book. Some Dutch and German dictionaries classify these combinations as “objectswisseling” or “Objektsvertauschung”. I will refer to this as “Metonymical Object Changes” (MOCs).

MOC often occurs with verbs that refer to situations in which objects are separated or put together. It also occurs in cases in which something is made out of something else. The first set of object changes is known in linguistic literature as transitive locative alternations, the second as material-product alternations. A third set of object changes occurs with verbs that can be combined with either an activity or with an object that plays a role in this activity. Examples taken from Dutch dictionaries are het schrijven continuar / het boek continuar (‘to continue writing / the book’); de presentatie onderbreken / de spreker onderbreken (‘to interrupt the presentation / the speaker’) and de wedstrijd afvlaggen / de coureurs afvlaggen (‘to flag down the race’/ “to flag down the racing drivers”). Since the early nineties linguists have analysed these examples as “logical metonymy”.

The notion “metonymy” is interesting, because lexicographers define MOC as a specific instance of metonymy. However, transitive locative alternations and material-product alternations are seldom analysed by linguists as involving metonymy. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to answer the question of whether MOCs can be explained in terms of metonymy.

For this purpose, chapter II first gives an overview of how metonymy is defined by linguists. Metonymy was originally regarded as a rhetorical and literary figure of speech. However, metonymy is so pervasive in language that linguists no longer regard metonymy as a stylistic device. Everyday expressions like reading Shakespeare for ‘reading Shakespeare’s books’ or drinking a whole bottle for ‘drinking what is in the bottle’ support this view. In particular cognitive linguists analyse metonymy in normal language use. They describe metonymy as a cognitive-linguistic mechanism that leads to an association between two concepts. This association is based on ‘closeness in reality’, also referred to as contiguity. Metonymy influences language and language use. This influence is analysed as a so-called ‘figure-ground effect’ (a gestalt switch) or as ‘highlighting’ in a conceptual structure (such as a ‘frame’). I have argued that influence on language by metonymy must be analysed semasiologically as well as onomasiologically. A semasiological analysis of metonymy starts with a linguistic sign and analyses its meaning (from a given form to its meaning), while an onomasiological analysis takes as its starting point the communicative purpose and works towards the words selected (from
intended meaning to form). In reading Shakespeare this means that not only has the interpretation of “Shakespeare” been metonymically shifted to ‘books by Shakespeare’, but also the choice of the expression “Shakespeare” rather than “books by Shakespeare” is determined by metonymy.

Chapter III analyses in which ways metonymy precisely influences language and language use. Taken together chapters II and III form the theoretical basis of this study and they will be of interest to every linguist who is interested in metonymy in general. Table 1 on page 84 gives an overview of all types of metonymical influences on language. The classification in this table is solely based on past linguistic literature. The table shows that linguists also analyse grammatical structures, such as the particular type of direct object, as metonymy-based. These metonymies are called predicative metonymies (cf. table 1, page 84).

Chapter IV contains an analysis of which metonymical influences on languages are explicitly described in Dutch and German dictionaries. For this purpose, I have looked at the older German dictionaries by Adelung and by the Grimm brothers (Deutsches Wörterbuch). For Dutch the traditional WNT and the modern dictionary by Van Dale have been used. Almost every type of metonymy appears to be marked in these dictionaries (cf. table 2, page 97). In this chapter I also consider how dictionaries describe tagged metonymies that determine the combination of a verb and certain types of direct object (i.e. MOCs). It turns out that in the vast majority of cases lexicographers of these dictionaries treat an MOC under one general meaning description. This would make the verbs non-polysemous. Linguistic tests support this view.

From chapter V onwards MOCs are analysed in detail. In chapter V, I discuss which examples are labelled MOC in dictionaries. Lists of the verbs from the dictionaries are found in the appendix (page 341ff). On the basis of these examples I analyse some characteristics of MOCs which distinguish them from other semantic-syntactic phenomena. This analysis shows that not all examples in dictionaries are clear or even real examples of MOC. Also, the list of verbs taken from dictionaries is far from complete. Therefore, I examine in this chapter which types of verbs allow MOC. Many linguists have argued that particle verbs often allow two different types of direct objects. I show that this is not caused by the particle itself, but by the meaning of the particle verb as a semantic unit. This view is supported by the fact that synonymous verbs, which do not contain a particle, exhibit the same MOCs.

In addition, I show that it is not only particular types of verbs but also particular types of direct objects that often occur in MOCs. A classification of verb classes is not sufficient; MOCs can also be classified according to the relationships between their possible direct objects. This classification shows that these relations are the same as in classical metonymies, as in the reading Shakespeare or drinking a whole bottle examples. Figure 5 on page 171 and table 8 on page 173 illustrate this.
The following chapters (VI-IX) contain the core of the analysis of MOCs. **Chapter VI** analyses the first two groups of MOCs, the transitive locative alternations and the material-product alternation. **Chapter VII** analyses eventive MOCs, i.e. examples of logical metonymy. Both chapters are based on corpus data.

These chapters also discuss some methodological issues. Firstly, chapter VI shows that it is important to determine whether the other object must be expressed in the sentence, for instance in a prepositional phrase (e.g. *to load goods into the ship* / *the ship with goods*). In clear examples of MOC, the other possible object does not have to be realised, it is optional. Secondly, chapter VI also shows that the comparison of shifted direct objects with two different verbs are misrepresentative. Surprisingly, some scholars contrast different verbs in Dutch and German in their research on MOC-structures, although real alternation are two different possible argument structures of a single verb. Thirdly, chapter VII discusses to what extent corpus data can be used in a linguistic analysis of these phenomena. It explains the notion “**corpus-oriented**” in the title.

Chapters VI and VII primarily analyse characteristics of MOCs themselves. In line with the arguments in chapter V, the data confirm first of all that MOCs are determined by contiguity. It is the relationship between both objects that determines whether MOC is possible or not. This is illustrated by the fact that some verbs do allow MOCs but not with all kinds of direct object nouns.

Secondly, I show that MOCs exist in a continuum with other kinds of metonymies. Although MOCs are not prototypical metonymies -in which the interpretation of a specific metonymical word is shifted-, they cannot always be distinguished from these cases of metonymy. This therefore supports the metonymical nature of MOCs. Also, MOCs are determined to the same extent by contiguity as classical metonymies.

Thirdly, I make clear that the meaning of the verb also plays an important role. The relevance of the contiguity relation with respect to the meaning of the verb determines MOC.

The meaning of some verbs is therefore discussed in detail. **Table 9** on page 214 provides an overview of Dutch *vullen*, German *füllen* and the morphologically derived particle verbs; **table 10** on page 227 illustrates the meaning and use of Dutch *laden* and German *laden*; **table 11** on page 229 does the same for Dutch *pakken* and German *packen*; and **table 12** on page 232 for Dutch *smeren* and German *schmieren*. These tables confirm that the contiguity relation between the direct object nouns within a particular meaning of the verb is crucial.

The same point is made clear in the discussion of logical metonymies. **Table 16** on page 274 shows that certain types of concrete direct object nouns occur frequently in combination with verbs that, from a semantic point of view, require an event as their direct object. Also, the interpretation of the verb and the concrete direct object noun depends on both: The verb and the concrete object noun determine together which events are often inferred. This again shows that MOCs depend on an interplay between verb and direct object noun.

Fourthly, I discuss some reasons for opting for a particular type of direct object. I also discuss some restrictions on MOC. Many object changes occur with a direct
object noun that refers to the result of the action expressed by the verb. This makes sense, because our actions are in general intentional and therefore they are focused on a result. The change between a certain direct object and a result is immediately clear in the material-product alternation, but also in locative alternations results often occur as direct objects. For example, in to pack a suitcase the suitcase is not only an object which refers to the location of the things packed; the suitcase which is being packed is also the goal of the ‘packing’. It is even often difficult to tell whether we are dealing with a locative alternation or material-product alternation, as is the case with to press (out). Also the third group of MOCs, which shift between a concrete object and an event, often focuses on the result. In most cases, the additional event which is interpreted is a so-called agentive action (cf. page 237 and table 16 on page 274). In those cases the concrete object is the end result.

Contiguity between the concepts of the direct object nouns is not the only restriction on MOC; the two potential objects should also be equally important in the action referred to by the verb. This explains, for example, why the verb to fill and also the Dutch verb vullen do not allow a noun denoting the content of a container as its direct object: Because to fill means ‘to cause a container to become full’ the container is more important than its content. The behaviour of German füllen is different, which is in line with the fact that in German also the verb voll füllen (‘to fill full’) exists: The non-redundancy of voll füllen shows that füllen has a slightly different meaning than ‘to cause a container to become full’. The focus of füllen is not entirely on the container, which explains why füllen can be combined with a direct object noun denoting content.

Languages generally avoid the use of a direct object when it can be interpreted as the wrong type. I refer to this principle as “avoidance of ambiguity-of-DO-type”. This principle explains, for instance, why we cannot use to remove the table for ‘to remove things from the table’, even though we can use to clear the table for ‘to clear things from the table’. The phrase to remove the table would be interpreted as meaning that the table itself is removed. The object change is less problematic with to clear, because this verb is frequently used for taking objects away from a table. In this context, the table will therefore not be interpreted as the object that is taken away. The different possible objects with Dutch ruimen and afruimen and with German räumen and abräumen illustrate this principle even better: The verbs ruimen and räumen allow MOC with, for instance, snow and the location of the snow but not with the things on a table and the table. Phrases such as de tafel ruimen in Dutch and den Tisch räumen in German would be interpreted as removing the table itself. The object change is unproblematic with Dutch afruimen and German abräumen, because these verbs are always used in the context of taking objects away from a table.

Objects that may cause confusion are also avoided with verbs such as schenken, gießen or to pour. These verbs refer to the action of pouring some liquid from one container into another. They are therefore hardly ever combined with a noun denoting a container as their direct object, because in most cases it will not be clear whether this is the container which is poured out or the one which is filled by the ‘pouring’-action. If there is a clear focus on one of the two containers, the verb can
be used with a container as a direct object, as is the case in *to pour someone another cup*.

**Chapter VIII** models the analysis of chapters II-VI in a frame semantic approach. This chapter shows that the definition of metonymy in chapter II as a ‘highlighting’-effect gives a good account of MOCs. Every type of MOC, including logical metonymy, can be explained in the same way, viz. as a highlighting effect in a frame. In addition to this, it turns out that a number of predictions on the basis of this model fit the actual data. An example of this is that logical metonymy should not only be possible between an event and an object involved in this event, but also between an event and the agent of this event. Examples such as *de presentatie onderbreken / de spreker onderbreken* (’to interrupt the presentation / the speaker’) and *de wedstrijd afvlaggen / de coureurs afvlaggen* (’to flag down the race’/ “to flag down the racing drivers”) are exactly of this type.

**Chapter IX** gives an overview of the findings of this study. In this dissertation I have shown in a cognitive linguistic way that MOCs are of a metonymical nature.