

A Cognitive-Linguistic Analysis of the English Preposition ON

英語前置詞 ON の認知言語学的分析

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Abstract: A cognitive linguistic analysis of the English preposition ON is presented. It is meant to be both systematic and comprehensive. It is systematic in that the various apparently disparate senses of ON are made to follow from a single simple core meaning. It is comprehensive in that it is meant to cover the entire range of senses that are displayed by ON. Specifically, the whole set of extended senses of ON can be traced back to either the ‘contact’ aspect or the ‘support’ aspect of the core meaning of ON. It is shown in this paper that by hypothesizing a very simple core meaning for ON it is possible to account for the set of extended senses in its entirety in a systematic way.

keywords : on, preposition, cognitive linguistics, core meaning

0. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to make a comprehensive cognitive-linguistic analysis of the English preposition ON. As is always the case with prepositions in general, ON is highly polysemous, covering a very wide range of senses or uses. Faced with the problem of polysemy, the tack that we usually take is first to fix the core meaning of ON and then to elucidate how the various senses or uses that ON displays are derived from the core meaning. In accordance with this line of research strategy, I will first determine the core meaning of ON, followed by a detailed description and explanation of how the multitudinous senses or uses are derived from the core meaning.

The example sentences and phrases whose sources are not quoted are all taken from E-DIC.

1. The Core Meaning of the English Preposition ON

As is abundantly demonstrated in the literature, the core meaning of a polysemous lexical item is (almost) always the one that is related to the spatial domain, the other senses or uses being its extensions. Accordingly, I propose that the core meaning of the English preposition ON is as follows:

(1) TR *on* LM = TR is in contact with LM and is supported by LM.

The core meaning of ON in (1) is basically the same as the one proposed by Herskovits (1986). One immediate problem with this definition that seems to arise is that examples such as in (2) appear to run afoul of it.

(2) a. There are some pretty fancy digs *on* this street.

b. The park is *on* the lake. (constructed example)

The sentence in (2a) states that the TR (*some pretty fancy digs*) borders the street, and the one in (2b) states that the park borders the lake. In neither cases are the TRs supported by the LMs. Taking these cases into consideration, Herskovits proposed the core (or ‘ideal’) meaning of ON as in (3).

(3) the ideal meaning of ON proposed by Herskovits (1986)

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

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We notice that the definition in (3) makes a distinction between the case where the LM is a one- or two-dimensional object and the case where the LM (and the TR) is a three-dimensional object. However, we are left without any explanation of why there should be such a distinction at all. I believe that we can dispense with such an awkward and bulky definition of the core meaning of ON and that the simpler definition in (1) is preferable. Note that the concept of ‘support’ presupposes the existence of gravity. When we are talking about geometrical constructs, we are talking about things in a one-, or two-dimensional world. But there is no gravity in such a world. Thus the only world in which ‘support’ comes into play is the three-dimensional world. Hence even though the definition in (1) appears to be an overgeneralization, it does not present any real problem for the theory, given general assumptions about gravity. In the following sections, we will see how the core meaning of ON in (1) is extended to a multitude of senses or uses.

2. Extensions from the ‘Contact’ Aspect of ON

In this section, we examine how various senses or uses derive from the ‘contact’ aspect of the core meaning of ON.

2.1 Contact with a Line → Contact with a Line/Channel of Communication

We have already mentioned a use in (2) in which some object is in contact with another object. This concrete sense is extended to a somewhat abstract sense in the following examples.

- (4) a. She’s *on* another line right now.
 b. to talk *on* the phone
 c. to talk *on* the hot line

The next set of examples represent basically the same sense.

- (5) a. Are you chatting with Susan *on* the Internet?
 b. *on* Google
 c. *on* my e-mail

Though the examples in (5) no longer involve actual physical lines connecting both parties, they have in common with the examples in (4) that they involve some kind of communication tool or device. Though technological advances have enabled us to dispense with physical lines of communication, we are still talking as if there were, just like we no longer move our telephone receiver upward when we hang ‘up.’ Similarly, we have an expression such as in (6).

- (6) Nowadays you can see CNN and BBC *on* cable television.

Here as well, there need not be any physical line connecting the sender and the sendee of information, as is seen in (7).

- (7) a. I have seen him *on* television many times, but never in person.
 b. We listened *on* the radio to a New York orchestra playing the New Year in.

I believe that a somewhat mysterious use of ON observed in the following examples can be accounted for along the same lines.

- (8) a. The singer bitched that if she couldn’t sing last she wouldn’t appear *on* the program.
 b. Duffy hit the jackpot *on* a quiz show

Though the examples in (8) do not have communication devices per se in the LM, they still have entities directly related to such devices. We could then explain them as metonymic extensions from such examples as in (7).

2.2 Contact with a Line → On a Trip

The next set of examples has been considered quite idiosyncratic and therefore idiomatic in nature.

- (9) a. My wife’s away *on* a trip.
 b. to go *on* {a field trip/ an adventure/ a tour/ a picnic/ a Caribbean cruise/ a hike/ a pub crawl/ a camping excursion/ a date/ your honeymoon/ a journey/ an expedition/ a quest to find it out}
 c. to go *on* {(a) vacation/ leave/ a shopping binge}

The solution that I propose is that these are also extensions from the core meaning of ON, specifically, from its ‘contact’ aspect. Notice that they all involve some kind of journey. A journey involves departure from some place, going to a particular

place and returning. All these elements constitute a line of movement. A journey therefore can be construed as a line on which one moves. If this analysis is on the right track, the expressions in (9) can be seen as metaphorical extensions from the core meaning of ON.

2.3 Contact with a Surface

The following set of examples represents a type somewhat extended from ‘contact with a surface.’

- (10) a. the instructions *on* clothing tags
 b. I drew a line *on* the blackboard. (constructed example)

The examples describe something written or depicted on top of something. When you write, paint, or depict something, you literally put some material (like ink, chalk or paint) on something. So conceived, the examples like (10) may be a subtype of ‘contact with a surface.’ But I believe that they do not necessarily represent the core meaning of ON per se, but rather somewhat extended from it. One piece of evidence comes from an example like (11).

- (11) He carved his name *on* his desk. (Collins COBUILD)

The sentence (11) states that he cut his name into the surface of the object, which means that his name is not literally ‘on’ his desk. The fact that ON can still be appropriately used in examples like (11) shows that it has come to acquire a somewhat extended sense with sentences which express writing-like activity. Once ON acquires such an extended sense, it has come to be used freely even if there is felt to be no material on top of the LM, as in the following.

- (12) a. Twelve topics will be *on* the program.
 b. Order anything *on* the menu.

2.4 Extensions from Contact with a Surface

2.4.1 Contact with a Surface → Images on something

Let us take a look at the following examples.

- (13) a. The reading *on* the monitor told him ...
 b. my reflection *on* the water

These examples represent extensions from the ones like (10), since there is no physical substance at all on top of the LM, but just abstract images.

2.4.2 Contact with a Surface → Images on something → something on Record

The following are extended one step further.

- (14) a. The event is *on* record.
 b. We have all the information *on* file.
 c. Best lectures are being captured *on* tape.
 d. Can you capture the last moments of a person’s life *on* film?

These examples state that some information is kept on record. This sense can be regarded as an extension from the sense seen in (13).

2.4.3 Contact with a Surface → Images on a surface → Scars/Scratches on a Surface

As we have seen in (11), what appears to be written or printed can cooccur with ON even though they are in fact not ‘on,’ but ‘in,’ the LM. This phenomenon goes to show that appearances are more important in preposition selection than the reality. The following examples are variations on the same theme.

- (15) a. She had a deep cut *on* her leg.
 b. He had a scar *on* his forehead. (Collins COBUILD)

Cuts and scars are in reality ‘in’ the LM, but they look like writings on the LM. However, if the TRs are inherently deep, they do not look like writings and does not cooccur with ON, as observed by Herskovits.

(16) *the ruts *on* the road (Herskovits, 1986)

2.4.4. Contact with a Surface → Images on a Surface → on the List

Another mysterious sense of ON about which foreign language learners are very confused is the one seen in (17).

(17) a. Put me *on* the list.

b. There are new names *on* the list.

For example, if you are a Japanese learning English, you are most likely to use ‘in’ instead of ‘on’ in these contexts. The explanation of this use seems to be as follows. A list is a set of things such as names or addresses written in some order. In other words, a list is something ‘on’ which names or addresses are written. Thus, my claim is that the ON-list sense is another extension from the sense seen in (10). The following example of ON is basically the same, since an agenda is a list of the items that have to be discussed at a meeting,

(18) What’s on the agenda?

The ON-list sense in turn provides a basis for a closely related sense to it. Consider (19).

(19) a. He is *on* the basketball team.

b. She’s a nurse *on* the hospital staff.

c. He’s a veteran agent *on* the task force.

d. He’s been *on* the commission for three years.

The use of ON in (19) is also mysterious to non-native English speakers. But our account provides a basis for an explanation of this use. Nouns like *team*, *staff*, *task force*, *commission*, *jury* and *committee* are collective nouns that denote a group or set of people. The reason that these nouns can cooccur with ON seems to be that they involve lists of people. When you become a member of such a group, your name will be ‘on’ the list of that group. It is therefore quite reasonable to consider the ON-team sense to be an metonymic extension from the ON-list sense.

2.5 Exerting Force

Let us consider another facet of ‘contact with a surface.’ When we exert force on something, we do it ‘on’ the surface of it. This scenario has the possibility of giving birth to a use seen in (20).

(20) a. They examine estrogen’s effects *on* the skin.

b. Money plays strange tricks *on* the heart.

c. to improve *on* nature

d. to act *on* the abuses

e. It has worked *on* thousands of patients.

These sentences and phrases describe situations in which someone/something exerts some kind of force on another.

When we bring on more data, we find that this use of ON is highly proliferous, as is seen in (21)-(28).

(21) a. A knock *on* the door brought our argument to an end.

b. The judge banged his gavel *on* the bench.

c. She works hard. You should give her a pat *on* the back once in a while.

The predicates in (21) describe forceful contact on the surface of the LM of ON.

(22) a. Make sure that the brake is off before pressing *on* the accelerator.

b. to step *on* the brake

The predicates in (22) describe pressing.

(23) a. I used to chew *on* my fingernails, but I grew out of the habit.

b. Nibble *on* fresh fruit instead of candy.

c. I was sitting munching *on* an apple.

The predicates in (23) describe biting-like activity

(24) to wipe his nose *on* his sleeve

The predicate in (24) describes wiping.

(25) to puff *on* his cigar

The predicates in (25) describes smoking activity.

(26) a. To pull through this recession, we'll have to draw *on* all the resources we have.

b. The pilot pulled back *on* the stick, jolting upward.

The predicates in (26) describe pulling-like activity.

(27) to blow *on* the old trombone

The predicate in (27) describes blowing or playing a musical instrument by blowing. Another type of musical instrument playing is seen in (28).

(28) A bald-headed man was hammering out a tune *on* a piano next to the bar.

It would seem that the use of ON in (28) is related to that in an example like (29).

(29) The keyboard of the word processor is broken again. / It must be because you're so hard *on* it.

The following example involves natural force.

(30) Despite the welcome blast of warm air *on* his face, ...

This example describes natural force exerting force *on* something.

What all these activities have in common is that they involve something exerting force on the surface of another.

The extensions in (21)-(30) in turn provide a basis for a use of ON seen in (31).

(31) a. He knotted his brows *on* her.

b. Please accept my sympathy *on* the loss of your beloved son.

c. to have a crush *on* someone

The examples in (31) seem to be metaphorical extensions from the use seen just above. They describe situations in which someone's emotional force exert force on someone/something.

2.6 Snagging on something

A somewhat similar use to the one in the previous section is the following.

(32) My skirt snagged *on* the exposed tree roots.

This use, 'snagging-ON', seems to be a variation of exerting force on a surface, since snagging involves getting caught, and hence exerting some force, on the surface of an object. The only difference that I see between 'snagging-ON' and 'ON of exerting force' is that in the former case the one who exerted force suffers damage from the object as a result of the exertion of the force. In addition to snagging, there are many types of snagging-like situations in which we incur damage from the surface of an object, as seen in (33).

(33) a. He tripped [stumbled] *on* a rock and fell down.

b. His baby cut her finger *on* grass.

c. A small child could choke *on* the doll's hair.

2.7 Fixing

The 'contact on a surface' aspect of ON gives birth to another productive class of uses which involve fixation of something on the surface of another. Consider (34).

(34) a. A black dust settled *on* the walls.

b. It is fixed *on* the wall... (Collins COBUILD)

This use is not so remote from the core meaning of ON, since the TR comes to be on the surface of the LM after settling/being fixed.

The following seem to be metaphorical extensions from this use of ON.

(35) a. I'll get in touch with you so we can decide *on* the time.

b. The teachers will vote *on* a strike tomorrow.

- c. I am determined *on* a few alterations.

One piece of evidence that they are metaphorical extensions from literal expressions like (34) is that the very phrase *settle on* can be metaphorically extended to mean a concept like ‘decide on,’ as can be seen in (36)

- (36) I finally *settled on* a Mercedes estate. (=decided on) (Collins COBUILD)

3. On the Move

Consider the following idiomatic expressions with the preposition ON.

- (37) a. The city police got a squeal that a man of suspicious appearance was *on* the prowl in a fashionable residential area.
 c. The rescue team got *on* the move within ten minutes of the distress call.
 d. I came *on* the run as soon as I heard you were ill.
 e. The middle class is *on* the march against higher taxes.
 f. My wife is always *on* the alert for bargains.
 g. Bats catch insects *on* the fly.

The above examples depict situations in which someone is engaged in some activity.

- (38) a. Her warning put me *on* guard against telling others of my plan.
 b. Let me see the gloves *on* display.
 c. The buses and trains were *on* strike, so I had to walk to work.
 d. I was *on* hold for over ten minutes.

The above examples differ from those in (37) in that the former lack a definite article in front of the LM of ON.

- (39) a. My fortune is *on* the decline.
 b. Socialist thinking appears to be *on* the wane among younger people.
 c. The economy appears to be *on* the rise.
 d. Divorce is *on* the increase these past few years.

The above examples describe increase or decrease of something.

All the examples in (37)-(39) could be characterized by the fact that the TR is engaged in some activity or process. The appearance of ON in these cases seems to be related to the fact that ON appears in a phrase like *turn on the light*. The use of ON in this phrase is an extension from the ‘contact’ aspect of the core meaning of ON. When you close a circuit by closing a contact, you have currents of electricity and the lights are on. This could be interpreted to mean that the lights are ‘in action.’ The TRs in the examples in (37)-(39) are likewise metaphorically ‘on’, just like the lights being ‘on.’

4. Consecutive Events

As our last case of extensions from the ‘contact’ aspect of ON, let us take a look at the following.

- (40) a. We would help only *on* demand.
 b. Your credit is pre-approved *on* your first order.
 c. This restaurant will prepare a special dinner course for you *on* request. (Collins COBUILD)
 d. He was killed *on* the King’s orders. (LDCE)
 e. I accepted the offer *on* the advice of my lawyer. (LDCE)

The sentences in (40) describe situations in which some event takes place as a result of someone’s demand, order, request and advice. At least two possible analyses suggest themselves of this particular use of ON. One is to class this use together with the use of ON for dependence, which we will see below. On this view, (40e), for example, means that I decided to accept the offer *on the basis of* my lawyer’s advice. Another analysis would be to say that one event took place immediately following, or ‘in contact with’, someone’s demand or request. On this view, the use of ON in (40) is an extension from the ‘contact’ aspect of ON. Although there is a possibility that the two possible sources both influenced the emergence of the use of ON in (40), I tend to think that the latter source carries more weight, since the following examples seem to be classed with those in (40).

- (41) a. *On* seeing the strange creature, I ran as if my life depended on it.

- b. I'm sorry to ask this so suddenly *on* meeting you, but could you lend me some money?

A plausible analysis of (41) would be to think of ON as a metaphorical 'contact' between two events, as a result of which the interpretation of (41a), for example, is that the event of my running took place almost at the same time, or immediately after the event of my seeing the strange creature.

5. Extensions from the 'Support' Aspect of the Core Meaning of ON

The core meaning of ON consists of two components, the 'contact' and 'support' components. We have seen extensions from the 'contact' component so far. In the sections to follow, we examine extensions from the 'support' component of ON.

5.1 Support → Burden

Consider (42).

- (42) a. The burden of proof is *on* the accuser
 b. Paying ¥20,000 a month for tuition is a burden *on* our household budget.

If the LM supports the TR, the latter often constitutes a burden on the former. That is why ON has developed a sense compatible with burdens. The following casual expressions are also of this type.

- (43) a. Drinks are *on* the house tonight.
 b. This round is *on* me.

5.2 Burden → Constraint

Since constraint-like entities are types of burden, it is expected that ON has a sense compatible with them.

- (44) a. ...we don't have all those constraints that we have *on* the operational test. (Collins COBUILD)
 b. I entertain at home with no time limit *on* my parties.
 c. We need stricter restrictions *on* gun sales.
 d. There are some rules *on* capital gains and losses.
 e. It was a permanent prohibition *on* corporal punishment.
 f. A ban *on* some abortions is desirable.

5.3 Burden → Adversely Affected

ON has developed a use peculiar to English, examples of which are the following.

- (45) a. I had the door locked *on* them all.
 b. "Where did my date go?" "I dunno. Looks like she skipped out *on* you."

In these examples, the LM is adversely affected by the events referred to in the predicates. Since adverse effects can be regarded as a kind of burden on the one adversely affected, these are extensions from the Burden sense of ON, which in turn comes from the 'support' aspect of ON. The following are accounted for similarly.

- (46) a. The court system should be tough *on* criminals.
 b. The government is getting tough *on* drugs.

But the following example seems to defy explanation.

- (47) The graduation ceremony was crowded with well-dressed girls. They were certainly easy *on* the eye.

My guess is that at one stage, expressions like *tough on* entered the language along the lines that I have outlined, and that only at a later stage did an expression like *easy on* come to be used, modeled on the basis of the *tough-on* construction, since *tough* and *easy* are antonyms, which means that they belong to the same category of meaning.

5.4 Support → Dependence

If the LM supports the TR, the latter is dependent on the former. Thus, it is quite natural that ON has developed a sense compatible with dependence.

- (48) a. to depend *on* ...
 b. to be based *on* ...
 c. to count *on* ...

5.4.1 Dependence → Charges of Criminal Acts

This sense seems a very specific version of dependence, being restricted to charges of criminal acts. Consider (49).

- (49) a. She is wanted *on* charges of writing bad checks.
 b. The homeless people were arrested *on* the charge of trespassing.

In (49), the individuals referred to by the subject NP are charged *on the basis of* certain criminal acts. In (49), the LM itself refers to *charge(s)*. But that is not necessary so long as the LM represents a criminal act, as seen in (50).

- (50) a. He went to jail *on* some financial matter.
 b. He was booked *on* suspicion of murder.
 c. He wasn't tried *on* the other murder.

5.4.2 Dependence → Hinges

When a door opens and closes, it is usually supported by hinges. It is physically dependent on hinges; hence, we have the following expressions.

- (51) The top swung open *on* well-oiled hinges. (Collins COBUILD)

5.4.3 Dependence → Fuel

When a machine operates, it needs a substance which provides it with power. It depends on fuel for its operation. Hence, we have (52).

- (52) a. The train runs *on* diesel fuel.
 b. This car can run farther *on* the other brand of gasoline.
 c. Not many automobiles run *on* electricity yet.

5.4.4 Dependence → Resources

This category of dependence is parallel to the previous one. In fact, it might be a subtype of it on the supposition that human beings are machines. In any case, human beings, or living things in general for that matter, can only operate when provided with necessary resources.

One type of such resources is income.

- (53) a. to live *on* such a salary
 b. to be *on* a limited income
 c. to live *on* \$10 a week
 d. to get along *on* \$5 a week
 e. to eat well *on* a small budget

Another is food.

- (54) a. to feed *on* mother's milk
 b. to subsist *on* fish
 c. to lunch *on* fruit
 d. to feast *on* buffalo

A drug seems to be considered a kind of food in the following example.

- (55) He overdosed *on* the prescribed drug.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I gave a cognitive-linguistic account of the English preposition ON in a way as systematic and comprehensive as possible. The analysis is systematic in that the various apparently disparate senses are made to follow from a single simple core meaning. It is comprehensive in that it is meant to cover the entire range of senses that are displayed by ON. But some senses are quite recalcitrant to analysis. For example, I have not touched on the following type of examples.

(56) a. an essay *on* political economy

b. speak/write/lecture *on* Shakespeare (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary)

One possible analysis is presented by Lindstromberg (1997). His idea is to regard the TR (articles, lectures, etc.) as being metaphorically 'on' the LM, which is some kind of topic. He states that "...just as a floor is typically broader than anything we might think of as being on the floor, so is a topic almost invariably broader than any single article or report 'on' it. Conversely, one says that a remark, article, etc. is 'off the subject' when it fails to make (metaphorical) contact with the subject in question." (Lindstromberg, 1997, 60) This account seems to be on the right track, but we will need more confirmative evidence to be sure about the analysis.

All in all, then, although there are some problems remaining, I hope that the general picture has become clearer now.

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