An extended view of extended lexical units: tracking development and use

Naomi Hallan

Trier University

Abstract

Using corpus data derived from recordings of spontaneous conversations, the article examines the acquisition and use of various types of extended lexical units involving the path morpheme out. Data from children acquiring British English is compared with material from the COLT corpus of teenage English and with adult conversational data from the British National Corpus and some of the changes in usage that occur during development are examined.¹

1. Introduction

The astronomical increase of computing power and data storage available to the ordinary researcher has led to a massive change in the way many scholars approach the study of language phenomena. It seems no longer necessary to deal in detail with the objections of the prevailing orthodoxy of the mid-20th century to the use of empirical data. Scholars such as Stubbs (1996, 2001), Sinclair (1991), Hunston and Francis (2000) and Moon (1998) have shown how the application of corpus linguistic methods can lead to new insights into the way language is used. The methods they describe are being applied ever more widely, and provide a valuable addition to the study of language acquisition, enabling the researcher to detect and quantify patterns which are easily overlooked when simply reading through transcriptions of child speech (c.f. Theakston et al. 2005 on the complexities of the acquisition of auxiliaries).

The investigation discussed in this article forms part of an on-going study, part of which has already been reported in Hallan (2001). As discussed in that article, the function of word-forms such as on, over or out, which are traditionally classed as prepositions, is in fact quite complex. Data on the acquisition of over and on showed that they are initially acquired not only or even primarily with prepositional function, such as on there or over the road, but rather in adverbial or particle functions as part of multi-word expressions, such as over here, come on or fall over. Following Bowerman (1996) I use the function-neutral term path morpheme to refer to the closed class of grammatical words under investigation. The term is of course not entirely neutral, since it assumes that these forms are fundamentally spatial terms of some sort, which may not be the whole story. In the case of over, for example, there is some evidence that the deixis involved
could be as much interpersonal as spatial (Hallan 2001: 100). However, the form considered in this article is clearly spatial from its very first use.

Linguists have observed for some time that a great deal of language is produced and understood as relatively unanalysed multi-word building blocks (e.g. Pawley and Syder 1983, Langacker 1987, 2000, Sinclair 1991, Stubbs 2001, Bybee 1998). It has become clear that the meaning of such extended lexical units (ELUs) is not simply built up additively from that of the individual word-forms they contain. Many of these units are framework constructions with variable slots (Goldberg 1995, Stubbs 2004). I shall use here Stubbs’ (2004) term phrase-frame to describe such units. As became clear in the earlier work in this project, some path morphemes are acquired from the beginning as parts of extended lexical units as well as, or even before, their acquisition as free-standing lexemes.

2. The meanings of out

Different languages vary enormously in the way they encode spatial relations. An important typological distinction, first described by Talmy (e.g. Talmy 1985, 1991), is between verb-frame and satellite-frame languages. Verb-frame languages, such as Spanish or French, encode the path of motion in the verb itself (sortir, entrer, monter, descendre) and the manner of movement as an optional adjunct (sortir en courant). Satellite-frame languages, such as English, encode the path of motion using satellites — path morphemes — either as adverbs or prepositions (go/come out, in, up, down); the manner of movement is encoded in the verb (run out, crawl in, jump up, roll down). Basic verbs of motion and caused motion in English encode some sense of a direction of movement, but only in terms of changing distance from a reference point (go, come, bring, take).

2.1 Primary out

The path encoded by out is bound up with one of the earliest learned spatial concepts — that of a container and its contents (see Bowerman 1996 for an overview of work on conceptual development). In cognitive linguistics this notion is considered to be one of a number of pre-conceptual image schemas (e.g. Lakoff 1987: 271 ff.), arising naturally out of the configuration of our own bodies and underlying our interpretation of the physical world. The function of out is assumed to be the encoding of the path of something moving from the inside to the outside of a container of some sort.

As stated above, the encoding of a path is not necessary the only or even the first function in which young children encounter these word-forms (cf. Hallan 2001: 99, 104). However, in the case of out, the spatial function does seem to be primary, and has such force that the word can occur independently, in a quasi-verbal function (cf. Tomasello 2003: 87) with directive force, in the speech of the youngest learners: