

## ON THE MEANING OF *ON*/*ANT*: HOW RELEVANT IS THE CONCEPT OF CONTACT?

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*The paper sets out to examine the relevance of the concept of 'contact' and/or '(the top of) the surface' in the explication of the meaning of *on* in English and *ant* in Lithuanian. The investigation of a corpus of English and Lithuanian data revealed that the term is largely superfluous and imprecise, also in many cases a result of interpreting larger strings of context and an outcome of realising the overriding concept of 'support', underlying the prototypical meaning of *on* and *ant*.*

### 1. Introduction

During the last decades of the last century prepositional semantics received a fair amount of attention from linguists who previously seemed to underestimate the intricacies of locative expressions either due to their misleading simplicity of form often equated with meaning or numerous cases of polysemy, which in some contexts lead to ambiguity (on prepositional polysemy see Taylor 1995, 108–16). Quite a few original treatments were suggested by cognitivists who expanded the area of investigation by erasing the boundaries dividing language and thought, language and human experience. *On* is no exception in this respect.

Neither theoreticians nor practitioners, lexicographers, seem to be unanimous when discussing and employing the metaterms explicating the meaning of *on*. Taylor (1993, 155) calls the preposition *on* simplex since in the majority of usage cases it refers to 'punctual' entities, even though multiplex are not excluded, either.

Lindstromberg (2001, 83) claims that *on* is "the only English preposition of pure contact". Herskovits (1986; 1988) describes *on* employing the concepts of *surface*, *contiguity* and *support*; however, which of them should be viewed as an overriding feature (if at all), constituting the prototypical meaning, is not quite clear. *Contiguity* seems to be the concept similar to what Cuyckens calls *coincidence* (1994) or many other authors refer to as *contact*. The Lithuanian researcher Valiulytė (1998) providing a detailed analysis of *ant* and its usage types also employs the term *surface* as the main concept disclosing the meaning of *ant*. The same concept is adopted by Ambrazas et al (1997).

Klebanowska (see Cienki 1989, 5) working in the framework of cognitive linguistics and admitting that spatial meanings contain a large amount of pragmatic information, describes the Polish *na* (Eng. *on*) by employing the concept of *exterior surface* and *contact*; the idea of support being implicitly referred to: “the localised object remains in contact with the exterior surface of the localiser which prevents it from falling” (ibid.).

Vandeloise (1991) promoting his functional approach in describing locative expressions points out that for the French *sur/sous*, which are rough counterparts of the English *on*, *over/under*, the concept of *support* is the most relevant and in accordance with the naive physics view in language advocated by cognitive linguists. The idea that for *on* the concept of *support* is cognitively salient is also supported by Sandra and Rice (1995). Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976), who consistently worked on the metalanguage of spatial expressions, describe the meaning of *on* through the concepts of *support* and *top* (ibid., pp. 386–7): “... the supported referent (X) is on top of the supporting relatum (Y).”

With a high number of semantic treatments in linguistic literature, which shows a disparity of opinions, the ‘small’ preposition is no less problematic for lexicographers, either. The latter do not seem to have found a clue either in the number of meanings (entries) or the descriptions themselves (for the criticism see Lindstromberg 2001).

The linguists relying merely on the concept of (*top of*) *surface* or *contact* seem to disregard the fact that *on* can equally be used in seemingly different cases, like in the following:

- (1) *The fly on the ceiling.*
- (2) *The book on the table.* (When it is on a stack of other books on the table)
- (3) *The picture on the wall.*

In the three cases above the *surface* or *contact* seem to be part of the situation, but whether it could be considered as the leading semantic component discriminating the meaning of *on* from semantically adjacent *over* is debatable and thus is posed as the main research question of the present paper.

## 2. Data, methods and key terms

The data for the present investigation have been collected from the British National Corpus, modern dictionaries and English fiction books written by British authors and the Lithuanian Corpus Donelaitis (<http://donelaitis.vdu.lt>) as well as Lithuanian fiction books of contemporary writers.

The methods used for the present investigation are componential analysis whose main underlying principle is the decomposability of meaning into smaller components/constituent parts, the general hypothetical deductive method and the prototypicality theory whose main idea is that meanings are structured around prototypes, the most representative meanings. Peripheral meanings might share some but not all of their components with the prototype of their own category and peripheral members of the adjacent category (for more details and the psycholinguistic relevance see Rosch 1978).

In the present investigation, X and Y are used as the key terms. Thus a preposition expresses a relation between two entities X (referent) and Y (relatum). The former is defined as the entity whose position/situation is described in relation to the latter. The terms *referent* and *relatum* have been borrowed from Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) and are similar to the cognitive terms Trajector (X) and Landmark (Y) (see the seminal work of Langacker 1987).

### 3. Results and discussion

Arguing for the concept of *support* as the leading and overriding semantic component explicating the prototypical meaning of *on* in English and *ant* in Lithuanian, in this section we focus on some most characteristic usage patterns in both languages. The analysis seems to be leading to extremely interesting results, which, apart from proving the main hypothesis, also attest to the intricacies of different space conceptualisation in the two languages.

*Support* in the English *on* and the Lithuanian *ant* is manifested in two types: object- and earth-type support. Within each category, the preposition clearly marks two types of Y: a two-dimensional surface and a one-dimensional line.

**Object-type support with Y as a two-dimensional surface.** What is relevant for the meaning of *on* is that Y should not only be positioned beneath X but also conceptualised as a horizontal upward facing surface, i.e. either top or bottom of a solid object. In a large majority of English instances, *on* is combined with the verbs *be*, *sit*, *stand* and *lie*, often classified as static verbs. However, its combinability with dynamic verbs is not excluded either. The Lithuanian data manifest the same trends in terms of static and dynamic context, e.g.:

- (4) (...) *the towering dais on which he stood, flanked by military officers* (...) (BNC)
- (5) *Then she (...) put her elbows on the table and rested her chin in the palms* (...) (BNC)
- (6) (...) *griebėsi už telefono, stovinčio čia pat, ant palangės.* (Granauskas)  
'[She] grasped the telephone, which stood nearby, on the windowsill.'
- (7) *Mane užkėlė ant neštuvų, į veną įšvirkštė gliukozės.* (donelaitis)  
'[They] put me on a stretcher, syringed glucose into the vein.'

*On* and *ant* are frequently combined with the word *top*, *viršus*, which does not violate the initial hypothesis. However, more interesting cases are given below ((8), (9)), where the top of the object (like *tree* or *head* in English) in the extra-linguistic reality is not quite planar. The grammaticality of the below instances can be explained by the principle of abstraction (for further details see Talmy 1983) when language abstracts from any specificity of an object's shape, magnitude etc., cf.:

- (8) (...) *the fairy on top of the Christmas tree* (...) (CCED)
- (9) (...) *Kiaušinį galima dėti ant salotų viršaus ir pabarstyti krapais.* (donelaitis)  
'You can put an egg onto the top of salad and sprinkle with dill.'

However, the situation with the *bottom* is much more cumbersome in that English seems to allow the collocation *on the bottom* at least with some objects, whereas Lithuanian is much more restrictive in that *apačia* (*bottom*) does not allow surface conceptualisation at all (*\*ant apačios*); *ant dugno* in the majority of cases can only be accepted as a marginal case, unless the implication of a very small amount that can only be placed at/cover the bottom is realised (see Valiulytė 1998, 80), e.g.:

- (10) *Spread the onion slices on the bottom of the dish.* (CCED)
- (11) *Bulvių rūsyje nedaug – tik ant dugno.* (Valiulytė 1998, 81)  
'There are not too many potatoes left in the basement—just on the bottom.'

The most natural conceptualisation of the bottom in Lithuanian would be the container type, like in the following:

- (12) *Guli skrynelė jūros dugne* (...) (donelaitis)  
'The small case lies on the bottom of the sea.'

The spatial configuration “X on/ant Y” may refer to the situation not only along the whole top surface but also along its prominent part, like a supporting *edge* (Lith. *kraštas, briauna*):

(13) *Daniel stepped in front of her desk and sat down on its edge.* (CCED)

(14) (...) *ją sulaikysiu ant pat vandenkrėčio briaunos, kol atvyks pagalba.* (donelaitis)  
'I will keep her on the edge of the waterfall, until the ambulance comes.'

The latter type of utterances seem to generate metaphoric extensions which render an implication of being close to a dangerous, inevitable turning point through transferring the space conceptualisation from physical domain into emotional:

(15) *Their economy is teetering on the brink of collapse (...)* (CCED)

Unlike English, the Lithuanian language does not emphasise the idea of a supporting edge in metaphors and thus does not allow *ant* in the following type of utterance:

(16) *Supyko Joniukas ir buvo arti ašarų.* (donelaitis)

'Joniukas got angry and was close to tears.' (cf. *on the brink of tears*)

Object-type support with Y as one-dimensional line/band is realised in the following type of utterances:

(17) *The acrobat was dancing on a rope.* (BNC)

(18) *Cirko akrobatai šoko ant ištempto lyno.* (donelaitis)

'Circus acrobats were dancing on the stretched rope.'

In the earth-type support Y is also either a two-dimensional surface/space or a schematised line/band on the surface of the ground (street or road type). In the former Y one can come across *ground, territory, battlefield, land, plot, beach, pasture, lawn* in English and *žemė, pieva, laukas, dirva* in Lithuanian.

Interestingly, in the English data, geometric delineations in the earth-type support may also include such broad geographic terrains as *islands, continents* and even *earth/planet*. The Lithuanian samples, however, show that such configurations of entities require the use of the locative case. Hence no relation of support, which testifies a cross-linguistic variation in space conceptualisation:

(19) *Visi trys apsigyveno saloje.* (donelaitis)

'They all settled in the island.'

(20) *Kiek valstybių yra Europos žemyne?* (donelaitis)

'How many states are there in the European Continent?'

(21) *Jis— pats greičiausias žmogus žemėje.* (donelaitis)

'He is the fastest man in the earth.'

At the meaning extension level in English, when *territory* and *ground* provide reference geometry, the English language furnishes special metaphorical locutions, too, implying either a situation in which a person feels the most confident because of his / her familiarity with it, or some basis for an argument / area of experience. The samples, therefore, are particularly apt for elucidating the meaning component “Y supports X”, e.g.:

(22) *Sensing she was on shaky ground, Marie changed the subject (...)* (CCED)

As seen from the examples discussed so far, the supporting top is viewed as a functionally salient surface of a solid area of land. Liquids may also be considered as entities with their upper surface providing support for objects:

(23) (...) *neighbourhood with fishing smacks bobbing on the water* (...) (BNC)

(24) (...) *apsigyvenome tarsi mažam kambarelyje ant vandens paviršiaus*. (donelaitis)  
'[We] settled in a small room on the surface of the water.'

Interestingly, Lithuanian hardly allows collocations with *water* unless there is explicit reference to the surface, like *waves* or *surface* (*ant bangų*, *ant vandens paviršiaus*).

When Y represents a **schematised line or band**, the utterances with *on* are extremely prolific; one can come across such Ys as *lines*, *railroads*, *motorways*, *roads*, *streets*, *paths*, *lanes*, *tracks*, *courses*. In this respect, Lithuanian is quite different. Allowing surface type denotata for Y, like *ant tako*, *plento*, *kelio*, *šaligatvio*, *gatvės* (path, pavement, road, sidewalk, street), in the majority of cases, however, roads and streets in Lithuanian are conceptualised as three-dimensional entities, hence the locative case rather than *ant* is preferred, cf.:

(25) *Autostradoje Vilnius-Klaipėda visada daug mašinių*. (donelaitis)  
'In the motorway Vilnius-Kaunas it is always crowded.'

(26) *Gatvėj intensyvus eismas*. (donelaitis)  
'In the street the traffic volume is very high.'

Another feature related to cross-linguistic differences in conceptualising locatives is concerned with means of transport, which in English are seen as platforms rather than three-dimensional entities. Thus, the English tend to travel *on buses*, *trains*, *planes*, but *in cars*. This can be accounted for by historic reasons: surface conceptualisation was originally applied to topless carts and stages, but, with the passing of time, it has frozen into a fixed image inflexibly imposed on other means of transport, including *a bike*, *a tricycle*, *a pedalo*, *a jitney*, *a road trailer*, *a lorry*, *a railway freight wagon*, *subway*, *metro*, *an ocean liner*, *a ferry*, *a troopship* and even *a crane* and *escalators*, like in the following:

(27) (...) *some guys on a crane can change a light-bulb* (...) (BNC)

In Lithuanian, however, platform conceptualisation of means of transport are ruled out. Instead, Lithuanian employs the ablative case (*autobusu*, *traukiniui*, *lėktuvu*, cf. *by bus/train/plane*) and the locative case (*autobuse*, *traukinyje*, *lėktuve*). The latter of the two allows for Y's conceptualisation as a three-dimensional entity, a container. However, the examples below (28) and (29) show that *bikes* and *skateboards* are still thought of as platforms, not as containers:

(28) (...) *atvažiuoja toks princas ant juodo dviračio*. (Ivanauskaitė)  
'There is a prince on a black bike is coming.'

(29) *Pro šalį (...) praskriejo vaikaliai ant riedlenčių*. (Ivanauskaitė)  
'Youngsters on skateboards rushed past us.'

#### 4. Conclusions

A cross-linguistic analysis of *on* in English and *ant* in Lithuanian has proved the initial hypothesis that in the prototypical meaning the central role of the above prepositions is reserved for the relation of *support* between X and Y rather than *contact*, *surface* or *contiguity*. Contact seems to be rendered as an outcome of the relation of support, but not vice versa; i.e. what is supported is usually in contact with the supporter. Moreover, the component of support is realised in a wide variety of utterance types in both languages. It is manifested in two types—object and earth; each of the types is realised in its typical linguistic environment. Y, the relatum, is the other parameter of description which can also be either a two-dimensional surface or a line/band. These features are

relevant for both languages. However, English and Lithuanian manifested a fair number of differing conceptualisations (cf. Eng. *on the bottom* and Lith. *dugne, apačioje*), which might be due to historic reasons (cf. *on a bus* and *autobuse*) or different language structures with English being an analytical language and having larger resources of expression by prepositions, articles, word order etc. and Lithuanian much more productive in flections.

The present study has been limited to a fairly small scope; however, the concept of *support* having proved a viable overriding semantic component seems to open new possibilities for investigating the meaning extension (like in Lith. *ant širdies guli*, Eng. *to be on one's conscience* etc.) from a cross-linguistic perspective.

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## APIE ON/ANT REIKŠMĘ: KIEK SVARBI KONTAKTO SAŲOKA?

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje keliama reikšmės aprašymo metakalbos problema. Įrodinėjama, kad angliškojo prielinksnio *on* ir lietuviškojo *ant* reikšmei apibūdinti tinkamesnė yra *atramos* sąvoka. Dažnai leksikografinėje praktikoje ir teoriniuose lingvistų darbuose sutinkama *kontakto* ar (*viršutinio*) *paviršiaus* sąvoka, kaip manoma, neatskleidžia prototipinės *on* ir *ant* reikšmės, o yra tik *atramos* pasekmė, nes vienas į kitą atremti objektai dažniausiai liečiasi. Tyrimė remtasi Britų nacionalinio teksto ir lietuviškojo VDU *Donelaičio* teksto medžiaga. Bendrasis hipotetinis deduktinis metodas, papildytas komponentinės analizės, prototipų teorijos ir kitais kognityvinės

lingvistikos principais, leido atskleisti postuluojamos sąvokos relevantiškumą bei skirtingos konceptualizacijos nulemtus kalbos ypatumus. Skiriami atramų tipai (objekto ir žemės tipo) bei Y (reliatumo) tipai (dviejų matavimų erdvė arba linija/juosta). Nagrinėjami įvairūs vartojimo atvejai, įskaitant ir reikšmės perkėlimą, atskleidžia panašią ir skirtingą erdvės santykių konceptualizaciją, kas, kaip manoma, gali būti tiek istorinių ekstralingvistinių, tiek skirtingų kalbų ir dėl to besiskiriančių kalbos priemonių raiškos būdų pasekmė. Tikėtina, kad atramos sąvoka tolimesniuose tyrimuose leis atskleisti reikšmės perkėlimo mechanizmą tokiuose pasakymuose kaip *ant širdies guli, to be on one's conscience etc.*

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