

## What use reveals about prepositional meaning: The case of *sobre* in Brazilian Portuguese

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We discuss the results of an investigation on the meaning of the Brazilian-Portuguese spatial preposition *sobre*, based on the analysis of 195 uses in static contexts retrieved from the corpus CETENFolha (the Linguatca Project). We aimed to obtain as thorough a description as possible of the semantics of *sobre*, both in terms of a possible distinctive schematic locative sense (or senses) as well as of pragmatic constraints to its use. This preposition can be translated as *on*, *over*, and *above* and its meaning is thus quite context-dependent. Our study assigned paramount importance to figure-ground asymmetry, and we based our analysis on two complementary theoretical perspectives which focus on this perceptual-cognitive phenomenon.

We first examined how prepositional use reflects the five characteristics proposed by C. Vandeloise (1991) for the French prepositions *sur* and *sous*, which he subsumed as the Bearer/burden Functional Relation. These features are order on the vertical axis, contact, size, concealment, and opposition to gravity, and are seen as traits of a family resemblance relationship (Wittgenstein, 1953). We found that only the first three of these characteristics apply to *sobre*, on a prototypical basis. If *a* is *sobre* *b* then: 1- *a* is usually higher than *b*, a situation observed in 70.41% of the samples, and which is instantiated in a sentence such as “Fixe uma prateleira *sobre* o monitor.” (Attach a top-shelf (to the wall) above the monitor); 2- *a* is usually in direct contact with *b*, a configuration obtained in 80.41% of the cases, e.g. “O vidro *sobre* a foto foi quebrado” (The glass on the photograph has been broken); and 3- *b* is usually larger than or the same size as *a*, as in “Fixou os binóculos *sobre* a paisagem que se perdia no horizonte” (He/she set the binoculars on the landscape that was lost in the horizon), a feature occurring 87.76% of the samples. Similarly to its French counterpart *sur*, concealment of the Bearer does not apply to *sobre*, which means we could not find any use presenting this feature only, this latter being the criterion we used to identify a meaningful characteristic. As for distinctions between *sobre* and *sur*, we found that contact is not a necessary condition for the use of *sobre* and opposition to gravity alone cannot define its meaning.

Our attempt to find a distinctive sense for *sobre* took into account the primary object's spatial disposition as related to a secondary object (Talmy, 2000). We realized that *sobre* cannot be defined in terms of distance between the figure and the ground, neither in terms of their geometry, but instead, a sense of “opposition between figure and ground” would better distinguish *sobre* from other prepositions such as *perto de* (near), or *junto a* (next to). Opposition on an axis can be further understood as “the figure converges to the ground”, a feature that may be thought of as a prototypical category with at least four related members: the figure's smaller than or the same size as the ground and is entirely or mostly situated over it; the figure is larger than the ground and its weight-center totally converges to the ground; the figure's intrinsic orientation converges to the ground; the figure is larger than the ground which is still the sole reference point for its localization.

We concluded that, for a preposition as vague as *sobre*, meaning needs obviously be defined in terms of pragmatic constraints which can be arranged on a systematic basis, and these can in turn lead to some conventionalized distinctive sense(s) as described above.

### References

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