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**What uses reveals about prepositional  
meaning: the case of *sobre* in *Brazilian  
Portuguese***

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# The Brazilian-Portuguese spatial preposition *sobre*

- Can be translated as: English *on, above, over*; French *sur*, which means great dependence on context.
- With a spatial meaning, occurs mostly in written texts, to describe scenes both on the vertical and front-back axes.
- Traditionally known as opposing to *sob*.

# Research questions

*What semantic and pragmatic constraints are there for the use of sobre?*

*Are sobre and sob truly converse?*

## A functional description

... or “utilitarian” description – depends also on non-spatial factors determined by context and by the circumstances of the use of prepositional terms. (Vandeloise, 1991: 239)

## The Bearer/burden functional relation (Vandeloise, 1991)

The B/b Functional Relational was proposed by Vandeloise as a family-resemblance concept (Wittgenstein, 1953), to explain the semantics of French *sur*, *sous* (*au dessous de*; *en dessous de*)

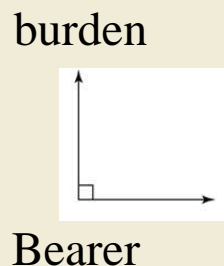
- For *sobre*, the burden is the **figure** and the Bearer is the **ground**.

### *Features in the B/b functional relation:*

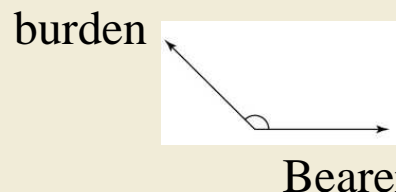
- Order on the vertical axis
- Contact
- Access to perception
- Relative sizes of figure and ground
- Opposition to gravity

A feature is relevant if it occurs alone in a context.

# 1 - Vertical orientation as a family-resemblance concept (Vandeloise, 1991) applied to *sobre*



(1)



(2, 3)

1. Sua cama era um cobertor<sub>burden</sub> do Exército, dobrado **sobre** o chão<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[His bed was an army blanket, folded on the floor.]

2. Há quem<sub>burden</sub> prefira acordar debruçado **sobre** o mar<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[Some people prefer to wake up leaning over the sea.]

3. Alteava-se o Solar, seis janelas<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** a rua<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[The manor house towered up, six windows above the street.]

The Bearer/burden **vertical order** is not easily inverted  
with *sobre*.

1. La mouche<sub>burden</sub> est **sur** le plafond<sub>Bearer</sub>. (Vandeloise, 1991: 187)

[The fly is on the ceiling.]

2. ? A mosca<sub>burden</sub> está **sobre** o teto<sub>Bearer</sub>. vs. A mosca está **no** teto.

**But an inversion is possible if there is a covering sense:**

3. O afresco<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** o teto<sub>Bearer</sub> mostra a cena do natal.

[The fresco on the ceiling shows the Christmas scene.]

If **a** is **sobre** **b**, then **a** is usually higher than **b** (70.4%)

A feature is relevant if it occurs alone in a context:

1. Compre uma prateleira<sub>burden</sub> para fixar **sobre** o monitor<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[Buy a top-shelf to assemble above the monitor.]

✓ burden higher than Bearer

X Contact

X Hiding

X Opposition to gravity by Bearer

X Bearer larger than burden



## II - Contact

- On the vertical axis, contact is in 75,1% of the sentences, with the pragmatic effect of pressure on the Bearer.

1. Isa propôs (eles<sub>burden</sub>) ficarem sentados **sobre** a relva<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[Isa proposed that they remain seated on the grass.]

- Beyond the vertical axis, contact is in 96,0% of sentences.

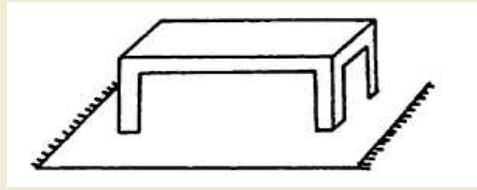
2. Foi fotografado com a mão *sobre* o rosto<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[He was pictured with his hand on his face.]

3. Raspador é usado para afastar a cutícula<sub>burden</sub> sobre a unha<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[The scraper is used to remove the cuticle on the nails.]

- *Sobre* does not express indirect contact.



(Vandeloise, 1991: 188)

1. *La table*<sub>burden</sub> *est sur le sol*<sub>Bearer</sub>. [The table is on the floor.]
2. A mesa<sub>burden</sub> *está no chão*<sub>Bearer</sub>. vs. ? A mesa *está sobre* o chão.
3. A mesa<sub>burden</sub> *está sobre* o tapete<sub>Bearer</sub>. [The table is on the rug.]

- No contact is necessary.

4. Lâmpadas<sub>burden</sub> a 1,60 metro do piso, **sobre** os canteiros<sub>Bearer</sub>, ficam acesas por 30 minutos.

[Lamps 1.6m from the floor, above the flower beds, are lit for 30'.]

If a is *sobre* b, then there may be contact between a and b; no object stands between a and b.

Still, contact is the only characteristic present in the example below.

1. ... o vidro<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** a foto<sub>Bearer</sub> foi quebrado.

[... the glass on the picture was broken.]

X Order on the vertical axis

✓ Contact – **a relevant characteristic**

X Covering

X Burden larger than bearer

X Opposition to gravity

### III – A covering sense in 30% of sentences

- Covering usually depends on the Bearer and the burden relative sizes.

1. Foi fotografado com a mão<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** o rosto<sub>Bearer</sub>.  
[He was pictured with his hand on his face.]
2. Uma mulher fazia sinal de silêncio com o indicador<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** os lábios<sub>Bearer</sub>.  
[A woman signaled for silence with her index finger on her lips.]
3. A lingerie<sub>burden</sub> pode também ser usada *sobre* a blusa<sub>Bearer</sub>.  
[The underwear can also be worn on the blouse.]

**It does not apply to *sobre* as it does not occur alone.**

## IV - The Bearer is larger than the burden in 89 % of sentences

**If *a* is sobre *b*, *b* is usually larger than or the same size as *a*.**

1. Sentou-se à janela com binóculos<sub>burden</sub> sobre a paisagem<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[He sat at the window, with binoculars over the landscape.]

X Order on the vertical axis

X Contact – **a relevant characteristic**

X Covering / hiding

✓ Bearer larger than burden

X Opposition to gravity

# Active zones (Langacker, 1987)

The object's size is construed relatively to its role in the scene, which explains the use of *sobre* with a burden only apparently larger than its Bearer. A specific part of the belt is in focus.

1. Nunca use o cinto <sub>burden</sub> **sobre** objetos rígidos ou quebráveis <sub>Bearer</sub>.

[Never fasten a seat-belt over rigid or breakable objects.]

2. ? Nunca use o cinto *diante de* objetos rígidos...

[Never fasten a seat-belt in front of rigid objects.)

# V - Opposition to gravity

- Applies to uses of *sobre* on the vertical axis and only in co-occurrence with other variables.

1. É necessário que a casa<sub>burden</sub> seja assentada **sobre** uma base<sub>Bearer</sub> de pelo menos 30 cm.

[The house must be mounted on top of a base at least 30 cm high.]



# Opposition to gravity alone does not apply to **sobre**

Vandeloise (1991: 193)

1. *Il ya a des boutures*<sub>burden</sub> **sur** *la plante-ruban*<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[There are buds on the spider-plant.]

2. \**Há alguns brotos*<sub>burden</sub> **sobre** *a planta-aranha*<sub>Bearer</sub>.

3. *Há alguns brotos* **na** *planta aranha*.

4. *Les feuilles*<sub>burden</sub> **sont sur** *l'arbre*<sub>Bearer</sub>.

[The leaves are on the tree.]

5. \**As folhas*<sub>burden</sub> **estão sobre** *a árvore*<sub>Bearer</sub>.

6. *As folhas estão* **na** *árvore*.





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6. *As folhas estão* **na** *árvore*.

# Bearer/burden asymmetry (Talmy, 2000)– *sobre / sob as non-converse*

Sobre and sob are usually thought of as converse opposites. This is not always the case, though.

1. A ponte<sub>burden</sub> fica **sobre** o córrego dos Couros<sub>Bearer</sub>.  
[The bridge is on the Couros Brook.]
2. \*O córrego<sub>Bearer</sub> dos Couros fica **sob** a ponte<sub>burden</sub>.  
[The Couros Brook is under the bridge.]
3. A lingerie<sub>burden</sub> pode também ser usada **sobre** a blusa<sub>Bearer</sub>.  
[The underwear can also be worn on top of the blouse.]
4. \* A roupa<sub>Bearer</sub> pode também ser usada **sob** a *lingerie*<sub>burden</sub>.  
[The blouse can also be worn under the underwear].

# Bearer / burden symmetry – **sobre / sob** *as converse*

In these cases, a same interpretation is possible because the Bearer. The monitor does not hold the shelf, which is probably larger than the monitor, and both have the same mobility. Cognitively, none of the entities is a more/ less adequate locative reference point to the other.

1. Nesse caso, basta comprar uma prateleira<sub>burden</sub> para fixar sobre o monitor<sub>Bearen</sub>.

[Buy a top-shelf to attach above the monitor.]

A prateleira<sub>burden</sub> está sobre o monitor<sub>Bearer</sub>.

O monitor<sub>Bearer</sub> está sob o top-shelf (prateleira)<sub>burden</sub>.

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Thank you.

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