REVIEW

Semantic erosion of Middle English prepositions. By Luis Iglesias-Rábade. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011. Pp. 230.

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The title of this volume suggests that it focuses on Middle English prepositions, although in order to limit the scope of his study the author has restricted his research to the semantic erosion of twelve ME prepositions expressing location or/and/or direction. The analysis is based on textual evidence provided by a large number of samples extracted from the *Helsinki Corpusof English Texts* (1991) and the *Middle English Dictionary*. As the author has shown, Middle English prepositions present unpredictable meanings and some of them, such as *of*, *on*, *in*, *at* and *bi*, frequently interchange their use to cover similar semantic connotations. For this very reason the author has decided to base his study of these prepositions on a large corpus which includes texts reflecting different dialects, types of composition, styles and topics.

Iglesias-Rábade proposes a quantitative, statistical study based on the ME section of the *Helsinki Corpus* with a detailed account of all records attested in the corpus. In so doing, a great deal of attention is paid to an analysis of the transition from spatial meanings to other figurative and abstract connotations (semantic erosion). The twelve prepositions under survey are *aboue*, *after*, *at*, *bi*, *bifore*, *bihinde*, *biside*, *in*, *on*, *ouer*, *þurgh* and *under*. Since the majority of Middle English prepositions come from adverbs, adjectives or participles, the author provides a detailed study of the transition from lexical items to grammatical or relational items. However, he suggests that it is not possible to separate the meaning of the preposition itself from the meaning conceptualised by its trajector and landmark. Thus, the meaning of a preposition is not self-governing, as the speaker always has a specific location or orientation, that is, a place or thing in mind. The meaning of a preposition, then, depends on the contextual factors.

With all this in mind, and following Tyler and Evans (2003: 35-63), the author has developed a polysemic model by accounting for a motivated network of senses associated with spatial and temporal prepositions. In this way Iglesias-

Rábade proposes some linguistic criteria for determining the primary sense associated with a spatial or temporal semantic network and shows how this network can be extended from its central-primary sense ("proto-scene"/spatial or temporal) to other figurative or idiomatic senses that may be attested.

The book is organised into eight chapters followed by a section for conclusions and an appendix. The first chapter is dedicated to determining the causes and mechanisms which lead both to the process of grammaticalisation and to the loss of lexical properties (semantic erosion). Following Kuryłowicz (1965: 52), Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer (1991: 2), Hopper and Traugott (2003: 2) and Lehmann (1995: 11), the author focalises grammaticalisation as a process by which a lexical item may be transformed into a grammatical item, or a grammatical item may shift from a less grammatical to a more grammatical status. This basic notion of grammaticalisation is applied to the study of prepositions, with the claim that these had initiated a process of loosening pragmatic significance and associative content in Middle English as they became routinised and constrained to a mere morphosyntactic function.

Chapter two, "Prepositional phrases in Middle English", introduces both the tools for the analysis of Middle English prepositional phrases and the methodology used in the study. The author shows the primary sources in detail, the structure of the database used, and the general data. The database includes two designs. The first one incorporates all the prepositional phrases included in the study and which are found in the whole *Helsinki Corpus* with reference to Context, Text, Date, Dialect, Text Type, Composition Type, Structure and Sense. In a second database, the author provides the specific data for each of the 96 texts of the corpus, including the characteristics of the text, the prepositions which are present in it, the number of occurrences of each preposition, and the number of instances within the four semantic fields (senses) covered by this study: spatial, temporal, figurative and idiomatic.

In the third chapter the author presents a detailed account of occurrences and percentage rates of each type of prepositional phrase. Tabulated and graphic information is provided for the four subperiods of Middle English, as established in the *Helsinki Corpus*, so as to view the development and variations of each preposition over the course of Middle English. The chapter ends with a presentation of all data previously shown for the twelve prepositions, illustrating the figures and rates of all the prepositional phrases found in the corpus.

"Dialectal distribution, composition type and text type" is the title of chapter four, and this chapter is indeed devoted to examining the dialectal distribution of all prepositional phrases covered in the study. The author also provides a detailed account of their usage in both prose and verse texts, and also their usage according to type of text (e.g. religious, technical, etc.). A notable finding is that he discovers significant variations not only in the dialectal distribution of

prepositions but also in the use of a given preposition through the four subperiods of Middle English.

The next two chapters, "Spatial and temporal senses" and "Figurative senses: semantic erosion", analyse the semantic domains of all prepositional phrases headed by the twelve prepositions involved in the study, chapter five looking at the spatial and temporal roles and chapter six dealing with the figurative – "eroded" ones. The study of the semantic roles of the prepositions is preceded by an excellent theoretical overview of the proto-scene sense of each one – supported by recent literature – emphasising the roles of trajector and landmark. Chapter six analyses the transition of the primary meaning (spatial or temporal roles) of prepositions to a more figurative one. The author shows that prepositions tend to gradually lose much of their specificities, shifting from concreteness to abstractness as an indicator of "semantic generalisation" or erosion (Heine – Reh 1984; Hopper – Traugott 2003) over the course of Middle English. The primary meaning or "proto-scene sense" (Tyler – Evans 2003) then tends to develop a semantic network of distinct figurative or abstract senses. The author here provides a very detailed analysis of the figurative senses of the prepositions involved in his study.

Iglesias-Rábade has done extensive research on collocational structures in the past (2001, 2007). His expertise is clearly demonstrated in chapter seven, devoted to the collocational framework of prepositional phrases in Middle English. The reasons why some words tend to associate with others in a given order and at a given time in the history of a language is still a matter of conjecture. However, the author has assumed that, whatever the circumstances of mental organisation for speakers to associate some words, word-combinations must eventually have developed in a particular cultural framework, more dependent on speech-cultural domains than on statistical probability of co-occurrence. The chapter is preceded by a very interesting discussion of the theoretical framework underlying collocations, with a fine review of recent literature in the field. As with other authors (Lareo 2009), Iglesias-Rábade proposes to restrict his analysis to the notion of collocation provided by Mel'čuk (1998) and the notion of "bound utterances" rendered by Fónagy (2000).

The author retrieves and filters out collocations following Church and Hanks's Mutual Information (MI) technique (1989) which can be applied using *WordSmith* tools. By using this MI technique, he compares and assesses the probability of two words occurring as mutually bound with the probability of them occurring separately. The word lists used were previously lemmatised using *WordSmith* tools in order to combine under the same lemma the spelling variants of a preposition and both the spelling and morphological variants of the complements of a preposition. Finally, the categorisation and identification of collocations in this study is based on a succession of determining factors:

a) the degree of probability of a multi-word-item is measured in relation with its degree of *institutionalization* (conventionalized multi-word item); b) the degree of fixedness of the set phrase is also measured in relation to its grammatical restrictions; c) finally, the degree to which the meaning of the set phrase can or cannot be derived from the meaning of its constituent parts is also measured (*non-compositionality* – meaning is not interpreted on a word-by-word basis) (Iglesias-Rábade 2001: 129-130).

The author considers that many collocational prepositional patterns of late Middle English were modelled through French prototypes, and he provides evidence of it with a large number of examples.

Finally, chapter eight covers the idiomatic framework of prepositional phrases, and begins with an extensive theoretical analysis of idioms concerning both acquisition and processing of idioms and idiom formation. For the purpose of this work the author seems to apply the traditional definition of idiomatic set phrases as "conventionalized complex expressions" (Everaert et al. 1995: 3) which are semantically noncompositional and unanalysable and syntactically fixed or frozen. The links with certain basic definitions of grammaticalisation are obvious. The book concludes with a comparatively short section of "Conclusions".

Although only twelve prepositions are dealt with, the book overall is an example of meticulousness. It would be desirable to see similar work on other sets of prepositions, so that a more complete picture of semantic erosion in Middle English might emerge.

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