

Putting English Verb + *out* Constructions into Perspective

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1 Introduction

Verb + particle constructions (also called 'multi-word verbs' or 'phrasal verbs') represent a very interesting and challenging group of lexical items in English as most of them are non-compositional in their meaning. This may be the reason why the traditional grammatical (morphological and compositional semantic) approaches (cf. for example, Bolinger 1971, Fraser 1976) proved to be inappropriate for their description, and their usage was generally regarded to be arbitrary. Even modern theoretical linguists and lexicographers started to deal with them intensively only from the beginning of the 80s.

It was cognitive grammarians such as Lindner (1982), Lakoff (1987) and Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) who took up the challenge of the alleged arbitrariness of prepositional/particle usage. They demonstrated that the meaning of most prepositions/particles is highly structured and motivated by metaphors in our conceptual system. Thus in this view, English verb + particle constructions are also analysable, at least to some degree.

To justify the above claim, I set out to examine English verb + *out* constructions. My primary aim is on the one hand, to demonstrate that the meanings of *out*, one of the most common particles in English multi-word verbs, form a network of related senses; and on the other hand, to explore what metaphors are involved in the conceptualisation of their abstract meanings.

2 The role of metaphors in conceptualisation

First of all, it seems to be appropriate to highlight what role metaphors play in cognitive semantic analyses and thus in the analysis of the meanings of English verb + particle constructions. As stated by cognitive linguists (cf. Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2005), metaphors are not just superfluous, though pleasant rhetorical devices, but an indispensable

property of our thinking and conceptualisation. They assume that our language is highly metaphorical, which uses thousands of expressions based on concrete, physical entities in order to express high-level abstractions. In this view, we structure abstract concepts (*love, happiness, anger, fear, time, wealth, and desire, etc.*) on concrete, physical bases (*human body, buildings, machines, animals, and plants, etc.*). In other words, conceptual metaphors always combine two domains: a concrete, well bounded, ‘source domain’ and an abstract, ‘target domain’. To illustrate what kind of correspondences or mappings there are between a source domain and a target domain, let us have a closer look at one of our basic feelings: *love* (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2005). We often conceptualise love via the following metaphors:

LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE

There is incredible *energy* in their relationship.
I could feel the *electricity* between them.

LOVE IS A PATIENT

This is a *sick* relationship.
Their relationship is *in really good shape*.

LOVE IS MADNESS

I’m *crazy* about her.
She *drives me out of my mind*.

LOVE IS MAGIC

She *cast her spell* over me.
The *magic* is gone.

LOVE IS WAR

He is known for his many rapid *conquests*.
She is *besieged* by suitors.

As far as English multi-word verbs are concerned, the meaning of their majority is also abstract, which is one of the basic reasons why it is difficult to understand and master them. If we, however, understand the metaphors underlying these abstract meanings, it will make it easier for us to understand and use them properly.

3 The semantic properties of verb + *out* constructions

Before examining what role metaphors play in the semantic analysis of verb + *out* constructions, let us look at some syntactic and semantic properties of these multi-word verbs.

As mentioned above, English multi-word verbs are the combination of a verb and a particle, in which the latter functions either as a preposition or an adverb. What is more, the majority of verb + particle constructions are polysemous in their meaning. For example, *come out* can mean *leave a place*, but in most cases its meaning is figurative or more or less figurative, as illustrated by the following examples: *become known (the truth)*, *stop being fixed somewhere (baby tooth)*, *be removed from something such as clothing or cloth by washing or rubbing (dirt)*, *be spoken, heard or understood in a particular way (as a criticism)*, *become available to buy or see (a book or a film)*, *start to appear in the sky (the sun, moon, stars)*, *become easy to notice (difference)*, *open (flower)*, etc. As evident from the above examples, the verb can also have a literal, physical meaning, i.e. motion, but abstract meaning as well. When the verb in the construction is used metaphorically, it is usually clear. The particle can, however, have abstract meanings as well, i.e. their literal meanings are extended to abstract non-visible domains such as thoughts, intentions, feelings, attitudes, relations, social and economic interactions, etc. and is not so easy to perceive. In fact, we can, however, often discover a clear link between the concrete and the abstract meanings of the particles as well. The prototypical meanings of the particle usually denote place or direction while their abstract meanings are based on these concrete, literal meanings.

Let us take the concrete meaning of *out*: 'getting out of a closed, well-bounded area', for example *fly out*, *fall out*. Besides, it often refers to growth, i.e. something becomes wider spreading on a bigger area or lasting longer, such as *stretch out (his hand)*, *string out the debate*.

Furthermore, *out* can also mean that something gradually reaches its final state, e.g. *die out (become extinct)*, *wipe out (destroy something, kill a lot of people)*. *Out* can also refer to communication between two people, i.e. the information leaves one of them and reaches the other, e.g. *sob out his grief* or it can also denote that a secret, an unknown piece of information becomes known, like in *worm the secret out of sy*.

It might seem that these meanings form a network of unrelated senses but if we examine the meanings of *out* in the above examples more closely, we can discover a systematic relationship between these meanings (cf. *Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus* 2005: 298–300).

4 Metaphors in the analysis of the semantics of verb + *out* constructions

As mentioned in the introduction, Lindner (1981) was one of the first linguists who provided a cognitive analysis of the particles *out* and *up* using the relation of *trajector-landmark*. In cognitive linguistics, the *landmark* is understood as a reference point, whereas the *trajector* as a moving entity. Lindner analysed the meanings of these particles with the help of the so-called prototype theory, and demonstrated what kind of extensions they have into the abstract domain. She, however, failed to show the interactions of what kind of metaphors their meanings are motivated by.

After this, using Lindner's analysis as a starting point and the diagram for the meaning network of *out* in the *Macmillan Phrasal verbs Plus* (2005), let us see what kind of metaphors are involved in the conceptualisation of the meanings of some English verb + *out* constructions. In the view of Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory (1980), we conceptualise the phenomena of our world as objects, materials or containers with boundaries and an in-out orientation. A wide range of domains, objects, sets, activities, even states, are metaphorically conceived as containers.

The conceptualisation of abstract categories as containers can provide an explanation for the different meanings of *out* in the English verb + *out* constructions. Thinking of the spatial, prototypical meaning of the particle *out*, we have the image of a closed, well-bounded container, from which an entity, an object or a person moves out, as illustrated by the following common examples: *go out*, *break out*, *fall out*, the meaning of which is based on the metaphor PHYSICAL OBJECTS WITH BOUNDARIES ARE CONTAINERS.

The metaphor OUR HOME/AN INSTITUTION IS A CONTAINER FOR ITS MEMBERS can be recognised in the examples such as *eat out*, *dine out*, *go out*, *stay out*, *sleep out*, *camp out* *invite out*, *take out*, or *drop out*, *boot out*, *kick out*, *throw out*, *turf out*, *chuck out*, and *freeze out* etc. where it means leaving a place, i.e. eating somewhere other than at our house, usually in a restaurant or removing somebody from a place, i.e. causing somebody to lose his home/club membership/job.

Sets, groups of objects and people can also be viewed as containers in which there are members or elements. In some cases, members can be rearranged or given a new position, in others the member does not remain inside the set or group but it or part of it is removed out of it, with sometimes nothing left, for example *pick out* (a shirt), *empty out* (your bags), *sort out* (your papers), *cut out* (a picture, several paragraphs), *strip out* (information from a financial or statistical calculation), *cross out* (some words), and *score out* (some paragraphs), etc. Beyond denoting physical removal of an

object from a group, *out* can also refer to the cognitive process of distinguishing, choosing objects for special purposes (praise or criticism) or rejecting objects from among others as they are useless or unwanted or have not reached a high enough standard as illustrated by the following examples: *pick out (the best candidate)*, *single out (somebody for special attention)*, *weed out (corrupt police officers)*, and *cut out (a person out of your will)*, etc. These expressions can be generalised with the help of the following metaphors: GROUPS ARE CONTAINERS, CHOOSING IS REMOVING AN OBJECT FROM A CONTAINER.

In several verb + *out* constructions the metaphor BODIES/PARTS OF BODIES ARE CONTAINERS can be discovered, such as in *pull out his tooth*, *spit out (food)*, *reach out (stretch out your arm)*, *stick out your tongue*, *cry out in pain*, *take money out of your pocket*, and *hand out the test papers*, etc.

The metaphor BODIES/PARTS OF BODIES (E.G. YOUR HEART) ARE CONTAINERS, FEELINGS ARE OBJECTS is evoked in the expressions, such as *cry out his grief*, and *pour out his heart* where expressing your feelings is very much like taking an object out of your body. In both cases, the object which is inside the container moves out of it, and can therefore be linked to one and the same image.

Our image of our mind and human communication can be characterised by the following ontological metaphors: MINDS ARE CONTAINERS, IDEAS ARE OBJECTS WHICH FILL THEM. Accordingly, our thoughts, ideas are objects that fill our mind i.e. they are inside. When we communicate, they come out of our mind in the form of words. Thus our language serves as a means that passes our ideas. The meanings of the following verb + *out* constructions are conceptualised via the above metaphors: *stammer out a few words*, *speak out (state your opinion firmly and publicly about something)*, *slip out (a piece of information)*, *blurt out his name*, *fling out a remark (say it quickly in a rather aggressive way)*, and *spit out words (say them in an angry way)*, etc.

In the cognitive view, states of existence, accessibility, and visibility, etc. are also seen as entities with boundaries around them, i.e. containers. Interestingly, the abstract states of non-existence or of being unknown can also be conceptualised as containers and the particle *out* refers to the fact that an object moves out of these states. Thus several verb + *out* constructions are based on metaphors such as STATES OF NON-EXISTENCE, IGNORANCE ARE CONTAINERS and PRIVATE IS IN/PUBLIC IS OUT. When we learn a secret or when a piece of information becomes known, or when we discover or find out a piece of information, they move out of the states of non-existence or of being unknown into the state of being known,

as illustrated by the following verb + *out* constructions: *ferret out*, *nose out*, *sound out*, *find out*, *leak out*, and *come out*, etc. When you look for and find something, it also becomes known, examples for which include: *dig out*, *hunt out*, and *root out*, etc.

Similarly, when a book is published or a new product or service is introduced, it becomes available for the public. In other words, it gets out of the state of inaccessibility into the state of accessibility. In this sense, change of state (inaccessible to accessible) is viewed as change of location via STATES OF NON-EXISTENCE ARE CONTAINERS, and ACCESSIBLE/PUBLIC IS OUT, such as in the following examples: *bring out a book*, *come out (book)*, *rush out (produce a product quickly in a very short time)*, and *roll out (a new vehicle)*, etc.

In some multi-word verbs, *out* refers to the fact that something ceases to exist, disappears completely or is caused to stop existing, which is justified by the examples below: *run out*, *peter out*, *sell out*, *give out*, *burn out*, *conk out*, *die out*, *peg out* and *wipe out*, *stamp out*, *root out*, *blow out*, and *phase out*, etc. The metaphor underlying these constructions is as follows: STATES OF EXISTENCE/ACCESSIBILITY ARE CONTAINERS and the particle *out* refers to the cessation of this state.

Physically viewed, a moving entity can reach its maximum boundaries. ENTITIES WITH BOUNDARIES ARE CONTAINERS, ENTITIES REACH THEIR MAXIMUM BOUNDARIES are involved in the meanings of some verb + *out* constructions, such as in: *spread out/lay out the map*, *spread out their branches (trees)*, *fan out their feathers (birds)*, and *roll out the dough*, etc. Some abstract expressions also reflect the metaphor AN ACTIVITY/SERVICE REACHES ITS MAXIMUM BOUNDARIES. Let us just think of phrasal verbs with *out*, the meaning of which is that a new product or service is introduced and spread by a company, for example *branch out (a company)*. In some verb + *out* constructions like *lay out your ideas*, *set out your plans*, the expression of ideas and a clear and thorough explanation of plans are referred to while in *pad out his report*, *flesh out* and *broaden out/open out a debate* the implication is that more things or topics are included in the discussion.

In some cases, the temporal extension of an activity can be observed. The concept of time is often conceptualised by the way of motion and space. Accordingly, the following mappings emerge in the case of some verb + particle constructions: TIMES ARE OBJECTS, EXTENSIONS OF TIMES ARE EXTENSIONS OF OBJECTS. To justify this, consider the following examples: *drag out (a debate)*, *hold out (his money, strength)*, *last out the night*, *sit out the bad weather*, and *wait out the storm*, etc.

5 Conclusion

Summing up, the following results have emerged from the above analysis. In the light of Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory (1980), I have tentatively suggested that the conceptualisation of abstract categories as objects, containers with boundaries can provide an explanation for the different meanings of *out* in English verb + *out* constructions. Analysing the meanings of some verb + *out* constructions in this view, I have found the following mappings between a source and target domain: OUR HOME/AN INSTITUTION IS A CONTAINER FOR ITS MEMBERS (e.g. *go out*), GROUPS ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *pick out*), BODIES/PARTS OF BODIES ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *pull out*), MINDS ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *slip out*), STATES OF NON-EXISTENCE ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *bring out*), STATES OF EXISTENCE ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *wipe out*), ENTITIES WITH BOUNDARIES ARE CONTAINERS (e.g. *spread out*) and TIMES ARE OBJECTS (e.g. *drag out*).

As might be evident from the above analysis, the meanings of English verb + *out* constructions also form a network of related senses and they are analysable, at least to some degree. Thus English multi-word verbs are not just an arbitrary combination of a verb + a particle but their meaning is structured and motivated by metaphors in our conceptual system. It is also justified by the fact that in the case of novel verb + *out* constructions, some senses of *out* mentioned above can be discovered even if it is combined with a new verb or with an existing verb in a new construction. As evidence for this observation, consider the following relatively new multi-word verbs used in informal language (McCarthy & O'Dell 2004: 164):

be partied out (tired of going to parties because you have been to too many)

After a whole week of birthday celebrations, I feel totally *partied out*.

bliss out (become or make someone become totally happy and relaxed)

They *blissed out* on music.

chill out (relax completely, or not allow things to upset you)

Chill out! Life's too short to get so stressed.

veg out (relax by doing nothing)

I wish I had loads of money – I'd go and *veg out* in the Caribbean.

pig out (eat an extremely large amount of food, much more than you need)

She felt like *pigging out* for once.

google out (discover information by means of a thorough research)

I had *googled out* a relevant website.

The reason why we understand their meaning easily is that these new expressions remind us of existing verb + *out* constructions in which the particle *out* contributes one special meaning to the verb.

In my paper I hope to have proved how significantly cognitive linguistics has been and will be able to contribute to a better understanding and a more effective mastering of multi-word verbs, a notoriously difficult aspect of the English language.

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