

The Separability of German *über*:- A Cognitive Approach

Robert B. Dewell
Loyola University, New Orleans

[Martin Pütz and René Dirven (eds.), *The Construal of Space in Language and Thought*. de Gruyter 1996. pp 109-33.]

1. Received Accounts

One of the most striking aspects of the German language is the alternation of plain verbs with compound verbs which have either separable prefixes (stressed particles such as *auf*- or *ein*-) or inseparable prefixes (e.g. *be*- or *ver*-). A particularly interesting subset of these compound verbs involves prefixes which are sometimes separable and sometimes inseparable. This set of variable prefixes consists essentially of *durch* (corresponding to the preposition meaning "through"), *um* (corresponding to the preposition for "around"), *unter* (corresponding to the preposition for "under"), and *über* (corresponding to the preposition meaning "over").¹

The standard handbooks typically illustrate the phenomenon using starkly contrasting pairs of separable and inseparable verbs, such as these taken from the pedagogical grammar by Schulz and Griesbach (1960: B340):

- (1) a. Er setzt die Leute mit seinem Boot über.
He sets the people with his boat over
"He takes the people across in his boat"
b. Ich übersetzte den Brief ins Deutsche.
I over-set the letter into German
"I translated the letter into German"
- (2) a. Er kam in Frankfurt nicht unter.
He came in Frankfurt not under
"He didn't find lodging in Frankfurt"
b. Bitte, unterlassen Sie diese Bemerkungen!
Please under-let (IMPERATIVE) these remarks
"Please refrain from these remarks"
- (3) a. Das Auto fährt den Mann um.
The car drives the man around (here =toppling over in the vertical plane)
"The car runs over the man [knocking him down]"
b. Wir umfahren die Stadt.
We around-drive the city
"We drive around [= detour] the city"
- (4) a. Die Mutter schneidet den Apfel durch.
The mother cuts the apple through
"The mother slices the apple"
b. Das Schiff durchschneidet die Wellen.
The ship through-cuts the waves
"The ship cuts through the waves"

The received wisdom, presented with varying degrees of sophistication, is that such pairs exhibit these broad tendencies: the separable verbs tend to have "literal" spatial meanings, and the inseparable verbs tend to occur in transitive constructions with "figurative" meanings.

Such an analysis does point out crude tendencies, but there are serious problems with it. To begin with, the standard treatments usually fail to deal very convincingly even with their own chosen examples. These Schulz-Griesbach sentences, for example, include separable constructions which are transitive (1a, 3a, 4a), separable constructions which are figurative (2a, arguably also 3a), and — of primary interest to us here — inseparable verbs which are spatial and literal (3b, arguably 4b). They would have us believe, in effect, that a separable construction like *Wir fuhren den Baum um* ("We knocked the tree down [by driving over it or into it]") is more literal and spatial than *Wir umfuhren den Baum* ("We drove around the tree") — even though the inseparable construction preserves the basic meaning of the spatial preposition (cf. *Wir fuhren um den Baum*) while the separable construction has no prepositional counterpart.

Moreover, traditional accounts consistently neglect a significant portion of the data, namely the obvious regularity reflected in sets such as (5). A typically "figurative" inseparable variant such as (5d) can be systematically related to spatial constructions with a prepositional phrase (5a) or a separable prefix (5b), by way of an inseparable prefix (5c) which is essentially spatial and presumably "literal":

- (5) a. Sie springt über den Graben.
"She jumps over the ditch"
- b. Sie springt hinüber.
 *She jumps DIRECTIONAL PARTICLE- over*²
 "She jumps over"
- c. Sie überspringt den Graben.
 She over-jumps the ditch
 "She jumps (over) the ditch"
- d. Sie überspringt die zweite Klasse.
 She over-jumps the second class
 "She is skipping the second grade"

Detailed studies such as those by Kühnhold (1973) and Mungan (1986) do acknowledge these regular alternations, but they emphasize the semantic consistency in all the variants without making a serious attempt to account for the regular differences among separable, inseparable, and prepositional constructions (Eroms 1982:34). Eroms (1982) addresses the issues of primary interest to us here, but he only treats *durch* and *um*. As for *über* (or *unter*), he implies (p. 49) that it is more difficult to analyze adequately and that the difference between concrete and abstract variants plays a significant role.

There are also some intriguing aspectual differences between separable and inseparable constructions, related to the obvious link between inseparable compounds and transitivity. Although such issues go to the heart of the function of these prefixes (see section 4 below), existing studies do not get beyond Eroms' (1982) observation that inseparable compounds tend to have intensified perfective (resultative) force.³

Finally, the received treatments also ignore what might seem to be the most obvious observation of all about the core set of variable prefixes, at least to anyone not concerned with separating syntax from semantics, namely that they form a coherent semantic group. They correspond to the English expression "over, under, around and through" and form the essential German set of terms for *route paths*. They all describe a path characterized medially as passing through a defining point or points relative to a landmark (LM). Route paths can be

contrasted with destination paths (cf. *in/ ein-, auf, an*), which are characterized by a defining end-location relative to a LM, and with origin paths (cf. *von/ ab-, aus*), characterized by a defining source location relative to a LM.⁴

In short, the traditional treatments do not describe all the data adequately, and they make little attempt to explore some intriguing underlying regularities. There is much more to be learned here about some very basic phenomena such as the representation of paths, the development of specialized semantic variants from spatial-path images, and the role of prefixes in conveying aspectual contours or transitivity. This paper will suggest some new directions of inquiry into these issues within a cognitive-linguistic framework. More specifically, it will concentrate on the prefix *über-*, focusing attention on the regular relationships reflected in the core spatial variants of examples like (5).

2. Separable *über-*

2.1 Gapped LMs and medial abstracting

The analysis of separable *über-* is straightforward. It is essentially like the prepositional constructions with *über*, except that it has a gapped LM which is pragmatically recoverable from the given context (cf. Talmy 1993, who discusses gapping the whole medial section of a path, not just the LM). If Levin (1993:43) can speak of "preposition drop" alternations in English, we might call the (b) variants of examples (6)-(8) "LM drops":

- (6) a. Sie klettert über den Zaun.
"She climbs over the fence"
b. Sie klettert hinüber.
She climbs DIRECTIONAL-PARTICLE over
"She climbs over"
- (7) a. Sie ist über den Fluß gefahren.
She is over the river ridden
"She rode across the river"
b. Sie ist (auf die andere Seite) hinübergefahren.
She is (to the other side) DIRECTIONAL-PARTICLE over ridden
"She rode across (to the other side)"
- (8) a. Er hat sie über den Fluß gefahren.
He has her over the river driven
"He drove her over the river"
b. Er hat sie (auf die andere Seite) hinübergefahren.
He has her (to the other side) DIRECTIONAL-PARTICLE over driven
"He drove her across"

A prepositional *über*-phrase — the (a) variants of (5)-(8) — describes a smooth, continuous path scanned sequentially from an unspecified source location to an unspecified destination, related to the LM at each point along the way. A separable construction (the corresponding (b) variants) portrays essentially the same durative path, but with the LM gapped, so that the path is construed with a sort of *medial abstracting* — typically describing transition from one discrete location to another. Separable *über-* thus tends to occur in situations when the LM can be construed as a highly abstract boundary.⁵

2.2 Overflow and covering

The notion of "overflowing" is an obvious fit for separable *über*-. In examples such as (9b), the LM is naturally construed as an abstract, gapped boundary — the boundary of a container. Although an explicit LM can be provided, e.g. the edge in (9a), it is typically presumed vaguely as an inherent abstract part of the container, in this case its "active zone" (Langacker 1984).⁶

- (9) a. Das Wasser fließt über den Rand.
 "The water is flowing over the edge"
 b. Das Wasser fließt über.
 The water is flowing over
 "The water is overflowing"
 b'. Die Wanne fließt über.
 "The tub is overflowing"

Incidentally, the special nature of container LMs is reflected in variant constructions with the container as nominative subject, e.g. example (9b'). Compare the English "swarm" alternations (Levin 1993:53-54) like *The bees are swarming in the garden* vs. *The garden is swarming with bees*. English also has "overflow" counterparts like *The water is overflowing out of the tub* vs. *The tub is overflowing with water*, or *The wine is running over (out of my cup)* vs. *My cup runneth over*.

Unlike "overflowing", the "covering" sense associated with prepositional *über* (e.g. 10a, 11a) does not seem to fit separable *über*- very well. When a trajector (TR) such as the cover in (10) or the water in (11) spreads to cover a LM surface, there is a sustained interaction between the TR and the LM which would normally suggest a fairly salient LM rather than a gapped one. And in fact, this variant of separable *über*- is marginal, occurring only in highly restricted variants like (10b) or (11b) with a personal dative. In all cases, the precise LM is a gapped *portion* of the person's surface, an implicit active zone which the TR covers, so that the construction can best be related to prepositional constructions like (10a') or (11a') rather than (10a) or (11a). Again, separable *über*- occurs with a gapped LM.

- (10) a. Sie hat eine Decke über ihn gelegt.
 "She laid a blanket over him"
 a'. Sie hat ihm eine Decke über die Schultern gelegt.
 She has him-DATIVE a cover over the shoulders laid
 "She laid a blanket over his shoulders"
 b. Sie hat ihm eine Decke übergelegt.
 She has him-DATIVE a cover over laid
 "She laid a blanket over him"
- (11) a. Sie hat Wasser über ihn gegossen.
 "She poured water over him"
 a'. Sie hat ihm Wasser über den Kopf gegossen.
 She has him-DATIVE water over the head poured
 "She poured water over his head"
 b. Sie hat ihm Wasser übergegossen.
 She has him-DATIVE water over poured
 "She poured water over him"

2.3 General observations

Since separable *über*-verbs essentially describe a durative spatial path, they are typically intransitive (with a *sein*-perfect). Transitive separable *über*- can occur, though, with causative root verbs as in (1a), (8b), (10b) or (11b) that describe setting an accusative TR in motion.

Like spatial path expressions generally, separable *über*- can be used metaphorically in nonspatial domains. Nonspatial dividing lines or "boundaries crossed" occur with changes of state (12), remainders or other extensions beyond a temporal boundary (13), changes of sides of an issue (14), changes of topic (15), and the spread or overflow of abstract "substances" such as emotions (16).

- (12) Die Leiche war schon in Verwesung übergegangen.
The corpse was already into decay over gone
 "The corpse had already gone into decay"
- (13) Sie haben einen Baum überbehalten.⁷
They have a tree over retained
 "They left a tree standing"
- (14) Er ist ins feindliche Lager übergewechselt.
He is into the enemy camp over changed
 "He switched over to the enemy camp"
- (15) Der Redner sprang auf ein anderes Thema über.
The speaker jumped to another topic over
 "The speaker shifted to a new topic"
- (16) a. Die Epidemie hat auf andere Gebiete übergegriffen.
The epidemic has to other areas over grasped
 "The epidemic spread to other areas"
 b. Ihre Fröhlichkeit sprang auf alle über.
Her happiness jumped to all over
 "Her happiness spread to everyone"

It is fair to say, however, that separable *über*-verbs are used nonspatially only according to principles that apply to spatial path expressions generally (e.g. the metaphorical conception of changes of state as movement from one state-location to another). In other words, it is the *über*-path structure which is being applied metaphorically to a nonspatial domain. The specific combination of *über*- with a particular root verb does not introduce new metaphorical possibilities which are not available to *über*-paths generally.

Finally, comparing the constructions with prepositional *über* with the separable *über*-verbs — the (a) variants vs. the (b) variants in examples (5)-(9) — reveals a consistent difference in cognitive salience. The prepositional (a) variants have a balanced focus, describing a continuous sequence of spatial relations between the TR and the LM. Separable *über*- also describes a sequential path, but it is a spliced path focusing on the TR's transition from one location to another, reducing the LM to a highly abstract boundary crossed.

3. Inseparable *über-*

3.1 Transitivity and salient LMs

The basic nature of inseparable *über-* is considerably more difficult to describe, but a few observations are fairly clear. To begin with, it is well known that inseparable *über-*verbs are transitive.⁸ As in transitive constructions generally, the accusative object is construed as individuated and affected holistically (Hopper and Thompson 1980). Like the very similar *be-*verb of (11d), an inseparable *über-*verb like (11c) implies that the accusative object is covered by the water completely — an implication not shared by (11b).

- (11) a. Sie hat Wasser über ihn gegossen.
 "She poured water over him"
 b. Sie hat ihm Wasser übergegossen.
 "She poured water over him"
 c. Sie hat ihn mit Wasser übergossen.
 She has him with water over-poured
 "She doused him with water"
 d. Sie hat ihn mit Wasser begossen.
 She has him with water BE-poured
 "She doused him with water"

Moreover, as (11c) and (5c) illustrate, it is the LM of *über* which becomes the accusative object in the typical transitive constructions. As a result, the LM in the (c) variants becomes especially salient, not only in comparison with the gapped LM of (b), but also in comparison with the oblique prepositional object of the (a) variants. There is a clear progression in LM salience from the separable (b) sentences with their gapped LM; to the oblique prepositional (a) sentences with their balanced interaction between TR, LM, root-verb activity and *über*-path; to the inseparable (c) sentences, which we can now consider in more detail.

3.2 Regular spatial alternations, pragmatic niches and specialized meanings

A key observation is that each of the separable spatial types potentially has an inseparable, transitive counterpart; i.e., there are regular correspondences, in the spatial domain, between constructions with prepositional phrases, separable *über-*verbs, and inseparable *über-*verbs. We have already seen the full set of alternations in examples (5) and (11), and we can also add inseparable variants to (6)–(7).

- (5) a. Sie springt über den Graben.
 "She jumps over the ditch"
 b. Sie springt hinüber.
 "She jumps over"
 c. Sie überspringt den Graben.
 "She jumps (over) the ditch"
 d. Sie überspringt die zweite Klasse.
 "She is skipping the second grade"

- (6) a. Sie klettert über den Zaun.
 "She climbs over the fence"
 b. Sie klettert hinüber.
 "She climbs over"
 c. ?Sie überklettert den Zaun.
She over-climbs the fence
 "She climbs (over) the fence"
- (7) a. Sie ist über den Fluß gefahren.
 "She rode across the river"
 b. Sie ist (auf die andere Seite) (hin)übergefahren.
 "She rode across (to the other side)"
 c. *Sie hat den Fluß überfahren.
She has the river over-ridden
 "She crossed the river"
 d. Sie hat die Kreuzung überfahren.
She has the intersection over-ridden
 "She drove past the intersection"
 e. Sie hat ihn überfahren.
She has him over-driven
 "She ran over him"

This regularity has not seemed as obvious as it would otherwise have been, because most purely spatial inseparable variants are not that useful pragmatically. There is normally no reason not to describe the spatial path using the basic prepositional construction of the (a) variants. The inseparable (c) variants only come into consideration when the speaker wishes to mark the event as transitive (and aspectually more punctual, with a pronounced focus on the LM). (5c) is thus restricted to specialized contexts in which the LM is an obstacle crossed in a single bound (cf. *überwinden*); and *überspringen* is normally associated with even more specialized uses such as skipping a portion of a book or a grade in school (5d). (6c) is comprehensible and sanctioned by the *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*, but it sounds very odd to native speakers, probably because it is odd to collapse its path into a single event without durative extension. (7c) is even worse, since it is definitely odd to construe its path as a single punctual event; even though (7c) does not exist, however, it is still comprehensible. (7d) and (7e), moreover, are fine, filling more specialized pragmatic niches consistent with the general nature of inseparable compounds. The fact is that there is definite motivation in the language system for such potential uses whenever the pragmatic need arises. Some inseparable verbs, especially those such as (17)-(19) which focus on the LM as an obstacle to be overcome, unquestionably have firmly entrenched spatial-path uses.

- (17) Sie überschreitet die Schwelle.
She over-steps the threshold
 "She crosses the threshold"
- (18) Wir überfliegen den Ozean.
We over-fly the ocean
 "We are flying over the ocean (crossing it by flying)"
- (19) Es ist nicht gestattet, die Absperrung am Ufer zu übersteigen.
It is not permitted the barricade at the shore to over-climb
 "Climbing (over) the barricade at the shore is not permitted"

"Covering" variants would seem to be a more natural fit than normal paths with inseparable *über*-verbs, since there is clear interaction with the LM and thus "transitive" motion directed "toward" it. And in fact, "spreading to cover" variants like (11c), (20c) and (21c) are natural:

- (20) a. Der Strom flutet über die Ufer.
 "The stream is flooding over the banks"
 b. Der Strom flutet über.
 "The stream is flooding over"
 c. Der Strom überflutet die Ufer.
 The stream over-floods the banks
 "The stream is flooding its banks"
- (21) a. Sie streut Zucker über den Kuchen.
 "She sprinkles sugar over the cake"
 b. *Sie streut (dem Kuchen) Zucker über.
 She sprinkles (the cake-DATIVE) sugar over
 "She sprinkles sugar over"
 c. Sie überstreut den Kuchen mit Zucker.
 She over-sprinkles the cake with sugar
 "She sprinkles the cake with sugar"
 d. Sie überzuckert den Kuchen.
 She over-sugars the cake
 "She sugars (ices) the cake"
 e. Sie bestreut den Kuchen (mit Zucker).
 She BE-sprinkles the cake (with sugar)
 "She sprinkles the cake (with sugar)"

Even in the "covering" sense, though, inseparable *über*- tends to have somewhat restricted usage, as reflected in the oddity of (10c).

- (10) a. Sie hat eine Decke über ihn gelegt.
 "She laid a blanket over him"
 b. Sie hat ihm eine Decke übergelegt.
 "She laid a blanket over him"
 c. *Sie hat ihn mit einer Decke überlegt.
 She has him with a cover over-laid
 "She covered him with a blanket"
 d. Sie hat ihn (mit einer Decke) bedeckt.
 She has him (with a cover) BE-covered
 "She covered him (with a blanket)"

There are several reasons. For one, alternative expressions are available. An inseparable *über*-verb competes not only with prepositional phrases like (10a) or (21a), but also with *be*-verbs such as (10d), (21e), or (11d), as well as with verbs that incorporate the TR as in (10d) or (21d). For another, specialized uses of inseparable verbs in nonspatial domains, e.g. the entrenched use of inseparable *überlegen* to mean "consider, ponder", are often so well established that the association would disturb their use in sentences like (10c). Finally, the inseparable compounds work best when the root verb focuses on the covering process itself, the manner of interacting with the LM. Verbs such as *legen* or *setzen* focus more on the end location of the TR and thus are not as natural with inseparable *über*- as verbs such as *streuen*, *fluten*, *ziehen*, *spannen*, or *decken* are.⁹

Even stronger pragmatic restrictions apply in "overflowing" situations like (9), where a construction with a separable *über*-verb is definitely preferred. If the containing LM or its surface is to be given marked prominence, that can be accomplished by promoting the LM to sentence subject (9b').

- (9) a. Das Wasser fließt über den Rand.
 "The water is flowing over the edge"
 b. Das Wasser fließt über.
 "The water is overflowing"
 b'. Die Wanne fließt über.
 "The tub is overflowing"
 c. *Das Wasser überfließt die Wanne.
 "The water is overflowing the tub"

In sum, the potential for spatial uses of inseparable *über*-verbs is there in the language, motivated by established uses and ready to be exploited in particular situations when the pragmatic need arises for a transitive construction with a salient LM. But the pragmatic need tends to arise mainly to fill particular, marked descriptive niches, since other means exist to express very similar general relations (e.g. prepositional phrases, *be*-verbs, container-LM subjects). Thus inseparable *über*-verbs have come to be associated, even in the spatial domain, primarily with highly specialized readings such as overcoming an obstacle (5c) or overwhelming (7e).

3.3 Nonspatial variants

The specialized, marked, spatial meanings of inseparable *über*-verbs extend nicely to fill particular niches in nonspatial domains as well, as illustrated in (22)-(26). The (a) examples are intended to give a very rough indication of the spatial source for the nonspatial extensions. Variants with accusative LMs include overcoming (22), overwhelming (23), bypassing or overlooking (24), and surpassing or outdoing (25), as well as "covering" extensions like competitive layering (25d) and holistic perception (26).

- (22) a. Er hat die Hürden überlaufen.
 "He jumped the hurdles"
 b. Er hat seine Angst überwunden.
 "He overcame his fear"
 (23) a. Die Kompanie überrannte die feindlichen Stellungen.
 "The company overran the enemy positions"
 b. Angst überwältigte ihn.
 "Fear overwhelmed him"
 (24) a. Er überschoss das Wild. (hunting jargon)
 "He overshot the animal"
 b. Er übersah den Fehler.
 "He overlooked the mistake"
 c. Er überging unsere Einwände.
 "He ignored our objections"

- (25) a. Sie hat den Lastwagen überholt.
 "She passed the truck"
 b. Sie hat ihn im Sport übertroffen.
 "She outdid him in sports"
 c. Sie überlebte ihren Mann.
 "She outlived her husband"
 d. Der Chor übertönte die Solistin.
 "The choir drowned out the soloist"
- (26) a. Die Sonne überstrahlt das Tal.
 "The sun shines over the valley"
 b. Sie hat die Rechnung überprüft.
 "She looked over the check"

All of these verbs can be traced semantically to spatial constructions, but they are variants specific to the particular verbs as units, filling restricted gaps in the lexical system, not general path images applied to other domains. As the glosses suggest, English *over-* behaves similarly to *über-* in specialized nonspatial extensions. (Note that *über-* often corresponds to English *out-* for competitive surpassing, e.g. (25).)

There is also a very productive set of "excess" variants for "overdoing" virtually any activity. Typical examples such as (28) can be traced to the specialized spatial images of "overfilling" or "overloading" a LM (27), the transitive counterparts to "overflow" variants such as (9).¹⁰

- (27) a. Der Saal war überfüllt.
 "The room was overfilled (overcrowded)"
 b. Sie haben den LKW überladen.
 "They overloaded the truck"
- (28) a. Das Land ist überbevölkert.
 "The country is overpopulated"
 b. Er hat seine Augen überanstrengt.
 "He strained [overexerted] his eyes"
 c. Man kann die Sparsamkeit übertreiben.
 "One can exaggerate frugality"

These "excess" variants, especially a sentence like (28c), might also be related to the linear-path image of extending over a normative bound on some presumed abstract scale (see the extensive treatment of these variants in Ritsch 1995). In that case, the image would be related directly to separable constructions with a gapped LM like *Die Zweige des Baums hingen über* ("The tree's branches hung over (a property boundary)") and the accusative object would be the TR of the spatial path rather than the LM. There is established precedent for this direct relationship between inseparable and separable *über-* in a fairly productive group of abstract "transfers", as illustrated in the examples of (29). These verbs are direct counterparts to the basic transitive separable verbs for causing a transition from one discrete location to another. They differ from the separable verbs mainly in that they are restricted to fairly precise extended domains, particularly transfer of possession (29a), transmitting information (29b), transfer of medium (29c, 29d), or persuasion to change sides of an issue (29e). (As the category designations indicate, English often uses *trans-* in these meanings.)

- (29) a. Er übergab die Angelegenheit seinem Anwalt.
 "He turned the matter over to his lawyer"
 b. Das Konzert wird live im Fernsehen übertragen.
 "The concert is being carried live on television"
 c. Sie hat den Roman ins Deutsche übertragen.
 "She translated the novel into German"
 d. Diese Insekten übertragen die Krankheit.
 "These insects carry the disease"
 e. Er ließ sich nicht davon überzeugen.
 "He couldn't (wouldn't let himself) be convinced of it"

These are the instances which have received the primary focus in traditional accounts (example (1)), precisely because they can be directly contrasted with transitive separable verbs as more abstract "figurative" extensions from a basic spatial image. Essentially, they correspond to the transitive separable verbs in the same way that other inseparable constructions correspond to intransitive separable verbs. They are typical in most respects: they are transitive, and they tend to have marked, specialized uses tied to specific contexts. They are atypical only because their accusative object does not correspond to the LM of *über*.

4. The underlying constituent structures

We can begin to account more precisely for the descriptive observations made thus far if we take the analysis to a more syntactic level and focus on the sequence of processing the constituents. In order to highlight the distinctions between inseparable compounds and prepositional or separable constructions, we will again focus on examples such as (5) and (7).

- (5) a. Sie springt über den Graben.
 "She jumps over the ditch"
 b. Sie springt hinüber.
 "She jumps over"
 c. Sie überspringt den Graben.
 "She jumps (over) the ditch"
 d. Sie überspringt die zweite Klasse.
 "She is skipping the second grade"
- (7) a. Sie ist über den Fluß gefahren.
 "She rode across the river"
 b. Sie ist (auf die andere Seite) (hin)übergefahren.
 "She rode across (to the other side)"
 c. *Sie hat den Fluß überfahren.
 "She crossed the river"
 d. Sie hat die Kreuzung überfahren.
 "She drove past the intersection"
 e. Sie hat ihn überfahren.
 "She ran over him"

4.1 Prepositional and separable constructions

In the prepositional constructions of (5a) and (7a), the preposition *über* combines first with its LM (*Graben, Fluß*), producing a path image in which a TR moves through a sequence of spatial states relative to the LM, ultimately describing a characteristic shape. *Über* is the syntactic head (profile determinant). The prepositional phrase then elaborates the valence of the verb, sharing its TR (*sie*), and providing a more detailed description of the internal structure of its path, a sense of beginning, middle and end for the event. Most verbs which combine with an *über*-phrase (e.g. *klettern, fahren*) are what Langacker (1987:87) calls "bounded episodes"; i.e., they are internally homogeneous and unstructured except for a constant recurring activity. They do presume temporal limits on the activity and the path, but they depend on other elements, such as an *über*-phrase, to provide a more detailed specification. (*Springen* is atypical in this regard, since it implies a starting propulsion, a flight and a landing, making the *über*-path largely redundant with it except that the path is related to the LM.) As a result, the *über*-phrase provides the internal aspectual contour of the construal, while the main verb provides the overall temporal profile. The whole process is structured as a path, with successive stages scanned through time, and the end result is a new location for the TR.¹¹

With separable *über*-, the processing is exactly the same except that the LM is implicit and must be inferred from context before the *über*-path is combined with the root verb. Because the LM is gapped, the resulting path image seems sketchy and disjointed compared with a full prepositional phrase, but nothing else changes. The path expression (*über*) and the root verb (*springen, fahren*) each retain their syntactic and intonational independence as profile determinants, and the resulting verb phrase is the straightforward result of combining the two components. *Über* provides the specific aspectual shape of the event as construed, i.e., as consisting of a medial peak and an implicit starting and end location for the TR with reference to the LM, and that path fits neatly into the root verb's temporal profile as a generic durative path.

4.2 Inseparable compounds

4.2.1 The problem of aspect

The inseparable *über*-verbs, however, are fundamentally different, and more problematic. They do not simply describe a sequence of spatial relations persisting through time until an end-location is reached by the TR (a sequentially-scanned path characterized by a *sein*-perfect). They describe an act carried out by the TR with respect to the LM, as reflected in their perfect tense form with *haben*. Unlike (7a) and (7b), sentences such as (7d) and (7e) are not appropriate responses to the question *Wohin ist sie gefahren?* ("Where did she ride/drive (to)?"); they answer a question like *Was hat sie gemacht?* ("What did she do?"). They do not describe where the TR goes with respect to the LM; they describe what the TR does to the LM.

The precise aspectual character of these verb phrases is difficult to specify, because there are seemingly contradictory construals involved. On the one hand, they suggest an almost punctual construal that is not associated with either component of the verb alone, a sense that a holistic event is occurring rather than an extended path, and that there is a focus on the interaction with the accusative object, a vague sense of transitive action "aimed" at the LM. On the other hand, they seem to be describing exactly the same extended trajectory that the prepositional and separable constructions do. Despite all the evident differences, there is a strong intuition that we are dealing with the "same" *über* (and the same *springen* and *fahren*)

in all the expressions of (5) and (7), that there is a semantic constant running through all the variants. In short, all the constructions seem to describe essentially the same situation using the same basic elements in the same basic meanings, yet there are important aspectual differences setting the inseparable compounds apart. The rest of this paper will be concerned with tracing these differences in construal to the sequence in which the constituents are processed.

4.2.2 The sequence of processing

In an inseparable construction such as (5c), *über* combines first with the root verb (*springen*), not with its LM. It is not a profile determinant at any point in the derivation, and its reduced status is reflected in its reduced stress. The resulting compound verb describes a composite path image with a temporal profile, an image which is essentially the same as the final image for (5a) or (5b) except for one crucial difference: the LM has not yet been inserted (or even gapped as an implicitly recoverable element in context). In separable or prepositional constructions, the processing of the verb phrase concludes by combining *über* with the root verb; in the case of inseparable *über-*, the verb phrase is not complete until an accusative object is supplied.

In fact, *über-* is never directly combined with its own specific LM. The only LM explicitly represented is an immediate constituent of the verb phrase; it elaborates a slot within the valence structure of the compound verb, not of *über* alone. In contrast to the separable and prepositional constructions, inseparable compounds introduce a direct syntactic relation between the verb and the accusative object, a relation that underlies the basic "transitive" implications that the verb is "aimed" at the object.

4.3 Constituent-order profile

In order to understand the somewhat perplexing situation described in section 4.2.1, it will help to distinguish different levels of sequential construal operating in parallel. Most obviously, there is a *temporal profile* inherent in the objective scene as the TR moves through conceived time, and the path usually has a more detailed *aspectual contour* specifying a sequence of stages (the beginning, medial or end points of the path). There is also, however, an inherent sequential profile contributed by the syntactic order of processing a sentence, the order in which we assemble constituents to form a whole composite image. This *constituent-order profile* also contributes to our construal of the objective scene, i.e. to the meaning of the sentence.¹²

4.3.1 Normal transitive profiles

When we process a transitive verb, we are aware that the verb phrase is incomplete as long as the accusative object remains unspecified. Filling that valence slot is the concluding moment of processing the verb phrase. In conceptual terms, we first set up the verb's path image and then we look to specify its LM slot as the culminating "target" of processing.

With typical transitive verbs, such as *schlagen* or *betreten*, that constituent-order profile is in harmony with the actual temporal sequence being described. The accusative LM is not only specified as the salient concluding moment of processing, it is also the concluding point of the path that the verb describes. Our natural attention flow (see DeLancey 1981:633-35) and our

syntactic processing path both arrive together at the same destination. All paths converge at the same target.¹³

4.3.2 Transitive route-paths and cognitive dissonance

In the case of inseparable *über*-verbs, however, the aspectual profile of the compound verb does not merge harmoniously with the transitive constituent-order profile. The path described by *über* is normally a route path that leads "past" the LM in both the spatial and temporal senses of the word. When we finish tracing the TR's motion, the LM is history; it is intact and unaffected by the TR's passing. The transitive profile inherent in the constituent order of the inseparable-verb phrase, however, introduces the LM at that point as the culminating event of processing. Thus we get a kind of cognitive dissonance between the two sequential profiles, and tension arises between a durative path leading beyond the LM and a transitive act implying a punctual arrival at the LM.

When we process the compound verb in a sentence like (5c), we conceive an *über*-path with an aspectual profile like that of separable *über*, so that our natural attention flow ends on the other side of a gapped LM. When we then insert the specified transitive object of the verb, we are forced to loop back conceptually from the end of the *über*-path. Put another way, we are forced to take the whole summarily-scanned *über*-path and relate it dynamically to a LM which does not receive any direct transfer of energy from it; we collapse the path event into a conceptual unit, a punctual act applied to an accusative object. The culminating event of the constituent-order profile (the moment when the verb image unites with the accusative object) does not coincide with the culmination of the verb path as described.¹⁴

4.4 Some effects of constituent processing on inseparable *über*-verbs

It is this cognitive dissonance, then, which explains the conflicting intuitions about inseparable *über*-verbs discussed in section 4.2.1. Essentially, what is odd about the transitive *über*-verbs is that the culmination of the *über*-path does not coincide with any moment of interaction with the LM; the constituent-processing sequence does not fully accord with the conceived temporal sequence. The aspectual profile of the *über*-path and the transitive profile of constituent-order processing are delivering mixed messages, and the peculiarities of inseparable *über*-verbs can all be understood in this context.

4.4.1 Dissonance effects

For one thing, we can account for the fact that inseparable constructions are understood primarily as acts (with a *haben*-perfect) rather than as paths. When the two profiles conflict, the one which predominates will be the last one imposed. The aspectual profile of the *über*-path is processed first, as part of the compound verb, and then it is wrapped into a summarily-scanned gestalt and thus backgrounded. It is relatively less salient than the transitive effect of specifying the accusative object as the final event in the processing sequence.

Moreover, the cognitive dissonance of transitive route paths helps explain why inseparable *über*-verbs are used sparingly to describe concrete spatial paths such as those in (5c)-(7c), especially when the root verb describes an ongoing activity such as clambering or driving which is strongly associated with an extended temporal profile. The more vivid our image of the TR's route path is, the more aware we are of the clash between that path and the transitive profile.

Since the transitive construction involves focusing on a concluding moment of interaction with the LM, the compound verbs become more natural when there is a real transfer of energy affecting the LM (7e), or when the LM is an obstacle to be overcome, as in (5c). An obstacle is a mental "target" which the TR focuses on, and so achieving separation from it becomes a decisive, culminating moment which the whole path has pointed toward. Similarly, a sentence like (7d) is typically construed to mean inadvertently missing a turn which the TR had "aimed at" (which was to have ended that section of the path), so that the TR's anticipation parallels our conceptual anticipation of "reaching" the LM. Conceptually, we conclude the processing by looping back from the end of the *über*-path to focus on a LM which has already been passed, just as the TR looks back to see a target which has been missed. In all cases, inseparable *über*-verbs focus on the LM, implying some kind of conclusive interaction with it. Since that interaction does not coincide neatly with the end location of the TR, the construction is marked and usually carries specialized connotations.

4.4.2 Conceptual separation of the transitive LM from the path-activity

Since inseparable *über* is combined with a root verb without first specifying its LM, there are actually two conceptually distinct LMs involved in the processing — the maximally abstract LM of the *über*-path and the explicit accusative LM of the transitive compound verb. The transitive object typically denotes the same entity as the LM of the *über*-path, but constructions have developed where that is not the case. As we have seen, there are inseparable *über*-verbs such as (29) in which the accusative object is the TR, not the LM of the *über*-path.

These constructions make sense under the analysis being proposed here. The root verb (e.g. *geben*, *senden*, *liefern*, *bringen*, *tragen*, *setzen*, *nehmen*) is itself transitive, describing a higher-order activity which operates on its accusative object; and that object in turn is the TR in a transfer path.¹⁵ When *über* combines with these roots, it adds aspectual contour to the path just as it did in separable transfers, suggesting an abstract, gapped but implicit LM boundary crossed. But *über*'s TR does not correspond to the TR of the root verb; it corresponds to the root verb's direct object, which has yet to be specified. As with the other inseparable compounds, when the *über*-verb is processed it contains an unspecified slot for a transitive object which must be inserted as the final piece of the constituency puzzle. But now the focus element in the constituent-order profile is the TR of *über*, not its LM.

Otherwise the constructions of (29) are typical inseparable *über*-verbs. The embedded transfer path is processed first, and then our attention loops back to focus on the insertion of the path's TR. This constituent-order profile, as opposed to that of separable verbs like (12)-(16), focuses on the moment when the top-level TR (the agent) acts on the transitive object, not on the object's durative motion from one location to another. The construal is particularly natural when the transfer is a well-defined specialized act construed as a single event applied to the transitive object.

4.4.3 Autonomy of the compound verb

Another important trait of inseparable compounds, given their constituent-order profile, is their status as relatively autonomous units independent of the *über*-LM. The *über*-path and the root-verb activity are wrapped into a single concept, and the path is re-construed as a summarily-scanned event before being joined with the accusative object. The gestalt construal of the whole path in turn introduces an element of singularity. Just as the moment of inserting the transitive LM added a sense of punctuality to the construal, so also does the related holistic processing of the path.

Furthermore, inseparable *über*-verbs are more abstract than separable *über*-verbs, since they involve both the true gapping of the *über*-LM and the summary scanning of the path. As a result, the verbs lend themselves to marked, specialized, often technical meanings, and there is some evidence that they are losing ground diachronically in comparison with separable verbs (Eroms 1982).

Their unitary status also means that inseparable compounds are more like specific individual lexical units, as opposed to general path expressions. As such, they are freed from restrictions on path expressions generally. The inseparable verbs can and do often develop idiosyncratic variants which are peculiar to the individual lexical compound — hence their common association with "figurative" meanings not generally associated with spatial path expressions. Since separable verbs can also have figurative variants, however, it is more accurate to adopt Weinrich's (1993:1067) term and say that the specialized inseparable variants are "demotiviert", not strongly suggested by general principles for applying spatial path expressions to nonspatial domains. They represent the odd combination of a route path with transitivity.

5. Conclusions

There is obviously much more to the analysis of separable and inseparable *über*-verbs than has been accomplished here. An adequate analysis will need to be embedded in a more general framework which includes studies of the other variable prefixes and of prefixes generally, of aspectual contours and temporal profiles, of constituent-order processing, of transitivity, of salience, and of much more. The observations made here do suggest some tentative conclusions, however.

There are deep regularities and semantic constants underlying the alternations among prepositional phrases, separable prefixes, and inseparable prefixes. Separable prefixes are essentially like prepositional phrases except that the LM is gapped, resulting in medial abstracting. Inseparable verbs also describe essentially the same path as constructions with a prepositional phrase, but there are important differences which can be traced to the constituent-order profile. As an inseparable prefix, *über* is not a profile determinant and its LM is left fully unspecified as it combines with the root verb. The empty slot in the valence of the compound verb must be completed by the insertion of an explicit accusative LM (typically corresponding to the LM of *über*). Its appearance becomes the concluding moment of processing, lending the construction a sense of punctuality and a sense of aiming at the transitive object as target — both of which are at odds with the basic aspectual profile of the path described by the compound verb. The various semantic interpretations and restrictions on the use of compound-verb constructions make sense within this framework.

¹There are two other, peripheral and unproductive members of the set of variable prefixes: *voll*- (corresponding to the adjective meaning "full") and *wieder*- (corresponding to a largely archaic preposition meaning "against", and to the modern particle meaning "again").

²The directional particle *hin* in the (b) variant simply adds a deictic spatial element to the construction, bringing the destination into conceptual view. It (or its partner *herüber*, indicating direction toward the deictic reference point) tends to be required with fully spatial uses of the separable prefix when there is no other specification of the destination.

³Bellavia (1994) provides a semantic analysis of *über* from a cognitive linguistic perspective, taking into account the regular alternations between inseparable, separable and prepositional

constructions. She proposes a continuum of transitivity, with prototypical separable verbs at the intransitive pole and inseparable compounds with accusative TRs at the transitive pole.

⁴Route paths appear to have other interesting common properties which bear investigating, particularly with respect to image-schema transformations such as endpoint focus and the "covering" variants.

⁵As with spatial path constructions generally, the TR can also be an object that extends in the shape of the path (so our attention moves along the path in subjective motion as we scan the extending TR). When the LM is gapped in the separable constructions, there can also be a reflexive TR. (The common use of English *over* for reflexive-TR images like *turn over* or *overturn*, however, corresponds in German to *um-*, not *über-*; see example (3a).)

⁶Although the container is usually a three-dimensional volume, it can also be a two-dimensional enclosure. The image-schema transformation linking the two images is reflected in transitional instances like *Das Feuer griff auf die umliegenden Gebäude über* ("The fire spread to the surrounding buildings"), which is a path over a gapped LM bound, but also suggests spreading out of a containing region and "overflowing" into other areas.

⁷This usage is colloquial, not accepted by all speakers.

⁸Intransitive inseparable *über-*verbs are virtually non-existent. The only examples I have been able to find are either rare frozen prepositional phrases turned into verbs (*übernachten*, *überwintern*, *überborden*); or have clearly recoverable deleted accusative objects (*Im Süden des Landes überwiegt das Laubholz. Es überwog die Meinung, daß .. Der Moderator hat um 3 Minuten überzogen.*); or, in one truly odd case, a sentence which is apparently like the container-subject variants (9b'), but with a covered LM as subject: *Die nasse Straße überfror* ("The wet street froze over").

⁹I am grateful to the editors of this volume for bringing this factor to my attention. It explains why a sentence like **?Sie überhängte den Käfig mit einem Tuch* ("She covered the cage by hanging a cloth over it"), taken from the Duden *Universalwörterbuch*, is better than (10c) to the extent that it suggests a characteristic manner of handling the TR, but is still not as natural as *überziehen*, *überspannen* or *überdecken*. Another possible factor is the likelihood that the accusative object could be a TR for the *über*-path, i.e., the object of the root verb — cf. example (29).

¹⁰A few *über-*verbs with this kind of highly general semantic variant have a stressed prefix, namely those like *überbelasten*, *übererfüllen*, *überdosieren* whose root verbs begin with an unstressed syllable. The handbooks treat these verbs as having separable *über-*, maintaining the principle that separable prefixes are always stressed and inseparable prefixes are always unstressed. The problem is that these verbs are not separable! They tend to occur only as infinitives, past participles, or inflected verbs in subordinate clauses, i.e., in syntactic positions where the prefix is never separated in any event. And in the rare event that they are used in inflected positions requiring separation, they are left inseparable: *Er überdosiert oft. Das Werk übererfüllt seine Norm. Du überbeanspruchst ihn. Er überbetont diese Mängel.* (All examples are from the Duden *Universalwörterbuch*.) Rather than treat these verbs as defective separable verbs, it makes more sense to treat them as inseparable verbs with unusual stress patterns which cause uncertainty in use.

¹¹Langacker (e.g. 1987:74, 1991:152) would say that prepositional *über* is scanned summarily, but this assessment seems problematic to me. Certainly the combination of verb + prepositional phrase has to be scanned sequentially, so why assume the path-prepositional phrase is first construed summarily (which entails sequential processing plus a more complex cumulative gestalt construal) and then converted back to a sequential construal? Why not assume it is simply sequential in the first place? All Langacker seems to gain is the conjecture

that sequential scanning is an exclusive property of verbs, but perhaps the exclusive property of verbs lies in a temporal profile as distinct from sequential scanning. A prepositional *über*-phrase could be sequential, but the passing of conceived time is not profiled until it combines with a verb.

¹²Obviously, the processing sequence being discussed here is not necessarily identical to the actual surface ordering of the elements in the sentence. In sentences such as (5c) with the compound verb in inflected position, the surface order reflects the constituent processing order fairly well. But in sentences such as (7) the accusative object occurs before the verb. Logically, however, it cannot be assembled into a composite image for the whole verb phrase until the verb has been processed as profile determinant. The actual order of appearance of the parts of a sentence is of course yet another level of sequential construal.

¹³In effect, the aspectual paths all reflect the natural image-schema transformation according to which the final state of a path is profiled — e.g. "gone" from "go", or the (subjective) endpoint focus variants of route-path prepositions in English as in *She lives over the bridge*.

¹⁴Transitive origin paths (e.g. with *verlassen*) also require a conceptual loop as the LM is inserted at the beginning of the path described by the verb; but at least the sense of punctual aspect associated with the transitive fits the moment of separation described by the origin path. Compare *ent*-verbs, which focus on the moment of separation from the LM in a generic origin path, with *be*-verbs, which presume a generic destination path and focus on the moment of arrival at the LM. There is no corresponding prefix for generic route paths, which explains why *über*, *um*, etc. have inseparable uses while particles like *auf*-, *ein*- or *aus*- can only be separable. As for covering images, they have a similar but distinct kind of problem in transitive inseparable constructions. Covering is normally construed as a process with an extending TR, not as a momentary event with punctual aspect.

¹⁵There are also compounds with nontransitive root verbs like *zeugen* or *reden*, which are used with *über*- to mean "convince" by analogy with normal transitive transfer roots like *tragen* (compare the conduit metaphor).

References

- Bellavia, Elena
1994 The German *über*. Unpublished manuscript.
- DeLancey, Scott
1981 An interpretation of split ergativity and related patterns. *Language* 57, 626-657.
- Drosdowski, Günther
1983 *Duden Deutsches Universalwörterbuch*. Mannheim/ Wien/ Zürich: Bibliographisches Institut.
- Eroms, Hans-Werner
1982 Trennbarkeit und Nichttrennbarkeit bei den deutschen Partikelverben mit *durch* und *um*. In Eichinger, Ludwig M. (ed.), *Tendenzen verbaler Wortbildung in der deutschen Gegenwartssprache* (Bayreuther Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft 4), Hamburg: Buske, 33-50.
- Hopper, Paul and Sandra Thompson
1980 Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *Language* 56, 251-299.
- Kühnhold, Ingeburg
1973 Präfixverben. In Kühnhold, Ingeburg and Hans Wellmann, *Das Verb (Deutsche Wortbildung: Typen und Tendenzen in der Gegenwartssprache, Erster Hauptteil)* (Sprache der Gegenwart 29). Düsseldorf: Schwann. 141-362.

- Langacker, Ronald W.
- 1984 Active zones. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 10, 172-188. (Also in Langacker 1991, 189-201.)
 - 1987 Nouns and verbs. *Language* 63, 53-94. (Also in Langacker 1991, 59-100.)
 - 1991 *Concept, Image, and Symbol: The Cognitive Basis of Grammar*. Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Levin, Beth
- 1993 *English Verb Classes and Alternations: A Preliminary Investigation*. Chicago: UP.
- Mungan, Güler
- 1986 *Die semantische Interaktion zwischen dem präfigierenden Verbzusatz und dem Simplex bei deutschen Partikel- und Präfixverben* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe 1, Bd. 886). Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.
- Risch, Gabriela
- 1995 *Verbpräfigierung des Deutschen: Skalierungsverben mit über- und unter-*. PhD dissertation, Stuttgart.
- Schulz, Dora and Heinz Griesbach
- 1960 *Grammatik der deutschen Sprache*. München: Max Hueber.
- Talmy, Leonard
- 1993 The Windowing of Attention in Language. Technical Report 93-5, Center for Cognitive Science, SUNY Buffalo. Also available from L.A.U.D. Series A, paper no. 337. (to appear in a Festschrift, 1994)
- Weinrich, Harald
- 1993 *Textgrammatik der deutschen Sprache*. Mannheim, Leipzig, Wien, Zürich: Dudenverlag.