A Semantic Analysis of Live on and Live off
Masumi Iwai, Souma Mori, Shiro Takeuchi, and Shun Kudo

In this study, we deal with the phrasal verbs live on and live off, as shown in (1):

(1) a. The fish live on the plankton.
    b. He’s been living off state benefits.

(COBUILD)

The Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary (Fifth Edition) says that “if you live on / off a particular amount of money, you have that amount of money” and “if an animal lives on / lives off a particular food, this is the kind of food that it eats.” That is, live on and live off are used as having apparently same meanings. On and off, however, are in a semantically opposite relation, so that there must be a certain semantic difference between the two expressions above. Our aim in this research is to explain the semantic difference which is attributed to the meanings of on and off.

Live on and live off are different from, for example, turn on and turn off, in that on and off cannot follow their object NPs, as shown below:

(2) a. *The fish live the plankton on.
    b. *He’s been living state benefits off.

(3) a. He turned on / off the light.
    b. He turned the light on / off.

For this reason, we find that on in live on and off in live off function as prepositions.

Next, let us consider the expression live on, as exemplified in (4), and the meaning of the preposition on, as exemplified in (5):

(4) a. He lives on his mother’s savings.
    b. The birds live mainly on nectar.

(5) a. a book on the table
    b. a fly on the ceiling
    c. a poster on the wall

According to our informant, (4a) means that the subject referent only uses his mother’s savings to live. And the preposition on means ‘contact with line or surface’
and derivatively ‘support,’ as in (5). From these two points, it seems that \textit{live on} means the subject referent depends on the referent of the object of \textit{on}. It also seems that the dependence of the subject referent is strongly toward the referent of the object of \textit{on} because of the meaning of \textit{on}.

How about \textit{live off}? Consider the following sentences and the meaning of the preposition \textit{off}:

\begin{enumerate}[a.]
\item He's been living off state benefits.
\item Most species live off aquatic snails.
\end{enumerate}

\begin{enumerate}[a.]
\item Two books fell off the shelf.
\item My house is off the main street.
\item A button has come off your shirt.
\end{enumerate}

\textit{Off} differs from \textit{on} in that it has ‘separation,’ not ‘contact’ meaning, exemplified in (7). This ‘separation’ meaning leads us to the following expectation: \textit{live off} means the subject referent gets something from something else in order to live. In addition, unlike \textit{live on}, \textit{live off} does not necessarily mean that the dependence of the subject referent is only toward the object referent of \textit{off}. For example, in (6a), the subject referent can be interpreted as having another source, e.g. his parents, from which he gets money to live. Consider the following:

\begin{enumerate}[a.]
\item But the works here express a spirit that soared free, a society that lived off the land but was not bound by it. (\textit{American Cowboy})
\item The beguines lived off alms, but also off the work of their hands.
\item ... the beghards sometimes lived off alms. But many of them worked. (b and c: \textit{Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages})
\end{enumerate}

In (8a), one can think that \textit{the land} is not the only source from which \textit{a society} gets something to live. Sentences (8b-c) mean that each of the subject referents, \textit{the beguines} and \textit{the beghards}, has at least two sources from which they can get something in order to live.

In conclusion, we showed the semantic difference between \textit{live on} and \textit{live off} in this study. Such a difference comes from the fact that the prepositions \textit{on} and \textit{off} are in a semantically opposite relation: \textit{on} means contact with something, and \textit{off} means separation from something.