

A Semantic Analysis of *Live on* and *Live off*

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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 *live on* means the subject referent depends on the referent of the object of *on*. It also seems that the dependence of the subject referent is strongly toward the referent of the object of *on* because of the meaning of *on*.

How about *live off*? Consider the following sentences and the meaning of the preposition *off*:

- (6) a. He’s been living off state benefits.
- b. Most species live off aquatic snails.
- (7) a. Two books fell off the shelf.
- b. My house is off the main street.
- c. A button has come off your shirt.

Off differs from *on* in that it has ‘separation,’ not ‘contact’ meaning, exemplified in (7). This ‘separation’ meaning leads us to the following expectation: *live off* means the subject referent gets something from something else in order to live. In addition, unlike *live on*, *live off* does not necessarily mean that the dependence of the subject referent is only toward the object referent of *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:

- (8) a. But the works here express a spirit that soared free, a society that lived off the land but was not bound by it.
(*American Cowboy*)
- b. The beguines lived off alms, but also off the work of their hands.
- c. ... the beghards sometimes lived off alms. But many of them worked.
(b and c: *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*)

In (8a), one can think that *the land* is not the only source from which *a society* gets something to live. Sentences (8b-c) mean that each of the subject referents, *the beguines* and *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 *live on* and *live off* in this study. Such a difference comes from the fact that the prepositions *on* and *off* are in a semantically opposite relation: *on* means contact with something, and *off* means separation from something.