

A Semantic Study of the Prefixes *over-* and *under-* in English
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In this study, I am concerned with some semantic aspects of the words to which *over-* and *under-* are prefixed. When the prefix *over-* is attached to a verb, it adds the "excessive" sense to it, as exemplified by (1).

- (1) John overheated the room. (cf. John heated the room.)

This prefix is notable for its grammatical phenomena. For instance, its prefixation often affects the selectional properties of base verbs.

- (2) They overbuilt {the city/*houses}. (cf. *They built the city.)

This example reveals that *overbuild* can only take as its object an NP that is interpreted as Place. Moreover, this prefix can be attached to verbs to which *under-*, the antonym of *over-*, cannot be prefixed, as illustrated by (3a).

- (3) a. overbuild/*underbuild, overeat/*undereat, overload/*underload
 b. overbuy/underbuy, overvalue/undervalue, overpay/underpay

In order to explain these phenomena, it is important to elucidate what serves as the norm of evaluation. In what follows, I will discuss how the norms of evaluation are related to the grammatical phenomena observed above.

When we judge something to be excessive, we evaluate its property in light of the relevant norm. It seems to me that there are at least three types of norms of evaluation. Let us first consider the following example:

- (4) The ship was overloaded with people.

Sentence (4) describes a quantity of the loaded things, i.e. the number of people, which exceeds the capacity of the ship. In this case, we can see *the ship* as a container, and this holds for *the city* in (2). A container evokes limited space, that is, the capacity. We speak of an excessive state as one in which a quantity of things goes beyond the capacity or upper limit of a container. Thus, in (2) and (4), the capacity of the city or the ship serves as the norm of evaluation. It is important to note that in these cases, the norm of evaluation can be regarded as the one which is objectively determined because the upper limit of the container is predetermined. It seems to me that in such cases, the NPs interpreted as containers must appear in object position. This is verified by the following examples:

- (5) a. Harry overloaded the wagon with hay.
 b. *Harry overloaded hay onto the wagon.

In these sentences, the wagon is construed as a container, and the upper limit of the container serves as the norm that is objectively determined. The contrast between (5a) and (5b) shows clearly that the NP interpreted as a container must appear in

object position. Therefore, this requirement often changes the selectional properties of base verbs, as shown by (2).

Next, let us examine the following example.

(6) He {overtasks/tasks} his workers every day.

In this case, the norm of evaluation is the upper limit of the amount of task assigned to workers. There is usually a reasonable extent in doing something, and if one does it more than necessary, his action is considered to be excessive. Of much importance is that the norm of this type is more subjective than those in (4) and (5a), and it largely depends on the context. For this reason, the norm itself is put onto the background. Hence, the selectional properties of base verbs are not changed.

Finally, consider the following pair of examples.

(7) a. He overvalues his daughter.

b. He undervalues his daughter.

In a case like this, the norm of evaluation is a state which we regard as normal, standard, or reasonable. When reality is not in such a state, we think of what is expressed by the stem verb as excessive in a certain context. Thus, the prefix *over-* can be attached to the base verb, as shown in (7a). Furthermore, it is important to point out that when reality is not in a normal state, we take it to be done to an insufficient extent in another context. In such a case, the prefix *under-* can be attached to the base verb, as verified by (7b). That is, a base verb is compatible with both of the prefixes *over-* and *under-* only when the norm of evaluation is a state in which we see something as normal, standard, or reasonable.

In this study, I examined how the norms of evaluation are related to some grammatical phenomena that are observed with the prefixation of *over-* to a base verb. When the upper limit of a container serves as a norm that is objectively determined, the NP interpreted as a container must appear in object position. This often affects the selectional properties of base verbs. On the other hand, when the upper limit of the extent associated with some action functions as a norm, such properties do not change. Moreover, when the norm of evaluation is a normal state, both *over-* and *under-* can be prefixed to base verbs.

SELECTED REFERENCE

- Yumoto, Yoko (1997) "Verbal Prefixation on the Level of Semantic Structure," *Verb Semantics and Syntactic Structure*, ed by Taro Kageyama, 177-204. Kuroshio Publishers, Tokyo.