

From Frame to multiframe: the case of BREAK in English and its near synonyms

This paper is part of a larger project on French and English verbs of breaking inspired by crosslinguistic work on the conceptual class of SEPARATION verbs (Lakoff, Rosch, Majid/Bowerman et al.) We focus specifically on the similarities and differences between French and English breaking verbs, and the mappings between frames and constructions. We use the term Multiframe Semantics to refer to the complex overlap and interaction between lexically and constructionally evoked frames. The present paper focuses on the English verb *break*, and on the similarities and differences between the frames referred to by *break* and those referred to by French *casser*, *briser* and *rompre*. As expected in a construction grammar framework (Kay and Fillmore, Goldberg), we do not observe exceptionless predictions, but rather generalizations centered on small families of constructions. The literal physical references of French *rompre*, for example, are strongly centered on creation of a discontinuity in a long thin object (a stick, a spine, a baguette); no such clustering occurs with *briser*, or *casser*, or with English *break*.

Corpus data (BNC, WAC, the Economist, Google), show that English *break* involves at least these frames: Frame 1= make dis-integral, into pieces (e.g. *break rocks*), Frame 2 = render non-functional (e.g. *break one's cell phone*), Frame 3 = make a discontinuity in a surface (*break the skin of an apple*), Frame 4 = introduce a temporal discontinuity in an ongoing event (also metaphoric, e.g. *break the silence*) , Frame 5 = something unknown becomes known (metaphor: SECRECY IS A CONTAINER) (e.g. *the news broke*), Frame 6 = succeed against resistance (metaphor: RESISTANCE IS A BARRIER, e.g. *break a taboo*). The frames or subframes show a syntax close to some other near synonym verbs inside each frame division which allow us to go further in the direction of BREAK verb classes (Levin 1993). For example, *break/smash/shatter/split into pieces*, but **break/smash/*shatter/*split one's phone into the wall*, *break/*smash/*shatter/*split the data down into categories* (but you can *split the data up* between analysts). The study of the syntactic alternations has to be done verb by verb.

The polysemy structure of BREAK appears to involve a Lakoff-style radial category, involving both family resemblances and partial overlap between subcategories (a *broken toy* may be both no longer integral and non-functional). But syntax may be quite specific to a frame or subframe: for example, I can *break the silence with a sudden comment*, but I can't *break the afternoon's work*, I can only *break **up** the afternoon's work with occasional cups of coffee*. Common English phrasal compounds such as *break up* and *break down* do much of the work done by lexical verbs in French, and evoke their own clusters of semantic and syntactic frames: e.g., *break down* has a cluster of meanings involving resulting parts which are more manageable or easier to deal with than the original whole.