

# A model for representing polysemy : The Italian preposition *da*

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## 1. Introduction

Prepositions are highly polysemous items. Indeed, their high degree of polysemy has led many to think that prepositions have no meaning at all, and are rather *des mots vides*, or “empty words”. According to others, different meanings of prepositions must be explained by setting up as many homophones as there are meanings. In my paper, I take the stance of Cognitive Grammar (CG) regarding the meaning of grammatical forms. In CG, all forms, both free and bound morphemes, are conceived of as having meaning, and polysemy is explained in terms of shared features within prototypical categories. In order to show how the CG approach to polysemy can do justice to the meaning of prepositions, without denying its existence and without multiplying the number of homophones, I have chosen a notoriously puzzling item, the Italian preposition *da*.

## 2. The meaning of prepositions in Cognitive Grammar

In CG, prepositions are described as implying an asymmetric relation between a figure or trajector (tr.), the element to be located, and a ground or landmark (lm.), which provides reference for the location of the figure, as in *the cat* (tr.) **on** *the mat* (lm.). Furthermore, the domain of space is thought to be the basic cognitive domain. This can be viewed as a consequence of embodiment, one of the most important tenets of CG. In CG, the mind is conceived of as being embodied : as a consequence, mind and cognition are conditioned by the physical dimensions of the human body and by physical experience. Space is the most readily available domain to human experience. Regarding the meaning of prepositions, evidence for the basicness of spatial relations is provided by diachronic developments : prepositions whose history can be traced often derive from spatial adverbs, so the spatial meaning can be shown to constitute the basis for the development of other abstract meanings (Luraghi 2003).

In a recent study devoted to English prepositions, Tyler and Evans have put forward a model for describing polysemy, the polysemy network, which takes as its starting point a protoscene (Tyler and Evans 2003). The protoscene is “an idealized mental representation across the recurring spatial scenes associated with a particular spatial particle... It combines idealized elements of a real-world experience... and a conceptual relation” (Tyler and Evans 2003, 52).

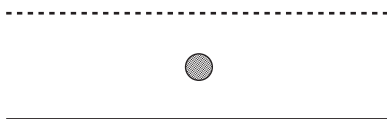


Fig. 1 Protoscene for *over* (Tyler and Evans 2003)

In other words, in order to determine the protoscene for the semantic network of a certain preposition one has to consider all possible scenes (idealized mental representations of events) and find the common mental schema which remains constant, without necessarily being directly connected with all items in the network: it is important to remark that some meanings of a preposition may derive from a scene other than the protoscene.

### 3. The meaning of *da* in modern standard Italian

The meaning of the preposition *da* is notoriously complicated. While its spatial meaning is often described as corresponding to English *from*, its behavior with certain nouns, mostly with human referents, is peculiar, as shown in the examples below. Dictionary entries make the issue even more complicated by listing a dozen of different meanings, which can be grouped as follows:

(a) Source, origin and related roles, in space, time or in a metaphorical sense: *partire da casa* “leave from home”; *venire a sapere da qcn.* “learn from somebody”; *cominciare da zero* “start from scratch”; *dalla mattina alla sera* “from morning to evening”.

(b) Closely related to source is the usage of *da* in a causal sense, to indicate the stimulus for a reaction (*arrossire dalla vergogna* “to blush with shame”). In such occurrences, a cause is conceived of as the source/origin of a state of affairs: similarly, an agent can be conceived of as a source (Luraghi 2003), which explains the usage of *da* to indicate agent or force

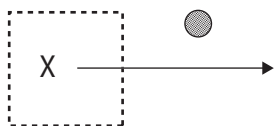
with passive verbs: *il ladro è stato catturato dalla polizia* “the thief was arrested by the police”; *la casa è stata distrutta da un terremoto* “the house was destroyed by an earthquake”.

(c) A somewhat less expected meaning of *da* is found in occurrences in which the preposition indicates a quality or specifies the usage of an object or a role taken by a participant (*una ragazza dai capelli biondi* “a blond girl”, *vino da pasto* “table wine”, *sala da pranzo* “dining room”, *macchina da cucire* “sewing machine”; *trattare da amico* “treat as a friend” *combattere da eroe* “fight like a hero”). This meaning can be reconnected with source/origin in two steps. In the first place, we have a metaphor according to which a quality is a constituting part of an entity, i.e. part of its constituting matter (Nikiforidou 1991,182-183). This metaphor in its turn is supported by another metaphor in which entities are conceived as coming out from their substance (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Note that in occurrences such as *vino da pasto*, *sala da pranzo* the quality coincides with the purpose to which a certain object is used: this explains a further development, in which *da* occurs with verbal infinitives in purpose clauses, such as *rimangono molte cose da fare* “many things remain to be done”.

(d) Perlocative, as in *passare da casa* “to pass by home”, is an extension of source: the Im., which serves as path for motion, is left behind after having been passed by.

(e) With personal pronouns and nouns denoting human beings, as well as with certain nouns denoting spatial regions (such as *lato* or *parte* “side”), *da* indicates locative or allative: *vado/sono da lui* “I go to him/am at his place”; *andare/essere dal medico, dal macellaio* “to go to the doctor, to the butcher’s/be with the doctor/at the butcher’s”; *andare/essere da quella parte* “go that way”/ “be (located) on that side”.

In practice, the preposition *da* has many of the meanings usually associated with the concept of “ablative”, except for the meanings in (e): indeed, it seems quite strange that the proposition that indicates source can also indicate allative and locative, and this peculiarity of *da* has attracted a number of studies that I will briefly survey in the next section. For the time being, limiting ourselves to meanings (a)-(d) we can draw the scene for *da* in Fig. 2 based on the source schema:

Fig. 2 Scene for *da* meanings (a)-(d)

From the discussion of the meanings (a)-(d) we can further draw the semantic network in Fig. 3, in which the source /origin meaning is taken to constitute the core of the network:

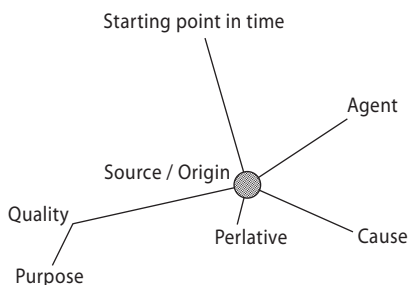


Fig. 3 Semantic Network of meanings (a)-(d)

It must further be remarked that *da*, in much the same way as other typical markers of ablative relations, can indicate locative in occurrences such as *essere lontano da qualcosa* “to be far from something”. In such occurrences, a location is referred to in terms of the trajectory that would lead from it to a reference point (the *lm.*) if the *tr.* moved (“fictive motion”, Talmy 2000). Ablative markers in such occurrences are referred to as “ablative of separation”. Indeed, even the meaning of origin, which is intuitively connected with source, does not, strictly speaking, imply movement: in an occurrence such as *a girl from Canada* we indicate an origin, but do not imply that the person referred to has ever moved away from her homeland.

In order to accommodate the meaning of separation, which also accounts for the expression of origin so frequent and important for ablative markers, one must set up a scene that does not imply a trajectory:

Fig. 4 Scene for *da* = separation

The question now is to identify the protoscene : in the network given in Fig. 3, I have assumed it to be the scene for source. In sec. 6 I will show that the scene for origin is a better candidate to be taken as the protoscene and integrates all usages of *da* within a unitary semantic network. I will return to this issue after discussing the evidence.

#### 4. Historical development

As well known Italian *da* is quite unique within the Romance languages. Elsewhere in Romance, we find a single preposition, such as *de* in French and Spanish, which derives from Latin *de* and continues two Latin cases, the ablative and the genitive. Only in Italian does one find two different prepositions, *di*, which derives from *de* and has the meanings of a genitive, and *da*, whose etymology connects it with Latin *de ab* (De Felice 1954). In addition, Italian is the only language in which the preposition that represents the ablative also displays the peculiar distribution of spatial roles shown above in (e).

An exhaustive discussion of the diachronic development of *da* can be found in De Felice (1954). De Felice observes that the usage of *da* in locative expressions with words such as *lato* and *parte* directly continues a usage of Latin *ab* in occurrences such as *a parte*, *a dextra (laeva)*, *a tergo* (see further Hofmann and Szantyr 1965, 255-256 and Luraghi forthcoming) :

(1) Liv. 2.65.2: *quamquam cessere magis quam pulsati hostes sunt, quia ab tergo erant clivi, in quos post principia integris ordinibus tutus receptus fuit*. “but the enemies withdrew, rather than be pushed away, because behind them were hills, which offered a safe shelter to which they retreated in good order behind the first lines”.

(2) Matth. 27.38: *tunc crucifixi sunt cum eo duo latrones unus a dextris et unus a sinistris*. “then there were two robbers crucified with him, one on his right hand and one on the left”.

In the above occurrences, the ablative preposition *ab* indicates that a tr. is located with reference to a lm. but not in direct contact with it. This extension is made possible by the meaning of separation conveyed

by the ablative and by ablative prepositions, which I have discussed at the end of section III. In other words, an ablative marker with words indicating the side of a referent locates a tr. in a more vague fashion than a locative would do, simply specifying a position of the tr. in the vicinity of the lm. but separated from it.

Extension of an ablative preposition to locative meaning is by no means infrequent, and not limited to *ab* in Latin. As well known, many Romance adverbs developed a locative meaning out of an original ablative one, such as *fuori, di fuori, dehors, de-intro > dentro, di dentro, de-avant > devant,...* Such a change is called ‘ablative-locative transfer’, and is attested in other languages as well (see Lachlan Mackenzie 1978).

The compound preposition *de ab, dab* occurs in Medieval Latin with nouns such as *parte, latere, caput, pede, sera, meridie, occasum, oriente*, and occasionally proper names, and with the verbs *esse, stare, habere* :

(3) *Cartulario Eccl. Terami* (9th-12th century) : *dab uno latere fine terra Teutoni dab alio latere terra Sancti Petri*

“on one side the territory of the Germans, on the other side the territory of the Pope.

In Early Italian (13th-15th century), *da* frequently indicates locative with nouns that denote local regions situated at one of the sides of a lm., as in :

(4) Dante *Purg.* 2.43 : *da poppa stava il celestial nocchiero*

“the heavenly helmsman stood on the stern” i.e. “he stood on the side of the ship where the stern is located” ;

and in the adverbial locutions *di sotto da, di sopra da, davanti da, dinanzi da, dentro da, intorno da*. In most of such occurrences, *da* is no longer used in Modern Standard Italian, in which *a* occurs instead.

Sporadically, the locative meaning of *da* is also attested with nouns that refer to urban landmarks (churches, official buildings, etc.), with the meaning *by, nearby*, and with human nouns or personal pronouns :

(5) *Ritmo lucchese*, 1213: *ma loro arme e lor cavalli/lassarò dai pagani* “they left their weapons and their horses by the pagans.”

As compared to the locative sense, which, as we have seen, is well attested and old, going back to a meaning of Latin *ab*, the allative sense of *da* appears to be a later innovation ; besides, its distribution shows a stronger connection with nouns that have human referents, similar to Modern Standard Italian :

(6) Boccaccio *Dec.* 2.10 : *io... vi menerò da lei*

“I will take you to her.”

To sum up, the evidence points towards the existence of a locative meaning of *da*, inherited from Latin *ab*, which indicated the position of a tr. in the vicinity of a lm.’s side; the usage then extended to human lms., and in the meantime it started to occur with motion verbs as well.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation has been challenged by Poppe (1963), who proposes a number of different origins for the various usages of *da*, some of them brought about by chance. In particular, Poppe calls attention to the existence of locative adverbs that could or could not be prefixed with *da*, such as *davanti/avanti*, *dattorno/attorno*, and writes that

l’oscillazione dell’uso tra *avanti* e *davanti*... cioè tra forma con *d-* e forma senza *d-*, deve aver dato origine alla sostituzione di *da* ad *a* quale mezzo di collegamento sintattico... *avanti a...*; *davanti a...* > *davanti da*..... quasi la mobilità della consonante iniziale potesse estendersi alla preposizione susseguente” (1963, 354-355).<sup>2</sup>

Reasons of space prevent me from discussing in detail all of Poppe’s hypotheses regarding the origin of locative *da*; the ‘accidental’ origin of *da* quoted above, however, seems unlikely. In its use with human lms., according to Poppe, *da* sometimes originated from passive constructions (in particular in *confessarsi da* “make confession to”), while other times it originated as a contraction from *davanti da X* > *da X* (in which, as we have seen, Poppe views *da* as secondarily introduced by analogy with the prefixed adverb).

As accurate as Poppe’s study may be regarding the chronology and the distribution of locative and allative *da*, a unitary explanation as the one given by De Felice still looks preferable to an array of hypotheses, each regarding a few specific contexts of occurrence. In the next section, I will discuss the type of lms. that trigger the locative and allative meanings of *da*, and will argue that, by generalizing *da* with such lms., Italian has found a solution for encoding a relation which is problematic in some of the other Romance languages, namely the locative and allative relation with human lms.

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1. Extension of locative markers to allative is quite frequent, see Luraghi (2003 and forthcoming) for reference.
  2. “Alternance in use between *avanti* and *davanti*... i.e. between forms with and without *d-* must have caused substitution of *a* with *da* as a means of syntactic connection *avanti a...*; *davanti a...* > *davanti da...* as if the mobile initial consonant could extend to the subsequent preposition.”

## 5. Space expressions with human referents

Unmarked locative in Latin is indicated by the preposition *in* (or by the locative case in the case of certain toponyms), implies (partial) coincidence in space and is based on the container schema (Luraghi 2003 and forthcoming):

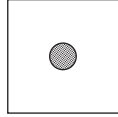


Figure 5. Scene for Latin *in*

Obviously, this schema cannot apply if the *lm.* is a human being: if an entity, especially a human trajector, is located with respect to a human *lm.*, there can be no containment and no coincidence in space. In other words, the *tr.* must be located in the vicinity of the *lm.*, as in the case of the English preposition *by*; crucially, the *tr.* must be separated from the *lm.* In Latin both locative and allative with human *lms.* are expressed by means of prepositions which do not imply containment, i.e. *apud* and *ad*:

(7) Cic. *Rab. Post.* 26–27: *non in hortis aut suburbanis suis, sed Neapoli, in celeberrimo oppido*

“not in their country seats or their suburban villas, but in Naples, a much-frequented town.”

(8) Pl. *Bacch.* 354 *senex in Epbesum ibit aurum arcessere*

“the old gentleman will be going to to fetch his gold.”

(9) Catull. 13.1: *cenabis bene, mi Fabulle, apud me paucis... diebus*

“you will feast well with me, my Fabullus, in a few days.”

(10) Cic. *Verr.* 1.1.23: *eadem illa nocte ad me venit*

“he came to me on the same night.”<sup>3</sup>

In Medieval Italian, before *da* extended to locative and allative with human *lm.*, we find direct reflexes of the Latin prepositions shown in (9) and (10):

3. In origin the meaning of *ad* was ‘by’, ‘nearby’, and it did not imply coincidence in space between the *tr.* and the *lm.*, as shown in Cic. *Verr.* 1.1.45: *ipse denique Cn. Pompeius cum primum contionem ad urbem consul designatus habuit* “lastly, Gnaeus Pompeius himself, when first he delivered a speech by the city walls as consul elect”.



(11) *Rett.* 63.17: *non muove la questione appo coloro che si conviene*  
 “he does not raise the matter with the appropriate people.”

(12) *Trec.* 481.134: *andati a lui gli dissono ciò che era seguito*  
 “having gone to him, they told him what followed.”

The situation changed at a rather early time, partly on account of the disappearance of *appo*, partly of changes in the meaning of *a*, which I cannot discuss here: suffice it to say that *a* often indicates coincidence in space in Modern Standard Italian, as shown by its usage with city names, with which it has virtually replaced *in*, frequently used in Medieval Italian. Thus, expressing the locative and allative relation with human lms. became problematic.

Such a problematic state of affairs is far from being unique in the Romance languages. In French, for example, locative and allative with human lms. are encoded through a newly created preposition, *chez*, which derives from the noun *casa* ‘home’ through grammaticalization, and a similar development is attested with *ca* in Catalan.<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, allative with human lms. is still expressed by *a*, which derives directly from Latin *ad*, but there is no specific way of encoding locative: in some South American varieties, the adverb *donde* is used, in much the same way as Italian *da*, in occurrences such as:

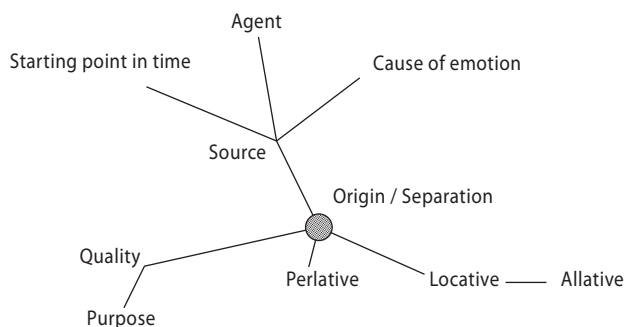
(13) *Vive donde su prima* “s/he lives with her/his cousin”.

In Italian, the availability of *da* in occurrences such as *dalla parte*, *dal lato* “on the side” provided a convenient solution for the problem of expressing locative and allative with lms. in cases in which it needed to be indicated that there were no relations of containment or coincidence in space.

## 6. A semantic network of *da*

The discussion of the examples in sec. 4 and 5 has shown that the meanings of *da* given in sec. 3 under (e) can be connected with a frequent meaning of the ablative, which indicates separation and origin. If we assume this meaning as being responsible for the protoscene, then all usages of *da* in Italian can be accommodated in the semantic network, as shown in Fig. 6.

4. In French, *à* often indicates spatial coincidence, much in the same way as Italian *a* (cf. *sono/vado a Roma/je suis/vais à Rome*). It can further be noted that, both in French and in Catalan, Latin *apud* came to be used for comitative, and consequently it was no longer available for locative.

Fig. 6 Semantic Network of *da*

Note that usages that imply motion, such as source, also imply separation (in a source expression, a tr. is moving away from a lm., i.e. motion separates the tr. from the lm.), while usages that imply separation do not necessarily imply motion. Thus, the scene in Fig. 2 is a much better candidate for being considered the protoscene for *da* than the scene in Fig. 1. Note further that the scene in Fig. 2 allows integrating the locative and allative usages of *da* in a way which would be impossible, if the protoscene were the scene in Fig. 1.

Of course, disambiguation of the highly polysemous preposition *da* heavily relies on contextual features, and not only because human lms. trigger some special spatial usages: only the extra-linguistic context can help us understand if a sentence such as:

(14) *l'auto è stata lavata dal benzinaio*

must be taken to contain a locative expression (“the car has been washed at the gas station”) or a passive agent (“the car has been washed by the gas station man”). Keeping in mind that contextual features play a major role in the understanding of the meaning of prepositions and of lexical meaning in general could prevent dictionary entries to contain long lists of apparently unrelated meanings, as observed by Tyler and Evans:

a significant problem with previous approaches [to prepositions] is that they fail to distinguish between what is coded by a lexical expression and the information that must be derived from context, background knowledge of the world, and spatial relations in general... formal linguistic expression underspecifies for meaning (2001, 97).

The separative meaning is quite common for ablative prepositions; its extension to indicate locative and allative with human lms. constitu-

tes a case of conceptual blending, as described in Fauconnier and Turner (1998). Two mental spaces are “blended” with each other, namely the mental space of origin/separation and the mental space of human beings, which contains the information that human lms. of locative and allative relations cannot imply spatial coincidence. The knowledge that human beings have about bodily dimension implies the notion that in locative situations the position of a tr. relative to a human lm. is not the same as the possible position relative to an inanimate lm. Thus, embodiment plays a crucial role in the extension of *da* to locative and allative with human lms.

As a conclusion one may add that *da*, while acquiring new meanings, has lost some old ones. The extension of *da* has provided a solution to the problem of encoding locative and allative with human lms. in Italian, a problem which, as we have seen in sec. 5, has been variously solved (or not solved) in some other Romance languages. However, it has created a new problem, i.e. the encoding of ablative with human lms., as shown below:

- (15) *vengo da Giovanni/vengo dal parrucchiere*  
 “I come to/\*from John/I come to/?from the hairstylist”

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