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On the Usage of Cognitive Verbs with *Of*—Compared to Those with *About*—

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It is well-known that some verbs share contrastive meanings when followed by *of* and when followed by *about*. For example, *dream of* refers to simply what kind of dream a speaker has, while *dream about* mentions contents of the dream. There are several verbs having this usage¹⁾ such as *feel*, *hear*, *know*, *learn*, *read*, *speak*, *talk*, *tell*, *think*, *write*; it is obvious that they involve cognitive activities about information or knowledge. In the paper, we analyse this usage in terms of “quality and quantity regarding information”.²⁾

First, we discuss the usage of a preposition *of*. The author thinks that this is “partitive genitive”, of which it is possible to find examples in OE. The partitive genitive is used as the object of certain verbs describing mental activity, eating and drinking, or despoliation. Partitive genitive means “some of”, and is concerned not with all of the object, but with only a part of it. In OE, the partitive genitive occurs with such verbs as *drink*, *eat*, *smell* and *taste*, all of which work as transitive verbs without prepositions in the present. In other words, some objects with which these verbal activities are concerned are material nouns such as liquid and food in general.

The reason why partitive genitive follows cognitive verbs like *dream* etc. is that their objects i.e. information or knowledge, are uncountable nouns which behave in a similar way to material nouns.³⁾

When the partitive genitive is used with material nouns, it shows partial quantity, i.e. a certain portion against an indefinite quantity which the transitive usage can mean. Quantitative aspects of the prepositional function are transferred into qualitative ones when a speaker is concerned with constitutional density of information; the way of perceiving information that the objects convey. Therefore, the partitive genitive with verbs meaning giving and getting information or

knowledge involves the wholeness as distinct from the totality⁴⁾, i.e. qualitatively definite information regarding the density. It is definiteness that is common both in quantity and in quality when we use *of*. Again, *of* is used when the speaker is interested mainly in the wholeness regarding the constitution of information on the verb object.

On the other hand, *about* refers to each component which semantically makes up the object of the verb.⁵⁾ Information about an object can be divided into concomitant 'sub-information', in which, *about* suggests a speaker is mainly interested. In other words, *about* mentions the subject-matter more comprehensively.⁶⁾

Generally speaking, *of* implies the wholeness while *about* suggests the totality in this usage. Therefore, the former is used to indicate some principal but limited (in quality, not in quantity) information of the object and the latter is used to express more detailed and comprehensive information or knowledge concerning the object. The difference would be more obvious in comparisons such as *dream of/about*, *hear of/about*, *learn of/about*, *speak of/about*, *think of/about*⁷⁾, *write of/about*.

It is interesting that *of* suggests how to get information; *hear of*, *know of*, *read of*, *speak well of* and *think well of*. They mean that a speaker has acquired the information indirectly i.e. through a secondary medium such as hearsay or a printed source etc. This meaning becomes clear when compared to the transitive usage. The author assumes that indirectness comes from partiality which partitive genitive originally implies. In addition, *hear of* and *know of* mean that a speaker simply has qualitatively limited and primary information, mostly a name of the object. A name is a part of the entire information and may be inessential or peripheral in terms of quality; it is often said "I know only the name" or "all I know is just its name" and so forth. In contrast, *hear about* and *know about* imply comprehensive information and a fuller knowledge from the speaker's point of view in terms of quality regarding subject-matter.

Of in *talk of* suggests values on the information which a speaker places. Partiality means that there is some room for change in his utterance, in other words, the speaker is less sure of the certainty of the information.

Because of partiality *of* is more preferred in negative sentences. For example, *not dream of*, *not hear of* and *not think of* carry very strong negation for verbal

activity. A speaker emphasises low probability through comparison to possible minimum or extreme examples like *even*. *Of* in the above phrases is paraphrased to *even a bit of information on*. Note such colloquial expressions as *not that I know of* and *no or not speak of*.⁸⁾

In contrast, when *about* is used with a negative expression, it could provide euphemistic atmosphere like *I don't know about*. See Wood (1970: 327-328).

In addition *feel of/about* share a different meaning; the former implies to examine by touching while the latter suggests to feel around, or at various places on or within⁹⁾. This usage clearly shows contrastive difference of quantity concerning verbal activity. But *feel of* is limited to American usage, which has retained some old usages of partitive genitive; *smell of* and *taste of*.

The author thinks that it is possible to regard the difference between *of* and *about* as parallel to that between singularity and plurality of collective nouns. For example, *dream of* refers to the wholeness of a speaker's dream, and it is comparable to the singular usage of *a family* in *My family is famous*, while *dream about* implies totality i.e. total components of the dream, and it is similar to the plural usage when we say *All my family are famous*; it makes reference to each member of the family. Wood (1970: 429, 507) explains *read about* and *tell one about* are modified by *all*, while *read of* and *tell one of* cannot. The author thinks that *all* means literally all components which *about* implies regarding objects. Needless to say, a difference between singularity and plurality depends on a speaker's aspect of numerical quality of a collective noun. In other words, it is important how a speaker perceives numerical characteristics, i.e. whether it works as a unit or a set of components. A difference between the two prepositions also basically derives from the point of view of numerical quality. It is obvious that the English language pays great attention to numerical quality of nouns. The usage is one of the examples of this property.

Notes

- 1) There are numerous words in which a difference of meaning is not caused by the exchange of two prepositions. In the present paper, the author does not treat these cases; *bastful*, *brag*, *care* (v.) and *care* (n.), *careful*, *doubtful*, *inform* and so on. In other words, we deal with the case where semantic

change can take place between *of* and *about*.

2) OED describes as follows:

of 26. In sense: Concerning, about, with regard to, in reference to. After verbs, substantives, and adjectives. a. After intransitive verbs; esp. those of learning, knowing, thinking, and expressing thought as *hear, read, know, think, dream, judge, tell, relate, write*, and the like...

about 7. Abstract connexion: Touching, concerning; in the matter of, in reference or regard to. The regular preposition employed to define the subject-matter of verbal activity, as in *to speak, think, ask, dream, hear know about*...

3) For instance, in *dream of/about a lion* there is syntactically a countable noun as an object, i.e. *a lion*, but according to COBUILD, *to dream* means to see imaginary pictures and events in one's mind. In other words, dream is information on something to get during sleep, therefore *to dream of/about a lion* is paraphrased to "to get some imaginary information on a lion during sleep". Semantically speaking, the author assumes that the object of a cognitive verb is information regarding something. That is to say, what is done when using a cognitive verb is cognition of the subject-matter which is shown as the syntactic object, and cognition involves information or knowledge.

4) Both words can be interchangeable, but COBUILD explains as follows:

wholeness is the quality of being complete or a single unit and not broken or divided into parts...

A total is the number that you get when you add a series of figures together or when you count how many things there are in a group...

A difference would be clear in comparison of *as a whole, in whole* and *in total*.

5) Another important point is that it is semantic opposition that decides the function of prepositions; when *about* is used in temporal usage such as *about October 1* it expresses approximateness, while *on* in *on October 1* shows preciseness. See Bennett (1968a).

6) According to Wood (1970:141) there is a tendency to use *about* when emphasis is placed on *boast*. The author thinks that this is because *about* suggests that a speaker assumes closer relationship between the action of boasting and the object of the boast. This is an example of how *about* refers to each compo-

nent, which justifies 'boasting' in this case.

- 7) According to Wood (1970:512) , *he thinks too much of himself*=*he has too high an opinion of himself*, on the other hand, *he thinks too much about himself*=*he worries over his health, or his aches and pains, too much*. The former represents that it is his whole personality that is treated as an object to think of, while the latter denotes that the more detailed and concrete features that make up his personality could be problems.
- 8) According to Wood (1970:208) , when *doubt* is used as a noun *of* is perhaps rather more emphatic than *about*. This is because *doubt* itself has a negative meaning.
- 9) See Wood (1970:254) .

References

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