

## A Cognitive Semantic Approach to the Polysemy of *off*

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Shi, Jiaojiao and Youngju Choi. "A Cognitive Semantic Approach to the Polysemy of *off*." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 44.4 (2018): 155-174. English prepositions have been known to include seemingly heterogeneous and unrelated meanings. Therefore, traditionally, the diverse meanings of a preposition are treated as something to be memorized. However, cognitive semantics considers the meanings of prepositions to be interrelated to each other, and can in fact provide the linguistic motivations in these interconnected relationships. In this paper, based on the cognitive semantics, the seemingly unrelated meanings of *off* are explained in a more holistic and systematic way. Among different tools of cognitive linguistics, perspectivization is adopted in the analysis of *off*. The meanings of *off* are categorized based on which part of the image schema is highlighted. In the image schema of *off*, a trajector moves from its source to a goal over a path. Depending on which part, among source, goal, and path is highlighted, the basic spatial meaning of *off* is extended diversely, creating various literal and metaphorical meanings. The result shows that the meanings of *off* always emphasize the source part of its image schema, unlike the meanings of *away* whose main emphasis is on the goal part. (Chosun University)

**Key Words:** cognitive semantics, image-schema, perspectivization, *off*, metaphor

### I. Introduction

Traditional linguistics has observed that the semantics of English prepositions are arbitrary and very difficult to characterize (Bloomfield, 1933; Frank, 1972; Chomsky, 1995). Therefore, it has been believed that the best way to learn English prepositions

is to memorize their meanings. However, Cognitive Linguistics (CL) puts forth a different idea, claiming that the multiple meanings of any linguistic units are related in systematic and principled ways (Brugman, 1988; Dewell, 1994; Dirven, 1993; Lakoff, 1987; Linder, 1982; Tyler and Evans, 2001, 2003; Vandeloise, 1991, 1994; Lindstromberg 2010).

The observation that the meanings of prepositions are related to each other spurred researchers to pay more attention to the analysis of prepositional meanings from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. As a result, since the beginning of the 1980's, a number of cognitive linguists began to research the semantics of English prepositions under the cognitive linguistic framework (e.g. Brugman, 1981; Brugman and Lakoff, 1988; Hawkins, 1988; Herskovits 1986, 1988; Lakoff, 1987; Linder, 1982). For example, Tyler, Mueller and Ho (2011) explain the central meaning of *to* as a spatial scene in which an oriented object faces a highlighted element, as in *Jane walked to school*. Based on its central meaning, *to* has several extended meanings which denote non-spatial relationships between two entities. For example, *to* denotes 'limitation,' when the goal represents a limit on the activity the person engage in, which means the person cannot go further, as in *The swimmers swam to the opposite side of the pool*.

However, among many prepositions, *off* has been regarded as being recalcitrant to relate one of its meanings to the other, with its diverse meanings. That may be the reason why only a handful of researchers have turned their attention to *off*. Lindstromberg (2010) analyzes *off*, but his explanation is restricted to some meanings of *off*, comparing it with other prepositions. Lee (2008) also analyzes *off* in his book *English Prepositions*, but he deals with the various meanings of *off* very thoroughly. He successfully explains how the diverse meanings of *off* come from its prototypical image schema where an entity, which is originally attached to the other entity, moves away from the one that it is attached to. However his analysis is restricted to listing the usages of *off* and explaining them one by one.

Any systematic explanation has not been given to *off*. Therefore, this paper aims

to deal with the various meanings *off* in a more systematic way, grouping the meanings of *off* based on which part of the image schema is more highlighted.

## II. Previous Research of *OFF*

Even though many cognitive linguists (e.g. Brugman, 1981; Brugman and Lakoff, 1988; Hawkins, 1988; Herskovits, 1986, 1988; Lakoff, 1987; Linder, 1982). have conducted research on English prepositions, the polysemy of *off* has not received appropriate attention since the main focus of the most researchers has not been analyzing the entire body of *off*'s meanings. For example, although Milošević (2016) and Milošević and Pavlović (2017) provide an analysis of the phrasal verbs composed of *off*, they do nothing but analyse the phrasal verbs including *off*, instead of presenting a systematic analysis of the diverse meanings of *off*.

Lindstromberg explains meanings of *off* in his book *English Prepositions Explained* (2010), but his focus is confined to comparison between *off* and other prepositions in English, leading to partial analysis of the meanings of *off*. For example, the comparison of *off* with *from* leads to the conclusion that, although they both have the meaning of 'separation,' *off* is used when the landmark is viewed as a surface, as in *The rocket is taking off*. Even though Lindstromberg successfully compares some meanings of *off* with those of similar prepositions, he fails to touch upon the entire body of the meanings of *off* as his main focus is on comparison, rather than on providing a systematic analysis of *off* in its own right.

Lee (2008) analyzes various meanings of *off* in his book *English Prepositions*. According to his analysis, the basic meaning of *off* is 'separation' from the object it is originally attached to. For example, in the sentence *The wheels were off the car*, the wheels which used to be attached to the car, move away, being separated from the car. He also deals with some metaphorical meanings of *off*, including the instance of *off* in *We are going off the subject*, where *off* means 'abstract distance'

between the aim and what they have achieved. Although he analyzes many meanings of *off* in his book, his focus is on listing the diverse meanings and showing how the diverse meanings are related to the prototypical image schema of *off*, rather than analyzing them in a systematic way. The most obvious difference between this paper and Lee's explanation of *off* is that this paper groups various meanings of *off* based on which part of the image schema is highlighted rather than just lists them one by one, which can help readers understand and memorize the meanings of *off*. For example, this paper groups 'unemployed', 'interrupted' and 'abnormal' meanings under the title of metaphorical separation because these meanings are all related to 'metaphorical separation' which always highlights the landmark and the end-point at the same time, but Lee just lists these meanings and then explain them with image schemas, which seems not so systematic.

Trying to overcome the limitations the previous research has, this paper adopts the key notion of cognitive semantics, such as image schema, metaphor, and perspectivization, in analyzing the meanings of *off*. Especially the notion of perspectivization will help us to reveal how the seemingly heterogeneous meanings of *off* are interrelated to each other, depending on which part of its image schema gets greater highlight.

### III. Some Key Notions of Cognitive Semantics

Before analyzing the meanings of *off* in detail, the basic notions of cognitive semantics, that are to be used in the analysis, such as image schema, metaphor, and (metonymic) perspectivization, will be introduced in this section.

#### 3.1. Image schema

According to Johnson (1987, 267), the image schema refers to "relatively simple

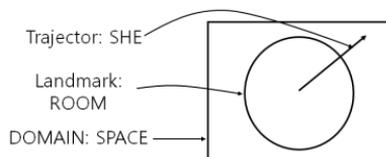
structures that constantly recur in our everyday bodily experience: CONTAINER, PATHS, LINKS, FORCES, BALANCE, and in various orientations and relations: UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK, PART-WHOLE, CENTER-PERIPHERY etc.” It has been argued that image schemas are “mental patterns associated with broad classes of concepts or experiences (Grady 2005, 36),” so image schema is very important for abstract thinking. Lakoff (1987, 275) emphasizes the importance of image schemas, when he puts forward “image schema provides particularly important evidence for the claim that abstract reasoning is a matter of two sides : 1) reason based on bodily experience; and 2) metaphorical mappings from concrete to abstract domains.” Our conceptual structure is shaped by our external experiences with the world and we use image schemas to communicate our perception of the world.

The internal structure of a typical image schema is explored by Langacker (1987), who claims that there are three elements in an image schema, namely, Trajector, Landmark and Path. The object which is in focus is called the *Trajector* and the object which serves as a reference point is the *Landmark* (Langacker 1987: 231). And the trajectory that has undergone is the *Path*.

To illustrate these concepts mentioned above, we turn to Lindner (1982) who connects the various meanings of *out* with its basic spatial meaning. The spatial meaning is observed in (1a) and the image schema of *out* is represented visually as in (1b).

(1) a. She went out of the room. Lindner (1982: 307)

b.



Lindner (1982: 308)

The trajector is *she*, and the landmark is the space the trajector *she* is located in.

The trajector starts out inside of the landmark, but after the movement, *she* is outside of the landmark. In the analysis of *off*, the same notions, including ‘image schema’, ‘trajector’, ‘trajectory’, and ‘landmark’, will be used.

### 3.2. Metaphor

In cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one concept in terms of another, as stated below.

Humans regularly observe the recurrent co-occurrence of two distinct phenomena. With repeated exposures, the two distinct but co-occurring phenomena become strongly associated in memory such that we conceptualize and talk about one in terms of the other (Tyler, Mueller and Ho 2011: 186-187)

People often think and talk about their internal world, such as emotions, feelings and thought, in terms of their experiences with the external and physical world. This is how we conceptualize an abstract concept in terms of physical objects and/or spaces (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The abstract concepts are the target domains, which we try to understand. The physical objects and spaces are source domains, which we use in trying to understand the target concepts.

Returning to the analysis of *out* in Lindner (1982), we can see that the spatial and physical meaning of *out* is extended to metaphorical meanings. In these cases, *out* is applied to abstract trajectors such as percepts or ideas, as in (2). The landmark is a cognitively and perceptually inaccessible area from the viewpoint of the viewer. When the trajector *solution* moves out of its landmark, it becomes cognitively and perceptually accessible.

(2) I figured out a solution to the problem                      Lindner (1982: 311)

The trajectory can be in the opposite direction as well, as in (3). When the

trajectors move out of the viewer's range of cognitive and perceptual access, they become unknown. *Out* in this case denotes a change of state from accessible to inaccessible.

(3) He tried to blot out the painful memory. Linder (1982: 311)

In this paper, we also use the concept of metaphor to explain the metaphorical meanings of *off*. The abstract meanings are all extended from its basic spatial meaning.

### 3.3. Perspectivization

Perspectivization is the highlighting of one part of a complex image schema (Taylor 1995).<sup>1</sup> It is also defined as below in Tyler, Mueller and Ho (2011).

Certain parts of a spatial scene can be highlighted or profiled. Additions or shifts in highlighting can give rise to new inferences, which in turn can give rise to additional senses. (Tyler, Mueller and Ho 2011: 186)

Prepositions highlight many different aspects of the spatial scene. They can highlight the goal part (the end-point of the trajector's movement is highlighted), the source part (the starting-point of the trajector's movement is highlighted), or the path (some or all of the trajectory followed by the trajector is highlighted) (Taylor 1995: 90). For example, Taylor does research on the preposition *over*. He identifies major meaning clusters for *over*. First, *over* indicates some kind of covering relationship between trajector and landmark, as in *He laid the tablecloth over the table*. Second, *over* designates a curved, arc-like path, as in *He walked over the hill*. A final cluster of senses of *over* has to do with the end-point of a path, as in *He lived over the*

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<sup>1</sup> Highlighting in the perspectivization is different from highlighting of metaphor in Lakoff&Johnson (1980).

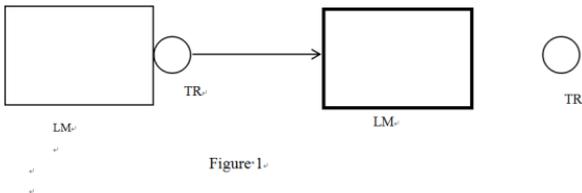
*hill*.

In this paper, we will analyze the various meanings of the preposition *off* based on which part of the image schema of *off* is perspectivized. When the source and end-point of the trajector's movement is highlighted, the emphasis is on the separation of the trajector from its source. When the source is highlighted, the emphasis is on the fact that the source does not have a trajector. When the path is highlighted, the emphasis is on the distance between the source and the place where the trajector is located.

#### IV. Categorization of Meanings of *OFF* based on Perspectivization

##### 4.1. Perspectivization Towards Source

At the beginning of the movement indicated by *off*, the trajector is attached to the landmark, but after the movement, they become separated. When the aspect of the landmark without having the trajector is highlighted, as shown in <figure 1><sup>2</sup>, the meanings such as 'absence,' 'removal,' and 'cancellation' arise.



Lee (2008: 254)

<sup>2</sup> The <Figure 1>, which represents the prototypical meaning of *off*, is from Lee (2008) and other figures, which represent extended meanings, are all ours.

## 4.1.1. Absence

When a trajector leaves a landmark, the landmark does not have the trajector any more. When the trajector is a person and the landmark is an abstract concept such as *duty* or *work* as in (4), *off* indicates that the person is absent.

- (4) a. I still had to take a day *off* of work and jeopardized my job.  
 b. I'm *off* duty tonight and just wanted to make sure to get this on record.

(COCA)

## 4.1.2. Removal

When both of a trajector and a landmark are physical or abstract objects, and the elimination of the trajectory is highlighted after the trajector moves away from the landmark, then the meaning 'removal' is elicited. In (5a), the trajector is *a big burden* and the landmark is *my shoulder*, which metonymically refers to the person's psyche. The use of *off* indicates that the *burden* has been eliminated. In (5b) the trajector is *the issue*, and the landmark is *the table*, which metonymically refers to a discussion. The use of *off* indicates that *the issue*, which had originally been a part of the discussion, has been removed. In (5c), the trajector is *the debt* which the landmark, *they*, had. Here, *pay off* indicates a complete and total removal of *the debt* from *they*.

- (5) a. I feel like a big burden is *off* my shoulder, and I can take my family to a place where I can feel safe.  
 b. So it's not about the environment. So he has just taken that issue *off* the table.  
 c. They enjoy the option to *pay off* all outstanding debt and keep the assets or to walk away without personal liability.

(COCA)

## 4.1.3. Cancellation

Elimination of a plan or an event results in the cancellation of it. When the

implicated result becomes a denotation, the meaning ‘cancellation’ is elicited. In (6), the uses of *off* indicate that *the trip*, *the deal* and *the wedding* are canceled.

- (6) a. The child is told that the trip to the zoo is *off*.  
 b. After they’ve held up their end of the bargain, tell them that the deal is *off*.  
 c. Needless to say, the wedding is *off*, and when her fiance is found dead a few days later, all evidence points to Teeny.

(COCA)

The landmark is always implicit in this condition and the trajectors are the anticipated events, such as *the trip*, *the deal* and *the wedding* in above examples.

## 4.2. Perspectivization Towards Source and Goal

When the source of the trajector’s movement and the end-point of the movement are highlighted simultaneously, the meanings *physical and metaphorical separations* are elicited. At the outset of the movement, the trajector is attached to the landmark, but at the end-point, it is separated from the landmark. This state of separation of the trajector from the landmark is highlighted, as in <figure 2> where the highlighted part is in bold.

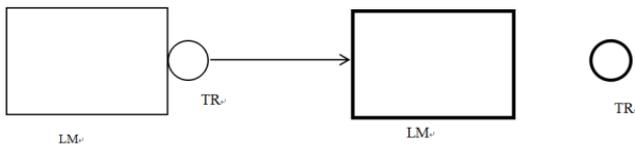


Figure 2.

### 4.2.1 Physical Separation

*Off* means ‘physical separation’ from the source due to the movement of an entity

from its source. For example, in (7a), the landmark is *the president's shirt* and the trajector is *the button*. Here, *come off* indicates that the button has been removed from the president's shirt, so it is physically separated from that shirt. In (7b), the landmark is *the car*, and the trajectors are *the wheels*. The use of *off* indicates that the wheels are physically separated from the car.

- (7) a. Then the thought came to Betty to keep for herself the button that had *come off* the president's shirt and sew another in its place. (COCA)  
 b. The wheels were *off* the car. Lee (2008: 255)

Except to above kind of physical separation, *off* can be used to express another kind of physical separation which denotes the separation of the part from the whole. Here the landmark and the trajector are the same things, which are different from the above examples. For example, in (8a), the landmark is *the chicken patty* and the trajector is *one piece of chicken*. The use of *cut off* indicates that one piece of chicken is physically separated from the whole chicken patty. In (8b), the landmark is his sister's whole income and the trajector is a part of his sister's income which is spent on by him. The use of *living off* means that a part of money spent on him is separated from the whole income.

- (8) a. "I grabbed a plastic state-issued fork and cut one piece *off* the chicken patty, tasting it," recalls Valdez.  
 b. He is *living off* his sister.

(COCA)

#### 4.2.2 Metaphorical Separation

When *off* is used metaphorically, *off* indicates that the trajector is separated from the landmark. In the case that the landmark is something along the lines of consciousness, balance, function, and continuation, the separation of the trajector from that landmark suggests that the trajector is unconscious, imbalanced, inoperative, and interrupted.

#### 4.2.2.1. Unconscious

As shown in (9), the use of *dozed off* indicates being tired and having no consciousness. The person in the sentence is the trajector, and s/he moves from a state of consciousness to a state of unconsciousness.

- (9) I must have *dozed off*, because when I open my eyes a few hours have passed.  
(COCA)

#### 4.2.2.2. Imbalanced

When a trajector is separated from a landmark indicating balance, *off* is used to designate that the trajector is imbalanced. In (10a) the trajector *her* moves from the landmark of balance and is separated from it at the end-point. Therefore, she is imbalanced. Similarly, in (10b), the trajector *me* also ends in a state separated from balance.

- (10) a. The movement sent her *off* balance, and the bag slipped from her grasp and hit the pavement.  
b. The unexpected change in plans really threw me *off*.  
(COCA)

#### 4.2.2.3 Inoperative

In addition, *off* means the movement from operative to inoperative. For example, in (11) the uses of *turn off* and *shut off* indicate that the *mobile devices* and a *digital signal* are separated from the operative domain, and are therefore not working anymore.

- (11) a. Before the lecture begins, have students *turn off* their mobile devices.  
b. Furthermore, the area where a digital signal is *shut off* should be limited to the precise point of attack.  
(COCA)

#### 4.2.2.4 Interrupted

When *off* means the movement away from a state of continuation, *off* obtains the meaning of ‘interruption.’ In (12) the trajectors, *communication*, *conversation*, and *work* move from the continued domain and are therefore interrupted.

- (12) a. After I yelled at her cat, she *cut off* all communication with me.  
b. The conversation *broke off* as the thing stopped, changed direction, and started spiraling upward.  
c. From time to time he’d *knock off* work for an hour or two, eat a bite, relax, down a scotch.

(COCA)

#### 4.2.2.5. Unemployed

When a trajector is separated from the employment domain, *off* indicates that the trajector is unemployed. As shown in (13), the trajector *workers* moves from the landmark of employment, which means unemployment.

- (13) The factory *laid off* workers. Lee (2008: 269)

#### 4.2.2.6. Abnormal

*Off* can also mean the movement from normal to abnormal. For example, in (14a) the use of *goes off* indicates that *the milk* turns bad and is not the same as the normal one. The trajector, *the milk*, is separated from the normal domain and become abnormal.

- (14) The milk *goes off* in a hot weather. Lee (2008: 276)

According to the above analysis, the landmarks in all examples are abstract domains. The trajectors are with the landmark at the beginning of the movement, but after the movement, they are separated from the landmark. All the above

examples can be explained by <figure 3>.

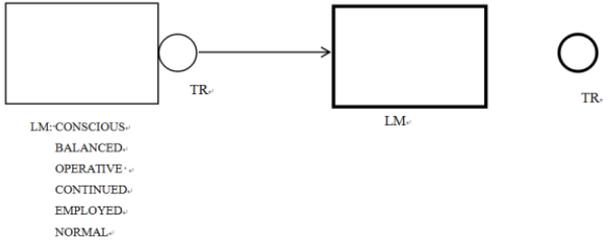


Figure 3.

#### 4.2.2.7. Activated

In the previous examples, metaphorical extensions of *off* are all related to the movement from positive domains, such as the domains of ‘consciousness’, ‘balance’, ‘operation’, ‘continuation’, ‘employment’ and ‘normality’ to negative domains, such as the domains of ‘unconsciousness’, ‘imbalance’, ‘inoperation’, ‘interruption’, ‘unemployment’ and ‘abnormality’. In the following subsections we will observe trajectors moving in the opposite direction, from a negative domain to a positive one. The meaning ‘activation’ is included in this category.

As shown in (15a), *go off* indicates that *the alarm* has entered a state of operation. At the start-point of the movement, *the alarm* is inactive, but the movement occurs toward activation, and this endpoint is highlighted. In (15b) a *firestorm of controversy* starts from a state of inexistence or inactivation, and moves to a state of activation as a result of the *law*.

(15) a. So when Andie hits the water, the alarm should *go off*.

b. The law and its subsequent iterations were designed to aid local fiscal crises but were met by voters with hostility, *setting off* a firestorm of controversy over the laws’ implications for democracy and municipal governance.

(COCA)

The landmarks in the above examples are all abstract domains, namely inoperative, invisible and un conspicuous domains. Trajectors are concrete entities. At the starting point, the trajectors are attached to the landmark, but after the movement, they are separated from the landmark, as can be shown in <figure 4>.

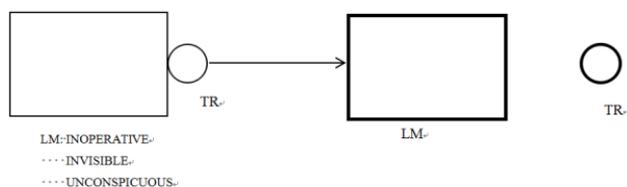


Figure 4.

### 4.3. Perspectivization Towards Path

When a trajector separates from its source and moves to a goal, the trajectory, which is called a path, is experienced.

#### 4.3.1 Physical Distance

When a movement indicated by *off* is complete, a distance is created between the trajector and the landmark. This can be seen as a type of path. When this path is highlighted, *off* is used to indicate 'distance.' For example, in (16a) the use of *off* indicate that there is a relatively long physical distance between *the North Carolina coast* and *the shark*. When the distance is not specified, it is assumed to be a short one, as in (16b). Under this circumstance, the entire length of the trajectory between the original place and the goal is highlighted, as shown in <figure 5>.

- (16) a. A picture taken at the time shows a shark eating a dead pig three miles *off* the North Carolina coast.  
 b. His car strikes Joe's, causing Joe's car to crash into a ditch *off* the side of the road, killing Joe instantly.

(COCA)



Figure 5

#### 4.3.2 Abstract Distance

*Off* can metaphorically indicate abstract distance between the metaphorical source and goal. In this case, the distance is related to abstract concepts such as TIME, PRICE, and GOAL, as shown in (17a), (17b), and (17c), respectively.

- (17) a. With the exams now only a week *off*, I had to study hard.  
 b. Start the negotiation at 50 to 75 percent *off* the retail price, say our experts.  
 c. My aim was *off*. I was trying to hit Jussac.

(COCA)

#### 4.4. Brief Comparison with *AWAY*

According to the above analysis, *off* frequently emphasizes the source part of the image schema and its emphasis on source becomes apparent when it is compared with the synonym *away*. In case of *away*, the goal part is more frequently highlighted. In *Put your toys away before you go to bed*, the focus is more on the final location of the toys than its original position, as shown in the profile of <figure 6>.

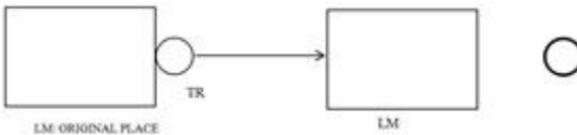


Figure 6

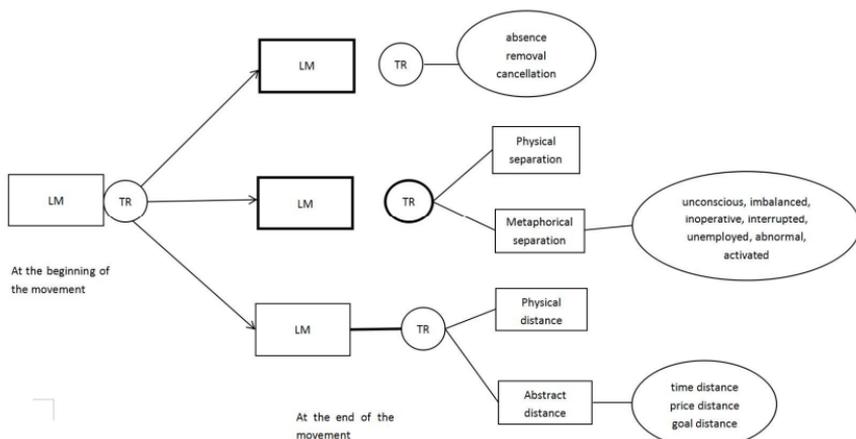
The contrast shown in *take off* and *take away* demonstrates that with *off*, speakers pay more attention to the source part than with *away*.

- (18) a. It is hot, *take off* your coat.  
 b. Were they going to *take away* our sledges?

In (18a), even after the trajector *coat* is *taken off*, the coat can be put on again, meaning that it goes back to its original place. However, in (18b), when *the sledges* are *taken away*, it is hard to expect that they are returned again.

#### 4.5. A Meaning Map of *OFF*

The meanings of *off* can be summarized as shown in <Figure 7>. Depending on which part of the final stage of the movement is highlighted, the different meanings of *off* is obtained.



<Figure 7>

## V. Conclusion

*Off* indicates a movement of a trajector away from the landmark, which it is attached to, in the beginning. When the absence of the trajector, after it moves away from the source, is highlighted, *off* denotes ‘absence’, ‘removal’ and ‘cancellation.’ When the separation of the trajector from the source and its movement to a new position are both highlighted, it denotes ‘physical separation’, ‘unconsciousness’, ‘imbalance’, ‘inoperativeness,’ ‘interruption’, ‘unemployment’, ‘abnormality’ and ‘activation.’ Finally, when the path between the source and the goal is highlighted, it denotes ‘physical distance’ and ‘metaphorical distance.’ Based on the above analysis, it is obvious that the source part in the image schema of *off* is always emphasized, which is different from the preposition *away*. Throughout the paper, it has been demonstrated that the categorization of meanings of *off* based on perspectivization can provide a systematic explanation for the entire body of meanings.

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