

Profiling in *Open*-Clauses

The English verb *open* is used to describe situations where a type of barrier is removed. “Barrier” in *open*-clauses has a wide semantic range - the barrier can be physical (open the window) or intangible (open your mind), and the removal of the barrier can facilitate passage (open the door) or vision (open the curtains). And, as there are many *barrier* types in English, there are many types of *to open*. For instance, the act of opening a laptop is physically very different from the act of opening a jar. The actual phrasing of *open*-clauses, however, can be broken down into just two types: one type that profiles the entire container, and another type that profiles the specific part of the container that is moved, or changed, to allow a kind of access.

An example of an *open*-clause that profiles an entire container is “opened the jar,” which promotes as salient the entire jar, instead of the lid of the jar (which is the part literally being “opened”). This can be defined as a type of reverse metonymy: instead of a part representing a whole, the whole container is representing the part undergoing the barrier removal. In an *open*-clause that profiles just the barrier, like “open the door,” it is truly the part of the container being removed (or de-barricaded) that is salient in the phrase.

In an attempt to determine a pattern for the occurrence of these two profiling types, container size can be considered. To open a container that is smaller than a person, it is highly unusual for someone to specify the part of the container they are opening. For instance, “opened the jar” gets 18,900 hits, while “opened the lid of the jar” and “opened the jar lid” get a total of 15. Similar discrepancies occur with other typically small containers, like box and can. However, for larger containers, like a room, “opened the room” only occurs in semantically specific contexts, whereas “opened the door” gets 1.3 million google hits. Rooms are typically far larger than a human being, and boxes typically far smaller. So we see that these instances of reverse metonymy tend to occur with small containers, but not larger containers. To look at a slightly morbid example that is inbetween these sizes, “opened the lid of the coffin” and “opened the coffin lid”

get a total of 134 google hits, while “opened the coffin” gets 13,500 hits. From this example, the size requirements for reverse metonymy can be pinpointed a bit better. It seems that container spaces must be significantly larger than a human before instances of reverse metonymy begin to be the norm.

There are a couple of ideas that can be induced from these observations. First, this situation may indicate that the entirety of small objects like boxes and cans are considered to be the actual barriers to the inside contents (with lids being the most accessible point of barrier breakage), while other containers, like rooms, are considered to be a part of what is barricaded. In other words, there may be a semantic distinction between containers that **are** barricades, and containers that **include** a barricade (and the distinction would be relative to human size). The second possibility is a bit simpler. English has two separate events indicated by “opened the door” and “opened the shop/house/etc.” Because there are two separate events, they cannot overlap without creating confusion. This leads the reverse metonymy to be limited to one specific event type (e.g., opening the shop for business), and the phrasing that profiles the barrier to be limited to the other specific event type (e.g., literally opening the door of the shop). This too would explain why opening other objects (even human-sized coffins) are not acts that tends to specify the lid: there is no competing events to limit the use of reverse metonymy to one specific event-type.