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On the polysemy of *help*

Mathilde Pinson

Introduction

- 1 Looking at lexical items from a speaker-oriented perspective can be done from a variety of angles. One of the first speaker-dependent aspects which have been revealed in the literature is the influence on language of the speaker's temporal and/or spatial localisation, i.e. deixis, e.g. Benvéniste [1966]; Maingueneau [1976]. Others also focus on how lexical items may reflect the subjectivity of the speaker, in terms of axiological or epistemic evaluation, e.g. Kerbrat-Orrechioni [2002 (1980)]. Contrasting with formal frameworks, which posit the autonomy of syntax, most speaker-oriented approaches study how meaning emerges in context, through an intricate combination of both syntax and semantics. One of the major breakthroughs of speaker-oriented approaches is to have shown that the grammatical well-formedness of a sentence does not guarantee its acceptability [Culioli 1990-1999]. Many perfectly correct sentences cannot be uttered because they would violate other types of constraints related to pragmatics and subjectivity. Indeed, the focus is on language as an act of communication and utterances have to be apprehended in context, notably in interaction. This new direction is accompanied by a thorough study of semantics and of the subtle differences in meaning that distinguish alternative variants with quasi-similar informational content. In order to go deeper into the semantics of lexical and grammatical items, and to understand underlying mechanisms, speaker-oriented researchers often endeavour to identify their invariant pole.
- 2 Apart from deixis, which is unrelated to the case of the verb *help*, all the other dimensions mentioned above are relevant to the study of this verb. More specifically, this paper will focus on the polysemy of the verb *help*, the emergence of meaning in context and particularly the emergence of new senses over the course of history. The main research questions are: 1) what do the various uses of *help* have in common? and 2) how can we account for the appearance of the secondary uses of *help*?

- 3 I will first address the semantics of prototypical *help*, before focusing on the emergence of each of the other meanings of *help*. I will finally propose a semantic grid and a graph for the verb *help*, in order to summarise what its various meanings share semantically and how they diverge.

1. The semantics of prototypical *help*

- 4 The notion of prototype [Rosch 1973] refers to the ‘best’ representative of a category. The prototype theory makes it possible to apprehend categories in all their complexity, as it includes the possibility for members of a given category to be more or less central, therefore challenging the conception that all members have to share the same set of features.
- 5 In that respect, the prototype theory converges to some extent with Culioli’s notional domains, with their borders, their interior and exterior and their organising centres [Pauly 2010: 86].
- 6 When native speakers of English are asked about the meaning of the verb *help*, they invariably associate it with the notion of assistance. Moreover, a sample of 100 occurrences of the verb *help* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English [Davies 2008-] exhibits this meaning of assistance 95 % of the time. This prototypical meaning is also the oldest meaning of the verb, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* testifies (s.v. *help*).
- 7 As a dynamic verb (in the sense of Talmy [2000] and Jackendoff [1990: 133]), the central meaning of the verb *help* implies an interaction between protagonists followed by an effect. Prototypically, it associates an animate helpee with an animate helper, who performs some task for the former.

1.1. Participation of each protagonist

- 8 The exact share of action undertaken by each participant is, however, not explicitly encoded in the verb. In some cases, both participants take part in the action in (relatively) equal amount. For instance in the following example, the process *carry it up to my room*, which refers to the lifting of a heavy referent (a freezer), implies that the action is likely to be performed by both participants together:

(1) “I have to keep this freezer here,” Thorn said.
 “You can’t put it there. It’s not convenient.”
 “Will you **help** me carry it up to my room?” (COCA, 2011, FICTION)

- 9 Conversely, in other cases, the type of infinitive verb following *help* indicates that the helpee is the one who performs the process encoded in the infinitive clause, not the helper. This is what we observe in the case of predicates that express individual physiological or psychological processes, such as the following:

(2) Think only of your own welfare and mine and do the right thing, the Christian thing, and **help** me to die properly. (COCA, 1994, FICTION)
 (3) Mr. Griffith helped me to understand who I could become if I kept trying. (COCA, 1998, SPOKEN)

- 10 In the case of these internal processes, the helper performs some task towards an outcome which concerns the helpee alone. These examples contrast with cases in which the part played by the helpee is insignificant. In an utterance like:

(4) Voice-over: Things were so bad, they concluded the only way to end their suffering was to commit suicide. After a 43-day hunger strike, her mother, brother and sister all slit their wrists. But not even that worked [...].
 Oufkir: After 43 days of a hunger strike, you cut your veins but the blood doesn't flow. He **helped** me open it with a piece of broken glass. (COCA, 2001, SPOKEN)

the helpee may play no part at all in the opening process. It is quite clear that she wants the infinitive process to happen, but she probably does not do anything towards this aim, since such an action is likely to be performed by a single agent.

The exact share of action undertaken by each participant is therefore not what defines 'help'. The type of complementation, however, has been used to specify the role of each participant, as the question of the presence versus absence of *to* after *help* suggests.

1.2. *To* versus zero after *help*: an overview

- 11 In Old English, the verb *help* was associated with an animate recipient in the dative, optionally followed by an adverbial clause denoting purpose (Los [2005]). It subsequently became a ditransitive verb, as the possible *wh*-extraction of (a part of) the object suggests¹ (cf. Chomsky [1980]):

(5) He helped [you] [to build a house].
 (5') What did he help you to build?
 (6) You need his help [(in order) to build a house].
 (6') *What do you need his help (in order) to build?

- 12 The purposive origin of the infinitive clause explains why *to* was initially present, but its use has now ceased to be compulsory. While formal frameworks posit that the infinitive marker is completely devoid of meaning [Chomsky 1957: 100], many researchers working within the framework of speaker-oriented theories have tried to identify a semantic invariant for *to* (e.g. Adamczewski [1982]; Cotte [1982]; Chuquet [1986]), and so have some cognitivist researchers (e.g. Egan [2008]).
- 13 Among the speaker-oriented linguists who have looked for a core value of *to* that could subsume both the preposition and the infinitive marker, the work of Duffley [1992], in particular, has proved seminal. Regarding the alternation between *to* and zero after *help*, he claims that the absence of *to* is correlated with more agentivity on the part of the helper.
- 14 This implies that inanimate subjects are incompatible with the omission of *to*, and so are infinitive predicates denoting individual psychological or physiological processes (cf. *supra*). It also implies that the speaker can express the directness or indirectness of the helping process through the omission or the use of *to* (cf. Dixon [1991]; Fischer [1995]). The well-foundedness of these observations can be illustrated by the following examples, dated from the 19th century and the early 20th century:
- animate vs. inanimate subject:

(7) I'll **help** you \emptyset catch the Englishman. (James Fennimore Cooper, *The Pilot*, 1824)

(8) Here is a ring whose signet may **help** us **to** understand each other. (James Fennimore Cooper, *The Bravo*, 1831)

- individual process:

(9) And you'd be doing her a much more neighborly act if you **helped** her **to realize** the value of money, instead of encouraging her to throw it away. (COHA, 1928, FICTION)

- direct help:

(10) However, he told her that she would have to eat up all the meat. She said she couldn't. "I will **help** you \emptyset eat," said the man. (*The Journal of American Folklore*, 1888)

- indirect help:

(11) [She] could neither sit nor be made to sit; she had an attendant to move her and **help** her **to** eat. (*Publications of the Oriental Translation Fund*, University of Michigan, 1922)

15 As can be seen in (10) and (11), when it comes to eating, the helping process can be done by eating a part of the food (direct help) or by, say, holding a fork for the eater (indirect help).

16 However, the clear-cut semantic distinction between *to* and zero had considerably loosened by the mid-twentieth century. Corpora show that the omission of *to* has now become compatible with all of the above cases. It can occur with inanimate subjects and indirect help:

(12) Pepsodent Tooth Paste **helps** \emptyset stop decay before it starts. (*Saturday Evening Post*, 1950)

as well as with individual psychological or physiological processes:

(13) Mr Parish **helped** me \emptyset understand this problem when I several times proposed moving a painting or a statue to take a photograph. (COHA, 1958, MAGAZINE)

17 This innovation is undoubtedly partly due to reasons of economy, but other possible causes can be suggested. None of these factors constitute categorical constraints but they can be hypothesised to have had some influence on the increase of the use of zero. They include euphonic and cognitive principles such as stress alternation [Schlüter 2003] e.g. *He 'helped me 'make my 'bed*. Another such potential factor is *horror aequi* (see Bolinger [1979]; Rohdenburg [2003]; McEnery & Xiao [2005]) e.g. *?I want to help him to write* (see Pinson [2009: 159-163] for a quantitative analysis of the influence of *horror aequi* on the omission of *to* after *help* in the 18-19th centuries).

18 The semantic distinction between the two variants may also have contributed to the decrease in the use of *to*, because of the influence of advertising language on everyday English. Indeed, as example (12) illustrates, advertisers generally favour the zero version, because it is an excellent way to subtly enhance the efficiency of the product advertised, while remaining within the bounds of legalities of truth (Pinson [2009: 189-191]). Because of increasing exposure to the zero version, speakers/hearers ceased to conceive it as

encoding direct help and started to see it as the default version, a process known as habituation Haiman [1994]. So, paradoxically, the exploitation of the semantic distinction may therefore have led to its gradual demise.

- 19 The omission of *to* is on its way to becoming the statistical norm, except in syntactically and cognitively complex co-texts, such as the negation of the infinitive verb, and the passive voice (cf. Wierzbicka [1988: 49]). Between 1961 and 1991, the percentage of the use of zero after *help* increased from 22 % to 60.8 % in British English and from 68.3 % to 81.9 % in American English [McEnery & Xiao [2005]. This sharp increase suggests that the semantic distinction is no longer a meaningful criterion to explain the alternation between *to* and zero.
- 20 Recent research (e.g. Egan [2008], who works within a cognitive framework) now tends to acknowledge that “the semantics of the two constructions are [...] very similar [in the case of *help*] and it should not therefore be surprising that in many instances speakers may choose to use either of them to encode one and the same situation” (Egan [2008: 214]) and that “this distinction between the two construction types is blurred in the case of *help*” (Egan [2008: 243]).

2. The core value of *help*

- 21 As suggested by the fact that the NP following *help* was originally a dative, the semantic core of *help* seems, at first sight, to be based on the fact that the effect of the process is seen as beneficial for the helpee. When a helper helps a helpee, it is not clear who does what exactly, and in which proportion, but what is certain is that the result is seen as positive for the helpee.
- 22 In that respect, *help* is an evaluative verb that constitutes an indication of the subjectivity of the speaker. Based on Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s typology of verbs [2002 (1980): 113 ff.], *help* can be said to belong to the list of inherently subjective verbs. The evaluation emanates from the speaker; the object of the evaluation is the process expressed in the infinitive clause and the type of evaluation is axiological. More specifically, the speaker evaluates that the process expressed by the infinitive is good for the referent of the first object of the verb.

2.1. The polysemy of *help*

- 23 The prototypical semantics of *help* reflects a process whereby some participant acts in a way that is beneficial to some other participant, but does the euphoric denotation associated with prototypical *help* apply to the other meanings of this verb?
- 24 Although dictionaries do not reflect the complexity of polysemy, they can constitute a useful starting point for a first tentative analysis of *help*, which will be refined in the remainder of this paper. Dictionaries usually list five different meanings for the verb *help*. Apart from the prototypical meaning (15a and 15b), one notes the meanings “alleviate/cure” (16); “contribute” (17); “provide/serve” (18); as well as the meaning “not be able to control or stop”, associated with the phrase *cannot help* (19)².
- 25 Each of these senses is illustrated in the following utterances:

- (15) (a) They **helped** me to get to where I'm at today. (COCA, 2012, NEWS)
 (b) One of her older brothers took her hand to **help** her across the highway. (COCA, 1998, FICTION)
- (16) Amma applied a paste of turmeric and egg yolk to **help** the pain and swelling. (COCA, 2000, FICTION)
- (17) The Government's decision to axe half-price coach fares for the over-60s saw one million fewer pensioners travel with National Express last year, **helping** to send the transport firm's annual pre-tax profit down 9 % to £164.1 million. (*Evening Standard*, 28/02/2013)
- (18) He **helps** himself to a melon from a bowl. (COCA, 1997, FICTION)
- (19) This woman can't **help** but giggle. (COCA, 2012, SPOKEN)

- 26 Quite clearly, the beneficial value is absent from sentence (17), in which *help* is closer to the meaning of the verbs *cause* or *contribute* (cf. Mair [1995], [2002: 126]; Deléchelle [1998]). By contrast, the verb *help* in sentence (19) corresponds to notions such as *refrain* or *avoid*. How is it possible to reconcile such contradictory meanings as 'contribute' and 'avoid'?

2.2. A semantic invariant?

- 27 Researchers working within the framework of speaker-oriented theories or psychomechanics usually endeavour to find an invariant semantic value for polysemous words. This is especially true for grammatical items (e.g. Joly [1980]; Adamczewski [1982]; Chuquet [1986]; Culioli [1990-1999]; Franckel & Paillard [2007]), but also for lexical items (e.g. Picoche [1995]; Victorri & Fuchs [1996]; Cadiot [1994]; Franckel & Lebaud [1995]; Paillard [2000]; de Vogué [2004], Pauly [2010]). For instance, Picoche, following Guillaume, posits that polysemous lexical items have a 'potential meaning' which can account for the multiple senses observable in context; Franckel and others, following Culioli, endeavour to identify the 'schematic form', or abstract scenario of polysemous verbs.
- 28 However, the existence of a semantic invariant is far from being straightforward, as shown notably by Girard [1996], Kleiber [1999], Puckica [2008] and Toupin & Lowry [2010]. Approaches in favour of an invariant pole claim that the use of the same word for different meanings cannot be attributed to chance and that there has to be some semantic feature in common between all the senses of this word (except of course in cases of homonymy). Although it is evident that polysemy is not random, it is far from certain that all the meanings of a verb share a common semantic core or display a common scenario.
- 29 When Paillard, Franckel, and others, work on schematic forms, they manage to account for the various literal and figurative meanings of verbs, but seldom do they have to describe such strikingly contradictory meanings as those observed in the case of *help*. In order to reconcile all the meanings of *help*, and in particular 'avoid' and 'contribute', one would have to bridge an unbridgeable gap. The only type of scenario that could reflect the meaning of *help* would be that the verb *help* means that an action *a* is related to a situation *x*. Is it really appropriate to reduce the meaning of *help* to such a broad scenario, which could also correspond to hundreds of other verbs?
- 30 As Lakoff [1987: 95-96] suggests, "categories on the whole need not be defined by common properties" and "central members are linked to other members, which are linked to other members, and so on". In the case of *help*, it is not always easy at first sight to identify the

ties which unite each member, as some of the connections have become opaque. That is why it seems interesting to look at the semantics of *help* from a diachronic perspective in order to determine how less central meanings emerged (cf. e.g. Geeraerts [1983], [1997]).

- 31 The first meaning that will be addressed here is ‘provide/serve’, which is encoded by the form *help* [NP] to [NP].

3. Help_{serve}

- 32 The meaning ‘serve’ (often for food), which was illustrated by sentence (18) above, is related to the prepositional construction found for the expression of movement (20-21), which is still in use today:

(20) Alef **helped** him to bed, and bade him a good night. (COCA, 2009, FICTION)

(21) Soldiers **helped** her across the tarmac, as she was still recovering from gunshot wounds and her three-week imprisonment in Iraq. (COCA, 2003, MAGAZINE)

- 33 These spatial uses of *help* can easily be derived from the prototypical meaning of the verb. The only difference between the two is that the process following *help* is here encoded elliptically with a prepositional phrase, rather than with an infinitive clause.
- 34 The first instances of the prepositional construction date back to 1380, according to the OED (s.v. *help* verb). The meaning of this construction was not restricted to purely spatial uses, such as ‘help to reach’ (cf. 20-21), but also included cases with a more metaphorical movement, toward an object of some sort, which could be paraphrased as ‘provide’. The purely spatial uses have persisted, but the other types of uses, in which the NP following the preposition does not indicate a location, are now obsolete, as the following examples suggest:

(22) The Protector [told] him that if he would **help** him to the Sight of Mr. Howe, [...] he would then give his judgement. (Edmund Calamy, *A Continuation of the Account of the Ministers...*, 1727)

(23) There were the two Persons of the Kingdom the King was most obliged to, since they **helped** him to the Victory of Bosworth [...]. (M. Rapin de Thoyras, *History of England*, 1728)

(24) He had teiz'd my Mother 500 times to **help** him to a Wife. (*Old Bailey*, 1725)

(25) I should **help** you to success. (Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839)

- 35 These cases, in which *help* [NP] to [NP] means ‘provide’ rather than ‘help to reach’, have completely disappeared, except for the restricted meaning ‘provide food/serve’. According to the OED, the first occurrence of this sense is exhibited in the following sentence:

(26) Shall I **help** you to a piece of Veal? (Guy Miego, *The Great French Dictionary*, 1688)

- 36 As the unnaturalness of examples (22) – (25) demonstrates, the *help* [NP] to [NP] structure meaning ‘provide’ has now been replaced by infinitive clauses. These sentences would sound more acceptable to our modern ears if they were re-written as follows:

- (22') The Protector told him that if he would **help** him to see/meet Mr. Howe, he would then give his judgement.
- (23') There were the two Persons of the Kingdom the King was most obliged to, since they **helped** him to win at Bosworth
- (24') He had teiz'd my Mother 500 times to **help** him to find a Wife.
- (25') I should **help** you to succeed.

37 In a similar vein, it is fruitful to compare the following utterances, pronounced 180 years apart.

- (27) The Prisoner said in his Defence, that he enquiring of a Baker's Man for Business, he promised to **help** him to a Place. (*Old Bailey*, 1717)
- (28) The RECORDER suggested that Mr. Wheatley might **help** him to find work. (*Old Bailey*, 1896)

38 The gradual replacement of *help* [NP] *to* [NP] by *help* + infinitive clause is illustrated in table 1, which shows the percentage of these two structures in the *Old Bailey* for two distinct periods.

Table 1. Proportion of *help* [NP] *to* [NP] versus *help* + infinitive in the *Old Bailey*

	<i>Help</i> [NP] <i>to</i> [NP] (purely spatial cases excluded)	<i>Help</i> + infinitive
1700-1740	59,09 % (130)	40,9 % (90)
1800-1840	5,7 % (49)	94,3 % (807)

39 Table 1 shows that the *help* [NP] *to* [NP] structure has decreased dramatically over the course of time. Between 1700 and 1740, nearly 60 % of cases of the verb *help* were followed by *to* NP. This percentage decreased to less than 6 between 1800 and 1840. This decrease is therefore dramatic and it is highly significant statistically ($p < 0,0001$). Many uses exhibiting the [NP] *to* [NP] structure involved the expression of processes (cf. *sight*, *victory* and *success* in the above cases). Infinitival structures being more clausal than noun phrases, they were seen as more appropriate to encode such processes.

40 With the meaning 'serve', on the other hand, it is an entity which is provided. Consequently, this specialised use was not affected by the syntactic change that concerned the expression of processes. Therefore, during the nineteenth century, the general meaning 'help to obtain / provide' decreased, while the sense 'serve' persisted, as the following table suggests.

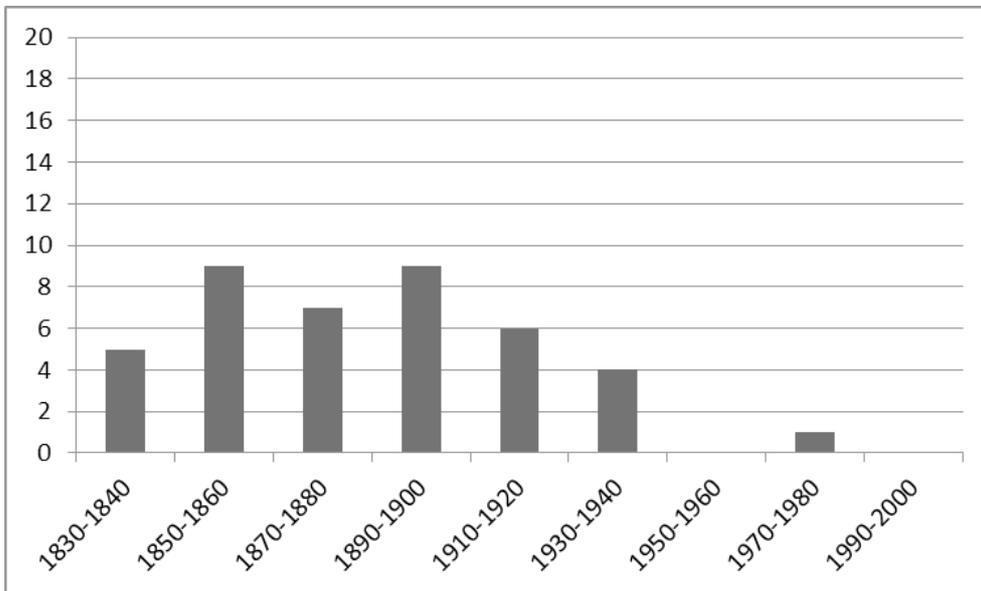
Table 2. The semantics of the *help* [NP] *to* [NP] structure in the *Old Bailey*: *provide* vs. *serve*

	General <i>help</i> [NP] <i>to</i> [NP] meaning 'provide'	Specialised <i>help</i> [NP] <i>to</i> [NP food] meaning 'serve'

1800-1820	73 % (19)	27 % (7)
1821-1840	56.5 % (13)	43.5 % (10)

- 41 The sense ‘to serve (food)’ was completely absent from the *Old Bailey* in the period between 1700 and 1750 but it gradually increased during the early 19th century, reaching around 40 % of the cases of *help* [NP] to [NP] in the period between 1821 and 1840. In the OED, the first mention of the corresponding noun, *helping*, referring to the action of serving food or to a portion of food, dates back to the early nineteenth century (s.v. *helping*, noun).
- 42 On the whole, occurrences of *help*_{serve} involve reflexive pronouns, rather than simple pronouns. The following graph, based on COHA, shows the raw figures for the following string: *help** [non-reflexive personal pronoun] to [singular noun / a / some]. Only the instances involving food and drink are mentioned here.

Figure 1. Occurrences of *help*(s/ing/ed) + [non-reflexive personal pronoun] + to + [singular noun / a / some] in COHA



- 43 As can be seen, the meaning ‘serve’ only marginally occurred with non-reflexive pronouns in COHA and this type of pronoun has now virtually disappeared.
- 44 When the structure involves a reflexive pronoun, the verb predominantly encodes a transfer of food or drink. A study on the string ‘*help** [reflexive pronoun] to’ in COCA shows that the percentage of food and drink is 75.8 % (385/508); the rest is composed of other types of supplies, notably money (4.3 %), vehicles (1.2 %), seats (1.2 %) and clothes (0.8 %).
- 45 The second non-prototypical meaning of *help* that will be addressed is *help*_{avoid}.

4. Help_{avoid}

- 46 An examination of an Early Modern English corpus, such as the *Lexicons of Early Modern English* (LEME) (Lancashire 1999), makes it possible to document the appearance of the meaning of *help*_{avoid}. This corpus gathers dictionaries and technical lexicons, as well as medical treatises, which proved key to understanding the semantic shift between prototypical *help* and *help*_{avoid}.

4.1. The emergence of *help*_{avoid}

- 47 In Early Modern English, a monotransitive use of *help* started to appear alongside the *help* + NP + infinitive structure. From the original meaning of *help* derived the sense ‘facilitate’, present in (29), and ‘alleviate/cure’, present in (30):

(29) Myrtles are [...] veye profitable to **helpe** the restoring of broken bones.
(Lanfranco of Milan, *Chirurgia*, 1565)

(30) If it be strened, it **helpeth** and swageth the sores in a mannes mouthe.
(Anonymous, *Banckes's Herbal*, 1525)

- 48 This meaning is still in use, as indicated by example (16) above. Several utterances included in LEME show how the sense ‘alleviate/cure’ could have led to a notion of protection or prevention. This is notably the case of (31):

(31) The floures of Lavander [...] mixed with Cinnamon, Nutmegs, and Cloves, made into pouder, and given to drinke in the distilled water thereof, doth **helpe** the panting and passion of the heart. (Thomas Johnson, *The Herbal or General History of Plants*, 1633)

- 49 It is possible to imagine that such a treatment, used primarily to cure tachycardia and shortness of breath, was subsequently used to stave off the occurrence of such symptoms, as nothing in the utterance explicitly specifies the moment when the drug is to be used: at T_{-1} or at T_{+1} (T symbolising the moment when the dysphoric situation occurred). Similarly, in the following sentence, with a prepositional object, it is not made explicit whether the medicine is used for its curative or for its preventive properties.

(32) It **helpeth** against the bitings of any venomous beast, either taken in drinke, or outwardly applied. (Thomas Johnson, *The Herbal or General History of Plants*, 1633)

- 50 Although this medicine is probably supposed to be used after a bite, it is not specifically encoded in the sentence. In addition, the use of the preposition *against* resembles the structure of the verb *protect* and this makes it possible for hearers/readers to infer that the medicine can be used preventively. One can therefore suggest that the lack of semantic explicitness of such structures, together with the frequent use of therapeutic drugs for prophylactic purposes, may have led to the appearance of *help*_{avoid}.
- 51 Both prototypical *help* and *help*_{avoid} imply the existence of some dysphoric state of affair. The common semantic features between them can be described as an ‘action with a euphoric outcome’. Whether an unfortunate situation was solved after it happened (at T_{+1}

) or solved by avoiding its occurrence altogether (at T_{-1}) was considered irrelevant and was conceptually backgrounded at the time when the semantic shift took place.

- 52 This analysis confirms that the focus of speaker-oriented theories on the act of communication itself is well-founded. By studying utterances, rather than mere sentences, it becomes possible to uncover the decisive role that communication plays on the evolution of the lexicon. The interaction between speaker and co-speaker, and the various phenomena that it implies, such as potential semantic and structural ambiguity, as well as pragmatic inferences, are at the heart of language change (cf. Traugott & Dasher [2002]).
- 53 Additionally, the preposition *against*, used in (35), substantiates the tenet that meaning emerges through a combination of lexical and grammatical items. This rather marginal prepositional use of *help* contributes to expanding the semantic interpretation of the verb by imperceptibly shifting its meaning towards that of other verbs used in similar prepositional constructions.
- 54 Finally, the meaning of *help*_{avoid} became clearly distinct from ‘alleviate/cure’, as can be seen in the unambiguous sentence that follows:

(33) I do not believe the prisoner could **help** the accident. (*Old Bailey*, 1834)

4.2. The lexicalisation of *can(-ed) not help*_{avoid}

- 55 Since the beginning of Late Modern English, *help*_{avoid} has been associated with the notions of capacity and negation, forming a rather loose colligation, i.e. a recurring combination of lexical items and grammatical features (Firth [1957]; Sinclair [1991]). Subsequently, the number of expressions used to refer to capacity gradually narrowed, as the following examples, which are no longer attested, show:

(34) This was a heavy piece of news to my nephew, but there was no way to help it but to comply. (William Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719)

(35) [T]o say all in a word, he doats upon you; and I begin to see it is not in his power to help it. (Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, 1740)

(36) It is impossible to help lamenting the unhappiness of Sir Edward. (Charlotte Smith, *Ethelinde*, 1789)

- 56 These examples demonstrate that non-prototypical expressions of inability have decreased over time. Additionally, the verb ceased to be a real negative polarity item (NPI). In the 19th century, the use of *can help* was licensed by a wide range of co-texts, like other typical NPIs³. For instance, it could be licensed by a subject containing a negative quantifier (37), by a *wh*-question (38) or by a *than*-clause (39):

(37) No man, outside of a deaf and dumb asylum, who is awakened at midnight on the 3d of July with – a hideous din that he knows will grow worse and worse for the next twenty-four hours, can **help** feeling that the Declaration of Independence was a terrible mistake, and that slavery and quiet are infinitely preferable to freedom and fire-crackers. (COHA, 1876, NEWS)

(38) It was difficult to understand how the snow could **help** melting in such an atmosphere. (COHA, 1832, NON FICTION)

(39) I can no more help loving you than I can **help** breathing. (COHA 1885, FICTION)

- 57 These types of contexts have dramatically decreased over time and the use of *can help* now tends to be limited to cases when it is in the syntactic scope of a negative particle (Pinson [2011]).
- 58 As the means of expressing capacity became fixed and as the verb ceased to be attested in many NPI licensing co-texts, it lost most of its flexibility. All of these elements suggest that *can (-ed) not help* has undergone a process of lexicalisation: “the change whereby in certain linguistic contexts speakers use a syntactic construction or word formation as a new contentful form with formal and semantic properties that are not completely derivable or predictable from the constituents of the construction or the word formation pattern” (Brinton & Traugott [2005: 96]). *Can (-ed) not help* is now completely lexicalised, as it is virtually impossible to use *never* instead of *not* or to use intervening material in the middle of the multi-word expression (see Pinson [2011] for a more detailed analysis of this process).
- 59 The lexicalisation of *can(-ed) not help_{avoid}* facilitates communication, as the use of unanalysable chunks improves fluency and gives the speaker more time for language planning (cf. Bolinger [1975]; Kuiper [1996]) and they are easier to interpret, since they can potentially limit cases of semantic ambiguity.
- 60 In its lexicalised version, *can(-ed) help* means that somebody performs an action even though they would rather not. The euphoric component associated with the non-realisation of the action is still valid today. For example, a speaker may say *I couldn't help but laugh* during a solemn celebration or *I can't help thinking that...*, followed by a comment which is unpleasant for the co-speaker or for a third party.
- 61 With this lexicalised multi-word verb, the subject is deagentivised and presented as an undergoer (patient or experiencer). This use is therefore far from being pragmatically neutral as it is meant to excuse the referent of the subject. The process being presented as unavoidable, it implies that the subject is not responsible for it (see Pinson [2011] on the pragmatic specificities of the *can(-ed) help but V* structure).

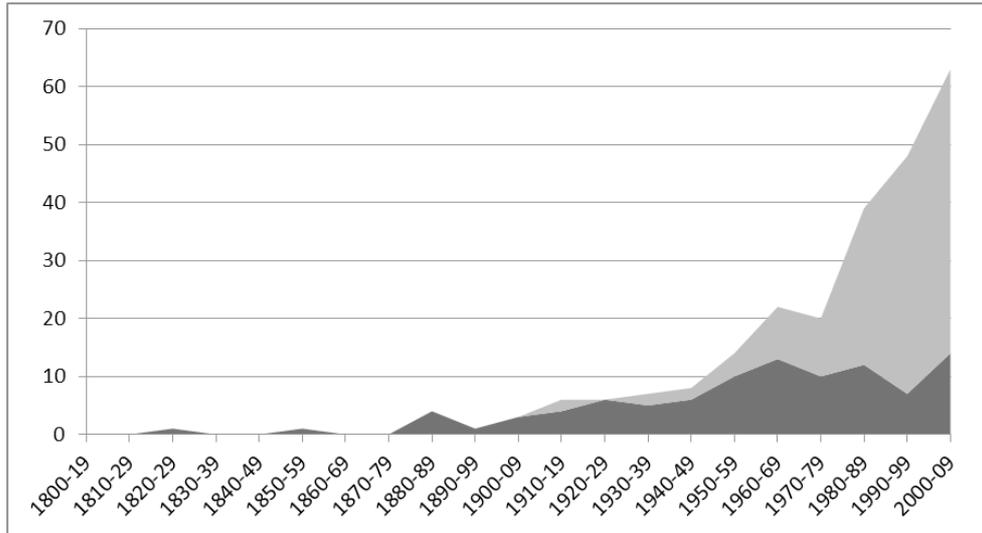
5. Help_{contribute}

- 62 The euphoric denotation expressed by the verb *help* is present in all the different types of *help* mentioned so far. However, other uses can be found today, as Mair [1995] noted:
- (40) Nor have they eliminated the unburned hydrocarbons which **help** produce the smog that blankets such a motor-ridden conurbation as Los Angeles. (quoted in Mair [1995: 125])
- (41) Negro cabbie John W. Smith, whose arrest for tailgating a police car [...] **helped** spark five days of rioting [...], was found guilty of assaulting a policeman. (quoted in Mair [1995: 125])
- 63 These recent examples are particularly striking as they do not exhibit the same euphoric denotations as the other uses of *help*.
- 64 In order to have a better understanding of this peculiar usage, I have looked for instances of the string ‘helped (to) create’ in COHA. I chose this particular string because it appears more frequently than ‘helped (to) spark’ and ‘helped (to) produce’, and because, like *produce*, the verb *create* can be followed both by negative and by positive referents.

5.1. *Helped (to) create*: a case study

- 65 As Deléchelle [1998] noticed, structures with no NP after *help* are increasing. The following graph represents the raw figures for the string *helped create* and *helped to create* in COHA.

Figure 2. Occurrences of *helped to create* (in dark grey) and *helped create* (in light grey) in COHA



- 66 The meaning ‘contribute’ correlates with a monotransitive structure, which can be associated to cases of prototypical *help* with a recipient omitted, as in the following example:

(42) Jear [rope], a piece of a hauset (in great ships) fastend to the main yard and foreyards, to **help** to hoyses up the yard and succor the ties. (Elisha Coles, *An English Dictionary*, 1676)

- 67 The recipient can be omitted because it is inferable or generic, as in (42), where it refers to sailors.

The compatibility with dysphoric outcomes, however, is a more recent development, even though a few isolated cases of *help* with a dysphoric outcome can be found in Early Modern English, in different types of structures:

(43) Assez escorche qui tient le pied: Prov. He does ill ynough that **helps** to doe euill. (1611, Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionary of the French and English Tongues*)

(44) At last, I went to Sea of my own Accord, against my Mother’s Will; which I fear was the Cause of breaking her Heart, and has been a Means of **helping** me to this unfortunate End, because I disobeyed her. (*Old Bailey*, 1749)

- 68 In spite of these early examples, it seems that the use of *help* followed by a dysphoric outcome remained extremely marginal before the 19th century. A look at COHA may be useful to understand how the compatibility with dysphoric results became possible.
- 69 First, some examples show that it is not easy to classify utterances in terms of euphoricity or dysphoricity, because speakers may not agree on the axiological evaluation of the outcome:

(45) The impression is spreading here that the Soviet Union and the United States, far from having shaped alliances in their own images, have really **helped** to create an abundance of nationalisms that now threaten to engulf both in a display of old-fashioned European diplomacy played out over a worldwide scale. (COHA, 1963, NEWS)

(46) Thus, to say (in implied criticism) that the free alliances "have really **helped** to create an abundance of nationalisms" is in fact to state that the alliances have achieved success. (COHA, 1963, NON FICTION)

70 Secondly, a substantial proportion of utterances with an animate subject contain outcomes which were not negative at first, but turned out to be dysphoric subsequently:

(47) The epidemic of strikes spreading throughout the country indicates that workers will no longer be the pawns of an acquisitive society and the victims of the industries they have **helped** to create. (COHA, 1937, NEWS)

71 The creation of the industries was not necessarily a bad thing for workers at first, since it provided them with jobs and money, and maybe a feeling of achieving something, of being part of technological progress. It is only at a later stage that the industries started to be dysphoric for them.

72 Another clear illustration of a chronologically ambivalent axiological evaluation of the outcome is provided by the following example, given here in context:

(48) Indeed, it was a part of Mr. Pulitzer's instinct for politics and sagacity in reading the future in the present that he should have been so often on the right side of important public questions. It is a different matter when we consider the type of journalism which Mr. Pulitzer first fully exemplified in New York. [...] He came to feel that what he had **helped** create had somehow become too powerful and had got away. [...] From the first days of his control of the *World*, he struck out boldly for a new kind of "publicity" in journalism. But that word may mean many things. It covers not only the exposure of political scoundrels, but it denotes, in practice, a kind of constant clamor rising into a shriek, with a daily prying into private affairs as if nothing existed anywhere which should not be dragged into the light of day, and worse than all, a lurid exploitation of crime and nastiness. (COHA, 1911, MAGAZINE)

73 As can be seen, Pulitzer was unable to foresee the future excesses of investigation journalism. The outcome of the process is therefore ambivalent, as the axiological evaluation varied across time, from positive to negative.

74 The idea behind these examples is that the person responsible was not aware of the negative consequences that the action would subsequently have. The use of *help* thus highlights the fact that the helper unwittingly contributed to something which turned out to be dysphoric.

75 This aspect is present in the following example, which underlines the fact that the dysphoric situation in question is happening unbeknownst to the public:

(49) For when we fail to practice tolerance in our individual lives, we jeopardize the structure for all. Insidiously, intolerance grows in its place. This does not happen suddenly, but by imperceptible degrees: a privilege is shorn away, a censorship erected, a hatred takes root, oppressive legislation is enacted. If we passively connive in this process, neglecting to protest unless our own rights and opinions are attacked, we shall discover some day

that despotism has crept up on us – that we are about to be swallowed one and all by the monster we have **helped** create. (COHA, 1938, MAGAZINE)

- 76 This point is also put forward in a few examples which evoke the concept of (tragic) irony. This literary notion refers to the fact that a character is unaware of an unfortunate state of affairs that the reader/spectator knows about:

(50) Ironically, some actions taken by the park service have **helped** to create problem bears. One example in recent years was the approval given by the park service for construction in Yellowstone of Grant Village, a mammoth complex that includes lodging units for nearly three thousand people, along with parking lots, recreational facilities, restaurants, a sewage treatment plant, a post office, and several other facilities. It was built on the confluence of several trout streams, a place that until the construction of Grant Village was a primary grizzly feeding site. Doubtless bears returning to the area in search of nourishment will come too close to people and will be dispatched as problem animals. (COHA, 1989, NON FICTION)

(51) Once humans decided to do anything but walk, once they became “traffic,” they had to learn a whole new way of getting around and getting along. What is the road for? Who is the road for? How will these streams of traffic flow together? Before the dust kicked up by the bicycles had even settled, the whole order was toppled again by the automobile, which was beginning to careen down those same “good road” the cyclists themselves, in a bit of tragic irony, had **helped** create. (COHA, 2008, NON FICTION)

- 77 In view of these examples, one may hypothesise that it is through these ambivalent cases, in which the referent of the subject is unwittingly responsible for an unfortunate state of affairs, that the innovative meaning of *help* arose.

5.2. Grammaticalisation hypothesis

- 78 According to Mair [1995]; [2002]; [2006], this semantic innovation is a sign that the verb *help* is undergoing a process of grammaticalisation, but it is actually difficult to prove or disprove this hypothesis. The semantic broadening and the increase in token frequency and type frequency described by Mair are real, but *help* still behaves like normal verbs in many respects, notably because it does not exhibit any of the NICE properties (cf. Deléchelle [1998]; McEnery & Xiao [2005]).
- 79 Mair does not define the category that he calls “concatenation or modal idiom” [2006: 139] and no syntactic test is offered to identify this category. The only test mentioned is the replacement of the verb by a preposition, which is supposed to illustrate semantic broadening: “A ‘plan to help youngsters find jobs’ is nothing more specific than a ‘plan *for* them to find jobs’; and money used to ‘help pay’ for something is just money used *for* paying something” [1995: 265].
- 80 However, this test, from Rohdenburg [1990: 146-148⁴], seems problematic for two reasons. First, the fact that a word is acquiring the same distribution as a preposition certainly does not make it a modal auxiliary. Secondly, if this test was really valid, it would mean that the following verbs were also grammaticalising, which is doubtful:

(52) David McCreary is coming on **to replace** Tommy Jackson. [... coming on **for / instead of** Tommy Jackson]. (Rohdenburg 1990: 146-148)

(53) I’ve worked very hard **to write** this book.

(53’) I’ve worked very hard **on** this book.

- (54) He helped me **(to) get over** my addiction.
- (54') He helped me **with** my addiction.

81 Therefore, the only element that is decisive in establishing that *help* does not behave syntactically like prototypical lexical verbs is the omission of *to*.

82 When a lexical item becomes grammaticalised, one usually observes a phenomenon known as layering (Hopper [1991: 22]). This means that the grammaticalised item and the same item in its ungrammaticalised version can coexist. For example:

- (55) I'm going to London next week.

in which *going to* isn't grammaticalised, coexists with

- (56) John's not going to be happy about it.

in which it is grammaticalised.

83 When grammaticalisation is accompanied with phonetic erosion, it does not concern the non-grammaticalised item (Bybee [2002]):

- (55') *I'm gonna London next week.

84 Yet, in the case of *help*, the omission of *to* initially concerned cases with animate subjects, in which the verb really has its prototypical meaning, as in:

- (57) The Prosecutor's Wife depos'd, That the Prisoner being employed to **help** her Wash, carried away the Goods. (*Old Bailey*, 1717)
- (58) Mrs. Taylor her Mistress deposed, that on Sunday the 26th of October, the Prisoner complain'd that she was not well, and had the Gripes, &c. but did **help** her make the Bed, and she afterwards went out to Church leaving her to dress Dinner. (*Old Bailey*, 1718)
- (59) He did not confess to me any more Robberies, but own'd a great number of small Thefts, he constantly did as occasion offer'd; and in Alleviation of his Guilt in this Affair, he said, he was no farther concern'd in the Robbery, only that he was present at the Time of committing it, he being 7 Yards distant, and did not **help** them take any Thing from Mr. Daniel. (*Old Bailey*, 1742)

85 The high compatibility between an animate subject, who actually brings help in the literal sense, and the omission of *to* has been noticed by many researchers, as mentioned above. So, how could the omission of *to* be a sign that *help* is grammaticalising if it originally affected only the prototypical meaning of *help*?

86 Finally, Mair considers that "adding *to* before the infinitives would be slightly incongruous" in cases which display negative effects [2002: 126]. Yet, the expression of a negative outcome does not necessarily coincide with the omission of *to*. In my study on *helped (to) create*, I even notice a higher proportion of negative outcomes in combination with the use of *to* than with the omission of *to*.

Table 3. Proportion of negative outcomes following *helped create* and *helped to create* in COHA

	Proportion of negative outcomes
"helped create"	26 % (38/146)

“helped to create	42,7 % (41/96)
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- 87 Therefore, Mair’s hypothesis of grammaticalisation, however tempting, is slightly undermined by these observations on the omission or presence of *to*.
- 88 After this analysis of the emergence of the non-prototypical meanings of *help*, it could be useful to provide a grid which synthetises the similarities and the differences between the various meanings of the verb.

6. Synthesis

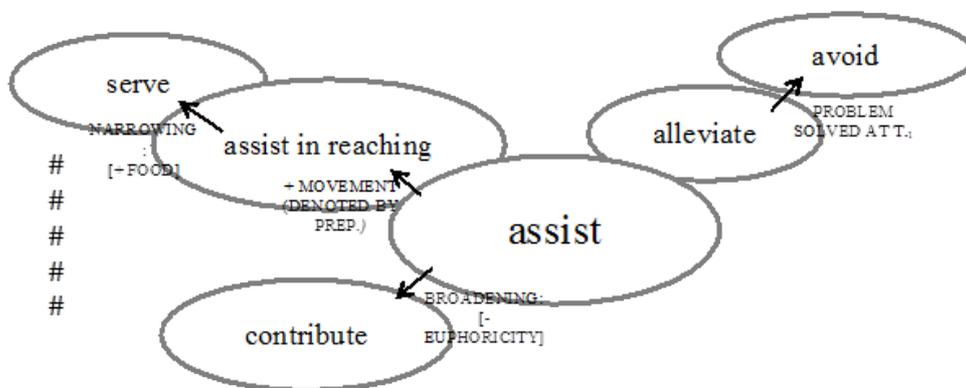
- 89 The following table is meant to capture the diversity of *help* by means of a restricted set of features.

Table 4. A description of the polysemy of *help*

NEAR SYNONYM	ACTION	SHARED ACTION	CHANGE	EUPHORICITY: RESOLUTION OF PROBLEM	ARGUMENT STRUCTURE
assist	+	+	+	+ solved at T ₊₁	3 S + V + {recipient} + {theme _{process} } <i>e.g. He helped me (to) do it.</i>
serve	+	-	+	+ specific: lack transfer at T ₊₁	3 S _i + V + {recipient } + {theme} <i>e.g. He helped himself to some tea.</i>
avoid	+	-	-	+ solved at T ₋₁	2 S + can-(-ed) not V + {theme _{process} } <i>e.g. We couldn't help laughing.</i>
alleviate	+	-	+	+ solved at T ₊₁	2 S + V + {theme} <i>e.g. The drug helped the pain.</i>
contribute	+	+	+	-	2 S + V + {theme=process} <i>e.g. They helped (to) produce a smog.</i>

- 90 Table 4 provides a semantic description of the various meanings of *help* based on a selection of distinctive features and it displays the correspondence between these meanings and their respective argument structure. Although all the senses of *help* involve an action of some kind related to a situation *x*, not all of them express an action resulting in a *new* situation, since *help*_{avoid} implies the absence of change. Similarly, the meaning ‘contribute’ differs from all the others as it does not involve the resolution of some problematic situation.
- 91 The semantic evolution of the verb could be described as a movement from ‘interaction’ to ‘action’, with a combination of parameters such as [+/- dysphoric situation] and [dysphoric situation solved at T₊₁ or at T₋₁]. In the most recent meaning of *help*, the notion of interaction has diluted into a mere denotation of shared action, i.e. the origin of the process is one cause among other potential factors. This is virtually the only trace of the prototypical meaning of *help* left, as the euphoricity component is no longer applicable here.
- 92 These observations can be summarised as follows, in a graph representing the semantic evolution of the verb *help*.

Figure 3. The semantic evolution of the verb *help*



Conclusion

- 93 The polysemous verb *help* displays a wide variety of meanings, some of which are even contradictory. It is possible to find some semantic core that encapsulates all of them, because they all refer to an action related to a given situation. However, this scenario is so general that it fails to really account for what the verb *help* actually means. I have therefore adopted a diachronic perspective, as it seems better suited to explain what each secondary meaning has in common with the prototypical one.
- 94 Quite clearly, syntax and semantics are interrelated, as each structure reflects a different meaning. The first monotransitive use, meaning ‘alleviate’, which still exists today, gave rise to the sense ‘avoid’, by pragmatic inference: ‘if *x* cures *y*, then *x* can also be used to avoid *y*’. The second monotransitive use gave rise to the neutral meaning ‘contribute’, which is compatible with dysphoric outcomes. The elliptical prepositional version of prototypical *help*, with the rather broad meaning ‘assist in reaching or obtaining’, split into two uses, the spatial use and the meaning ‘serve’.

- 95 The fact that meanings are so divergent can partly be explained by the distinct phenomena which have been at play. Semantically speaking, we observe a case of narrowing (*help to obtain* => *serve*) and a case of broadening (*help* => *contribute*). Syntactically speaking, we note that *help_{avoid}* underwent lexicalisation, while *help_{contribute}* may correspond to a case of grammaticalisation, although this hypothesis remains hard to prove.
- 96 The strict correspondence between form and function probably explains why it is possible to have such a wide array of meanings for the same word. No two uses share the same argument structure and the same type of complementation. Thus, maximally isomorphic constructions compensate for the lack of isomorphism of the verb.

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NOTES

1. It is difficult to be very specific regarding the date when this change occurred. Indeed, it is still possible to use purpose clauses with *help* today and opinions still vary concerning the status of infinitive clauses after this verb (see Mair [1990] and Quirk et al. [1985]). However, the diachronic connection between purpose clauses and infinitive complements is well documented (e.g. Los [2005] and Haspelmath [1989]). The following sentence shows that this change had been established by at least the late sixteenth century in the case of *help*: What Letters *did he help* the Frenche Ambassador to conveye into Scotlande? (*Collection of State Papers relating to Affaires in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* [1571], published in 1759 by Cecill William).
2. The near-synonyms given here are used to illustrate the different meanings of *help*. They are not necessarily commutable with *help* in context because *help* displays several syntactic peculiarities: e.g. the omission of *to* does not occur with other verbs of assistance and the use of the complementiser *but* has completely disappeared in unmarked contemporary English, except after *cannot help* (see Pinson [2011] on the use of *but* after *cannot help*).
3. Negative polarity items never occur in positive assertions using the simple past (Giannakidou [1998]). By contrast, such items occur when they are in the syntactic scope of a) a negative particle, b) a restrictive particle, c) a subject containing a negative quantifier, d) a subject containing a restrictive quantifier. They are also licensed by e) a negation with inverse scope i.e. when the item is "within the semantic scope of an expression which does not c-command it at S-structure" (de Swart [1998: 179]), f) *wh*- and *yes/no* questions, g) *if*-clauses, h) *than*-clauses and i) *before*-clauses.
4. G. Rohdenburg, "Aspecte einer vergleichenden Typologie des Englischen und Deutschen", in C. Gnutzmann, *Kontrastive Linguistik*, Lang, Frankfurt, 1990, 133-152.

ABSTRACTS

The verb *help* is highly polysemous and some of its meanings even seem contradictory. In order to try and understand how this polysemy came into being, I propose a look back at examples

from the early modern period onwards, so as to trace the link that unites each secondary meaning with the original meaning of *help*. These observations are compiled in a synthetical table and a graph, which show how a limited range of semantic features and syntactic structures interact to generate meaning.

Le verbe *help* est hautement polysémique et certaines de ses acceptions semblent même contradictoires. Afin de comprendre comment cette polysémie s'est mise en place, nous proposons un retour en arrière commençant à la période élisabéthaine pour retrouver ce qui unit chaque sémantisme secondaire au sens originel de *help*. Ces observations sont compilées dans un tableau et un schéma synthétiques, qui montrent comment un nombre limité de traits sémantiques se combine avec la syntaxe pour permettre l'émergence du sens.

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