Modern Language Society

HOW TO UNDERSTAND *UNDERSTAND*

Introduction

The verb *understand* poses an interesting semantic problem. Although it can be decomposed into a prefix *under-* and a verb *stand*, it is by no means obvious how the sense of 'understand' has developed out of this formation. In what follows, I would like to review some of the explanations which have been offered concerning this semantic development. Although these explanations may appeal in some ways, none of them is particularly compelling. In an attempt to throw more light on the problem, I would like to highlight certain facts about Old English *under-* compounds which have not figured as importantly as they should have in previous discussions. Facts about *stand* can also contribute to a better appreciation of this development.

The account I offer is influenced in a number of ways by developments within the Cognitive Linguistics movement: an appreciation of central and peripheral meanings of morphemes, including affixes (in this case Old English *under-*); an appreciation of the role of metaphor in understanding semantic extension (relevant to both *under-* and *stand*); and an appreciation of image schemas (e.g. of *stand*) and their relevance to semantic extensions.

Occurrence in Old English

The verb *understand* is found in Old English where it occurs with the meaning 'understand, perceive, take for granted' (Sweet 1896: 189, though see below for more discussion on the semantics of this form) and so it is to the Old English period that we must turn our attention. The meanings of *understandan* as given in Bosworth and Toller (1898: 1100) are those in (1).

(1)　　I.　to understand, have insight into
　　　　　　Ia. with prep. *ymbe*
　　　　II.　to understand, perceive, know certainly
　　　　III.　to understand, to conceive of, consider
　　　　　　IIIa. with prep. *be*
　　　　　　IIIb. to accept as correct
　　　　IV　to observe, notice, consider

Within the Old English corpus, it has been observed that the verb appears in early and late West Saxon, though its frequency is much higher in the later period (see the references to the relevant scholarship in Ono 1979). Ono (1979: 95) counted one instance of the verb in the early West Saxon *Cura Pastoralis* and a total of 100 instances in the later West Saxon works of Ælfric. Availing myself of the search facilities of the electronic Old English Corpus associated with the University of Toronto's Dictionary of Old English Project (DOE), I was able to obtain the following statistics on the occurrence of both inflected and uninflected forms of *understandan*:

Table 1: Prose occurrences of Old English *understandan*

	Anglian	Saxon	Unknown
Early	0	9	0
Indeterminate	0	5	0
Late	0	305	0

Table 2: Glossary occurrences of Old English *understandan*

	Anglian	Saxon	Unknown
Early	0	0	0
Indeterminate	0	0	0
Late	0	51	1

The statistics confirm the absence of *understandan* in Anglian and its higher frequency in later West Saxon, compared with early West Saxon.[1]

Some early examples of the verb are given in (2). The examples illustrate the use of *understandan* with a sentential complement (2a), a nominal complement in (2b), and a prepositional complement in (2c).

(2)   a.   *þu   genoh   wel   understenst   þæt   ic   þe   to   sprece*
           you   enough well understand   that I   you to   speak
           'you understand well enough what I am saying to you.'
           (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Chapter 13, p. 27, l. 14 in
           Sedgfield 1899)

      b.   *ic   wolde   þe   nu   ascian hu   þu   þis*
           I   wanted   you   now   ask   how   you   this
           spell   understandan hæfdest
           discourse   understood   had
           'I wanted to ask you now how you had understood this discourse.'
           (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Chapter 34, p. 86,
           l. 22 in Sedgfield 1899)

      c.   *...cuþen   understondan on   Englisc*
           ...could   understand   on   English
           '...could understand English'
           (Gregory the Great, *The Pastoral Care*, *Letter to Wærferth*, line 13 as
           assigned by DOE, following lineation of Sweet 1871)

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[1] The statistics were obtained by searching the corpus for the sequences *under, ynders*. The resulting passages were then examined to eliminate the few forms not connected with the verb *understandan*. One Anglian instance of the form *understonda* has been noted (see Ono 1979: 97 for discussion of this form).

There are two instances of OE *understandan* which should be mentioned on account of their unusual semantics. Ono (1984: 220–221) discusses one instance of OE (West Saxon) *understandan* which corresponds to 'stand under'. This is the example in (3).

(3)	*Gyf*	*mon*	*ðonne*	*aceorfe*	*an*	*treow*,
	if	one	then	cut down	one	tree
	þæt	*mæge*	*ðrittig*	*swina*	*understandan...*	
	that	can	thirty	pigs	stand under	

'If one were to cut down a tree under which thirty pigs can stand...'
(Alfred-Ine (44B), from Liebermann (1903–1916), cited by Ono 1984: 220)

The variants *undergestandan* and *undergestondon* also appear in other manuscripts of this passage, leading Ono and others to treat the *under-* in this instance as a separable prefix. Indeed, as Ono (1984: 221) points out, some scholars have treated *under-* and *gestandan* as two independent words in the form *undergestandan*. In contrast, *understandan* in the meaning of 'understand' does not have a separable prefix. The other instance of *understandan* which should be noted is the single Anglian instance of the form *understonda* (see discussion in Ono 1979: 97). This form occurs as a loan translation of Latin *subsistere* 'to withstand'. This contrasts with the *understandan* in early West Saxon which, as Ono (1984: 221–224) shows, does not occur as loan translation.

Cognates of OE *understandan*, made up of an 'under' + 'stand' morpheme and meaning 'understand', can be found in other Germanic languages in later centuries (Old Frisian, Middle Danish, Middle Swedish, Old Icelandic, Middle Low German, Middle Dutch, Middle High German). However, of the Germanic languages which have written records prior to the ninth century, it is only West Saxon (i.e. not Gothic, Old High German, nor even the Old Saxon of the *Heliand*) which has such a form and it is in West Saxon in the OE period where one can observe the form becoming entrenched. The early history of its distribution and the extent and direction of borrowing between the dialects remain uncertain. I will proceed to discuss the form in light of the linguistic facts of OE where the form makes its first appearance.

Previous explanations
The earliest scholarly discussion of the semantics of the verb is to be found in an exchange of ideas published in *Modern Language Notes* in 1899–1900 between Francis Wood, Cornell College, and George Hempl, University of Michigan (Wood 1899, 1900; Hempl 1899). This exchange covered the etymological explanation of various words, as indicated in the titles of the articles, including *understand*. While the two authors disagreed with some points of classification and explanation, both accepted the same general idea of the history of *understand*, an idea advanced by Wood (1899: 129–130) in the first of these articles. The basis of the interpretation is the idea that the Old English prefix *under-* is to be understood as meaning

'between' (semantically equivalent and, according to Wood, cognate with Latin *inter-*).[2] This prefix, it is claimed, helps to create a sense like 'to separate' which in turn gives rise to 'understand'.

Despite some points of agreement, the two authors disagree about the precise details of this development. Hempl (1900: 233) assumes a development we may call Hypothesis I:

(4) **Hypothesis I**
        'stand between' > 'separate$_1$' = 'keep x apart from y' > 'understand'

Hypothesis I is extracted from Hempl's discussion, particularly the passage in (5).

(5)   OE. *Understandan* was originally simply 'to stand between,' and so 'to keep apart,' 'to separate,' and it, like Latin *distinguo*, German *unterscheiden*, etc., got the figurative meaning 'distinguish', 'make out', 'understand', 'know how (to)'(and in German, *unterstehen* passed on to 'undertake (to),' 'presume (to)'). Hempl (1900: 234)

Wood explains things differently, assuming the semantic development I will call Hypothesis II, as shown in (6).

(6) **Hypothesis II**
        'stand between' > 'separate$_2$' = 'take something away from the rest, thereby bringing it to oneself' > 'perceive' > 'understand'

Hypothesis II, though it appeals to a notion of separation, does so in a rather different way. Wood elaborates on this point of difference in (7).

(7)   I agree with Prof. Hempl–or rather he agrees with me–in seeing in E. *understand* the primary meaning of 'separate.' But, this separation is not an 'auseinandernehmen,' but a 'zusichnehmen,' 'vernehmen.' Wood (1900: 15)

Despite the difference in the details of the explanation, both authors cite the same supporting examples from other Indo-European languages. Foremost amongst the parallel examples are Latin *cernō* 'separate, sift; distinguish, discern', *distinguō* 'separate; distinguish', Greek *κρίνω* 'separate; judge'. In these examples, a meaning 'separate' is seen as the starting point for the development of a (supposedly) later, more abstract sense relating to perception or some intellectual ability. An example which is an attractive parallel for Wood is Latin *intelligō* (< *inter-* 'between' + *legerō* 'pick up, gather') 'perceive, comprehend'. Here, the verb

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[2] Not all dictionaries accept an original sense of 'between, among' for the *under-* in *understandan*. Ayto (1990:549), Klein (1967:1677), and Partridge (1958:751) all take the original meaning of the verb as 'stand under'. And, of course, the single instance of OE *under(ge)standan* with separable prefix *under-* means 'stand under', not 'stand between', as discussed above.

base *legerō* contributes the sense of 'bringing something to oneself', a meaning which constitutes a kind of bridge in Wood's path of semantic development of 'understand'.

Jäkel (1995: 224), in his overview of metaphors relating to mental activity, accepts the interpretation of 'to stand among' as underlying *understand*, but this is then analyzed as an illustration of a metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS ESTABLISHING PHYSICAL CLOSENESS, rather than resulting from a 'separate' sense. This is different again from what Wood and Hempl were proposing. The different nuances of 'between' and 'among', often cited as two sub-meanings of Old English *under-* are involved here. 'X between y's' suggests that y's are separated by x, whereas 'x among y's' suggests rather that the y's are enclosing x. Hence the 'between' meaning inclines one more toward 'between' > 'separate', whereas the 'among' meaning is more consistent with 'among' > 'close to'. We may call this Hypothesis IIIa. A variant of this is the idea that *understandan* originally meant 'stand under', like the form with the separable prefix, which in turn is linked to 'understand' through the idea of being 'physically close to'. This variation, which we may call Hypothesis IIIb is found in Ayto (1990: 549).

(8) a. **Hypothesis IIIa**
     understandan = 'stand among' > 'be physically close to' > 'understand'
     b. **Hypothesis IIIb**
     understandan = 'stand under' > 'be physically close to' > 'understand'

English *I'm with you* 'I'm following what you are saying, I understand what you are saying' might be taken to be a further illustration of this metaphor.

It is a problem for all three hypotheses that there simply is no 'stand' meaning (e.g. 'stand between, stand among, stand next to, stand near, stand at, stand under') documented for OE. *understandan* (with inseparable prefix). Furthermore, the more meanings which one constructs as part of the chain of semantic development, the more speculative the account becomes. Hypothesis I and II, for example, require not just a 'stand' kind of meaning, but a 'separate' kind of meaning, thereby increasing the degree of speculativeness.

Dictionaries vary in just how much of these hypotheses they wish to incorporate. Some dictionaries refrain from providing any explanation e.g. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (New College Edition, Morris 1981) and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Hoad 1986). Note also Bloomfield's reference to this verb in *Language*, cited in (9), where some difficulty with the semantics of this verb is acknowledged:

(9) Isolation may be furthered by the obsolescence of some construction. We find it hard to connect the meaning of *understand* with the meanings of *under* and *stand*, not only because the meaning 'stand close to' or 'stand among', which must have been central at the time the compound was formed, has been obsolete since prehistoric time, but also because the construction of the

compound, preposition plus verb, with stress on the latter, has died out except
for traditional forms, which survive as irregularities, such as *undertake*,
undergo, underlie, overthrow, overcome, overtake, forgive, forget, forbid.
Bloomfield (1933: 433)

It would appear that, despite the previous scholarly attempts to explain away the
semantics of *understand*, there remains a lingering doubt about the emergence of
the 'understand' meaning.

Old English "under-"
In this section I shall review the semantics of *under-* verbs in Old English and show
that the prefix presents a more complex picture than simply meaning either 'under'
or 'between, among'.

Sweet (1896: 189–190) lists a total of 39 *under-* verbs, shown in Table 3 along
with their meanings and other information as found in the Sweet dictionary. Many
of these verbs are parallel to Latin *sub-* compounds, either by way of loan
translation or as an independent development, e.g. Latin *supportare*/OE.
underberan. In some cases, the loan translation is viewed as a rather artificial
translation and Sweet marks them with a symbol meaning "slavish imitation of
Latin". The verbs designated this way by Sweet are: *underbrǣdan, undercįerran,
undercuman, underdręncan, underfylgan, underhębban, underhlystan, un-
derīecan, underiernan, underplantian.* Some verbs appear only as glosses of Latin
words and these are indicated by "Gloss" in the table, following Sweet. I have
indicated with an UNDER the verbs which are most obviously consistent with a literal
or figurative meaning of 'under'. Such a meaning is obvious in the overwhelming
majority of these verbs (26 by my count).

The meaning of 'between, among' is not at all common in this group. Only one
verb really suggests a 'between' prefix: *undersċēotan,* which translates as
'intercept, cut off', deriving presumably from *under-* 'between' + *sċēotan* '*tr.* shoot
or throw missile; hit with missile; move quickly, push, throw; contribute, pay
(money); refer case to person or court; *intr.* move quickly, rush, flow, run (of road)
also met.; shoot (of pain)'. However, note that this verb also translates as 'support',
a meaning more consistent with an 'under' sense, parallel to the way in which other
Old English words for 'support' (and Modern English *support*) contain an 'under'
component of meaning. So, even in the case of this verb, there is some question
about the role of *under-. Undersēcan* 'investigate' might be construed as 'search
among', but equally it might be construed as 'search under'. Note also that the
'investigate' meaning is conveyed by the stem itself (*sēcan* ' try to find; try to get;
try to find out, investigate, inquire; visit, go to; attack'). So, again, it is not at all
clear just what the force of the *under-* prefix is here and I think it is more likely that
another meaning (see below) is more relevant here. For both these verbs, then, I
have indicated the semantic role of the prefix as BETWEEN;UNDER?.

Table 3: Old English *under-* verbs and their meanings following Sweet (1896)

1.	?	*underbeginnan*	'begin, undertake'
2.	UNDER	*underberan*	'support' (Gloss)
3.	UNDER	*underbīegan*	'subject'
4.	UNDER	*underbrǣdan*	'spread under'
5.	UNDER	*underbūgan*	'submit'
6.	UNDER	*undercięrran*	'subvert'
7.	?	*undercrēopan*	'enter surreptitiously *also fig.*'
8.	UNDER	*undercuman*	'assist'
9.	UNDER	*underdelfan*	'undermine, dig out'
10.	UNDER	*underdręncan*	'suffocate' (Gloss)
11.	UNDER	*underetan*	'sap, undermine *fig.*'
12.	UNDER	*underflōwan*	'flow under'
13.	?	*underfōn*	'receive; receive surreptitiously (stolen property)(?); undertake'
14.	UNDER	*underfylgan*	'follow'
15.	UNDER	*undergān, undergangan*	'undermine *fig.*, deceive; undergo'
16.	?	*underginnan*	'begin, undertake'
17.	?	*undergietan*	'understand, perceive'
18.	UNDER	*underhębban*	'lift'
19.	UNDER	*underhlystan*	'supply (omitted word)'
20.	UNDER	*underhnīgan*	'go beneath tr.; submit to, undergo'
21.	UNDER	*underīecan*	'add'
22.	UNDER	*underiernan*	'run beneath; help'
23.	UNDER	*underlęcgan*	'support'
24.	UNDER	*underlicgan*	'submit'
25.	UNDER	*underlūtan*	'stoop under, lift'
26.	?	*underniman*	'take upon oneself; take in (with mind); steal'
27.	UNDER	*underplantian*	'supplant'
28.	BETWEEN; UNDER?	*underscēotan*	'intercept, cut off; support'
29.	BETWEEN; UNDER?	*undersēcan*	'investigate'
30.	?	*undersmēagan, undersmūgan*	'come upon unawares, surprise'
31.	?	*understandan*	'understand, perceive, take for granted'
32.	UNDER	*understapplian*	'supplant' (Gloss)
33.	UNDER	*understingan*	'support'
34.	UNDER	*understręgdan*	'strew under'
35.	?	*underþęncan*	'consider'
36.	UNDER	*underþīedan*	'subject'
37.	UNDER	*underwrębian*	'support'
38.	UNDER	*underwrītan*	'sign'
39.	UNDER	*underwyrtwalian*	'supplant' (Gloss)

Obviously, the meanings 'under' and 'between, among' do not explain away all cases and it is important to realize that the semantics of OE *under-* is considerably more complex than just a matter of a meaning of either 'under' or 'between, among'. Examining the list more closely, it is possible to identify clusters of these verbs which share semantic characteristics, allowing us to infer additional sub-meanings of *under-*. Clearly, there is a question as to how psychologically real such sub-meanings are. One such sub-meaning is based on the forms in (10).

(10) a. *undercrēopan* 'enter surreptitiously *also fig*' (cf. *crēopan* 'creep, crawl')
      b. *underfōn* 'receive; receive surreptitiously (stolen property) (?); undertake' (cf. *fōn* 'grasp, seize')
      c. *underniman* 'steal; ...' (cf. *niman* 'take hold of, hold; ...')
      d. *undersmūgan* 'come upon unawares, surprise' (cf. *smūgan* 'creep; penetrate gradually')

There is an element of secrecy immanent in the meanings of these *under-* verbs. To some extent, an element of secrecy is perhaps present in the unprefixed verb, e.g. *crēopan* 'creep, crawl', *smūgan* 'creep; penetrate gradually'. In these cases, *under-* may not be adding very much to the overall semantics, but it still remains true that the *under-* compounds in this group are associated with secrecy and this is a "local" generalization which can be extracted.[3] The OED (1971:3488) notes "In later [subsequent to OE] examples, the sense is usually that of (secret) investigation as *under-feel, -look, -search, -watch*, or of unobserved action, as *underhear*". Even contemporary English *under-* may be said to have a sub-meaning such as 'secrecy or treachery', as in Morris (1981: 1395). The notion of 'secrecy' is too strong to describe the meaning 'understand' but there is some semantic overlap between these notions nevertheless. Understanding is something one does without any obvious, overt manifestation or associated action. So, while *understandan* would not count as a central member of the *under*+V 'secret...' category, it could count as a peripheral member.

Another sub-meaning which can be extracted relates to the formation of *under-* compounds referring to psychological processes.

(11) a. *underniman* 'take in (with mind);...' (cf. *niman* 'take hold of, hold; ...)
      b. *undergān, undergangan* 'undermine *fig.*, deceive; undergo' (cf. *gān, gangan* 'go, come, proceed')
      c. *undergietan* 'understand, perceive'
      d. *underþęncan* 'consider'

[3] One should note that Latin *sub-* 'under' is shown as having this submeaning in Lewis and Short (1879: 1772): '...a concealing or being concealed behind something; a secret action'. Relevant words cited in connection with this extension are *subausculto* 'to listen secretly, to eavesdrop', *subnoto* 'to note secretly, to mark, watch, observe', *suborno* 'incite secretly, to investigate, suborn', *suffūror* (< *sub-fūror*), *surripio* (<*sub-ripio*) 'to snatch or take away secretly, to withdraw privily, to steal, pilfer, purloin'. It could be that the element of secrecy attaching to OE *under-* verbs was influenced by these Latin *sub-* verbs, or that the association arose independently, or some some combination of both.

Note that *underniman* does not occur in early OE and *underþencan* occurs in a very limited way. Clearly, *understandan* is a psychological process and, as such, it conforms to the pattern observed in (11).

Somewhat related to the foregoing is the group of verbs in (12), which are associated with a sense of 'personal engagement, responsibility towards something':

>   (12) a. *underbeginnan* 'begin, undertake' cf. *beginnan* 'begin'
>   b. *underginnan* 'begin, undertake' cf. *ginnan = onginnan* 'begin'
>   c. *underniman* 'take upon oneself;...' cf. *niman* 'take hold of, hold; contain, have room for; take by force; catch, receive, accept, take, also met'

The case of *undergietan* 'understand, perceive' is particularly relevant to the present discussion. Firstly, note the contrast between the more specifically abstract *under-* compounds compared with the corresponding *on-* compounds in (13).

>   (13) a. *underhnīgan* 'go beneath; submit to, undergo' (cf. *onhnīgan* 'bend down, bow, *tr.* and *intr.*')
>   b. *undergietan* 'understand, perceive' (cf. *ongietan* '(in poetry) seize, assail; perceive, see, hear, feel; be told of, hear of; understand, know, recognize, know carnally')

Undergietan and *ongietan* are of particular interest on account of the similarity in meaning with *understandan*. Ono (1979: 95–96) provides statistics on the distribution of *undergietan*, confirming the impression given by Gorrell (1895) that this verb is favoured in later Saxon (0 occurrences in the *Cura Pastoralis*, 32 occurrences in the works of Ælfric). Interestingly, *ongietan* '(in poetry) seize, assail; perceive, see, hear, feel; be told of, hear of; understand, know, recognize, know carnally' becomes less favoured over the same period of time. Ono's (1979: 95) statistics on *ongietan* are: 216 occurrences in the *Cura Pastoralis*, 27 occurrences in the works of Ælfric. Thus, we see a kind of inverse relationship in the frequencies of occurrence of *undergietan* and *ongietan*: as *undergietan* comes into use, *ongietan* becomes less used (observed already by Gorrell 1895: 397, 399 and discussed in some detail in Ono 1984). But note the difference in usage, something which has not been a focus of the earlier scholarship: while the meanings of *ongietan* ranged over both the concrete ('seize, assail') and the more abstract ('understand, perceive'), *undergietan* is restricted to the latter. An appropriate way to construe this is to say that *undergietan* came into use as a more specifically abstract variant of *ongietan*. The emergence of *undergietan* is instructive because, like *understandan*, when it makes its appearance, it is only used in the abstract sense of 'understand, perceive'. *Undergietan* is not used in any sense of 'take among, take between, take under' etc. There is no evidence that *undergietan* emerges gradually out of any immediately prior concrete sense.

The history of *undergietan* provides a basis for a similar hypothesis concerning the history of *understandan*. Just as *undergietan* is introduced in order to carry the more abstract senses of another *-gietan* verb, so we may surmise that *understandan* is introduced to carry the more abstract sense 'understand' of another *standan* verb, namely *forstandan* 'defend; obstruct, stop (way); understand; *wda.* hinder from; *wd.* help, avail, profit'. *Forstandan* is found in the earliest period of Old English, where it is restricted to West Saxon, as is *understandan*. The main statistics on occurrences of this verb, as obtained from the electronic Old English Corpus of the DOE are given in Table 4 and Table 5.[4] In addition to the occurrences shown in these tables, there are 11 occurrences in Late Anglian Glosses.

Table 4: Prose occurrences of *forstandan*

	Anglian	Saxon	Unknown
Early	0	19	0
Indeterminate	0	14	0
Late	1	28	0

Table 5: Verse occurrences of *forstandan*

	Anglian	Saxon	Unknown
Early	0	0	0
Indeterminate	0	14	4
Late	0	0	0

Since *forstandan* was in use in the earliest period, it is possible that it might have been a source for the emergence of an *understandan* variant. Note also that a comparable form *forstantan* occurs at roughly the same time in Old High German (which lacks any formation directly equivalent to Old English *understandan*).

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[4] The statistics were obtained by searching for the sequence *forst* and then eliminating irrelevant items.

Table 6: A comparison of *ongietan, undergietan, forstandan,* and *understandan*

on-gietan			under-gietan	
CONCRETE	ABSTRACT	→	ABSTRACT ONLY	
seize, assail	perceive, understand		perceive, understand	
for-standan			under-standan	
CONCRETE	ABSTRACT	→	ABSTRACT ONLY	
defend; obstruct, stop	understand		understand	

Stand

Old English *standan*, in its unprefixed form, does not have meanings which appear close to 'understand, perceive'. The meanings given by Sweet (1896) are: 'stand; stand still, stop, stay, remain (undisturbed), last; be valid, in force (of laws); (with *on* dative) consist of, be; start from (of direction), also *fig.*'. A meaning of 'stand', cross-linguistically, does not seem to be commonly associated with an 'understand' sense. Nevertheless, there are various connections which can be made between the 'stand' and 'understand' senses.

Note, first of all, that a verbal 'stand' morpheme can easily be extended to abstract senses, including psychological senses: for example, English *insist* and *persist* derive ultimately from the reduplicated 'stand' stem of Latin *sistere* 'to set, place, stop, stand'. Prefixed forms of a verb 'stand' are common in the Germanic languages with a variety of meanings, but most noteworthy in the present context are Old High German *fir-stantan* and *in(t)-stantan* (the latter only in Otfrid and Isidor), both meaning 'understand, know, think'. In the history of German *unterstehen* has taken on a number of meanings, including 'understand'[5]. The form *bestehen* is also documented with the meaning 'understand' in some cases (see *Deutsches Wörtebuch*).[6] Outside of Germanic, there is the Greek source of our word *epistemology*, as described in Morris (1981: 441): *epistanai* (<*epi* + *histanai* 'understand, believe'). While the Greek prefix *epi* can have a range of meanings ('on, upon; over, above; around, covering; to, toward, close to, next to; besides, in addition; after; among'), 'under' is not one of them. 'Among' is, but it is not 'among' but the meaning 'upon' which is claimed to be the relevant one, according to

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[5] *Unterstehen* is used with this sense by Luther. See *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (elfter Band, III. Abteilung, 1832) for other examples.

[6] Both of these verbs (*unterstehen* and *bestehen*) might be seen as variants of the more established *verstehen*, Old High German *firstantan* 'understand'. Old High German *in(t)stantan*, like Old English *understandan*, only occurs with the 'understand' meaning, which suggests that it, too, could have emerged as a purely abstract variant of *firstantan* which can also be used in the sense of 'defend'.

Morris (1981:439). Also, Old Irish *hiress* 'belief' is said to derive from an Indo-European prefix *\[p\]eri* (= Greek *peri* 'about, around, encircling close at hand, adjacent, near') and *stā* 'stand' (See Lewis and Pedersen 1937:26, 266 and Pokorny 1959:1005). The exact meaning of **peri* which is relevant here remains unclear, though there is no suggestion that it might mean 'under'.

As a nominal, we find English *stance* meaning not only 'the attitude or position of a standing person or animal; especially the position assumed by an athlete or sportsman in action', but also 'one's emotional or intellectual attitude or position' (Morris 1981: 1256). Compare also German *Standpunkt*, literally 'stand-point', for 'point of view'.

The discussion of 'stand' in Gibbs et al (1994) is particularly relevant. Gibbs et al attempted to empirically establish the image schemas which subjects reported as inherent in the act of standing. Subjects were asked to consciously think about twelve different image schema with respect to the act of standing (after having just engaged in the act). The three major image schemas established in this way were: BALANCE, VERTICALITY, CENTER-PERIPHERY. Each of these three image schemas are relevant to 'understand'. As far as BALANCE is concerned, note that a lack of balance is associated with mental confusion, as in English *unbalanced* and *unstable*, referring to someone who is not mentally not sound. The image of VERTICALITY ("an extension along an up-down orientation") partially overlaps with notions of UP which have been well documented. UP is a metaphorical source for many kinds of 'control' concepts, including *to be on top of something*, which can easily be taken to refer to 'understand something'. As for CENTER-PERIPHERY, understanding is associated with the centre of things, as in *get to the heart of the matter* and possibly Otfrid's use of *in-* in *instantan* 'understand'.

Cienki's (1998, particularly 116–125) discussion of metaphors relating to 'straight' is not irrelevant here. 'Straight' gives rise to many senses relating to the mind and Cienki formulates a number of larger metaphors at work in Indo-European languages which are equally relevant to 'stand'. The ones most relevant to the present discussion are summarized in (14).

(14)   a.   ORDERLY (LOGICAL) THOUGHT IS STRAIGHT
       b.   CORRECT IS STRAIGHT
       c.   SERIOUS IS STRAIGHT

(14a, b) underlie various expressions in English relating to clear or truthful ways of talking or thinking such as *Let's get the story straight, tell it straight, give it to me straight, set the record straight* etc.[7]; (14c) is relevant to expressions such as *keep*

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[7] Cienki (1998:121–122) attributes extensions of *straight* to *Let's get the story straight* and *Tell it straight* to an interaction between the image schema ORDERLY (LOGICAL) THOUGHT IS STRAIGHT and THOUGHT IS MOTION ALONG A PATH. Hence, one might propose ORDERLY (LOGICAL) THOUGHT IS MOTION ALONG A STRAIGHT PATH. Etymologies such as *wrong* (< PIE **wer-* 'to turn, bend') and *error* (< Latin *errare* 'to stray, wander') appeal to an image of motion more obviously than does 'straight'.

a straight face and *play it straight*. Cienki does not claim a specific associa-
tion between 'straight' and 'understand', though this would be close to the
other senses discussed by him. In Lushootseed (Salish, vicinity of Seattle), in fact,
the morpheme *cəkʷ* 'straight; be right, correct' does give rise to a transitive verb
cə́kʷ–dxʷ 'have it straight, understand' (Bates 1994: 44).

Summary

Common assumptions about the history of *understand*, as evidenced in
etymological accounts in dictionaries, are based on hypotheses first proposed
about a century ago. The proposals may be feasible, but have not been entirely
convincing and sometimes the history of the word and its meaning is simply treated
as unknown or obscure. This is understandable when the word, already in the Old
English period, is only documented with the 'understand' sense. Postulating earlier
senses relating to ways of standing or positioning oneself, as happens in the case of
these hypotheses, remains a very speculative enterprise. In the account offered here
I have not tried to discredit any of these earlier hypotheses concerning the period
prior to Old English documents. Instead, I have shown how there are separate
factors about *under-* and *stand* which can (also) motivate the development of an
'understand' sense.

I have reexamined the use of *under-* as a verbal prefix in documented Old
English. The work on polysemy in the Cognitive Linguistic movement would lead
us to expect a network of meanings associated with a verbal prefix like this and
indeed there is quite a degree of complexity to be found with this prefix. Subtle
semantic meanings can be associated with this prefix in Old English and the
compound *understandan* is in varying degrees compatible with some of these
meanings. Also, the presence of a more established *forstandan* verb with the
meaning 'to understand' is arguably relevant and indeed *understandan* could be
viewed as a variant of this verb. Within the Old English period, the rise of
undergietan 'to understand' may mirror the way in which *understandan* developed
from the earlier *forstandan*.

The semantics of *stand* in its central sense of standing upright may also be
relevant. The earlier hypotheses about the semantics of *understand* have seen no
real contribution of the meaning 'stand' to 'understand', other than taking 'stand'
to imply a positioning or location. 'Stand' predicates may often be extended to
senses relating to mere position, but it is also the case that 'stand' predicates can
give rise to other extensions building upon images such as balance and verticality,
as investigated by Gibbs et al. (1994). These components of meaning in the 'stand'
concept are probably relevant to the development of 'understand' and 'belief' senses
from the IE 'stand' root in OE and other IE languages. Previous work on 'straight' and
its connection with concepts of thinking (Cienki 1998) is relevant too. Straightness
is a typical feature of standing and one should expect some overlap in the kinds of
semantic extensions which are associated with 'straight' and 'stand'.

The points I have made concerning the semantics of OE *under-* and the semantic components of 'stand' have been made in order to establish motivations for the OE compound *understandan*, distinct from the motivations for this compound proposed in previous scholarship. The motivations which I point to in Sections 3 and 4 need not be thought of as replacing the earlier hypotheses. Rather, one might consider the motivations proposed here as constituting additional reasons for the emergence and consolidation of *understandan* in OE.

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