

Paper title: What learner corpora can reveal about preposition use

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Abstract:

Mastering the English preposition system is generally acknowledged as difficult, "...a traditional and recurring nightmare for all learners of English" (Littlemore & Low 2006: 285). In determining the appropriate preposition, learners face multiple challenges, including e.g. the polysemous nature of English prepositions as well as a lack of complete correspondence between English preposition use and preposition use in the learner's first language (assuming that the L1 even uses them). Such potential problems are compounded by the manner in which prepositions may be presented in grammar books, where their various meaning extensions are frequently portrayed as arbitrary, leaving learners with few options other than to memorize prepositions "narrow context by narrow context" (Lindstromberg 1996: 227) and/or develop good dictionary-using habits (see e.g. Parrott 2010: 94).

This paper presents the results of an in-depth investigation of the written texts of advanced Norwegian learners of English, to provide empirical evidence concerning the nature of the 'problem' with prepositions. It answers the following questions:

- 1) How often do these learners produce an inappropriate preposition?
- 2) Is there a correlation between inappropriate use and metaphorical use?
- 3) Is there a correlation between inappropriate use and L1 influence?

The data for this investigation consists of 1773 prepositions identified in roughly 20,000 words of argumentative texts retrieved from the Norwegian component of the International Corpus of Learner English. These instances were first classified by metaphorical status using the Metaphorical Identification Procedure, calling for comparison of their contextual and basic (most concrete) senses (see e.g. Steen et al. 2010). All contextually anomalous prepositions, both metaphorical and non-metaphorical, were subsequently categorized in terms of their congruence between the L1 and L2 by virtue of two factors: 1) the required syntactical structures required by the two languages in the particular context and 2) the correspondence between the basic meanings in congruent cases. In 'congruent' cases, both the L1 and L2—Norwegian and English in the present investigation—require prepositions in context (factor 1). Application of factor 2 shows that there are three congruency patterns, one of which indicates L1 influence.

This investigation follows on the heels of recent research about adapting the cognitive view of metaphor as a pedagogical tool through showing how metaphorical senses are related to the core senses of prepositions in a principled manner and replacing conventional wisdom that there is no rhyme nor reason for why one preposition is preferred over another in a given context (see e.g. Lindstromberg 1998; Tyler & Evans 2003). What this investigation adds, however, is empirical evidence from one group of L2 English learners concerning the real magnitude of the challenge preposition use presents, with subsequent suggestions for how learner corpora may help in the development of a more nuanced, targeted approach to prepositions in the classroom.

Key words:

Prepositions, metaphor, Norwegian learners, International Corpus of Learner English

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