

What can oral learner corpora reveal about preposition use?

Mastering English prepositions 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 L1. 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 1998: 227) and/or develop good dictionary-using habits (see e.g. Parrott 2010).

This paper adds empirical evidence concerning the real magnitude of the challenge that preposition use presents, through investigating the use of English prepositions in oral language produced by advanced learners. This investigation answers the following questions:

- 1) How often do these learners produce an inappropriate preposition?
- 2) Is there a correlation between inappropriate use and L1 influence?
- 3) Is there a significant difference between Norwegian learners' preposition use in oral and written language?

The data for the investigation is the Norwegian subcorpus of the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (Gilquin et al. 2010). The subcorpus contains 50 interviews of advanced English L2 students, amounting to approximately 13 hours of recorded and transcribed conversation.

All contextually inappropriate prepositions in the material have first been identified, indicating the frequency with which these learners produce inappropriate prepositions as well as showing which prepositions prove most difficult. One particular focus in this regard is whether challenges increase as the contextual meaning shifts away from a core, concrete meaning to a more peripheral, metaphorical meaning. All prepositions have thus also been classified according to metaphorical status (i.e. metaphorical or non-metaphorical), using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (Steen et al. 2010).

Further, the contextually inappropriate prepositions have subsequently been categorized in terms of their congruence between the L1 and L2 by virtue of two factors: 1) the syntactic 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 languages require prepositions in context (factor 1). Application of factor 2 shows that there are three congruency patterns: basic congruence, where the basic meaning of the L2 preposition corresponds to the basic meaning of the L1 equivalent (example 1); divergent congruence, where the basic meanings of the L2 and L1 prepositions do not correspond (example 2), and zero congruence, where neither of the languages require a preposition (example 3). Example 2 is thus an indicator of L1 influence on the student's learner language, while also illustrating effects of real-time processing on preposition use in spoken language: hesitation, reformulation and self-correction (which in this case resulted in an inappropriate preposition).

Inappropriate use, L2	Corresponding L1 prep	Appropriate L2 prep	Congruence	Metaphor status
1. saying . why can't it just work and arguing <u>at</u> each other (NO037)	med	with	congruent: basic	metaphor
2. I realized that . living <u>in</u> a <u>on</u> a country . with few people around you is fantastic (NO008)	på	in	congruent: divergent	non-metaphor

3. it's basically: . f= fantasy game [...] and you . ∅ ∅ congruent: ∅ metaphor
do . tasks and . move up in a level... (NO026)
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In addition, a cross-study comparison is carried out to provide a broader perspective on preposition use in learner language. Our empirical results from the analysis of oral preposition use in LINDSEI are thus compared with those from a previous investigation of preposition use in the written language of advanced English L2 students. This earlier study was based on 20,000 words from argumentative essays collected in the Norwegian component of the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger et al. 2009). Here it was shown that only 4.5% of the prepositions are contextually inappropriate, that L1 transfer does play an important role in production of the relatively few inappropriate prepositions produced, but that there is no correlation between core and peripheral meanings and inappropriate prepositions (Author 1 2010; submitted). In short, prepositions seem much less problematic than is generally believed.

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