

Paper title: Metaphoricity in English L2 learners' prepositions

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates preposition use in written and spoken language of advanced Norwegian learners of English, to provide empirical evidence concerning the nature of the 'problem' with prepositions – typically considered “a traditional and recurring nightmare for all learners of English” (Littlemore & Low, 2006, p. 285). The following research questions are answered:

- 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 significant difference between metaphorical use of prepositions across the oral and written modes in L2 learner English?

The data for this investigation consists of all prepositions employed in roughly 20,000 words of argumentative texts retrieved from the Norwegian component of the International Corpus of Learner English, together with all prepositions uttered by fifty L2 English students in approximately 13 hours of recorded and transcribed conversation from the Norwegian subcorpus of the Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage (1773 and 5171 prepositions respectively). Informants for both corpora were Norwegian college students characterized as higher-intermediate to advanced learners of English.

All prepositions 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). In addition, all contextually inappropriate prepositions in the material were identified, indicating the frequency with which these learners produce inappropriate prepositions in both spoken and written language, as well as showing which prepositions prove most difficult. Previous studies based on the same data indicate a 44% correlation between inappropriate use and possible L1 transfer in both written and spoken modes (Nacey, 2013a, pp. 205-240; 2013b; Nacey & Graedler, 2013, submitted). The present investigation provides evidence about the extent to which metaphor might also play a role with respect to learner difficulties, by considering whether challenges increase as the contextual meaning shifts away from a core, concrete meaning to a more peripheral, metaphorical meaning.

This paper 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, 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 is empirical evidence from one group of L2 English learners concerning the real magnitude of the challenge preposition use presents, and the true extent of the role of metaphor in preposition use.

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