

## Prepositional Usage at the University Level

### Abstract

This article is an attempt towards making teachers aware of the influence and the impact of learners' prior knowledge on their actual performances. The grammatical area investigated for this sake is prepositions which are high frequency words and of vital importance to foreign learners to understand the language and make themselves understood. However, the English prepositional system can be confusing because of the very asystematic nature of prepositional rules. In addition to that, the different conceptualizations of relationships in space and time, expressed in many languages through the use of prepositions can lead to formal differences. Because of this language specificity, prepositional usage can be problematic to learners of English as a foreign/second language, who will have to make choices and distinctions which are not necessarily made in their language. This situation can be applicable to Algerian learners of English.

The results of an error analysis study carried out on a corpus of errors made by fourth year B.A students of English at the university of Constantine, concluded that in the case of prepositions, students relied on transfer, to judge the appropriate usage of prepositions.

**Hanane BELHOULA**

Department of Foreign Languages  
Faculty of Letters and Languages.  
Mentouri University  
Constantine (Algeria)

### ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إثراء الصدى على مدى تأثير النقل الناتج عن الاختلاف بين اللغة العربية والانجليزية في استعمال حروف الجر الانجليزية عند الطلبة الجزائريين.

لهذا الغرض تم اللجوء إلى وسائل إحصائية إستراتيجية كمية لتحليل اختبار طبق على الطلبة. أوضحت نتائج الدراسة أن اللغة العربية قد تكون مصدرا للاستعمال الخاطئ لحروف الجر من قبل الطلبة. إضافة إلى ذلك بينت النتائج أن مصادر معرفة أخرى كاللغة العربية الجزائرية، اللغة البربرية، والفرنسية يمكنها أن تؤثر على الاستعمال الخاطئ لحروف الجر ذاتها.

### I. Language Transfer

#### 1. Contrastive Analysis vs. Error Analysis

The analysis of learners' difficulty in acquiring a second language (L2) has always been the concern of CA and EA. The psychological basis of CA is transfer theory. It claims that the comparison of the native language and foreign language will predict the facility or difficulty a student of an L2 will have when learning the foreign language. This is what Wardhaugh (1974: 176) calls the "strong version of CA" that deals with *a priori* analyses. The "weak version of CA" (Wardhaugh, *ibid.*: 181) or EA, deals with *a posteriori* analyses. It uses as a basis for its analyses a corpus of data in recorded tapes and/or texts written by students. Candlin, in

the preface of Richards (1974) holds that CA should be used to explain difficulties which have already been observed rather than to predict such difficulties, i.e. CA should be used as part of the explanatory stage of EA.

## 2. Language Transfer Research

### 2.1 Types of Transfer

Odlin (1989) defines transfer as follows:

Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been personally (and perhaps) not perfectly acquired (p.27)

However, several types of transfer have been identified leading to different definitions of the term. For instance, Dipietro (1971) distinguished between **transfer** and **interference**; Sharwood-Smith and Kellerman (1986), on the other hand, make a distinction between **transfer** and **cross-linguistic influence**

To trespass the controversy on the definition of transfer, we are going to follow Ellis' (1994) definition of transfer:

Transfer is to be seen as a general cover term for a number of different kinds of influence from languages other than the L2. The study of transfer involves the study of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), avoidance of target language forms and their over-use (p.341)

- **Negative transfer:** Transfer errors occur when the L2 is linguistically distant from the learners' first language who will have to resort to L1 structures to fill up any gap in their use of the target language. This influence can manifest itself at a syntactical, grammatical, lexical as well as a phonological level.
- **Positive transfer (facilitation):** Linguistically related languages may facilitate the learners' use of the target language. As Hammerly (1991) points it, "(...) a typologically close language can be understood much faster than a typologically distant language." (p.69).
- **Avoidance:** When certain structures in the L2 are very different from the learners' L1, the latter could simply avoid (not always consciously) using those structures (Schachter, 1974).
- **Over-use:** It refers to the over-production of certain L2 forms due to the learners' use of the forms they already know rather than try out the ones they are not sure of.

### 2.2 The L1 Transfer Controversy

With the birth of EA, the L1 was assigned two different roles in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The first way of dealing with transfer is "**the minimalist approach**" (Ellis,1994:309). This approach minimises the importance of the L1 and stresses the similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition focusing on what Richards (1974) calls intralingual and developmental errors.

In the second way, transfer is viewed as one of the several processes involved in SLA. Based on empirical data, researchers such as Selinker (1972) consider the learners' L1 as one of the most important aspects of their "interlanguage".

## II. Prepositional Usage in English

### 1. Definition

The purpose of using a preposition is to express or indicate a relation with the other object that it governs, as put by Quirk et al. (1972):

A preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that expressed by the prepositional complement, the other by another part of the sentence. Of the various types of relational meaning, those of place and time are the most prominent and easy to identify. Other relationships such as instrument and cause may be recognized (p. 309)

The sentence “the cup is **on** the table” expresses a spatial relationship between “the cup” and “the table” through the use of the preposition **on**. Cognitive linguists will use the expressions “Located Object” and “Landmark” to refer, respectively, to “the cup” and “the table”. This means that some prepositions have a concrete meaning that we can show or demonstrate. They often define time, place, position or movement.

### 2. Prepositional Verbs

#### 2.1 Definition

It is a grammatical collocation that “consists of a lexical verb followed by a preposition with which it is semantically and/or syntactically associated” (Quirk et al., 1985:1155).

*We are **looking at** her wonderful paintings.*

In the above sentence, **at** is more closely related to the preceding word, i.e. the verb which determines its choice, than to the prepositional complement (her wonderful paintings).

#### 2.2 Non-idiomatic Prepositional Verbs

Prepositional verbs can be either idiomatic<sup>1</sup> or non-idiomatic. Non-idiomatic prepositional verbs differ from idiomatic ones in that the latter are frozen expressions which meanings do not reflect the meanings of their components parts, as explained by Quirk et al. (1985):

Whereas a sequence of a verb and preposition like “live at” is purely non-idiomatic free-combination; in prepositional verbs like look at, look for, etc, the verb word has a literal use, but has a fixed association with the preposition. These cases may, in their turn, be distinguished from other prepositional verbs, for example: go into (investigate) where both words form a semantically idiomatic (often metaphorical) unit. (p.1155)

Gries (1999) says that:

In the idiomaticising process, the preposition becomes part of a new idiomatic unit in which the meaning of the two components is not assembled to form a composite meaning, but which has a different meaning altogether so that the preposition no longer has its own meaning. (p119)

### 3. Semantic Properties of Prepositions

Prepositions vary and meaning varies accordingly in a constant way. A number of researchers tried to give a clear picture of the way in which English handles spatial and temporal relations.

#### 3.1 Spatial Relationships

Close (1981) states that:

In using spatial prepositions, we are concerned not so much with objective measurements, i.e. with the actual dimensions of the things to which we are referring, as with how we imagine them to be at the time of speaking. Thus we can imagine a town as a point on the map, as a surface to go across, or as a space we live in, or walk through. (p.148)

So, the semantic distinctions made by language with respect to any spatial environment do not necessarily agree with the entity's real spatial extension, but with its conceptual schematization. Talmy (1983) sees schematization as "the fundamental principle underlying the linguistic expressions of spatial configurations" (p.225).

Furthermore, many prepositions in English may seem to have quite similar meanings; but the use of one preposition rather than the other may alter the meaning. We are concerned, in that case, with the prepositions which are relatively general in meaning (**in**, **under**, **on**, ...) and those which are more specific (**within**, **below**, ...). Besides, an area which may prove to be problematic for learners of English as a foreign language is that there are some prepositions which are "unambiguously dynamic and therefore, potentially very emphatic" (Lindstromberg, 2000:38), **into** (as opposed to **in**) and **onto** (as opposed to **on**). This accounts also to some prepositions of proximity: **by**, **near**, and **next to**. The distinctions made by these prepositions do not necessarily correspond to the ones made in many languages, where one preposition may account for the different meanings used in English.

As mentioned above, prepositions have both a prototypical (central) meaning and a figurative (peripheral) one. The former is the ideal, spatial meaning of a preposition. This spatial sense is also used in shaping the expression of figurative meanings, i.e. metaphorical applications. Lindstromberg (2001) talks about a **continuum of metaphoricity**. As emphasised by advocates of Cognitive Semantics, the figurative meanings of a preposition are extended from its spatial meanings through conceptual metaphors. When a preposition collocates with a verb, each one contributes to such expressions "at least something of one of its well-attested spatial senses" (Lindstromberg, 1997:172-3).

#### 3.2 Temporal Prepositions

Many prepositions such as **at**, **on**, **in**, **to**, **from**, **by**, **about**, **for**, ... apply to both place and time, with very similar meanings. "The temporal uses of prepositions frequently suggest metaphorical extensions from the sphere of place" (Quirk et al., 1972:377). In fact, "prepositions of time are very regular and easy to understand" (Hill, 1989:224) as compared to prepositions of place. If we examine the three frequent prepositions **at**, **on**, **in**, a general pattern emerges:

- **at** is used in reference to specific times of the clock or points of time in the day,

- **in** refers to longer periods of time, several hours or more,
  - **on** is used with dates and named days of the week.
- The following table summarizes the usages of **on**, **in** and **at** with different descriptions of time.

**Table 01: The Distribution of *on*, *in*, and *at* with Different Units of Time**

Prepositions Units of Time	<i>on</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>at</i>
<i>days</i>	on Friday	/	/
<i>day + part of the day</i>	on Wednesday afternoon	/	/
<i>clock time</i>	/	/	at 8:00 p.m.
<i>dates</i>	on the second of April	/	/
<i>year</i>	/	in 1975	/
<i>month</i>	/	in October	/
<i>parts of the day</i>	/	in the morning	at night
<i>special day</i>	on Christmas day	/	/
<i>season</i>	/	in winter	/
<i>festival</i>	/	/	at Christmas/Easter
<i>mealtime</i>	/	/	at lunchtime
<i>fixed expressions that refer to specific points in time</i>	/	/	- at the same time - at present
<i>long periods of time</i>	/	in the Middle Ages	/

### III. Learners' Prepositional Usage

#### 1. The Students' Test

The subject of the study are fourth (final) year B.A students of English. We have chosen these subjects because they are supposed to have reached a certain level of proficiency in English, and are thus capable of manipulating the language's grammatical structure. The number of the subjects' population amounts to 80 students.

Data about the subjects' prepositional usage was gathered through a test. The test given was an elicitation task in which test-takers were supplied with a number of prepositions among which – according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) – the nine most frequent prepositions in English: **at**, **by**, **for**, **from**, **in**, **of**, **on**, **to**, and **with**. Students were asked to fill in gaps with the appropriate preposition that expresses spatial, temporal or other meanings, neutral as between space and time (**with** and **of**). The prepositions chosen were used, in the 30 sentences that constitute the test, either

closely related to the preceding verb, which determines its choice forming a free, non-idiomatic combination of Verb + Preposition; or as closely linked to the prepositional complement. In the former case, prepositions expressing spatial relationships contribute to the pattern Verb + Preposition some of their basic spatial meaning, as used figuratively.

## 2. Analysis of the Results

Analysing the results, it was found that problems Algerian learners of English have with prepositions are of three types:

- i) Use of a superfluous preposition (74.81%).
- ii) Omission of a required preposition (63.08%).
- iii) Use of a wrong preposition (62.86%).

When their handling of English prepositions was erroneous, Standard Arabic (St.Ar.) could have been the major source of error. However, errors could also have been the result of negative transfer from other languages and dialects used in Algeria: Algerian Arabic (Alg.Ar.), French (Fr.) and Berber (Ber.).

The results we had when analysing the errors made by learners in the three above stated categories revealed that Algerian learners of English tend largely to transfer negatively the usage of Standard Arabic prepositions (50.57%). The errors made by learners, and which could not be explained in terms of differences between St.Ar. and English (49.43%) show that Alg.Ar., Fr., and Ber. Affect to a non-negligible extent the learners' prepositional usage. Of the 49.43% of errors of other origins, 85.05% are the result of negative transfer from Alg. Ar., Fr., and Ber.

### Category 1: Use of a Superfluous Preposition

When St.Ar. does not distinguish between prepositions but English does, the percentage of transfer errors (74.81%) was considerable. Students, in that case, used the preposition that is closer to St.Ar. . In other words, they used the one that is much more general in meaning instead of the more specific.

Example 1: I was the first one to **jump in** the swimming pool.

*Instead of*

I was the first one to **jump into** the swimming pool.

(kuntu ?awwala man **ġataša fi** alħammāmi) <sup>2</sup>

Movement in the direction of a space then penetrating it is expressed simply by **in**, but to emphasise movement towards and then position in space, we say **into** when emphasis is put on movement towards the water and then position in it. This means that the two prepositions contrast with one another and diverge in St.Ar. into **fi** (**divergence phenomenon**). In this language, the idea of motion is contained in the lexical verb, which precedes **fi**, and not in the meaning of the combination of V + Prep. .

Example 2: I have not seen her **since** the birth of her baby.

As far as the prepositional usage in this sentence is concerned, the students tend not to make transfer errors when they have to choose between the two exclusively distinctive temporal prepositions, **since** and **for**. This may be explained by the fact that students are taught this distinction.

➤ The 25.19% of errors from other origins other than St.Ar. cannot be traced back to Alg.Ar., Fr., or Ber.; the reason is that only one preposition is used in these

languages to account for the two different meanings expressed by two different prepositions in English.

**Table 02: Equivalences in Prepositional Usage between English, French, Algerian Arabic, and Berber in the First Category**

languages and dialects prepositions	Fr.	Alg.Ar.	Ber.
since/for	depuis	məlli	sī
in/into	dans	fə	dī
under/below	sous/en dessous de	təht	zadū
For/to	à/pour	lə	?i
with/by	avec/par	bə	sa

### Category 2: Omission of a Required Preposition

Learners' errors were errors of omission of a required preposition, which combines freely with a specific lexical verb forming a non-idiomatic prepositional verb. This can be traced back to St. Ar. where the lexical verb in question does not co-occur with a preposition, hence the omission of a preposition.

Example: In the absence of the chairman, the vice-chairman **presided**  $\emptyset$  the meeting.

*Instead of*

In the absence of the chairman, the vice-chairman **presided over** the meeting. With its figurative meaning of "control" (Tyler & Evans, 2001), **over** contributes to the meaning of the prepositional verb "to preside over" something of its spatial meaning of "higher than and proximate to some point". In St.Ar., this meaning portrayed by **over** is part of the verb "yatara?asu" that does not collocate with any preposition.

➤ In this category, 20% of the errors from other origins (36.92%) can also be the result of transfer from Fr., Ber., and Alg.Ar.. For instance, in the the sentence: "Both girls **compete for** their father's attention", the preposition **for** was replaced, in some cases, by **on**, which equivalent in Alg.Ar. (**clā**) co-occurs with the verb "yatqābad clā".

### Category 3: Use of a Wrong Preposition

E.g.1 Jane **trembled from** happiness.

*Instead of*

Jane **trembled with** happiness.

The reason behind the erroneous usage of **from** rather than **with** can be related to the use of the corresponding preposition to **from** in St.Ar., namely **min** as in

?irtaca?at jāyn **min** al□araḥi

Like **from** which carries a figurative extension of its spatial meaning, **min**, in the above sentence, expresses the origin of the trembling, which is happiness. English, on the other hand, makes use of the preposition **with** with which the state expressed in the sentence can be regarded as something static. This means that trembling is not seen as being the

result of happiness but rather as a state that proceeds together with the state of being happy.

➤ The learners' erroneous usage can also stem back to the influence of Alg.Ar., Ber., and Fr. as in the above sentence:

- Alg.Ar.: **man**
- Fr.: **de**                    all of which are equivalents of **from**
- Ber. **sī**

Example: I was born **in** a Friday afternoon.

Instead of

I was born **on** a Friday afternoon.

In English, **on** and **in**, can both be used to refer to periods of time, whereas, in St.Ar., only **fi** is used to refer to the same temporal entity. This can explain the students' use of **in** instead of **on**.

➤ The usage of **with** instead of **on** can be traced back to Alg.Ar., when we say  
zədt **bə** ljamca laclīya.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the light of this study, teachers should make learners understand the basic, prototypical meaning of spatial and temporal prepositions, with special emphasis on spatial prepositions because the understanding of their semantics may result in a better understanding of the meaning of non-idiomatic prepositional verbs. Such a presentation may lead to a mastery and acquisition of the usage of the part of speech in question.

A model lesson - based on the **eclectic method** to grammar teaching - can be organized following three different stages (Ur, 1988):

**1. Presentation stage:** we present the class with a text which includes a variety of prepositions. The objective of this stage is to introduce and ensure an understanding of the language that will be practised and used later; i.e. learners are made familiar with the form of prepositions (simple vs. complex prepositions).

**2. Isolation and explanation stage:** we focus on leading learners to understand the functional characteristics of prepositions and the different relations they express. At this stage, teachers can resort to the use of diagrams in explaining the literal (basic) meaning of prepositions. At this level, Standard Arabic as well as French, Algerian Arabic, or Berber (if it is the teacher's native language) can be used as means of explanation by raising the learners' attention to equivalences and differences between the languages (or dialects).

**3. Practice stage:** it consists of a series of activities which aim is to cause learners to absorb English prepositional usage thoroughly. The activities can be of two kinds:

➤ *Meaningful drill activities* such as filling in gaps in a text and description questions about images (in which learners, if they have understood the core analytical meaning of prepositions, will be ready to discuss the translation of this meaning into images).

➤ *Communicative drill activities* in which learners engage into free communication where practice of the use of prepositions should be the main objective, such as conversing and writing a story.

**Notes:**

1. We avoid the use of the term ‘phrasal verb’ simply because of the controversy among grammarians and lexicographers to what a phrasal verb is. For instance, Cowie (1993) says that “he follows common practice in applying the term to idiomatic combinations, whether of verb + adverb or verb + preposition” (p. 39). Unlike Cowie, Close (1981) uses the same term to refer to all constructions of verb + adverb, or verb + prepositions whether used idiomatically or not. Chalker (1984), on the other hand, considers as a phrasal verb any idiomatic or non-idiomatic combination of verb + adverb, such as ‘to try on’ and ‘to carry on’.

2. Throughout the investigation part of the research paper, the reading convention used in the transliteration of sentences in Arabic is the one used by Saad (1982):

**Table 03: Transliteration of the Arabic Writing System (Saad, 1982: 05)**

Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Phonetic Value	Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Phonetic Value
<b>Consonants</b>					
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ض	d	ḏ
ب	b	b	ط	ṭ	t
ت	t	t	ظ	ẓ	ḏ
ث	ṯ th	θ	ع	c ʾ	ʕ
ج	j	j	غ	ġ i gh	ɟ
ح	ḥ	h	ف	□	f
خ	x th	x	ق	q	q
د	d	d	ك	k	k
ذ	ḏ dh	ḏ	ل	l	l
ر	r	r	م	m	m
ز	z	z	ن	n	n
س	s	s	هـ	h	h
ش	š sh	ʃ	و	w	w
ص	ṣ	□	ي	y	y
<b>Vowels</b>					
اَ	a	a	آ	ā	a:
أُ	u	u	و	ū	u:
إِ	i	i	ي	ī	i:

**References**

- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983). *The Grammar Book*. Rowley, MA: Newbury

- Close, R.A. (1981). *English as a Foreign Language: its Constant Grammatical Problems*. George Allen and Unwin.
- Cowie, A.P., (1993). "Getting to grips with phrasal verbs". *English Today*, 36 (9). 38-41
- Dipietro, R. (1971). *Language Structures in Contrast*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gries, S.T. (1999). "Particle of movement: a cognitive and functional approach". *Cognitive Linguistics*, 10 (2). 105-145.
- Hammerly, H. (1991). *Fluency and Accuracy*. Multilingual Matters.
- Hill, J. (1989). *Grammar and Practice: Self-Study with Key*. Language Teaching Publications.
- Lindstromberg, S. (1997). *English Prepositions Explained*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lindstromberg, S. (2000). "(Sometimes) against the grain". *Humanising Language Teaching*, 3 (3). 32-40.
- Lindstromberg, S. (2001). "Preposition entries in UK monolingual learners' dictionaries: problems and possible - solutions". *Applied Linguistics*, 22 (1). 79-103.
- Odlin, T. (1989). *Language Transfer*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge.
- Quirk et al. (1972). *A Grammar of Contemporary English*. Longman.
- Quirk et al. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.
- Richards, J. (Ed.) (1974). *Error Analysis*. Longman.
- Saad, G.N. (1982). *Transitivity, Causation and Passivization: A Semantic-Syntactic Study of the Verb in Classical Arabic*. Kegan Paul International.
- Schachter, J. (1974). "An error in Error Analysis". *Language Learning*, 24 (2). 205-214.
- Selinker, L. (1972). "Interlanguage". *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10 (3). 209-231.
- Sharwood-Smith, M., & Kellerman, E. (1986). "Crosslinguistic influence in second language acquisition: an introduction". In M. Sharwood-Smith & E. Kellerman (Eds.), *Cross-linguistic Influence in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 1-9). Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.
- Talmy, L. (1983). "How language structures space". In H. Pick & L. Acreadoes, (Eds.), *Spatial Orientation: Theory, Research and Application* (pp. 225-282).
- Tyler, A. & Evans, V. (2001). "Reconsidering prepositional polysemy networks: the case of "over"". *Language*, 77. 724-765.
- Ur, P. (1988). *Grammar Practice Activities: A practical Guide for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wardhaugh, R. (1974). *Topics in Applied Linguistics*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House