

a b c d e f g h i j l k m n o
 p q r s t u v w x y z a b c d
 e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s
 t u v w x y z a b c d e f g h i
 j l k m n o p q r s t u v w x y z
 a b c d e f g h i j l k m n o
 p q r s t u v w x y z a b c d
 e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s
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 p q r s t u v w x y z a b c d
 e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s
 t u v w x y z a b c d e f g h i
 j l k m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

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Fax 958 283 246
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TEACHING ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS TO SPANISH SPEAKERS: SOME ASPECTS TO BEAR IN MIND

Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa

Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canarias
avcasas@dfm.ulpgc.es

Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa teaches at the Department of Filología Moderna of the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. His main areas of interest include English morphology, syntax, and semantics, as well as ELT.

This paper focuses on English prepositions, whose importance is due, among other reasons, to their high frequency of occurrence. Teaching them to Spanish speakers proves to be a hard task which involves dealing with two different disciplines: (Applied) Linguistics and ELT. Firstly, attention will be paid to their morphological, syntactic, and semantic complexity and fuzziness. Secondly, as for ELT, some books concerned with this topic have been published. Moreover, there are projects, such as PrepNet (<http://www.irit.fr/recherches/ILPL/prepnet.html>), which are aimed at describing the syntax and the semantics of prepositions within a multilingual perspective. From our own teaching experience, we can conclude that this issue is relevant enough so as to make us investigate the problems Spanish speakers face when learning English prepositions.

"Teaching is not the primary function because it is not an end in itself; learning is the primary function".

Aristotle (4th century B.C.)

ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

As far as prepositions are concerned, it should be mentioned not only that they are one of the key areas of the English language, but also that teaching them to Spanish speakers is a very hard task. Our own teaching experience made us research into the problems these students face, this mission involving two main disciplines, namely, Applied Linguistics and ELT. The relevance of prepositions is due to features such as their high frequency of occurrence. In fact, according to Sinclair (1991: v),

Most sentences that people produce contain at least one preposition; indeed, three out of the ten most frequent words of English are prepositions: of, to, and in. This means that the number of times you need to use a particular preposition is much higher than for an ordinary word such as a noun, adjective, or verb.

One of the characteristics to bear in mind is their importance in both English and Spanish, as García Yebra (1988: back cover) states: "*Las preposiciones, esas palabras generalmente diminutas, son importantísimas para ordenar y estructurar la frase*". This author (1988: 32) also refers to them as "*Estos elementos sintácticos imprescindibles*". Furthermore, they play a very important role in any language, especially in English: "*This book provides information about the combination of words and prepositions in English, something you need to know for almost every sentence you write or speak*" (Sinclair, 1991: v).

In addition, López (1972: 46) focuses on the relations they establish:

La preposición es una de las especies gramaticales que manifiestan más visiblemente la vida de las palabras y marcan mejor la originalidad de una lengua. En efecto, lo que cambia de una estructura lingüística a otra es menos los elementos

fundamentales de su representación del mundo que las relaciones que se establecen y expresan entre estos elementos primeros del conocimiento.

Escarpanter (1992: back cover) also refers to this feature: "*Estas partículas invariables de la lengua, las preposiciones, a menudo tan olvidadas, establecen relación entre las palabras y dan sentido a una oración o un párrafo*".

Moreover, scholars such as Mott and García Fernández (1985: 173) highlight the relevance of their acquisition when learning an FL:

El tema de las preposiciones resulta de particular interés en el estudio de una lengua, puesto que ellas nos revelan en cierta medida la psicología de sus hablantes, y nos proveen de una información muy valiosa acerca de cómo dichos hablantes relacionan entre sí los elementos del mundo que les rodean.

Besides, their complexity should be taken into account; this is evident from the fact that, as García Yebra (1988: 14) explains, prepositions undergo certain changes: "*El uso de las preposiciones, como muchas cosas de la lengua, no sólo tiene carácter un tanto subjetivo, sino que es una de las parcelas del idioma que más cambian con el tiempo*". In fact, they also cause problems in translations:

Si se observa, además, que la influencia ejercida sobre la preposición por los dos términos que une varía según las tendencias propias de cada lengua, podemos comprender por qué es aquí justamente donde los traductores encuentran las mayores dificultades (López, 1972: 46).

López's (1972: 12-13) quote sums up most of these ideas:

El papel de las preposiciones, tanto en la lengua hablada como en la lengua escrita, es de una gran importancia, por la frecuencia de su empleo, por la facilidad con que se dejan introducir en las construcciones más diversas y, sobre todo, por las distinciones extremadamente sutiles que pueden expresar. [...] De ahí la dificultad que encuentran los traductores con estas partículas, y sus errores

cuando no han asimilado perfectamente dicho sistema.

TEACHING ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS TO SPANISH SPEAKERS

On the one hand, there are some preliminary considerations regarding Spanish prepositions that should be born in mind. Many scholars have tried to define them; Escarpanter (1992: 7) stated: "*Las preposiciones son partículas invariables que pueden dar sentido a un grupo de palabras al establecer una relación entre ellas*". However, Trujillo (1971: 234; in Horno Chéliz, 2002: 79n) underlines how difficult it is to define them and to describe their behaviour: "*No es fácil cosa decir qué son las preposiciones, ni aun determinar con exactitud cuántas hay, ni si se trata de una clase homogénea o varias*".

Even though they are few in number, they are very relevant. Thus, López (1972: 10) refers to "[...] el derrumbamiento de los casos, de donde vino la complejidad del sistema de las preposiciones al recargarse sus funciones". García Yebra adds that "*El mucho uso y el escaso número de las preposiciones ponen de manifiesto su importancia*" (1988: 33).

In fact, we realize that Spanish students of English make mistakes even in the use of Spanish prepositions: "*Hoy es el inglés la lengua que más interferencias produce en el español, también en el uso de las preposiciones*" (García Yebra, 1988: 32). Escarpanter (1992: 7) mentions this idea, too:

Es, precisamente, en las preposiciones donde muchas personas cometen la mayoría de las faltas. ¿Acaso no hemos oído decir en la televisión a un locutor con dicción impecable: 'El árbitro señaló una falta sobre el jugador', cuando debiera haber dicho: 'El árbitro señaló una falta contra el jugador...'?.

Another feature to bear in mind is that the same preposition may express different relations, as will be seen later. According to Fernández López (1972: 15), those relations are traditionally divided into three main groups: spatial (*Viene de Madrid*), temporal (*Trabaja de tarde*), and notional ones, among which we find notions such as cause, aim, instrument, manner, etc. (*Siempre habla de su madre*; *Nunca está de mal humor*). This scholar

(1972: 15-16) also refers to the fact that the same word may be followed by different prepositions which establish a relationship with different parts or elements of reality, as can be seen with the verb *ir* in Spanish: *Vamos al cine*; *Vamos de vacaciones*; *Vamos con María*; *Vamos para ayudarte*. As for the semantics of Spanish prepositions, she (1972: 16) establishes a distinction between empty and full prepositions:

Algunos gramáticos las [a, de, en, con y por] consideran preposiciones vacías de contenido porque pueden marcar muchas relaciones y su significado está en función del contexto. Otras expresan más claramente la clase de relación que establecen como sin, 'exclusión', desde 'comienzo espacial o temporal', entre 'localización en medio de dos puntos', etc. A estas preposiciones se les suele llamar preposiciones llenas.

Prepositions are, due to their complexity, highly relevant in SLA. Two quotes that point out this feature will be provided. The first of them is by Fernández López (1972: 11): "*La adquisición del sistema preposicional es uno de los aspectos más complejos del proceso de aprendizaje de una segunda lengua*". The second one is by López (1972: 12): "[...] *el conocimiento profundo de una lengua no se consigue en tanto no se tenga un dominio completo del sistema de las preposiciones*". Other authors who have referred to this characteristic are García Yebra (1988: 33) and Pérez Cino (2000: 10).

On the other hand, there are some preliminary considerations regarding English prepositions that should also be considered:

Many students of English make the mistake of trying to translate English prepositions into their own language. This is never successful because most prepositions express more than one idea, and while one meaning of the preposition may translate, the others often do not (Hall, 1986: 4).

This is not the only difficult aspect affecting prepositions; Hall (1986: 4) reflects on the following idea: "*Another difficulty often encountered by students is that prepositions are usually practised*

in meaningless contexts". Another problem is "*having to decide exactly at which point a preposition ceases to be just a preposition and becomes part of a verb combination, or even a phrasal verb*" (Hall, 1986: 4).

THE COMPLEXITY OF PREPOSITIONS

(Applied) Linguistics and the complexity of prepositions

When dealing with the complexity of prepositions from the (Applied) Linguistics point of view, attention should be paid to three linguistic levels: morphological, syntactic, and semantic complexity. Firstly, morphological complexity is a characteristic both English and Spanish prepositions share. This part of speech is not only complex, but also fuzzy. In fact, no agreement is reached when trying to determine the number of English prepositions. One of the reasons for this is that a distinction is drawn between simple and complex prepositions. Another one has to do with the fact that the defining features of English prepositions have not been clearly stated yet. It is not even possible to state whether this is an open or a closed word-class. Moreover, there is confusion about prepositions and other parts of speech such as adverbs, conjunctions, and particles. An example taken from Merino (1982: 3) is the word *before*, which in the following examples behaves as a preposition, an adverb, and a conjunction, respectively: "I shall arrive in Paris *before* you"; "I have never been in Paris *before*"; "I shall have read it *before* you return".

Secondly, syntactic complexity is obvious, too, from evidence such as the binding function prepositions perform, together with other roles they may play: "*Las preposiciones sirven, como las desinencias de la declinación en las lenguas que la tienen, para determinar y caracterizar la función sintáctica de la palabra regida, y a veces también para precisar el significado de la palabra regente*" (García Yebra, 1988: 28). Among their main syntactic features, it can be stated that they usually follow certain adjectives ("aware of"), nouns ("belief in"), and verbs ("rely on"). Furthermore, they may seem weak because their presence is determined by the elements surrounding them.

One illustrative example is the word *regard*; when it behaves as a verb, it is followed by a direct object and a prepositional phrase introduced by either *as* or *with*, as can be seen in the following examples: “I regard creativity both *as* a gift and *as* a skill”; “He regarded drug dealers *with* loathing” (Collins). When *regard* is a noun, it may be associated with up to five different prepositions; it may be followed by the prepositions *for* and *to* and preceded by *as*, *in* or *with*, as these examples show: “I have a very high regard *for* him and what he has achieved”; “Give my regards *to* your family”; “*As* regards the war, Haig believed in victory *at* any price”; “The department is reviewing its policy *with* regard *to* immunisation”; “I may have made a mistake *in* that regard” (Collins).

Thirdly, prepositions are characterised by their semantic complexity. One of their main features is their polysemy:

La polisemia de las preposiciones tiene el mismo origen que la de las demás palabras: la economía del lenguaje. Las preposiciones son, comparadas con el número de relaciones que nuestra mente puede establecer entre las cosas, sumamente limitadas en número. Por eso son necesariamente polisémicas. (García Yebra, 1988: 68).

Pérez Cino (2000: 9) also refers to this: “Las preposiciones pueden expresar un número infinito de matices según el contexto léxico. [...] La dificultad en el uso de las preposiciones proviene en gran medida de esta maleabilidad semántica”.

Moreover, they can also express a wide range of meanings, such as space, time, and other notions. Another aspect to highlight is the distinction between literal and metaphorical meanings. The following instances include metaphorical uses of the prepositions *over* and *beneath*, respectively: “The lecture went right *over* our heads (= «We could not understand it»); “Such behaviour is *beneath* him (= «He would not do a thing like that»)” (Mott and García Fernández, 1985: 182). Attention should also be paid to the presence of prepositions in idioms and fixed expressions, as well as to the subtle differences and contrasts that can be conveyed by means of prepositions. Thus, in phrases such as the following ones, both «A walk *across* the park» and «A walk *through* the park» are grammatically correct. However, each preposition expresses a different nuance; whereas *across* implies a wish to reach the other end of the park as soon as possible (as if walking across it were a shortcut), *through* suggests quietly going for a stroll, paying attention to the trees and bushes in the park (translated and adapted from Mott and García Fernández, 1985: 183).

It goes without saying that all these subtleties should be born in mind by translators, for the semantic complexity of prepositions is reflected in both translations from English into Spanish and from Spanish into English. One example to illustrate the semantic complexity of English prepositions when translated into Spanish is *by* (translated and adapted from Merino, 1982: 33-36):

Translation into Spanish and/or other features	Sentence in English	Sentence translated into Spanish
Al lado de	There is a little house <i>by</i> the lake.	Hay una casita al lado del lago.
Por	I go <i>by</i> the baker's every day.	Paso por la panadería todos los días.
Antes de	Breakfast will be ready <i>by</i> eight o'clock.	El desayuno estará preparado antes de las ocho.
In measure and quantity expressions	They sell wine <i>by</i> the pint.	Venden vino por pintas.
Solo	I was all <i>by</i> myself.	Yo estaba solo (sin compañía).
Por (means or instrument)	I'll send the parcel <i>by</i> post.	Mandaré el paquete por correo.
Por (agent)	This book was written <i>by</i> my father.	Este libro fue escrito por mi padre.
Por (via)	We travelled to Japan <i>by</i> the North Pole.	Viajamos a Japón por el Polo Norte.

Translation into Spanish and/or other features	Sentence in English	Sentence translated into Spanish
After the verb <i>mean</i>	What do you mean <i>by</i> that?	¿Qué quieres decir con eso?
After the following verbs: <i>begin, start, end, finish</i>	You must start <i>by</i> studying phonetics.	Debes empezar por estudiar la fonética.
Means of transport	<i>By</i> bus	En autobús/guagua
In time expressions	<i>By</i> day	De día
In some phrases	<i>By</i> chance <i>By</i> hand <i>By</i> heart Two <i>by</i> two	Por casualidad A mano De memoria De dos en dos

One instance to illustrate the latter (i.e. from Spanish into English) is *ante* (Mott and García Fernández, 1985: 183):

ANTE tus propios ojos	BEFORE your very very eyes
ANTE Dios	In the eyes of God
ANTE el peligro	In the face of danger (Nunca «in front of»)
ANTE la perspectiva de...	At the prospect of... (Nunca «before»)

ELT and the complexity of prepositions

There are many references that highlight the complexity of this part of speech. This is shown by the titles themselves (bold type is our own emphasis): López's **Problemas y Métodos en el Análisis de Preposiciones**; García Yebra's **Claudicación en el Uso de Preposiciones**; Nájuez Fernández's **Uso de las Preposiciones** (Colección: **Problemas Básicos del Español**); Escarpanter's **Eso No Se Dice. El Rompecabezas de las Preposiciones**; Horno Chéliz's **Lo que la Preposición Esconde**; Murphy and Rodellar's **Las Trampas del Inglés. Cómo Evitar los Errores Típicos de los Hispanohablantes**.

It is not only highlighted in the titles, but also in comments that are included within these and other books. Merino (1982: 3), for instance, refers to prepositions as "[...] punto

muy conflictivo en el estudio del idioma inglés [...]"; Watcyn-Jones and Allsop (1990: 5) underline that "For the majority of students, learning English prepositions is both very difficult and very time-consuming"; Sinclair (1991: v) mentions that "In many cases there is one particular preposition that regularly occurs in relation to a meaning of a word, and it is not always easy to work out which preposition is the appropriate one"; then, he (1991: vii) adds that "One of the most common errors that people learning English make is to use the wrong preposition. This book is intended to help you choose the right preposition at the right time"; finally, Sánchez Benedito, Dawson, and Moreno Ortiz (1994: 5) comment on that:

Este libro intenta facilitar al estudiante de inglés el aprendizaje de las preposiciones desde la perspectiva del hispanohablante. Cualquier estudiante que haya trabajado mínimamente con ellas se habrá dado cuenta de la dificultad que implican en todos los aspectos.

The main books on prepositions can be divided into different groups according to their features. The following chart includes, on the one hand, those concerned with Spanish prepositions, which can be classified in two main groups, i.e. Spanish as L1 and Spanish as L2. On the other, some books on English prepositions are also provided:

Sp. as L1	López's <i>Problemas y Métodos en el Análisis de Preposiciones</i> (1972)
	García Yebra's <i>Claudicación en el Uso de Preposiciones</i> (1988)
	Escarpanter's <i>Eso No Se Dice. El rompecabezas de las preposiciones</i> (1992)
	Horno Chéliz's <i>Lo que la Preposición Esconde</i> (2002)
Sp. as L2	Fernández López's <i>Las Preposiciones. Valores y Usos. Construcciones Preposicionales</i> (1972)
	Náñez Fernández's <i>Uso de las Preposiciones</i> (1990)
	Pérez Cino's <i>Manual Práctico de la Preposición Española</i> (2000)
English	Schibsbye's <i>A Modern English Grammar with an Appendix on Semantically Related Prepositions</i> (1969) ¹
	Hall's <i>Working with English Prepositions</i> (1986)
	Keane's <i>Practise your Prepositions</i> (1990)
	Watcyn-Jones and Allsop's <i>Test your Prepositions</i> (1990)
	Sinclair's <i>Collins COBUILD English Guides 1. Prepositions</i> (1991) ²
	Lindstromberg's <i>English Prepositions Explained</i> (1998)
English preps. for Sp. speakers	Merino's <i>Las Preposiciones Inglesas y sus Ejercicios</i> (1982)
	Mott and García Fernández's <i>La Composición Escrita en Inglés: Método y Ejercicios Gramaticales</i> (1985) ³
	Sánchez Benedito, Dawson, and Moreno Ortiz's <i>Preposiciones</i> (1994)
	Rosset's <i>Dictionary of English to Spanish Prepositions</i> (1995)
	Murphy and Rodellar's <i>Las Trampas del Inglés. Cómo Evitar los Errores Típicos de los Hispanohablantes</i> (2003)
Sp. and Eng. preps.	Rivas' <i>Prepositions in Spanish and English: A Contrastive Study and Sample Thesaurus Based on the Spanish Word Count Taken at the University of Puerto Rico</i> (1981)

A last resource to which some attention will be devoted is PrepNet, which can be defined as a multilingual framework which is aimed at describing the syntax and the semantics of prepositions within a multilingual perspective. Its main researcher is Patrick Saint-Dizier and, since the site is still under construction, there is only a preliminary version available. Preposition senses are viewed as relatively large, including a number of sense variations, for example metaphors. Even though the first idea was to deal with Romance languages, there are links to English and German.

PrepNet is organized as follows: the higher level in the system is a global categorization of preposition senses on three levels (family, facet, and modality). If we take the prepositions *through* and *via* as an example, their family is localisation (other families being instrument, manner, accompaniment, etc.); their facet

would be passage; and, finally, as far as modality is concerned, whereas *through* expresses a more or less narrow passage, *via* conveys a point of passage to go from one place to another. The second one is the abstract notion level: syntactic frames are provided in order to describe preposition senses. The lower level is the language realization one which, as its very name points out, shows how abstract notions are realized in various languages.

CONCLUSIONS

After analysing Spanish speakers' problems when learning English prepositions, some pedagogical implications should be suggested. First, prepositions should not be taught as isolated items; therefore, students should be provided with meaningful contexts. A good resource is Keane's book for "*All the work is*

practised in meaningful contexts" (Keane, 1990: 4). Moreover, according to Keane (1990: back cover)

In Practise your Prepositions the situations centre on the activities of four people as they travel around England. The exercises take the learner through prepositions of time, place and direction to prepositions occurring with verbs and adjectives, and in common phrases.

In this case it should be highlighted that, rather than providing the student with long lists of prepositions and words such as verbs, adjectives, and nouns that are followed by

prepositions, a context is provided for the use of prepositions. Thus, whereas the four characters travel around England, the student travels around the world of prepositions.

It goes without saying that the depth with which prepositions are taught, explained, and exemplified should vary taking into account the level of our students. Finally, reference will be made to Watcyn-Jones and Allsop's sentence (1990: 5): "Who said learning prepositions has to be boring!". We agree with these authors, who propose exciting activities, such as cartoons and jokes, and encourage English teachers to make use of them whenever possible.⁴

Notas

- ¹ The first edition was published in Danish and it did not include the above-mentioned appendix, which was added in the second edition. It is striking that a grammar of the English language (a 390-page volume) devotes more than a fifth of its pages (80 pages) to prepositions. This lets us become aware of their importance.
- ² According to Sinclair (1991: vi), "In order to produce acceptable and natural English, you need to be able to select the right preposition".
- ³ This book deals not only with English prepositions but also with other difficult areas: "Los problemas que aquí se han expuesto y discutido son aquéllos que se han manifestado con mayor evidencia y de una forma reiterada en las composiciones escritas de nuestros alumnos, año tras año. Así por ejemplo, la sección que trata de las preposiciones no es una exposición exhaustiva y sistemática de TODAS las preposiciones inglesas, con ejemplos relativos a su empleo. Es más bien un estudio de ciertas áreas de dificultad específica para el estudiante español, con ejemplos que ilustran, tanto el punto en el que estriba la dificultad, como el correcto uso de cada caso particular o concreto" (Mott and García Fernández, 1985: 11-12).
- ⁴ Some of the jokes included in the book are the following ones:
 "Teacher: What's the definition _____ 'minimum'?
 Student: A very small mother" (Walcyn-Jones and Allsop, 1990: 30).
 "Girl: You remind me _____ the sea.
 Boy: Because I'm so wild and romantic?
 Girl: No, you make me sick" (Walcyn-Jones and Allsop, 1990: 31).
 "Jill: You're wearing your wedding ring _____ the wrong finger.
 Pam: I know. I married the wrong man" (Walcyn-Jones and Allsop, 1990: 59).

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