

# *Prepositions: meaning and method*

*Seth Lindstromberg*

*This article outlines a new approach to teaching prepositions and directional adverbs based on work by Brugman (1981) and Lakoff (1987). The approach runs counter to the theories of word meaning which underlie virtually every aspect of the treatment of prepositions in ELT generally. In particular, it is almost diametrically opposed to that described in influential examples of the corpus-based, lexical phrase approach (e.g. Sinclair 1987; Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). The article aims to familiarize readers with the gist of prototype semantics as applied to prepositions, and to suggest pedagogical (including lexicographic) applications and benefits. The argument is developed primarily with reference to the word on.*

## **Introduction**

The approach taken in this article is subsumed within Lakoff's application of prototype theory to linguistics (as formulated most prominently by, for example, Rosch 1978). A key contention about prepositions is that each one is likely to have a relatively small number of related literal meanings, among which the tendency is for one to be psychologically 'prototypical', that is, to be a 'best example', in the same way that for many people a robin would be the best example of a bird. An additional contention is that some of the literal meanings of a preposition, especially its prototypical meaning, are extended by metaphor to create another relatively small set of related meanings.

## **Three views of word meaning**

Let's begin with the relatively uncontroversial assertion that a word can have a meaning or not. 'Prestidigitation' is a good example of a word that has a meaning. An example of a word that does not have a meaning, in one context anyway, is the word 'by' in the expression 'by and large'. Further, it seems that most linguists accept that different kinds of words have different kinds of meaning. And, having made that observation, we near the limit of what one can claim about words and meaning without seeming wrong and misguided to one or another group of linguists.

## **Words have a single meaning**

The lexicologist, Charles Ruhl (1989: 6) has argued that meaning is 'modular', with 'the meaning of a sentence [being] the sum of its lexical parts, as structured by syntax'. While he acknowledges that many words seem to have quite different meanings in different contexts, Ruhl argues that virtually all polysemy is an illusion, there being rather a strong tendency for every word to have a single 'general' meaning. He has tried to show how a close examination of a very wide range of contexts for a given word (even an allegedly highly polysemic word, such as the verb

*hit*) suggests that there is a particular, sometimes quite abstract and inexpressible, meaning which the word contributes to all of those contexts. The illusion of polysemy arises when we judge a word to have a meaning over and above its general meaning, by mistaking what we infer from the context for meaning that is inherent in that particular word. Ruhl does not go into detail about prepositions, as opposed to what he calls 'primary verbs' such as *hit*, *bear*, and *put*. However, I have found nothing in his work to indicate that he excludes prepositions from his approach.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of the teacher, a problem with Ruhl's approach is precisely the fact that a word with a wide range of quite different uses is, *ipso facto*, held to have a meaning so abstract that it may well not be possible to express it in words. Since many prepositions patently *do* have a wide range of different uses, and since our stock-in-trade as teachers is expressing things in terms that others can understand, Ruhl's approach might have relatively little to offer us. I will resume discussion of this possibility below.

*Words have no meaning*

A different view of word meaning, currently very popular among applied linguists, has it that a considerable number of words, particularly words of high frequency, are thoroughly 'delexicalized'. That is, they do not have a meaning that is common to all or even very many of their contexts. The preposition *of* is an example of a word that even sceptics might accept as a fairly clear example of delexicalization. It follows from this second view of meaning that the focus of interest in teaching lexis ought to be raised from the single word, as in traditional lexicography and some language teaching methods, to recurring combinations of words—as in, for example, Benson *et al.* (1986), Sinclair (1987), and Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992). Some advocates of this recent 'collocational' approach to elucidating or teaching lexis might be prepared to grant Ruhl's contention that, in most cases, words each have a single general meaning. What Sinclair and other collocationists would certainly not grant is that a search for abstract general meanings is likely to yield any benefits to the language learner in terms of improved dictionaries, course materials, or methods.

*Words have a number of related meanings*

A third view of word meaning has been given its fullest statement in Lakoff (1987), which includes a lengthy restatement of Brugman's seminal work on *over* (1981). Unlike Ruhl, Brugman and Lakoff do not consider polysemy to be unnatural. Unlike Sinclair, they maintain that the tendency is for individual words, even ones so common and so variably usable as prepositions, to have a relatively small number of related meanings which combine with meanings of other words in a more or less modular fashion to form overall meanings. Thus, Brugman and Lakoff see far less delexicalization about than a collocationist like Sinclair. And they believe that enquiries into what individual words mean (as opposed to what phrases they occur in) can lead to useful insights. To that I would add my opinion that these insights can be useful pedagogically.

The only work I know of in which prototype theory is applied in a sustained fashion to the semantics of English prepositions is that by Brugman (1981) and Lakoff (1987) referred to earlier. Lindner's (1981) investigation of *up* and *out* is not quite so deliberately written from the same theoretical viewpoint but presents clear evidence for it. To my knowledge, neither Brugman, Lindner, nor Lakoff have publicly discussed the implications of their work for ELT. Accordingly, this article is concerned with outlining the 'prototype approach' to representing prepositional meaning, and suggesting applications of this approach in ELT, including the formulation of a number of specific learning points. The particular focus is the word *on*.

I concentrate on this word because its semantics seem to me to be more than averagely complex, but not so complex that I would lack space here for an adequate overview.<sup>2</sup> I think it is in the area of teaching prepositions in particular that current ELT methods and materials are inferior to what an expanded acquaintance with prototype semantics would allow.

### **Teaching prepositions**

Considering their prominent role in the semantics of English, remarkably little space is devoted to prepositions or directional adverbs (e.g. *forward*) in ELT coursebooks produced in the UK or the USA. (Because I am interested only in meaning, I will use the term 'preposition' to describe both parts of speech, without wishing to suggest that they behave the same syntactically.) Reference grammars, practice grammars, and supplementary books of the 'phrasal verbs made easy' sort frequently have small sections on prepositions (sometimes accompanied by simple pictures or diagrams). Of the twenty or so such books I have looked at recently, none attempts to present more than one or a very small set of meanings for any one preposition. However, a dictionary (Sinclair 1987) goes to the other extreme: an entry for *on*, for example, has 19 sub-sections, with no attempt to explicitly highlight semantic relations between any of the various uses that are covered. The assumption both of ELT grammarians and lexicographers seems to be that the semantics of prepositions are too complex and unsystematic to warrant thorough investigation either in or out of the classroom. Rather, prepositions are largely to be learned narrow context by narrow context, often phrase by phrase. No doubt there is some unavoidable rote learning to be done. I believe, however, that the collocational approach greatly underestimates the extent to which prepositional semantics is systematic. It thus leaves the student with far too much item-by-item learning to do.

The following section is a case study of *on*. While fairly comprehensive, it does not deal with every possible type of context in which *on* can occur. For instance, there is no discussion of *on* as a preposition of time. My aim, though, is simply to suggest how teachers and materials writers might do better at helping students to achieve a fairly unified understanding of a range of its common literal and metaphorical uses.

**Teaching on with  
reference to off,  
back, etc.**

This section presents a set of learning points (LPs) which make up a syllabus of senses of *on* and some methodological suggestions concerning ways of:

- 1 using schematic pictures, or icons;
- 2 clarifying meaning by considering how semantically-related prepositions may differ in meaning;
- 3 relating late-taught senses to ones learned earlier;
- 4 clarifying metaphorical extensions.

The ordering of the learning points in part reflects the belief that literal, as opposed to metaphorical, senses of a word are conceptually primary, and so probably also explanatorily primary (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987). I have also placed last those senses which would be difficult to explain to lower-level learners without resort to translation. The order of learning points is not intended to reflect any natural or necessary order of learning or acquisition. Nor do I mean to say that each learning point should be the subject of a presentation to an entire class. What I do mean is that each learning point identifies a sense of *on* which is worth bringing to the attention of individual students at some point in their learning career, whether in whole class presentation or feedback to individual students, in oral or written presentation, in dictionaries or coursebooks.

**Prototypes**

Placed first in the list of learning points is the meaning I judge to be the best candidate for designation as the prototype. To confirm this judgement, the answer to each of the following questions needs to be 'yes':

- 1 Is an allegedly prototypical meaning the one that native-speaker children have in mind when they first begin to use the preposition?
- 2 When asked out of the blue—with reference to no particular situation—to form a sentence using the preposition, do native speakers strongly tend to produce sentences exemplifying the meaning which I propose as the prototype?
- 3 Can a wide range of other meanings of the preposition be seen as special instances or metaphorical extensions of the meaning in question?
- 4 Is the preceding point more true of the meaning in question than it is of any other identifiable meaning of that preposition?

I will attempt to give the gist of an answer to question 3. As for questions 1 and 2, I have only begun to gather relevant data. Answering question 4 would take up more space than I have here.

**Defining terms**

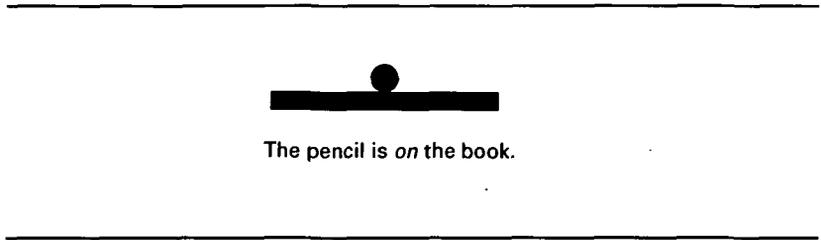
Finally, a note on terms (in which I follow Herskovits 1985). When I refer to a 'landmark', I mean 'the object of a preposition'. This indicates that a preposition may say something about where one thing is or moves in relation to a point of reference, or landmark. When I use the term 'subject', I refer to what stands in a relation of place or path to a

landmark. For example, in the following five sentences *cat* is the subject of a preposition. In sentences 1 to 3 *mat* is the landmark, while in sentences 4 and 5 the landmarks are *trouble* and *distemper*, respectively:

- 1 The cat is *on* the mat. (literal location)
- 2 I saw a cat *on* the mat. (literal location)
- 3 The cat jumped *over* the mat. (literal path)
- 4 The cat is *in* trouble. (metaphorical location)
- 5 The cat got *over* its distemper. (metaphorical path)

**Learning points** *LP 1: The prototypical meaning: 'contact of an object with a line or surface'*

Figure 1

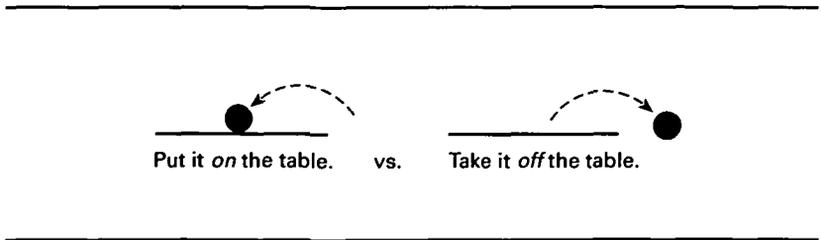


**Method** First demonstrate with objects. TPR (Total Physical Response) works well as a method here (see Richards and Rodgers 1986:87–98 for an overview of TPR and a bibliography). Then draw Figure 1 on the board. Point to the circle and ask, 'Pencil or book?'. Do the same with the horizontal line, which represents the landmark, e.g. a book. Repeat with a couple of other pairs of objects. Now you can use the icon as classroom shorthand for this meaning. For example, to check and consolidate meaning/form associations, you can compose texts containing icons in place of prepositions. Students then write the appropriate preposition over each icon (see Lindstromberg 1991).

**Commentary** I will refer to the meaning indicated above as *on*<sup>1</sup>.

*LP 2: A variation of on*<sup>1</sup>: *on vs. off*

Figure 2



**Method** First demonstrate with objects (again, as in TPR, perhaps). Then introduce the icons. Relate these to *put on* and *take off* (a hat/glasses, etc.).

**Commentary** *on*<sup>1</sup> is varied here, in that the landmark is now the endpoint of a path.

LP 3: The other basic literal meaning:  $on^2$  vs. back

Figure 3



*Method* Teach  $on^2$  in contrast with *back*. Ask a volunteer to stand in front of the class. Stand in front of the volunteer. Motion the volunteer forward, saying, 'Come on'. Hold your hand up and say, 'Stop'. Repeat a few times, beckoning the volunteer closer and closer. Then say, 'Stop. Now go back.' (Use gesture in order to make your meaning clear.) At this stage avoid asking the student to approach you again by saying, 'Come on', because, in real life we might now say, 'Come back'! (Here 'back' means 'to the place you were before'.) Instead, repeat the same sequence with a new volunteer. Alternatively, stand just behind a volunteer and say, 'Go on. Stop. Go on again. Stop. Go on again. Now come back.' You can add paraphrases of  $on^2$  either in the mother tongue or, at post-beginner level, in English, e.g.  $on^2$  means either 'in the direction you are looking' or, if one is continuing along a path already begun, it means 'in the same direction as before'. Thus, *go on* can mean 'keep going'; *back* means either 'in the opposite direction to the one you are facing' or 'to the place you were before'. Present your icons (Figure 3).

*Commentary* Like  $on^1$ ,  $on^2$  is the basis of various metaphorical extensions, as will be shown below.

LP 4: Turn on vs. turn off

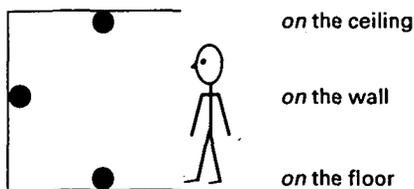
*Method* Demonstrate with lights, cassette players, videos, etc.

*Commentary* Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that this is a metaphorical extension of  $on^1$ . That is, what is *on* is 'up', therefore visible, therefore current, in operation, not defunct; what is *off* is 'down', therefore less visible, less current, not in operation, defunct.

LP 5: Rotation of the prototype

*Method* Draw Figure 4.

Figure 4



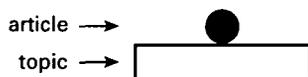
Point to each line and circle and elicit an appropriate sentence or phrase, e.g. '(The light is) on the ceiling', or '(The light switch is) on the wall', or '(We are) on the floor'.

*LP 6: on = about or concerning, e.g. An article on holidays in France.*

*Method* Introduce *on* as a synonym for *about* when the landmark noun stands for a topic.

*Commentary* This is a metaphorical extension of *on*<sup>1</sup>. The gist of the metaphor is that the basis of an article, for example, is its topic (Figure 5).

Figure 5



*LP 7: on top of*

*Method* Demonstrate or draw, for example, 'on the paper' and 'on top of the bottle'. Show that we can also say 'on the bottle', but add that *on top of* is what we often say for tall things. Introduce the following figure.

Figure 6



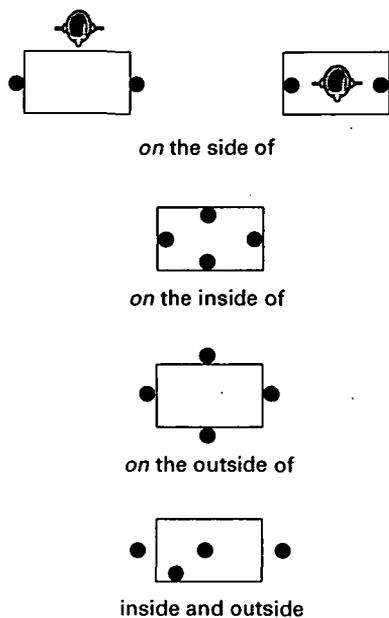
*Commentary* *On top of* is used especially when the landmark is not flat. Obviously, in *on top of*, *top* is the landmark of *on*.

*LP 8: on the inside of, etc.*

*Method* Use drawings such as the ones in Figure 7, and relate them to particular objects.

*Commentary* *On* is often used before landmarks like *inside*, *bottom*, *top*, *side*, etc. Although these expressions are not, strictly speaking, idiomatic, students may need some help in understanding exactly what they mean.

Figure 7



(*On* is absent so there may or may not be contact of subject and landmark.)

*LP 9: The party's on/off*

*Method* Ask students to guess what 'the party's on' and 'the party's off' mean. Ask them to guess what words could replace 'party' (e.g. 'meeting', 'conference', 'game', 'exhibition', 'show', 'performance'). That is, words for 'arranged gatherings'. But usually not, for example, 'film', 'play', or 'opera', since these are not so much gatherings as what people gather to see. That is, a film is pictures on a screen, a play is what the playwright wrote in a book, an opera is the music and words. Related uses (in British English) are, e.g. 'The ale/pudding is *on/not on*.' [= (un)available]; 'Such behaviour is *not on*.' [= not acceptable]; *off* as in 'the cheese is off' [= bad] is more extreme than *not on*.

*Commentary* This is a metaphor deriving from the use of *on*<sup>1</sup> seen in LP 4.

Learning points 10 to 12 deal with other metaphorical uses of *on*<sup>1</sup>, which may be worth explaining, especially to academically-minded students.

*LP 10: on: the burden metaphor*

*Method* Draw a burden and a carrier, as in Figure 8.

Figure 8

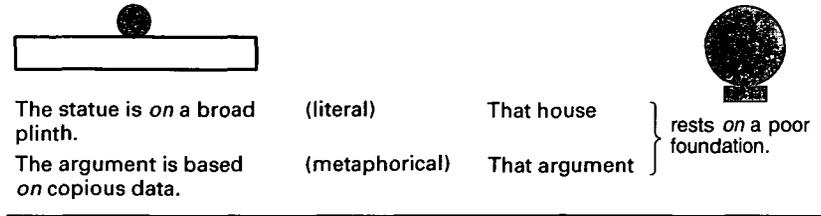


Explain that this image is called into play in examples like ‘The engine died *on* us’, ‘Don’t give up *on* me’, or ‘Did you inform/tell/rat/grass *on* me?’. That is, the action mentioned is a burden—by extension, a misfortune—for the person involved.

*LP 11: on: the basis metaphor*

*Method* Display Figures 9 and 10 in order both to depict the literal meaning and to suggest the sense of its metaphoric extension.

Figures 9 and 10

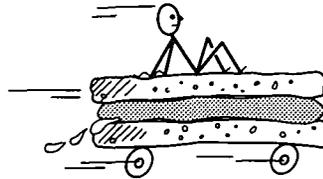


*Commentary* This metaphor is also involved in examples like ‘X depends *on* Y’ or ‘I did it *on* purpose’(= my action was based *on* a purpose).

*LP 12: on: the vehicle metaphor*

*Method* Display Figure 11 and explain that this metaphor is closely related to the basis metaphor, except that the landmark (the basis) moves; that is, the basis is a vehicle.

Figure 11



It’s hard to get through a day *on* one sandwich.

*Commentary* The suggestion of movement is related to our general tendency to think of life or a stage in life as a journey. (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 61–65 present an especially clear anatomy of ‘conventional metaphors’ such as ‘Life is a journey’.)

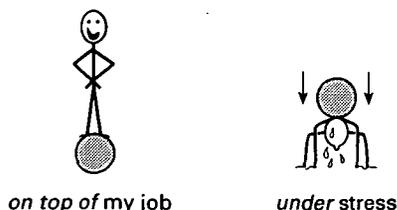
*LP 13: On top of as an emphatic form of on<sup>1</sup>*

*Method* Explain that we can use *on top of* concerning flat things for special emphasis when we want to be extra definite, e.g. ‘No! Not under the paper. *On top of* it!’.

*LP 14: Metaphorical on top of*

*Method* Contrast with, for example, *under stress/the weather*, perhaps by drawing or showing a picture such as Figure 12.

Figure 12



*Commentary* *On top of x* is used metaphorically in a way which is easy for students to understand and remember: To be *on top of x* means to be 'in control of something which has been or could be a problem' (e.g. a job), as in 'I can't seem to get *on top of* all this work I have to do'.

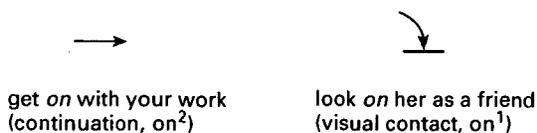
*LP 15: on<sup>2</sup> vs. forward*

*Method* Explain that *forward* always means 'in the direction someone/ something is facing/pointing', whereas *on<sup>2</sup>* can mean either 'in the same direction as before' or 'towards a goal that speaker and hearer both have in mind'. Thus, if you are directing (from the side) a driver who is in the middle of reversing slowly into a parking place, 'Go on' and 'Go forward' have opposite meanings. Unlike *forward*, *on* is also used for up-down movement (*Ahead* seems to me to be a less emphatic synonym of *forward*).

*LP 16: Clarifying the sense of on in multi-word verbs*

*Method* Simply adding iconic labels may be helpful to some students, provided you have made the sense of these icons clear in earlier work.

Figure 13



*Commentary* Explaining the meaning of each component of a multi-word verb is often not worth the time it takes even when the line of argument is clear. On the other hand, it may be open to a teacher or materials writer to improve learners' chances of correct understanding and efficient recall of a multi-word verb by at least making it plain which of a preposition's literal meanings has been metaphorically extended in a given case.

**The heuristic value of the approach**

To be really useful, an approach should help in solving problems. In this section I describe a problem I recently became aware of, and what seems to me to be the solution. The problem is: Why, and in what way, are the following prepositions nearly, but not quite, synonymous?

The car sped *on/off/away*.

*The car sped on* This is *on*<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, the meaning is that the car continues along a route already begun, even though it may have stopped for a while. Or perhaps the driver slowed down a little after hitting a branch lying in the road, but then speeded up again.

*The car sped off* This is the meaning represented in Figure 2b above. 'Off what?', one might ask. The answer is 'off the spot it had been standing on'. Here *off* suggests that the car had been stopped, or at least that it had slowed down considerably. Unlike *on*<sup>2</sup>, *off* says nothing about whether the driver was continuing along a route already begun. In fact, if we add a landmark, as in 'drove off the road', the meaning is that the car separated from its route.

*The car sped away* Like *off*, *away* is neutral about whether a route was being continued or not. Like *on*<sup>2</sup>, it is wholly neutral about whether the car had stopped or even slowed down. Unlike *on*<sup>2</sup> and *off*, *away* is neutral about whether the car was ever at a landmark. In the following example, it never was (the landmark is underlined):

The car was coming towards us far across the plain but then, speeding up, it veered north and sped away (from us).

**Conclusion** According to Ruhl's (1989) theory, *on* must have single general meaning which is sufficiently abstract to embrace both *on*<sup>1</sup> and *on*<sup>2</sup>. I don't even know how to begin putting such a meaning into words that might be intelligible to a learner of English. In the end, I fail to see how a pedagogically useful definition of *on* can result from Ruhl's theory. Further, the value of this theory as a heuristic for teachers and learners interested in developing their language awareness seems to reside solely in its warning against confusing a word's intrinsic meaning with implications arising from particular contexts.

In contrast, the collocationist view, as a matter of principle, shies away from almost any unifying insight about relations among different uses of a particular word. With respect to prepositions, this must frequently lead to uneconomical use of learners' time both in and out of the classroom (as when, for example, a user of a collocationally organized dictionary must scan a long, unsigned list of examples before finding the one he or she is looking for).

The approach I argue for has the advantage of striking a balance between the unrevealing generality of Ruhl and the concern of the collocationalists with unrelated specificities. Moreover, the approach outlined in this article suggests that there may be many opportunities for us to help learners make sense of unfamiliar uses of a preposition if we help them to see these as expressions of meanings already learned.

The use of icons to represent prepositional meaning long pre-dates the view of prepositional meaning advocated here. However, icons are tools which this view exploits in a variety of potentially clarificatory ways. In

contrast, Ruhl's theory would require use of only one icon for each preposition. The icon for *on* would have to be one that expressed the meaning of both *on*<sup>1</sup> and *on*<sup>2</sup>. I cannot see how this can be done. Collocationalism, on the other hand, comes perilously close to denying that prepositions have enough meaning of their own to merit expression by any means, iconic or otherwise.

My purpose in this article has been to offer glimpses into a kind of lexical analysis which is little discussed in British or American ELT literature. At the least, I hope that I have suggested some ways in which existing materials (including dictionaries) might be improved with a view to giving teachers and learners adequate guidance about what prepositions mean and why they are used as they are. For one thing, reference and classroom materials are apparently silent about a number of the learning points discussed above (e.g. the contrast between *on*<sup>2</sup> and *forward*). More broadly, I know of no ELT publication that attempts even the beginning of a systematic portrayal of the semantic consistency underlying a wide range of the uses of prepositions generally. This is a state of affairs which I believe needs to be remedied.

*Received October 1994*

#### Notes

- 1 Readers with a specialist interest in prepositions can find in Zelinsky-Wibbelt (1993) case studies which presuppose or which argue for a position similar to Ruhl's as well as ones which follow Lakoff.
- 2 Lindstromberg (1996) deals with the semantics of all the common English prepositions.

#### References

- Benson, M., E. Benson, and T. Ison.** 1986. *The BBI Combinatory Dictionary of English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Brugman, C.** 1981. 'The Story of *Over*'. Unpublished MA thesis, University of California, Berkeley. Available from Indiana University Linguistics Club. (Summarized in Lakoff 1987).
- Herskovits, A.** 1985. 'Semantics and pragmatics of locative expressions'. *Cognitive Science* 9: 341-78.
- Lakoff, G.** 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson.** 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Turner.** 1989. *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lindner, S. A.** 1981. 'Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Verb-Particle Constructions with "up" and "out"'. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego. Available from Indiana University Linguistics Club.

- Lindstromberg, S.** 1991. '(Re)teaching prepositions'. *Forum* : 29/2:47-50.
- Lindstromberg, S.** (forthcoming). *English Prepositions Explained*.
- Nattinger, J. and J. DeCarrico.** 1992. *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. and T. Rodgers.** 1986. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosch, E.** 1978 'Principles of categorization' in E. Rosch and B. Lloyd (eds.) *Cognition and Categorization*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ruhl, C.** 1989. *On Monosemy*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Sinclair, J.** (ed.). 1987. *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. London: Collins.
- Zelinsky-Wibbelt, C.** (ed.) 1993. *Natural Language Processing 3: The Semantics of Prepositions*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.

#### The author

**Seth Lindstromberg** teaches at Hilderstone College, Broadstairs, Kent, and is editor of the Pilgrims Longman *Teacher's Resource Books* series. He was general editor of *The Recipe Book* (Longman 1990) and *The Standby Book* (Cambridge University Press 1996). With Tessa Woodward he is co-author of *Planning from Lesson to Lesson* (Longman 1995).