

Spatial Prepositions in three U.K. Published General English Courses¹

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1 Introduction

I have from time to time noted—and had it noted to me—that learners of English may suffer short or permanent periods of bafflement about English prepositions. Course books I have used in years gone by were of as good as no help here. Recently, I wondered if newer ones were better. I decided to look through three series¹.

2 About terms

In talking about prepositional meaning, I use a couple of terms from cognitive linguistics which might be unfamiliar to some readers. Namely, in the phrase *the orange on the table*, ‘the orange’ is the Located Object and ‘the table’ is the Landmark. Here *on* functions as a preposition of place locating the orange with respect to the Landmark (the table). In the phrase *go towards that door*, *towards* is a preposition of path. It describes the orientation of a path with respect to the Landmark (the door). Since an adverb such as *away* seems always to imply a Landmark such as ‘from here/there’, I include words like this in the semantic class of *spatial prepositions*.

3 Why are spatial prepositions useful to know?

- a) Many members of this closed class of word occur with extremely high frequency in all forms of discourse.
- b) There cannot be many topics potentially more vital than configurations and paths of entities in the physical world.
- c) Most prepositions have clearly structured spatial meanings which are drafted wholesale to give shape essentially non-spatial concepts—for example, time, cause, manner, means, agent, relative status, logical grounds, continuation and so on.
- d) Accurate understanding of these high frequency words will, time and again, provide alert learners with clues about the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Consider a learner who knows that *behind* construes a Landmark as a thing of significant height. (Viz., Wrong: **behind the lake*/Right: *on the other side of the lake*.) Such a learner, on encountering *screen* in *She stood behind a screen*, will have a better chance at supposing what a screen might be than will a learner who thinks that *behind* is a perfect synonym of *on the other side of* (the Landmark of which can be flat).

4 The three series

I looked at *True to Life (TtoL)* from Cambridge University Press, *Matters* from Addison Wesley Longman and *The Cobuild English Course (Cobuild)* from Collins.² I chose these particular series because *TtoL* and *Matters* seemed very representative of newer U.K. published course books. *Cobuild* I chose because it is assertively corpus based.

A striking thing about these three series is their concentration on prepositions in collocations rather than as words having meanings of their own. Where this collocational approach is appropriate (i.e., in the case of probably genuine lexical phrases such as *on purpose* and *by accident*), these books provide good learning material. But I contend, and will argue briefly below, that too great a reliance on the collocational approach has the

potential (1) initially to hamper learners at the same time as it helps them and (2) eventually to hamper learners *more* than it helps them.

5 List of the missing

- a) Except in *Cobuild* (because it is systematically corpus based), coverage of prepositions is markedly haphazard. For instance, there are surprising omissions-- e.g., *behind*, *towards* and 'continuative' *on* (as in *carry on*) are absent from the *TtoL* 1 student's book, while *along* is in the *TtoL* 1 student's book but not in book 2.
- b) In all the series, clarifications of meaning are very scarce in the lower level books and almost totally absent beyond pre-intermediate level. One result of this is that in *TtoL* 1 especially (but also in *Matters* 1) a particular preposition or a specific use of a preposition is fairly often first met in task instructions or in a gap fill exercise. What clarification of a given preposition's meaning that one does find frequently misleadingly simplistic. (E.g., I could find no explicit distinction between *under* and *below*.) A further indication of dearth of attention to prepositions in *TtoL* 1 and *Matters* 1 is that prepositions are almost entirely missing from the wordlists at the back of the student's books. For example, the wordlist in the *Matters* 1 seems to include only *front/back* (as nouns) plus *backwards* (adv.) and *into*. To me, only two conclusions seem plausible—either the authors did not think prepositions important or they assumed that elementary students will have had fabulously effective beginners courses.

There are minor exceptions. *TtoL* 1 has a 'Visual Dictionary' representing 20 prepositions of place. This is a great idea but much more could be done here. For instance, the pictures do not need to be anywhere near this big. It would not be at all difficult to get twice as much information into the relevant section. Also, important sense information is missing, as indicated below. And *Matters* 1, the student's book has a composite of line-drawn boxes to illustrate the meaning of about a dozen prepositions. This display is, however, quite vague about some (e.g., *in front of* and *under*). In fact I can well imagine that some learners could not correctly interpret this geometric maze unless they already knew the meanings of the prepositions appearing in it as labels.

- c) There is very little variety in mode of clarification. The pictorial is greatly under-exploited in all the materials, especially in *Cobuild*. (In all series, it is the obligatory unit on giving/understanding directions that is most supported by pictures and seems most likely to adequately clarify the senses of a few prepositions such as *opposite*.) The kinesthetic seems totally ignored. Basically, the instruction which all these books promise in this area is incredibly bookbound. I found no reminders to teachers that, *especially in clarifying prepositions*, there is no substitute for movement and physical demonstration.³ Videos have some potential to make up for deficiencies in this area; but so far as I know, none of the four series has a video component.
- d) Paradigmatic sense relations are not brought out in any remotely thorough explanation or exercise that I could find.
 - (1) Antonymic relations (e.g., *over* v *below*, *towards* v *away from*, *to* v *from*) are almost never made explicit.
 - (2) I found no clarification of entailments whatsoever. What I mean is information

such as the following: *Outside, off, above, below, behind, in front of* entail ‘near’. *On* and *against* entail ‘not near but touching’. *Near* entails ‘neither in nor in contact with’.

(3) I found no explicit attempt to sort out such near synonyms as the following: *On/on top of, on/onto, in/into, under/beneath, (lie) on/over, (bump) into/against, to/towards, from/away from, (point) at/to/towards, (be) at/in/by, near/by/next to, (be) along/beside/alongside, (go) away/from/off, among/amid, across from/opposite, through/throughout, (do X) over/(be) through with something, behind/on the other side of, in front of/before, in/under, back/backwards, go over/through/across, on the other side of/past/beyond, over/above/all over, through/throughout, in/on a boat/chair/bus, (speak) at/to/with, in/within/inside of, by/around, against/near*.

Students not somewhat in the picture about this kind of thing are unlikely ever to understand straightforwardly derived metaphorical distinctions such as those between *think something out, think something /over* and *think something through* (see Section 7).

(4) Use of a relatively image rich preposition (e.g., *out [of]* which construes a Landmark as an enclosure) rather than a less image-rich preposition (e.g., *from* which can apply also to points, lines and surfaces as well as enclosures), has the potential to shift the register downwards—e.g., *She took it from me* → *She took it off me*. (This is, at root, no different than stylistic variation between the faintly image-generative *fracture* and the very image-generative *snap*.) In any case, I found nothing on this aspect of prepositional meaning and usage.

- e) I could find no clarification of pseudo-idiomatic usage. I will give one indication of what can be involved here.

One use of *by* is to express ‘means’. A means, of course, is something that literally or metaphorically comes between a doer and a result as in *She came by car*. *On*, though, always entails ‘contact’, whether physical or metaphorical. If I come ‘on foot’, I am in contact with the ground. There is no intervening means—nothing between me and the ground. That is why *by car/plane*, etc and *on foot* are not irredeemably idiomatic.

- f) Also seemingly completely missing is clarification of deictic variation in the meaning of prepositions such as *in front of, behind, in, out, up* and *down*. Suppose, for example, that you and I are in single file facing in the same direction. If there is a chair in front of me, you could say, “There’s a free chair is in front of you, Seth”. But if I were a potted palm instead of a person, you might say, “The chair is behind the palm”.

- g) In *Matters 3* there is a short section on *up/down* as signifiers of the notions ‘increase’ and ‘decrease’. Work on expressions of other, less universal, metaphors would very likely be even more valuable to many learners—for instance, expressions with *around* where this word contributes the notion of indirectness in coming to a goal or result (e.g., *beat around the bush, talk around an issue, come around to my way of thinking, get around to doing something, Can I just look around...*).⁴

- h) Explicit coverage of prepositions tends to be very ‘bunched’—into elementary and/or pre-intermediate materials (all three series) and (though least in *Cobuild 2*) in fairly widely separated ‘block’ exercises. *TtoL 1-2* each sin further and bunch coverage of prepositions into early units and pretty much ignore them in latter units.

It seems to be accepted these days that undue bunching of information can hamper intake, review and consolidation.

- i) Some brief discussion of differences of usage in different dialects might be useful not least for the reason that this might give evidence of underlying systematicity and instill some confidence about the learnability of the preposition system. One example--in North America one may say *live on Elm Street* while in Britain one says *live in Elm Street*. Often overlooked is the fact that the so-called North American usage is also normal in British English when one speaks not of streets but roads—*There used to be a good café on the road/way/motorway to London*. What could be going on here? North American cities sprawl. Streets tend to be wide and buildings and houses tend to be low and set well back behind car parks and lawns. Old city-centre districts are almost the only exceptions. But, in many British streets nearby buildings rise up all around you--you definitely feel **in** something. (Actually, there aren't many such differences which itself might be worth pointing out somewhere.)

6 Disadvantages of over-reliance on the collocational approach to teaching prepositions

There are at least two major weaknesses to the collocational approach which is in all three series the preponderate alternative to thorough teaching of individual prepositions. First, it amounts to saying that instead of learning only about 70 prepositions well, it is more efficient for learners to memorize phrases one by one. But these exist in thousands. Secondly, the collocational approach often fails to apply satisfactorily even in cases where it seems, at first, to be clearly appropriate. Thus, one might assume that *be good at something* is a fairly fixed collocation. Yet the following multiple choice task (*Matters 3*, workbook, unit 17) is distinctly problematic: *She is good in/at/about French*. Of course, *at* is wanted, but the other two choices are also possible, though they have different meanings. *About French* fits into a context like this: "I'm not very good about French. I know I should go to class but I just stay home and watch TV." *In* could mean 'in French class' or 'in the subject, French'. All in all, it seems risky to me to rely so heavily on an approach which does not prepare learners for creative use of prepositions as words with their own meanings.

7 Common task types

The commonest relevant tasks in all three series are gap fills, with matching tasks being next most relied on.

Gap fill tasks

Two well-known aims in designing gap fill tasks are: (1) forcing a single choice and (2) making the frame usefully clarificatory.

As to forcing choice, materials writers probably do not need reminding that, where prepositions are concerned, even pictures do not automatically turn the trick. For instance, *Matters 3*, workbook, unit 8 contains the frame: *The dog has run _____ the hotel*. Even though there is a drawing of a street scene, all of the following could go in the gap: *by/past/from/out of*.

As to forcing choice, this is an especially desirable goal when, as is curiously often the case in all these books, gap fills are used to introduce rather than review. From

pre-intermediate level the target items are mainly phrasal verbs which, happily, are readily dealt with via gap fill tasks. It seems much harder to deal with the individual prepositions in this fashion—viz. ‘the dog has run’ example mentioned just above.

Matching tasks

Starting with pre-intermediate level the focus on phrasal verbs becomes more and more noticeable--the matching of phrasal verbs with paraphrases being a common aim. I found almost no tasks even in the lower level material involving matching individual prepositions to a picture exemplifying a particular meaning although this, to my mind, is by far the most effective substitute for physical demonstration (which still ought not to be forgone).

Cobuild 2 is the outstanding exception among all the books looked at on account of its systematic coverage of individual prepositions, that is, prepositions outside of phrases such as phrasal verbs. A typical section (there is one per unit devoted to a particular preposition) begins with a dictionary-like entry noting the different senses and/or uses, with each being exemplified. Then follow sentences each of which students are to match to a particular sense/use noted in the entry. There is the germ of a great idea here. Unfortunately, the *Cobuild* entries are rather seldom explanatory to any noteworthy degree. For example, ‘perfective’ *out* (see just below) is merely characterized as “complet[ing] or intensify[ing] the meaning of a verb”. Even less helpful, is another rubric in the entry--“[used] together with a verb to produce a new meaning”.

Here I offer three examples of how matching exercises might be used more effectively to clarify this kind of prepositional meaning:

Example 1 (intermediate level)

Match the preposition in the centre to the continuation on the left:

She thought the matter	{	over	a) , looking at all sides in her mind, as if it were an object she could turn over in her hands.
		out	b) from beginning to end.
		through	c) , almost as if it were a folded map she could, in her mind, spread out on a table so she could see it all clearly.

Example 2 (upper-intermediate)

Three metaphorical uses of *out*.

A Match the lettered senses to the numbered examples. You can choose more than one letter for each of the examples 1-10.

- a) *Roll out a carpet/spread out butter*
(Something is spread or opened out of its original shape so more can be seen.)
- b) *Take your keys out of your pocket/Come out of a hiding place*
(Something which was hidden inside comes out where we can see it or use it; it becomes public.)
- c) *I threw the radio out the window.*
(Something inside with us goes out = It is gone.)

1. What did you find out?
2. The lights went out.

3. Let's talk this problem out.
4. The short boxer knocked out the tall one.
5. I got nothing out of his talk.
6. He asked his friend, the author, when his next book would be out.
7. Let's get our differences out in the open.
8. I can't figure out how much I owe in taxes.
9. When she heard the news she passed out and hurt her arm as she fell.
10. He used to be too thin but he's filled out a lot.

B The words on the left come from Latin. The meanings are on the right. Match each of these four words with meaning a, b or c.

explain.....'out' + 'flatten'

explicate.....'out' + 'fold'

expose..... 'out' + 'put'

exhibit..... 'out' + 'hold'

A potentially useful task at elementary level is matching appropriate mini-pictures with phrases such as these—*in a chair, on a chair, in a boat, on a boat, in a house, on a house, on a tree, in a tree*. [The picture for *on a tree* might be someone standing on the trunk of a fallen tree. Re *in/on a chair*, the chairs would be of different sorts; *in* would require an armchair.]

8 Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the scope and the nature of the English preposition system has largely escaped the attention of the authors of these books. There are dozens of streams of systematicity which are wholly ignored--e.g., sets of metaphorical expressions such as the ones with *on* mentioned just above. On the bright side, the materials I looked at provide a good deal of promising material on phrasal verbs and fixed collocations such as *depend on*. *Cobuild* is much better than the other two series in its coverage of individual prepositions but even it falls down badly in a number of important respects. I will repeat just four here. Its treatment is very biased against the pictorial and kinesthetic. It strongly tends to categorize uses of individual prepositions without clarifying meaning. It includes next to no material on the differences between near synonyms. Its coverage of prepositional usage effectively ends with book 2.

I hope I have made the case that prepositions are important enough to warrant more attention than they get in these materials. But how?

For one thing, it is already difficult for authors to find room in 3-5 course books for all the syllabus elements now deemed indispensable (grammar, learner independence, etc). But the most useful step would require almost nothing extra to go in. That is, at lower levels prepositions must be treated more kinesthetically in book-free, TPR-type instruction. Especially at lower levels books should include many more clarificatory pictures, but these can be quite small and might be positioned in margins or inside of or even on book covers. At higher levels, through inclusion of as much work on metaphor sets and semantic contrasts as can be accommodated. Jettisoning just a few of the decorative visuals that publishers think students love would provide room for a significant amount of a useful material.

Notes

- 1 This article is a version of a talk given at the MATSDA Conference in Dublin, Jan. 15-16.
- 2 See 'References' following the endnotes. I was not able to locate the workbook for *Elementary Matters*. Note also that '1' after a title means elementary, '2' means pre-intermediate, and so on. Thus, *Matters 1* means *Elementary Matters*.
- 3 Total Physical Response must be the ideal method for teaching prepositions. See Brian Tomlinson, 'Materials for TPR', *Folio*, vol. 1/2:8-10 for an introductory discussion of TPR generally, and bibliographical leads.
- 4 A few dozen other sets of metaphorical expressions are described in *English Prepositions Explained* (S. Lindstromberg. 1998. John Benjamins.)

References

Collins Cobuild English Course (Collins). Books 1 (1988), 2 (1989), 3 (1989) all by Willis, Dave and Jane Willis.

Matters (Addison Wesley Longman) Elementary (1997), Pre-intermediate (1995), Intermediate (1991), Upper-Intermediate (1992) all by Bell, Jan and Roger Gower

True to Life (Cambridge University Press) Elementary (1995) by Collie, Joanne and Stephen Slater; Pre-intermediate (1995) by Gairns, Ruth and Stuart Redman; Intermediate (1996) by Gairns, Ruth and Stuart Redman with Joanne Collie. Some supporting materials such as workbooks are by additional authors.

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