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Prepositions: Learning Difficulties of a Semantically-Oriented Part of Speech

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Keywords: - <i>prepositions</i> - <i>semantic features</i> - <i>parts of speech</i>	Abstract: The learners of English mostly face difficulties in selecting the right preposition for a sentence in speech and in writing. The wrong choice of preposition could occasionally be ascribed to interference and overlap caused between the mother tongue and the target language. One more difficulty may emerge when a single preposition may possibly have more than one semantic use. It is hypothesized that the linguistic differences between English and Arabic could be the reason behind impeding the learners of doing well in the target language. The learners, therefore, may unconsciously convey the Arabic linguistic habits to English although the syntactic and semantic characteristics between the two languages are totally different. The researchers
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Received:12\11\2019	try to pose the most important information about prepositions available in the English literature of grammar. This information is put under analysis, paraphrase and ample comments so as to reach reasonable conclusions that are useful for all readers' levels. Conclusions, some are newly-posed and not dealt with before, are listed at the end of the research.The current study is confined to prepositions whether they are simple or complex and sometimes with a mention of these words in combination with ordinary verbs forming phrasal verbs which have meanings quite different from these verbs when they are used alone. This research can be of a great value and benefit to improve the performance of learners of English language in general, teachers specialized in English and researchers in particular.
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حروف الجر: أجزاء الكلام : دراسة في المعنى الدلالي

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الخلاصة : غالبا ما يواجه متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية صعوبات في اختيار حرف الجر الصحيح للجملة. وقد يعزى هذا الاختيار الخاطئ الى التداخل بين اللغتين الانكليزية و العربية اضافة لذلك قد يفصح عن ضعف في اللغة الانكليزية من قبل المتعلم. من المفترض ان تكون الفروقات اللغوية بين الإنكليزية والعربية وكما هو متوقع واسعة وكبيرة لان اللغتين تنتمي الى أنظمة لغوية مختلفة وينقل المتعلمون من غير وعي العادات اللغوية العربية الى الانكليزية بالرغم من الفروقات الحاصلة بين اللغتين. تقتصر الدراسة الحالية على حروف الجر الانكليزية بنوعيتها البسيط والمعقد مع ذكر هذه الحروف مسبوقه بالافعال الرئيسة احيانا "مكونة" تراكيب فعلية اصطلاحية. يمكن ان يكون للبحث قيمة وفائدة كبيرتين لتحسين الكتابة والتحدث لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية ويستفيد منه ايضا معلموا وباحثوا هذه اللغة.	الكلمات الدالة: - - حروف الجر - الخصائص المعنوية - اجزاء الكلام معلومات البحث تاريخ البحث: - الاستلام: ٢٠١٩\١١\١٢ -القبول: ٢٠١٩\١٢\٢٥ التوفر على الانترنت
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1 Introduction

The meanings of the prepositions are nearly vague when they are encountered alone without contexts; their meanings are made clear when they are used in meaningful sentences. These words are often used in sentences to perform semantic duties though they are grammatically classified as structure words by some grammarians. Therefore, prepositions are semantically-oriented utterances more than being considered as structural ones. The researchers of this paper stand strongly against classifying prepositions as structural words. These words are used for several different semantic purposes that affect greatly the whole meaning of the sentence. The meaning of any preposition is clearly shown through the presence of the other components of the sentence. (Biber et al, 2007:74; See also Quirk et al , 1985: 657-661).

The prepositions are a hard topic for the learners of English in Iraq and they (prepositions) might be difficult for learners in other parts of the Arab homeland. The difficulty stems from the fact that the verb and other components of the sentence do affect and decide the meaning of the preposition; sometimes, however, the meaning of the verb is fully controlled by the preposition. In this case, the verb and the preposition make one entity which gives absolutely a new meaning. The duty of prepositions is not only to connect the different parts of the sentence but also to add meaning to it. Occasionally, more than one preposition are used in a single sentence to get a complete idea. So their use in the sentence is significant. As stated by many grammarians, prepositions are used to express mainly the meanings of time and place and other various meanings which will be discussed thoroughly in the body of this study. The position of a preposition is not fixed in the sentence. They usually have more than one possible place, but mostly they appear before noun phrases at the end of the sentence.

Prepositions are widely used in the English language due to the fact that a preposition is nearly available in every sentence. The language does not work in the absence of prepositions. They are indispensable in every language. So the researchers believe that this linguistic subject is universal being available in every language all over the world.

2 Definition

During the study of prepositions, any researcher can detect a lot of definitions of the term in the books of grammar given by many English grammarians. Therefore, according to Quirk (1973: 143) “prepositions express a relation between two entities, one being that represented by prepositional complement 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 are also recognized, although it is difficult to describe prepositional meanings systematically in terms of such labels”, for example:

1. a. The old man with white beard is over there.
- b. The old man who has a white beard is over there.

Although Quirk refers to the idea of various types of prepositional relationships, he does not mention them all. Relationships, such as: means or agent; manner; state or condition; quality or measure and purpose are overlooked though the uses of these prepositional relationships form an integral part of the subject. This is a weak point in Quirk's definition.

Carter and McCarthy (2006: 462) signify that prepositions refer to relational place between two entities or more, or time relationship between two incidents or actions, or other abstract relationships like instrument and cause. These writers offer one more definition by saying a preposition indicates a word or a phrase which shows the relationship between one thing and another. It is, however, used to connect a noun, a pronoun or a phrase to the other elements of a sentence. As with Quirk, these writers mention some prepositional relationships and overlook the others.

As stated previously, a preposition may tell about the notion of where (such as: in, beside, above, etc.) as in :

4. The man stood close to his wife and threw his arm around her shoulder, and started to kiss her on the neck.

Prepositions, such as: *right after, before, until, during* etc. all denote the meaning of *when* or, in other word, the idea of time, as in :

5. Mr. Ali should attend an important meeting until ten o'clock. During the meeting his cellphone rang. His wife was on the phone, she requested him to return straight home right after the end of the meeting.

The prepositions (of and to) are utilized to mean possession or belonging to, :

6. The red car belongs to her.

(Biber, 2002:195)

A preposition is also defined as a word which talks about the possibilities of denoting more about a thing or an action due to selecting any proper noun combination after it as an object. The object usually comes after its preposition. See the examples below:

7. The bell is at the door.
8. He put money in his pocket.
9. Look behind you, Nancy!

Many prepositions can be used as adverbs, that is to say, they can be used without an object. Such prepositions are named adverbs particles, as in:

10. The young man hated to work underground.
11. The engine was about to be out of work as we flew southward.

The researchers of this paper have their own view about prepositions. We define a preposition as a relational word that clarifies the connection between a noun or a noun substitute and another word or a group of words in the sentence, :

12. The young woman at the back row is a good reporter.

The relationship is obviously shown between the noun (woman) and the group of words that identify the location (at the back row) in the previous example. Prepositions clearly are mostly semantic words that connect different parts of sentence to get a full sentence meaning. The meaning of a preposition, however, is often realized through its use in sentences. The absence of preposition from a sentence, that requires it, leads to a vague idea.

3 Prepositions as an Arbitrary Tool

Prepositions have a very crucial role in the structure of all languages and the English language in particular. They pose a challenge to English learners. Using the right preposition in the right place is not logical but it depends on linguistic customs and common practice. Consulting dictionaries can be helpful, but intensive readings with careful scrutiny will be the proper approach to overcome this obstacle. Prepositions can be regarded as mediators between nouns in sentences to link them together structurally and semantically. This relation can be seen clearly in the following sentence:

13. The baby is *in* the cradle.

the preposition *in* shows the connection between *baby* and *cradle*. The objective case is constructed through the relation built between the preposition and the noun. (Eckersley & Eckersley, 1988:277)

4 Types of English Prepositions

English prepositions fall into two groups: simple prepositions and those complex ones. A simple preposition consists only of a single word, whereas a complex preposition is made up of two or three elements except the sole preposition “with the exception of” which has four elements. This preposition is encountered through deep investigation of the subject currently under study. Most of the complex prepositions are categorized into the following groups:

a. **Adverb or preposition + preposition** like: *as for, away from, along with, up to, out of*..etc.

14. As for me, I can't endure such noises.

15. It is up to you, you say it in English or in German.

b. **Verb/ Adjective/ connective/ etc. + preposition** like *owing to, due to, because of*... etc.

16. I couldn't discuss that matter with him because of his stupidity.

17. He can't see the figures due to colour blindness.

c. **Preposition + noun + preposition** like: *by means of, in comparison with, in front of* ...etc.

18. The teacher was standing in front of the class.

19. In comparison with her elder sister, she is a little bit shorter.

Many adjectives, nouns and verbs can go with the following prepositions forming idiomatic phrases.

d. Adjective combined with preposition

20. She is fond of riding a bicycle.

(The preposition “of” is collocated with the adjective).

e. Noun combined with preposition

21. They show hatred to the girls.

22. They show several solutions to the mathematical problems.

f. Verb combined with preposition

23. She relies on her mother in answering the questions.

(the verb “relies” is employed with preposition “on”)

g. Some adjective + Preposition combinations

angry with	fond of
ashamed of	full of
capable of	engaged to
different from	mad of or from
due to	married to
familiar with	proud of
composed of	interested in

h. Selected verb + Preposition Combinations

agree on (something)	hope for
agree with (someone)	laugh at
arrive at	listen for/ to
ask for	look at
belong to	look for
believe in	participate in
consist of	provide with
disagree with	respond to
insist on/ upon	speak to / with

Two Tables are Given Below Showing Simple and Complex Prepositions

A. Simple Preposition

aboard	Along	at	besides	down	inside	On	Around	to	Up
About	Amid	before	between	during	Into	Onto	Since	towards/towards	Upon
Above	amidst	behind	beyond	except	like	opposite	Than	under	Via
Across	Among	below	but	for	Near	outside	Through	underneath	With
after	Around	beneath	by	from	of	Over	throughout	unlike	Within
against	as	beside	despite	in	Off	Past	Till	until	without

B. Complex Prepositions

according to	as well	due to	in exchange to	inside of	on account of	prior to
Ahead of	because of	except for	in favour	in spite of	on top of	subsequent to
apart from	but for	for lack of	in front/back of	instead of	out of	such as
as for	by means of	in addition to	in line with	near to	outside of	thanks to
as of	by virtue of	in aid of	in place of	next to	owing to	up to

5 The Concept of Prepositional Phrases.

A prepositional phrase contains a preposition preceding a prepositional complement which is grammatically characterized as a noun phrase, a Wh- clause or V-ing clauses, :

23. Trump was at the house door.

24. I thought about who he remarked.

Although that clause and infinitive clauses often have a nominal function but they do not exist as prepositional phrases. The change between the presence and absence of a preposition is obviously observed in the following cases:

25. I was astonished by

}	her decision.
}	her showing this decision.
}	what she decided.

26. I was astonished that she decided this.

More examples of verbs and adjectives that can be used either as prepositional complement or that clauses are listed below:

Disagree (with) , argue (with) , believe (in) , angry (at) , aware (of), disappointed (in) , sure (of).

(Quirk, 1973:143)

6 Function of Prepositional Phrases

The prepositional phrases may be found in one of the following functions:

- a. Adjunct: a construction which is part of the sentence but not essential in meaning and can be deleted without leaving the sentence ungrammatical, :

27. They are all dancing on the bus.

- b. Disjunct : A disjunct is an adverbial that indicates information usually not essential to the sentence; this adverbial signifies the speaker's or writer's attitude. This is marked by separation of or from the neighbouring elements, as in :

28. To my opinion he made several attempt.

- c. Conjunct: It is an adverbial, a phrase or a clause which has a cohesive function, connecting various part of a text. These elements add cohesion to the text. They provide a link to the previous sentence or paragraph, :

29. On the other hand, he did neither attempt to help the victim nor did he arrest the attacker.

- d. Noun phrase as post-modifiers

30. The spectators in the stadium are clapping.

- e. Complement of a verb

31. We always argue with them.

- f. Complement of an adjective

32. I am sure of your failure.

7 Positions of Prepositional Phrases

8.1 After verbs denoting position

The prepositional phrases most commonly follow verbs in the English sentence. In this case, when used after verbs; they (the prepositional phrases) are used to indicate position to clarify where something or someone is, as in:

33. Ahmed lives in Erbil.

34. The president's statue stands in the city square.

35. You should not stay in the sun for long. (Biber et al, 2007:103)

The following are some verbs indicating position

be	Belong
Hang	Lie

live	Remain
Sit	be situated
stand	stay

(Quirk et al, 1985:673)

8.2 After verbs with sense of movement

The prepositional phrases are utilized after verbs denoting activities to specify where an activity occurs, :

36. Mr. Flex went into the room and began to read.
37. The teacher was leading the pupils to their seats.
38. The bus took us to the zoo.
39. The others went out of the tents.
40. She went up the hill and started to roll down.
41. They were guiding the boss to the council.

8.3 At the beginning of a clause: for emphasis or contrast.

The prepositional phrases are put at the beginning of the clause for emphasis or contrast. This way of use is usually encountered in description writings and in preparing reports as well, :

42. From animals we get fur.
43. In the stadium the supporters of both teams were calm.
44. On a through train you can reach your destination without changing trains.

(Cobuild, 1990:296)

9 States of Postposed Prepositions

Actually, a preposition precedes a complement in the English language. Hence, there are some cases in which this rule is not applied, either because the complement needs to occupy first position, or due to its absence in the sentence.

(Quirk (1973:144)

Prepositions are usually postposed with :

1. Wh- questions

45. Whom did you speak with?
46. At which level / is he inserted?

2. Relative clause

47. The old building which I was telling about is crowded.

3. Wh- clause

48. What I am persuaded of is that the world's population is increasing in an unexpected way.

4. Exclamation

49. What a problem he is in!

5. Passives

50. She was left behind by all her friends.

6. Infinitive clauses

51. He's impossible to deal with.

A prejudice against such postposed prepositions remains informal English, which offers alternative of an initial preposition for relative clauses and for direct or indirect questions.

52. It was a trap from which no escape was possible.

10 Meanings Indicated by Prepositions

As is known for the specialists of English that prepositions are often used to refer to place in which an action occurs or the place that they are going to or coming from, the direction they are moving in.

In fine, the main meanings expressed by prepositions are the concept of position and that of direction, besides, the concept of time. The examples below represent the chief meanings expressed by prepositions:

53. He remained in the room. (position)

54. On the right is the bank. (position)

55. The nightingale singing is coming from the garden.
(direction)

56. They continued to run for three hours. (time) (Quirk et al, 1985:673)

10.1 Indicating Position

The following examples show the place where an action takes place; in other words, these examples indicate where someone or something is:

57. Striptease usually takes place at night clubs and discos.

58. He waited in the back garden.

59. Several minutes later the audience were quiet inside the theatre.

The use of some prepositions is confined only to a limited group of nouns. For example, “aboard” is used with nouns referring to means of transport such as, “ship”, “plane”, “train”, or “bus” , or with a name of a certain ship, the flight number of a certain plane and so forth. For example:

60. There’s something terribly wrong aboard the plane.
61. They are all getting abroad that flight to Sydney.
62. There had been more than a thousand people aboard the Titanic before sinking.

Some prepositions like “on” may be used to denote to someone or something that is resting on a horizontal surface or fitted to something or that someone who does work in certain areas such as, a farm or a building site, :

63. The mobile phone was on the shelf in the kitchen.
64. My brother was working on a farm all day yesterday.

10.2 Indicating direction

Some prepositions are used to signify the place which someone or something is moving toward or the place they are going to, :

65. I am going with the group to London.
66. She saw the boy running towards the ball.

Targets and destinations are indicated by some prepositions, as in:

67. The sparrow hopped up onto the branch.

Some prepositions like “after” may be used to refer to someone or something is going after a person or a thing. Or someone or something is moving in the same direction but behind them :

68. They ran after the thief.

Some prepositions can also be used to indicate the place or object that represents a start of movement. For example

69. She ran away out of the operation theatre.
70. She took her hand out of his arm.

Sometimes “from” is used before other prepositions or some adverbs to show the starting point of a movement, :

71. I had been given the drinking bowl from beneath the kitchen table.
72. She had stopped eating her lunch from home.

10.3 Indicating time

Prepositions used before nominal phrases of time are encountered considerably in English. Such prepositional uses are fundamental in the language. The talk about this use is mainly available, besides, the other main uses of direction and position, :

73. Her surgery will be on Monday.

11 Other Uses of Prepositions

11.1 Referring to manner

Some prepositions are used to tell something more about the manner of performing an action, or the way it ought to be done, as in:

74. She brushed her hair with her hand.

(Quirk et al, 1985:673)

11.2 Referring to (like) and (as) in comparison

The preposition “like” is mostly used to compare someone or something in a way similar to someone or something else. For example:

75. She walked like an old lady.

“Like” and “as” are used particularly to indicate that someone or something is given a similar treatment to someone or something else. The noun group after “like” or “as” is used to describe the person or thing. But these prepositions are not involved in the action of the sentences. Doing the action, however, belongs to the agent of the sentence, as in:

76. My children were dressed like a little doll.

77. They made her behave as a child.

“Like this” and “like that” are used in the language to indicate a certain manner of something, :

78. Behaving like this is a shameful thing.

79. How dare you speak to me like that.

11.3 Reason, cause or purpose

Some prepositions are used to refer to the reason behind an action. And some times the cause or purpose of an action is also referred to by some prepositions.

For example

80. He died of blood cancer.

81. The president is highly supported by masses because of his achievements.

11.4 Circumstances of action

Some prepositions are used to indicate actions accompanied by particular circumstances, as in:

82. No, she said in a harsh tone.

11.5 Indicating instrument

The instrument relationship indicates the tool by which an action is carried out. This relationship is mentioned by several English grammarians, :

83. The girl stabbed and killed her rapist with a penknife.

12 Common mistakes in using Prepositions

Due to the precise nature of prepositions, a considerable number of learners of English, whether native or foreign, make mistakes when using them, but the foreign learners are more exposed to such mistakes than native ones. This is because native learners are much more familiar with their native language. On the other hand, foreign learners do not have a real- life situation beforehand to get acquainted with such subject. Foreign learners have to be subjected to as much authentic English materials as possible to master using prepositions. The following are some of the commonly mistaken prepositions:

beside, besides. *Beside* means by, while *besides* indicates in addition.

84 The book is *beside* the table lamp.

85 *Besides* finishing the job, they also cleaned the worksite.

between, among. In general, *between* is used when two things are in question; when three or more things are mentioned , among is used.

Between him and her, she is *among* her friends.

due to: *Due to* must not be confused with *because of*. *Due to* and *owing to* are more formal than *because of*:

86 The delay was *due to* a problem with the ship's engines.

Because of (not *due to*) ill health, he had to retire. (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*)

inside of. The *of* is not necessary.

87 The jewels were locked away *inside* the safe.

88 I'll meet you *outside* (not outside of) the theatre at two o'clock.
(<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep4.html>)

13 Conclusions

English implies a great number of prepositions which exceeds a hundred. So this number creates difficulties for learners of English. Some grammarians state that the number of prepositions is even more. They, however, can get a big advantage of the present research and, especially, the section of conclusions reached by the researchers of this paper after examining it for several times. The following conclusions are supposed to be useful equally for both learners and researchers of English:

1. The prepositions are used automatically and spontaneously on the lips of native speakers; but foreigners frequently make mistakes in selecting and using the right preposition in their speech and writing.
2. As stated earlier, the native speakers of English are outstanding at their language because it is innately endowed in their minds by birth; so the learners of English can enhance their performance in this area of English grammar, besides, the other areas of the language by imitating those native speakers whenever and wherever the opportunity is available.
3. Prepositions mainly express time and place relationships. Thus, these two uses should be clearer to the learners of English rather than the other meanings. In other words, these two meanings are more common than the rest ones in the language.
4. A preposition is semantically understood and assimilated via the other parts of the sentence, especially, the noun phrase which follows it. These parts definitely clarify the meaning of the preposition precisely.
5. The Arabic counterparts of prepositions when these prepositions are used in isolation differ from the real meaning when indicated in contexts. The learners of English have to have a good mastery on the Arabic actual meanings of them taken always from the context of the sentences they are in.
6. A phrasal verb (verb + preposition) is more difficult to learn than a single verb because a verb combined with a preposition might express a meaning quite different from the meaning the same verb when used alone. Prepositions are

semantically effective in this case because of their power to change the meanings of the main verbs.

7. Undoubtedly, the subject of prepositions is one of the most thorny topics in English; therefore, the learners of English, especially the beginners, should devote much time and exert intensive efforts in learning them. And it is better to say they should be studied in sentences context.

A closer look at the prepositions shows that the simple group is easy to learn since they are simple in form. Although prepositions are huge in number, beginning learners are advised to focus on most famous and important ones which are used widely in daily communication, in this way, the learners' task can be possible and easier in using English and later on learning more prepositions may come next.

14 Recommendations

1. A language cannot be used for communication fully without prepositions. For this reason, the researchers of this paper believe that the subject of preposition should be universal and it should be available in any language around the world. This belief has come to our minds through intuition. And this fact can easily be reached after reasonable thinking about this linguistic issue.
2. The difficulty of the subject lies in the fact that the number of prepositions in English may be a hundred although some grammarians mention even more than this number. This great number of words may stand strongly against learning and memorizing them all easily.

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