

Teaching Correct Usage of *in*, *on*, and *at*

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Framing the Issue

L2 learners of English encounter prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* in early stages of language learning. These prepositions are considered “basic words.” Being basic does not, however, mean that they are easy. In fact, English prepositions are “notoriously difficult” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 401) to learn for many learners. Two questions arise here: (a) why are these little words difficult to learn? (b) What can language teachers do to minimize the difficulty?

If a learner’s first language does not have prepositions, it would be naturally difficult for him or her to learn English prepositions. Even when a learner’s L1 has prepositions, English prepositions are far from easy, because there are always “mismatch problems” between English and other languages regarding how to use prepositions. However, the basic and literal meaning of a preposition is not necessarily so hard to learn regardless of the learners’ language backgrounds. For example, Japanese students, whose L1 lacks prepositions, will find it relatively easy to learn the use of *on* as in “The cat is on the sofa.” However, they may have difficulty in filling in the blank of the sentence: “The frost made patterns [] the window,” where the answer is *on*. The difficulty of learning English prepositions is mainly due to their polysemic nature (Lindstromberg, 2010). To illustrate, consider just a few cases of *on*.

- (1) Look at the shadow on the wall.
- (2) There are many apples on the tree.
- (3) Can you stand on your hands?

The learner will wonder why the same *on* is used across these situations. The use of *on* is not limited to the domain of concrete spatial relations, but easily extends into the domain of abstract concepts, as in “Japanese live on rice” and “Liz is on a diet.” In short, *on* is highly polysemous.

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Making the Case

A dictionary, a great resource for both learners and teachers, lists a set of word meanings for a preposition with their examples. For example, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* has 18 senses under the heading of *in*, which include the following:

- i) at a point within an area or a space: *a country in Africa*
- ii) during a period of time: *in the morning*
- iii) wearing something: *dressed in their best clothes*
- iv) used to describe physical surroundings: *We went out in the rain.*
- v) used to show a state or condition: *I'm in love!*
- vi) used to show somebody's job or profession: *He is in the army.*

If this list becomes longer, the learner will have an impression that the meaning of *in* is very diverse and complicated. It looks like highly idiosyncratic. Cognitive linguistics, however, gives us a different view. The semantics of *in* is captured in terms of "containment" (Herskovits, 1986). Thus, in the sentence "John is in the kitchen," John is contained in a three-dimensional thing (i.e., the kitchen). It is true that in a sentence like "John is dancing in the rain," John is not contained in the rain in a clearly delineated fashion, in that the rain does not have any visible boundaries. However, as Miller (1978, p. 101) points out, "there are many things that things can be *in* and *out of* in much the same way: trouble, love, time, view, action." Bennett (1975) suggests that various occurrences of a preposition are somehow related to its basic locative sense. The underlying assumption is that many spatial locatives are used in abstract senses, which have a metaphorical relation to their basic locative sense.

Johnson (1987) goes further to claim that the meaning of a spatial preposition emerges within an individual as "an image schema" on the basis of bodily experiences. An image schema is an embodied structure of experience. The preposition *in* has its image schema, a "container" image (Johnson, 1987). The image schema of *in* can be taken as a visual representation of its semantic feature(s): i.e., *in* [+inside space or containment]. The question here is how the single schema applies to different situations.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain the mechanism of schema projection with "the metaphorical process of spatialization." Let us take a look at the following:

- (4) Jane is in the kitchen.
- (5) Jane is in the army.
- (6) Jane is in love.

To explain these uses of *in*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue:

[T]he word "in" and the concept IN are the same in all three examples; we do not have three different concepts of IN or three homophonous words "in." We have one emergent concept IN, one word for it, and two metaphorical concepts that partially define social groups and emotional states. (p. 60)

In (5), Jane is conceptualized as being contained in a social space (i.e., the army). Similarly, the concept “love” in (6) is not a bounded entity, and yet, it can be conceptualized as a psychological space as illustrated by expressions like “fall in love,” “be in love,” and “fall out of love.” We take it that the notions of image schema and its projection can be used as effective pedagogical devices.

Pedagogical Implications

The teacher often encourages students to memorize the usages of prepositions together with their distinct meanings, and yet the memorization strategy does not help students develop lexical competence in the area of English prepositions. Boers and Demecheleer (1998) suggest that it is important to “draw learners’ attention to those aspects of a preposition’s spatial sense that are especially relevant for its metaphorization processes” (p. 197). Nation (2001) notes that one effective strategy in learning words with multiple senses is to pay attention to the [core] concept that runs through all its senses (pp. 49–51). In other words, in learning the correct usage of *in*, *on*, and *at*, learners will find it useful to internalize the image schema of each preposition, and learn how each schema applies to different situations. Let us now take a look at the cases of *in*, *on*, and *at*.

The Case of IN

The preposition *in* is characterized by the image schema shown in Figure 1.

This schema represents the meaning of “inside space,” or “containment within an enclosure.” The feature [+space] is the common core of different uses of *in*. Canonically, it is a three-dimensional space, but it can be a two-dimensional space as well (Herskovits, 1986). The dotted lines in Figure 1 indicate that the three-dimensional boundaries are not essential to the semantics of *in*. The following are prototypical examples of *in*:

- (7) Drink the milk in the glass.
- (8) There is a worm in the apple.

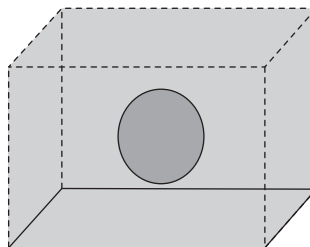


Figure 1 Image schema of *in*.

In these examples, the object of *in* (e.g., the glass) can be perceived as a container with three-dimensional boundaries. Let us take a look at examples (9) and (10).

- (9) There are birds in the tree.
- (10) Look at the girl in the rain.

Here, the boundaries are not clear-cut, and yet, one uses *in* because one views “the tree” or “the rain” as something having three-dimensional space. In this way, the teacher helps students stretch the image schema of *in* into different situations.

The following examples in (11) and (12) are characterized by two-dimensional space.

- (11) The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.
- (12) There is a nice chair in the corner.

Focusing on the use of *in*, we interpret sentence (11) as follows: the sun-rising takes place within a field (i.e., two-dimensional space) named “the east,” and the sun-setting within a field named “the west.”

The “container” schema can be extended to the non-physical (i.e., abstract) domain, as in (13) and (14).

- (13) Cherry blossoms are in full bloom.
- (14) Bill is in trouble.

These are the cases in which “a state” is conceptualized as “space.” “Full bloom” is a state in which cherry blossoms are now. Sentence (14) can be construed as “Bill is contained in an emotional state of trouble.”

In is also used in the temporal domain, referring to temporal space. A sentence like “There are seven days in a week” is a clear example of temporal space (i.e., during a period of time). Even in an unclear sentence like “I’ll be back in two hours,” “two hours” is still conceptualized as temporal space, or “a span of time,” which starts at the time of the utterance and ends when the person comes back. This explains why “I’ll be back in two hours” means “I’ll be back two hours from now,” not “I’ll be back anytime within two hours.”

It is important for the student to understand that the use of a spatial preposition is a marker of how an entity is conceptualized by the speaker. *In* indicates that the entity is something having space—physical or metaphorical, three-dimensional or two-dimensional.

The Case of ON

The feature [+contact] is the common thread of different uses of *on*, and the image schema is illustrated in Figure 2.

The prototypical examples of *on* include sentences like (15) and (16).

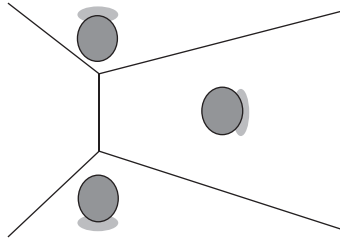


Figure 2 Image schema of *on*.

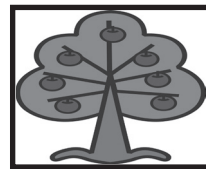
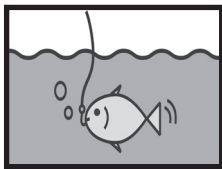
- (15) The cat is on the sofa.
- (16) There is a fly on the ceiling.

Highlighting the common feature of “contact,” the teacher continues presenting examples such as (17) to (19).

- (17) The boy has a bump on the head.
- (18) Wipe the sweat on your forehead.
- (19) I saw a shadow on the wall.

The “contact” sense of *on* can be applied not only to “surface-contact,” but also to “point-contact” as shown in the following examples with their pictures.

- (20) The fish is on the hook.
- (21) There are apples on the tree.



With a pictorial device, it is easy to see the contact relations between the fish and the hook, and apples and the tree. The image schema of *on*, capitalizing on the feature [+contact], can be easily extended to such situations as in (22) and (23).

- (22) Can you stand on your hands for 60 seconds?
- (23) I usually sleep on my stomach.

The “contact” schema applies not only to a variety of situations in the physical domain, but also to the non-physical domain, where *on* is used metaphorically.

- (24) Japanese live on rice.
- (25) She is on a diet.

The “surface-contact” extends to the notion of “support.” If A is on B, B supports A. If there is a book on the table, the table supports the book. Likewise, when we say sentence (24), we imply that rice supports the life of Japanese. In the same way a person is on the bus (i.e., a moving thing), a person can be on a diet, a dietary program with which a person moves along.

The “point-contact” of *on* can be metaphorically extended to the sense of “continuation,” just like a line emerges as points are connected. Sentences (26) to (28) are the examples which imply “continuation.”

- (26) I’m on duty.
- (27) Be on guard.
- (28) Keep on walking.

The notion of “continuation” applies to sentence (29).

- (29) On arriving at Tokyo Station, John made a call to Mr. Tanaka.

This *on* implies that there is no break between the two events (i.e., arriving at Tokyo Station and making a call to Mr. Tanaka) in the sentence.

The common feature [+contact] of *on* can also be extended to the sense of “fixation.” The use of *on* in “a book on Indian economy” suggests “topical fixation”: the book is topically fixed (centered) on Indian economy. “Just on time” is a good case in point to illustrate “temporal fixation.” Thus, we use the preposition *on* to show a particular day or date as in “on Monday,” “on Independence Day,” “on the first of January,” and “on my birthday.” In “a marathon on Monday,” for example, we interpret that “a marathon” is fixed (i.e., scheduled) on Monday.” Thus, the teacher is able to use the concept of “contact” as a common thread of different uses of *on*.

The Case of *AT*

The image schema of *at* is harder to depict because the common feature [+location] or [+place] is too general to have a clear image of it. However, we may present the schema shown in Figure 3 as a possibility.

The schema applied straightforwardly to the following examples:

- (30) The man at the door is Mr. Brown.
- (31) We met at the lake.

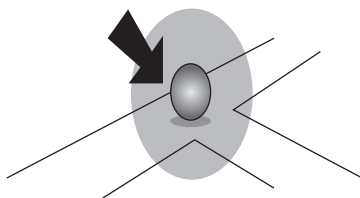


Figure 3 Image schema of *at*.

These are basic and physical instances of [+location]. In (30), “The door” refers to the location of “the man.” *At* is also used when a person is at a place or location for some activity, where “for some activity” is a contextually inferred meaning.

(32) The students were at their desks.

(33) There is nobody at the counter.

If the students are at their desks as in (32), it is most likely that they are studying. In a supermarket, when someone is at the counter, he or she is likely to be working at the counter.

The “location” schema can be extended into sentences like (34) and (35).

(34) The airplane is at 15,000 feet.

(35) I bought a leather jacket at a cheap price.

Sentence (34) is a possible answer to the question asking the location (i.e., height) of an airplane. Prices are gradable on a scale from cheap to high. “At a cheap price” in (35) suggests where the price is.

The locative sense of *at* can be metaphorically used as in (36) and (37).

(36) Flowers were at their best.

(37) She is good at math.

In (36), the state of flowers is assumed, and we interpret the sentence as “Flowers are at the best place of blooming.” In sentence (37), the speaker assumes the domain of school subjects, which includes physics, social studies, and math, and makes an evaluation about a female student. In this case, math is taken as “a place” or “an area” at which she is good.

Preposition *at* is used to refer to time. Time is conceptualized spatially as a line, and *at* indicates a reference point in the moving time.

(38) The sun always looks best at dawn.

(39) He came home at 11 p.m.

(40) He came late at night.

In (40), “in the night” is also possible. While “in the night” assumes “duration of time,” “at night” disregards it, like “at midnight” and “at dawn.” An idiom “Like a thief in the night” is a good example here—a thief does his or her job during the night.

One possible way of putting the ideas here into pedagogical practice is the use of picture drawing. For example, we may give students the following expressions: (Look at) the couple in the lake / the couple at the lake / the couple on the lake. We then ask the students to draw pictures which may illustrate their interpreted meanings by paying attention to the use of prepositions. With this picture-drawing exercise, we are giving them opportunities to personalize the word meaning. In order to draw a picture of a sentence using a preposition, the student needs to

construct the meaning in his or her own way, presumably resulting in deeper semantic processing. Drawing a picture is a very personal experience, and yet it becomes an effective pedagogical device when it is combined with feedback. Some of the pictures drawn by the students may capture the meaning of an expression well. There may be some pictures which do not semantically match the expression in question, and yet, even an “inappropriate” picture can motivate verbal interaction between the teacher and the student, through which the student modifies his or her ideas behind the picture. Picture drawing can also help students discover a common thread (i.e., the feature [+contact]) of different usages such as a ring on the woman’s finger, apples on the tree, and a fish on the hook, for example.

L2 lexical development in the areas of English prepositions is often hampered by inter-lingual mismatches. Translation-based instruction, which is prevalent in monolingual classroom situations, promotes such mismatches. The use of an image schema is promising: (a) it helps students differentiate *in*, *on*, and *at*, and (a) it can connect different meanings of a preposition into a polysemic network, and bridge the semantic gap between the use of a preposition and its translation equivalent.

SEE ALSO: Teaching Prepositions and Particles; Teaching Prepositions of Location; Teaching the Many Uses of the Word “UP”

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Suggested Readings

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