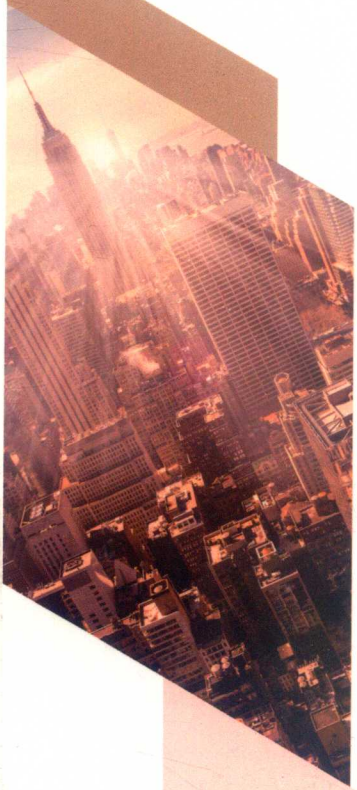

A Cognitive Linguistic Approach to Teaching English Prepositions

英语介词认知语言学方法

宋昕 / 著

大连理工大学出版社
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Preface

Prepositions play a very important role in language. Although there are only a small number of English prepositions, they play a substantial role in language and thus appear frequently: in English, one in every eight to ten words is a preposition (cf. Svartvik, 1988; Leech et al., 2001). English may, therefore, be considered to be a language of prepositions. Furthermore, English prepositions are characterized by polysemy: one preposition can be used (in different contexts) to express two or more different meanings. Take *in* for example, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD) (Hornby & Wehmeier, 2005) and British National Corpus (BNC, 2011), *in* means "within the shape of something" and *sit in an armchair* (BNC, AC5 2362) as an adverbial of space expresses spatial relations. The preposition *in* also means "during a period of time" (OALD, 2005) and *in early 1991* (BNC, A03 406) as an adverbial of time expresses temporal relations. Moreover, *in* is used to "show a state" (OALD, 2005) and *in need* (BNC, A5Y 1120) as an adverbial of state expresses abstract relations. "The problem of translation of prepositions is twofold" (Li et al., 2005, p. 412): in different languages, the translation of prepositional phrases does not essentially match in meanings and

"even for a single meaning, different prepositions are possible". For example, *in the street* and *on the street* are sometimes interchangeable but they have distinct meanings. A street is "a public road in a city or town that has houses and buildings on one side or both sides" (OALD, 2005), so it can be conceptualized as a container in English, and *On Wednesday I met Mrs Matthews in the street and she asked if I'd taken the cat to the vet and I admitted that I hadn't* (BNC, A5K 238) are used to express "[somebody]at a point within an area or a space" (OALD, 2005). In American English, our houses are "on" a street, people drive "on" a street and live "on" a street, etc.. Because a street also focuses on the road, "without a home; outside, not in a house or other buildings" (OALD, 2005), it results in a surface conceptualization. So, prepositions in British English and American English may have different usages. Moreover, English prepositions are also characterized by multi-function. Most central usages of English prepositions characteristically express spatial or temporal relations (e.g. *in*, *under*, *toward*, *before*), and it can also "serve to mark various syntactic functions and semantic roles" (e.g. *of*, *for*) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 603). The expressions of spatial relations, such as *in the car* (BNC, AOF 1311), *under the table* (BNC, AB5 987), are very

common in our daily life. Similar to the spatial relations, the temporal expressions, such as *in early 1991* (BNC, A03 406), *before 11 pm* (BNC, CK5 199) and the like, are widely used. Of course, a lot of prepositional phrases playing the syntactic and semantic role, e.g. *the outcomes of education* (BNC, AM7 144), *run for a bus* (BNC, A6E 888), cannot be avoided. For students, these characteristics make prepositions a highly difficult item in the target language. Although English prepositions are very high in frequency in everyday conversations and therefore are also displayed frequently in English language textbooks, students show rather low learning achievements. The polysemous nature of English prepositions results in the fact that students are not able to draw links between the different meanings of the occurrences and thus fail to acquire the multiple meanings incidentally. So far, the strategy commonly employed by teachers is teaching the multiple senses of prepositions by rote.

By contrast, meaningful learning as one specific application of cognitive constructivist learning theory points out that meaning is "created through some form of representational equivalence between language (symbols) and mental context" (Cooper, 2009). Mastering such representational equivalence, meanings can be understood and therefore, the language can be

acquired. In addition, the ITPC model (The integrated model of text and picture comprehension, Schnotz, 2005) illustrated thoroughly how meaningful learning processes information through every step in the cognitive procedure. New cognitive linguistic (CL) findings systematizing and linking the multiple senses of prepositions provide a fruitful basis for explaining preposition usages, especially prepositions as polysemy, and thus may have an impact on the methodologies of foreign language teaching and learning.

As such, the book is subdivided into five parts. With each successive part, the focus will increasingly sharpen on the main hypothesis that CL-inspired meaningful learning and teaching methods explicitly teaching English prepositions assist the students to gain better achievements and more improvements.

Part Ⅰ describes the objectives of the present study that are teaching the English prepositions: *in*, *on* and *at*. A subsequent step critically looks at the different strands of preposition teaching approaches based on rote and meaningful learning within the ITPC model, and how CL contributions illustrate the multiple senses of prepositions made within the last three decades. As "prepositions are largely to be learned narrow context by narrow context, often phrase by phrase" (Ming,

2011, p. 1), there is some unavoidable rote learning to be done (Lindstromberg, 1996). Opposed to rote learning, meaningful learning is to incorporate new material into one's cognitive structures which could link new knowledge to previous knowledge (Ausubel, 2000). And the ITPC model illustrates the mechanism of applying meaningful learning from a cognitive point of view. Considering new CL findings, they make the integration between new knowledge and cognitive structures possible. Three important theories are taken into account: Langacker's *Theory of Domains* (Langacker, 1987) which structures the usages of English prepositions, and also the notions of image schemas (Johnson, 1987) which consist of the content of metaphorical mappings and provide the objective foundation, and the insights of Lakoff and Johnson's *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (1980) which provides important insights into "the structure, function and processing" of English prepositions. Thus, these "relevant aspects to consider for the language classroom applications" are used to design the present study (Juchem-Grundmann, 2009, p. 3). The last section of this part systematically summarizes the existing materials and possible contributions to set up a didactic framework for the CL-inspired approach which is for further didactic implications in teaching the English prepositions

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in, *on* and *at* in the present study and beyond other prepositions for the language classroom applications.

As a result of the preceding didactic and theoretical linguistic exploration, Part II firstly identifies the central issues to be addressed and formulates four main hypotheses based on three major research questions. In the second section of this part, a pilot study as a difficult test is conducted to investigate the difficulty of each item for the further empirical test as well as to have a preliminary view on students' achievements. After the statistic analysis, the test material for the main study is to set up. The successive section introduces the main empirical studies exploring the learning of the English prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* by German students from different types of secondary schools. The study is meant to test the conceptual framework presented in the previous part.

Part III and Part IV describe the analysis of the empirical data sets. Reasons for the chosen statistical computation procedures are given and the results of the achievements and improvements taken up in the empirical study are presented. Thus, the sections here discuss the actual empirical results in the context of the set research questions. Hence, Part III and Part IV form the empirical part of the book.

Finally, Part V again deals with specific implications for teaching. The didactic and theoretical linguistics, the empirical findings earlier statements were talking about as well as the claims for the language classroom are revisited and refined, and finally an agenda for further empirical investigations is sketched out.

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