

How do Iraqi Learners Recognize and Produce Prepositions?

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Abstract

Prepositions is considered as problematic area for Iraqi students ,Many studies try to find a solution and identify these problems .This study tries to identify the case with Iraqi students and explains the reasons behind committing errors .

Keywords: prepositions, phrasal verbs, idioms

I-Introduction

Prepositions are a problematic category for two fundamental reasons. The first is a problem central to the definition of the category itself: what are the members of the category? The second is central to defining the syntactic nature of the category: how do they fit into the categorization of syntactic categories as lexical or functional?

To answer these two questions, we increase our understanding of the nature of syntactic categories as well .At the heart of the category Preposition are the transitive prepositions such as *in*, *on*, *under*, *to* and *with* that are traditionally taken to be prototypical of the category ;these form the core of any definition of the category (Abbas, 1985:42).But at the edges of the category are elements such as particles (which together with their verbs are also known as phrasal verbs) and adverbs (or prepositional adverbs) that seem inherently related to prepositions and at the same time show striking differences in their syntactic distribution. Are these elements prepositions, or do they represent different, non- prepositional categories?

These categories are most widely discussed in the literature on particles, adverbs and prepositions as in (Fraser 1965, 1971; also discussed in Bolinger 1971, Baker 1995, Sawyer 1999).

The second fundamental problem with the category of preposition is a more modern problem, which deals with the classification of syntactic categories as lexical or functional: where do prepositions fit in this taxonomy?

Prepositions seem to be lexical in some ways and functional in others as explained in the studies mentioned above . These observations are, of course, not new, and there have been a handful of attempts to account for these apparent conflicts. Despite the differences in each approach to the problem, one underlying theme unites each of these efforts: they all share the view that prepositions represent some sort of hybrid category where some elements are lexical and some are functional. The grammatical functions and semantic features of prepositions can be seen in Downing (2006: 540-555).

The fact that particles and adverbs are phonologically identical to transitive prepositions is taken as an indicator that they must belong to the same category .Jackendoff explains it this way: “By treating particles as a type of preposition, we can claim that particles are related to the corresponding prepositions in much the same way that intransitive verbs such as *eat*, *drink* and *smoke* are related to their transitive counterparts” (1973: 346).Moreover, prepositions, particles and adverbs that share a phonological form also share a core meanings; according to this argument, the word *up* has the same central meaning whether it is used as a preposition, particle or an adverb (Abdulkarim Humam, 2007 : 4). Emonds explicitly states that “when such a word is used as a directional adverb, it has the same intrinsic meaning whether or not it has an object” (1985: 253).

Jackendoff and Emonds argue that there is a similarity in the distribution of the types of structures in which these elements can be involved. Three structures are offered as specific examples: locative inversion, directional *with* sentences, and *right* modification. Each of these three constructions are argued to be unique to prepositions ,and as they can also occur with adverbs and particles, they show strong evidence for a collapse of these three elements into a single category.

Prepositions, adverbs and particles have overlapping meanings also has a common-sense level of validity. While their core meanings are related to each other, they relate to different things in the sentence. In a sense, it is like *love* as a verb and a noun .It stems from the same historical root, and both words have at their core a sense of ‘devotion,’ but both give different information to the sentence: one is a predicate and one is a nominal. A parallel argument can be made for prepositions, particles and adverbs :they stem from the same historic root, and have at their core the same meaning, but they offer different types of information to the sentence: prepositions relate one thing to another, adverbs modify, and particles add telicity or an idiomatic sense to the verb (Jackendoff ,1973: 347).

For Prepositions being lexical or functional: First, prepositions seem to be a lexical category in a number of ways. They typically contribute substantive, descriptive content, and are similar to verbs in designating relationships between things. Spatial prepositions like *in*, *on*, *under*, *between*, and *next to* provide the

relation between two or more objects. Temporal prepositions such as *before*, *after*, and *since*, show how events relate to one another, and other prepositions such as *with* and *for* provide similar information regarding other (Fang, 2002:20).

Prepositions are essential sentence elements to comprehension since they can signify different functions such as temporal, locative, and directional, among other things. Hardly, if ever, can one produce or listen to a sentence that has no preposition (Murcia, and Freeman, 1983:250).

This entails that foreign language learners are bound to encounter difficulty in leaning and using them properly. This complexity is exacerbated by the fact that prepositions in each language have their own unique syntactic and semantic specifications, a matter that leaves a great deal for LI transfer to occur in the process of learning English by foreign language learners (Jiménez, 1996:172). This is true especially in the case of Arabic and English, which have very little in common since each language belongs to a different language family. Another aspect of the difficulty Iraqi learners of English encounter in acquiring prepositions has to do with the fact that prepositions do not receive proper attention in foreign language teaching textbooks and curricula. By and large, ELT textbooks do not provide foreign language learners with detailed information on prepositions. Hence, Iraqi learners of English are expected to encounter problems in the process of learning English prepositions.

1.1. Aims of the study

This study aims at identifying the difficulties that Iraqi learners of English encounter in recognizing and comprehending prepositions. More specifically, the paper is an attempt to answer the following questions.

1. How do Iraqi learners of English acquired English prepositions?
2. What are the main errors that Iraqi learners of English may commit in recognizing and producing prepositions?
- 3- Are Iraqi learners able to distinguish between prepositions, adverbs, and particles ?

1.2 Previous Studies:

Lowie and Verspoor (2004:4) presented a study to examine the effect of certain variables on the acquisition of English prepositions. The subjects were 75 high school and college students. They investigated the role of two variables in the acquisition process: similarity between prepositions in LI (Dutch) and L2 (English), and the frequency of prepositions in the L2 input, was found that lower level learners opted for more frequent prepositions and were more accurate where LI was similar to L2. Another study was conducted by Maria and Catalan (1996:54) on Spanish learners of English. The study has revealed the frequency of preposition errors in descriptive compositions written by Spanish students. They have discovered that preposition errors are the most. Other studies tried to show the errors committed by learners in producing preposition as (Zoghoul 1979; Mukattas 1984; Swan and Smith 1987; Hamdallah and Tushyeh 1993; Kharma, N. and Hajjaj, A, 1997; Mahmoud, A. 2000; AbiSamra 2003).

AbiSamara (2003:3) has conducted a study to reveal the errors committed by Arabic-speaking students in writing English essays. The study has presented the type of errors that Arabic speakers' commit and a remedial strategies avoiding these errors .

II. Methodology

2.1. Subjects

The data were collected from 50 fourth year students male and female studying at the college of Mansour University during the academic year 2013 -2014. Their courses include grammar, linguistics, translation, drama, essay, and phonetics.

2.2. Data collection

The data were presented through a questionnaire that is designed to evaluate the subjects' ability to produce and recognize prepositions.

The prepositions are presented in four uses as:

- 1- to indicate time,
- 2- to indicate place,
- 3- as part of a verb, and
- 4- as part of an idiom.

The questionnaire comprises 41 items for each part of the questionnaire. In the production part, the subjects have to fill in the blanks with the most suitable preposition from a given list as in (Appendix 1). In the recognition part, the subjects are asked to recognize the proper use of prepositions as in (Appendix 2). In this section, the subjects were asked to choose the correct answer. The production part was administered first and a week later the subjects were given the second part. That is, the subjects were asked to answer the production part

first so as not to be influenced by the alternatives found in the recognition part.
 The table below shows the distribution of the prepositions in the questionnaire based on their use or function.

Table 1

Prepositions ranked according to their functions

No.	Preposition	Frequency of prepositions in the questionnaire			
		time	place	Phrasal Verb	Idiom
1	at	8	4	6	
2	of			8	2
3	in			4	2
4	on		6	10	4
5	about		2	2	2
6	between		4		
7	over		4		
8	for			4	2
9	with			6	2

Despite the fact that most of the sentences in the questionnaire were adapted from such sources as TOEFL, and EFL learning sites.

2.3. Data Analysis

The subjects' responses were graded by the researcher herself. The percentages of correct and wrong responses were calculated to present the errors that are committed by the subjects in recognizing and producing prepositions.

III. Discussion of Results

3.1. Production

The results of the analysis of the questionnaire starting with the production version followed by the recognition version. In this part, the results will reveal the problems that the subjects face in producing the appropriate prepositions.

The table below presents the subjects' responses in the production part

Table 2

Correct responses ranked from the most to the least difficult

No	Preposition	Correct Responses	%
1	at	75	35
2	on	81	40
3	of	80	40.5
4	for	96	48
5	with	96	48
6	about	97	48.5
7	over	126	63
8	in	146	72.5
9	between	170	85.5
	average	107.44	53.44

The table shows the prepositions that are ranked from the most to the least difficult according to the subjects' responses. According to the responses, the performance of the subjects reveals that prepositions constitute a difficulty for Iraqi learners. The average of correct responses is only 53.44, a remarkably low percentage indeed. This means that more than 46.5% of the subjects' responses are incorrect. This percentage of incorrect responses is quite high. By examining the responses of the learners, the results show that 'between' tends to be the easiest for the subjects. The number of correct items is 170. This high percentage of correct responses due to the fact that 'between' is easily used by the students. On the other hand, 'at', which tends to be the most difficult prepositions; with 35% of the total number of correct responses. As shown below:

1. Look --- the bottom of the page.

The subjects tend to use 'on' and 'in' instead of 'at' because they confuse the exact meaning of look in this item.

The next problematic preposition for the students is 'on', because the subjects are unable to distinguish between the various uses of 'on' (place, time, phrasal verb and idiom)

2. There are some books ---- the ground floor.(place)

3. You can rely ----- this test.(phrasal verb)

4. Don't forget to turn the light -----.(idiom)

The third error is introduced in the use of 'of' as a phrasal verb as shown in the example below:

5.He is accused ---- killing innocent people.

Or using 'in' as an idiom as in the items below:

6.That teacher is ---charge of the school library.

Using preposition as part of an idiom or as part of a prepositional verb will be difficult for the learners. Out of the 202 responses to this group, only 122 were correct answers.

3.2 Recognition

According to the results , the performance of the students in this part is worse than their performance in the production part. Table (3) below shows the rank-ordered from the most to the least difficult preposition.

Table 3 Correct responses ranked from the most to the least difficult

No.	Preposition	Correct Responses	%
1	on	46	26
2	at	47	26.5
3	in	70	35
4	of	76	37
5	over	89	44.5
6	for	90	45
7	with	99	49.5
8	about	130	65
9	between	170	85.5
	Average	90.77	46

The results show that the majority of the subjects were unable to recognize the correct preposition as shown below:

a. The most difficult preposition to use was 'on' with a percentage as low as 26%. This remarkably low performance can be attributed to the subjects' tendency to replace this preposition with its nearest semantic equivalents, i.e., 'in' and 'at'. Many subjects erroneously used 'in' instead of 'on' in a sentence such as the following:

7. There are some books ---- the ground floor.

8. She hung the picture ---- the wall.

9.We usually go for a picnic --- weekends

Furthermore, the idiomatic use of the preposition 'on' as well as its use as part of a prepositional verb were often left unanswered or erroneously replaced by other prepositions as was the case in the following sentences:

10. That teacher is ---charge of the school library.

Another problematic preposition is 'of'. The subjects are unable to use 'of' as a phrasal verb as in the examples below:

11.He is capable ---- writing a new song .

12. My desk is composed ---- wood.

The apparent inability of the subjects to comprehend the overall meaning of some of the items (sentences) in the questionnaire could be the cause behind committing errors as was the case in the sentence:

b. In many cases 'over' was replaced with 'on' or left blank. This replacement leads us to attribute it to the effect of negative transfer from Arabic in which both have the same equivalent, namely ala or fawq as in the example below:

13. I jumped ----the wall .

14.The plane flew ---- mountains.

15. She hung the picture ---- the wall.

c. The same difficulty manifested in producing the preposition 'at' as in the following example below:

16.He is good ---- English.

17. We usually go for a picnic *at weekends.(instead of 'on')

d. The other problematic preposition was 'for'. The percentage of correct answers was 45.'For' is exchanged with 'of' throughout the questionnaire as in:

18. The demand *of goods is rising.(for)

19. I warned him * for the danger. (of)

e. The preposition 'between' was the easiest one. In both versions of the questionnaire, this preposition occupies the tenth position, i.e., the lowest place in terms of difficulty. This might be due to its high frequency in English.

IV. Conclusion

The study has revealed that Iraqi learners encounter problem in recognizing and comprehending prepositions.

The average percentage of correct responses in production was 53.44 and 46 in recognition. The low performance will raise a question about such results.

As far as causes are concerned, it was noticed that the semantic complexity of the prepositions and the multi-uses each preposition has are major causes of difficulty. Furthermore, negative transfer from Arabic was also detected in many of the erroneous responses of the subjects.

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Appendix(1)

A. Production

Fill in the blanks with suitable prepositions (at, in, on, over, between, of, with, about, for)

1. There are some books ---- the ground floor.
2. My brother is studying ---- this university.
3. He is accused ----- killing innocent people.
4. Compare your answers---- your partner.
5. He is good ---- English.
6. I have got two pens. What ----- you?
7. Chris lives ----- Catherine and Paul.
8. You can rely ----- this test.
9. I jumped -----the wall .
10. The plane flew ----- mountains.
11. I put the new batteries -----the radio.
12. Don't forget to turn the light -----.
13. Look --- the bottom of the page.
14. My sister gets up -----six in the morning.
15. I heard the news ---- the radio.
16. I congratulate you ----- your success.
17. I warned him --- the danger.
18. Summer comes ---- spring and autumn.
19. They agreed --- what he says.
20. He apologized ---- the delay.
21. Are you interested ---- playing football?
22. That teacher is ---charge of the school library.
23. You must depend ---- yourself.
24. Is he still angry ---- you?
25. He blamed himself ---- coming late .
26. I give it to you ---- pleasure.
27. He insisted ---- going by coach.

28. The dog barked --- the boy.
29. We usually go for a picnic --- weekends.
30. He is capable ---- writing a new song .
31. My desk is composed ---- wood.
32. I've heard --- his father's death.
33. There is a car ----- the back of the house
34. The demand ---- goods is rising
35. Very few live --- the age of 100.
36. She hung the picture ---- the wall.
37. The criminal was hanged --- dawn.
38. He has interest ---- music.
39. The cat has lain ---- the carpet.
40. Father provided me ---- the necessary money to buy a suit.
41. He wandered aimlessly ---- the streets.

B. Recognition

Choose the correct choice (a, b, or c) to complete each of the following sentences.

1. There are some books ---- the ground floor.
a-in, b-on, c-at
2. My brother is studying ---- this university.
a-in, b-on, c-at
3. He is accused ----- killing innocent people.
a-in, b-on, c-of
4. Compare your answers---- your partner.
a-in, b-with, c-on
5. He is good ---- English.
a-in, b-with, c-at
6. I have got two pens. What ----- you?
a-in, b-with, c-about
7. Chris lives ----- Catherine and Paul.
a-in, b-with, c-between
8. You can rely ----- this test.
a-in, b-with, c-on
9. I jumped -----the wall .
a-in, b-over , c-on
10. The plane flew ----- mountains.
a-on, b-over c-at
11. I put the new batteries -----the radio.
a-in, b-with, c-on
12. Don't forget to turn the light -----.
a-in, b-on, c-at
17. 13. Look --- the bottom of the page.
a-in, b-on, c-at
14. My sister gets up at six ---- the morning.
a-in, b-with, c-on
15. I heard the news ---- the radio.
a-in, b-for, c-on
16. I congratulate you ----- your success.
a-in, b-on, c-for
17. I I warned him --- the danger.
a-in, b-of, c-for
18. Summer comes ---- spring and autumn.
a-between, b-with, c-for
19. They agreed --- what he says.
a-to, b-with, c-for
20. He apologized ---- the delay.
a-in, b-with, c-for
21. Are you interested ---- playing football?
a-in, b-with, c-for

22. That teacher is ---charge of the school library.
a-in, b-with, c-for
23. You must depend ---- yourself.
a-in, b-on, c-for
24. Is he still angry ---- you?
a-in, b-with, c-for
25. He blamed himself ---- coming late .
a-in, b-with, c-for
26. I give it to you ---- pleasure.
a-in, b-with, c-for
27. He insisted ---- going by coach.
a-in, b-with, c-on
28. The dog barked --- the boy.
a-in, b-with, c-at
29. We usually go for a picnic --- weekends.
a-in, b-with, c-at
30. He is capable ---- writing a new song .
a-in, b-of, c-on
31. My desk is composed ---- wood.
a-in, b-of, c-on
32. I've heard --- his father's death.
a-about, b-with, c-on
33. There is a car ----- the back of the house.
a-at, b-between, c-in
34. The demand ---- goods is rising .
a-of, b-for, c-at
35. Very few live --- the age of 100.
a-about, b-to, c-at
36. She hung the picture ---- the wall.
a-on, b-over, c-at
37. The criminal was hanged --- dawn.
a-about, b-to, c-at
38. He has interest ---- music.
a-about, b-in, c-at
39. The cat has lain ---- the carpet.
a-on, b-to, c-at
40. Father provided me ---- the necessary money to buy a suit.
a-with, b-to, c-at
41. He wandered aimlessly ---- the streets.
a-about, b-in, c-at