

# A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TOWARDS THE USE OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN NORWEGIAN - THE CASE OF *I* AND *PÅ*

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ABSTRACT. The paper gives an insight into how Polish learners of Norwegian distribute locative prepositions *i* and *på* (*in* and *on*) in the most basic spatial contexts. The project is set within SLA studies with cognitive theories and conceptual transfer theory as a key-stone. The data which has been analysed is elicited from four main sources. The two most vital ones are based on ASK-corpus (AndreSpråksKorpus) with the total of 800 informants, and a fill-in-the-gaps survey with 90 participants. The overall aim of the project was to discover patterns native speakers of Norwegian use for distributing *i* and *på*. Based on this knowledge, I pinpointed potential mistake domains which could motivate conceptual forward transfer for the Polish learners. Thereafter, Polish informants' performance in L2 was analysed with respect to transfer. I propose four potential transfer domains, i.e. different conceptualization of some objects and places, marking abstract and concrete contexts, marking of dynamic situations and lexicon shortages combined with language diversity of Norwegian, which should be taken into consideration when acquiring Norwegian.

## 1. WHY PREPOSITIONS?

The aim of my project is to investigate and present differences in ways one encapsulates space by applying varied concepts. I

believe that Polish and Norwegian native speakers CONCEPTUALIZE space on slightly different premises, which results in numerous mistakes in the target language, Polish being L1 and Norwegian, L2.

As the idiomatic use of prepositions has already been investigated by many, my sight is focused on the very basic and ORIGINAL MEANING of a preposition. I would argue that as long as one does not have the right feeling for preposition's genuine sense, it is nearly impossible to develop more ABSTRACT USES which would originate from the preposition itself. The research will be supported by theories about cross-linguistic influence on a CONCEPTUAL<sup>1</sup> level. The spectrum of my research is predominantly focused on the use of two SPATIAL PREPOSITIONS, namely *in* (Norwegian *i*, Polish *w*) and *on* (No *på*, Pl *na*) as they are probably the first representatives of the class of prepositions one encounters whilst learning Norwegian. Slobin (1979), on the basis of acquisition of a wide range of European languages (including Turkish), states that *in* and *on* concepts, that is VERTICAL SUPPORT vs. PROPER CONTAINMENT, are universally available and are amongst the earliest learnt by children. Both *i* and *på* are also among the 30 most frequent Norwegian words (University of Bergen's frequency list based on 4.7 million texts) and the mistake rate is relatively high both on the genuine and more abstract level.

## 2. GENUINE MEANING OF *I* AND *PÅ*

In this paper I will establish some PREREQUISITES for understanding *i*'s (in's) and *på*'s (on's) genuine meaning, which are slightly different for the languages in question. Both in Norwegian and Polish *i* (*on*) presupposes some kind of encapsulation, placement in a three-dimensional CONTAINER. However, the idea of the container might be vague and in some cases very distant from the prototypical one (e.g. bottle, sea, plane, air, sofa and armchair). Vandeloise (2006:142) defines it as a multidirectional support which involves powers of nature. Additionally, Vandeloise claims that the objects need a contact with the support, which I think is arguable as there are many examples where the object is still in a container but the contact is not inevitable (e.g. *a fly in a jar*, *pollen in a room*). On the contrary, this is the case when it comes to *på* (*on*). The object is localized on a horizontal or vertical plan and it requires support usually from under or side. (*The book is on the table. The picture is on the*

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<sup>1</sup> [...] conceptual transfer starts with language and ends, via cognition, with language, hypothesizing that certain instances of CLI [cross-linguistic influence] in a person's use of one language are influenced by conceptual categories acquired through another language. (Jarvis og Pavlenko 2008:115)

wall.) This applies for Polish as well as for Norwegian, although the latter one shows a few INCONSTENCIES.

In general, native speakers of Polish and Norwegian understand and express spatial relations in a very similar way, i.e. using prepositions (unlike some Subsaharian languages which render them using verbs that imply e.g. to-and from-movement). In both languages all three FRAMES OF REFERENCE<sup>2</sup> are applicable (absolute, relative and intrinsic). Although Polish is a case language, I would not consider it as a significant difference as far as the very concept of space is concerned. The discrepancy in distribution of the mentioned prepositions and, what follows, the difficulties which emerge while acquiring L2 are reigned by other aspects.

The main difference lies in the fact that some objects and places can represent a DOUBLE CONCEPT in Norwegian. Native speakers of this language distinguish between a place or a vehicle understood as the very PLACE and as an INSTITUTION. When a place is conceptualized as an institution, one uses *på* (on), whereas when it comes to a place itself, or a place which is a part of a bigger entity, *i* (in) is more relevant. As I am a native-speaker of Polish, I realize that this difference is perceivable only to a certain extent, as we do not apply such categories in our mother tongue. I believe that it is already here that the conceptual transfer emerges. Some phrases with *på* (on) and *i* (in) may encapsulate both space and time (*On the train children played cards.* - at this particular time *When I was in London I was really busy.* - when I stayed there), but I do not think that such cases pose a challenge as this is exactly the way one uses them in Polish.

Another significant difference is related to DYNAMIC<sup>3</sup> and STATIC spatial relations. Although there is a Norwegian preposition which expresses movement towards a bigger object or LANDMARK<sup>4</sup>, its applicability is relatively constrained in comparison to Polish. Norwegian *til* (to) implies approaching a Landmark but the Landmark is reached in a few cases only (towns and cities, people, countries and a few others). On the contrary, Polish *do* (to) expresses both movement towards and reaching the Landmark. This DISCREPANCY is difficult to neutralize at the initial level of Norwegian language acquisition but I believe it is fully eradicatable. There are a few cases in Polish where one uses *na* (on) instead of *do* (to) but these are very few and rather predictable, often determined by historical factors, e.g. *na Litwie, na Ukrainie*, which used

<sup>2</sup> A frame of reference consists of six half-line axis with their origin at the Landmark; these axes are usually labelled front, back, right, left, up and down. Frames of reference make it possible to describe location of an object in relation to the speaker, another object or cardinal directions (depending on the type)

<sup>3</sup> Expressing movement of one object towards another

<sup>4</sup> Trajector is a moving point whose path is conceived as a variable, whereas Landmark has a stationary setting within a reference-frame, with respect to which the trajector's path receives characterization.

to be Polish territories, *na poczcie*, *na uniwersytecie* which refers to the previous character of these institutions (Sysak-Borońska 1980).

### 3. RESEARCH

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned I would present the investigations I carried out. Although they differ in many aspects, all of them are quantitative and corpora based. As a different scope is applied in all three cases and they might be considered as irrelevant, they confirm the idea of a conceptual transfer adopted on this ground.

#### 3.1 HANDWORKERS

The first one (2008) was carried out among Polish handworkers who were attending an intensive four-week Norwegian course. The corpus consists of originally oral utterances (82 informants at the initial level) including prepositional phrases of all types. The utterances were incorrect and each mistake was made at least 10 times, all together 50 mistakes taken on different premises. The results were as follows: 36% were caused by a transfer from mother tongue (Polish), 4% resulted from transfer from other languages, 22% were explained as confusion (a few Norwegian prepositions with a common equivalent in Polish), 6% as a result of phonetic similarities with Polish, and 32% mistakes of unknown source.

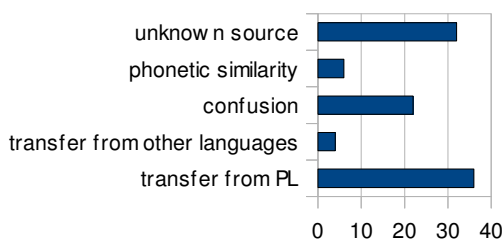


Fig. (19) *Basic level, handworkers (2008)*

#### 3.2 4<sup>th</sup> YEAR STUDENTS

The second research (2009) was more specified and it aimed at revealing mistakes in prepositional phrases which described spatial relations. This time only 6 informants were available so the research is more qualitative than quantitative. All of them were 4<sup>th</sup> year students of Norwegian philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, whom I would place at C1-C2 level

according to CEFR<sup>5</sup>. The students were given a set of 144 Norwegian headings from which the spatial prepositions had been removed. Below each heading there was a Polish translation. The students were asked to fill in the gaps with the most suitable, in their assessment, preposition. This research showed that 175 of a total 849 of the suggested prepositions were wrong and 64 were omitted. The original preposition was rendered in only 513 cases, which seems to confirm the difficulty created by this question.

Although the number of informants was rather scarce, the results depict the challenge of this matter. The answers were divided into four main groups. The first one, where the original preposition was rendered (513/849), the next one (97/849) where the students changed the original meaning by applying a different preposition as they did not realize that the research aimed at spatial uses. The remaining two groups were followingly one with mistakes which lack a reasonable explanation (175/849) and omissions (64/849). The chart below shows the percentage in particular groups.

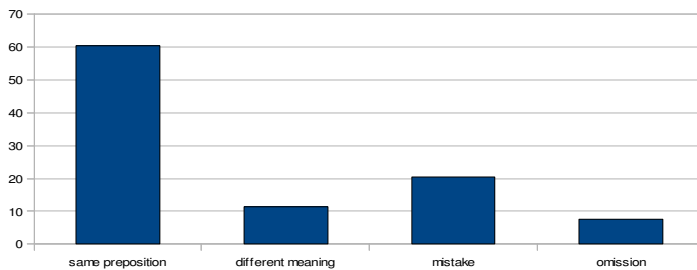


Fig. (2) 4<sup>th</sup> year students of Norwegian philology, Adam Mickiewicz University (2009)

### 3.3 ASK-CORPUS

The next research was carried out in autumn 2009. This time it was focused on the prepositions in question i.e. *i* (in), *på* (on) and *til* (to) and it was based on a written Norwegian learner data corpora<sup>6</sup> (ASKeladden, University of Bergen). As the corpora includes texts at different proficiency levels and 10 different language backgrounds, it was possible to investigate the problem in a broader perspective. I have chosen four languages, three Slavic (Polish, Russian and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) and English. Russian and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian were taken into consideration so that I could learn whether there is a significant discrepancy within the Slavic group, and English

<sup>5</sup> The Common European Framework of Reference

<sup>6</sup> A language learner corpus of Norwegian as a second language; it contains essays collected from language tests on two different proficiency levels as well as personal data from the test-participants. Apart from texts from informants with 10 different mother tongues, the corpus contains control data from Norwegian native speakers.

was investigated for INCLINATION towards Norwegian prepositional phrases. As there are many separate results which have to be considered from different points of view, I will refrain from presenting very detailed results. However, I think there are two worth mentioning. It is the fact that native speakers of English often made many more mistakes than the Slavic informants, and the latter one is that the problem in distinguishing between *i* and *på* really exists.

### 3.4 ADDITIONAL RESEARCH, NORWEGIAN INFORMANTS

As the data I received after analysing ASK material were not sufficient and the very corpus material was not tailored to reveal IRREGULARITIES in distribution of prepositions, but on mistakes in general, I decided to carry out yet another research, this time designed especially for this purpose. The questionnaire I designed consisted of sentences with 31 most frequent place adverbs (according to University of Bergen's frequency list) which were given in 4 examples - 2 originally concrete and 2 abstract ones. 30 Norwegians with different social, educational and dialectal background were asked to fill in the form with most suitable, in their assessment, prepositions. The aim of this investigation was to see whether the ABSTRACT-CONCRETE division functions in the language, as we read it in grammar books (e.g. Hagen, 2002:195). The informants were rather unwilling to participate in this research as they considered the task difficult. The results I received were surprising as it turned out that inconsistency<sup>7</sup> in the distribution was rather significant. When it comes to dynamic phrases, 72% were reported stable (i.e. there was little inconsistency between single informants), whereas 28% were deemed unstable (there was a significant difference between informants). As far as the static phrases are concerned, only 50% can be regarded as stable and the following 50% as instable. By this division *stable* – *instable* I mean the situation where one of the prepositions in question is used much more often than the other one. By *instability* I understand that any of these can be used, although, according to several grammar and students' books, they do differ in meaning. The charts below depict the results.

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<sup>7</sup> I apply the term for phrases which the Norwegian informants were not consistent about. If there was less than 75% agreement, I classified the use as inconsistent.

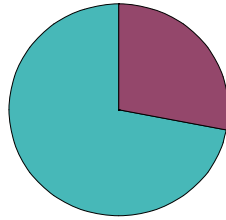


Fig.(3) *Dynamic relations : stable 72%, instable 28%*

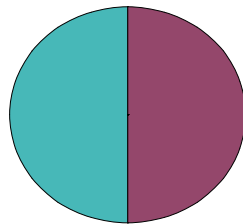


Fig.(4) *Static relations: stable 50%, instable 50%*

### 3.5 ADDITIONAL RESEARCH, POLISH INFORMANTS

Encouraged by my Norwegian colleagues from ASKeladden<sup>8</sup>, University of Bergen, I conducted a similar investigation with Polish informants in focus, in order to see whether Poles are consistent in distribution of *w* (in) and *na* (on) in their mother tongue. Again, 30 adults with different social, educational and regional background were asked to fill in a questionnaire which consisted of 62 sentences – 34 LOCATIVE PHRASES similar to the Norwegian ones. My aim was to investigate whether there is a consistency in distribution of *w* and *na* and whether a distinction between static-dynamic is always made. The results were not surprising, as it turned out, as expected, that Poles are very consistent in usage of the two prepositions. When it comes to dynamic relations, 94% of all phrases were considered stable, whereas 5,8% were unstable, but this resulted from regional differences or mistakes (*chodzić w górach*). On the other hand, the static relations were even more stable as there was only 1,47% instability, which I would prefer to call a mistake rate (*w poczcie*). This stability may lead us to conclude than when acquiring a new language a Polish learner does expect similar tendencies in the target language. By now we know that this is not the case in Norwegian.

<sup>8</sup> An ongoing project at the University of Bergen which focuses on L1 influence on L2. The project is set within cognitive theory of language acquisition, development and change. Individual projects within ASKeladden elicit data from AndreSpråksKorpus

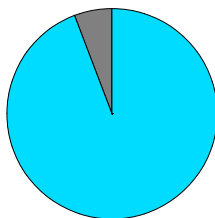


Fig.(5) Dynamic relations: stable 94,2%, instable/mistake 5,8%

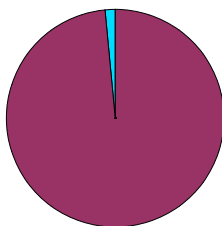


Fig.(6) Static relations: stable 98,53%, instable 1,47%

#### 4. DIAGNOSES

There are many factors that contribute to the difficulty and complexity of appropriate acquisition and distribution of the two Norwegian prepositions in question, i.e. *i* (in) and *på* (on). As my project aims at diagnosing the most recidiving ones, this chapter will be fully devoted to presenting four potential MISTAKE SOURCES, which I consider most vital. These differ from each other in each respect, but all together they pose a real nuisance to L2 learner.

##### 4.1 DOUBLE CONCEPT - OBJECT VS. ABSTRACT

As I have already mentioned in introduction to this paper, Norwegian distinguish between a place as a concept (abstract) and a concrete designate. According to grammar books a different preposition should apply in each case. Hagen (2002) proposes så called institution rule (institusjonsreglen). Compare:

- (1) **I** kaféen har vi et bredt utvalg av påsmurte baguetter og rundstykker.  
In the café we have a wide range of baguettes and rolls.
- (2) Skal vi gå å sette oss **på** en kafé?  
Shall we go and sit in a café?
- (3) Hvordan finner jeg den beste plassen **i** flyet?  
How do I find the best seat on the plane?



- (4) Statistikken viser at nordmenn flørter mer **på** flyet enn både italienerne og franskmenn.  
The statistics show that Norwegians flirt on plane more often than Italians and Frenchmen.

This distinction is almost ungraspable for a Polish speaker as we are used to fixed phrases irrespective of grade of their abstraction. The problem is: how to minimize this conceptual gap and whether to follow the distinction, if Norwegians themselves do not always do. It turns out that irrespective of the change in meaning, native speakers of Norwegian are more fond of *på* and overuse it in contexts where *i* is considered more appropriate (Engh 2001).

#### 4.2 CONTAINER VS. SURFACE

The distinction between container and surface might seem obvious, at least for all speakers of European languages, however this distinction often proves misleading when applied in a different language. The point is that objects that are considered containers, and followingly *i* (in) is applied in the spatial phrases, are often perceived as surfaces in Polish. My investigation shows that Polish containers are much more prototypical than Norwegian ones. Compare:

- |                                  |                               |                          |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (5) klatre <b>i</b> tre          | wspinać się <b>na</b> drzewo  | to climb a tree          |
| (6) sitte <b>i</b> sofa          | siedzieć <b>na</b> sofie      | to sit on a sofa         |
| (7) bo <b>i</b> en tredje etasje | mieszkać <b>na</b> 3. piętrze | to live on the 3rd floor |

I believe this shows a slight difference in conceptualization of space, and can be therefore classified as conceptual transfer, which according to Jarvis and Pavleko (2008:142-145)<sup>9</sup> is extremely difficult to eradicate. On the other hand there is a set of fixed expressions with *på* which apply also to prototypical containers:

- (8) Hun fylte vann på flaska.  
 (9) Kaffe på termos.  
 (10) Fiskeboller på boks  
 (11) Ris på pakke

Whereas the first two examples can be perceived as some kind of contraction of *fylle på*, where *på* applies for the very container, I believe this is not the case in (10) and (11). The last two examples represent a separate class of items which are boxed or packed. Although they come across as simple relations of inclusion, they represent in fact more abstract uses that stand rather for concepts than concrete objects.

<sup>9</sup> Jarvis and Pavlenko claim in order to acquire concepts from L2, one has to restructure the inborn internal category structures from L1.

#### 4.3 DYNAMIC VS. STATIC

In Polish there is a clear difference between static and dynamic spatial relations. This is expressed by applying different prepositions. Whereas in static relations mostly *w*, and in some few cases *na* is used, *do* (to) expresses a movement towards and usually reaching the Landmark. When it comes to Norwegian *til* (to), it can also be applied to express dynamics, but it is just in few cases that the Landmark is reached (see introduction 1.2), which is yet another candidate for conceptual transfer. Compare:

(12) Han ble kjørt **til/på** sykehuset.  
Został zawieziony **do** szpitala.  
He was taken to the hospital.

(13) Han gikk **på/til** jobb.  
Poszedł **do** pracy.  
He went to work.

(14) Skal vi **på** en restaurant?  
Pójdziemy **do** restauracji?  
Shall we go to a restaurant?

(15) Jeg må **i** butikken.  
Muszę iść **do** sklepu.  
I must go to the shop.

#### 4.4 SOCIAL FEATURES AND STYLISTIC MATTERS

Apart from all the inconveniences I enumerate above, there is some information I received from my Norwegian informants. They commented on the questionnaire and reported that their choice of preposition is to a great extent dependent on their interlocutor – whether it is a person with a higher status, or a friend etc. Age was yet another criterion – the older the informant, the more rigid rules and less instability. Surprisingly enough the difference between spoken and written language was reported. It turned out that when writing one pays attention to the phrase's nearest neighbourhood, and if the most suitable preposition is already used in the IMMEDIATE CONTEXT, another one is applied in other to avoid repetition, which is deemed stylistically incorrect, compare:

(16) Han jobber **på** en psykiatrisk avdeling **på** /I sykehuset.  
(17) Polakker viser **til**bøyelighet **til** /MOT bruk av visse strukturer.

Such choices might be supported by Herskovits' quote: *There are many different ways the ideal meaning can be manifested in a use type. So, though it is clear that it makes sense to use a given preposition in some situation, it*

would often also make sense to use another. Only convention justifies the correct choice (1986:155).

## 5. CHALLENGES

In this paper I aimed at presenting the core of my project, i.e. introduce difficulties a Polish learner of Norwegian encounters whilst acquiring L2's prepositional phrases. Although the differences between the two languages may seem negligible, there are some language specific factors that jeopardize and block the appropriate expressing of spatial relations. As it takes place already at the very basic semantic level, so called language universals, I believe it is the result of the conceptual transfer combined with instability of Norwegian itself that hinder more abstract notions of space at the basic level of language acquisition.

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