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Prepositional use with the object-of-activity function of the landmark in English and Slovene

The paper examines the use of spatial prepositions in English and Slovene with an OBJECT OF ACTIVITY. The term refers to the landmark in a functional relation with the trajector engaged in the normal use of the landmark (as in *the man at the wheel*). In English, the object-of-activity function is typically signalled by *at*. It is shown in the paper that *at* has no direct equivalent in Slovene but rather three counterparts with more specific meanings: *za* ('behind'), *na* ('on') and *pri* ('by'). The paper points out a relatively low occurrence of Slovene *pri* in comparison with English *at*, arguing that *at* has functional associations, while *pri* is primarily a spatial preposition. The most typical signal of the object-of-activity function in Slovene is *za* because it presupposes the trajector's orientation towards the inherently functional side of the landmark. It is also pointed out in the paper that although the lexical meaning of a preposition may play a role in making the preposition more or less reliable a signal of the functional relationship, the landmark's functionality remains a pragmatic specification that can only be derived from the context.

Key words: spatial prepositions; English; Slovene; landmark; object of activity; functional relationship.

1. Introduction

Spatial prepositions express static or dynamic relations described schematically in terms of geometric configurations between a TRAJECTOR (TR) and a LANDMARK (LM): the former is the primary focus and the carrier of the relation, and the latter a secondary focal participant viewed as the reference point for locating the TR (Lan-



gacker, 1987: 217, 231-243, Langacker, 2000: 171-174, Langacker, 2008: 113; cf. also Heine, 1997; Lakoff, 1987; Talmy, 1983).¹ The central image schema triggered by the preposition represents the basis from which other uses are derived, including non-spatial ones (cf. Lakoff 1987). A TR located in proximity to the LM can enter into a specific functional relationship with the LM whereby the latter is recognized as an OBJECT OF ACTIVITY (cf. Cienki, 1989). For example, in (1a) below the TR-LM relationship is purely spatial while the semantic implication of (1b) may be that the girl was about to play some music. In other words, sentence (1b) may imply some kind of “practical connection” (Lindstromberg, 1997: 168) between the TR and the LM:

- (1) a. *She was sitting by the piano.*
b. *She was sitting at the piano.*

In English, the object-of-activity function is typically expressed by *at*. Research into the Slavic languages (cf. Cienki, 1989 for Polish and Russian, Cuyckens, 1984 and Knaš, 2006 for Polish) has shown that *at* finds its counterparts in spatial prepositions whose meanings are more specific than the meaning of *at*. The aim of the paper is to show that the same applies to Slovene. It should be noted at this point that while a great deal of research into English and Slovene prepositions has been devoted to contrastive aspects in terms of valency and collocations (cf. Sicherl, 2001, 2004, 2007; Sicherl and Žele, 2006; Žele and Sicherl, 2010), little or no attention has been paid to this specific functional relationship. Sicherl (2007), for example, recognizes the instrumental function of landmarks with *on* and its Slovene counterpart *na*, but makes no mention of the object of activity. Greenberg (2008: 101) mentions the possibility of “abstract senses” with *pri* (‘at’, ‘by’), but provides no further elaboration. The object-of-activity function is also largely ignored by the major reference grammar of Slovene (Toporišič, 2000) as well as the dictionary of standard Slovene, SSKJ.²

The present paper is therefore an attempt to shed more light on the matter. By adopting the cognitive approach to prepositions as a radial category with central and derived uses (cf. Lakoff, 1987), and the view that spatial prepositions necessarily express also functional relations based on interaction (cf. Coventry, 1998;

¹ Some of the authors cited in the paper use other designations for the two entities. In particular, Cuyckens (1984) distinguishes between the “located entity” and the “place of location”, and Cienki (1989) between the “Spatial Entity” and the “Localizer.” For the sake of clarity, TRAJECTOR (TR) and LANDMARK (LM) are used throughout the paper.

² *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika*, available at: <http://bos.zrc-sazu.si/sskj.html>.



Cuyckens, 1988), the paper will look at the Slovene counterparts of *at* in object-of-activity contexts and examine the factors governing their use. It will also consider the role of the preposition's lexical meaning in signalling the functional relationship.³

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 focuses on the special nature of English *at* and contrasts it with other prepositions occurring in object-of-activity contexts. Section 3 examines the counterparts of *at* in Slovene and possible restrictions of their use. A short synthesis follows in section 4. The main points are summed up in the Conclusion.

2. *At*: from spatial to functional use

The example provided in the Introduction suggests that the object-of-activity reading of (1b) arises from the use of *at*. The feature *at* shares with *by* is their activation of a proximity schema (i.e. one with the TR located in proximity to the LM), but the two schemata differ with respect to the conceptualization of the LM. Lindstromberg (1997: 141) calls *by* a "less precise alternative" to *beside*, *in front of* and *behind*. For example, *the man by the tree* refers to a man that can be perceived as standing beside, in front of, or behind the tree, depending on the position of the observer. It could be argued that the same applies to *at*: if two lovers have arranged to meet at an old oak tree in the park, they will fall into each other's arms at a spot beside, in front of, or behind that tree. Nevertheless, *by* and *at* differ in one significant respect: while *by* evokes the image of a TR located close to a LM that has kept its dimensions, *at* evokes the image of a TR located with regard to a LM whose dimensions have been reduced to zero. In other words, *by* entails external proximity between two dimensional entities in the horizontal plane while *at* entails location at a point. If we compare the following pair of sentences for illustration, (2b) presents the LM merely as an orientation point:

- (2) a. *I saw them hugging and kissing by the old oak tree.*
b. *Let's meet at the old oak tree tonight.*

³ The term FUNCTIONAL is used in the paper as the opposite of SPATIAL to refer to the object-of-activity function of the LM. It should be noted though that functional relations (in terms of control, support, containment etc) play a role also in purely spatial uses (cf. Coventry, 1998; Cuyckens, 1988).



Lindstromberg (1997: 165–174) describes spatial *at* as imprecise about the TR-LM relationship, vague about possible physical contact between the two entities and neutral about their relative sizes. Nevertheless, Keizer (2008) argues that although *at* seems less specific in meaning than other prepositions because it does not indicate the exact TR-LM relationship, its use is subject to quite a few restrictions, which makes it even more specific in this respect. A similar observation is made by Sysak-Borońska (1974), who compares *at* with *to* and *from*, pointing out that *at* has a much narrower range of application. Keizer (2008) concludes that *at* must have a specific meaning of its own, namely expressing location at some non-dimensional, geometric point in space.

The point-apprehensibility of the LM is the key component of *at*. As stated by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 654), the “core lexical meaning of *at* expresses location in a specific geographical position conceived as a point in the plane.” This, however, should not imply that the TR is necessarily COINCIDENT with the LM. According to Cuyckens (1984), the TR has to be included in the REGION of the LM, which covers the area taken by the LM itself as well as the surrounding area outside the LM. It follows that the TR-LM relationship can be that of coincidence or proximity. Cuyckens argues that coincidence and proximity are not part of the semantics of *at*, but rather further specifications that are derived from the semantics of the sentence and the context. In (3) below for example, the coincidence relationship is rather unlikely in (3a) while (3b) allows both readings: if the two lovers have arranged to meet inside the boat-house, the TR is perceived as coincident with the (point-like) LM:⁴

- (3) a. *Let's meet at the old oak-tree tonight.* (= 2b)
b. *Let's meet at the boat-house tonight.*

Cienki (1989) points out the role of distance in conceptualization. He proposes a centrality condition that is based on the relative distance between the TR and the LM: the applicability of *at* decreases with distance because the TR should not move out of the LM's region. Furthermore, the relationship may be that of proximity from a close-up view but will turn into coincidence from a more remote point of view because from a distance the whole LM's region tends towards a point-like conceptualization. This observation reflects the role of the observer and his/her distance from the LM as one of the restrictions imposed on the use of *at* (cf. Keizer 2008).

⁴ With the container apprehended as a point, the containment relationship turns into that of coincidence.



Coventry (2003: 255–256) states that the “use and comprehension of *at* is dependent on both the relative distance between objects and whether the objects are interacting.” Interaction between the TR and the LM comes into play when the LM represents an object of activity. For example, *the man at the computer* can be understood not only in terms of proximity, but also in terms of functionality: the man is using the computer. Cuyckens (1984) considers functionality a pragmatic specification of *at* that is part of the conversational implicature(s) of the sentence.

If a preposition other than *at* is used to imply this kind of functional relationship, the problem may be that the spatial arrangement lexicalized by the preposition clashes with the actual TR-LM arrangement. For example, it is not difficult to imagine the author of the paper sitting in front of the computer and typing these lines. The reader should have no difficulty recognizing the spatial arrangement of the author and the computer: owing to the impression that, when using a computer, one interacts with the computer screen rather than the case, the author must be positioned in such a way that she can look at the screen. The same spatial arrangement is recognized in (4) below:

- (4) a. *Teenagers spend too much time in front of the computer.*
b. *I like working in the lab as well as behind the computer.*
c. *The kids haven't been on the computer for the whole week.*
d. *Please don't sit at the computer for too long.*

Nevertheless, this spatial arrangement appears to be in clash with the meanings of *behind* and *on* in (4b) and (4c) respectively. Spatial *behind* occurs when the TR is located by that side of the LM which is opposite the LM's face or front (cf. Lindstromberg, 1997: 106–107). In (4b), by contrast, the TR is found on the very same side as the LM's front. As to spatial *on*, it evokes the picture of the TR located on the surface of the LM, which is definitely not the case in (4c). As far as (4d) is concerned, the meaning of *at* is vague enough to be compatible with any kind of spatial arrangement as long as the TR remains within the LM's range. It follows that the spatial arrangement in (4b–d) can only be deduced from the functional relationship between the TR and the LM: it is reasonable to expect that a person engaged in computer work is positioned in front of the computer screen.

A semantic implication shared by all the sentences in (4) is that the TR and the LM are in a functional relationship whereby the LM represents an object of activity. A question arises how this functional interpretation is derived. With *at*, the interpretation obviously depends on the context because *at* is simply too vague with re-



gard to the TR-LM arrangement, be it spatial or not. What about the other three prepositions, which are more specific in this respect?

With *in front of*, it is exactly the implied spatial arrangement that makes the object-of-activity reading possible (compare (5a) and (5b)). Nevertheless, the actual interpretation depends on the context and semantics of other parts of the sentence (compare (5a) and (5c)):

- (5) a. *Peter was sitting in front of the computer.*
- b. *Peter was sitting near the computer.*
- c. *The cat was sitting in front of the computer.*

It should be noted at this point that *in front of* is not normally used in object-of-activity contexts. It seems to be restricted to LMs with screens or front sides that produce images (e.g. *She spends hours in front of the television/mirror*). With other LMs that allow object-of-activity readings, the interpretation is purely spatial. Sentence (6b), for example, by no means implies that the girl was sitting at the keyboard side of the piano. Moreover, she could be sitting at some distance from the piano:

- (6) a. *She was sitting at the piano.*
- b. *She was sitting in front of the piano.*

With *behind* and *on*, a functional interpretation cannot be conditioned by the implied TR-LM configuration because the functional relationship involves a different spatial arrangement. The context together with the semantic properties of the TR and the LM in particular have to be considered to identify the actual relationship. With *on*, the functional use may be precluded by a verb of position or motion, which would yield a (possibly absurd) spatial interpretation (e.g. *He spent/*sat the whole day on the computer.*) It is crucial to note that the spatial arrangement is different with the object-of-activity reading: the TR is located in front of the computer screen in (7a) and (7c), but on the other side of the screen in (7b), and on the computer case in (7d).

- (7) a. *Peter fell asleep behind the computer screen.*
- b. *The cat fell asleep behind the computer screen.*
- c. *I found the kids on the computer again.*
- d. *I found the cat on the computer again.*



It can be concluded that what *in front of*, *behind* and *on* share with *at* is that the functional interpretation has to be derived from the semantics of the sentence and the context. Unlike *at*, however, the three prepositions trigger specific spatial configurations which are often in clash with the actual TR-LM arrangement. In this respect, *at* is much more appropriate because it is compatible with any kind of spatial arrangement as long as the TR is included in the LM's region.

2. Slovene equivalents of *at* in object-of-activity contexts

The point-like conceptualization of the LM and its indefiniteness regarding the exact TR-LM relationship makes *at* unique not only among English prepositions but also across languages. In the title of his paper, Cuyckens (1984) refers to *at* as a “typically English” preposition. Cienki (1989: 128) comments on that suggesting that an even more appropriate designation would be a “peculiarly English” preposition. Indeed, *at* appears to have no direct equivalent in other languages (for its counterparts in Slavic see also Knaš, 2006). Irrespective of whether the implied relationship is spatial or functional, *at* will have to seek its translational counterpart in a preposition that lexicalizes a specific spatial relationship. Rather than being conceptualized as a point, the LM preserves its “full fledged spatial extensionality” (Cuyckens, 1984: 63). Sentences (8b) and (8d) below are Slovene translations of (8a) and (8c) respectively:

- (8) a. *Let's meet at the park.*
 b. *Dobiva se v parku.* (lit. ‘in the park’)⁵
 c. *Who was at the wheel?*
 d. *Kdo je bil za volanom?* (lit. ‘behind the wheel’)

The wheel in (8c, d) represents an object of activity (driving). In Slovene, the following three prepositions occur as counterparts of *at* when the object-of-activity function of the LM is implied: *za* (lit. ‘behind’), *pri* (lit. ‘by’) and *na* (lit. ‘on’):⁶

⁵ Literal translations are marked by *lit.* and put in brackets.

⁶ As already pointed out in the Introduction, Toporišič (2000: 418–223) makes no mention of this functional relationship. An object of activity can be found in the expression *sesti za volan* (‘to sit behind the wheel’), but the example is classified as purely locative (p. 422). Similarly, the SSKJ subsumes expressions like *za mizo* (‘at the table’) and *na vratih* (‘at the door’) under spatial use (position, proximity). With *na*, only the instrumental use appears as a separate category in the SSKJ (e.g. *igrati na klavir* ‘play a piece on the piano’). The example *presedeti pri televiziji* (lit. ‘to sit by the television’) is labelled ‘expressive’.



- (9) a. *The children sat at the kitchen table.*
b. *Otroci so sedeli za kuhinjsko mizo.*
- (10) a. *The pupil at the blackboard couldn't answer any of the teacher's questions.*
b. *Učenec pri tabli ni znal odgovoriti na nobeno od učiteljevih vprašanj.*
- (11) a. *Hurry up, please. The postman is at the door.*
b. *Pohiti, prosim. Poštar je na vratih.*

It is interesting that the occurrence of *pri* is much lower than would be expected of a preposition that is often regarded as the nearest equivalent of *at* since it evokes a picture of the TR located in (external) proximity to the LM without any further details regarding the spatial arrangement (cf. Šarić, 2006). Greenberg (2008), for example, presents *at* as an equivalent of *pri*, but not also of *za*, which is in sharp contrast with actual usage. A brief corpora search has been conducted to compare the occurrence of *at*, *behind*, *pri* and *za* with a computer in the object-of-activity function.⁷ The ratio of *at* to *behind* was 94:6, and the ratio of *pri* to *za* was quite the reverse, namely 10:90. The data are, of course, far from compelling, but they nevertheless point towards a strong prevalence of *za*.

The functional use of *za* is motivated by spatial *za*, which is the Slovene equivalent of *behind* and occurs when (cf. Lindstromberg, 1997: 106–107):

- (i) the LM is positioned between the observer and the TR, so that the LM obscures the TR from the observer's view, or
- (ii) the LM has a face or front, and the TR is located by the side of the LM that is opposite the face or front.

Despite its spatial nature, however, the applicability of *za* (lit. 'behind') in object-of-activity contexts is not conditioned by either (i) or (ii) above. The observer can refer to the pianist in (12) below as *moški za klavirjem* 'the man at the piano' (lit. 'behind the piano') irrespective of their own position with regard to the piano:

- (12) *Moški za klavirjem je moj brat.*
'The man at the piano is my brother.'

⁷ The corpora used were the ukWaC for English (accessed via the Sketch Engine: <https://the.sketchengine.co.uk>) and FidaPLUS for Slovene (<http://www.fidaplus.net>).



Furthermore, with a LM that has a recognizable face or front, the TR is located in front of the LM (13a). With spatial *za*, by contrast, the TR would be on the opposite side (13b).⁸

- (13) a. *Ure in ure preživi za računalnikom.*
 ‘He spends hours at the computer.’
 b. *Vazo sem skrila za računalnik.*
 ‘I hid the vase behind the computer.’

In his comparison between *at* and Russian *za*, Cienki (1989: 116) points out that *za* is restricted to cases where the TR enters into a functional relation with the inherently functional side of the LM. For example, the functional side of a computer is the one the screen is facing and where the keyboard is found. The TR has to be functionally oriented towards the inherently functional side of the LM to be engaged in the normal use of the LM.

The same condition applies in Slovene. The less likely the expected functional relation with the LM, the less acceptable is *za*.⁹

- (14) a. *Malicala sem za računalnikom.*
 ‘I was having a snack at the computer.’
 b. **Plesala sem za računalnikom.*
 ‘I was dancing at the computer.’
 c. *Zaspala sem za računalnikom.*
 ‘I fell asleep at the computer.’
 d. **Maček je zaspal za računalnikom.*
 ‘The cat fell asleep at the computer.’

While it is perfectly common to have a snack while browsing the Net, it is hardly imaginable to sit at the computer and dance. (14c) above is acceptable because one can easily fall asleep during work. (14d) is unacceptable because cats are not able to use computers. It is not impossible to find a cat sleeping in front of the computer

⁸ This important difference is too often ignored. Toporišič (2000: 423), for example, uses *sesti za volan* ‘to sit behind the wheel’ side by side with *skriti se za hišo* ‘to hide behind the house’ to illustrate the spatial use of *za* followed by the accusative. See also fn. 6.

⁹ A parallel can be found with inanimate TRs that serve a specific function regarding the LM. A writing desk, for example, can be in a functional relationship with an armchair that is used as an office chair, but hardly with a sofa: *stol/?naslonjač/*pručka/*ležalnik/*kavč za pisalno mizo* ‘a(n) chair/armchair/stool/deckchair/sofa at the writing desk’.



screen, but the cat cannot be in a functional relation with the computer. The only acceptable reading of (14d) would be that the cat was actually BEHIND (in the purely locative sense) the computer.

It can be concluded that *za* is quite reliable a signal of the TR-LM relationship. Sentence (15a) below implies that the person telling jokes was engaged in some kind of activity on the computer, or, at the least, that the computer was on and ready to use. Sentence (15b), by contrast, can be understood also in a purely locative sense without any further specification of the TR-LM relationship:

- (15) a. *Sedel je za računalnikom in mi pripovedoval šale.*
'He sat at the computer, telling me jokes.'
- b. *Sedel je pri računalniku in mi pripovedoval šale.*
'He sat at/by the computer, telling me jokes.'

The preposition *pri* (lit. 'by') is another preposition compatible with object-of-activity readings, but it needs a greater amount of support from the context. Sentence (15b) above is ambiguous as to whether the LM and the TR are actually interacting.¹⁰

The following sentence is much less likely to present the LM as an object of activity than (15b). In fact, it implies that the man was sitting by the desk but not necessarily by the functional side of the desk:

- (16) *Sedel je pri pisalni mizi in mi pripovedoval šale.*
'He sat by the writing desk, telling me jokes.'

It appears that *pri* is more readily felt as a functional equivalent of *za* if the LM can be operated by the TR. A possible explanation is that the LM's operability makes the TR-LM interaction conceptually salient, which leaves more room for a non-spatial interpretation.

¹⁰ Spatial proximity, with or without physical contact, can also be expressed by *ob*, *poleg* and *zraven* ('beside', 'next to'). Their meanings often overlap with that of spatial *pri* (cf. also Sicherl 2000: 421), but they do not normally occur in object-of-activity contexts and are therefore excluded from the discussion. *Ob* may combine with an instrument or tool (e.g. *hoditi ob palici* 'to walk with a stick'; cf. SSKJ), but will not readily turn the instrument into an object of activity (for example, *moški ob palici* will not yield the interpretation 'the man using the stick' but rather 'the man beside the stick'). Although a metonymic extension to the very activity can be observed with some nouns (e.g. *preživeti popoldan ob knjigah/klavirju/televiziji/računalniku* 'to spend the afternoon studying/playing the piano/watching television/working on the computer'), this usage is very restricted (for example, *moški ob klavirju* 'the man by the piano' does not imply that the man is about to play).



With multiple TRs, a functional relationship can be established only if each TR can be functionally oriented towards the LM. Compare:

- (17) a. *Otroci so sedeli za mojo pisalno mizo.*
 ‘The children sat at my writing desk.’
 b. *Otroci so sedeli za kuhinjsko mizo.*
 ‘The children sat at the kitchen table.’

Sentence (17a) implies that the children sat together by the same side of my desk. There is no such implication in (17b); in fact, the sentence most probably means that each child occupied their own side of the table. This difference in interpretation is due to the fact that a normal writing desk has only one inherently functional side (i.e. the one where one is supposed to sit when using the desk) while a (square) kitchen table may have four (cf. Cienki, 1989: 116).

The kitchen table in (17b) is understood as an object of activity with up to four active functional sides. It should be pointed out that the TR-LM relationship is the same for all sides. With some LMS, however, different functional relationships can be recognized. A case in point is a counter on which drinks are served (*šank* 'bar'):

- (18) a. *Mladenič za šankom mi je nekako znan.*
 ‘The young man at the bar looks somewhat familiar.’
 b. *Mladenič pri šanku mi je nekako znan.*
 ‘The young man at the bar looks somewhat familiar.’

The young man can be interpreted as a waiter or a guest in (18a), but only as a guest in (18b). It seems that *za* is compatible with both functional relationships (serving and being served) while *pri* is compatible only with the latter.

With a counter in a shop (*pult* ‘counter’), by contrast, *za* is unambiguous. The following sentence is about shop assistants rather than customers:

- (19) *Za pultom sta bila dva mladeniča.*
 ‘There were two young men at the counter.’

If the two men in (19) were customers, *pri* should be used:

- (20) *Pri pultu sta bila dva mladeniča, ki sta želela plačati s kreditno kartico.*
 ‘There were two young men at the counter who wanted to pay by credit card.’

The difference between a counter in a bar and a counter in a shop lies in the second functional relationship (i.e. being served), which is conceptualized as the mir-



ror image of the first one (i.e. serving). This foregrounds the first relationship and reduces the counter to an object of SERVING. Nevertheless, the counter in a bar is conceptualized also as an object of HAVING A DRINK. This functional relationship is equally salient as the first one, which accounts for the applicability of *za*. That it is actually HAVING A DRINK (rather than BEING SERVED) that makes *za* possible is further supported by the fact that if one only orders or collects a drink at the bar, *pri* is the strongly preferred option:

- (21) *Kje je Peter? – Tamle pri šanku/?za šankom naroča pijačo za našo mizo.*
'Where's Peter? – He's over there at the bar, ordering drinks for our table.'

A functional relationship in terms of the TR actively using the LM presupposes the TR's physical orientation towards the LM. It can be assumed that *za* will be precluded if the TR is not physically oriented towards the LM. For example, classical dancers perform warm-up exercises at the barre. The expression *at the barre* is used in reference to barre work. Notwithstanding the obvious functional relationship between the dancers and the barre, *za* is not acceptable:

- (22) a. *Baletna ura se začne z vajami pri drogu /*za drogom.*
'A ballet class begins with exercises at the barre.'
b. *Najprej se ogrejemo pri drogu /*za drogom.*
'First we warm up at the barre.'

Za is ruled out because the dancers doing the barre work are not necessarily facing the barre.¹¹ In fact, most barre exercises are executed with the dancer facing the direction parallel to the barre. *Za* would imply that the TR is oriented towards the LM while *pri* leaves the actual orientation unspecified. It can be concluded that the TR's orientation towards the inherently functional side of the LM represents the key criterion for the applicability of *za*.¹²

Irrespective of the TR's orientation, the spatial arrangement of the TR and the LM in (22) above is perfectly compatible also with a purely spatial use of *pri*: the dancers are standing BY the barre. This, however, does not hold for *na* (lit. 'on'):

- (23) *Na drogu smo bile skoraj eno uro.*
'We spent more than half an hour at the barre.'

¹¹ With a barre, two identical inherently functional sides can be recognized: if the barre is placed in the centre of the studio, the dancers can line up along either side.

¹² A parallel can be found with inanimate TRs (cf. fn. 9). For example, a table chair turned away from the table rather than facing it will occur with *pri* rather than *za*.



The dancers in (23) were most certainly not sitting on the barre. If anything was ON the barre, it was the dancers' hands holding it. The functional part of the TR (typically a body part) is in physical contact with the functional side of the LM, and it is exactly this specific type of contact that helps preclude a (most likely absurd) spatial reading. The object-of-activity reading activates a metonymic extension of *barre* from 'ballet bar' to 'barre work', which manifests itself most clearly in uses like:

- (24) *Drog je bil danes precej naporen.*
 'The barre exercises were pretty hard today.'

In (25) below, the extension has gone even further. (25a) can be understood not only in terms of practising the piano by oneself, but also in terms of attending a piano lesson. In (25b) only the latter interpretation is possible.

- (25) a. *Na klavirju sem bila celo popoldne.*
 'I spent the whole afternoon at the piano /in my piano class.'
 b. *Klavir se je malce zavlekel.*
 'The piano lesson took a little longer than usual.'

The use of *na* with a ballet bar (*barre*), computer or piano is motivated by a physical contact that can be described in terms of spatial *na* (e.g. the hands ON the keyboard). Nevertheless, *na* is not applicable if the contact has not been established or if the activity is not actually based on this contact (cooking, for example, is not defined in terms of operating the knobs on the cooker):¹³

- (26) a. *Fant za klavirjem/*na klavirju je listal po notah.*
 'The boy at the piano was thumbing through the sheet music.'
 b. *Celo dopoldne sem preživela za štedilnikom/*na štedilniku.*
 'I spent the whole morning at the stove.'

No physical contact, however, is presupposed in (27) below.

- (27) a. *Pohiti! Nekdo je na vratih.*
 'Hurry up. There's somebody at the door.'
 b. *Ženska na oknu je huda opravljivka.*
 'The woman at the window is a terrible gossip.'

¹³ With the landmark as an instrument, by contrast, the use of *na* is perfectly acceptable: *zaigrati na klavir* 'play a piece on the piano', *zavreti vodo na štedilniku* 'to boil water on the stove' (cf. also Sicherl 2007: 565).



Pri would imply a purely spatial meaning:

- (28) *Kdo je ženska pri vratih/oknu?*
'Who is the woman by the door/window?'

Examples like (27) above suggest that *na* is quite reliable a signal of a functional relationship because a spatial interpretation is either absurd or needs more support from the context. Moreover, this use of *na* goes hand in hand with the tendency to use *na* with names of activities, which are conceptualized in Slovene as surfaces rather than containers (cf. Lipovšek 2013): *na baletu/angleščini/plavanju* 'in my ballet/English/swimming class'.

It can be concluded that *na* and *za* prevail over *pri* because they do not normally give rise to ambiguity as to whether the intended relationship is spatial or functional. *Pri* is less reliable in this respect unless the spatial arrangement is such that it is typically evoked by another preposition. In (29) below, for example, the girl is standing IN FRONT OF the blackboard and the preposition *pri* implies a functional interpretation (i.e. the girl's knowledge was tested in front of the class by the teacher):

- (29) *Dekle pri tabli je bilo malce zmedeno.*
'The girl at the blackboard was a little confused.'

3. Synthesis

English *at* finds its Slovene counterparts in *za* 'behind', *pri* 'by', and *na* 'on'. Its vagueness with regard to the specification of the TR-LM arrangement makes *at* very suitable also for non-spatial use. Slovene *pri*, by contrast, remains first and foremost a spatial preposition. Owing to the fact that the TR-LM arrangement with the LM as an object of activity is not normally in clash with the external proximity schema evoked by *pri*, ambiguity may arise as to whether the intended relationship is functional or spatial. Much more reliable in this respect is *za*, because the TR-LM arrangement is just the opposite of what would be expected of the purely spatial *behind*. It should be noted at this point that the functional use of *behind* can be found in English as well, but is far from productive:

- (30) a. *the man at/behind the wheel/ the computer screen/ the desk/ the counter*
b. *the man at/*behind the piano/ the stove/ the table*

It may sound as a contradiction, but the non-applicability of (functional) *behind* in (30b) in fact proves that the functional use of *behind* must be motivated by its



basic spatial meaning. The spatial arrangement of the TR and the observer in (30a) can easily be imagined in such a way that the LM is positioned between the TR and the observer, so that the LM, at least to some extent, obscures the TR from the observer's view: one can stand in front of a car and look at the driver through the windscreen, or approach a computer desk or a counter from in the front. From the observer's perspective, the TR is literally BEHIND the LM. Furthermore, a bar (i.e. a counter where drinks are served), which enables two different functional relationships, allows *behind* only with reference to bar attenders: it is reasonable to expect that the observer will stand in front of the bar. The LMs in (30b), by contrast, do not support this kind of visualisation: a piano is rarely found positioned directly between the pianist and the audience, and a stove is usually placed with its rear side against the wall. A table is problematic because it allows multiple TRs on different sides – an arrangement that does not comply with the requirement for spatial *behind*.

Unlike English *behind*, Slovene *za* has turned productive also in its functional use and represents the nearest equivalent of *at* when the LM is recognized as an object of activity. Its applicability, however, is subject to the restriction that the TR be physically oriented towards the inherently functional side of the LM (cf. *at the barre/*za drogom*). If the use of *za* is precluded, the speaker resorts to *pri* or *na*.

Na occurs most naturally with names of activities because they tend to be conceptualized in Slovene as two-dimensional surfaces. The use of *na* with an object of activity can be regarded as a preliminary step: the LM (a piano, for example) as the object of activity allows a metonymic extension when used with the preposition. In English, *on* is possible as well, but is less common, especially if there is no presupposed contact between the TR and the LM (e.g. *ženska na oknu* vs. *the woman at/*on the window*). *On* is more likely to occur if the activity is already named or inferred from elsewhere in the sentence, which turns the LM into a mere instrument:

(31) a. *He played a few pieces on the piano.*

b. *Sarah accompanied him on the piano.*

Pri with an object of activity needs more contextual support because of its relative vagueness regarding the spatial arrangement it implies. First, the external proximity schema triggered by *pri* is not in clash with the actual TR-LM arrangement, and second, if the TR-LM relationship is interpreted in a spatial way, the implied TR-LM arrangement is perceived as normal. For example, if (32a) below is understood in a purely spatial sense, the man will probably be perceived as standing by the side of the piano. In (32b), a spatial interpretation is perfectly possible as well, but is



conditioned by the placement of the observer with regard to the TR and the LM. In (32c), by contrast, a spatial interpretation would sound absurd unless strongly supported by the context.

- (32) a. *Moški pri klavirju je moj brat.*
'The man at/by the piano is my brother.'
b. *Moški za klavirjem je moj brat.*
'The man at/behind¹⁴ the piano is my brother.'
c. *Moški na klavirju je moj brat.*
'The man at/on¹⁵ the piano is my brother.'

Pri has its spatial equivalent in English *by*, which necessarily yields a spatial interpretation. It should be pointed out, however, that also *at* can be used in a purely spatial sense with the LM representing the reference point for locating the TR. It follows that *at*, too, can be ambiguous as to whether the relationship is spatial or functional. Compare:

- (33) a. *The man by the piano is my brother.*
b. *The man at the piano is my brother.*

It may look now as if *at* in (33b) was the same as Slovene *pri*, but there is an important difference in conceptualization. The vagueness of *at* with regard to the exact TR-LM arrangement, together with the point-like conceptualization of the LM, makes *at* far from a typical spatial preposition. In fact, it can be argued that even spatial *at* is a preposition in functional use: the LM's role of a spatial location has been reduced to the function of a reference point. It can be concluded that *at* always has some functional associations. That makes *at* a relatively reliable signal of a functional relationship, which is then checked against the context. *Pri*, by contrast, evokes an external proximity schema with a dimensional LM whose role is primarily that of location. In (34) below, both sentences are, in principle, ambiguous, but it is more likely that the Slovene one will be understood in the spatial sense and the English one in the functional sense:

- (34) a. *Moški pri klavirju je moj brat.*
b. *The man at the piano is my brother.*

¹⁴ *Behind* is possible only in the locative sense.

¹⁵ *On* is possible only in the sense 'performing on the piano'.



This difference accounts for the relatively low occurrence of *pri* in comparison with *at* and explains why *pri* and *at* cannot be treated as equivalents.

4. Conclusion

The paper has looked into the use of spatial prepositions in object-of-activity contexts in English and Slovene. English *at* is perfectly suited for this role, which is due to its indefiniteness regarding the TR-LM arrangement and the conceptualization of the LM as a zero-dimensional reference point. With no direct equivalent in Slovene, *at* has to seek its counterparts in prepositions that lexicalize more specific spatial arrangements, namely *za* ('behind'), *na* ('on') and *pri* ('by'). The most reliable signal of the object-of-activity function appears to be *za* because it presupposes the trajector's orientation towards the inherently functional side of the landmark. A notable discrepancy can be observed between the prevalence of *at* and the relatively low occurrence of *pri*, which is a clear manifestation of the fact that *at* has functional associations while *pri* is primarily a spatial preposition. Furthermore, the relative vagueness of *pri* often leads to ambiguity concerning the actual relationship while *za* and *na* are more reliable in this respect. The lexical meaning of *za* or *na* implies a specific spatial arrangement – the less plausible the implied arrangement in a given context, the more reliable the preposition as a signal of the object-of-activity function. Nevertheless, although the lexical meaning of the preposition may contribute indirectly to signalling the functional relationship, the LM's functionality is not part of its semantics and remains a pragmatic specification that has to be derived from the context.

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UPORABA PRIJEDLOGA S FUNKCIJOM ORIJENTIRA KAO PREDMETA RADNJE U EN- GLESKOME I SLOVENSKOME

Rad se bavi uporabom prostornih prijedloga s PREDMETOM RADNJE u engleskom i slovenskom. Taj pojam odnosi se na orijentir u funkcionalnoj relaciji s trajektorom pri čemu je trajektor uključen u normalnu uporabu orijentira (kao u frazi *the man at the wheel*). U engleskom se funkcija predmet radnje obično signalizira prijedlogom *at*. U radu se pokazuje da za *at* u slovenskome nema direktnoga ekvivalenta, nego postoje tri mogućnosti sa specifičnijim značenjima: *za* (behind), *na* (on) i *pri* (by). Rad ukazuje na relativno nisku pojavu slovenskoga *pri* u usporedbi s engleskim *at*, te se tvrdi da je *at* vezan za funkciju, a *pri* je prvenstveno prostorni prijedlog. Na funkciju predmet radnje u slovenskome obično ukazuje *za*, jer podrazumijeva usmjerenost trajektora prema strani orijentira inherentno vezanoj uz njegovu funkciju. U radu se također ističe da iako leksičko značenje prijedloga može igrati ulogu pri oslanjanju na njega kao više ili manje pouzdanog indikatora funkcionalnog odnosa, funkcionalna uloga orijentira ostaje specificirana pragmatički te se može izvesti samo iz konteksta.

Ključne riječi: prostorni prijedlozi; engleski jezik; slovenski jezik; orijentir; predmet radnje; funkcionalni odnos.