

CONNECTED IN SPACE: PREPOSITIONS AND CASES

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SPATIAL CONCEPTS IN SLAVIC: A COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF PREPOSITIONS AND CASES

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Introduction

Natural language expressions for spatial phenomena have long been recognized as being extremely puzzling and closely interconnected. For over two millennia space has been among the issues greatly intriguing thinkers and serving as fertile grounds for vivid discussions. One of the claims that the distilling of various, frequently opposed views on the topic has slowly yielded is the idea that space is one of the fundamental intuitions built into our nature (let us just recall the notion of space proposed as a universal cognitive primitive within the Kantian tradition). Linguistics has been no exception in this sense. From the surface, lexical level to the deep, cognitive one, many linguists have focused on a) the (mis)matches between the physical and the linguistic; b) the fact that both in the literal and metaphorical realms of language, similar terms are often used in both domains. This comes as no surprise given the conceptual primacy of space.

The “conceptual primitiveness” of space has been revisited once again in the past thirty years, becoming a particularly attractive and prolific topic within the scientific framework of cognitive linguistics. The advent of cognitive linguistics brought

issues such as a) semantic and/or syntactic particularities of spatial language, b) the crosslinguistic variations in the linguistic expressions of space, and c) the interplay between (spatial) language and (spatial) conceptualization, into the focus of scholarly studies. These issues attracted such interest and provided such far reaching insights that they quickly became pillars of research within the discipline. It is no exaggeration to state that studies of spatial language and conceptualisation have been of fundamental importance in the development of cognitive linguistics.

It is, indeed, within this intellectual climate of cognitive linguistic research of spatial semantics’ explorations that the book ‘Spatial Concepts in Slavic: A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Prepositions and Cases’ by Ljiljana Šarić finds both its origin and target. An insightful study of the representation of selected prepositions and cases in a number of Slavic languages, this work aims at proposing answers that go beyond the basic descriptive, surface lexical level; the analysis proposed in the book might turn useful to anyone interested in the search for coding elements and principles that govern linguistic coding of spatial but also non-spatial domains, and possibly even beyond, into the

realm of the interrelation between spatial language, perception and cognition.

Although comparable studies, of both prepositions and cases, have been done for a number of Slavic languages (primarily Russian, followed by Polish, Czech, and Bulgarian), the work by Šarić proposes a particularly valuable feature, one that is rarely found in other works relative to the topics, i.e. a simultaneous analysis of both prepositional and case meanings, or rather, an analysis of their interrelation. Such an approach helps shed stronger light on both components under examination and helps reveal semantic and syntactic elements of both categories which, under approaches that look only at single language units, are likely to remain out of scholarly sight. Furthermore, most comparable analyses have left western South Slavic languages at the margin of the research focus. Šarić, on the other hand, puts the focus of the analysis of individual lexical items exactly on that group of languages, or, more precisely, on a group that she refers to as B/C/S (standing for Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian). In her own words, “B/S/C refers to the language area formerly known as Serbo-Croatian, which is presently differentiated into the standard languages of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian’ (Šarić, 2008: p.1). However, when in the book the author concentrates on examples and corpora from one of the three languages only, this is specified (e.g. all examples from Croatian). Yet, given the fact that most of the findings proposed in this book are applicable to all the three standard languages cited above, the author opted for the B/S/C language naming option.

Let us now turn to the review of the book, chapter by chapter.

Chapter 1: Spatial usages of prepositions and their relevance for other facets of prepositional semantics: Extensions from spatial meanings

The first chapter of the book focuses on what is the main theoretical notion that this work is concerned with, i.e. metaphorical expressions, or rather, extensions from the core spatial senses. The fact that the book on space in language proposes metaphor as the analytical point of departure might appear somewhat unusual. While the cognitive linguistic framework does propose metaphor as one of the most productive principles for semantic extensions from the prototypical (central) meanings toward more peripheral, but still related meanings, it is generally known and accepted that spatial metaphors, while being used for many other domains, are mappings onto space (in the physical sense). This latter is thus viewed as taking precedence over metaphor. This point is recognized in Šarić’s work too (e.g. theoretical analysis in pp 14 – 18).

However, given that the author in her book combines the treatment of prepositions and cases, and that the variation between the case marked on the object within the prepositional phrase is frequently determined by the distinction between spatial (physical) and metaphorical spatial (non-physical) contexts, it becomes evident that the issue of the relation between the spatial and non spatial usages of prepositions and cases presents itself right from the very start of the analysis.

In this first chapter, Šarić works on a series of selected examples which she uses to discuss both the notion of a spa-

tial prototype, as well as to try and show that the extensions from the prototype toward the semantic periphery (e.g. into the causal and temporal domains) are motivated. In both domains, general spatial schemes and semantic roles (e.g. place, path, source, goal) help explain the extension principles within the semantic network. The main spatial schemes that are presented in the chapter are: containment, support, isolation, proximity (attachment), orientation, and partitiveness. The prepositions looked at in this section include: *u, na, do, sa, oko, ka, iz*.

Before moving on, I would like to note that in this chapter the author makes what, in my view at least, is a very perceptive and potentially far reaching observation (which has not been sufficiently explored within the field of applied linguistics): that a cognitive semantic approach to prepositions is a valuable tool in the language learning process (p.18). In fact, in the light of the analysis proposed through the entire book, the same claim could be applied to cases as well, just as to the analysis and explication of the syntactico-semantic relations between prepositional phrases (particularly when it comes to the case marked on the object within the PP).

Chapter 2: Surface and container image schemas

In chapter 2, the author concentrates on two basic spatial prepositions, 'in' and 'on' (or rather on the concepts of 'in-ess' and 'on-ess'). We are talking about two central spatial prepositions, conceptually very prominent in all natural languages (but, obviously, sometime lexicalized with

lexical devices other than prepositions), which are also extremely productive when it comes to metaphorical extensions. Indeed, in this chapter Šarić tries to show that the meaning network of the two prepositions under analysis actually helps explain the meaning of the cases they combine with: the accusative and locative.

The chapter opens with the analysis of the semantics of the preposition 'na' (Engl. 'on', 'onto', 'at', 'to' – p.33). The analysis predominantly concentrates on the spatial usages (i.e. meanings) of the preposition, which are shown as representing the basis for meaning extensions into other domains. In the second part of the chapter (section 2.2., p.80, onwards), an analogous approach is applied to the preposition 'u'. A particularly interesting and valuable feature of this chapter is the comparison of 'na' (i.e. its translational equivalents), and, somewhat more marginally of 'u', in Slavic languages other than B/S/C (i.e. Slovenian, Russian and Polish). Such a comparative, or rather contrastive approach points to some crosslinguistic divergences not just in the basic usages, but in the prepositional and case pairings. These divergences, i.e. the need to observe, analyse and possibly explain them, represent one of the most challenging and potentially furthest reaching fields of investigation when it comes to the topic and the approach proposed in Šarić's work.

Chapter 3: Proximity prepositions: The examples of *kod* and *pri*

Having tackled the concepts of containment and support, the author turns

to another crucial spatial relation, that of proximity, which is the topic investigated in chapter 3. The central preposition under exam is represented by the 'kod' (translated as 'by, beside, next to, near, at; during, among'). The complexity of the translational i.e. crosslinguistic equivalence picture depicted between the semantics of 'kod' and its translational equivalents in the English language, stands to suggest that this is a semantically opaque and interesting preposition. 'Kod', a preposition selecting an object in the genitive, is examined in the spatial domain, but also in context of affiliation, temporal simultaneity, accompanying circumstances, reference point, and of comparison and contrast. A particularly valuable contribution to the overall study of prepositions within the cognitive framework, and even more so to the normativization of the B/S/H languages, stems from the observation that 'kod' occurs in both static and dynamic contexts. Although it primarily relates to static scenes, it is its dynamic usages that seem to shed light on some very interesting elements inherent in the relation between the (dynamic) 'kod' and the genitive, or rather on some elements inherent in the semantics of the genitive case. Of course, the analysis is heavily anchored to the verb that the PP is linked to, or rather, commanded by.

Another preposition expressing proximity that is investigated in this chapter is 'pri', which is particularly interesting from the crosslinguistic perspective. In fact, Šarić manages to show not just the crosslinguistic extension patterns from the semantic core to the periphery in various languages, but she also proposes an

account as to the (many) different metaphorical extensions and meaning shifts that may occur in individual languages, even when these languages are closely related. Finally, this chapter provides not just an insightful account of the various more and less prototypical senses of the prepositions under exam, but 'pri' and 'kod' also turn out to provide excellent pointers to the semantic features of the two cases they combine with, i.e. the locative and the genitive, respectively.

Chapter 4: The spatial meaning of the dative case

In chapter 4 the author turns to a somewhat different perspective. Rather than departing from a preposition and then looking at the cases the preposition selects on its object, Šarić takes a case – the dative – as her point of analytical departure. She observes that the dative (along with the instrumental) resembles a 'spatial case proper' in some languages, since it conveys information about space even when used without a preposition. The aim of this section is 'not to provide an exhaustive analysis of the semantic network of the dative case, but to highlight the general issues that directly or indirectly relate to the spatial semantics of the dative' (Šarić, 2008: 207). In chapter 4 Šarić examines dative's core prepositional usages, the bare directional dative in B/ C/ S, and the semantic relation of the bare directional dative to other meaning domains of this case. It is proposed that prepositional datives indicate clearly spatial expressions, whereas bare dative forms tend to (cognitively) resemble oth-

er, non spatial domains of the dative case (and the spatial bare dative forms are viewed as non prototypical). The crosslinguistic perspective (B/S/C primarily in relation to Russian and Polish translational counterparts) is a strong feature of this section, too.

Concluding remarks

In the concluding remarks to her book, Ljiljana Šarić proposes an outline of the main theoretical implication that the analyses proposed in the previous chapters seem to guide the reader to. She underlines the need for a comparative, i.e. crosslinguistic approach to analysis of linguistic phenomena. More specifically, she points to the need to comparatively and contrastively analyse linguistic phenomena in related languages (such as South Slavic), which are absent (at least at the surface level) from other languages i.e. linguistic groups. It is, indeed, the approaches such as those advocated by Šarić that will necessarily guide us toward new insights into not just structural characteristics of language(s), but also toward answers relative to the relation between language and conceptualization. Furthermore, in the final part of her work Šarić, once gain, points to the need to explore the semantic core (i.e. prototypical meanings) and (metaphoric) extensions, or rather, their relation, as, ultimately, the core is generally composes of a limited set of basic elements, and the principles of (semantic) extension are, at least partly, conventional. The rationale is that the set of basic elements should be defined, and the principles of extension – described.

The conventionality of the extensional principles can be explored within a single lexical category (e.g. preposition and prepositional semantic extensions, or rather usage/semantic networks), but also – and perhaps more thoroughly – by taking under exam two (or more) related categories, e.g. prepositions and cases, thus combining the analysis of lexical role and reference.

To conclude this review, we may wish to observe that the approach proposed by Šarić in her ‘Spatial Concepts in Slavic’ represents a valid analytical method for future research, Indeed, further work in this framework, which combines the semantico-syntactic features of prepositions and cases, is most urgently needed. In fact, one possible weakness of Šarić’s book lies exactly in the limitation imposed on the analysis by the narrow (and, to a degree, not entirely systematic) choice of prepositions and cases that the analysis focuses on. In other words, any claims to theoretical generalization would greatly gain in value and convincement if the author either selected a narrower number of prepositions and analysed all cases that those could combine with, or, alternatively, focused on a narrow number of cases, and then investigated all the prepositions that these combine with. Such an approach would help shed light on not just the relation from the spatial toward the non spatial (metaphorical) in both categories, but would also possibly help gain a deeper insight into the semantic components of each lexical category, as well as point to elements relative to the semantic-syntactic relation between the categories.

Another point that might be worth pointing out, so as to suggest directions of future research, is that the treatment of prepositions, viewed primarily from the topological and / or geometrical perspective, could and possibly should be broadened so as to include the functional approach as well (c.f. e.g. Vandeloise, 2006). It has namely been shown that the analysis of prepositional semantics from which does not take into account the functional aspect inherent in their meanings, may conceal a number of their semantic and syntactic features (and, most interestingly, issues relative to the semantico-syntactic interface). An excellent example in this sense is provided by Šarić's discussion of the 'o'-accusative vs. the 'u'-accusative (p.102). The author views the main feature underlying the alternation as being largely determined by 'intentionality'. An analysis of the semantics of the preposition 'o' from the force-dynamic perspective (cf. Brala-Vukanović, 2009, 81-82) seems to suggest that this might not be the case, or, at least, not the whole story, and that functional elements represent key features of prepositional semantics.

Having specified some points that might need further elaboration, I would like to conclude this review by pointing out, once again, what seems the greatest

merit of this work, i.e. its very perceptive approach to the interrelation of prepositions and cases *simultaneously*. Given the practical findings and theoretical conclusions presented in the book, it is beyond any doubt that this is work of very high scholarly merit, which represents a rich source of data and ideas for anyone with an interest in Slavic languages, their structure and semantics, as well as an excellent point of departure for linguists working within the cognitive framework, particularly those who focus on the expression of space and language and the relation between language and conceptualization.

References

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