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Cross-linguistic comparisons: A case study involving Irish and Italian prepositions

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Abstract

Cross-linguistic comparison of unrelated or distantly related languages is often hindered by the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between the formal repertoires of the different languages. This article presents an example of such a situation, where the comparison of the Irish and Italian prepositional inventories is made impossible, on a formal basis, by the different sizes of the two sets of forms and the different semantic segmentation of the spatial-content continuum, i.e., the fact that one and the same form can express different concepts in a way that is cross-linguistically not always valid, and – conversely – that one and the same concept may be expressed by more than one linguistic form in a language and by just one in the other. A possible way of tackling this problem for the case at hand, based on a conceptual rather than formal comparison, is subsequently expounded. The aims of the comparison in point, that is, finding patterns of metaphorical sense extensions in the domain of Irish and Italian prepositions, are also explained.

1 Introduction

When comparing two or more languages with respect to a certain aspect of their grammar, one may find that the comparison is made difficult by the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between the elements of the grammatical system to be examined. This can be easily observed in the case of closed-class linguistic forms such as prepositions. In this article, which accounts for part of the analysis carried out in my MPhil dissertation (Frenda 2005), an example is presented of a situation where such difficulty arose, and the method is presented whereby I tried to solve the problem posed by the apparent incomparability of two systems.

Frenda (2005) is a comparative analysis of Irish and Italian aimed at accounting for the widespread polysemy that characterizes prepositions in terms of the theory of metaphorical semantics as defined and supported by George Lakoff. The fundamental idea with that research study is that the meaning of prepositions is primarily spatial and that metaphor works as a pervasive conceptual mechanism linking the different meanings of one and the same preposition in a motivated and principled way.

These ideas, brought forward by a number of works in the domain of cognitive linguistics (see section 2 below for an account), were to be tested against two different Indo-European languages, Irish and Italian. In order for this to be done, it was necessary to find a common ground for comparing the two systems.

2 Prepositions and polysemy: The metaphorical semantics account

The distinction between closed- and open-class forms is functionally exploited by Talmy (2000), who explains it in terms of the opposition between non-lexical and lexical forms respectively. Open-class (lexical) forms are typically represented by nouns and verbs: it

is normally the case that in a spoken language their number is constantly accrued by loanwords and the formation of neologisms. Closed-class (non-lexical) forms, on the other hand, are defined as being not easily augmentable in number – in other words, closed-class repertoires are not subject to being updated by borrowings or neologisms (also cf. Frenda 2005:22). Prepositions are a handy example of closed-class forms: in a language, the restricted set of prepositions and prepositional forms is rather frozen and not open to the introduction of new members.

For instance, technological development may bring along a series of lexical entries (nouns) to describe new devices and applications (IT has been, for the past century, an inexhaustible source of neologisms and cases of resemanticization[23]). On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that a new preposition be introduced to express a new kind of relation brought about by technology: for instance, no new preposition has been invented and introduced to express the relation between SENDER OF AN E-MAIL and RECEIVER OF AN E-MAIL – to the contrary, prepositions holding for relations between SENDER and RECEIVER of ordinary mail, like *from* and *to* in English, have been successfully applied to the new context.

Frenda (2005) examines precisely this aspect of prepositions, i.e. their capacity of expressing different kinds of relations, or in other words, their inherently polysemous character. By this definition, not only is it meant that polysemy is a characteristic of prepositions, but also that, by virtue of their highly schematic nature, prepositions are typically fit to describe a number of more specific situations sharing the same kind of general schema (cf. for instance Talmy 2000:162–4) – hence the claim of their *inherent* polysemy.

The starting point of my discussion, there, was the assumption that the basic meaning of each preposition is a spatial one; that is, prepositions primarily describe a relation in space between entities, and typically two of them: a more prominent (figure) and a less prominent one (ground).[24] The fact that prepositions are commonly employed to express relations of a non-spatial kind is explained – according to Lakoff (1993) – by the notion of *metaphorical sense extension*. According to this view – which Lakoff terms a theory of *metaphorical semantics* – sense extension is made possible thanks to a process of metaphorical mapping of conceptual structure from one domain (the basic one, i.e. space) to a new, less concrete domain (e.g. time, emotions, etc.; cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This process allows for the human mind to employ well established and immediately understood conceptual schemes in order to make sense of abstract scenarios by setting up analogies between the basic and the non-basic. In Lakoff's terms, this is exactly what is called a *metaphorical mapping* of

[23] Cf. neologisms like *e-mail*, *internet*, *webspace* etc., and the resemanticization of existing words like *mouse*, *provider*, *portal*, etc.

conceptual structure: a concrete, spatial-like relation is used to make sense of a more abstract one thanks to some analogies that can be established between the two. For instance, a process of chronological succession of events like history or a person's life can be readily represented as a material experience, e.g. a journey (Lakoff and Turner 1989:61ff.), i.e. a progression on a path: analogies holding between life as chronological succession of events and life as voyage include BIRTH = STARTING POINT, DEATH = END OF JOURNEY, etc.

3 Finding common grounds for cross-linguistic comparison

It is a long-established tenet of linguistic typology that cross-linguistic comparisons should be based on parameters of meaning/function rather than on formal, language-dependent ones (cf. Croft 1990:11–8, Stassen 1985:14f.). The reason why it should be so is easily explained: by merely comparing formal structures, one will unavoidably exclude from the comparison those languages where a given formal structure is not found. On the other hand, if pragmatic functions are first singled out, one can compare the different formal structures that different languages employ in order to fulfil those functions. For instance, if the expression of spatial relationships were the issue, basing a cross-linguistic comparison on prepositions will lead to excluding from the analysis languages where such relationships are expressed by postpositions. In other words, one ought to allow for the structures to be compared cross-linguistically to be not necessarily coincident from a formal point of view, and rather choose them on a semantic basis – i.e., on account of their fulfilling a common function.

In our case, we set to compare two languages with respect to a formal structure that is known to be exhibited by both, that is, prepositions, in order to proceed further with the analysis of their metaphorical sense extensions. Now, although both languages do feature the class of prepositions, it was found that there was no one-to-one correspondence between the two prepositional inventories, the Irish and the Italian one. In fact, as far as simple prepositions go,[25] it was found that the Irish and Italian inventories for such prepositions, as retrieved from school grammars rather than specialized academic works,[26] differed in both size (number of items contained) and quality (semantic content), as shown by Tables 1 and 2.

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[24] The terms "figure" and "ground" were first used in this sense by Gestalt psychologists (cf. the account given by Zelinsky-Wibbelt 1993b:9). In linguistic studies, Langacker's (1987) terms "trajector" (for *figure*) and "landmark" (for *ground*) are also used.

[25] The definition of *simple* prepositions (as opposed to *complex* prepositions or *prepositional locutions*: cf. Lehmann 1998) is based on parameters of morphological simplicity and traditional grammar description: see Frenda (2005:28f.).

[26] Such as Mac Congáil (2004:62) for Irish, Sensini (1992:240) for Italian.

Followed by the nominative case:	**gan** 'without', **idir** 'between', **seachas** 'other than'
Followed by the dative case:	**ag** 'at', **ar** 'on', **as** 'out of', **chuig** 'to', **de** 'of', **do** 'to', **faoi** 'under', **go** 'to', **i** 'in', **le** 'with', **ó** 'from', **roimh** 'before', **thar** 'past', **trí** 'through', **um** 'about'
Followed by the genitive case:	**chun** 'to', **dála** 'as', **fearacht** 'as', **timpeall** 'around', **trasna** 'across'

Table 1: Simple prepositions as included in the Irish corpus (Frenda 2005:29).

di 'of', **a** 'at, to', **da** 'from', **in** 'in', **con** 'with', **su** 'on', **per** 'though, for', **tra/fra**[27] 'between'

Table 2: Simple prepositions as included in the Italian corpus (Frenda 2005:30).

That is, as can be easily seen by comparing Tables 1 and 2, not only does Irish exhibit more prepositions, so that a one-to-one correspondence is made a priori impossible, but the case also is that there is deep semantic incomparability between the two sets if individual forms from one language are to be compared to individual forms from the other.

To begin with, one language might have simple prepositions to express concepts that the other language entrusts to more complex forms: for instance, Italian has no simple preposition to express 'other than' (Irish *seachas*), and must resort to the complex form *oltre a*. At the same time, one language can entrust one form with more than one meaning whereas the other language keeps the two meanings lexically separate by employing two different forms; the converse is also possible, i.e., two or more forms might be indifferently be utilized to convey the same meaning. For instance, Italian *a* means both 'at' and 'to', whereas in Irish no preposition is found which expresses these two meanings: in fact, 'at' is translated by Irish *ag*, and 'to' is rendered by a number of forms including *chun*, *chuig*, *do*. The last observation

[27] *Tra* and *fra* are traditionally considered variants of the same prepositions (although historically they have developed from two different Latin prepositions, i.e., *intra* 'within' and *infra* 'under', respectively). Synchronically, they have no difference whatever in meaning and their choice seems to be only determined by euphony, to avoid the repetition of the same consonant cluster (e.g., ***tra fr**atelli* 'between brothers' is preferred to ***fra fr**atelli*, ***fra Tr**eviso e Venezia* 'between Treviso and Venice' to ***tra Tr**eviso e Venezia*): cf. Cortelazzo and Zolli (1980: s.v. *fra*; 1988: s.v. *tra*); Sensini (1988: p.216).

shows, in turn, how more than one form can be used to express one and the same concept in Irish.[28]

In order to make a comparison between the two sets possible, the meanings of the various prepositions were recovered from grammars (see above) and dictionaries (mainly Ó Dónaill 1977 for Irish, Zingarelli 1949 and The Oxford-Paravia Concise for Italian). Subsequently, their basic spatial meanings (BSMs for short) were isolated and compared, to be used as a reference for the cross-linguistic comparison. A graphic representation of the comparative analysis is shown in Figure I:

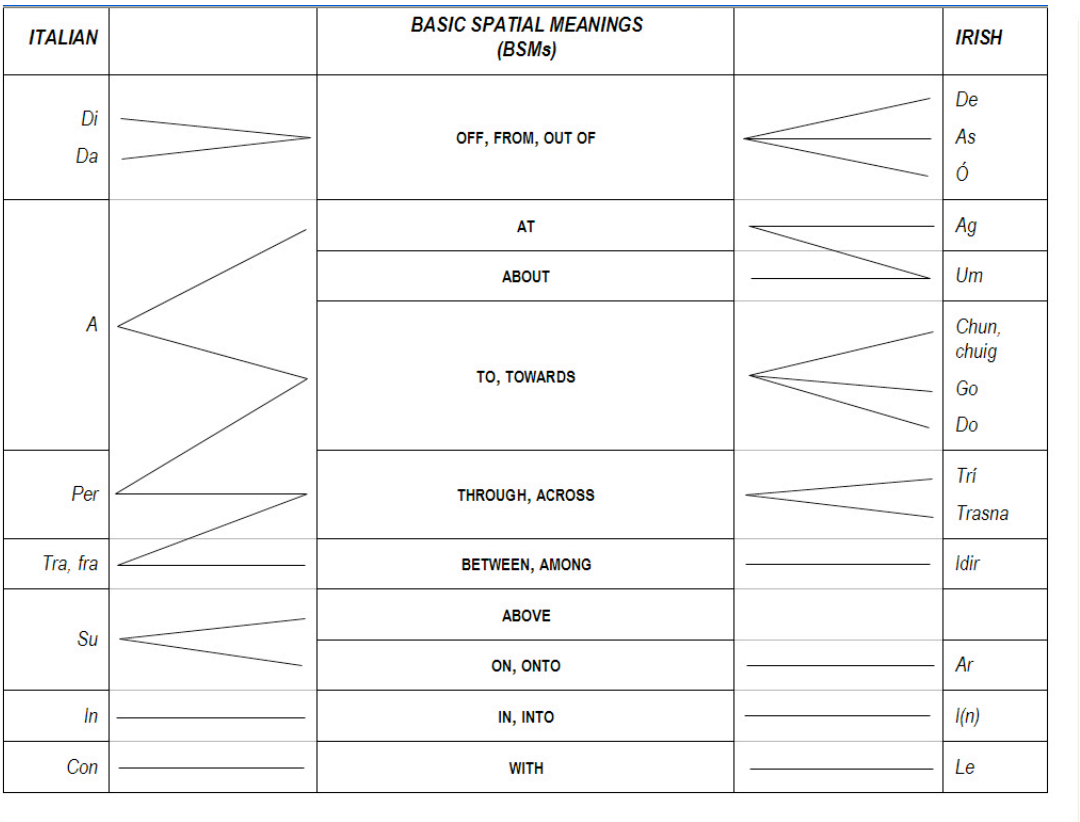

Figure I: Interrelationships between the basic spatial meanings of Italian (leftmost column) and Irish prepositions (rightmost column) (from Frenda 2005:33).

As can be seen in Figure I, eight of the Irish prepositions present in Table 1 (namely *dála*, *faoi*, *fearacht*, *gan*, *roimh*, *seachas*, *timpeall*, *thar*) were excluded from the comparison, as no semantic equivalents could be found for them among Italian prepositions. Only simple prepositions that had a comparable semantic core with one or more forms of the other language's repertoire were included.

[28] Besides, it might be the case that different forms express different shades of a concept that are thus kept formally distinct in a language but merged together in the other. This, at any rate, does not seem to be the case in Irish, were *chun/chuig*, *go* and *do* does not seem to differ on the basis of the selection of their objects (cf. Frenda 2005:40f.)

Therefore, what Figure I shows is an example of cross-linguistic comparison based on functional/semantic – rather than formal/lexical – criteria: a set of cross-linguistic correspondences between forms is set up through the medium of language-independent spatial concepts (our BSMs), which are not linguistic forms but abstract units of content. In other words, given a certain function, two or more linguistic forms from the two languages are associated on the basis of their common capability of being employed to carry out that function. For instance, Irish *de/as/ó* and Italian *di/da* can be associated in that all of them may be utilized to express SOURCE (i.e. the BSM FROM).

4 Conclusions

Cross-linguistic comparison on a formal basis may prove itself a difficult or impossible task, in that comparing language-specific structures will lead to excluding from the analysis those languages where a the same function is fulfilled by a formally different structure. To overcome this difficulty, one solution is to compare whatever kinds of linguistic forms are put into use by different languages in order to convey a certain semantic content.

Even when, like in our example, the same kind of linguistic structure does in fact exist in the two (or more) languages to be compared, it may be the case that their actual repertoires differ to various extents. Again, the same principle may be successfully applied and the two (or more) repertoires be compared via the correspondences that can be established on a semantic/functional basis between them.

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