

The Semantics of Three Locative Prepositions in English

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The relationship between natural language and spatial cognition has held an irresistible fascination for psychologists, linguists, anthropologists and neuroscientists, to mention only a few. Typical questions addressed are: How does the mind encode spatial information? How do we talk about the spatial aspects of our environment? Where does space get into language? How is space conceptualized? Is spatial structure culture-specific? How is space grammaticalized? The focus of this paper is on the way in which space is conceptualized in English. Drawing on the theoretical insights gained from current studies in the field of lexical semantics, this paper attempts to carry out a systematic analysis of three non-directional locative prepositions – 'at', 'in', and 'on' – with a view to identifying their distinguishing marks, particularly when they co-occur with nouns as their objects. To this end, the analysis is conducted along four axes: dimensionality, markedness, scalarity and environmental description. The underlying assumption is that each of the three prepositions in question can be characterized as exhibiting a unique combination of these axial features so much so that there is no possibility of their being interchanged in a syntactic milieu without affecting the meaning involved. Thus, 'at' can be delineated as [zero-dimensional], [unmarked], [typically scalar] and [environmentally irrelevant]. 'In', by contrast, is [three-dimensional], [marked], [non-scalar], and [environmentally relevant]. As for 'on', it is [two-dimensional], [marked], [non-scalar] and [environmentally relevant]. The fact that these locative prepositions can at times co-occur with the same object (e.g. at the sink, on the sink, in the sink) does not invalidate our theoretical orientation. What actually happens in such cases is that each preposition tends to make the following noun harmonize with it by activating the relevant features specific to it. In this respect, the constraints imposed by contextual and pragmatic factors are by no means insignificant.

Key words: Semantics, spatial cognition, conceptualization, dimensionality, markedness, scalarity, environmental description

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