

Construal of English Prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*

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ABSTRACT

The use of English preposition is a little bit confusing, especially for Indonesians. It is because Indonesia only has one preposition *di-* to indicate the English prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*. In this research, it is found that the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* are used differently based on the relation between the object and the landmark. For preposition *in*, the concept of containment is introduced. This preposition is used when the object is surrounded by the landmark. For preposition *on*, the concept of contact and support is highlighted, and gravity takes part in the use of this preposition. It means that the object should be in contact with the landmark and the landmark should support the object so that it will not move or fall. Lastly, the preposition *at* requires us to portray an imaginary location to determine a certain point of the object. By using the correct preposition *in*, *on*, and *at*, one can have linguistic knowledge, and be able to avoid ambiguity to convey correct messages or ideas to the interlocutors.

Keywords: *at*, *cognitive semantics*, *in*, *on*, *prepositions*, *principles*

INTRODUCTION

English prepositions are frequently used in sentence construction. However, not all, especially in Indonesia, are able to use the correct prepositions. The most problematic English prepositions are *in*, *on*, and *at*. The two reasons are, first, the translations of those prepositions are *di-* in Indonesia and, the second, English is considered as the foreign language in Indonesia, where people have little exposure to using the language.

There are a number of English prepositions, with different notions or purposes when they are used in sentences, such as to show time, place, movement, to say something metaphorical, etc.. This paper is only concerned with *in*, *on*, and *at* as they have similar meaning in Indonesian, but have different principles to follow. The focus is only on *in*, *on*, and *at*, which are used to describe a place.

As previously mentioned, in English, each of those prepositions has different purposes of use in good and correct sentence production. For example, the sentence *Buku itu ada di meja* is translated into *That book is on the table*, while *Buku itu ada di tas* is translated into *That book is in the bag*. The sentence *Saya meninggalkan buku itu di rumah* is translated into *I left that book at home*. Notice the prepositions used in those sentences; in Indonesian, the preposition of place used is only *di*, while those in English, they are *in*, *on*, and *at*.

The use of prepositions here seems to be fluid as it depends on how the speakers see the relation between the object and the landmark (Dirven, 1994). Compared to native speakers of English, Indonesians need to learn the prepositions more thoroughly and rely on their cognition to use them correctly, while native speakers rely on their intuitions. In this article, data of sentences containing prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* were taken from Cambridge dictionary, and were

analyzed by means of construal semantics to draw what principles are to observe in their use.

Analyzing English prepositions will help Indonesians to distinguish one preposition from another, although they have the same meaning in Indonesian. In translation, it is very important since correct prepositions should be used because translation is not merely changing the text from one language to another, but in essence a matter of transferring meaning, messages, and ideas as well (Hatim & Munday, 2004). In translating prepositions, one needs to know the culture of the TL, and this is very closely related to cognitive process (Zelinsky-Wibbelt, *Interpreting and translating prepositions: A cognitively based formalization*, 1994). In language learning, analysis of the use of English prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*, will facilitate Indonesians to use these prepositions in sentence construction. The principles and differences of using *in*, *on*, and *at* will be clearer and help one produce correct sentences, so that mistakes in using them can be avoided.

This paper consists of four parts, namely introduction, theoretical reviews, discussion, and the last part is concluding remarks. The first part discusses the background, scope, and purpose. The second deals with the theories of what construal is, and the review of English prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*. The third deals with the discussion of each preposition and their significance, and the last part is the concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL REVIEWS

Construal

In sentence production, language is formed first in the brain before sentences are uttered to communicate; we cannot say something without having anything in mind (Hottenroth, 1994). It is also related to the notion of “path” when we undergo a certain

process before we are able to form a sentence (Kaufman, 1994). In seeing something or communicating ideas, speakers need to construct the language using a certain frame to make the hearers understand the message. This process is a closely linked to the relationship between linguistic knowledge and cognition (Rambaud, 2012). Every sentence produced is related to mental processes of attention, memory, and reasoning.

The language formation here is driven by the concept of the real things and the linguistic experience of the speakers (Radden & Dirven, 2007). Construal here is different from one person to another since it is closely related to the thought or the perception of each speaker. To form perception, there are nine principles, namely “(i) viewing frame, (ii) generality vs specificity, (iii) viewpoint, (iv) objectivity vs subjectivity, (v) mental scanning, and (vi) fictive motion; the latter three relate to prominence: (vii) windowing of attention, (viii) figure and ground, and (ix) profiling.” (Radden & Dirven, 2007).

The first principle in forming perception is the viewing frame. This kind of perception is driven by the actual scene seen by the observer. In this viewing frame, the observer perceives that the situation is in progress or a routine. The use of the verb in the sentence will determine the perception of the observer in this viewing frame. Then, the generality and specificity concern with the precision of a certain scene. The use of grammatical categories in a sentence is a sign that the scene is in a general distinction. In specific distinction, the sentence will use lexical categories.

The third perception is called viewpoint, where the scene is seen differently from one person to another. The viewpoint here concerns with the use of the verb of motion that will determine the point of view of the sentence. In objectivity and subjectivity,

the important thing to consider is the involvement of the subject. A sentence is called an objective sentence when the subject is not involved in the sentence, and a sentence is called a subjective sentence when the speaker is involved in the sentence.

The next perception is mental scanning when the speaker has an imaginary situation based on the sentence produced. The imaginary situation here involves several processes and it will be different from one speaker to another. In the fictive motion, it is more or less the same with mental scanning when the speaker has some imaginary situation. However, in this fictive motion, the process is clearer. It means that there will be a start and there will be an end as well.

In windowing of attention, the speaker is in a certain situation, but he only focuses on a certain thing. Then in figure and ground, the speaker arranges the sentence based on the importance of the event. Lastly, in profiling, it is more or less the same with the figure and ground, but the sentence is arranged based on the expression and conceptual base,

However, it is a little bit different when it comes to the analysis of prepositions. In analyzing the prepositions, the spatial scene and bounded landmarks are the main things to consider (Tyler & Evans, 2003). The spatial scene here consists of two main points which are related to the physical location of the things being described and the non-physical concept of the things. Based on Lang (1994), the spatial location here is also related to "the height, width or depth of objects and prepositions locating objects in relation to the top-bottom, front-back etc. axis of other objects is intuitively obvious". Meanwhile, the bounded landmarks deal with the dimension where the things are being described. The bounded landmarks also deal with our knowledge in perceiving

a certain sentence. Both the spatial scene and bounded landmarks are related to one another and they are very beneficial in understanding the relation between the landmark and the object being described.

English Prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*

The prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* are sometimes confusing to use as they have more or less the same uses. The examples have been given before and it is clear that those three prepositions are very risky to use, especially for Indonesians. Since the use of prepositions in Indonesian and English is different, a spatial relation between the object and its place or landmark should be presented (Cuyckens, 1994).

The preposition *in*, for example, requires the landmark to support the object (Lindstromberg, 2010). The characteristic for this preposition is that the landmark will save the object and prevent it to fall or move. The concept of containment will be used here since the object is inside a certain landmark (Conventry & Garrod, 2004). Instead of just supporting the object in one side, there will be more sides to support the object so that it will be kept perfectly. The preposition *in* is also related to our perception of the concept of containment. If something is *in* something, it means that it is surrounded by the landmark (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

For the preposition *on*, the object should be in a contact with the landmark (Lindstromberg, 2010). The other characteristic is that the landmark acts like a supporting surface so it will support the object and it will not fall. The explanation is quite similar to the use of preposition *in*, but in preposition *in*, the landmark is only supporting the object on one side. Besides, some things do not need to be in a direct contact and support since this kind of preposition is usually used by some speakers to exaggerate things. In using this preposition, we perceive something based

on its relation between the support and the consequence (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

The use of preposition *at* is actually a little bit confusing since the relation between the landmark and the object is a little bit unclear. Based on Lindstromberg (2010), preposition *at* is often used “whether the Subject is near the Landmark but not touching it; whether it is right by the Landmark and touching it; or whether indeed the Subject is on, in or among the Landmark”. Therefore in using preposition *at*, the speaker needs to have a certain ability to imagine the location of the subject in the landmark. Also, the preposition *at* is used for indicating something that is very specific instead of the general one.

DISCUSSION

In this part, the construal of the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* is discussed in the light of the theories mentioned previously along with the examples taken from dictionaries. This part also presents the discussion and significance of using *in*, *on*, and *at*.

Construal of English Preposition *in*

As previously mentioned, the use of preposition *in* here is closely related to the concept of containment where the object is surrounded by the landmark. In using *in*, the concept of spatio-physical and that of non-spatio-physical containment are used, as seen in the following examples.

- (1) Put the milk back in the fridge when you've finished with it.
- (2) They live in a charming old cottage.
- (3) What's that in your hand?

In sentences (1)-(3), the use of *in* is to indicate the spatio-physical containment. All the objects in those sentences are surrounded by the physical landmark. In (1), the object *milk* will be placed inside the *fridge* and it will be surrounded by the

physical landmark of the *fridge*. Similar to (1), (2) also involves the relation between the object *they* and the landmark *cottage*. In (3), the object is surrounded by the landmark *hand* and if the hand is moved then the object will also move. Then, the preposition *in* in those sentences is used correctly since the landmark support the things. It means that the relation between the object and the landmark in the spatio-physical containment is closely related.

- 4) I never know what's going on in her head

Compared to (1), (2), and (3), (4) here do not have a physical location to indicate the landmark. The *head* here is more on the non-spatio-physical location because it is related to human's emotion. The idea of *knowing* and the non-physical location of *head* is linked, and we can easily understand the sentence since those two concepts are associated with one another.

Construal of English Preposition *on*

The idea of *on* in a sentence is the physical arrangement of the object and the landmark or surface. The object here should be in contact with the surface and the surface should support the object so that it will not fall or move. Therefore, the two important aspects to consider in the use of *on* are the contact and the support.

- (5) Look at all the books on your desk!
- (6) Ow, you're standing on my foot!
- (7) Your suitcase is on top of the wardrobe.
- (8) I got on my bike and left.

In sentence (5), the *books* are in contact with the surface *desk* and the *desk* is supporting the *books* so that they will not fall or move. This concept is similar to sentences (6), (7), and (8) where there is a contact between the objects and the surfaces, and the surfaces are supporting the objects.

Construal of English Preposition *at*

In using the preposition *at*, we need to be able to imagine the location of the object being discussed. The preposition *at* here will be used when the object is in a certain point of the location.

- (9) That bit *at* the beginning of the film was brilliant.
- (10) She was standing *at* the top of the stairs.
- (11) There's someone *at* the door
- (12) I enjoyed my three years *at* university.

In sentence (9), the preposition *at* is used to indicate a certain point or position of the film which is the beginning of the film. When we imagine the whole film, we will automatically refer to a certain point of the film since it is bounded in the sentence by using *at*. This concept is also similar in sentences (10), (11), and (12) when the sentences require us to image a whole situation or landmark and we automatically refer to a certain point since they are given the certain boundaries. In terms of generality and specificity, the preposition *at* is more specific since it is pointing in a certain landmark.

The Significant Use of English Preposition *in*, *on*, and *at* in Using English

The use of English preposition *in*, *on*, and *at* is very important in sentence construction. As mentioned previously, the

use of each is different from one another. The significance in using *in*, *on*, and *at* reflects our linguistic knowledge and plays significant role in successfully communicating messages or ideas.

Using correctly *in*, *on*, and *at* in a sentence can indicate the knowledge of the speaker (Zelinsky-Wibbelt, Introduction, 1994). It is related to the concept of construal, since we tend to speak or construct a sentence based on our capacity of knowledge. As the use of prepositions varies from one another, using the correct preposition is very essential. The context of the sentence also determines what preposition to use and the way we perceive something, in terms of the relation between the object and the landmark, will also determine the correct preposition to use. When we understand these concepts, we will be able to produce good sentences.

The second significance is when any of the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* is used correctly, the message and ideas can be conveyed successfully (Zelinsky-Wibbelt, Introduction, 1994). Some prepositions can be ambiguous when we are not able to distinguish the different uses of them. Aspects like embodied meaning and the spatial scene should be considered to distinguish the use of the prepositions. When we can use them correctly, others can draw conclusions of the positioning of the object and, in turn, successfully understand the message or ideas conveyed.

CONCLUSION

In using *in*, *on*, and *at*, we Indonesians still face difficulties as we only know one preposition *di-* in indicating the place of an object. To produce good sentences, one should use the correct prepositions. To do so, the principal differences of each unique preposition of *in*, *on*, and *at* should also be well understood.

The basic concepts of understanding of the use of prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* are the

embodied meaning and spatial scene. These concepts will determine the relation between the object and the landmark so that we can use the prepositions correctly. For the preposition *in*, the object is surrounded by the landmark; so, when we move the landmark, the object will move as well. For the preposition *on*, the concept of contact

and support should be considered. For *on*, the object should have a contact with the

surface and the surface should support the object so that it will not fall or move. For *at*, we need to have in mind a certain image of the landmark of the object and we will know the exact location of the object.

By understanding the principles of the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*, we will have proper and accurate linguistic knowledge to be operational in the sentences we produce as they reflect the way we understand what we have in our mind to communicate. As a result, we will be able to convey messages and ideas successfully to others. It is possible only if we know precisely how an object and its landmark are related, which, in turn, leads to the correct choice and use of any of the three prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*.

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