ON THE SO-CALLED COMPLEX PREPOSITIONS IN KRIOL

HILDO HONÓRIO DO COUTO

Abstract. This essay has a three-fold purpose. First, I try to show that, from an ecolinguistic perspective, prepositions in general are not "empty words" having no relation to the extra-linguistic world. This makes it necessary to briefly present the new discipline ecolinguistics. Second, I give additional arguments in favor of the thesis that the basic meaning of prepositions is spatial. Temporality and notion (or abstract relation) are reducible to it. The basic spatial positions are represented in what I call the Ecology of Spatial Relations. The third purpose is the most important, i.e., to defend the thesis that there are arguments to prove that the so-called "complex prepositions" are not complex prepositions, but constructions of the type "in + NOUN + of".

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the number of prepositions in any language is very low, besides the fact that they do not refer to things in the world, but to the relationships between and among these things, they play a very important role in the mastering of language in general. We could even say that languages differ more from one another where preposition use is concerned. In fact, they present a big problem to L2 learners. Cases like *the bear is in the hills*, *they live on the island* and *John is on bus* sound very strange to Portuguese speakers. I myself wrote this essay in my Brazilian L2 version of English. When I gave it to native speakers of English for corrections, most of my errors turned out to be in the domain of prepositions. What is more, even native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese are not hundred percent sure about the use of certain prepositions, as is the case with *a literatura no Brasil* x *a literatura do Brasil* (lit. 'the literature *in* Brazil' x 'the literature *of* Brazil'). There is certainly a difference in meaning. However, this difference does not come so easily and stantaneously to the mind of speakers.

As we will see below, I hope, this does not mean that the meaning of prepositions is erratic, following no principle. At least in the realm of spatial prepositions, departing from Pottier's model reproduced in figure 1 as well as from the Ecology of Spatial Relations, figure 2, practically all such apparent deviations can be explained. Speakers of the several languages have approximately the same type of experience with the world. In this case, they see the same types of relations that obtain between and among the several aspects of it. That is to say, everybody shares the cognition of these relations. What happens with the apparently erratic use

RRL, **LIV**, *3–4*, p. 279–294, Bucureşti, 2009

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

of prepositions is that speakers of each language see roughly the same things in the world, as well as the same type or inter-relations that take place between or among them, from their respective point of view. This means that, at least in principle, if they regarded these relations from the same point of view, probably they would use approximately the same type of preposition for each specific relation.

Not only normative grammars but also most linguists consider a construction like *in back of* as a complex, or compound, preposition. Another assumption commonly found is that prepositions are "empty words", as can be seen in the works of the Chinese grammarians as well as, more recently, in those of the Danish structuralist linguist Louis Hjelmslev, to mention just two sources.

This essay has three main purposes. First, to try to show that prepositions are not empty words because they represent relations that take place between/among the several phenomena of the world. Second, we will see that the basic meaning of prepositions is spatial, or is reducible to it. Third, I defend the thesis that so-called "complex prepositions" look more like constructions made up of a preposition like *in*, a noun-like word and another preposition like *of*. The English example I have given in the previous paragraph is a case in point. We will see that it indicates precisely the position of object B that is in the back side of object A.

In setting up the list of Kriol prepositions I resorted to published studies, such as Scantamburlo (1981, 1999, 2002), Doneux & Rougé (1988), Kihm (1994) and Couto (1994). Additionally, I looked up for prepositions in 466 proverbs, 28 fables and 99 poems. Proverbs and fables tend to be written in a conservative variety of the language, whereas the poems are written by educated speakers.

2. LANGUAGE AND ENVIRONMENT

The environment of language is the extra-linguistic world. Sometimes I use "territory" instead of world. The subject comes up especially in the philosophical (or semiotic) study of reference, where the relationship between word and thing is investigated.

The topic "language and environment" is the subject of the new discipline **ecolinguistics**, which has been defined as the study of the interrelationships that obtain between language and its environment. However, there is not just one environment of language, as most forerunners of ecolinguistics have implied. Haugen (1972) related language only to the social environment. Sapir (1972) admitted, additionally, a natural environment. Generative grammar, as is widely known, considers language basically as a mental phenomenon. The fact is that language is related to all these three environments, namely, the social, the mental and the natural one. Before exploring them in relative detail, it is important to remember that the term environment belongs to ecological studies, which are part of biology. In ecology, environment is part of an ecosystem, which consists of a population of organisms and their interrelationships with the habitat/niche (or

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

biotope or territory) or among themselves. The ecolinguistic equivalent of ecosystem is the **Linguistic Ecosystem**, which consists, as common sense tells us, of a people (P), living in its territory (T) and speaking its own language (L). This ecosystem constitutes what has been called the **Natural Ecosystem of Language**, inside which we have the **Natural Environment of Language**, namely, the people and its territory. The Natural Ecosystem of Language has also been called **Fundamental Ecosystem of Language**, and the respective environment, the **Fundamental Environment of Language**. As will become clear, I hope, in section 3 and especially in section 4, the relations indicated by prepositions belong to this ecosystem.

For the sake of completeness, let me at least mention the other two environments of language. The **Mental Ecosystem of Language** is constituted by the neural connections that obtain in the brain/mind. It is here that language is formed, stored and processed, as Chomsky has always empahasizes. Inside this ecosystem, it is the brain/mind or, more precisely, the neural connections, that constitute the **Mental Environment of Language**. Finally, we have the **Social Ecosystem of Language**, made up of the totality of the members of P, which is nothing more than society. Society, in this sense, is the **Social Environment of Language**.

In this connection, **language** (L) is the linguistic equivalent of the interrelations that take place among the members of the population (P). It is seen as interaction, as the way they communicate. Therefore, when ecolinguists talk about the relationships that takes place between language and its environments they are not reifying it. L is not a thing. It is the way the members of P communicate verbally. This includes sign language. In order to be successful, interaction must be based on rules of interaction. This means that the interactional view of language includes grammar, whereas a formal view like generative grammar excludes interaction.

Of course there is an intimate and intricate interrelationship among all three enviroments of language. This is not the appropriate place to discuss them in detail. The subject has already been discussed in Couto (2007a, b), as well as in Couto (*to appear*), among other publications. In these publications we have many additional references.

In general, we think that only content words refer to aspects of the extra-linguistic world (the environment of language) as is the case with words like ‘man’, ‘tree’, ‘river’, ‘mountain’, ‘wind’ and ‘sun’ as well as the actions performed by them. Grammar and grammamtical words like prepositions would be exclusively formal entities without any relation to the extralinguistic world. They would have only syntactic function. My contention is that so-called function words (or grammatical words) also have to do with the world outside of language or, more precisely, with the relations that take place among its several aspects. In the *Grammaire génerale et raisonnée de Port-Royal* (1660: 6), for example, it is said

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

that prepositions are used "to indicate the relations that those things have one with the other". For the authors of this work (Arnauld and Lancelot) language is a mirror of the world. For more discussion, see my works mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs.

3. PREPOSITIONS AND ENVIRONMENT

Before entering the proper subject of this essay, it is important to discuss the question of spatiality, or spatiotemporality. One of the background ideas of the present essay is that, originally, all prepositions were spatial, since they were formed as a reflex of the relationships that take place between/among the things and phenomena of the world. The structuralist linguist Bernard Pottier defended the idea that prepositions can be used in three domains, namely, his dimensions of space, time and notion. Some of them can be used in the three dimensions, as Spanish *en* (in, at, on), used in phrases like *en el jarro* (in the jug/pot), *en dos días* (in two days) and *en diciendo* (by saying). According to Pottier, spatial meaning is basic. This can be seen in the representation of figure 1 below:

(na)

→	→
pa	di
te	de(s)di, disna
antis di	dipus di
bas di	riba di
for a di	na, dentru di
sin	ku
…..	sima/suma
kontra	……..
…….	pabia di
…….	…….

Fig. 1.

All prepositions shown in figure 2 below are **locative**. However, those in figure 1 are not only (static) locative. They indicate **direction** or **source**. In English we have examples like *to*/*at*/*from*, *to*/*on*/*off* and *into*/*in*/*out of*, respectively. The first of each triple belongs to the left side of the figure and the third to the right side. As to the middle ones (*at, on, in*), they should more properly be placed on or above the central vertical line (se *na*) because, at least apparently, they do not indicate either directionality or source, although in Latin and Brazilian Portuguese we have constructions like *eo in Romam* ('I go to Rome') and *eu vou em Roma* ('I

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

go to Rome'), respectively, where the equivalents of *at, on* and *in* have a directional function, not a source one. In the next sections we will see some reasons for this apparent incongruence.

It is difficult to understand why *bas di* ('under') and *fora di* ('outside of') point towards something whereas *riba di* ('on, above') indicates movement away from something. The same could be said of *ku* ('with') and *sin* ('without'). According to Pottier, many other categories of words enter on one or the other side of figure 1. For example, the indefinite article (*a*, *an*), the masculine gender, the accusative etc. belong to the left side of the vertical line, whereas the definite article (*the*), the feminine gender, the nominative etc. belong to the right side of it. In the end, the best contribution of the author to the study of prepositions is the fact that he recognized that spatiality is the basis of the meaning of any preposition, and of prefixes, in Romances languages.

There is no doubt about the basic spatiality of the preposition *in*, and its equivalents in other languages. Doubts are raised when we come to prepositions like *with* and *of*, for example. Are they really spatial, do they have a spatial interpretation or do they indicate purely abstract relation? John Lyons says the following about *with*: "what *John is with Peter* means is *John is where Peter is*" (Lyons 1977: 693). This implies that its opposite (*without*) is also spatial, since it revolves around the same axis. In the case of *of*, it seems to indicate only abstract relation, namely, that of ownership. However, in a Kriol phrase like *libru di Maria*, (Mary's book), it indicates that the book is associated to Mary, it belongs to her, therefore, it is usually where she is. This is also recognized by John Lyons. In a French construction like *je parle de Jean* (I am talking about John), it is implied that my talk has John as its source. The Portuguese equivalent of this sentence (*eu falo sobre João* 'I'm talking about John') is even more eloquent in this regard. In fact, the original meaning of *sobre* is squarely spatial, i.e., 'on'.

Practically everything that has been said of simple prepositions applies to so-called "complex prepositions" as well. For example, the "complex" equivalent of Portuguese *sobre* ('on, about') is *a respeito de* (lit. 'in respect of'). Leaving the noun *respeito* ('respect') aside, this construction begins with the locative preposition *a* ('on, at, in') and ends with the preposition *de* ('of, from').

Besides locative, directional and source prepositions, there are also **path** prepositions like *through*, *across*, *around* and *along*. I would like to note that no one of them appears as "simple" preposition in Kriol. Their equivalents in this language are always "complex".

4. THE ECOLOGY OF SPATIAL RELATIONS

Bernard Pottier was not the first to emphasize the spatiality of prepositions. John Wilkins did this as early as 1668, as was pointed out in Couto (2007b: 492), where we can see an appraisal of Wilkins' study. In order to substantiate the claim

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

that prepositions reflect the interrelationships that obtain among the several aspects of the world, let us present what has been called the **Ecology of Spatial Relations**. As we will see below, there are other spatial terms. My contention is that all these relations are intuitively known not only by humans but also by many other species.

In dealing with spatiality in language, there are some parameters that must be observed. The first is the vertical versus horizontal orientation, which is probably due to the force of gravity as well as the upright position of humans and of trees, as compared to their lying down position. Secondly, if we place, let us say, a cubic object A in front of an observer, every object B could be, for this observer: a) vertically: *on* or *under* it; b) horizontally: *before* or *after*; *to the left* or *to the right* of it. However, there is a position which is independent of these parameters, that is, interiority and exteriority. In this case, object B could be *inside* or *outside* of A. The former is codified in English by prepositions like *in*, *inside of* etc. The latter is represented by *outside of*, for instance. These relations are shown in figure 2, with Portuguese examples.

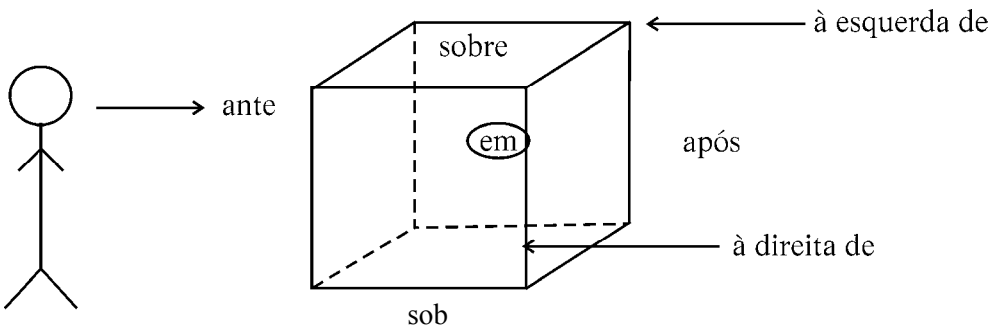


Fig. 2

(English equivalents: *ante* 'before'; *após* 'after'; *sobre* 'on'; *em* 'in, at, on'; *à direita de* 'to the right of'; *à esquerda de* 'to the left of'.)

Apparently, the prepositions in figure 2 would have a very different meaning from those shown in figure 1 because the latter are source/directional, whereas the former are locative (static). To begin with, all prepositions on the left side of figure 1 could be placed on the left side of figure 2 as well, namely, between the cube and the observer. Those on the right side of it could be placed on the right side of the cube, therefore, after the observer. Even path prepositions could be included here. In other words, all Pottier's relations shown in figure 1 could also be included in figure 2. For example, *across* could be represented by an arrow going from the right to the left side of the surface of the cube. As to *through*, it would be an arrow crossing the middle of the cube. And so on.

The relation of interiority (*in*, *inside of*) is the unmarked or universal position, because it is independent of an observer, as is the case with a stone (B) inside a fruit (A). This could happen even to a fruit floating in outer space. The relation of

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

superiority/inferiority (*on*/*under*) is also independent of an observer. However, it presupposes, additionally, the surface of the earth. One example could be a small stone *on*/*under* a bigger one. Anteriority/posteriority would come next, because, besides A and B, it presupposes an observer. In fact, object B can be *before*/*after* object A only in relation to the observer.

Apparently, *to the right/left of* is the most marked relation, not because of requiring more parameters, but because it has to do with the knowledge of which is the most/least skillful hand. This means that it requires knowledge of psychosocial values. In summary, the scale of markedness would be something like the following, from less to more marked: *in*/*out of* > *on*/*under* > *before*/*after* > *to the right*/*left of*. See Couto (2007b) for more discussion on this subject.

5. OVERVIEW OF KRIOL PREPOSITIONS

Not all relations involved in the Ecology of Spatial Relations have simple equivalents in Kriol. As a matter of fact, the only Kriol equivalent here is *na*. In order to fill the remaining positions we have to resort to so-called "complex prepositions". In (1) we can see the remaining Kriol equivalents of the English spatial prepositions shown in figure 1:

(1) a. in = *na*, *dentru di*
b. on = *riba di*
c. under = *bas di*
d. before = *antis di*
e. after = *dipus di, tras di*
f. to the right of = *na ladu diritu di*
g. o the left of = *na ladu skerdu di*

Although not indicated in figure 1, there is another locative spatial preposition that could be included in it, namely, *na metadi di* ('between'). It has something in common with *na*/*dentru di*. This can be explained from at least three perspectives inside the Ecology of Spatial Relations. In the vertical direction, *na metadi di* is a surrogate of *na*/*dentru di* if placed between *riba di* and *bas di*, giving the sequence *riba di* − *na metadi di* − *bas di*. In the horizontal dimension it has roughly the same function if placed between *antis di* and *dipus di*, that is, *antis di* − *na metadi di* − *dipus di*, or between *na ladu skerdu di* (to the left of) and *na ladu diritu di* ('to the right of'), i. e., *na ladu skerdu di* − *na metadi di* − *na ladu diritu di*. In summary, *na metadi di* is the substitute for *na* when pairs of these adjacent relations are implied. Here we have a straightforward explanation for the affinities existing between *na*/*dentru di* ('in/at/on') and *na metadi di* ('between').

Although it has no simple equivalent in Kriol, English *among* also shares some features with *in* and *between*. Its specificity lies in the fact that it requires more than two parameters (positions). In other words, *among* indicates interiority

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

surrounded by: a) *before, after, under*; b) *before, after, on, under*; c) *before, after, on, under, to the right of*; d) *before, after, on, under, to the right of, to the left of*. As we can see, this preposition is semantically very complex, once it presupposes more parameters than both *in* and *between*. It does not have any simple equivalent in Kriol either. Its meaning is also rendered by *na metadi di*.

In relation to the Kriol equivalents of *to the right*/*left of*, no one of them occured in my data. However, Doneux & Rougé (1988: 18), give the forms *na direta*/*na mon direta* ('in the right hand') and *na skerda* ('in the left [hand]'). Unfortunately the authors do not provide any example or explanation. What I have already seen elsewhere is the forms *na ladu diritu di*/*na ladu skerdu di* ('on the right side of/on the left side of'), or *na ladu di si mon diritu*/*skerdu* ('on the side of his/her right/left hand'). The form na *ladu iskerdu* is given by Scantamburlo (2002).

Some Kriol prepositions are present only in acrolectal varieties of the language, whereas a few others tend to occur only in the basilect. For this reason, it is advisable to establish two inventories of Kriol prespositions, namely, a minimalist and a maximalist one (see section 5). Let us see some of the remaining spatial prepositions of Kriol.

In (2) we can see some Kriol equivalents to English directional (2a) and source (2b) prepositions:

(2) a. to = *pa*; without = *sin*; until/up to = *te*
b. from = *di*; since/as of = *dedi*/*disna*

In view of the fact that in Latin and Brazilian Portuguese the equivalents of *in* can indicate directionality, their placing on the right side of figure 1 seems strange. However, we should remember that *na* (*in*) is the preposition par excellence (Kihm 1994: 69), above all because it indicates the unmarked location, namely, interiority. Therefore it can, in principle, replace any surrounding function. To the point that in Kriol we have constructions like (3):

(3) *lebri sai na si koba* (lit. 'the rabbit came out in its burrow') 'the rabbit came out of its burrow'.

It is true that the construction *lebri sai di si koba* is also possible, although probably due to the influence of Portuguese. In order to accommodate the apparently strange use of *na* in (3) to our way of thinking, we could imagine something like "the rabbit was in its burrow and came out of it".
There is another *na*, which functions as a TMA particle, as illustrated in (4):

(4) Jon na fuma
Jonh IMP smoke
'John is smoking'.

We could say that in (4) we have roughly the same *na*, in this case indicating that John is in ('inside') the act of smoking. As Claire Lefebvre appropriately said about similar morphemes of Haitian Creole, *na* is a multifunctional morpheme

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

(Lefebvre 1998). In fact, not only the preposition proper but also the "verbal particle" (4) come from the combination of the Portuguese *em* ('in, at, on') and the feminine definite article *a* ('the'), i. e., *na* ('in the'). Therefore, I think it would not be far-fetched to interpret the first as preposition with noun, the second as "preposition" with verb. In Couto (2007b) this subject is discussed in more detail.

5.1. Simple Prepositions

Before entering the study of "compound" or "complex" prepositions proper, it is advisable to give an overview of "simple" prepositions, if for no other reason because my thesis is that "complex prepositions" are, in the end, a construction made up of "simple prepositions" plus a noun, an adjective or an adverb, as the case may be. According to Kihm (1994: 67), Kriol has simple prepositions, as those in (5). The list in (5a) includes only prepositions found in basilectal varieties of the language. In (5b) we have those that occur in more acrolectal varieties of the language. In this case (5a) would be the **minimalist inventory** of Kriol "simple" prepositions. Taking the two (5a-b) together, we have the **maximalist inventory** of Kriol "simple" prepositions.

(5) a. *di* 'of, from', *entremetadi* 'between', *ku* 'with', *na* 'in, at, on, to', *pa(r)* 'for, by, toward', *sin* 'without', *suma* 'as', *(a)te* 'until', *disna* 'since', *de(s)di* 'since'
b. *a* 'to', *entri* 'between', *anti* 'before', *sugundu* 'according to', *kontra* 'against', *kunformu* 'according to', *peranti* 'in front of, before', *sobri* 'on, about'.

Let us see some statistics of these "simple" prepositions in order to better undestand their behavior. Out of a total of 2,143 prepositions, I came to the following figures:

Table 1

Preposition	Number of occurrence	Percentage
Di	1,043	48,81
Na	597	27,85
Ku	275	12,83
PA	68	3,17
Suma	60	2,79
Sin	57	2,65
Te	32	1,49
Disna	5	0,23
Kontra	2	0,09
de(s)di	1	0,04
Total	**2,143**	**99,95**

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

Theoretically, *na* should be the most frequent, since it encodes the unmarked location, that is, interiority. However, as already seen above, there is another *na*, apparently non-prepositional, although it can be considered a variant of prepositional *na*. As I tried to show in Couto (2003) *na*-preposition proper and *na*-TMA particle (*i na studa* 'he is studying') are one and the same multifunctional particle. The number of occurences of the former is roughly the same as that of the latter. Taking these two functions of *na* together, the figure would amount to more than 1,194 occurrences, i. e., much more than the number of occurrences of *di*.

As to *di*, its high frequency probably has to do with its polysemy. Let us see some statistics of its main functions, out of a total of 319 occurrences:

Table 2

Functions of *di*	Number of occurrence	Percentage	Examples
Genitive	255	79.93	libru di Jon
na X di	35	10.97	na metadi di
V di	14	4.38	gosta di
Source	8	2.50	di li pa la
Fixed expressions	7	2.19	di dia/noti
Total	**319**	**99.97**	

(English translation: *libru di Jon* = John's book; *na metadi di* = between; *gosta di* = to like [lit. 'to like of']; *di li pa la* = from here to there; *di dia*/*noti* = by day/night.)

In this table we can see why *di* is more frequent than *na* (*na*-preposition only) in spite of the fact that the latter has been called the Kriol preposition par excellence. It occurs in a least six functions. We will also see that *na* is frequently ommitted, whereas *di* only exceptionally does not occur.

Despite all the discrepancies in the use of the prepositions seen above, we have seen that there is a common core of prepositional meanings whose basis can be seen in the Ecology of Spatial Relations, as well as in Pottier's model (fig. 1). It is this common core that permits us to understand the apparent deviations in the use of prepositions in the languages of the world. To the point that, as early as the 17th century, the compilers of the *Grammaire gnénérale et raisonnée de Port-Royal* said, referring to the relations among things indicated by prepositions, that "Ce sont presque les mêmes rapports dans toutes les langues, que son marqués par les prepositions".

In this essay, I will not deal with simple prepositions. I have already investigated them in Couto (2007b), so that potentially interested readers can refer to that publication. My main objective here is the so-called "complex prepositions".

5.2. So-Called "Complex Prepositions"

Using the same criteria that were applied in setting up the inventory of "simple" prepositions, that is, including basilectal as well as acrolectal varieties, we

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

arrive at the **minimalist inventory** in (6a). The examples in (6b) are used exclusively by educated speakers. Still parallel to what happened in the case of simple prepositions, (6a) plus (6b) form the **maximalist inventory** of Kriol "complex prepositions".

(6) a. (*na*) *banda di* 'about, close to', *ba(s) di* 'under, below', *dentru di* 'inside', *dianti di* 'before, in front of', *di(s)pus di* 'after', *des(di)/dedi* 'since', *disna di* 'since', *filadu di* 'in front of, across', *fora di* 'outside, out of', *juntu di* 'near', *lungu di* 'along', *lunju di* 'far from', *na metadi di* 'between', *na roda di* 'around', *pabia di* 'because of', *riba di* 'on, above', *pertu di* 'near', *tras di* 'behind',
b. *fora di* 'outside of', *antis di* 'before', *pa/por kauza di* 'because', *na frenti di* 'in front of'.

As was done with "simple" prepositions, let us take a look at the frequency of occurrence of Kriol "complex prepositions". The results are shown in Table 3 (*disna* 'since' did not occur in my texts, but it is used by monolingual speakers of Kriol). *Na roda di* (along, around) did not occur in my data too, although we know that it is not infrequent elsewhere, especially in basilectal varietes of the language.

Table 3

"Complex preposition"	Number of occorrence	Percentage
(na) riba di	47	23.97
(na) dentru di	42	21.42
(na) ba(s) di	36	18.36
tra(s) di	18	9.18
(na)pertu di	14	7.14
na metadi di	10	5.10
(na) dianti di	9	4.59
(na) lungu di	5	4.08
anti(s) di	5	2.55
di(s)pus di	1	2.55
disna di	1	0;51
fora di	1	0.51
Total	**196**	**99.96**

Before entering the interpretation of these "complex prepositions", some comments on their form are in order. First of all, we can see that *tras di*, *bas di, antis di* and *di(s)pus di* also occur without the "s". Secondly, some constructions are preceded by *na*. At least one of them (*na metadi di*) tends to occur only beginning with *na*. However, even this phrase presents variants. In a count of 115 occurrences, the following variants appeared: a) *na metadi*, 35; b) *na metadi di*, 33; c) *metadi*, 27; d) *na se metadi* 'among them', 14; e) *metadi di*, 6. Form (c) is the regular noun meaning "half, middle", although sometimes it may replace the full

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

expression *na metadi di*. In regard to form (a), the most frequent, it is a case of haplology, in which case, it would be the same full expression (b). Doneux & Rougé (1988: 18) represent it as *na mita di*. The form *metadi di* (without preceding *na*) would be in the same case as (*na*)*riba di*, (*na*)*dentru di*, (*na*)*bas di* etc., in which *na* may be absent. *Tra(s) di* did not occur preceded by *na*, but I found the interesting case of *na kil tra di kasa* (lit. 'in that behind of house'), a further argument in favor of the semantic independence of the middle component of these constructions.

Besides the simple and "complex prepositions" already mentioned, there are other constructions in Kriol that, even if not being directly prepositions, they do have something in common with prepositions. Some of these constructions are shown in (7).

(7) a. Maria bai *na si tras* 'Mary goes at his back, Mary goes behind him'
b. Maria sta *na si dianti* 'Mary is in his front, Mary is in front of him'
c. Jugude bua *na si ladu* 'the vulture flew at his side, the vulture flew along him'
d. Jon sinta *na si ladu skerdu* 'John sat at his/her left' (not very common)
e. Fatima bai *na si ladu diritu* 'Fatima went at his/her right' (not very common)
f. kabesa dita *na se metadi* 'the head laid among them'.

Besides their affinity with prepositions, and with "complex prepositions" as the case may be, the constructions in (7) show additionally that the morpheme that appears between *na* and *di* in so-called "complex prepositions" are effectively referential nouns because they are preceded by a determiner, the possessive pronoun *si/se* 'his(her)/their'. Kihm (1994: 68) notes that (7a) and (7b) cannot be replaced by **na tras d-el* and **na dianti d-el*, with a pronoun following *di*. When it is followed by a noun, the construction is grammatical, as in *na tras di Jon* (lit. 'in the back of John').

Apparently, *de(s)di* would be another example of "complex preposition" ended by *di*. However, it comes *in totum* from Portuguese *desde* (since), so that it is indivisible, in spite of the fact that its Latin etymology contains the preposition *de*. Perhaps for this reason, sometimes Kriol speakers seem to feel that there is haplology here too, as if it the full form were **de(s)di di*.

6. ARE SO-CALLED "COMPLEX PREPOSITIONS" REALLY PREPOSITIONS?

Alain Kihm divides Kriol prepositions into simple and "complex" or "compound" prepositions. This practice is a kind of standard procedure among grammarians and linguists, apparently in all languages of the world. However, it is

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

a practical division, but hardly a unanimous one. As Kihm himself remarked, "all complex prepositions are made up of *di* preceded by an element which may be an adjective (*lunju* 'far', *juntu* 'close, similar'), an adverb (*bas* as in *i sta la bas* 's/he's over there below', *dentru* 'inside', *disna* 'long ago', *filadu* 'in front', *fora* 'outside', *lungu* 'alongside', *riba* 'above'), or a noun (*banda* 'edge', *diyanti, tras*)" (Kihm 1994: 67−68).

If we consider that, in fact, *lunju* and *juntu* are not adjectives, but adverbs, we can analyse the so-called "complex prepositions" as a construction containing an adverb according to the scheme Adv+*di*, as is the case with *lunju di*, *juntu di, bas di, dentru di, filadu di, fora di, lungu di, riba di* and *disna di*. Those containing a noun belong to the scheme *na*+N+*di*. The first preposition (*na*) indicates location of something in the denotatum of the noun, whereas the second (*di*) indicates to whom or to which thing this denotatum belongs. Genitivity is the main function of *di*, as we saw in table 2.

The "complex prepositions" made up of adverb plus *di* would, at least apparently, present a different structure, namely, the Adv+*di* structure seen above. However, it is well-known since as early as the times of the *Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Por-Royal* that adverbs are made up of a preposition plus a noun. Thus, Latin *sapienter* ('wisely') is an equivalent of *cum sapientia* ('with wisdom'), *hodie* ('today') is, underlyingly and etymologically, *in hoc die* ('in this day'), and so on. Therefore, it is perfectly legitimate to consider *dentru di*, for instance, as equivalent to 'in (the) interior of', as the variant *na dentru di* suggests. If this analysis is valid, constructions that seem to have the structure Adv+*di* do have, in fact, the structure *na*+N+*di*. In fact, in several constructions the idea of location indicated by *na* is conflated with the following noun. All apparent "complex prepositions" turn out to be phrases that begin with *na* and end with *di*. This implies that all constructions of this type contain additional instances of these two simple prepositions.

It is true that these constructions (so-called "complex prepositions") are relatively lexicalized, to the point that *dentru di* ('inside of') is an alternative for the simple form *na* ('in, on, at, inside of'). However, there are constructions of this type that we may not consider prepositional. One example is *na tempu di* [*fomi*] ('in the time of [hunger/famine]'). We cannot say that it is a (complex) preposition. It is similar to *na tempu di cuba* ('in the time of rain'), *na tempu di friu* ('in the time of cold') and so on. There are several phrases that have the same structure, like *na kau di Jon* (at John's place), *na kau di sinta* ('at the place of sitting'), *na [tudu] koldadi di limaria* ('in [all] types of animal'). The form *na metadi di* ('between') means, literally, 'in [the] middle of', i. e., in the middle of the space where two objects (A, B) are located. There are several syntactic constructions that are parallel to the ones at issue here. For example, *kamalion pega na rabu di lubu* (lit. 'the chameleon grasped *in* [the] *tail of* [the] wolf'). What happens is that constructions like *na metadi di* occur more frequently than the others mentioned

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

here. Their higher frequency gives the impression that they form a unit. In summary, what we have here are the prepositions *na* and *di*, according to the formula *na*+N+di. The cases of Adv + *di* belong to a more general tendency in Kriol towards conflation of *na* with the following noun, as is the case with *metadi di* instead of *na metadi di*.

In English there are similar constructions, like 'in the heart of Paris' and 'in the heart of the matter', French 'au sein de' and Portuguese 'no seio de' have the same meaning. I think that nobody would consider them as complex prepositions.

Another argument in favor of this interpretation is the fact that in some cases the N part of these constructions occurs alone and with roughly the same meaning. In (7), the nouns are preceded by a determiner. This implies that the constructions cannot be considered prepositional. Practically all the forms surrounded by *na* and *di* discussed in 5.2 are plain nouns. We have seen that *metadi* can occur as preposition even if not preceded by *na* or followed by *di*. In (8) we can see additional examples showing that the main component of "complex prepositions" has its independent meaning:

(8) a. *lubu padi na kil tra di baga-baga* 'the wolf gave birth to her cub behind the Termites'
b. *omi bai te na metadi di kamiñu* 'the man went up to the middle of the road'.

In (8a) *tra* is preceded by a determiner (*kil* 'the'), although before it we can see the *na* that heads most complex prepositions. In (8b) *na metadi di* cannot be considered the "complex preposition" equivalent to English 'between'. Here, *metadi* means literally 'the middle'. This is reinforced by the presence of *te* ('up to') preceding it.

Maybe the term "complex preposition" could be applied to Portuguese prepositions like *perante* ('before, in front of'), composed of *por/per* ('by, around') plus *ante* ('before'), although most grammarians seem to consider it as a "simple" preposition. Other cases would include *por sobre* (for/to + on 'above') and *para com* (for/to + with 'towards'). The last one is used in phrases like "ele não tem consideração *para com* Maria" (approx. 'he is rude to Mary'). In English we have examples like *from under*/*above*, *until after/before* and so on. We have already seen the examples of *into*, *onto* and *out of*, above. However, in this case we have two "simple" prepositions used one after the other, each one retaining its respective meaning. The same happens in the case of other sequences of prepositions. Each component retains its individual meaning, so that *na metadi di* is literally 'in the middle of'.

In (9) we can see three interesting examples of apparently "complex preposition" in which either *na* or *di*, or both, may be absent, always with *pertu* as the middle term.

(9) a. *i pertu ja riu* 'it was already near the river'
b. *serpenti na pertu elis* 'the serpent is near them'
c. *minjer garandi na pertu elis* 'the old woman is near them'.

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

Here *pertu* has a verbal function. As we have seen above, *na* is also a verbal particle, so *na pertu* is better rendered as "is approaching". By the way, it is frequently difficult to tell whether a word is a verb or an adjective (noun) in Kriol, whose categories are sometimes different from those of Indo-European languages. In any case, both adjective and verb have the feature [+V], namely, verb is [+V, –N], and adjective is [+V, +N]. None of the so-called "complex prepositions" could be so considered without restrictions.

In summary, the fact is that so-called "complex prepositions" are not complex prepositions, as unitary entities. Using a semantic criterion, which is a surer one in dubious cases, a sentence like *libru i riba di mesa* ('the book is on the table') means literally 'the book is on the top [superior surface] of the table', as it could be in the internal part of it (the drawer), and so on.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Of course, so-called "complex prepositions" tend towards some type of lexicalization, maybe due to their relatively high frequency. However, high frequency is no decisive argument in favor of the "complex preposition" interpretation of constructions belonging to the scheme *na* + N + *di*.

In what we have seen above, it becomes clear that syntax is not enough to decide whether certain word groups belong to one or another category. First of all comes semantics. Therefore, if the individual components of these expressions retain their original meaning, we are not allowed to consider the whole as if it were a unit. The fact that *na dentru di* (or simply *dentru di*) can be replaced by *na* in most cases is no sufficient argument for considering both as representing the same meaning. Something similar happens to *in* and *in* (the) *interior of*, as in *John is in the house* x *John is in the interior of the house*. In the latter the idea of interiority is emphasized by being represented by a noun, whereas in the former this does not happen. The syntactic representation of the two sentences is different from one another as can be seen in (10a) for *in* and in (10b) for *in the interior of*, respectively.

(10) a. $[_{CP}\ [_{TP}$ John $[_{T'}\ T_{is}\ [_{PP}\ [_{DP}$ ~~John~~ $]\ [_{P'}\ P_{in}\ [_{DP}$ the house]]]]]

b. $[_{PP}\ [_{DP}$ John] $[_{P'}\ P_{in}\ [_{DP}$ the $[_{NP}N_{interior}\ [_{PP}\ P_{of}\ [_{DP}$ [the house]]]]]]].

In other words, *in the interior of* has more semantic content than *in* because, among other things, it has three additional lexemes.

REFERENCES

Arnault, A., C. Lancelot, 1830, *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, Paris, Auguste Delalain (original: 1660).

Couto, H. H. do., 1973, *Os conetivos*, M.A. thesis, University of São Paulo.

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)

Couto, H. H. do., 1994, *O crioulo português da Guiné-Bissau*, Hamburg, Helmut Buske.
Couto, H. H. do., 2003, "A partícula multifuncional 'na' no crioulo guineense e a hipótese da relexificação", *Papia,* 13, 60−66.
Couto, H. H. do., 2007a, *Ecolingüística: estudo das relações entre língua e meio ambiente*, Brasília, Thesaurus Editora.
Couto, H. H. do., 2007b, "The ecology of spatial relations: The case of Kriol prepositions", in M. Schrader-Kniffki, L. Morgenthaler García (eds.), *La Romania en interacción: entre historia, contacto y política*, Frankfurt/Madri, Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2007, 479−514.
Couto, H. H. do., *to appear*, "Ecolinguistica", Special issue of *Cadernos de linguagem e sociedade*.
Doneux, J. L., J.-L. Rougé, 1988, *En apprenant le créole à Bissau et à Ziguinchor*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
Haugen, E., 1972, "The ecology of language", in Haugen *The ecology of language*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1972, 325-339.
Hoffmann, S., 2009, "In (hot) pursuit of data: complex prepositions in late modern English" in www.ingentaconnect.com/content/rodopi/lang (access: 04/02/2009).
Kihm, A., 1994, *Kriyol syntax*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
Lefebvre, C., 1998, "Multifunctionality and variation among grammars: The case of determiner in Haitian and in Fongbe", *Journal of pidgin and creole languages,* 13, 1, 93−150.
Lyons, J., 1977, *Semantics*, Cambridge, The University of Cambridge Press, 2 vols.
Mufwene, S., 2008, *Language evolution, contact, competition and change*, London/New York, Continuum.
Pottier, B., 1962, *Systématique des éléments de relation: Étude de morphosyntaxe structurale romane*, Paris, Klincksieck.
Pottier, B., 1969, *Grammaire de l' espagnol*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
Sapir, E., 1963, "Language and environment", *Selected writings,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 89-103 (previously presented orally in 1911).
Scantamburlo, L., 1981, *Gramática e dicionário da língua criol da Guiné-Bissau (GCr)*, Bologna, Editrice Missionaria Italiana.
Scantamburlo, L., 1999, *Dicionário do guineense − Inrodução e notas gramaticais*, Lisboa, Edições Colibri / FASPEBI.
Scantamburlo, L., 2002, *Dicionário guineense- português, disionariu guinensi-purtugis*, Lisboa, Edições FASPEBI.
Vandeloise, C., 1991, *Spatial prepositions: A case study from French*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

BDD-A319 © 2009 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:54:56 UTC)