A SEMANTIC DESCRIPTION OF THE PREPOSITION

Adina MATROZI MARIN
University of Piteşti

ABSTRACT

From the semantic point of view, the preposition is characterized by an insufficient lexical content and in the case of inherited prepositions extremely abstract (for some specialists inexistent); the content is expressed through various significances, determined by their occurrence in different contexts, mainly by the terms of the syntagm to which they belong. It does not have semantical autonomy, that is why it cannot have syntctical functions. Prepositions are dependent on or in a relation of semantic continuity (sometimes just compatibility) with the lexical content of the term they accompany on the one hand, and on the other hand with the syntactical function they have. Some of the simplest, most abstract prepositions such as de, in, la are not influenced by the semantic level of the subordinate term.

As far as the semantic characteristics of the prepositions are concerned, there have been different and various opinions expressed by specialists over the time. Although some researchers have argued that the preposition is not even a part of speech, but a grammatical sign, recent studies have shown that prepositions are units of meaning (a fundamental or clear meaning and a few secondary or not clear meanings were distinguished) and more, that according to the principles of logic, its clear meaning expresses a notion. Important contributions have been brought by cognitive linguistics whose methods and results can be applied to Romanian as well.

Key words: *prepositions*, *meaning*, *semantic level*, *functional values*, *polysemy*

From the semantic point of view, the preposition is characterized by an insufficient lexical content and in the case of inherited prepositions extremely abstract (for some specialists inexistent); the content is expressed through various meanings, determined by their occurrence in different contexts, mainly by the terms of the syntagm to which they belong. It does not have semantical autonomy, that is why it cannot have syntactic functions. On the one hand, prepositions are dependent on or in a relation of semantic continuity (sometimes just compatibility) with the lexical content of the term they accompany, and on the other hand with the syntactic function they have. Some of the simplest, most abstract prepositions such as *de*, *in*, *la* are not influenced by the semantic level of its subordinate term.

As far as the semantic characteristics of the prepositions are concerned, there have been different and various opinions expressed by specialists over the time. Although some researchers have argued that the preposition is not even a part of speech, but a grammatical sign, recent studies have shown that prepositions are units of meaning (a fundamental

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

or clear meaning and a few secondary or not clear meanings were distinguished) and even more, that, according to the principles of logic, its clear meaning expresses a notion. Important contributions have been brought by cognitive linguistics whose methods and results can be applied to Romanian as well.

There are various opinions regarding the semantic status of the preposition. Some grammarians do not even consider it a part of speech, the argument being that it cannot be part of a sentence by itself (cf. Zugun, 2003: 45). They are seen as morphemes that express grammatical meanings (space/localization, association, modality): "Prepositions and conjunctions are grammatical signs, so they are indicators of the grammatical, supralexical meanings of the words in the structure in which they appear" (*Idem*: 48).

Other researchers claim that the prepositional units endowed with meaning and their contextual variants may be reduced to a fundamental meaning, specific to each of them (cf. Gougenheim, 1959: 1-25).

A study that follows the same principles mentioned above is that of Laura Vasiliu. In her works *Câteva observații asupra conținutului semantic al prepozițiilor în lumina generalului şi particularului* (1961, a) and *Schiță de sistem al prepozițiilor limbii române* (1961, b) she emphasizes the link between the inner and the functional values of the prepositions and establishes their significance starting from the significance of the syntagms to which they belong; by eliminating the meanings of the noun and the verb from the syntagm N + Prep. + V (N – noun; V – verb), using the methods of analysis and synthesis, she eventually finds the specific meaning of a specific preposition: *în* – the interior of an entity; *cu* – association. The other meanings and secondary functions are clustered around this fundamental meaning. The various meanings analyzed are in fact particular occurrences of some general meanings characteristic of each of the prepositions.

But a few meanings remain outside the general meaning. They seem to be "remains of some older patterns that were not kept in the present relations system, recent influences that have not been integrated or will never be integrated in the system, mistakes" (Vasiliu, 1961: 143) or linguistic facts not clarified or classified.

The particular meanings of the prepositions can be close (in the case in which they comprise few variable notes) or far (when they have many variable notes). A relevant example for the latter situation is represented by the two meanings of the preposition *de*: "concrete direction and moving away from the initial point of contact" (*Pleacă **de** acasă.*) and the "cause" (*Moare **de** foame.*). Yet, if we consider the cause as being the abstract orientation from a point to the subject of the action, the difference between the two meanings is given by a single note" (*Idem*: 35).

Laura Vasiliu (1961, b: 144 and C. Dominte1970) underlines the fact that the prepositions (with their general meanings) form series of two or

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

three terms based on their common features, such as the "interior" for the group *în – din – prin* ("interior" – "going through the interior" – "getting out of/ falling off the interior").

It is not easy to establish the place of a preposition in a series, especially for those prepositions that have both concrete and abstract meanings. When the abstract meanings can be interpreted as variants of the concrete ones (most of the times conditioned by verbs), the general meaning remains concrete, as it happens in the case of the preposition *către* (*Se întoarce **către** casă.* – concrete; *a-şi descărca inima **către** cineva* – abstract), which is part of the series *pe la – dinspre.*

In one of his studies, *The Typology of Romance Languages*, D. Copceag (1998), analyzing closely the Slavic-Romanian parallels in the syntax of the preposition, considers that it is important to discover whether the preposition has a meaning of its own or not. He admits the criterion according to which the meanings of a preposition are divided into: fundamental, secondary and general, seen as a result of all its meanings, but he believes that it is important for his research to modify the terminology as a direct result of his findings: the preposition can have a clear meaning, corresponding to the fundamental meaning defined by Laura Vasiliu and a few meanings that are not clear. Following the principles of logic, the author claims that taking into account the clear meaning of the preposition, it expresses a notion, an opinion which is not shared by other grammarians.

That is how we can explain the fact that prepositions can be translated into other languages, because to translate means "to find an equivalence between two sound complexes based on their common link with the same notion (Copceag, 1998: 204). For instance, for the preposition *pe*, the following equivalence can be easily found: *Cartea este pe masă.*; *Le livre est sur la table.*; *The book is on the table.*

The explanation of the phenomenon is that "in the bilingual person's mind... the equivalence between the sound complexes is established" based on the clear meaning of the preposition. This is different from the meanings that are not clear, which appear in a series of syntagms, a case when the prepositions used vary from one language to another.

In such a situation "the use of prepositions is (...) one of the skills that are most difficult to acquire in a foreign language" because "in this linguistic area one cannot formulate rules, and the basic meanings are not very useful", the same relation being expressed in different languages by means of different prepositions (Zafiu, 40/1997).

G. Guillaume (1964, 1973) showed that the prepositions are characterized by mental operations which are fundamental for the development of the language. Their linguistic interpretation is taken into account through its genetic process, to which the linguistic signs provide material and impose restraints. Guillaume's theory opposes the structuralist

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

theories, considering that linguistic signs do not bring conceptual or structural elements to be put together in the course of the interpretation process, but influence directly the construction of the syntactic form (morphogenesis) and semantics (ideogenesis).

The existence of two classes of words is mentioned: the predicative class, characterized by their incidence to a base and the non-predicative class, to which prepositions belong. The grammarian introduces the notion of "seizure"(intercepting a movement), which can explain a part of the aspects of polysemy at a certain level. Some of Guillaume's disciples (Cervoni, 1991; Moignet, 1981, apud Lebas, 2002: 61) have tried to apply this theory to prepositions, but its correlation to the linguistic facts proved to be difficult. One of the problematic aspects was to explain the possibility of having more or less a semantic content, or to be more or less "colourful". Still, there is a paradox because, as mentioned before, the preposition was defined as a non-predicative class, without semantic contribution.

F. Lebas (2002: 61-64) presents a series or arguments against this theory. The first refers to the integration of the semantic nature of morphemes that can be achieved in a new theoretical frame based on the concept of „extrinsic property" introduced by P. Cadiot şi F. Nemo (apud Lebas, 1997: 61). The main motivation backing the theory of extrinsic properties is that the central meaning of the words is made up of the properties derived from the habits, behaviour, objectives and their use by the humans. These properties are extrinsic to the objects they designate but they are perceived as properties of these objects. It was demonstrated that the most semantic properties of the noun can be explained through this theory, especially polysemy which is an important aspect for the study of prepositions. The conclusion was that it can be applied to other linguistic categories such as the preposition.

F. Lebas (*Idem.*: 63) believes that what constitutes the semantic material of the preposition is neither the way in which this material is structured nor any kind of syntactic information that would be added to these words, but the linguistic use allowed by this material. The interpretation is non-incidental, which prevents the semantic material to contribute to the mental process of building/projecting objects, the semantic influence of the prepositions being directed towards the interpretation process itself.

Colourful prepositions (*colourful semantic prepositions* – Spang-Hanssen, 1963, apud Feigenbaum, Kurzon, 2002: 1), corresponding to the lexical prepositions whose semantic content is seen as a whole meaning, but directed towards grammatical processes, oppose the colourless (*colourless case prepositions*), corresponding to the functional prepositions that do not have a semantic aspect associated to their meaning, but different uses giving rise to a semantic intuitive peculiarity. From the

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

diachronic perspective, the latter category has so-called abstract values which lack in the case of the former (at least at first sight).

The second argument brought by F. Lebas is that the preposition does not indicate a particular type of relation between objects (statement which is true in the case of the adjective) and does not indicate a relation in a special manner either. It can contribute to creating an element of the interpretation that we can express relation, but this relation does not represent the meaning of the preposition and is not represented by the preposition in the interpretation. Consequently, the role of the preposition is much too indirect and too grammatical to consider that their meaning in context is a relation between two elements of the constructed meaning, opinion that contradicts Dumitru Copceag's theory.

The third and last argument is that, though prepositions can function in particular situations as relation elements to the constructed meaning, they have many uses that do not have anything in common with the relations they create; it is the example of more abstract prepositions such as *in: to consist in = a consta în*; *In his hurry he forgot his keys = În graba sa*, *şi-a uitat cheile.*, where F. Lebas considers that the concept of relation can be mentioned, but this does not help us understand the exact meaning (cf. Lebas, 2002: 64).

Although prepositions are grammatical instruments (some of them having many semantic variants) with no notional meaning, they cannot be considered as being void of meaning because if they play the role of instituting relations between the components of the utterance (...) they have a relational meaning expressing „the dependences between objects, actions and characteristics", so that the existence of some relational and referential functions cannot be denied (Găitănaru, 1998: 312).

The demonstration is easy to make if we compare sequences such as *Stau **la/pe/sub/lângă** masă*. On the other hand, the same preposition can have various meanings: *după* indicates the place: *S-a ascuns după dulap.*, the time: *A venit **după** Crăciun.*, the instrument: *L-a recunoscut **după** glas.*, the cause: ***După** atâtea necazuri s-a îmbolnăvit.*, the purpose: *Umblă **după** câştig.*, or the relation: "*Un bătrân atât de simplu*, ***după** vorbă*, ***după** port*". (Cf. Ciompec, 1985: 268).

Petru Zugun claims that the previous examples, used to demonstrate the lexical meaning of the preposition are not relevant because the prepositions mentioned above are organized in a microsystem (within the lexical meaning of localization) and furthermore they do not have the same lexical meaning in other constructions (2003: 50).

The situation can be explained because the relations expressed by prepositions are more numerous and concrete than those expressed by other grammatical morphemes, but just like case endings, some prepositions can express the same relation using different prepositions.

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

A. Tyler şi V. Evans have contributed to the study of the semantics of prepositions with a research whose theoretical information can also be applied to Romanian. According to this research, words are in fact lexical forms that, conventionally, have meanings and these pairs form/meaning are kept in a mental dictionary or lexicon as an interface between syntax, semantics and pragmatics (2003: 1).

The emphasis is placed on the interaction between words and the human conceptual system; the distinction between the conventionalized linguistic knowledge and the encyclopedic, general knowledge (semantics vs. pragmatics) is used to establish the semantic content of the lexical representations. They make a representation of the distinct meanings associated to a single lexical form, examining the semantics of a series of English spatial particles like *over = peste*, *up = deasupra*, *down = dedesubtul*, *in = în* and *out = în afara.* The analysis is justified by the different and numerous meanings of these particles, the results being applicable in the cases of other word classes. The preposition *over* can be paraphrased through *again = din nou* (non-spatial), *above = deasupra*, *finished = termina*t (non-spatial) and *in another place = în alt loc.*

The authors suggest that the distinct, but related, meanings make up a semantic network whose center is the primary meaning, underlining the systematic organization of the mental lexicon as well as the extremely creative nature of the human conceptual system. The language determines radically the multiple interpretation attributed to a lexical item, but the construction of the meaning is mainly a conceptual process implying the elaboration and integration of linguistic and non-linguistic information in a very creative manner.

Thus, the language does not refer to the real world, but to what is represented in the human conceptual system, comprising conceptual structures that reflect indirectly and interpret the world as being mediated by human experience and perception. Subsequently, the use underlies the extension of meaning, which is pragmatic in nature (cf. Tyler, Evans, 2003: 4). The synchronic semantic network is a diachronic product and the evolution of language is a systematic process (*Idem*: 5).

Two theories were proposed to explain the distinct meanings of a lexical item:

1. Homonymy, which does not explain why if one examines spatial particles as a word class discovers regular meaning patterns at all the members of the class and does not recognize that distinct meanings can be motivated and thus related at a certain level.

2. Monosemy (Ruhl, 1989, apud Evans, Tyler, 2003: 5) – the forms have a single meaning, very abstract; this meaning can be enriched by means of contextual knowledge, so that all the distinct meanings associated to a lexeme are derived.

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

A. Tyler and V. Evans' counterargument is that some meanings are not dependent on the context, a reality proving that pragmatic knowledge alone is insufficient when it comes to predicting all the meanings associated to a form. They make up a semantic network and while some variations take place within it and are stocked at the level of the long-term memory, others are created online during the usual interpretation of communication.

Although the importance of the pragmatic inferences (implicatures) and of the previous knowledge was recognized both by generativism and by cognitivism, the mainly non-linguistic nature of constructing the meaning or of conceptual integration was not taken into account adequately; not even the difference between the information coded at the level of the lexical item and the information recovered from the context, the previous knowledge and the cognitive processing was not made (*Idem*: 8).

The example chosen by the authors to illustrate the theoretical information is: *The cat jumped over the wall.*, which does not seem ambiguous. The demonstration shows that it contains lexical items that permit a series of interpretations. The verb *to jump* codes more trajectories: 1. from the floor to the table; 2. on a springboard; 3. over a puddle, the same way as the trajectories coded by *over* can be: 1. a spatial relation in which TR is located higher than LM: *The painting is above the fireplace.- Tabloul e deasupra şemineului*; 2. TR is higher than LM, moving continuously: *The hummingbird stayed above the flower.- Pasărea colibri a zăbovit deasupra florii.*; 3. TR is moving on a trajectory which is above and along LM: *The plane was flying above the city. - Avionul zbura deasupra oraşului*; 4. There is contact between TR and LM, with the trajectory modelled by LM: *Sam crawled over the wall*. (where TR is the element that follows the trajectory and LM is the background element or the landmark (cf. Tyler, Evans, 2003: 12).

All the previous theories based on the simple compositional approach (Jackendoff, 1997: 48, apud Tyler, Evans, 2003: 11) asserted that "all the elements of content in the meaning of a sentence are provided by the lexical items and by the configuration in which they appear." The change of the spatial particle results in the change of the interpretation regarding the trajectory, consequently the spatial particles code the trajectory and in the case of *over*, all its occurences that present differences of configuration as regards the form of the trajectory and the element LM, should be considered distinct meanings (*Idem*: 11). The verb is also important as a carrier of information on the trajectory.

Among the critical opinions against the cognitive theories is that according to which the preposition was approached in the context of lexical semantics. P. Cadiot (2002: 41) draws the attention to the tendency to move the scenes exclusively towards the observer's point of view, by presenting the spatial description in terms of connecting separate entities (landmark/trajectory).

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

A few researchers (Cervoni, 1991, Cadiot, 1991, 1997, apud Feigenbaum, Kurzon, 2002: 2) have focused on the pragmatic value of prepositions, mentioning that the appropriate structural frame for the study of the preposition is not the grammatical unit of the sentence, but the discourse unit.

A new trend in the pragmatic research is favored by specialists influenced by the theory of dynamics (Fauconnier, 1984, Visetti şi Cadiot, 2002, apud Feigenbaum, Kurzon, *Idem*: 3) who proved to be skeptical as far as the cognitive approach is concerned as a result of its main argument: the local or temporal space is a primitive semantic unit, upon which any study on the prepositions can rely.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ciompec, Georgeta, *Prepoziția*, în LRC (coord. I. Coteanu), Bucureşti, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1985.

Dominte, Constantin, „Exprimarea relațiilor spațiale şi temporale prin prepoziții în limba română", în *Sistemele limbii*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1970, 227-269.

Evans, Vyvyan, Tyler, Andrea, *Rethinking English "Prepositions of Movement"*, *The Case of To and Through*, în H. Cuychens, W. De Mulder, T. Mortelmans (Eds.), *Adpositions of Movement* (Belgian Journal of Linguistics), Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Evans, Vyvyan; Tyler, Andrea, *Spatial Experience*, *Lexical Structure and Motivation: the Case of In*, în G. Radden, G. Panther (Eds.), "Studies in Linguistics Motivation", New York and Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2004.

Evans, Vyvyan; Tyler, Andrea, *The Semantics of English Prepositions*, *Spatial Scenes*, *Embodied Meaning and Cognition*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Feigenbaum, Susanne, Kurzon, Dennis (Eds.), *Prepositions in Their Syntactic*, *Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002.

Găitănaru, Ştefan, *Gramatica actuală a limbii române*, Piteşti, Editura Tempora, 1998.

Gougenheim, R., *Y-a-t-il des prepositions vides en français?* în „Le français moderne", nr.1/1959, p. 1-25.

Guillaume, Gustave, *Langage et science du langage*, Québec et Paris, Presses de l'Université Laval et A.-G. Nizet, 1964.

Guillaume, Gustave, *Principes de linguistique théorique*, Québec – Paris, Presses de l'Université Laval – Klincksieck, 1973.

Lebas, Franck, *The Theoretical Status of Prepositions: The Case of the Prospective Use*, in Prepositions in Their Syntactic, Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002, www.books.google.ro.

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)

Spang-Hanssen, E., *Les prepositions incolores du français moderne*, Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1963.
Vasiliu, Laura, *Schiță de sistem al prepozițiilor limbii române*, în SG III, 1961, p. 11-42.
Zafiu, Rodica, *Diversitate stilistică în româna actuală*; www. ooks.unibuc.ro/ filologie/Zafiu/, 2003.
Zugun, Petru, *Cuvântul*, Iaşi, Editura Universității „Al.I. Cuza", 2003.

BDD-A3764 © 2008 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:52:03 UTC)