

**Quantitative analysis of the meaning of prepositional adverbials according
to their syntactic position
An insight into the degree of grammaticalization of prepositions**

Laure Sarda (CNRS & ENS, LATTICE)

Several linguistic studies conducted on adverbials (Charolles & Pery Woodley 2005, Diessel 2001, Ford 1983, Thompson & Longacre 1985) have shown that the more an adverbial is detached from the predicate, the more capable it is of playing a role at discourse level.

Based on this observation, we propose a quantitative study to highlight the semantic profile of prepositional adverbials according to their syntactic position: argument position vs. initial detached position. We aim to test the widely accepted idea that there is an evolutionary cline from spatial to temporal, notional and epistemic uses (see Traugott 1989, Traugott & Heine 1991, Traugott & Dasher 2002). We examine this hypothesis in a study on a wide synchronic press corpus (Le Monde (2002-2004)). We consider adverbials coined from prepositions that can have a spatial interpretation, either static (*à* 'at', *dans*, *en* 'in', *sur* 'on') or dynamic (*depuis* 'from', *par* 'by', *à travers* 'through/across', *vers* 'towards', *jusque* 'as far as') with the idea that it is more difficult for dynamic prepositions to free themselves from the influence of the verbal predicate (cf. Papahagi 2005, Sarda, & Stosic 2006).

However, in certain contexts prepositional phrase adverbials may also carry causal, notional, enunciative or epistemic interpretations. They can also take on fixed forms (*en fait* 'in fact/actually', *à la limite* 'to the limit', *dans le fond* 'basically', *par hasard* 'by chance'). The idea explored is that the frequency of semantic interpretation associated with a PP adverbial¹, according to its position in the sentence, tells us about the degree of grammaticalisation of the adverbial in its evolution from a predicative adverbial to a transphrastic function either as a connective (connection with a segment of preceding text), or as a framing adverbial (connection with a succeeding segment). In the same way, the frequency of fixed forms coined from a preposition tells us about its stage of development.

We expect to find more spatial interpretations in argument position and, at the same time, a larger number of temporal, causal, notional, enunciative or epistemic interpretations in initial position, the latter values being more likely to play a role in discourse cohesion. Preliminary results show that each preposition (although in variable proportions) shows a general trend towards describing a continuum between a high frequency of spatial uses in the argument position inversely proportional to the frequency of temporal, notional, enunciative and epistemic uses in initial position.

The annotation of the corpus enables us to precisely quantify the particular relationship between a semantic interpretation and a given syntactic position. On the basis of this annotation, we will propose a classification of prepositions according to their degree of grammaticalisation, subjectification and pragmaticalisation.

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¹ Examples of these different usages are as follows: Spatial (*dans la forêt* 'in the forest',...); temporal (*dans une semaine* 'in one week',...); causal (*dans la panique* 'in a panic',...); notional (*dans cette écriture sombre* 'in this dark writing',...); enunciative (*dans un communiqué de presse, il a annoncé* 'in a press release, he announced'...))

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