



A Framework for Using the Prepositions *In* and *On*

by Philip Suarez

Pedagogical methods of ESL teaching, in common with foreign language teaching generally, rely heavily on the syntactic and phonological components of language. In addition, ESL reading courses most often make use of the morphological component of language; that is, the study of word parts such as prefixes, suffixes and roots facilitates vocabulary building. Some of the language forms in English that receive the scantest treatment in ESL instructional material are those governed by the semantic component of the human language faculty. One question that is fundamental to teaching foreign language concerns how both the number and boundaries of semantic categories vary between languages. Rather than memorizing an unlimited number of word collocations, children instinctively internalize semantic guidelines when learning their native language. ESL students can likewise make use of categories of meaning when learning how to choose the correct lexical item or word form in a given environment. The present article investigates some of the ways in which the English prepositions *in* and *on* operate, either in their literal sense or a figurative sense, in accordance with semantic categories.

Some of the most common mistakes that ESL students make occur in those cases where the boundaries of usage for a given preposition differ between English and the student's native language. This divergence can manifest itself either when the preposition is used in its literal sense or metaphorically. The pair of English prepositions *in* and *on* constitutes one such example. Consider the comparison between the English prepositions and their Spanish equivalents in the following sentences:

(1a) I poured water **in** the glass.

(1b) Vertí agua **en** el vaso.

(1c) I put the food **on** the table.

(1d) Puse la comida **en** la mesa.

(2a) I left the keys **on** the table.

(2b) Dejé las llaves **en** la mesa.

(2c) I put the vase **on** the table.

(2d) Puse el florero **sobre** la mesa.

Clearly, English and Spanish use different semantic guidelines to determine the choice of preposition. In examples 1b and 1d above, the Spanish preposition *en* can be used before the noun *glass* (*vaso*) or the noun *table* (*mesa*). The corresponding English preposition *in* can only be used before the noun *glass*; the preposition *on* must be used before the noun *table*. In example 2d, however, the Spanish preposition

sobre is used before the noun *table (mesa)*; this is in contrast to examples 1d and 2b, where the Spanish preposition *en* appears before the same noun.

Regardless of their native language, ESL students need to learn the semantic categories that determine the choice between the English prepositions *in* and *on* when they are used in their literal sense. This semantic guideline reflects how English-speaking people view the world around them and will often differ from the semantic rules of other languages. The choice between *in* and *on* depends entirely on the noun that follows. All objects can be thought of as having a bottom, but not all objects have sides. In terms of geometry, nouns such as *table, floor, ground, wall* and *ceiling* refer to concepts that are defined as having only a surface. The surface can be horizontal (e.g., *table, floor* and *ground*), vertical (e.g., *wall*) or upside down (e.g., *ceiling*), but they are all only surfaces with no sides, which is why the preposition *on* is used. The preposition *in*, on the other hand, is used before nouns that refer to objects with sides, such as the nouns *glass, cup* and *basket*. The semantic category of objects with sides also includes enclosed structures, which have both sides and a top: *in a room, in a building* and *in a box*. Once students understand the semantic logic, they can apply it successfully to any object. The soup is *in the bowl* because a bowl has sides, but the food is *on the plate* because the concept of a plate is that of a flat surface. This guideline applies as well to very fine distinctions and unusual situations. Someone can put some cough syrup *in the spoon* because a spoon has sides to keep the liquid in. However, there can be some stains *on the spoon* because the stains are on the surface of the metal, just as the directions on a bottle might read “*pour the lotion on your skin*” since skin is a surface.

For the sake of comparison, we can review examples 1a-d and 2a-d above to understand the very different semantic rule that Spanish uses to determine the usage for the prepositions *en* and *sobre*. In the examples above, the preposition *en* can be used to put something either on a surface or in an object with sides, but there is no specific location indicated and the action is performed without any careful intent. Will the water land in the right side of the glass, the left side of the glass, the bottom of the glass or the top of the glass? The question is irrelevant. The water is just poured in the glass. Likewise, when you are serving a group of people at a dinner table, it is not important whether you put the food on the right side, left side or center of the table. When you come home and leave the keys on the table, it usually makes no difference where on the table you leave the keys. In contrast, the preposition *sobre* is used when someone is placing a vase with flowers on a table because people generally take care to arrange a vase with flowers on the table in an attractive way, meaning right in the center of the table. The factors that determine the choice of *sobre* rather than *en* in Spanish are the speaker’s intent and care regarding their action and the specific location of something that is on a surface.

The figurative use of the prepositions *in* and *on* presents an even greater challenge for ESL students. When speaking about methods of transportation, for instance, students often have difficulty choosing the right preposition. Are we riding *in the bus* or *on the bus*? Was it crowded *in the plane* or *on the plane*? We will begin with transportation as it existed before the industrial age, when there were only horse-drawn vehicles and ships. Passengers ride *in a carriage* because a carriage is privately owned, and herein lies the logic for choosing the correct preposition. Any form of transportation that is privately

owned or rented (by an individual, family, company, etc.) is paired with the preposition *in*. So you ride *in a carriage, in a car, in a truck, in a jeep, in a dune buggy, in an SUV, in a boat, in a canoe, in a millionaire's private jet* and *in a golf cart*. Regarding rented vehicles, teenagers go to their senior prom *in a limousine*, and city dwellers ride *in a taxi*; the fact that a limousine for senior prom and taxis are rented means that only those who rent them are allowed to ride in them, not members of the general public who buy tickets.

This leads us to the second semantic category for transportation: forms of transportation that are open to the general public. The understanding is that any member of the public can purchase a ticket and they will be riding with strangers. The most common such form of public transportation before the industrial age was the ship, and this may explain why the preposition *on* is paired with public transportation. Unlike a family-owned boat, a ship has a large deck, at least the size of a room, on which passengers can walk around. Recall the earlier discussion of the literal meanings of *in* and *on*: an object that only has a surface, but no sides, is paired with the preposition *on*. The deck of a ship is much like a floor, but a typical privately owned boat has no walking space that large. When the industrial age arrived, it was logical for English-speaking people to extend this usage to all forms of public transportation. So you ride *on a ship, on a bus, on a train, on a plane, on the subway, on a streetcar* and *on a ferry*. As for outer space, English speakers would say that the NASA crew is *in the spacecraft, in the rocket* and *in the capsule* because—at least for now—these forms of transportation are not open to the general public.

English-speaking people recognize a third, special category for the horse, which is meant for only one or two people to mount and then ride on; there are no seats to sit side by side. The horse is paired with the preposition *on*. To extend this logic into modern times to include similar modes of transportation, you ride *on a horse, on a bicycle, on a motorcycle, on a moped, on a skateboard, on a sled, on skis* and *on a scooter*. This gives us a total of three semantic categories for transportation: *in* (for privately owned or rented vehicles), *on* (for public transportation) and *on* (for anything that one or two people mount, like a horse). The only class of exceptions to this guideline includes forms of water transportation that are paired with the preposition *on* even though they are not public transportation. This is because they either have a floor-like deck, the same as a ship does, or consist mainly of a horizontal surface. Some examples are *on a yacht, on an aircraft carrier, on a raft* and *on an inflatable pool float*. The semantic connection between the preposition *on* and a floor to walk around on or a horizontal surface is so strong that it overrides the general rule about privately owned vehicles being paired with the preposition *in*. One last example that illustrates conversational context is *submarine*, which can be used with either *in* or *on*. If the emphasis is spending a short time inside a submarine as a visitor, a speaker could say, “*We took a guided tour of the naval facility, and we spent the afternoon in a submarine.*” If the emphasis is on using the floors and decks of a submarine for daily life, a speaker could say, “*My cousin is enlisted in the navy, and he's stationed on a submarine in the South Pacific.*”

A further metaphoric use of the preposition *in* concerns any way of dividing land, either by means of man-made concepts or natural features. The preposition *in* is used for almost all of these possibilities. Man-made concepts with which to divide land include all geopolitical divisions: *in the*

Americas, in North America, in Canada, in Ontario, in Maryland, in Los Angeles, in Cook County, in a city, in a town and in a village. Other man-made divisions of land include such urban features as *parking lot, alley, suburb, industrial zone, ghetto, Chinatown and the neighborhood.* The preposition *in* is also paired with any natural divisions of the earth. Here are some examples (preceded by typical articles): *the forest, the woods, the field, the desert, the jungle, the countryside, a lake, a river, the ocean, the sea, the sky, the clouds, a swamp, a bayou, the grassland, the tundra, the hills, the mountains and a valley.* In general, any division of land for any reason is paired with the preposition *in*. The exceptions to this general rule, which are paired with the preposition *on*, are areas that are defined as being a vast flat surface, like a floor for walking on, or a narrow flat surface, like a road for walking on: *on the plain, on the prairie, on the Russian steppe and on the beach.*

Now consider uses of the preposition *in* that describe even more abstract concepts, such as patterns that are either geometrical or figurative. When people are waiting for a cashier and there are other people ahead of them, we say that they are standing *in line*. ESL students often mistakenly say that they are standing *on line*, although the recently coined English word *online* refers to using a computer that is connected to the Internet. Similarly, soldiers march *in formation* and people participate *in a parade*. People can form figurative patterns when they enter a dance floor *in couples* or when a teacher asks students to work *in groups* or *in pairs*.

One last semantic category that is paired with the preposition *in* contains many time expressions. Common time expressions use the preposition *in* followed by the name of a month or season, a specific year or a specific time of day: *in April, in summer, in 1991 and in the morning.* A speaker can use the preposition *in* to describe a length of time that is used as an endpoint or deadline in the future. Examples of this are *in an hour* and *in a year*.

Finally, the preposition *in* is used for a few miscellaneous semantic categories. To describe the manner of an action, a speaker could say, *"The child left in tears."* To describe a result, a speaker could say, *"The discussion ended in an argument."* A speaker could also say, *"It resulted in a death."* The preposition *in* can also be used with noun phrases that refer to mental states, as in the phrases *in my opinion, lost in thought* and *deep in prayer*. The preposition *in* is similarly used with noun phrases that refer to status or occupation, as in the phrases *happy in their marriage, in training* and *in my profession*.

The preposition *on* is also used figuratively. Examples of some common time expressions that refer to a specific day or event are *on Thursday, on June 21, on Christmas, on the summer solstice, on his graduation* and *on that occasion*. Referring to an event, a speaker could say: *"On the death of his father, he contacted his estranged brother."* The preposition *on* is also used in conjunction with any type of path meant for people to walk on or vehicles to travel on: *on a road, on a sidewalk, on a highway, on Lincoln Street, on Fifth Avenue, on Interstate 95, on a forest trail* and *on a bicycle path*. Examples in which the preposition *on* can describe a topic are *an article on marine biology* and *a lecture on educational reform*. In order to specify a condition, a speaker could say *based on your recommendation* and *on one condition*.

Summary

The list below summarizes the literal and metaphoric uses of the prepositions *in* and *on*.

I. Uses of *In*

A. Literal meanings

1. Object with sides (e.g., *cup, basket, spoon*)
2. Object with sides and top (e.g., *room, building, box*)

B. Figurative meanings (transportation)

1. Privately owned or rented transportation (e.g., *car, boat, taxi*)

C. Figurative meanings (land)

1. Man-made divisions of land (e.g., *city, state, parking lot*)
2. Natural divisions of land (e.g., *forest, desert, field*)

D. Figurative meanings (patterns)

1. Geometrical patterns (e.g., *cashier line, military formation, parade*)
2. Figurative patterns (e.g., *couples, groups, pairs*)

E. Figurative meanings (time)

1. Time expressions for month, season, year and time of day (e.g., *April, summer, 1991, morning*)

F. Figurative meanings (manner, result, mental state, status and occupation)

1. Manner of action (e.g., *in tears*)
2. Result (e.g., *It resulted in a death.*)
3. Mental state (e.g., *in my opinion, lost in thought, deep in prayer*)
4. Status and occupation (e.g., *happy in their marriage, in training, in my profession*)

II. Uses of *On*

A. Literal meanings

1. Object without sides, i.e., object that only has a surface (e.g., *floor, wall, ceiling*)

B. Figurative meanings (transportation)

1. Public transportation (e.g., *bus, train, plane*)
2. Forms of transportation similar to a horse (e.g., *bicycle, motorcycle, moped*)
3. Water transportation with a large deck or consisting of a horizontal surface (e.g., *yacht, aircraft carrier, raft, inflatable pool float*)

C. Figurative meanings (land)

1. Natural divisions of land that are flat surfaces (e.g., *plain, prairie, beach*)

D. Figurative meanings (time)

1. Time expressions for a specific day or date (e.g., *Thursday, June 21*)
2. Time expressions for an event (e.g., *the death of his father, his graduation*)

E. Figurative meanings (paths)

1. Any type of path for people to walk on (e.g., *sidewalk, path, trail*)
2. Any type of path for vehicles to travel on (e.g., *street, road, highway*)

F. Figurative meanings (topics and conditions)

1. Topic (e.g., *an article on marine biology, a lecture on educational reform*)
2. Condition (e.g., *based on your recommendation, on one condition*)

Although the semantic guidelines that govern a given language, such as English, are specific to that language, the formation of such guidelines constitutes part of the semantic component of language and is innate. In the context of ESL instruction, this semantic component may help to describe the operation of other prepositions, both locational and non-locational. More complex is the relationship between the prepositions that are used as particles in phrasal verbs and the semantic content that they add to the phrasal verb. The fact that phrasal verbs remain so popular in English, and are actually increasing in number as the English-speaking population incorporates more phrasal verbs into the language, can only pressure ESL educators into incorporating the semantic component of language into their curricula. Especially for ESL students at the more advanced levels, relying on instructional material that only makes use of syntactic, phonological and morphological data will not be sufficient to attain their goals of proficiency. The material in this article can hopefully serve as a starting point in addressing the difficulty that ESL students encounter in mastering the usage of prepositions, and ultimately, more complex forms such as phrasal verbs.

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