



# English prepositions: Corpus linguistic methods and pedagogy for Nigerian students

## Review article

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### Abstract

This paper investigated five most frequently used prepositions in Nigerian English as presented in the ICE-Nigeria (International Corpus of English, Nigeria) database – *of*, *in*, *for*, *on* and *at*. Prepositions are a delicate linguistic category whose complex nature can be difficult for an L2 user of English partly because of their polysemous nature and the general lack of one-on-one equivalents or renditions in indigenous languages. Evidence from the analyses in this paper reveals that English prepositions when translated into Nigerian languages (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo) are rendered as prepositions, adverbials, particles and sometimes a null category. Teachers of English language and communication experts are saddled with the responsibility of being linguistic models who must make deliberate efforts to master the appropriate us of prepositions. An eclectic approach of using strategies and methods in Corpus Linguistics (maximising concordance and collocation patterns), Cognitive Linguistic theory (using pictures, proto-type approach), has been suggested for ameliorating the enigma of mastering and explaining prepositions in an English as Second Language or Foreign language learning context.



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## Introduction

- He requested for/Ø an adjournment of the meeting.
- We say 'lie in/on bed' and 'lie in/on the couch'.

Little words but sufficient enough to ruin a reputation or a life – Prepositions.

This article discusses how prepositions or spatial particles are encoded in some Nigerian languages. The aim here is to provide some additional evidence to discussions by scholars (Bukhari M, and Hussain S) (Jibril) (Delija Shpresa and Koruti Ogerta) that the difficulty in learning and using prepositions stem from mother-tongue interference. This challenge for 'second language learners' or L2 users of English language is evident in the incorrect usage of prepositions, using additional (most times unnecessary) prepositions and deleting necessary prepositions. (Grubic 4). The word preposition was derived from Latin **prae** meaning 'before' and **ponere** meaning 'to place'. It means invariably 'to pre-pend'; 'to place before'; literally 'to put in front of'. Generally speaking, it is a word class which expresses the relations between entities. These relations include:

- Relations of time – For example in, at, by
- Relations of location – For example in, to
- Relations of direction – For example on, to
- Relations of position and place – For example under, before, after
- Degrees of mental and emotional attitudes for example:
  - Possession: 'of' in *a friend of mine*
  - Purpose: 'for' in *the operation was done for the best of reasons*
  - The way something is done (manner): 'by' in *I went to Jos by car*

Prepositions are a delicate *Part-of-Speech* or linguistic category that challenge or 'threaten' the goal of many L2 users of English to achieve linguistic competence. Most times, prepositions portend structural ambiguity; and their polysemous nature makes them somewhat disturbing for English teachers (and native speakers alike) to understand their semantic and grammatical values. It is extremely challenging to learn all the nuances of prepositions (that is, mastering how to use and explain a preposition without being confused at some point).

## Methodology

The methodology used for this investigation is somewhat eclectic. Five most frequently used prepositions in the ICE-Nigeria database have been selected using the **word list** and **Concordance Hit** tools in the Corpus-based Analysis Software AntConc 3.4.4w.

Table 1

Preposition	Concordance Hits
Of	28508
In	17598
For	8990
On	6139
At	3921

ICE-Nigeria was released in 2013 as Nigeria's contribution (Nigerian variety of English) to the ICE project inspired by Sidney Greenbaum in 1990. Nigeria is one of the over twenty countries where English is the first or official language. Jowitt reveals that:

The plan was that the total corpus would be made up of twenty national components representing 'L1' or 'L2' varieties of English around the world, each in turn made up of 500 texts arranged under a number of different 'written' and 'spoken' categories; and each would altogether contain approximately one million words. (Jowitt 5)

One of the hypotheses of this work is that mother-tongue interference is one of the leading causes of inappropriate or incorrect use of English prepositions amongst Nigerians. Hence, the tenets of Cognitive Linguistics (CL) have been adopted as the theoretical framework. CL seeks to understand how we subconsciously think of language and how to subscribe or align our thought patterns in a particular language. For example, each preposition has a central meaning which branches out into a polysemic or semantic network of other prepositions and meanings. CL can also provide explanations for mismatch problems of prepositions between languages. Evans and Tyler observe that 'the way a culture views a scene will determine the way it is expressed in the language ...if two cultures or languages see a scene from different angles, they will use different prepositions' (3). The model of analysis used for this work is qualitative as the discussions therein highlight inferences from published works based on empirical data. The translation of English phrases and sentence into the three main Nigerian languages adopted is as supplied by <https://translate.google.com> (a useful online translation application).

### Orientation and Cognition

Orientation is fundamental to 'our perception of the world and to our thinking' (O'Dowd 55). Thus, the world is seen regarding forms whose size, shape, function, and significance are defined about us or one other. Human beings experience events as changes of state made visible in improved relationships between forms around them. Psathas G. (1989: 150) cited in O'Dowd opines that 'orientation requires skills and knowledge about what are relevant

objects and places in one's social world, how these may be identified, and what the spatial relationships of various types of objects and places are' (56). Language is what humans use to refer to objects, events, and situations; we represent our subjective understanding of how things are related to one and the other. This means that meaning in language is constructed 'inter-subjunctively'. O'Dowd emphatically states that 'words, phrases, and grammatical structures have meanings only to the extent that interlocutors agree on those definitions ...conversational discourse becomes an exercise in the cooperative construction, or negotiation, of meaning' (56). Negotiating meaning in discourse requires some orientation; it is goal-oriented or purposefully directed. Orientation includes knowing and understanding contextual information about the discourse.

In each discourse, it is hoped that interlocutors come to the realisation of the worldview expressed in the language used. Therefore, people only relate to things they understand, and every meaningful conversation relies on the linguistic, social and cognitive orientation of the parties involved. Consequently, the linguistic choices interlocutors make in discourse are influenced by the objects and places relevant in the physical world of their orientation. Again, relevance is a relative term which can vary according to the present position of the interlocutors, the discourse, and the immediate goal. For example, the expression '*there is a wasp on your head*' can generate different reactions depending on the physical proximity of the speaker and the recipient. The relevance and urgency of this sentence based on the physical context and the orientation the recipient has about 'wasp' will determine the spontaneity of his/her response. If this statement was made over a telephone conversation, the urgency or relevance might be low. In the previous context (where the speaker is physically present), if the statement was '*a wasp is hovering over the cap on your head*', the degree of the urgency of the recipient's response might not be the same as when he hears '*there is a wasp on your head*'. Hence the position of the 'wasp', expressed by a preposition determines the reaction or relevance of the statements - '*there is a wasp on your head*' or '*a wasp is hovering over the cap on your head*'.

## English Prepositions Rendered In Nigerian Languages

Table 2

English	1. Just a matter of time	2. some form of identification	3. The truth of the matter	4. Irrespective of how I voted
<b>Hausa</b>	kawai wani al'amari lokaci	wasu nau'i na ganewa	da gaskiyar al'amarin	tare da la'akari da yadda za i zabe
<b>Igbo</b>	dị nnoọ a okwu <b>nke</b> oge	ụdị ụfodụ <b>nke</b> njirimara	eziokwu <b>nke</b> okwu	irrespective <b>nke</b> otú m tozuru oke
<b>Yoruba</b>	O kan ọrọ kan <b>ti</b> akoko.	dię ninu awọn fọomu <b>ti</b> idanimọ.	otitọ <b>ti</b> ọrọ naa.	laifi <b>ti</b> bi mo ti dibo.

The renditions of ‘of’ in Igbo and Yoruba are stable from our data above – ‘nke’ and ‘ti’ respectively. In Hausa, it seems the preposition is embedded in the sense conveyed by the noun or noun phrase after the preposition.

Table 3

English	1. I live in Jos.	2. Man, in the society...	3. It was in the news.	4. Eight years in office
<b>Hausa</b>	Ina zama <b>a</b> garin Jos.	Maza <b>a</b> cikin al'umma	shi ne <b>a</b> cikin labarai	shekaru takwas <b>a</b> ofishin
<b>Igbo</b>	Ebim <b>na</b> Jos.	nwoke <b>na</b> otu	ọ bụ <b>na</b> ozi ọma	afọ asato <b>na</b> office
<b>Yoruba</b>	Mon gbe <b>ni</b> ilu Jos.	eniyan <b>ni</b> awujo	o si wà <b>ninu</b> awọn iroyin	ọdún mejo <b>ni</b> ofiisi

The renditions of ‘in’ in Igbo and Yoruba and Hausa are stable from our data above – ‘na’, ‘ni’ and ‘a’ respectively. English language speakers regularly use the spatial particle or prepositions *in* to code the concept of containment linguistically. For example, *I awoke in my bedroom; I live in Jos.* These sentences express explicit spatio-physical relations between physical trajectory [TR] (I) and physical containment or landmark [LM] (my bedroom or Jos). *In* is also used to show non-spatio-physical containments, for example –*it was in the news; Joshua is in love*. The relation between an idea and a text is conveyed by *in* in the first sentence and a person and an emotional state in the second. When an entity is in a spatial configuration with another entity, there are significant consequences for participating entities. In a non-spatio-physical relationship, TR is not physically surrounded by the LM, but we have a situation where the LM represents a pervasive influence on the TR. Tyler and Evans (27) observe that ‘English speakers extend *in* from its use to express TR-LM relations involving physical containment to express relationships involving concepts which are conceptualised as exerting

a pervasive influence'. In Igbo, **na** is used to express *in*, and **n'ime** means 'inside' which is used as an adverbial. In Yoruba, **ni** is the word for *in*.

Table 4

English	1. We will be back for our discussions.	2. Thank you for that beautiful presentation	3. Let us pray for the president	4. Thank God for today
Hausa	za mu dawo <b>domin</b> mu tattaunawa	Na gode <b>da</b> wannan kyakkyawan gabatarwa	Bari mu yi addu'a <b>ga</b> shugaban kasar	Godiya <b>ga</b> Allah da a yau
Igbo	Anyị ga-azụ n'ihi na anyị na mkparịta ụka.	Daalụ <b>maka</b> na mara mma ngosi	Ka anyị kpee ekpere <b>maka</b> president	Ekele Chineke <b>maka</b> taa
Yoruba	A yoo jẹ pada <b>fun</b> wa awọn ijiroro.	Dúpẹ lọwọ ọlọrun <b>fun</b> oni.	Jẹ ki a gbadura <b>fun</b> awọn Aare.	O şeun <b>fun</b> awọn ti o lèwa igbejade.

The rendition of 'for' in Yoruba 'fun' and Igbo 'maka' appears to be more stable than Hausa 'ga/domin/da'.

Table 5

English	1. Place the book on the table.	2. They are mounted on the rock.	3. Focus on God	4. My mind is not on the game.
Hausa	Saa litafin <b>akan</b> karaga.	Suna saka <b>a</b> <b>kan</b> dutse.	Mayar da hankali <b>a</b> <b>kan</b> Allah	Hankalina ba a wasan.
Igbo	Debe akwukwo <b>na</b> tebul.	Ha na-n'elu oké nkume.	Elekwasị anya <b>na</b> Chineke	Uche m bụ bụghị egwuregwu.
Yoruba	Fi iwe na si <b>ori</b> tabili.	Wọn ti wa ni agesin <b>lori</b> apata.	Fojusi <b>lori</b> Ọlọrun	Mi lokan ni ko <b>lori</b> awọn ere.

The spatial scene coded linguistically in *the cup is on the table* is constructed conceptually when it is understood that there is a direct contact between the cup and the table. Thus, the *table* functionally supports the *cup*. This knowledge is derived from the basic human understanding of gravity, the knowledge that certain surfaces can prevent an item e.g. cup/book from falling to the ground and an understanding of the physical properties of the entities involved e.g. cup/book are smaller or light-weightier than *the table*. The concept of support, which is derived from spatio-physical experience, can be systematically extended to non-physical domains. For example – *I count on your vote; You can rely on me*. Here, *on* is used

to express the notion of support without being related to gravity or spatio-physical experience in any way. It is natural to regularly extend the understanding of spatio-physical relations and entities to non-physical domains. They are an integral part of our linguistic systems. Tyler and Evans reveal that:

...the meanings associated with words that are instantiated in semantic memory, not regarding linguistic or semantic features, nor as abstract prepositions, but rather meaning prompted for by symbols such as words, morphemes and grammatical constructions constitutes as re-description of perceptual information, at some level related to external sensorimotor experience. (30)

In Igbo **na** conveys the meaning of on as evident in the translated sentence – *Place the book on the table*. The Igbo-English Dictionary (Okowa Okwu) presents on in Igbo as *di n'elu ihe* (at the upper surface). The adverbial used to express a position on a platform shows how challenging it can be to express in one word the English idea of on in Igbo. In Yoruba, **ori** is the equivalent for head/on. As evident in the translated sentence *ori* conveys the appropriate English essence for the preposition on which shows the idea of support provided by the table. In Hausa, the word **akǎn** is used to express the English preposition on. This means that a in akǎn is an appendage to help express the notion of on. Like the Igala equivalent ‘**nōjì**’, akǎn (on top of) is an adverbial showing place.

Table 6

English	1. Meet me here at 5pm.	2. Look at this bird	3. Stop making people stay at home.	4. He spoke at the meeting.
<b>Hausa</b>	Same ni anan a karfe biyar na yanma.	dubi wannan tsuntsu	daina yin mutane zauna a gida	Ya yi magana a cikin taron.
<b>Igbo</b>	Bia hum na eba n'elekere nke ise	anya na nke a na nnunu	akwusị na-eme ndị mmadụ ịnọ n'ụlọ	O kwuru ná nzukọ.
<b>Yoruba</b>	Pade mi ni ibiyi ni ago marun irolo.	wo ni yi eye	da şişe awọn eniyan duro ni ile	O si so ni ipade.

In the English language, the concept of ‘the exactness of time’ is expressed using the preposition – at. The renditions of ‘at’ in the three languages are consistent.

Table 7

Summary of Translated Prepositions into Nigerian languages

English	OF	IN	FOR	ON-	AT
Igbo	nke	na	maka	na	n'/na
Yoruba	ti	ni	fun	ori	ni
Hausa	na	a	Domin/da/ga	akǎn	a

### Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, the Hausa word **a** appears to be constantly used to show the placement of things performing the function of a preposition. As evident in table 6, Hausa and Yoruba use **a** to refer to 'at' and 'in', and **ni** is used to refer to 'at' and 'in' respectively as presented in the data above. It is also used in the prepositional phrase **akǎn** (on top of) to show the spatial relationship between an object and a flat surface as shown in the use of on and up. The use of prepositions in Igbo language is quite polysemous as **na** or the contraction **n'** (as in **n'azu** (behind), **n'ime**, **n'ulo**, **n'elu** (on top of)) is used to mean different prepositions. Hence, it can be hypothesised that in Nigerian indigenous languages prepositions have polysemous attributes which consequently may affect the Nigerian L2 user of English language.

The null or covet feature of some prepositions or particle in some expressions in Hausa (Table 1; 1,3,4. Table 4;4. Table 5;2.) and Igbo (Table 3;1.) might be the case in some other Nigerian languages. If this is true, it means the function and structure of prepositions in the English language is remarkably different from prepositions in Nigerian languages (by extension Nigerian thought patterns). As Jibril observes, 'many African languages do not have prepositions which correspond to the English ones. Instead, they make do with a few general-purpose particles which are less specific in their reference to temporal and spatial relations than the English ones' (525). However, from the analysis above, Yoruba tends to have distinctive words that match the English prepositions presented.

A corpus of Nigerian languages will help make an attempt made in this paper more quantitative. Corpora (pl. of the corpus) are databases of naturally-produced or authentic texts attested by linguists as a credible sample of linguistic evidence of how a language is used at a time by a linguistic community. The use of Corpus linguistics methods in classroom teaching of lexis and structure of English in a multilingual environment like Nigeria will improve the quality of the learning experience. For example, a quick query into the ICE-Nigeria database on the most frequently used prepositions by Nigerian users of English produced the five prepositions discussed in this paper. This information will help a language teacher prepare for a lesson or a lecture that involves the learning of prepositions and their practical usage (sometimes erroneous). The teacher will also be properly equipped to help the students learn the vocabulary (in this case prepositions) by exploring extended collocations, discovering new or creative patterns of usage and compare writings against model texts. The students will not only learn prepositions but will know how to use them in different contexts. For example,

collocation patterns of prepositions used with the word *result* can be extracted from the corpora (online or application-based) to show multiple ways in which the word *result* can be utilised with prepositions – say ‘of’ and ‘in’. Grammatically correct usage of *result of* occurs when it is followed by a noun = *result of crisis*, *result of hunger*, *result of a test*. While *result in* occurs when a verb follows it = *result in killing*, *result in stealing*, *result in testing*. The analyses show that the three main Nigerian languages (especially Yoruba) have lexical equivalents of the five prepositions discussed. This means that the earlier hypothesis that the lack of lexical equivalents in indigenous languages could be the reason for the difficulty L2 users of English language have with prepositions is fallacious.

In conclusion, an ESL situation requires a combination of many strategies to effectively master the learning and teaching of English language. The use of the proto-type approach involves teaching words in an explanatory manner. It emphasizes the spatial (physical) meaning of prepositions as the prototype of the other meanings of the polysemous non-prototypical prepositions (metaphorical extensions); for example, ... *in the field of play* (referring to football field (prototypical)) ... *in the field of linguistics* (field means ‘academic discipline’). The use of tools and methods of corpus linguistics and cognitive linguistic theory in the pedagogy of prepositions will surely contribute to ameliorating the lack of good performance in English examinations which is widely attributed to the misuse of prepositions.

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## Appendix

AntConc 3.4.4w (Windows) 2014

File Global Settings Tool Preferences Help

Corpus Files

Concordance Concordance Plot File View Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List

Concordance Hits 3921

Hit KWIC

68 nscription 1 can we have some Transcription 2 at a particular time Transcription 2 there are  
he casually mentioned meeting some girls at a party to Babby in some  
governing the state came to me at a period of brewing social malaise  
stand for 10, 20, 30, 40, 50,60 and 120 min. at a pH 7.5 and a temperature of 29 0  
Transcription 1 erm you don't stand at a place to watch a masquerade  
of the agreements amicably reached will, at a point, damn the consequences thrown  
did travel to the US at a point in time Transcription 1 and  
Nigeria you know they were planning at a point in time they were  
Zulu and that they got desperate at a point in the execution of  
broad range of lavender so that at a point one may have a  
from orange to lavender so that at a point one may have a  
discovered that his erm shirt because at a point the place was hot  
ption 2 erm Transcription 2 I think middlemen at a point they will come to  
mhm Transcription 1 really Transcription 2 at a point Transcription 1 I've never  
nscription 6 we must stop him Transcription 6 at a point Transcription 6 that is the  
of standard Nigerian English in fact at a point we tried Bolinger's  
Investment Bank Plutarchos Sakellaris said this at a press conference in Abuja said  
Nigerian child the minister said this at a press conference preceding this year'  
, last week unveiled the CyberPower Inverter at a press conference held in Lagos.  
have to board a canoe but at a price this canoe operator says

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nov\_09.txt  
btal\_26.txt  
ATec\_03.txt  
ph\_04.txt  
bl\_16.txt  
con\_38.txt  
unsp\_01.txt  
Pr\_17.txt  
ess\_05.txt  
ess\_05.txt  
leg\_02.txt  
con\_28.txt  
con\_16.txt  
parl\_01.txt  
unsp\_03.txt  
bnew\_16.txt  
bnew\_21.txt  
PTec\_03.txt  
bnew\_38.txt

Search Term  Words  Case  Regex Search Window Size  
at Advanced 50

Start Stop Sort

Kwic Sort  Level 1 1R  Level 2 2R  Level 3 3R

Total No. 902

Files Processed

Clone Results

The screenshot shows the AntConc 3.4.4w software interface. The top menu bar includes File, Global Settings, Tool Preferences, and Help. The left sidebar displays 'Corpus Files' with a list of 902 files, and 'Files Processed' with a count of 902. The main window title is 'Concordance Plot' with sub-tabs for Concordance Hits (17598), KWIC (selected), and Hit. The search term 'in' is entered in the 'Search Term' field. The search results are displayed in a KWIC format, showing the word 'in' in blue and its context in various transcripts. The results are paginated from 1 to 20. At the bottom, there are buttons for Start, Stop, Sort, and Advanced search, along with a 'Search Window Size' input field set to 50. A 'Kwic Sort' section is also present at the bottom.

AntConc 3.4.4w (Windows) 2014

File Global Settings Tool Preferences Help

Corpus Files

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bdis\_02.txt  
bdis\_03.txt  
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bint\_06.txt  
bint\_07.txt  
bint\_08.txt

Concordance Plot File View Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List

Concordance Hits 28508

Hit KWIC

File

1 Transcription 1 Ononuju an economist and we'll be looking at the state of the global Transcription 1 economy Transcription 1 erm Doctor Onon  
2 iption 1 up first Transcription 1 on Transcription 1 Ireland the republic of Ireland Transcription 1 the question there of course this Transcription  
3 option 1 Ireland the republic of Ireland Transcription 1 the question there of course this Transcription 1 came out about five months ago if I'm  
4 Transcription 1 the sovereign debt crisis Transcription 1 in the republic of Ireland and after some time we saw okay fine Transcription 1 that it  
5 d Transcription 1 why do you think Transcription 1 that the government of Ireland is reluctant Transcription 1 to accepting Transcription 1 a baik  
6 lous behaviour Transcription 2 in line Transcription 2 with the demands of those who have come to help you Transcription 2 we have been on  
7 who have come to help you Transcription 2 we have been on issue of Europe Transcription 2 it's not just been just Ireland Transcription 2 w  
8 pray that Europe Transcription 2 erm Transcription 2 brings this quality of preemptive Transcription 2 moves Transcription 2 on places like Port  
9 nomic prerequisites that are required for you to sustain that membership of the union Transcription 2 members of the union will come to try Trans  
10 or you to sustain that membership of the union Transcription 2 members of the union will come to try Transcription 2 to save you Transcription 2  
11 ve Transcription 2 a larger body problem to the Transcription 2 the rest of the union Transcription 2 and I think Transcription 2 yes Transcription  
12 economically Transcription 2 and you are requesting that he takes a kind of austere measures Transcription 2 to try to correct Transcription 2 the  
13 Transcription 2 erm stabilise the system Transcription 2 so has the rest of continental Europe erm come in to do Transcription 2 I think they shou  
14 should just go beyond Ireland Transcription 2 and provide the same kind of cushioning Transcription 2 erm you know Transcription 2 erm Trans  
15 Portugal and wherever they think this could come Transcription 2 instead of allowing Transcription 2 the currency brigade Transcription 2 to alert  
16 ue about the monetary union Transcription 2 you must not as a member of the union Transcription 2 damage the interest of the rest of members  
17 must not as a member of the union Transcription 2 damage the interest of the rest of members of the union Transcription 2 and that's what  
18 a member of the union Transcription 2 damage the interest of the rest of members of the union Transcription 2 and that's what this is Transcrip  
19 of the union Transcription 2 damage the interest of the rest of members of the union Transcription 2 and that's what this is Transcription 2 once  
20 an Union monetary union Transcription 1 would survive Transcription 2 of course it will survive Transcription 2 you see there are countries in the

Search Term  Words  Case  Regex Search Window Size  
of Advanced 100

Start Stop Sort

Kwic Sort  
Level 1  1R  2R  3R  
Level 2  2R  3R  
Level 3  3R  4R

Clone Results

