Cross-linguistic Encoding of Locative Predications

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The basic hypothesis of the present study is that the form of an expression describing an event in relationship to space depends on (1) whether the grammatical system of a given language has a functional domain, conventionally called “altri-locative point of view” that encodes movement or position in relationship to a place other than the deictic center, which is often, but not necessarily, the place of speech; and (2) whether the grammatical system has a functional domain that encodes movement in relationship to the deictic center, conventionally called “directionality from the point of view of deictic center,” “directionality” for the sake of brevity.

Some languages code only altri-locative point of view (1), some languages code only directionality (2), some languages code both (1) and (2), and there are languages that do not code either. The description of a physically identical event, such as “movement from X to Y,” thus has different forms across languages, depending on whether the language codes locative predication, directional predication, both, or neither. The present study demonstrates the importance of the existence of functional domain only with respect to altri-locative point of view.

Languages differ with respect to how they represent “locative events,” i.e., events involving movement to or from a place and events or states occurring at a place. The differences observed raise the following questions:

**Question 1:** Why, within the same language, do some clauses coding locative events involve prepositions while others do not?

**Question 2:** Why, in expressing the same locative event, do some languages use prepositions while others do not, even if there are prepositions in the language?

**Question 3:** Why do some languages have the distinct lexical category “locative predicator” while others do not?

**Question 4:** Why do the syntactic properties of verbs that refer to the same activities, such as equivalents of “come,” “go,” “run,” “swim,” “jump,” differ significantly across languages?

**Question 5:** Why do prepositions involved in coding the same locative events differ significantly, across languages, in their semantic and syntactic properties?

The aim of the present study is to explain differences across languages that have the same lexical categories, particularly prepositions and postpositions, and that have lexical items referring to the same types of events or states. The foundation of the explanation is the discovery, described in Frajzyngier with Shay (2016) and Frajzyngier (in press), that some languages have the function “locative predication” encoded in their semantic structure while others do not, and that, in a language that has encoded the function of locative predication, the formal means used to code this predication are distinct from the formal means used to code all
other predications in the language. As a consequence of encoding the function of locative predication, some verbs and nouns in the language are inherently locative and others are not. When the verb is inherently locative, no additional means are used to mark it as the locative predicate in a locative predication (all examples here are from Mina (Frajzyngier and Johnston with Edwards 2005), but similar phenomena have been observed in other languages; see Frajzyngier (in press)):

(1) yá i-bə̀ ndə̀ tə̀ b í ŋ
     call   PL-ASSC   go   3PL.POSS  room
     “They went into their room.” (the verb ndə̀ is inherently locative)

When the predicate is not inherently locative, as is the verb yà “call,” the verb phrase must be followed by the predicator á to mark the locative predication:

(2) nd-á yà ngúl ngàń á bíŋ
     go-GO   call   husband 3SG PRED   room
     “And [she] called her husband into the room.”
     (nd-á is a sequential marker and á is the locative predicator, not a preposition)

Note that the translations of (1) and (2) use the preposition “into,” evidence that the nature of the predicate plays no role in the coding of the locative expression in English.

If the complement of the locative predicate is inherently locative, i.e. if it refers to referents such as “house,” “room,” or “village,” it does not require a locative preposition in the locative predication (see examples (1) and (2)). If the complement is not inherently locative, it requires the locative preposition nə̀:

(3) hídì wà mà-nd-ám-kù dèɓ nà kítā
     man   DEM REL-beat-OBJ-1SG lead   PREP justice (Fula)
     “It was this person who hit me. Take him to be judged.” (lit. “take him to justice”)

Note that the English version requires a locative preposition regardless of whether or not the locative complement is inherently locative, as illustrated in the translations of examples (1–3).

The preposition nə̀ has only a locative function; it does not have a directional component, as evidenced by the fact that it can be used in clauses involving movement to a place (ex. (3)), movement from a place (ex. (4)), and in clauses involving the presence of an entity or the occurrence of an event at a place (ex. (5), where the place is represented by an inherently non-locative complement. Note that example (5) also contains the locative predicator á, since the main predicate of the clause, dáhà “exist,” is inherently non-locative. This example also shows that á is not a preposition:

(4) séy ábə̀ nd-á ngàŋ nà yàm zá
     so   ASSC  go-GO  3SG PREP   water   FACT
     “Then, he came out of the water.”
The existence of locative predications, as distinct from other types of predication, has the following implications for the questions posed above:

1. Some nouns and verbs are inherently locative and others are not. No such distinction exists in languages that have not encoded locative predication (Question 4).
2. Within an individual language and across languages, prepositions are not used when the complement is inherently locative (Questions 1 and 2).
3. When the predicate is not inherently locative, a locative predicator is used in locative predications (Question 3).
4. There exist prepositions that have only the locative function, i.e. they do not code spatial relationships with respect to the complement. Spatial relations are coded by another set of markers (not illustrated for lack of space). In languages without locative predication, the locative function is fused with spatial relationships, as in English “in,” “out,” “from,” “to” (Question 5).

References: