

Fixed Expressions in EFL: The Case for Prepositional Clusters

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Introduction

Prepositional clusters have long been absent in EFL/ESL coursebooks. This could be due to the fact that prepositions are notoriously difficult to teach due to their ambiguous nature of being both a lexical and grammatical item. Furthermore, the predominance of prepositional clusters in language (written and spoken) used metaphorically and how EFL/ESL language learners have struggled to make sense of their meanings as a result of this absence could be an additional reason case for arguing the inclusion of prepositional clusters in EFL/ESL coursebooks. The common use of prepositional clusters is obvious in the frequency with which they occur. Some spoken and written examples of these clusters are given below; they were taken from the television and local newspapers in the space of one week.

- ‘Although links between on and off screen violence have yet to be proven, we cannot deny that watching too much fictional brutality can desensitise the viewer to any real-life horrors...’ – (Dr Marian Watts, child psychologist, in an interview with Channel 4 News, about the effects of the increase in television violence on children, 16th August 1999)
- ‘Nottingham’s down and outs were having a cuppa with Housing Minister Hilary Armstrong last week...’ – (*Nottingham and Long Eaton Topper*, local newspaper, 18th August 1999)
- ‘The doctors are not only working in the hospitals but are also out and about the disaster area, treating victims...’ – (Julian Tapper, reporter for BBC World News, in an interview about the earthquake situation in Istanbul, 19th August 1999)
- ‘I’ve got a new cell-mate... He’s okay I guess... been in and out of jail a few times...but he’s alright...’ – (The TV character ‘Matt’ from *EastEnders*, BBC 1, 23rd August 1999).

Besides their pervasive use in daily life prepositional clusters are also used very frequently on the Internet in various types of written texts – electronic mailing lists, on-line advertisements, social messages, etc. With the Internet becoming so much a part of the information age and English being by far the most widely used language on the Internet, users of the Internet have to employ English to communicate with one another. This has resulted in the language of the Internet tending towards the informal where the use of idiomatic English is prevalent. One implication of this is that the use of prepositional clusters in everyday language interactions will not be an idiomatic aspect confined only to native English environments as other English language users of the Internet virtual community (native and non-native speakers of English) will soon acquaint themselves with their use.

The Conceptual Relationship in a Prepositional Cluster

A conceptual relationship refers to a relationship between constituent elements that show opposing, or reinforcing metaphorical concepts. In a prepositional cluster, the relationship between prepositional constituents will focus on the prototype meaning that prepositions like 'up', 'down', 'over' are assumed to possess. The application of prototype meaning here is based on the studies of single prepositions conducted by Brugman (1981, 1988), Rice (1992), Boers (1996), Boers and Demecheleer (1998) and Lindstromberg (1996, 1998). The advantage of applying the notion of prototype meaning is that the overall meaning interpretation of prepositional clusters becomes simpler if one relies on comprehension of basic prototypical concepts related to the up-down, front-back, in-out, far-near and left-right dimensions. Thus, the combination of deictic meaning interpretation and knowledge of common metaphorical concepts associated with a particular preposition aid the meaning interpretation of a prepositional cluster. Put simply, meaning interpretation is thus the result of the *extension* of the prototypical spatial and temporal conceptual meaning of the prepositional constituents into other mental conceptual domains such as state (e.g. happiness, sadness), area (e.g. huge, tiny), period (e.g. quickly, slowly), manner (e.g. rude, polite), etc. This claim can be illustrated in the analysis of two kinds of prepositional cluster. These clusters each comprise two prepositional constituents and follow the word patterns:

a) Prep + and + Prep, b) Prep + Prep respectively.

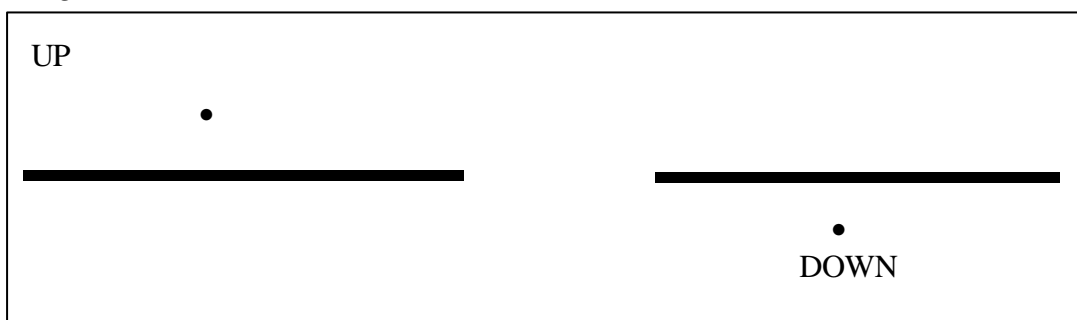
Opposing conceptual relationship in Prep₁ + and + Prep₂, Prep₁ + Prep₂

The notion of an opposing conceptual relationship will be demonstrated by the examples *up and down* and *inside out* which reflect the pattern Prep₁ + and + Prep₂ and Prep₁ + Prep₂ respectively. Some of the common metaphorical concepts attached to each preposition will be illustrated as well as how these metaphorical concepts oppose one another, thus creating this opposing semantic relationship between the prepositional constituents Prep₁ and Prep₂. Langacker's (1993) schema-prototype-extension theory will be used to demonstrate this opposing semantic relationship on various examples found below. All data for this chapter have been taken from the BNC, COBUILD and CANCODE corpora.

A) Example 1: *up and down*:

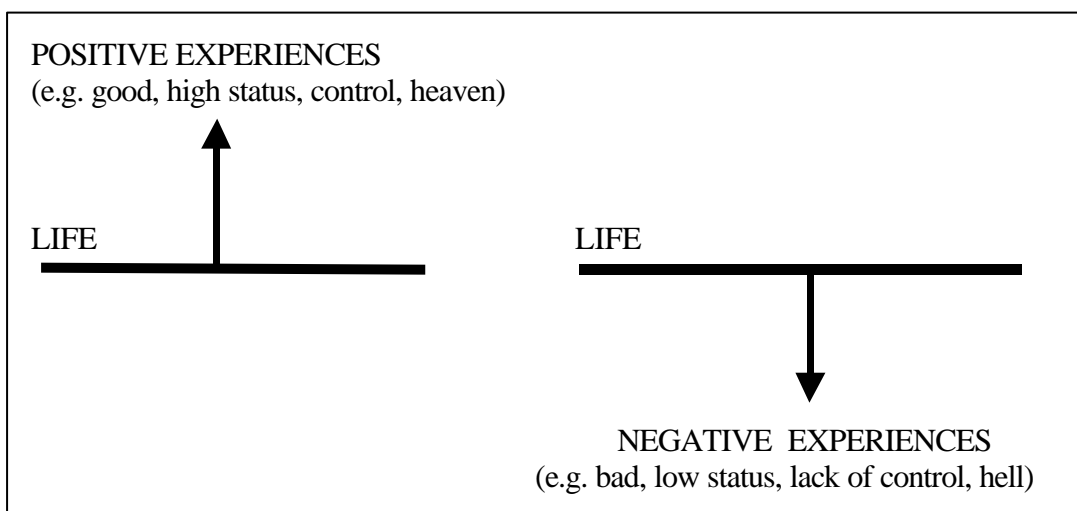
Prototype meanings (Spatial) for *up, down*:

Figure 1



Common metaphorical concepts for up, down:

Figure 2



Prototype Meaning of constituents + Metaphorical Concepts of constituents = Meaning of up and down:

Meaning 1: repeated physical movement in a defined space

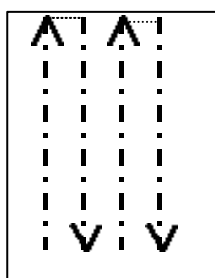
e.g.

His fingers were still around Tug's wrists as he looked the woman *up and down*...

Cologne was sprayed about and lipsticks swished *up and down*...

The trains, running *up and down* from London to Stanmore and back...

Figure 3



Meaning 2: positive and negative human experiences

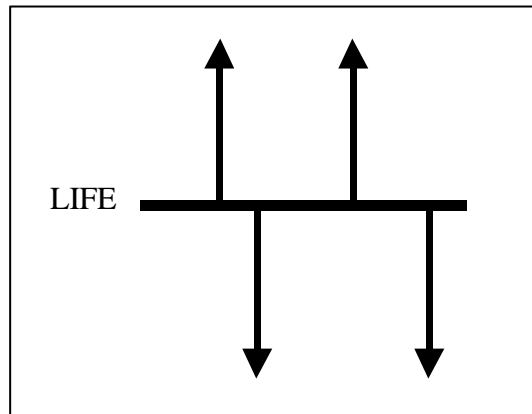
e.g.:

our marriage has its *ups and downs*, but it is mainly on the up and up...

has not been tied to the everyday *ups and downs* in the hurly-burly of school life...

As a pressman, I've had my *ups and downs* with Tommy...

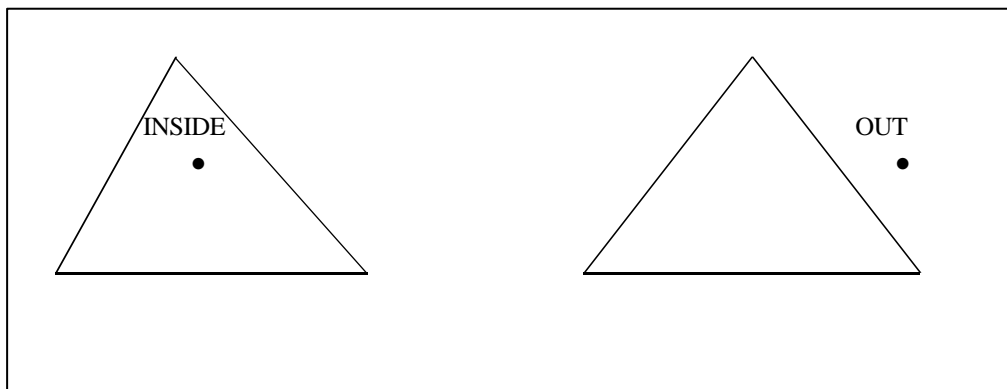
Figure 4



B) Example 2: inside out

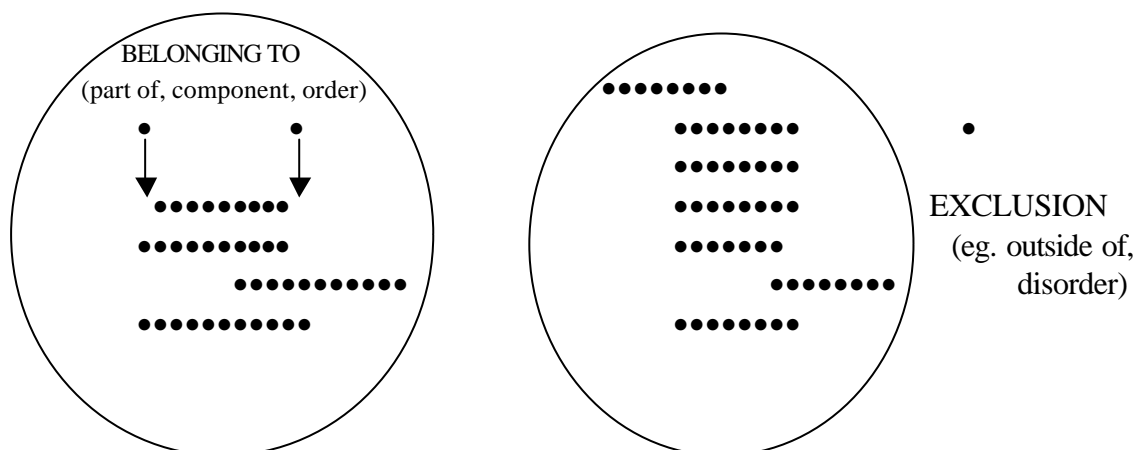
Prototype meanings (spatial) for inside, out

Figure 5



Common metaphorical meanings for *inside, out*:

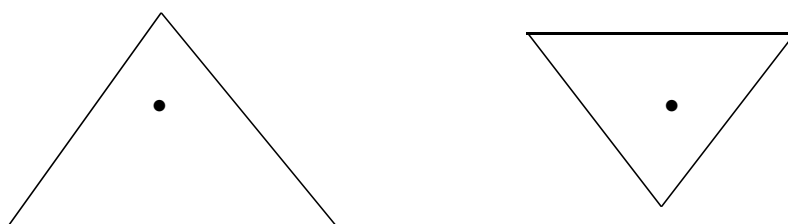
Figure 6



Prototype meanings of constituents + Metaphorical concepts of constituents = Meaning of *inside out*

Meaning 1: inversion

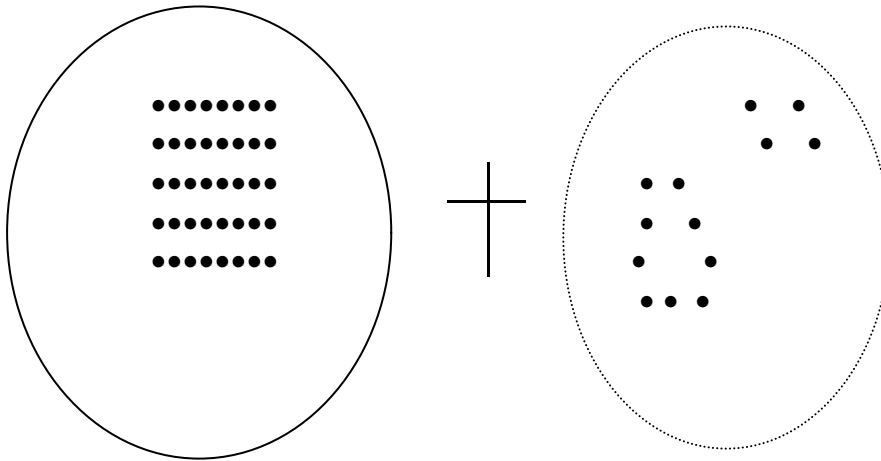
Figure 7



- e.g.
- the players turn their shirts *inside out*...
 - the child's socks were dirty so she had turned a pair *inside out*...
 - the ugly girl turned her lips *inside out*...
 - the lovedoll was turned almost *inside out*...

Meaning 2: detailed knowledge of

Figure 8



e.g.

He knows his subject absolutely *inside out*...

He knew the division *inside out*...

I know this one *inside out*...

as he was a ...professional journalist, he already knew the media *inside out*...

Meaning 3: chaos

Figure 9



e.g.

they had turned his flat *inside out*...

had once turned the Iris society *inside out*...

it gave her the feeling of being turned *inside out* for better examination...

More examples of an opposing conceptual relationship

Here are further examples demonstrating an opposing semantic relationship between Prep₁ and Prep₂. However, the list here is not meant to be exhaustive.

a) Prep₁ + Prep₂

his smile almost turns his face *inside out* with smugness
 they had turned his flat *inside out* and questioned him
 had once turned the Iris Society *inside out* with excitement
 he knows his subject *inside out*
 He knew the division *inside out*
 They know them *inside out*
 Sometimes he could be observed wearing some garments *inside out*
 Inversion is thus a kind of 'turning *inside out*' effect
 he pulled off his jacket in a hurry and left one sleeve turned *inside out*
 (Data taken from COBUILD, CANCODE and BNC)

b) Prep₁ + and + Prep₂

and we went *up and down* as if we were on springs
 panting as he scrambled *up and down* the ladder
 his emotional *ups and downs* are part of a manic depressive syndrome
 Life is full of *ups and downs* and I know that there are going to be bad times
 a self-destructive actress who drifted *in and out* of the story
 patterns of adult members being *in and out* of sync with one another
 we knew the *ins and outs* of the situation at hand
 Bill was aware of the *ins and outs* of the problem
 I've read a lot of arguments *to and fro*
 the old motorbike carried him *to and fro*

A point to add is that analysis of data also revealed that adverbs could also form clusters of the type which showed an opposing metaphorical relationship between the constituents. However, these adverbial clusters have to be of the syntactic pattern: Adv₁ + to + Adv₂ which has a parallel structure to Prep₁ + to + Prep₂ where the two adverbial constituents (Adv₁ and Adv₂) also demonstrate an opposing relationship. Another adverbial cluster which demonstrates this opposing relationship is Adv₁ + and + Adv₂. Some examples of adverbial clusters which show an opposing relationship are given below:

baseball hats worn *back to front*
 Vicky began writing *back to front* and upside down a year ago
 I think it's all er *back to front* er the way the government is
 born, after her mother's protracted...labour with her right foot twisted *back to front*
 we must have driven several thousand miles *back and forth* between Al
 Hauser paced slowly *back and forth* at the far end
Back and forth their bodies went, like a pair of dancers

He wrenched the knife *back and forth* to free it from the planking
 the stone-work mellow, and *here and there* vineyards appear
 delicate bamboo-screens placed *here and there*
 pulling at a weed *here and there* and swishing away flies
 (Data taken from COBUILD, CANCODE and BNC)

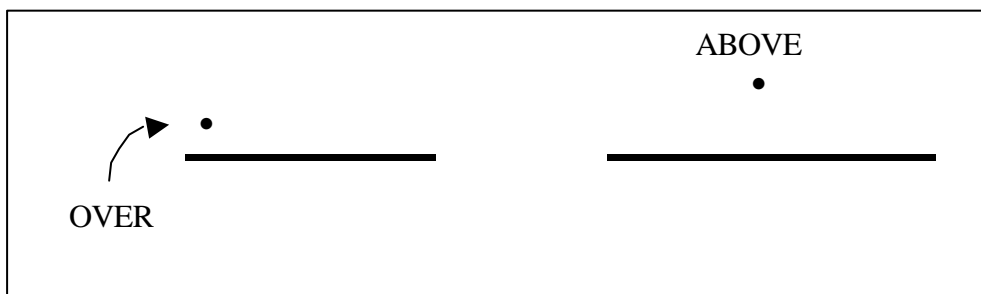
Reinforcing the conceptual relationship in Prep₁ + and + Prep₂, Prep₁ + Prep₂

The prepositional clusters *over and above* and *round about* which are examples of the syntactic patterns Prep₁ + and + Prep₂, Prep₁ + Prep₂ respectively, will be used to demonstrate a reinforcing semantic relationship. The diagrammatic representations below indicate that the metaphorical concepts and prototype meanings of the prepositional constituents Prep₁ and Prep₂ are almost similar and actually *intensify* and *strengthen* one another and thus, the overall meaning of the expressions.

a) Prep + and + Prep: over and above:

Prototype meanings of *over, above*:

Figure 10



Common metaphorical concepts for *over, above*:

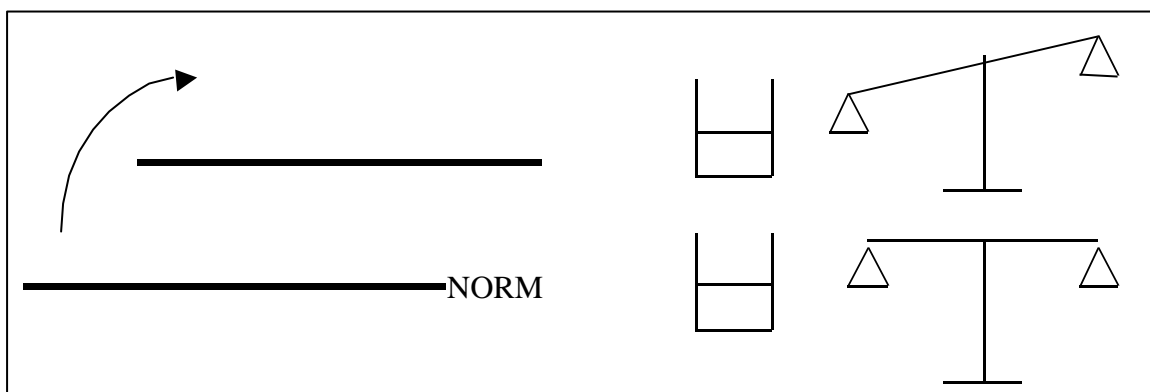
Figure 11



Prototype meanings of constituents + Metaphorical meanings of constituents = Meaning of *over and above*

Meaning 1: surpassing, exceeding the norm

Figure 12

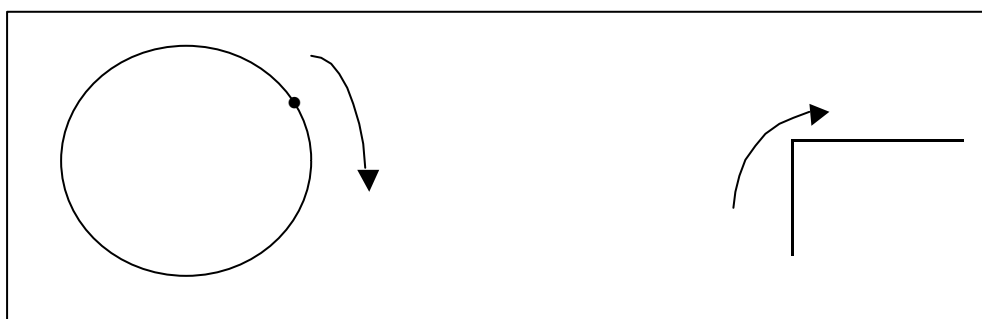


e.g
 increase average prices by 5% *over and above* inflation
 special reasons why this should be the case, *over and above* those that have been applied

b) Prep + Prep: round about

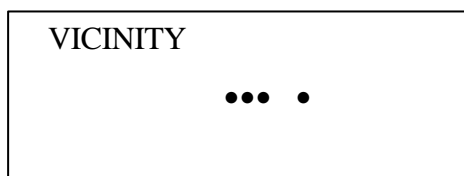
Prototype meanings of *round, about*:

Figure 13



Common Metaphorical concepts of *round, about*:

Figure 14



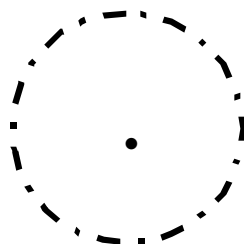
e.g.

so she's been *round about* the South of England
 ordered his tents to be pitched *round about* Valencia
 and the people *round about* would tug at her and shout

Prototype meanings of constituents + Metaphorical concepts = Meaning of *round about*

Meaning 1: Surround

Figure 15

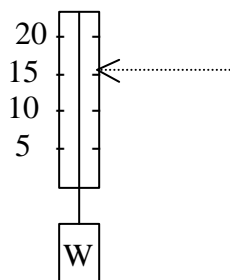


e.g.

I'll put a girdle *round about* the earth
 and fortified *round about* with sharp trees
 you elements that clip us *round about*

Meaning 2: Approximation

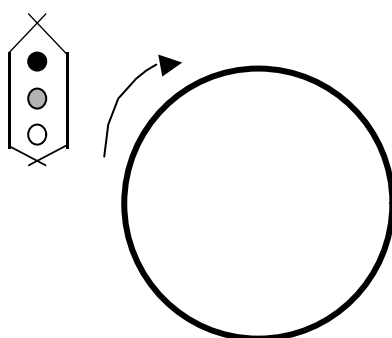
Figure 16



e.g.
 settled into what looked like immobility *round about* 1950
 between the two stations *round about* 500 times a second
 I think you're looking *round about* twenty years

Meaning 3: traffic-junction

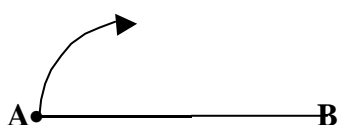
Figure 17



e.g.
 just after the *round about* intersection with the B3274

Meaning 4: circuitous

Figure 18



e.g.
 Sorry to bring you on this *round about* route
 She let Gwer up by a *round about* way
 could have spoken in a *round about* manner

Other examples showing a reinforcing conceptual relationship:

A) Prep₁ + and + Prep₂

Gail, 39, is *up and about* early to travel
 The elephant should be *up and about* in ten minutes
 lots of friends who like to get *out and about*

it's nice just being *out and about*
 they are currently *out and about* on their first major tour
 and Sporting looked *down and out* when irrepressible Gavin Peacock struck twice
 It's the worse you can imagine, *down and out* in Wigan
 they had in different measures contributed to society *over and beyond* their work
 many books are desirable possessions *over and beyond* the value of information
 it rolled *over and over* several times, preening its paws
Over and over again, the hands danced through the same short sequence of signs
 (Data taken from COBUILD, CANCODE and BNC)

It is interesting to note that adverbials can also show form clusters of the sort Adv + Adv which show a reinforcing metaphorical relationship between the adverbial constituents Adv and Adv. Some examples of this are shown below:

B) Prep + Prep

I lost interest *round about* a week when I was with them
 he does very well. And *round about* him, his band of assorted
 located on the right, just after the *round-about* intersection with the B3274
 I should have known what I was *in for*. She was silent for a moment
 If they try they're *in for* a nasty surprise
 the Gulf crisis may mean he's *in for* an easier ride
 the Prince of Wales's trip *Down Under*
 Koresh's current destination *down under*
 is tearing rugby league apart *Down Under*
 And I know exactly what I am *up against*. There are plenty of quick wingers
 for her steward Antonio comes *up against* a sense of power, hers over him
 Police are often *up against* a wall in trying to get evidence
 But this time he will be *up against* the Banana team
 Come on, come on, the game's *about to* start
 the pain you are undergoing or are *about to* is extreme
 Her time at 12.5 miles was *about to* go up on the result board
 (Data taken from BNC, COBUILD and CANCODE)

Adverbial clusters of the sort Adv + Adv which are parallel in syntactic patterning to Prep + Prep also show this reinforcing metaphorical relationship between the constituents. The examples below show this:

you can never go so *far out* that you can't get back
 rafts with beautiful wing-like sails - *far out* onto the open sea
 from the record labels, you won't stray *far out* of the west
 But if your old polling station is too *far away*
 are a bunch of enthusiasts, from as *far away* as Holland
 Follow a story deep-rooted in *far-away* lands, with colours of sand
 (Data taken from BNC, COBUILD and CANCODE)

Pedagogical Implications

The teaching of prepositional clusters could help learners develop an awareness of authentic language usage patterns in English. It thus remains the task of language teachers to empower language learners with appropriate skills which enable them to analyse for themselves how such patterns are used. Here is a sample lesson of how students could make develop their analytical skills and at the same time become aware of how prepositional clusters are used in everyday communication.

Sample lesson

The following examples demonstrate a particular metaphorical concept:

CONSCIOUSNESS IS MOVEMENT

e.g. I was *up and about* again within a week

he'll be *up and about* in no time, I can assure you

I work odd hours which means I'm *up and about* at funny times of the day

I don't see why he should lie in bed all day when I'm *up and about*.

When you come next week, I'll be *up and about*, as good as ever.

How good to see you *up and about* again.

(Data taken from BNC and COBUILD)

Question:

From the examples above, find some other expressions you know, that convey the same metaphorical concept.

Comment:

This task is suitable for all levels of learners in the sense that the teacher can grade and sequence the task depending on the ability of the learners. The task requires two stages of mental processing:

- a) Stage 1: Hypothesising or interpreting the meaning of the expression *up and about* from observations of lexical choices in the given examples about the concept of 'being conscious', based on their own cultural knowledge, world knowledge and experiences.
- b) Stage 2: Experimenting with their observations and hypotheses about expressions depicting similar concepts, by suggesting other expressions they might be familiar with. Beginner to intermediate learners can stop at Stage 1. However, more advanced learners can progress to Stage 2, where they meet the challenge of experimentation. In this stage, they are encouraged to extend their skills of observation and hypothesis by exploring and analysing other alternative expressions that convey the same concept.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe the semantic relationship between prepositional constituents in a cluster by applying prototype theory and conceptual categorisations of the world according to human experience. Whilst selection and analysis of the prepositional clusters in this article have been based on conventional cultural concepts experienced by native speakers of English, comparative studies in language learning and culture could be made to extend this work further. They could seek to establish if speakers from different cultures use similar or different kinds of prepositional clusters as those found in English to express the same kind of human experience. In fact, this aim could even be pursued in the language classroom, to extend language awareness in students through consciousness-raising exercises.

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