

Free and bound prepositions in a contrastive perspective

The case of *with* and *avec*

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1. Introduction

After having been discarded as ‘an annoying little surface peculiarity’ (Jackendoff 1973:345) for a long time, prepositions have been the topic of many studies over the last two decades, with special emphasis on prepositional metaphors (cognitive linguistics) and collocations/colligations including prepositions (corpus linguistics). The semantic approach of cognitive linguistics will have a role to play in this analysis, which sets out to compare the use of English *with* and French *avec*, but the focus will be on the syntagmatic axis and, more particularly, the contrast between free and bound uses of prepositions (see Biber et al. 1999:74 on this opposition). Some implications for lexicography and second language teaching will also be highlighted.

2. Corpus study

On the basis of French and English parallel corpus data coming from PLECI (Poitiers-Louvain Echange de Corpus Informatisés), it is first shown that, despite being obvious candidates for translational equivalence (cf. bilingual dictionaries), *avec* and *with* actually display a low mutual translatability of under 40% (see Altenberg 1999 on the concept of mutual translatability, as well as Schmied 1998 for similar results for *with* and German *mit* and Váradi & Kiss 2001 for *with* and Hungarian *-val/-vel*). This result, however, irons out the difference between the two translation directions, as *with* is translated by *avec* in only 30% of the cases, whereas *avec* is translated by *with* in 60% of the cases.

Two hypotheses are put forward to explain this discrepancy, both of which are tested against the corpus data. The first hypothesis is that *with* is more polysemous than *avec*, as suggested by e.g. Vreck (2000:111) and, more precisely, that it has developed more metaphorical, non-prototypical senses than *avec*. The second one is that *with* has more bound uses than *avec* (cf. Downing & Locke’s (1992:580) claim that ‘A notable feature of the English language is the extremely **wide lexico-grammatical use** it makes of prepositions’, our emphasis) and that these bound uses cannot, as a rule, be translated by *avec*. This lack of congruence for bound uses of words, incidentally, has often been underlined in the literature. Nesselhauf (2003:236), for instance, in her investigation of verb-noun collocations in English and German, notes that ‘more restricted combinations [are] less often congruent than freer combinations’ and Lewis (1997:64) points out that common words which individually carry very little meaning and are

elements in multi-word lexical items usually have no word-for-word translations – hence the difficulties such combinations can present for learners. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the same is true of multi-word expressions containing a preposition.

In order to test the number of senses of each preposition (first hypothesis), we first looked at the definitions given in several dictionaries and compared the different senses they recognise. We then examined all the occurrences of *with* and *avec* in the corpus (original language) and identified a number of clusters of meaning for each preposition. It turns out from these two reviews that *with* has indeed more senses than *avec*, and that these additional senses tend to be more metaphorical. Thus, while *avec* is mainly used to express the prototypical senses of mutual relation and addition/company, *with* has many peripheral senses such as ‘occupation’ (e.g. *to cope with*, *to deal with*), ‘knowledge’ (e.g. *familiar with*, *experience with*) or ‘containment’ (e.g. *filled with*, *peopled with*). Most of the time, in these cases, French will have to use another preposition (containment, for instance, is almost always expressed in French by *de*, cf. *filled with* = *rempli de*) or a different formulation altogether (e.g. *to deal with* = *gérer*).

In an attempt to determine the influence of phraseology on translational equivalence (second hypothesis), we calculated the number of bound and free uses of both *avec* and *with*. Although the comparable corpus data reveal that English has indeed significantly more bound uses than French (62% vs. 48%, $p \leq 0.01$), the parallel corpus data show that, contrary to expectation, translational equivalence is higher for the bound uses of *with* than for its free uses. In other words, the English preposition is more likely to be translated by its direct French equivalent if it is part of a restricted multi-word expression. This somewhat surprising finding, however, can be explained by supplementing the phraseological perspective by two other approaches, viz. type/token ratio and syntactic analysis.

The type/token ratio shows that many bound expressions with *with* occur more than once (e.g. *agreement with* and *begin with* – 6 times each; *relation with* – 5 times; *with the help of* – 3 times; etc.). Many of these frequent expressions have a word-for-word equivalent in French. Their high frequency, therefore, can be said to inflate the translational equivalence for bound uses.

Second, there also appears to be a bias in terms of syntactic analysis (see Schmied 1998 for a similar analysis), since the higher translational equivalence for bound uses is mainly due to the large proportion of nominal uses of *with* that can be – and often are – translated by *avec* (e.g. *agreement with* = *accord avec*, *contact with* = *contact avec*, *collaboration with* = *collaboration avec*). Of course, this factor combines with the preceding one, with many of these nominal uses being recurrent in English, as well as with the semantic analysis, with many of these nouns expressing mutual relation. The syntactic aspect can therefore be said to complement – and sometimes override – the phraseological and semantic aspects.

3. Applications

These findings have important implications for lexicography and second language teaching (SLT). As Schmied (1998:271) puts it, ‘the simple word-class based equivalents found in bilingual dictionaries are insufficient’. For one thing, we have seen that the ‘obvious equivalent’ is only one among many alternatives and not always the most common one at that.

For another, as Schmied himself has suggested, syntactic information should be given a more prominent place in dictionaries, since it turns out to be of great importance in translation.

As for SLT, it should also take the results of studies such as this one into account. While it is certainly true that ‘collocations do deserve a place in language teaching’ (Nesselhauf 2003:238), they should not automatically be seen as a source of problems for learners. True, there are bound uses which have no direct equivalent in learners’ mother tongue and these should be brought to their attention (when possible, with the help of semantic clusters equivalence, e.g. CONTAINMENT = *with / de*). But there are also bound uses which have a word-for-word translation in the other language and so may be acquired effortlessly by learners (but need not, cf. Nesselhauf 2003, who shows that mistakes can also be made when collocations are congruent). In addition, many free uses are in fact not directly translatable into the learner’s mother tongue and should thus be included in the curriculum (see also Nesselhauf 2003). Adapting second language teaching accordingly will eventually help ease the ‘colossal task’ (Brala 2002:1) of mastering the use of prepositions.

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