

Variation in the Morphosemantics of Postnominal Prepositions: The Case of Romance *A*

This study examines cross-linguistic variation of the cognates of the Romance functional preposition *A* ‘at’ in postnominal prepositional phrases (PPs). While *A* cognates evolved from the Classical Latin preposition *ad* ‘to’, their spatial meaning has diminished in Modern Romance. In postnominal PPs, *A* expresses comitative (French: *la fille aux yeux marron* ‘the girl with brown eyes’), locative (Italian: *il cancro ai polmoni* ‘lung cancer’), instrumental (French: *pommes de terre à la poêle* ‘pan-fried potatoes’), and part-whole relationships (Spanish: *el miedo a los fantasmas* ‘fear of ghosts’) (Luraghi 2001; Yamaguchi 2004; Palancar 2002; Hopper and Traugott 2003). This study shows that French *à* in postnominal PPs occurs in the most diverse set of functions compared to the Italian and Spanish cognates (*a* and *a*). We argue that the observed crosslinguistic variation in the semantic environments of *A* can be attributed to the different ways in which it has grammaticalized across the three languages, in ways that follow cross-linguistic tendencies of grammaticalizing goal markers (Hopper and Traugott 2003; Kuteva et al. 2019).

To study variation in *A* in the nominal domain, we conducted a corpus study, using translated subtitles in French, Spanish, and Italian (with no narrower varieties indicated) of the same English TED talks. We automatically extracted and examined parallel translations of tokens of N+P+N sequences with the prepositions *A*, *DE*, and other functional prepositions like *EN* and *PER*. These data allowed for a quantitative analysis of the contexts in which these prepositions appear as well as of any contextual variation within and across languages that emerge. The results of the corpus study showed that there is more variation in the semantic contexts in which *A* is used than in the contexts in which other prepositions appear. However, there were fewer tokens of French, Spanish, and Italian agreeing on *A* for a given N+P+N structure than instances of variation where used *A* to encode a nominal relationship mediated by *DE* in the other two. This suggests that there is more variation across the three languages than there is full agreement on the use of *A*.

Indeed, the use of *A* in nominal compounds appeared to be more productive in French and Italian than in Spanish. Italian used *A* the most, followed by French, and then by Spanish. However, French is the most innovative in its use of *A*, where it is used as a purposive, comitative, locative, and goal marker, even making its way to the realm of nominal compounds, where *A* is used as a linker (e.g. *boîte à musique* ‘music box’). Italian uses *A* primarily in locative expressions (*medio al bosque* ‘in the middle of the forest’), a productive construction which accounts for the higher number of *A*-tokens exclusive to Italian than those exclusive to French. Like its French counterpart, Italian *A* is used as compound linker (*intelligenza a sciame* ‘swarm intelligence’). Finally, Spanish *A* is used primarily with deverbal nouns, especially psychological predicates (e.g. *olor a barbacoa* ‘smell of barbecue’), or as a differential object marker (DOM) with a small class of nominalized transitive verbs that tend to take animate complements. Overall, the results of the corpus study showed that, if the relationship can be conceptualised in the meaningful domain of grammaticalising goal markers as laid out by Kuteva et al. (2019), *A* is preferred, although languages differ in the degree of its grammaticalization. In light of its history of variation, the distinct behaviour of Modern Romance *A* invites discussion as to the conceptual content of other ‘light’ or functional prepositions cross-linguistically, particularly in the context of nominal subordination, modification, and compound formation.

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