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TRANSLATING PREPOSITIONS

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As I have worked with translation projects over the last ten years or so, I have often come across mistranslations of phrases which contain a preposition or its equivalent. Sometimes this was due to the translator misunderstanding the source language (usually English), and sometimes it was due to the use of a wrong preposition in the language of translation. Here are a few examples:

- * Many readers of the old Lahu New Testament in Burma understand John 4.6 in their Bible to mean that Jesus was sitting on the surface of the water in the well as he talked to the Samaritan woman. (Compare KJV "he sat thus upon the well.")
- * 2 Cor 11.25 in the Lisu Bible is understood to mean that Paul is claiming that he was under the water for a day and a night.
- * A translator in Assam complained to me that the English of John 14.20 was nonsense in every version he had read. His argument was: "If my clothes are in the cupboard, how can I say that the cupboard is also in the clothes? So how can we understand the expression 'you in me, and I in you?'"
- * A Moru translator in Sudan correctly understood the English expression "I threw a stone at the cow" to mean that the stone hit the cow. So when he translated 1 Sam 18.11 he used a preposition which indicated that Saul's spear hit David both times. The next sentence, which actually says that David avoided the spear both times, presented a problem; so he translated it to mean that both times David removed the spear.

Even in English versions there are many expressions which sound very strange because a Greek preposition has been translated too literally. Take 1 Th 5.23 in the GNB or RSV "May God...keep your whole being free...from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus." In normal English this means that at the coming of our Lord Jesus, God is expected to begin to keep his people from every fault. The text of course means something different, and a better translation would be "May God keep your whole being free from every fault, so that you will be faultless at the coming of our Lord Jesus."

So, we can see that prepositions are a trap for the translator. They often don't mean what they seem to mean, and we cannot consistently translate a preposition in one language by one particular preposition in another. Rather, as in all translation, the meaning of the phrase containing the preposition must first be examined, and then a way must be found to convey that meaning in the translation.

There are many kinds of prepositions. Some mark relationships in terms of the place where the people, things or events are located. In English these are prepositions like "in, at, on, behind, above". We call them "locative prepositions". This article will contain discussion only about this type of preposition, and will ignore for the time being prepositions which deal with time (in two days), manner (with great joy) and degree (up to ten times). We will also only discuss literal uses, and not figurative ones.

In meaningful translation an attempt is made to translate a phrase according to its meaning, rather than try to find an equivalent word for every word of the text. This principle needs to be applied to prepositions too. First the translator must ask "What does this phrase mean?" And then he must try to convey that meaning in the translation. With prepositions this is not easy to do. Here are some reasons why.

1. One preposition in a language may signify many different kinds of relationship

For instance if an object is "in the cupboard" the cupboard completely encloses the object. The only way the object can be seen is by opening the cupboard. But if the same object is "in the field", it is touching the ground somewhere within the boundary of the field. It has the field below it and on all sides, but not above it. It is open to view from the sides and from above. The positions of the object and the cupboard and of the object and the field are very different. In many languages two different prepositions would have to be used to convey the meanings of the English preposition "in", in these two examples.

2. Two or more prepositions may signal only one kind of relationship

In other words they can be used in place of one another without changing the meaning. "The bandage on my finger" and "The bandage around my finger" mean the same thing. The fact that with this phrase we have an option of either preposition in English does not mean that another language has the same option.

3. Prepositions may signify more than just the positions of the participants

For instance, "John ran to Peter" and "John ran at Peter" both signify the same locations of John and Peter, that is John is moving closer to Peter in both phrases. But "John ran at Peter" also means that John intends to make physical contact with Peter. Thus the

difference between the two sentences is one of intention, not of location.

4. Not all locational meaning is signified by prepositions

For instance, the opposite of “near the tree” is not “far the tree”. In English the idea of distance is not signalled by a preposition, but nearness is. In other languages, instead of prepositions such as “past, across, up, down” verbs or auxiliary verbs may be used.

5. Some prepositions are used only with specific kinds of reference points

For instance the English preposition “along” can only be used with words for things like roads, rivers and lines of different kinds. You can say “along the path” but not “along the pinhead”.

6. Some prepositions change their meaning with different types of reference point

For instance, “the garden at the river” means the same as “the garden beside the river”. But “the garden at the University Campus” does not mean “the garden beside the University Campus”, it means “the garden in the University Campus”!

Three important questions

For these and other reasons, it is almost impossible to find a preposition in a given language which is the equivalent of a preposition in a source language text in all contexts. For locative prepositions, however, it is quite useful to have a way of identifying and describing accurately the kinds of positions and relationships involved in the phrase, and the kinds of things that are being used as points of reference. The following are questions which have been used as a guide by some translators, to help them define exactly the meaning in terms that will help them choose the correct preposition or verbal form in their own language.

The first question to be answered is “**How many points of reference are involved?**”

Prepositions associated with a minimum of one point of reference:

In English this group of prepositions would include “in, at, on, beside, to, from” and many more. In describing the positions of the participants or objects, there needs to be only one of the participants or objects which is used as a point of reference. In a sentence like “John was in Capernaum”, “Capernaum” is the general point of reference, and the preposition “in” makes specific the location of John with reference to this city.

Prepositions associated with a minimum of two points of reference:

In English, prepositions such as “between, beyond, behind” are in

this class. If we examine the phrase “between the Temple and the gate” we can see that two points of reference are used. We can’t say “between the Temple”, or “between the gate”. There have to be two points of reference. Similarly with a phrase like “beyond the Temple” there are two points of reference; the one is the Temple and the other is the place where the speaker is standing, or imagines himself to be standing. We can see this by examining the difference in meaning between “John stood beside the Temple” and “John stood beyond the Temple”. “Beyond the Temple” means that the Temple was between the speaker and John, or in other words, one point of reference was the Temple, and the other was the speaker himself.

Prepositions associated with a minimum of three points of reference:

In English the preposition “among” requires at least three points of reference. When we say “John stood among the Pharisees”, how many Pharisees do we mean? More than one, for certain. But we also mean more than two. We could not say “John stood among the two Pharisees”.

The second question to be answered is “**What kinds of things are being talked about?**” The six types that are important when examining locative phrases are points, lines, areas, cubic or three-dimensional objects, events and abstract qualities.

- * **Points** are fairly small places which do not extend in any direction. “The corner of Main Street and Fifth Avenue” would refer to a point.
- * **Lines** are places which extend in one direction at a time. Rivers, fences, roads and boundaries are all lines.
- * **Areas** are places which have boundaries which extend in two directions at the same time. Parks, gardens, yards, countries, and cities are areas.
- * **Cubic objects** are not just places, but objects which extend in three directions. They have length, width and height. Houses, people, trees, are all cubic objects.
- * **Events** are things that take place or happen.
- * **Abstract qualities** are qualities of things, places or events, such as colours, speed, height, weight, value, and so on.

In locative phrases, any type of thing may be related to any other type. If we examine only prepositions which require a minimum of one point of reference, the following are the possible combinations of types:

- P stands for Point
- L stands for Line
- A stands for Area
- C stands for Cubic object
- E stands for Event or Abstract quality

The twenty-five possible combinations are as follows (the second item is the point of reference in each case):

- P/P One point in space is being related to another, as in “the bus stop at the corner”.
- P/L A point is being related to a line, as in “the third junction on the freeway”.
- P/A A point is being related to an area, as in “the bus stop beside the field”.
- P/C A point is being related to a cubic object, as in “the bus stop beside that car”.
- P/E A point is being related to an event or an abstract quality, as in “a place near the fighting”, or “a spot in the shade”.
- L/P A line is being related to a point, as in “the street near the bus stop”.
- L/L One line is being related to another, as in “the line along the road”.
- L/A A line is being related to an area, as in “the path through the field”.
- L/C A line is being related to a cubic object, as in “the road near the palace”.
- L/E A line is being related to an event or abstract quality, as in “the route to the soccer match”, or “the road at the bend”.
- A/P An area is being related to a point, as in “the field near the bus stop”.
- A/L An area is being related to a line, as in “the field beside the highway”.
- A/A One area is being related to another, as in “a field in Surrey”.
- A/C An area is being related to a cubic object, as in “the field around the house”.
- A/E An area is being related to an event, as in “the countryside around the battle”.
- C/P A cubic object is being related to a point, as in “the house at the corner”.
- C/L A cubic object is being related to a line, as in “the car on the freeway”.
- C/A A cubic object is being related to an area, as in “the cow in the field”.
- C/C One cubic object is being related to another, as in “the lady in the cupboard”.
- C/E A cubic object is being related to an event or abstract quality, as in “the man in the fight” or “the man in the shade”.
- E/P An event or an abstract quality is being related to a point as in “the fight at the corner” or “the colour near the centre”.
- E/L An event or an abstract quality is being related to a line, as in “the war along the border” or “the colours along the bay”.
- E/A An event or an abstract quality is being related to an area, as in “the meeting in Switzerland” or “colours throughout Scotland”.
- E/C An event or an abstract quality is being related to a cubic object, as in “the joking in the boardroom” or “the colours in the bathroom”.

E/E One event or abstract quality is being related to another, as in “the joking in the meeting” or “the colours in the shadow”.

The third important question is “**Which components of meaning are important in this phrase?**” The following are the components of meaning which may be important for locative phrases:

1. **STATE:** Some locative phrases refer to positions which do not move or change. “In the cupboard” is a phrase which refers to this kind of static location. The thing being talked about may be moving around in the cupboard but it remains in the cupboard. Phrases like this we will mark as +STATE.

Other prepositions refer to changing positions. These we call dynamic locations. “Into the cupboard” is an example of a dynamic locative. The thing being talked about started outside the cupboard and ended up in the cupboard. Dynamic locatives we will label as -STATE.

2. **NEAR:** Part of the meaning of some prepositions is that they signal that a thing is **near** something else. This component of meaning will contrast with the components CONTACT and CONTAINMENT. Prepositions such as “near, beside, by” will be marked +NEAR, but so will “above” and “below” since in English one object needs to be close to another before one can say it is “above” or “below” the other object. This may not apply in other languages.

In English, some senses of “from” seem to have the component -NEAR, and it would also be a component of complex preposition-like compounds such as “away from”, and others.

3. **VERTICAL:** Some prepositions signal that an object is near another, but in a vertical plane. This component will differentiate between certain prepositions with +NEAR marking. “Above, below” are +VERTICAL, and “beside, by” are -VERTICAL.

4. **LATERAL:** In English all prepositions marked -VERTICAL are automatically also +LATERAL. In some languages, however, there may be prepositions which mean such things as “below and to one side”. These would need to be marked +VERTICAL and +LATERAL.

5. **HIGH:** This component will distinguish “over, above, up” which are +HIGH from “below, under, beneath, down” which are -HIGH.

6. **CONTACT:** Prepositions marked +CONTACT include “on”, and some senses of “in” and “at” such as in phrases “in the mud”, “he threw a stone at the cow”. It is interesting to note that “on” sometimes contrasts with “beside” or “under”, as in “on the table”. In these cases it is marked +VERTICAL +HIGH +CONTACT. In other cases “on” does not mean “on top of” and the important component in phrases such as “on the ceiling” or “on the door” is only +CONTACT.

7. **TOTAL:** Contact can be total, or partial. In the phrase “The fish in the water”, the preposition “in” is marked +TOTAL, but in “The

boat in the water” the preposition “in” is marked –TOTAL. In some languages two different prepositions have to be used for these two different meanings. Other prepositions which have two meanings depending on whether contact is total or not are “on, around, over”. The preposition “at” when it means “in contact with” seems always to mean “in partial contact with” and is marked –TOTAL.

8. **CONTAINMENT:** Compare the meanings of “at” in the following expressions: “Meet me at the cinema” and “Jane is at the cinema”. The first expression means “outside the cinema” and is marked –CONTAINMENT, while the second means “inside the cinema” and is marked +CONTAINMENT.
9. **COMPLETENESS:** If the phrase “in the box” refers to something which is inside the box, and the box is closed, and “in the cup” refers to something contained in the cup, but not completely enclosed by the cup, then there are two different meanings to “in”. Both meanings refer to something being contained in something else and are thus marked +CONTAINMENT. But “in the box” is also marked +COMPLETENESS, while “in the cup” is –COMPLETENESS.
10. **COMPONENT:** In the phrase “the finger on my hand” and “the drawers in the desk” there are new meanings for the prepositions “on” and “in”. In what sense are the fingers “on” the hand? Obviously something different is meant from phrases like “on the ceiling”, “on the table”. The fingers are not merely in contact with the hand, but are part of the hand. Similarly the drawers are not merely contained by the desk, they are part of it. This use of these prepositions in these cases will be marked as +COMPONENT.

We have now mentioned the basic dimensions of the problem. In examining the meaning of a locative preposition, we need to ask:

- a) How many points of reference are there?
- b) What types of things are being related to each other?
- c) Which components of meaning are important for this preposition in this context?

A chart for the meaning

Answering these questions is made easier if we have a chart to refer to. The chart has the types of object being related to each other listed along one dimension, and the components of meaning listed along the other. Such a chart could look like this: (This chart is only for static locatives with a minimum of one point of reference.)

Components	Types of C/C	objects C/A	being related P/C
STATE.			
NEAR			
Vertical			
Lateral			
High			

CONTACT

Total

CONTAINMENT

COMPLETE

COMPONENT

EXAMPLES

a) “Zechariah had seen a vision in the temple”

The vision, an event (E), is related to the temple, a cubic object (C). (But note that Zechariah was in the temple too—this could make a difference.) The locative relation is static (+STATE), the vision was neither near nor in contact with the temple, so the marking is –NEAR, and –CONTACT. Thus the components VERTICAL, LATERAL, HIGH and TOTAL are not relevant. The vision was contained by the temple, so the marking is +CONTAINMENT. The vision was contained on all sides by the temple i.e. containment was complete not partial and the marking is therefore +COMPLETE. The analysis of the prepositional phrase is thus:

“a vision in the temple”

E/C
 + State
 – Near
 – Contact
 + Containment
 + Complete
 – Component

If we were translating this phrase into Lisu, the possible prepositions meaning “in” are *kwa*, *naekwa* and *khwu naekwa*. Of these *kwa* in this context would not mean “completely enclosed”, in other words it would be marked +CONTAINMENT, –COMPLETE, and therefore would not fit this context. Then *naekwa* could be tried. It means “completely enclosed” so would be +CONTAINMENT, +COMPLETE. But it is usually used to refer to solid or liquid environments, and means that the thing is in contact with the thing that encloses it. It is marked +CONTACT and therefore is also not the right choice. But *khwu naekwa* has all the right components and is the right choice. (The 1966 Lisu Bible has *naekwa*!)

b) “You will find the babe...lying in a manger”

The babe, a cubic object is in another cubic object, a manger. The relationship indicated is static (+STATE). The babe is more than just near the manger, therefore the marking is –NEAR. The babe is in contact with the manger and we mark the phrase +CONTACT. The contact is only partial (–TOTAL). But the manger does contain the babe (+CONTAIN). This containment is not complete, since a manger,

which is a box-like thing does not have a lid which is closed. Therefore the marking is –COMPLETE. The babe is not part of the manger, so the marking is –COMPONENT. The analysis then is:

“the babe...in the manger”

C/C
+ State
– Near
+ Contact
+ Containment
– Complete
– Component

In Lisu, if we examine the same prepositions as referred to previously, *naekwa* does not fit because it is +CONTACT, +CONTAINMENT, +COMPLETE. Then *khwu naekwa* also does not fit because it is –CONTACT. That leaves *kwa* which has all the right components. (This one the Lisu Bible got right.) Elsewhere *kwa* translates “at, on, beside”.

c) “You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths”

For argument’s sake we will try to treat this as a locative phrase. One cubic object (C) the babe, is in another, the cloths (C). The relative position is static (+STATE), there is contact between the cloths and the babe, so the marking is –NEAR, +CONTACT. The cloths contain the babe (+CONTAINMENT) but presumably the baby’s face is not covered, so we mark the phrase (–COMPLETE) and, of course, –COMPONENT. The analysis looks like this:

“the babe...in swaddling cloths”

C/C
+ State
– Near
+ Contact
+ Containment
– Complete
– Component

This is the same analysis as for “in the manger”. But is the babe “in” the cloths in the same way as he is “in” the manger? The babe can be taken “out” of the manger without disturbing it, but if the babe is taken “out” of the cloths, what container is left? There is none. The cloths are not really a container at all. The problem in analysis is confirmed if we try to use any of the Lisu prepositions mentioned above. If *kwa* is used, the sense is that he is lying on the cloths. If *naekwa* is used, the sense is that he is completely wrapped up in the cloth, even his face is covered. And *khwu naekwa* doesn’t fit because it is –CONTACT. In fact the problem arises because “in swaddling cloths” is not a locative phrase at all. It is actually an instrumental phrase equal in meaning to “wrapped with swaddling cloths”.

We turn now to the problem passages with which this article started.

“He sat thus upon the well”

He (C) is related to a well, in this case a three-dimensional object (C) since it refers to the built-up wall of the well, rather than the water. He is in contact with the well (–NEAR, +CONTACT). The contact is partial (–TOTAL). He is not contained by or part of the well (–CONTAINMENT, –COMPONENT).

“He sat...upon the well”

C/C
+ State
– Near
+ Contact
– Total
– Containment
– Component

If we do a similar analysis of the Lahu phrase the result is one of two possibilities:

C/A	C/A
+ State	+ State
+ Near	– Near
+ Vertical	+ Contact
+ High	– Total
– Contact	– Containment
– Containment	– Component
– Component	

The first problem is that the Lahu word used for well is not referring to a three-dimensional object, but to an area. It means “water hole”. The first possible meaning (+NEAR) is “he sat above the water hole” (in the air because of –CONTACT), but the more natural one is “he sat on the water hole”. Hence the confusion.

“I was in the water...a day and a night”

An object (C) is related to water, which in this case is not just an area of water, but is three-dimensional (C). Paul is in contact with the water (–NEAR, +CONTACT) and the contact is partial (–TOTAL). Paul is also contained by the water (“in” and not just “on” it) but the containment is not complete, since his head, at least, is not in the water (+CONTAINMENT, –COMPLETE, –COMPONENT).

“I was in the water”

C/C
+ State
– Near
+ Contact
– Total
+ Containment
– Complete
– Component

In the Lisu Bible the preposition *naekwa* was used. It has the specification:

C/C
 + State
 - Near
 + Contact
 + Total
 + Containment
 + Complete
 - Component

The sense of this preposition in this context is “under the water”, meaning that all of Paul was in contact with the water, which completely contained him. The proper preposition would have been *kwa*.

“You in me...I in you”

The key to understanding this preposition is found in the latter half of the verse, where Jesus refers to the branch being “in the vine”. The intended relationship of Jesus and his disciples is the same as that of the vine and its branches. One person (C) is being related to another (C). The relationship is one of contact, containment and that of a component. The analysis is:

“I in you”

C/C
 + State
 - Near
 + Contact
 - Total
 + Containment
 - Complete
 + Component

In English, if we talk about vines and branches, the normal preposition which has this analysis is “on”. We say “the branch on the vine”, not “the branch in the vine”. But we would not speak, even figuratively, of one person being “on” another. If we search for an expression conveying the right sense, which we can use with both vines and people, we cannot find a suitable, natural, prepositional phrase. There just isn’t one. Instead, the proper components of meaning can be conveyed by verbal expressions such as “joined to”, “part of”, or “united with”.

Since the intended meaning is not usually conveyed by the preposition “in” in English (nor in a great many languages) the Assamese translator was confused. He was thinking in terms of containment, but not of componency.

“Saul threw his spear at David”

The relationship of the spear and David is not a static one. Therefore the marking is -STATE. With this marking, indicating changing positions, there is always a prior state and resulting state.

“threw his spear at David”

C/C
 - State

Prior state:

- + State
- Near
- Contact
- Containment
- Component

The resulting state is not clear just from this phrase, since we cannot tell whether there was contact or not. Did the spear hit David or not? From the phrase “at David” we cannot tell. The specification could be either:

Resulting state:

- | | | |
|---------------|----|---------------|
| + State | OR | + State |
| + Near | | - Near |
| - Contact | | + Contact |
| - Containment | | - Containment |
| - Component | | - Component |

In Moru there are two different ways of expressing these differences, and there is no preposition which leaves open the question of whether the spear hit David or not. In the translator’s mind “at” indicated –NEAR, +CONTACT and so this is how he translated. Had he understood the context better, the following sentences would have made it clear that this was the wrong choice.

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TRANSLATING *SADE* “FIELD”, IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Hebrew word *sade*, which is very often translated as “field” in English versions, occurs frequently in the Old Testament. It is not an easy word to translate, for two reasons:

It is one of those words which cover quite a wide range of meaning.

Its meaning relates to settlement and land ownership, land use and agriculture; and the people we translate for may have a very different system in these things from that which applied in OT situations.

This word provides a very good illustration of the translation principle that we should find an equivalent word or expression which is appropriate in each context where the word occurs, and not try to use the same equivalent in a range of different contexts. And since I have been studying the range of meaning of *sade*, I have come to see that “field” is often not the best equivalent for it in English, even in places where the various English versions all use it.

In what follows we will look at the different meanings that *sade* can