

# A study of the effect of learners' L1 in learning the usages of English Preposition "of"

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of learners' L1 in the process of learning the usages of English preposition *of* from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. As Lindstromberg (2010) mentioned, although the meaning of English preposition *of* may seem vague and insubstantial, across many of its usages its function is clear and consistent---just not spatial. However, for Japanese learners of English, especially those who are in low proficiency level, its usages are still vague and it is really difficult to use it correctly, since the correspondence of this preposition “-no” in their L1 may constrain their learning of the meaning, that is, over-generalization of its meaning.

## Keywords

Preposition, Cognitive Linguistics, Integrative Function, L1 Constraint, Core meaning, Prototype theory

## 1 The Change of the meaning of English Preposition “of”

In Old English, *of* was a spatial preposition. Before English was influenced by French in 11<sup>th</sup> century, it expressed literal separation in the sense of *away, out, from, and off*. The spatial meaning was replaced by the English preposition *off*, and *of* can be described as profiling an intrinsic relationship between its trajector (TL) and landmark (LM). According to Tanaka (2014), the core meaning of “of” is that A comes out B and at the same time, it attributes to B.

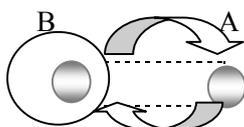


Figure 1: The Core meaning of “of”  
(Tanaka 2014, pp.185)

## 2 Lindstromburg's Study on the meaning of “of”

Lindstromburg (2010) examined the meaning of *of* more in detail. We can say that his analysis is based on the same idea of Tanaka's core-meaning theory, then, we list up the functions in his analysis.

### 2.1. Integrative Function

The first function is that the TR and LM are integrated, as whole and part, for instance, shown in (1).

(1) *The roof **of** the house is red.*

In (2), the integration of TR into LM amounts to near identity of one to the other:

(2) *The State **of** California*

He mentioned some other examples of integrative meaning, and he pointed out that how we mentally integrate the TR and LM depends on our knowledge of the world.

He listed the wide range of types of integration as follows;

- a. INTRINSIC / NEARLY INTRINSIC: *the existence **of** X, a copy **of** X*
- b. PART-WHOLE: *the eye **of** a storm*
- c. PRODUCT-SCENE: *a product **of** France*
- d. ACT-AGENT/PATIENT: *the howling **of** dogs, the delivery **of** the goods*
- e. SUBSET-SET: *a kind **of** X*
- f. EXAMPLE-TYPE: *a sample **of** tissue*
- g. GROUP/AMOUNT/UNIT-ENTITIES/STUFF/EMOTION/ACTION: *a herd **of** cows*
- h. CONTENTS, FEATURES, DENIZES-(NOMINALLY) BOUNDED AREAS OF SPACE: *the contents **of** a package*

And as for the function of possession, it is recognized that a thing possessed is integrated into its possessor (LM)'s sphere of influence. Of course the possessor can not only be animate but

also be intangibles such as attitude, sentiment, custom, and law, etc.

He also mentioned that integrative meaning of *of* appears in expressions of time like *ten of ten* (means the clock time 9:50, especially in American English), *half (of) a century*, *most of the week*, and *a bit of your time*, etc.

As for the words such as friend, companion, wife, or husband, each refer to a role that cannot exist without a counterpart. They occur in the construction like *a ## of mine* as in (4). It is also considered integrative function that integrates the person into the sphere of your affection.

(4) *A friend of mine came to see me today.*

## 2.2. Traces of the ancient meaning of “of”

Nowadays, *of* never has the robust spatial meaning of separation although it is possible to think of contexts in which it may appear that it does. However, in modern English we can find many examples of *of* that could indicate spatial separation like (5) to (7), especially in the idioms.

(5) *The came out of the house.*

(6) *Get off of the sofa and into some skates.*

(7) *What do you expect of me?*

Also, we found the example of the use of *of* so-called verbs of privation such as *rob* and *deprive* in (8).

(8) *Three unidentified persons robbed him of his money.*

## 3 Experimental Study

So far, we reviewed the Lindstromburg’s study for the various meanings of *of*, based on the one core meaning. The purposes of this study are to examine 1) whether the Japanese learners of English have a correct knowledge of the meanings of *of* and 2) how their L1 affects in the process of learning the meanings.

### 3.1. Participants

The participants were Japanese learners of English in Japan from different learning stages: 2<sup>nd</sup>-year high school students and university students. As for the high school students, they were divided into two groups according to their proficiency level (their term-end exam scores).

### 3.2. Experiment

The participants were asked to answer two types

of questions; 1) to fill in the blanks in the sentences with appropriate prepositions and 2) to judge the similarities between the sentences with different usages of English preposition *of* shown in the previous sections. The data for question 1) were used to examine the effect of their L1 and the data for question 2) were analysed by Multidimensional Scaling (MDS). The configurations and the results were analysed. From the results of this, we examined how each meaning of English prepositions extends in the mind of participants.

### 3.3. Results

Among the subjects’ groups that have different proficiency level, we found almost the same results of understanding the meaning of target preposition, especially the prototypical (core) meaning. However, there are slightly differences in subjects’ understanding rather peripheral meanings of it. Therefore, we could state that subjects’ L1 has some effects in the process of learning the usages of our target English preposition.

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