

Consideration of the web-based learning method: regarding English prepositions

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Abstract

This study introduces the currently popular web-based learning methods and discusses the existing problems despite the advancement of the methods. The web-based learning methods for this study are online dictionaries, web search engines and corpus-based programs, Brigham Young University-British National Corpus (BYU-BNC). The issue for the study is about English prepositions in their use with the verb and adjective. The web-based tools are the typical method taken by the learners, however, they show the prepositions as like an option. Thus, this paper argues that more fundamental approaches such as semantic and syntactic analyses should be overlooked for a completion of the explanation.

Keywords

Web-based learning method, online dictionary, corpus data, prepositions, semantic, syntactic

Introduction

In the area of English language learning, there are several issues requested almost always by learners in different levels. One of them is prepositions (Cowen 2008). This study deals with the English prepositions with the verb (as in the phrasal verb) and adjective. First, it introduces the general information about English prepositions, and then the results of the web-based tools. Lastly, it is the discussion section that presents the argument that semantic and syntactic approaches must be considered.

1 English prepositions

Prepositions, as small words occurring before noun phrases, typically inform the relationships in time, space or location, and direction between things and events (Altenberg & Vago 2010; Hurford 1994).

Grammar books introduce at least several through over 80 prepositions, and they deal with about the ten of the most commonly used ones (Altenberg & Vago 2010: as cited in Hargis 2008). This study discusses the prepositions with verbs such as in phrasal verbs, passives, and the adjective combinations. For instance, the frequently cited verbs are *decide*, *surprise* and the adjective is *afraid*.

First, *decide* in its phrasal verb takes *on*, but other prepositions such as *between*, *for*, etc. often occur with it. Second, *surprise* is often taught to be frequently passivized with *at*. Lastly, the adjective *afraid* is used with *of*. In the following section, these verbs and adjective with their corresponding prepositions will be examined with the web-based search tools.

2 Web-based learning methods

The web-based learning methods for this study are to use online dictionaries including mobile phone applications, internet search engines, and corpus data tools.

Table 1: Results of prepositions of tested verbs

	Dic.	Google	BYU-BNC
decide	against	822,000	15
	between	8,370,000	47
	for	8,220,000	112
	in	3,690,000	70
	on	37,300,000	473
surprised	at	29,700,000	391
	by	48,500,000	396
afraid	of	92,700,000	1151
	for	2,370,000	43

Note: Dic. Stands for online dictionaries including mobile collocation dictionary; Google refers to the hit results of the exact words searched in google.com website; BYU-BNC stands for the Brigham Young University-British National Corpus.

The prepositions of *decide* are *against*, *between*, *for*, *in*, and *on*. The google hit results are shown in Table 1: The greatest hit is with *on*. *Surprised* with *at* and *by* is shown in the online dictionaries, and the former is almost 30 million, and the latter hits almost 50 million results. *Afraid* occurs with *of* and *for*, with a great difference between the two hits, about 92 million and 2 million. Interestingly, *of* is known for *afraid*, but *for* also is used for *afraid*. In the corpus program, these combinations have been searched, and the results are shown in Table 1.

What this tells us is that the web-based learning tools can give us the information that various prepositions can occur with the target words.

3 Discussion

This section discusses the three target verbs by using semantic (including context-dependent) and syntactic approaches. The semantic approach refers to the examination of the meanings of the verbs and the prepositions. The syntactic structure is very useful to distinguish between the phrasal verb and the prepositional phrase.

The verb *decide* is an in- and transitive verb. The question is what prepositions may be used for *decide* and how the phrasal verb can be explained for learners. The context in which *decide* is used is the essential key of the choice of the prepositions: for example, if the agent's decision is opposed to the other side's, *against* will be taken; if a decision must be made between things, *between* will be chosen; lastly, *for* and *in* are for 'for someone' and the fixed expression *in favor of*. Given the context, all of these are based on the meaning of the prepositions. The phrasal verb *decide on* can be memorized by learners, but it can sometimes be ambiguous as in *the gentleman decided on the farm*. Syntactically, it depends on whether *on* belongs to the verb as a phrasal verb or the head of the prepositional phrase.

Regarding *surprised*, syntactically, *be surprised* is the passive form, so that *by* prepositional phrase can occur when the occurrence of the Agent is required. *At* can be syntactically and semantically analyzed in two different ways: *surprised* is an adjective and *at* often occurs with the adjective¹ as in *Jane is good at French*; if *surprised* is considered as the past participle in a passive, *at* is understood as a

¹ www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com

non-spatial meaning that sets up the noun phrase as a target in *angry at me* (Lindstromberg 1997).

Lastly, the preposition for *afraid* is *of* in general, but *for* also occurs for its preposition despite the great gap between the google results of the two (see Table 1). Semantically, *for* is used with some emotion words such as *love*, *pity*, *care*, *sorry* and so on (Lindstromberg 1997). This may explain the example given in the online dictionary (e.g., *I'm not afraid for me, but for the baby*).

In short, the semantic (also contextual) and syntactic approaches give more prosperous explanation for the target expressions, which is what web-based learning tools cannot do further than a simple but very prosperous presentation of the uses.

4 Conclusion

This paper discusses the web-based learning methods of English prepositions. They often end up with a simple illustration of the prepositions with the target verbs and adjectives. What learners mostly request is not a simple display of how many prepositions are possible for the verb, but how come the prepositions occur with the verb or adjective. The semantic and syntactic analyses can give more reasonable explanations for each pair of the preposition with the verb and adjective. What this implicates is that new learning methods should not forget the ways the theoretical methods have done, namely a fundamental and somewhat traditional analysis.

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