

## Spatial meaning and abstract contexts in English as a second language

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### ABSTRACT

In the use of language, analogical transfer is frequent. Meanings can be transferred from embodied to abstract meanings, and from one language to another when learning a new language. Our contribution concerns the interplay of both of these processes.

In English, uses of the prepositions *in* and *on* are functionally constrained by the notion of control. Uses of *in* suggest control by the *Ground*, whereas *on* associates control with the *Figure* (Coventry et al., 1994; Feist & Gentner, 2003). Thus, *the fly in the hand* is controlled by the hand, whereas *the fly on the hand* has enough control to fly away. This difference is preserved in abstract contexts (Jamrozik & Gentner, 2011). Here we ask whether German (L1) learners of English as a second language (L2) grasp this pattern.

Abstract uses of prepositions are notoriously difficult for L2 learners. In the case of *in/on*, an additional difficulty is that German distinguishes three prepositions (*in/auf/an*) where English uses just two. Based on a qualitative study of German L2 learners of English, as well as insights on analogical reasoning processes, we discuss the relevance of abstract meaning patterns in prepositions for L2 learning.

Using an experimental design by Jamrozik & Gentner (2011), we elicited verbalized intuitions from advanced English L2 (German L1) speakers in a qualitative study. Tasks included novel uses of *in/on* in abstract contexts (e.g., what might be the meaning of *I felt like I was in a tarb?*) as well as decisions about nuances of meaning (e.g., who is more prominent, somebody who is *on your mind* or somebody who is *in your mind?*). Participants

verbalized their thoughts while solving the tasks. Results revealed a number of explicit reasoning processes, such as trying to identify consistent patterns of abstract meaning. Often, participants relied on analogical transfer from L1—sometimes with counterproductive results. For instance, participants tried to find parallels from German idioms, such as *auf dem Holzweg sein* (to be on the wrong track), or *gut im Lauf* (in a good run), both of which differ from the control-related patterns of English speakers for *in* and *on*. Another construal was that *in* suggests a state of being deeply immersed, while *on* suggests only marginal involvement, by analogy with *an* in German, which suggests superficial contact rather than integration.

Such intuitions can be misleading in L2 learning. On debrief, our participants agreed that information about the control related abstract meaning patterns of *in* and *on* could be helpful to them. In our contribution, we outline how and why this may be the case.

## References

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