

## EXPLAINING THE INEXPLICABLE: TEACHING HARD SUBJECTS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH TO UNDERGRADUATES

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article aims at providing a new methodological perspective to the teaching of Old and Middle English to undergraduates. Specifically, we are concerned with those linguistic phenomena that are treated as arbitrary from traditional approaches in diachronic linguistics. We believe it is necessary to use a framework that looks for the motivation behind apparent randomness, for example cognitive linguistics. This will help students attain a basis for the explanation of issues that otherwise would remain unaccounted. The application of a new model to diachronic studies imposes extra work on the instructor because of the need to synthesize its relevant aspects. The students will also face extra work, because on top of learning new concepts from the field of historical linguistics they will also have to assimilate the main standpoints of a novel linguistic model. We will show that efforts are worthy in the long term.*

**KEYWORDS.** *Cognitive linguistics, diachronic studies, historical linguistics in the class-room.*

**RESUMEN.** *Este artículo pretende establecer una nueva perspectiva metodológica en la enseñanza del Inglés Antiguo y el Inglés Medio a estudiantes de licenciatura. Concretamente, nos interesan esos fenómenos lingüísticos que son tratados de manera arbitraria por perspectivas tradicionales dentro de la lingüística diacrónica. Creemos que es necesario utilizar un marco que busque la motivación detrás de la aparente arbitrariedad, por ejemplo, la lingüística cognitiva. Esto ayudará a los estudiantes a adquirir una base para la explicación de cuestiones que, de otro modo, seguirían sin tener explicación. La aplicación de un nuevo modelo a los estudios diacrónicos imponen un trabajo extra al profesor debido a la necesidad de sintetizar sus aspectos relevantes. También los estudiantes tendrán que enfrentarse a un trabajo extra, porque además del aprendizaje de los conceptos propios del campo de la lingüística histórica, tendrán también que asimilar los fundamentos de un modelo lingüístico concreto. Mediante este artículo vamos a demostrar que los esfuerzos compensan a largo plazo.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Lingüística cognitiva, estudios diacrónicos, la lingüística histórica en el aula.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Spain there is a five year degree called *English Philology* that covers a variety of courses to ensure that students end up with a proficiency in English, both spoken and written. However, its pivotal goal is to provide students with a general knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Thus, the students are expected to take courses in British and American history, literature, and general linguistics and their application to the study of the English language. Furthermore, this degree also comprises the study of the History of English and its ancestors, Indo-European and Germanic languages. Against this background students must take courses in Old, Middle and Early Modern English. These are the subjects students are more likely to fail and thus are most afraid of. The problem is that students, up to the moment they start these courses, had just heard about one English, present-day English. Suddenly, they are confronted with a completely new version of English with a whole universe of new concepts such as case declensions, vowel mutations, weak syllables, etc. With the exception of a few language-history-loving students, most students taking the courses are scared with the idea of learning Germanic vocabulary, understanding an unfriendly syntax, and finding out where the verbs are placed within the sentence.

In this paper, I will discuss one of the aspects of the History of English which puzzles students most. Specifically, the use of the topological prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in Old English.

## 2. SPOTTING THE PROBLEM

For Spanish students of English, using prepositions correctly, particularly *in*, *on* and *at*, is hard enough in itself. Old English is even more difficult because the objects they collocate with are quite unpredictable from the point of view of present-day English. By this we mean that we can find the preposition *on* indicating location in a building, or the preposition *at* expressing location in a town and the preposition *in*, seemingly, describing a relationship of support and contact. In this paper, we will use the cognitive grammar terms *trajector* and *landmark* to refer to the subject and object of the preposition respectively (Langacker 1987; Svorou 1993). Thus, the trajector is the element that precedes the preposition, whereas the landmark follows it. These terms have a cognitive perceptual basis: the trajector is movable and small, while the landmark position is stable and its size is bigger. Therefore, the landmark constitutes an optimal locative reference.

As stated above, it is a hard task for Spanish students to learn how to use the present-day English prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* correctly. This is due to two fundamental reasons. First, the Spanish preposition *en* subsumes all the categorization labor effected by those prepositions. In Spanish we say *en casa* ‘at home’, *en la pared* ‘on the wall’ and *en la habitación* ‘in the room’. Therefore, our students encounter a

more finely-grained system of locative conceptualization. The second reason is that students are not taught languages to benefit from the findings of new disciplines such as cognitive linguistics. For instance, Cognitive Linguistics can explain that the different preposition in *to be in love* and *to be focused on one's work* is not a question of arbitrariness and thus it is not a question to be learned by heart. These facts build up the scenario in which students confront Old English texts, when they discover that apart from other difficulties, nothing they had learned or memorized about these prepositions applies.

### 3. OLD ENGLISH TOPOLOGICAL PREPOSITIONS: THE STATE OF THE ART

Belden (1897) studied *in*, *on* and *at* prepositions in Old English in the context of several major literary works of prose of that period. Specifically, he looked into the semantics of case as a motivation for the use of one of these prepositions versus the other two. At the end of this book, Belden concludes that case is not a determinant factor since there is not any thorough consistency between the presence of accusative, dative or instrumental, and a particular preposition. Miller (1890) in the introduction to his translation of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* argued that the use of these prepositions in Old English can be considered arbitrary. However, in Guarddon (1999) it is demonstrated that the use of these prepositions in Old English was far from being arbitrary, rather these categories were an example of systemic organization. In fact, within the framework of cognitive linguistics and a thorough analysis of the broader context in which these prepositions occurred, Guarddon offered a classification of their uses in Old English. This author described how the different uses of each of these spatial categories had extended from a central prototype. This prototype being understood not as a best exemplar of the category, but a group of characteristics that define the most representative members of the category. Sometimes, functionality was also resorted to as a justification for some uses. Then, using catastrophe semantics theory (Wildgen 1983; Bernárdez 1995) the route followed by these prepositions to their state in present-day English is predicted. For the sake of example, let us consider the following extracts from the *Ecclesiastical History*:

- (1) XXI. *Ðæt se mæssepreost Wigearð arcebiscop to gehadianne on Breotene to Rome wæs onsended, ðonone sona hi hider onsendon gewritu ðaes apostolican papan ðær cyddon hine forðferende.*

“XXI. That the priest Wigheard was sent to Rome to be ordained archbishop **in Britain**; whence letters of the apostolical pope were presently sent here and announced his death there (BedeHead 3.16.21)”.

When a student of Old English is confronted with such an example, she may be led to think that *Britain* is not functioning as a canonical location, instead the preposition *on* might depend on the presence of a verb that required the preposition to introduce certain predicates or arguments. Nevertheless, at some point, the student will learn that *on Breotene* is simply a location with no other semantic denotation attached to it. Thus, in principle, the student may induce that in that period *on* had taken over the function of locating inside large landmarks. But the question is what new explanations should the student formulate when coming across examples as (2):

- (2) Se wæs mid godcundre inbryrdnesse monad þy feowertegeðan geareþæs ylcan caseres, ymb fiftig wintra hundteontig Ongolcynnnes hidercymes **in Breotone**, þæt he sende Agustinum oðre monige munecas mid hine Drihten ondrédende bodian Godes word Ongolðeode.

“In the fourteenth year of the same emperor, about one hundred and fifty years after the Angles came **into Britain**, he was directed by divine inspirations to send Augustine and many other monks with him, men who feared the Lord, to preach the word of God to the Angles (1 13.54.27)”.

To complicate things further, as stated above, the preposition *at* was not exempt of taking part in constructions that in present-day English would be considered downright unacceptable:

- (3) XXIII. *Hwilc gesihð sumum Godes were atywde, ær þam fe þæt mynster æt Coludes byrig mid bryne fornumen waere.*

“XXIV. The vision which appeared to a man of God, before the monastery at Coldingham was destroyed by fire (BedeHead 4 20.23)”.

In fact, the preposition *at* nowadays is not used for expressing location in a town. These cases only increase the student’s confusion, as this preposition is one of the most difficult to learn. The reason may be due to the fact that we do not even have a rough parallel of this preposition in Spanish. Thereby, it is translated by a myriad of different Spanish prepositions according to the context in which it occurs.

Traditional terminology does not provide a useful term to describe this situation. Thus the university instructor may hold the position of traditional approaches to linguistic problems and defend the arbitrariness of these sorts of cases. A second option is to provide the student with an account formed by the methodology and theories associated to modern linguistics, for example cognition. As a result, two mutually exclusive situations loom in the horizon: either we teach the students *pure* diachronic linguistics or we provide the student with a broader background against which to find an explanation for troublesome linguistic phenomena.

#### 4. A NEW PATH-WAY TO LINGUISTICS: COGNITIVE STUDIES

The advent of modern linguistic approaches has affected the way in which we have reappraised language change. For example, cognitive linguistics holds the view that linguistic facts cannot be explained without recourse to the other cognitive activities such as perception and conceptualization. Also it assigns a major role to the interaction of the speaker with her social and physical environment in the construction and organization of concepts. At the theoretical level, it does not regard syntax as independent from semantics, in other words, meaning pervades grammatical structure (Langacker 1987). Furthermore, cognitive linguistics is concerned with finding out the motivations of linguistic phenomena that could be considered arbitrary from more traditional approaches, i.e., idioms, metaphors, and figurative language (Lakoff 1987; Turner 1997). This approach to language also tries to uncover the predictability of meaning extensions giving rise to polysemy and vagueness (Lehrer 1990).

From our point of view, students are puzzled by the description of certain linguistic phenomena as arbitrary, since this notion is synonymous with uncontrollable and inexplicable, particularly when studying hard subjects. Thus, we believe that the teaching of disciplines such as Historical Linguistics should not leave aside the appearance of new trends and schools in linguistics. Rather, it should take advantage of the new findings and the instructor must be able to integrate them in the contents of the courses she teaches. We do not intend to make undergraduate students experts at a specific branch of linguistics, it is simply a question of converting recent analyses into convenient tools for their studies. In the short term, this may require more work but in the long term it will prove to be remarkably useful. It goes without saying that this methodology demands an extra effort on the part of instructors. Knowing the degree of applicability of a specific discipline on a subject involves a thorough examination of its main postulates. This is in consonance with the overall work expected from university instructors that requires not only the teaching of certain subjects but also research that should be applicable to their teaching activity.

Moreover, new findings in linguistics should be mirrored by the philological studies, particularly in diachronic analysis. We claim that the study of the history of a language should go beyond the mere description of facts and should try to explain why the facts are the way they are. In the same way physical sciences benefit from and evolve with the findings of other sciences, such as physics and mathematics, it must be considered that everything is not said and done in the study of Old and Middle English. The new perspectives must be used to obtain new results, and as in the example of physics, facts that could not be explained before should be reopened for novel lines of work. As we intend to demonstrate in the current paper, the application of perspectives set on work in the recent years should also bring about a change in the teaching methodology of those subjects. In this respect, cognitive linguistics provides a useful framework since it tackles those cases where there is, apparently, a considerable amount of arbitrariness and unpredictability. This is in part achieved thanks to the introduction

of pragmatic and cultural factors in the analysis of linguistic data. Thus, communicative purposes, speakers' intentions and perception, and context may be at the bottom of motivating much, seemingly, arbitrary data. This points out the need for a new approach to philological studies. One that reflects changes and new perspectives in linguistics and which adapts to the requirements that the new graduates must meet in order to find a place in their later social and professional developments. This, we claim, should result in allowing multidisciplinaryness to permeate philological analyses.

## 5. HANDLING THE PROBLEM IN THE CLASSROOM

Students should not be ignorant of the problems underlying a certain discipline. It is imperative that the instructor provides them with a broad context in which to place the subject at issue from a methodological perspective. In so doing, the students can understand the procedures followed in the classroom and the instructor's motivations in using specific theoretical devices. In the case of the study of Old and Middle English, the learner must have a clear view of the purpose of diachronic studies and the problems that this branch of linguistics is likely to encounter. One of these major problems is dealing with apparent arbitrariness and the absence of native speakers of the language that could serve as subjects in field work to solve the question of why certain linguistic items are used in the way they are. The instructor should remark that for decades, or even centuries the use of some words whose conceptual structure could not be elucidated from the texts were left aside as a matter of speakers' randomness or idiolectism. At this stage, the instructor should make the point that diachronic linguistics, as other sciences, is not deprived from advancement and inexplicable. This leads to situations in which things that in the past were thought to be unexplainable can now receive a satisfying explanation.

The instructor should not conceal from her students the fact that dealing with old languages from different perspectives, so that a more accurate description of the language can be achieved, implies enlarging their theoretical knowledge of linguistics. Now, they will not just work to obtain a descriptive view of the language, which involves skipping over troublesome data, but explanatory procedures will begin to avoid discriminating precisely those data. This line of work has a further dimension, i.e., training the student to use a theoretical framework in the analysis of empirical questions. Not only will this theoretical framework constitute a convenient background for students that will engage in postgraduate research, but it will also provide them with methodological skills and attitudes applicable to a variety of professional fields.

The introduction of new theoretical frameworks in a course of historical linguistics should not draw our attention from the fact that the students still have to get familiar with the language under study, and that is a huge undertaking. For example, as stated above, the confrontation for the first time with concepts such as inflectional endings, strong and weak verbs, case leveling, etc. Once the student is informed about the difficulties that may arise from the study of the new discipline, and the need for a theoretical apparatus

that complements its learning, the instructor may be overwhelmed by a pivotal question. The point is whether the instructor should start teaching the main aspects of the theoretical framework to be used in the explanation of the texts, with the subsequent delay in tackling the language. Another option is to proceed the other way round, to begin the description of the language and resort to theoretical principles just when controversial issues may arise. This second mode of action implies another drawback; the scarce time the students have to assimilate theoretical principles and the necessity to select those principles *ad hoc* for the question to be examined. Under ideal conditions, the organization of a university degree should take into account, beforehand, that diverse courses must be interconnected. However, this organization does not often occur under ideal conditions and university instructors usually find themselves restructuring or working out strategies for their courses after their own experience in teaching the course. Most of the time, changes in the general anatomy of the degree are not applicable. This favors a situation in which the instructor must modify contents and procedures internally to her course.

A course in English language history has as its central core to provide the student with a general knowledge of the linguistic period or periods to be dealt with. That means that the theoretical provision of a specific linguistic model should not exhaust the time and activities that are programmed for the learning of the language. Thus the instructor must count both with a reasonable knowledge of the linguistic model she is going to use as a tool to the teaching of the subject, and a defined picture of the issues the model will be applied to. Otherwise, being excessively informative about the model may distract the students from the real objectives of the course and may saturate their capacity to assimilate new notions. Assuming that the study of Old and Middle English already means a great deal of work, the implementation of the use of certain linguistic models in the teaching of Historical Linguistics should be open to modifications as the instructor tests how it works in the classroom. Thus the instructor must show a critical attitude towards the functioning of the theoretical devices used in the actual explanation of the data. In the next section, we will provide a practical case of how to proceed in the treatment of a specific question whose study must be carried out with the help of a linguistic paradigm that may be partially or totally unknown to the students.

## 6. COGNITIVE PRINCIPLES AT THE BOTTOM OF PREPOSITION USAGE IN OLD ENGLISH

As observed above, the difficulty to invoke an explanation for the use of the topological prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in Old English has led a number of scholars to claim that their behavior in that stage of the language was arbitrary. However, the advent of cognitive linguistics has brought about a considerable amount of research in prepositions. The reason for this is that even though the semantic core of prepositions deals with spatial relations, they are highly polysemous items categorizing in a variety

of domains apart from space (time, emotions, states of mind, etc...). This is connected with the prevalence that within the framework of cognitive linguistics is attributed to space and the speakers' body interaction with their physical environment, which is responsible for the structuring of abstract domains. The linguistic evidence for this state of affairs is found in the metaphoric uses of prepositions and other elements such as motion verbs. Nevertheless, not only has the metaphoric conceptualization of prepositions received a great deal of study, insightful analysis has moreover proved that simply the physical uses of these relational items already display a wide range of meanings. For example, Herskovits (1982, 1986) demonstrated that perception and viewpoint are determinant factors in defining some uses of a preposition. Thus even though prepositions can be defined in terms of ideal geometric configurations, there are cases of preposition alternation that can only be explained by reference to either the perceptual access of the speaker to a specific situation, or the perspective that she takes over a certain situation. Therefore, Herskovits (1986: 15) could provide an explanation for the alternation of *at* and the prepositions *in* and *on*:

*[T]ake Lucy is at the supermarket and Lucy is in the supermarket. Although both would often be true according to the simple relations meanings, we do not use them indiscriminately. If both speaker and addressee are in the supermarket, for instance, at the supermarket is usually inappropriate. A sentence like The train is at the bridge highlights the route followed by the train, marking the bridge as a landmark on that route, whereas The train is on the bridge or The train is just next to the bridge do not. The simple meaning of at, as contrasted with that of on or just next, does not account for this highlighting of a background element.*

Thus this explanation shows students that in present-day English these prepositions can alternate with the same landmark to indicate different perspectives of the same situation. In so doing, a link is established between Old and present-day English. The next step is to draw the students' attention to the fact that the difference between both periods is barely a question of degree. In present-day English there is little room for the speakers' perspective. The use of *in*, *on* and *at* is determined by the redundancy between the geometric configuration imposed by the prepositions on the objects that act as their landmarks and the most salient configuration of those objects. Whereas in Old English, the speakers' perspective plays a major role in the selection of one of these prepositions, and little space is left to geometric configuration.

Thus, considering Herskovits' examples above with *in*, *on* and *at*, *at* is usually present in expressions in which the speaker holds a distant perspective of the situation. In this sense, the behavior of this preposition is quite stable in Old English when compared to present-day English. Harder to explain are the cases shown at the beginning of this paper in which *in* and *on* alternated before the same geographic entities. Again visual perception and perspective can give us the key to their usage in Old English. The preposition *in* is associated to the spatial relationship *closure* that involves a three-dimensional perception of the landmark. This is connected with a



close-up perspective of the situation. On the other hand, the relation of contact expressed by the preposition *on* may be told even in situations that are remote to the speaker. Consider the following pair:

(7) I will not allow my soldiers to fight in this terrain

(8) I will not allow my soldiers to fight on this terrain

An average situation in which (7) can be said is that with the commander visiting the area where her soldiers are likely to fight. Thus she can perceive detailed information about the physical characteristics of the area. On the contrary, (8) could be expressed in a situation in which the commander is observing the area on a map. Therefore, location in that place is no longer associated with closure but with contact, as points on a surface. It goes without saying that a farther perspective allows more information about the surroundings. This is confirmed by visual perception, for example, when we are close to a house we have a three-dimensional perception of it. However, as we get farther from it, it becomes smaller until we can only see a point. In other words, we move from the three-dimensions, which is the dimension typically associated to the preposition *in* to the point or zero-dimensions, which is the dimension usually associated to the preposition *at*. Thus, it can be concluded that one basic difference between these prepositions is of scale, this scale is also responsible for the geometric configuration attributed to their usage. This difference in scale is implied in other studies of the present-day uses of these prepositions, other than that of Herskovits (1982, 1986). In fact, Bogess (1978: 34) stressed our ability to impose different dimensions on the same entity:

We certainly don't perceive cities, roads, and rivers in real life as points and lines. In the presence of a road I see that it has considerable width, and a river has much more. On the other hand, we don't get to toy around much with these objects, and maps have been a part of civilization for a long time, and our experience with the majority of rivers and cities and highways (excepting those near which we may live) is with point and lines on paper. And the older we get, the more practice we have treating them as such.

In Old English, this ability to impose different perspectives on the same landmark was used to modulate discourse situations. For example, when the narration line was located within the limits of a specific landmark, i.e. a monastery, the interior of that landmark played a focal role and the viewpoint was close to it, thus the preposition *in* was preferred in that case. On the other hand, when the location is referential, and no internal perspective was taken *on* was preferred, or *at* depending on the landmark size. Thus, in Bede's work there is a section called *Headings* in which the content of the different chapters is summarized in a telegraph-like style. The actions are only mentioned without providing details of the places that have simply a referential value. This *remoteness* is marked by the use of the preposition *on* and an absolute absence of the preposition *in*. Instead the preposition *in* is found in those cases in which there is a major involvement of the writer with the facts narrated.

Another advantage of demonstrating the evolution undergone by these prepositions is that it addresses the differences in diachronic changes depending on the distinct categories considered. For instance, to state these diachronic changes is harder when it comes to relational elements, such as prepositions, than in the case of nouns whose referents can be more straightforwardly established. Thus whereas nouns can have different referents in Old English when compared to present-day English because what they primarily expressed has been superseded, the prepositions we are examining show a lesser degree of flexibility when it comes to the landmarks with which they collocate in present-day English. The reason for that is that prepositions were more adaptable to the speakers' intentions and the discourse situation in Old English. On the other hand, there are only some remains of this former state of affairs. As it has been already observed, nowadays, geometric configuration imposes more restrictions on the landmarks. Introducing the student to this diversity in diachronic change will provide her with a wider perspective of the questions that diachronic studies must face.

An alternative exercise is to encourage students to examine the behavior of other prepositions and decide whether their usage has remained more stable. This analysis should be carried out following the knowledge attained in cognitive linguistics, so that students may check the explanatory power of this approach to language. A second option would be to invite students to analyze verbs that in present-day English always introduce their arguments through the presence of a fixed preposition and see what changes have taken place in this respect.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In writing this article, we have discussed how philological studies should adapt to the general panorama of linguistic study. New findings in linguistics address those dimensions of language change that have received little more than a cursory, matter-of-fact treatment. One that is no match for the depth and sophistication of linguistic analysis. Cognitive linguistics being a multidisciplinary science and emphasizing the speakers' role in motivating diachronic evolution opens a new perspective to look for inspiration. This will convert students into problem solvers when confronted with Old and Middle English. The question is not only to state the differences, but to explain them as well.

We have considered a controversial case example of preposition categorization, however any other issues of diachronic evolution can be approached within the framework of cognitive linguistics such as compound words, word order, or the use of pragmatic markers. In other words, not only diachronic semantics can be addressed from this paradigm but diachronic syntax and morphology too. This method will enhance the students' creativity when dealing with apparent inexplicable phenomena. Diachronic studies should not be taken as an isolated field of study, rather they should benefit from and find a place within the network of linguistics trends.

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