Space, radial networks and prototypes: a cognitive approach to prepositions in Spanish/L2 pedagogy

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Despite increasing efforts to approach the teaching of grammar in L2 instruction settings from a more meaningful perspective and with less of a focus on rules and exceptions, prepositions are frequently excluded from this challenge, and their uses are still perceived as largely arbitrary (Lam, 2009). Traditionally categorized as "function words", it is assumed that prepositions are linguistic units with little semantic value, used mostly to connect phrases and create periphrastic combinations. Explicit instruction at the elementary levels is also largely absent from textbooks, and yet, prepositions are highly meaningful and representational if they are approached from a cognitive perspective (Llopis-García, 2015).

As an example, prepositions in Spanish help encode motion events [corrió hasta la meta (*she ran up to the finish)*] and are responsible for indicating trajectories, not only for the literal expression of space, but also for the metaphorical construction of relationships between ideas in discourse [hasta que no termine, no me iré (*I won't go until it's over*].

A cognitive pedagogical approach to their core meaning and the radial networks that arise from the identification of a prototype offers an effective instruction alternative. It gives students comprehension tools to operate in real-life communication (outside the classroom), taking advantage of cognitive strategies that are based on encyclopedic knowledge of the world that they already have (Mendo Murillo 2014). This paper posits that better learning can be achieved through: 1) the use of images as embodiment of abstract schemas during instruction; 2) the definition of "space" as a central notion in the identification of prototypes for each preposition; 3) building the metaphorical competence of learners by teaching them to apply key concepts (such as "profile", "base", "trajector" or "point of reference") to each prototype, and to also be able to extend the polysemy of each preposition through radial semantic networks.

It is the aim of this proposal to show a global vision of current approaches to the teaching of prepositions, and thus illustrate the greatest advantage of this cognitive didactic opportunity for L2 students: systemic and motivated learning, less arbitrariness in the presentation of rules, common ground with prepositions in English, and a Gestalt understanding. The ultimate objective is to enable students to learn language from an empowering perspective: their communicative intent in the target language and how to relay it effectively (Castañeda Castro, 2012).

References

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