

Side by side as a preposition

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The English construction *side by side*, an instance of the NPN (Noun-Preposition-Noun) construction, has been described as an adverb (e.g. *sit side by side*) or adjective (e.g. *a side-by-side comparison*). But it is now starting to be used as a preposition, though informally or sporadically, as in *Work side by side the experts in your field* (<https://twitter.com/NewYorkFed/status/781844146961219584>) and *Singapore is an urban jungle—trees grow side by side the buildings, natural gardens co-exist with modern ones* (<https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/166734>). Since the category of preposition is more functional than that of adverb or adjective, this language change might be considered to be an example of grammaticalization. This paper investigates how the new usage—[*side by side*]_P—arose.

My exploration is premised on some of the basic assumptions of cognitive linguistics. Language is a structured inventory of phonological, semantic and symbolic constructions of varying degrees of specificity. Some of them are more frequent and entrenched than others. A construction is motivated to the extent that they are perceived to be related to other constructions in the language (Taylor 2004).

The most likely explanation for the emergence of [*side by side*]_P is that it is derived from *side by side with* by omission of *with*, because the latter seems to be highly entrenched and have a unit status (the *WITH-ENTRENCHMENT* account). Though one can say either *We are working side by side with robots here* or *We are working with robots side by side here* without flouting any grammatical rules, a corpus search reveals that the former type of alignment occurs far more frequently.

The omission of *with* may be partly induced by the perceived paucity of the phonological and semantic contributions of the preposition (the *WITH-WEAKENING* account). Phonologically, *with* in *side by side with* is forced to live in the shadow of the adjacent content noun *side*, being invariably unstressed and often reduced ([wɪθ]>[wəθ]). Also, for some speakers, *with* might be perceived as semantically redundant. The most salient ACCOMPANIMENT sense of *with* in *side by side with* is something that is intrinsic to, and has already been conveyed by, the preceding *side by side*.

[*Side by side*]_P might also be motivated by the preposition *vis-à-vis* (the *VIS-À-VIS* account). Phonologically, *vis-à-vis* follows the same phonological pattern as *side by side*: $\hat{S}_a-S_b-\hat{S}_a$ (S for 'Syllable'). An experimental study shows that even infants can discern abstract syllable patterns such as $S_a-S_a-S_b$ from nonsense sequences of syllables (Marcus et al. 1999). Thus, even if *vis-à-vis* and *side by side* were semantically unrelated, it is possible that they would cluster together in a speaker's mental representation simply because of their phonological similarity (Taylor 2017). In fact, *vis-à-vis* and *side by side* are *not* semantically unrelated. The former is based on and indirectly conveys the idea of juxtaposing one thing against another; the latter is more directly associated with the same idea.

However, the motivation provided by *vis-à-vis* cannot be very strong, because the phonological and semantic similarities between *vis-à-vis* and *side by side* are too abstract. Indeed, the *vis-à-vis* account cannot explain why other NPN constructions (as far as I am aware) have not developed prepositional uses even though many of them follow the $\hat{S}_a-S_b-\hat{S}_a$ pattern and convey the idea of juxtaposition. A corpus search suggests that *face to face* and even *arm in arm* (which evokes the image of people walking side by side!) are not used prepositionally as frequently as *side by side*. The *vis-à-vis* account thus leaves us with the question, *What is so special about side by side?*

My answer is that less abstract and stronger motivation might be provided for [*side by side*]_P by the prepositions ending with *-side*, i.e. *alongside*, *beside*, *inside*, *outside* and *upside* (the *X-SIDE* MOTIVATION account). The fact that other NPNs are not used prepositionally follows from the present account. *Arm in arm*, for example, does not have any corresponding X-*arm* prepositions that would motivate its prepositional use. Besides, three of the prepositions listed above—*alongside*, *beside* and *upside*—are semantically analogous to *side by side* in that they directly evoke the idea of laterality.

References

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