

Spatial Prepositions in Spanish

Carolina Fraga – The Graduate Center, CUNY

In this work I investigate the syntax and semantics of two groups of spatial prepositions in Spanish. The first group, which I term “small Ps,” includes forms like *bajo* ‘under,’ *tras* ‘behind’ and *ante* ‘front.’ The second group, which I term “big Ps,” is made up of the morphologically-related prepositions *debajo* ‘DE.under,’ *detrás* ‘DE.behind’ and *delante* ‘DE.L.front.’ An example with the *bajo* ‘under’ / *debajo* ‘DE.under’ pair is given in (1) below.

- (1) a. El libro está bajo la mesa.
the book is under the table
‘The book is under the table.’
- b. El libro está debajo de la mesa.
the book is DE.under of the table
‘The book is under the table.’

In this paper, I describe the different behavior of the Ps in these two groups, illustrating first and foremost that “small” versus “big” Ps display a series of syntactic and semantic asymmetries. In the first place, I show that while a bare nominal is possible as the complement of a “small” P like *bajo* ‘under,’ it is not possible as the complement of a “big” P like *debajo* ‘DE.under,’ as shown in (2).

- (2) a. El pirata escondió el tesoro bajo **tierra**.
the pirate hid the treasure under earth
‘The pirate hid the treasure underground.’
- b. *El pirata escondió el tesoro debajo de **tierra**.
the pirate hid the treasure DE.under of earth
‘The pirate hid the treasure underground.’

I propose that the ungrammaticality of (2b), with the bare nominal *tierra* ‘earth,’ is a direct consequence of a general requirement on the distribution of unmodified bare nominals inside the clause in Spanish. This requirement, formulated completely independently of the question of locative prepositions, states that bare nominals are banned from occupying A-specifier positions (as proposed by Cuervo 2003). I claim that the contrast between (2a) and (2b) can be explained if the nominal *tierra* ‘earth’ is a complement in (2a) but an A-specifier in (2b). With this fundamental complement/specifier difference in place, I then go on to flesh out the analysis for “small” and “big” Ps. In particular, I postulate that in the case of “small” Ps (e.g. *bajo* ‘under’) “what we see is what we get”: the P selects a single nominal complement. In contrast, the structure of “big” Ps (e.g. *debajo* ‘DE.under’) is more complex: the complement of a “big” P is a functional projection whose specifier is the nominal (as confirmed by the bare nominal facts) and whose complement is a silent PLACE element (in the spirit of the analyzes embraced by Terzi 2010 and earlier work, Noonan 2010, among others). Inside this projection, the nominal (e.g. *(de) la mesa* ‘(of) the table’ in

debajo de la mesa ‘DE.under of the table’) is interpreted as being the “possessor” of PLACE. I argue that other syntactic contrasts exhibited by “small” and “big” Ps, namely, the (un)availability of coordination and adverb intervention, lend further support to the structures put forth in this work.

On the semantic front, I discuss the locative interpretation of the PP and the (un)boundedness of the nominal. With respect to the first contrast, I draw attention to the fact that “small” PPs may have a non-locative interpretation, whereas this is not possible for “big” Ps. I claim that this is precisely due to the fact that the structure of “big” Ps contains a silent PLACE element, whereas silent PLACE is absent from the structure of “small” Ps. The second semantic contrast I address is the bounded versus unbounded interpretation of the nominal. I observe that the nominal complement of a “small” P can be interpreted as bounded or unbounded. However, the nominal complement of a “big” P is always necessarily interpreted as bounded. This contrast in boundedness is illustrated in (3).

- (3) a. Me acosté a descansar bajo el sol.
 CL.1SG lay to rest.INF under the sun
 ‘I lay down to rest in the sun.’
- b. #Me acosté a descansar debajo del sol.
 CL.1SG lay to rest.INF DE.under of.the sun
 ‘I lay down to rest right underneath the sun.’

I propose that the anomaly of (3b) is a direct consequence of the fact that the nominal complement of a “big” P is a possessor, whereas the nominal complement of a “small” P is not. I show that other possessive structures (such as datives and sentences with the verb *tener* ‘have’) also seem to exhibit a ban on unbounded possessors.

Finally, I relate the contrast between “small” and “big” Ps to the contrast between non-clitic doubled structures (e.g. *Vi a María* ‘saw.1SG A María’) versus their clitic-doubled counterparts (e.g. *La vi a María* ‘CL_{ACC} saw.1SG A María’) observed in Uriagereka 2000. I show that, more abstractly, the syntactic and semantic parallels found across these seemingly unrelated phenomena further support the promise of the present proposal.

Selected references: Bošković, Ž. & H. Lasnik. 2003. On the distribution of null complementizers. *Linguistic Inquiry* 34: 527-546. Cuervo, M. C. 2003. Datives at large. Doctoral Dissertation, MIT. Demonte, V. 1991. Preposiciones plenas y vacías. Su papel en la predicación. In *Detrás de la palabra. Estudios de gramática del español*, 220-232. Madrid: Alianza. Kayne, R. 2004. Here and there. In *Lexique, syntaxe, et lexique-grammaire (Syntax, Lexis and Lexicon-Grammar) Papers in honor of Maurice Gross*, eds. C. Leclère, É. Laporte, M. Piot, and M. Silberzstein, 254-273. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. McCloskey, J. 2006. Questions and Questioning in a Local English. In *Crosslinguistic research in syntax and semantics: negation, tense, and clausal architecture*, eds. Zanuttini, R., Hergurger, E. & H. Campos, 87-126. Washington DC, USA: Georgetown University Press. Noonan, M. 2010. Á to zu. In *Mapping Spatial PPs*, Vol. 6, eds. Cinque, G. & L. Rizzi, 161-195. OUP. Terzi, A. 2010. Locative prepositions and Place. In *Mapping Spatial PPs*, Vol. 6, eds. Cinque, G. & L. Rizzi, 196-224. Oxford: OUP. Uriagereka, J. 2000. Doubling and possession. In *Clitics in Phonology, Morphology and Syntax*, eds. B. Gerlach & J. Grijzenhout, 205-431. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.