

**POSTMODIFYING PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN ENGLISH AND
SPANISH (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LOCATIVE
POSTMODIFIERS)**

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Introduction

This paper investigates postmodifying prepositional phrases in English and Spanish (*the villages in the mountains; los pueblos de la montaña*), paying particular attention to locative postmodifiers, with a view to establishing to what extent these constructions, which are freely used in English, are also permitted in Spanish.

In order to undertake this work, it was first necessary to consult the existing information in dictionaries, grammar books and articles. Once the basic bibliography had been consulted, questionnaires were distributed to Spanish students and staff in the English Department of the University of Barcelona to verify the acceptability of prepositional postmodification in Spanish. Then the Penguin Parallel Text *Spanish Short Stories 1 (Cuentos Hispánicos 1)* was consulted (along with various other sources) to look for further examples of this type of structure and examine how it had been rendered by the translators in English.

At a later date, it was decided to try out the data and conclusions on an audience to elicit feedback and possibly obtain additional bibliography. The occasion was provided by a twenty-minute slot at the *IV International Conference on Translation Studies*, held at the University of La Coruña from the 8th to the 10th of May 2003. The conference proved to be particularly fruitful because it turned out to be possible to discuss the topic with Leo Hickey, who has directed his attention to the question of postmodification in Spanish (see 6 and bibliography).

On returning to Barcelona from the congress, I decided to look for confirmation of my provisional conclusions in translations of English literature into Spanish on the assumption that native Spanish speakers rendering English texts into their own language would afford ample proof of the acceptability or non-acceptability in Spanish of the structure that I was examining. Translations of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (translated by María Pilar García) and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (translated by Rafael Abella) provided a number of examples of the phenomena I had been looking for, and certainly enough to support my theories, though this part of my investigations has not been used in the present paper. However, it is worthy of mention that, of the one hundred and forty-four cases of prepositional postmodification in English examined in these two texts, only nineteen were transferred to Spanish as such (i.e. as postmodifying prepositional phrases) with an unambiguous adjectival value.

Prepositional postmodification of nouns in English and Spanish

According to Biber (1999: 8, 9), prepositional phrases are extremely common as postmodifiers in all registers of English. In fact, with this function they are commoner than any other type of postmodifying construction, although the prepositions involved in the majority of cases constitute only a small subset of this grammatical category, namely, *of*, *in*, *for*, *on*, *to* and *with*, in that order of frequency. Typical examples are *the crux of the matter*, *the mess in the hallway*, *the search for a peace settlement*, *the restrictions on the committee’s power*, *the right to life*, and *the girl with blue eyes*.

Not surprisingly, *of* is top of the league, accounting for well over half the number of cases, owing to its highly polysemous nature ranging through such functions as an indicator of possession (*the age of the woman*) or a certain quality (*the beauty of silence*), origin (*John of Gaunt*), and representation or association (*the King of Spain*); note also its use after nouns of quantity (*masses of paper*) and measu-

rement (*a yard of rope*), etc. and its individualizing function (*a blade of grass*).

In Spanish, the incidence of *de* is even greater, given in particular the absence of a synthetic possessive construction like the Anglo-Saxon genitive (cf. Sp. *los amigos de María*, Eng. *Mary's friends*) and its frequent use in locative expressions (cf. Sp. *los vecinos del primer piso*, *los alumnos del aula 2*, *el farol de la entrada*, Eng. *the neighbours on the first floor*, *the pupils in room 2*, *the light at the entrance*, respectively).

Even the less common prepositions in English are found much more often in postmodifying phrases than in clausal alternatives. Thus a construction like *rudeness beyond belief* is far commoner than its expanded clausal equivalent *rudeness which is beyond belief*.

Of special interest when comparing English and Spanish are postmodifying prepositional phrases expressing physical location, such as English *the books on the table*, *the sofa in the sitting-room*, *the accident at the factory*, *the landing in the middle of the countryside*, and *the noise in the street*, since Spanish places much greater restrictions on their use than English. For example, the English expression *the books on the table* can either be expressed in Spanish by *los libros que están encima de la mesa*, thus expanding the prepositional phrase into a clause, or by *los libros de encima de la mesa*, in which the noun phrase *los libros* is linked to the prepositional phrase *encima de la mesa* by the connective preposition *de*, but it cannot be constructed as in English by directly juxtaposing the prepositional phrase with the preceding noun (**los libros en[cima de] la mesa*). There are cases where this is possible in Spanish, but these very often turn out to have an adverbial rather than a postmodifying function, or they are ambiguously adverbial or adjectival. Thus a sentence like *La contaminación en la ciudad es terrible* does not sound unacceptable in Spanish in view of the possible circumstantial interpretation of the phrase *en la ciudad*. Indeed, proof of its possible adverbial interpretation is to be found in its mobility: it can be moved either to the beginning or to the end of the sentence:

En la ciudad, la contaminación es terrible.
La contaminación es terrible en la ciudad.

Note also the fact that it can be bracketed off from the rest of the utterance by means of commas if left in medial position, which renders it unambiguously adverbial:

La contaminación, en la ciudad, es terrible.

The most convincing evidence for inferring an adverbial role for the prepositional phrase in this context is the fact that, if adjectival postmodification were intended, the sentence would most usually be formulated in Spanish in one of the following two ways:

La contaminación que afecta a la ciudad es terrible.
La contaminación de la ciudad es terrible.

Spanish appears to place fewer restrictions on postmodification if the noun being modified is a nominalization of an underlying verb. Thus the deverbal nouns in the following examples taken from the *Corpus Cumbre* (SÁNCHEZ *et al.* 2001) allow a postmodifying prepositional phrase to be added directly:

... cansados de esperar en la cárcel **la llegada a la tierra prometida** de la solución ...
El primer gobernador, Diego de Góngora, confió a los misioneros franciscanos y jesuitas **la penetración en la Banda Oriental**.
Campaña: el aspirante a la intendencia porteña aseguró que se orquestó **un ataque contra él** desde círculos relacionados con la Casa Rosada ...

In the first example above, the expression in bold could be recast with a verb as *que llegara a la tierra prometida*. Similarly, in the second example, *la penetración en* would correspond to *que penetraran en*,

and in the third, *un ataque* is the nominalized form of the verb *atacar*.

J. P. Wonder

In his 1979 article, “Expresiones locativas modificadoras de sustantivo”, John P. Wonder claims, among other things, that Spanish allows locative phrases with prepositions other than *de* in the case of “situaciones ‘activas’” (which, in some cases, coincide with the nominalizations referred to in (2) as against “situaciones estáticas” (**el sofá en la sala*), and if the phrase implies an alternative location for an object or contrast with another similar object (*el sofá en la sala contigua*). In my opinion, supported by evidence from consultation with Spanish colleagues and students, these assertions are erroneous (although one must always allow for the fact that perhaps they can be proved to apply to the syntax of certain non-standard varieties of Peninsular Spanish or to Latin-American Spanish), and the theoretical underpinning of Wonder’s conclusions requires revision.

As far as Wonder’s claim that an expression like *el sofá en la sala contigua* is more acceptable than *el sofá en la sala* is concerned, I find no evidence for this at all.

To support his case for what he calls “situaciones ‘activas’”, Wonder adduces the following as acceptable:

1. El choque cerca de la calle Serrano (fue comentado por todos).
2. (Todos los vecinos oyeron) la conmoción dentro de la tienda.
3. El espectáculo en el estadio (atrae a mucha gente).
4. El aterrizaje en pleno campo (destruyó el avión).
5. (Muchos apaudieron) el desfile al lado del parque.

First of all, whereas it is true that *El choque cerca de...* may be accepted by some Spaniards, it is not the widely accepted form. My informants still showed a preference for a clausal construction like *El choque que tuvo lugar / ocurrió / sucedió...* and one person suggested *El choque de cerca de....* There was a similar reaction to examples 2

and 3 above, although example 2 seemed more acceptable than 3, partly perhaps because it contains a compound preposition (see below), and also because it is ambiguous and could mean that the neighbours were themselves actually inside the shop, in which case *dentro de la tienda* would be adverbial. A similar example is provided by G. García Márquez, (1966: 80):

Sólo sé que después de muchas horas incontables oí una voz en la pieza vecina.

Here again, *en la pieza vecina* could be interpreted as purely adverbial and therefore referring to the place in which the hearing was done rather than to the place of origin of the voice. This possibility of interpretation, however remote, is probably one of the factors that tips the balance towards acceptability.

Examples 4 and 5 were deemed to be more tolerable than the others. Number 4 is a case of nominalization, but note also that the prepositional phrase is idiomatic, therefore more lexicalized and less prototypical, which seems to account also for cases like the following (GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ 1966: 72):

No se sabía qué era más desagradable, si la piel al descubierto o el contacto ...

Number 5 is once again less prototypical in the sense that it has a compound preposition containing a noun, *lado* (and this construction is therefore a less central member of the grammatical category of prepositions). Compound prepositions derived from adverbs seem to be more admissible than simplex ones in postmodifying phrases.

A lexicalization-grammaticalization hypothesis

In view of the above, my contention is that the acceptability of postmodifying prepositional phrases in Spanish is dependent upon

the degree of grammaticalization or lexicalization of the preposition involved. The less lexical content a Spanish preposition has, the more support it requires from lexical words in the immediate environment of the sentence (at least, as far as time and place expressions are concerned). It is as if there were a conspiracy in Spanish to establish an acceptable balance for the reader or hearer between lexical and grammatical material. The message is intelligible to the Spanish hearer or reader when this balance is optimal for this language. Thus *en*, being very near the grammatical end of the grammatical-lexical scale, requires greater reinforcement and expository elucidation than, say, compound forms like *al lado de*, *al fondo de*, *a lo largo de*, *al margen de* or *frente a*, even though the general preference in Spanish in all cases like the above is still to maximize explicitness and include a verbal element or the primarily connective preposition *de* (though *de* is not permitted before *a lo largo de* and in one or two other cases). The observations of Emilio Lorenzo (1999: 101) on the preposition *en* are highly relevant here:

... cuando contemplamos la profusión con que aparece esta preposición en los más variados contextos de situación en el espacio, advertimos su sobrecarga semántica y no nos extrañan los esfuerzos realizados o iniciados para aliviarla, sobre todo cuando se combina con el verbo universal de situación en español *estar*. Así, decir que el adorno está en la pared no aclara si está dentro (en un nicho), encima o colgado de un clavo.

Note that, although Lorenzo refers to “sobrecarga semántica”, this should be taken to mean ‘polysemy’, not ‘degree of lexical content’ as the meaning of *en* in any one instance does not reside in the preposition itself, but derives from the particular context in which it is used.

Now consider the following examples, all accepted unconditionally by my informants and with the possibility of variants, which show that compound prepositions are quite usual in Spanish in postmodifying phrases:

El coche al lado de la carretera parece abandonado. (OR: El coche de al lado de la carretera parece abandonado. El coche situado / que se encuentra al lado de la carretera parece abandonado.)

El chico al fondo de la sala es el hermano de Luis. (OR: El chico del fondo de la sala es el hermano de Luis. El chico que está al fondo de la sala es el hermano de Luis.)

Las casas a lo largo del río están semiderruidas. (OR: Las casas situadas / que hay / que se encuentran a lo largo del río están semiderruidas. *... de a lo largo del río...)

Pero hay un deber al margen de la compasión que todo Gobierno debe observar: el respeto a las propias leyes. (Sánchez et al. 2001)

El Haiga grande y perfumado como un cuarto de baño era un Buick negro, ahora perlado de gotitas de rocío y estacionado en la era frente a una masía en las cercanías de Tortosa.

What evidence is there to support my theory that Spanish strives to counteract low semantic content in prepositions by reinforcing them lexically or morphophonetically and to achieve a balance between grammatical and semantic elements in an utterance? First of all, as López (1970: 87-92) points out, indirect constructions containing a preposition can often be converted into direct constructions without the preposition, the preposition being incorporated into a verb. Thus greater lexical content tends to mean less grammatical content, as in:

padecer con María	compadecer a María
arrojar un saco desde una peña	despeñar un saco
en cesta poner algo	encestar algo
so la tierra cavar	socavar

Where compound prepositions derived from adverbs coexist with simplex forms, the compound is more tolerable as a postmodifier.

Compare the use of *debajo de* (DE CARLOS & POUNTAIN 1993) and *bajo* (BLASCO IBÉÑEZ 1966: 32) in the following sentences:

La casa debajo de la farmacia
... el pozo que se abría bajo una parra vetusta.

Where *bajo* is actually used in postmodification, it tends to appear in more idiomatic expressions like *bajo llave*, *bajo tierra*, leans more towards an adverbial interpretation, and conveys the idea of ‘protected by’, as in the following example (SÁNCHEZ *et al.* 2001):

Los habitantes del Carmelo se acostumbraron pronto a ver en sus calles aquella figura tímida bajo un paraguas azul, envuelta en un corto abrigo a cuadros pasado de moda y con una banda de terciopelo granate en los cabellos.

Compare also the case of *detrás de*, which is more acceptable in postmodification than *tras* (which, in any case, tends to be used more for temporal than locative expression):

El retrato detrás de ti.
*El retrato tras ti.

De Carlos and Pountain (1993) also say that *El hombre delante de la ventana*, which contains the compound preposition *delante de*, is not entirely unacceptable.

The second piece of evidence for my thesis is that verbs rarely govern compound prepositions, so that the low semantic load of the preposition is offset by the higher semantic content of the verb in cases like the following:

pensar en	obligar a	soñar con
olvidarse de	divertirse con	llegar a

Thirdly, it is noticeable, too, that a weaker, more polysemous preposition can often be replaced by a more precise one, thus increasing its transparency and contribution to the message, where necessary (for further examples, see GARCÍA YEBRA 1984, II: 750-751):

un hombre de / con talento	de / desde el mar a la sartén
taza de / para té	seguido de / por
un libro de / sobre historia	hábil en / para los negocios

Other considerations

Having said that semantically “poor” prepositions, which tend to be polysemous (their meaning is generated largely by the very varied contexts in which they are used), often require reinforcement from lexical words, it may seem contradictory that *de*, being in this category, should not demand any such support. However, *de* appears to be a very special case. It has a highly binding effect on the elements it conjoins and actually lexicalizes phrases itself. Take the case of Spanish noun phrases like *torre del reloj* and *máquina de coser*. The preposition has the effect of conferring a strongly lexicalized compound meaning on these units, and in the equivalent English forms this unitary meaning can be seen by dint of their having only one strong stress on their first component and not allowing any other syntactic element in the middle: *clóck tower*, *séwing machine*; **clóck big tower*, **séwing big machine*. Indeed, many compound nouns in English are fully lexicalized in the sense that they are felt to be monomorphemic by native speakers. For example, *blackboard* is never analysed into its components *black* and *board*, but just trips off the tongue like the monomorphemic words *table*, *chair*, *floor*, etc. Note also that in Spanish, *de* has become redundant in some contexts, thus producing a tightening of the syntactic screw. A case in point is street names, which are no longer expressed with *de*: *la calle Balmes*, earlier *la calle de Balmes*.

Related to the above is the fact that *de* associates nouns that are associable, i.e. that are semantically connected in some way. Thus it may imply a more permanent situation and express a greater sense of belonging, as in *la torre de la iglesia* (the tower is part of the church), *los pueblos de la montaña* (the villages are always present in that location), *los pájaros del cielo* (the sky is the domain of birds), and *la alfombra de tu dormitorio* (the carpet is in your bedroom and, in that sense, belongs there). For this reason, the first of the following sentences sounds less natural than the other two:

El coche del otro lado de la calle lleva días allí.
El coche al otro lado de la calle lleva días allí.
El coche situado / aparcado al otro lado de la calle lleva días allí.

In the above context, the car is not seen as belonging to the other side of the street in the sense of habitually being there, or as constituting a part of the other side of the street as the tower is part of the church in the example above. Note, however, that *de* can set up arbitrary, often humoristic, relationships between entities, as in Cela’s story *La romería*, in which a little girl is stung by a wasp and is thereafter referred to as *la niña de la avispa* (‘the wasp girl’):

A la niña de la avispa le dieron, además, un caramelo de menta.... (p. 110)
A la niña de la avispa, a la Encarnita, ya le había pasado el dolor... (p. 132)

In some cases, *en* can be viewed as a stylistic variant of *de*:

Sólo recuerdo esto como una prueba de que él anotaba mis comedias en la cantina. (ONETTI 1966: 86)
Le hace gracia ese lunar en la mejilla. (MOLINER 1998: 1090)
El español en América y el español en España. (HICKEY & VÁZQUEZ 1994: 29)
Las imágenes de las atrocidades en la guerra de Bosnia están causando mucha emoción. (DE CARLOS & POUNTAIN)

Postmodification introduced by *en* (and other prepositions) may depend partly on the position of the modified noun. If it is found in the predicate, as in the first example above, or is at least right-edged in its sentence or clause, as in the second example, then perhaps it is more acceptable. Moreover, it is very common in this right-edged position in book titles, as in example 3 in the above set and in the following:

El español en la encrucijada.
La lengua española fuera de España.

In these cases, despite the absence of a verb, the postmodifying phrase has a strong adverbial ring to it and could be regarded as elliptical in this style and an aid to concision, which is a prerequisite of titles.

In the above example *Las imágenes ...*, it looks as if *en* may have been used to avoid three tokens of *de*, but, as Hickey & Vázquez point out (1994: 32), *atrocidades* are actions, which makes postmodification with *en* more tolerable. On the other hand, it is also observable that accumulation of prepositions seems to license postmodification with prepositions other than *de*, although this is probably because the phrases succeeding the first have an adverbial function. Consider the following examples:

... con una pila de monedas de diez sobre su mesa de la cantina del club... (ONETTI 1966: 84)
Desde cuando salimos al atrio y me sentí estremecida por la viscosa sensación en el vientre. (GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ 1966: 66)
Y estuve allí, sentado contra el pasamano, con los pies en una silla y la cabeza vuelta hacia el jardín vacío. (GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ 1966: 68)
Estaba frente a mí, con el rosario en la mano, diciendo ... (GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ 1966: 76)

Comparisons also seem to license postmodification:

Se incorporó alarmada, creyendo que había entrado un animal en el cuarto, y entonces vio a Rebeca en el mecedor, chupándose el dedo y con los ojos alumbrados como los de un gato en la oscuridad. (SÁNCHEZ *et al.* 2001)

—se apresuró a contestar Genaro, perdido como una sombra en la oscuridad de la tienda, temeroso de que su mujer le conociera en la voz la pena que traía. (SÁNCHEZ *et al.* 2001)

Mientras tanto, la madre, doña Encarna, daba órdenes a las criadas como un general en plena batalla. (CELA 1966: 108)

Tal vez había dormido un poco esa noche cuando desperté sobresaltada por un olor agrio y penetrante como el de los cuerpos en descomposición. (GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ 1966: 76)

It may be significant that the article in these constructions is often indefinite. Certainly, *un gato en la oscuridad* sounds much more acceptable than non-generic *el gato en la oscuridad*, although the definite article would sound acceptable, like the indefinite article, if used to refer to the feline species as a whole. Of course, a generic reading is not possible for *sombra*, and barely so for *general* in the second and third examples above.

Prepositions of low lexical content besides *en* require semantic reinforcement even if they are not locative or temporal. This is the case of *por* introducing an agent:

*Los ataques por los terroristas sembraron el pánico.

Los ataques de los terroristas sembraron el pánico.

Los ataques perpetrados por los terroristas sembraron el pánico.

On the other hand, prepositions of higher lexical content, like *a favor de*, or ones like *con*, *contra*, *para* and *sin*, which are not as highly polysemous as *de*, *en* and *a*, for example, in the sense that their meaning is not so context-dependent, can be used more freely in postmodifying phrases:

Se aprobó una moción a favor de su detención.
Llevaba un vestido con adornos.
Éste es un crimen contra la humanidad.
Esto es un regalo para usted.
La vida sin él me resultaría vacía.

Hickey & Vázquez (1994: 35) come close to the truth when they say that:

Parece que hay cuatro preposiciones, a saber, “para”, “de”, “sin” y “con”, que funcionan como enlaces sustantivales de forma algo diferente de las otras, y cuya semántica predomina sobre su función sintáctica.

What needs to be said, however, as I hope I have indicated earlier in this examination of the facts, is that *de* is not exactly in the same category as the others. *De* is highly grammatical and polysemous, like *en* and *a*, but has a special lexicalizing effect on the elements it bonds, while the others are also near the grammatical end of the grammatical-lexical scale, but can be allowed in postmodification because they are less polysemous and therefore produce less ambiguity. In their paper (1994: 35), Hickey and Vázquez are puzzled by the relatively high mark out of 5 (i.e. 3, 3) given for acceptability by their informants to the first of the following sentences in contrast with the second:

Cada objeto encima del armario del baño le recuerda algo: 3, 3.
Se mira en el espejo encima del lavabo: 2,6.

Lo que parece más difícil de explicar es la nota relativamente alta acordada a la primera frase, puesto que no es interpretable como adverbio: “objeto” es algo estático y la frase parece formar parte del sujeto.

As I see it, the point here is that postmodification is tolerated in the first sentence because, being a compound preposition, *encima de* is

sufficiently distanced from the grammatical end of the grammatical-lexical scale to stand on its own without additional lexical support or syntactic anchorage that would be provided by placing *de* before it. And just like *encima de*, the preposition *sobre* is more capable of independence than *en*: *Sobre las piedras grises*, the title of the novel by Juan Arbó, sounds all right, whereas the same title with the more grammaticalized *en* would sound much weaker and fail to convey the nuances of meaning of *sobre*, which tells us that it all took place ‘here, on these very paving stones’.

The second of the above sentences probably received a lower mark because it is, at least potentially, ambiguous: *encima del lavabo* could possibly be interpreted as adverbial, even though such an interpretation would, strictly speaking, not make much sense in the context.

Time expressions, being metaphorical extensions of place expressions, seem to be bound by the same restrictions as the latter, as can be seen from the following examples:

- *Nos conmocionó el accidente el día anterior. (only acceptable if *el día anterior* is given an adverbial interpretation and the sentence means ‘we were shocked the day before’.)

Normally:

Nos conmocionó el accidente del día anterior.
Nos conmocionó el accidente ocurrido / que había tenido lugar el día anterior.

- *La fiesta por la tarde fue muy divertida.

Normally:

La fiesta de la tarde fue muy divertida.
La fiesta que se dio por la tarde fue muy divertida.

- *Los éxitos en su carrera fueron muchos.

Normally:

Los éxitos a lo largo de / durante su carrera fueron muchos.
Los éxitos conseguidos / obtenidos a lo largo de / durante su carrera fueron muchos.

Finally note that, rather than use postmodifying phrases, Spanish often resorts to adjectives. Consider the following examples from Gooch (1995: 24-26):

<i>Spanish</i>	<i>English</i>
una calle céntrica de Madrid	a street in the centre of Madrid
anécdotas callejeras	tittle-tattle picked up in the street
pueblos nilóticos	villages on (the banks of) the Nile
cuestiones formales	questions of form
alimento espiritual	food for thought
transporte vial	transport by road
lesiones cerebrales	damage to the brain (brain damage)

Conclusions

Postmodifying prepositional phrases are extremely common in English and occur with all prepositions. It has been observed, notably by J. P. Wonder, that Spanish, while also allowing this type of structure, places restrictions on its use, especially in the case of locative expressions. Wonder has attempted to explain these restrictions by analysis of the contexts in which the phrases occur. Basically, for him, “situaciones activas” (*El choque cerca de la calle Serrano*) tolerate postmodification of nouns with prepositional phrases, while “situaciones estáticas” (**el sofá en la sala*) do not.

My opinion is that acceptability of the afore-mentioned structure depends on the degree of grammaticalization or lexicali-

zation of the preposition involved, a related factor being the greater or lesser polysemy of the preposition. Thus, Spanish *en*, which is highly grammaticalized and polysemous, like *a*, requires more lexical support than compound prepositions like, say, *a favor de*, or the less polysemous monomorphemic *para*, *con*, *sin* and *contra*. *De* has special status. Although highly grammaticalized and polysemous, it tends to lexicalize the elements it connects, thus assisting in maintaining the optimum amount of lexical material required by Spanish to render utterances transparent.

Greater explicitness in Spanish is a preference not just with prepositions in locative expressions, but also with those in time expressions, and in other contexts, too, where the preposition is felt to be semantically weak (e.g. *por* introducing an agent).

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