DETERMINERLESS PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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1. Introduction

Despite the growing body of literature on the syntax and semantics of prepositions, few analyses up to now have been conducted on determination in prepositional phrases, and more specifically on determinerless prepositional phrases. PPs such as English “in bed”, “off duty” or “by car” are syntactically marked because the article of a count noun is omitted after the preposition. Such constructions have often been dismissed as frozen, and yet two typological analyses have shown that their cross-linguistic regularity as well as a number of shared syntactic and semantic features (affinity with certain types of prepositions, modifiability, clustering into certain semantic subclasses) precluded an idiosyncratic reading (N. Himmelmann 1998, T. Baldwin et al. 2006).

The present paper will discuss the results of a corpus-based investigation of French and English locative determinerless PPs. In the first part of my analysis, I will describe the constraints on the distribution of the constructions in my data. I will then focus more specifically on the very productive French en PPs and show that the use of the bare form of the noun in the PP can be used to convey several types of locative contrasts. This will provide us with valuable clues for future research about the linguistic treatment of space in the two languages.

2. Interest of the comparison between English and French

The comparison of English and French is of particular cross-linguistic interest. French, unlike English, imposes the use of articles even before non-count nouns and plural nouns. And yet, interestingly, French also corroborates N. Himmelmann’s claim (1998: 317) that, “articles are generally used less frequently, and, with regard to semantic and pragmatic generalizations, less consistently in adpositional phrases than in other syntactic environments.” In French, the use of the bare form ties in more exclusively with the adpositional context: the French nouns to be found in determinerless PPs cannot occur in bare form in other syntactic contexts, unlike their English counterparts, which can sometimes occur in subject (“school is over”) or object (“to leave school”) position (L. Stvan 1998, L. Stvan 2007).

The prepositional systems of the two languages also make them interesting candidates for comparison. There is a relatively high number of cases where, in comparable contexts, French will opt for a change of preposition rather than for the omission of the article. The contrast between “in the hospital” and “in hospital” in English will for instance be rendered in French by
the use of the preposition à in the second case (dans l’hôpital / à l’hôpital), a phenomenon sometimes mirrored by the use of the preposition at in English, albeit to a lesser extent.

The interplay between articles and prepositions is further complicated in French by the existence of the two complementary prepositions en and dans. The two prepositions could roughly be described as the counterparts of English “in”, but en is in modern French, apart from a small set of exceptions, always followed by a bare noun (en prison/*en la prison). Dans, on the other hand, cannot be followed by a bare noun (dans la prison/*dans prison).

3. Previous research

Both the above cross-linguistic studies note that the interest of determinerless PPs has so far gone largely unnoticed. Locative PPs of the type “in school” / “in prison” are usually analysed in descriptive grammars in terms of the locative / quasi-locative distinction: “in the prison” and “in the school” refer to the buildings of a prison or a school, whereas “in prison” and “in school” are quasi-locative and refer to the institutions associated with these buildings (R. Quirk et al. 1985: 277). R. Huddleston and G. Pullum (2002: 409-410) adopt a similar view and mention activities linked to locations (“in hospital”, “off stage”) and indications of status (“on call”, “out of place”). They note that, “the nouns which permit this use are severely restricted”, as shown by the unacceptability of PPs such as, “*Ed is at desk/at computer/ in kitchen”.

The only extensive analysis of such constructions in English is, to my knowledge, the thesis of L. Stván (1998, summarized in L. Stván 2007). She analyses occurrences of bare singular count nouns in American English after prepositions but also in the cases mentioned above, i.e. when they occur in subject and object positions. Her analysis of the determinerless PPs in her data is mostly concerned with a subset of locative PPs. She distinguishes between three possible readings of such PPs:

(1) they are used to specify the particular location connected to either the speaker, the hearer, or located entity (2) instead of merely naming a location, these bare forms are used to evoke the locatum’s activity as being the one that is associated with that place or; (3) they are used generically. (L. Stván 2007: 171).

Type (1) would for instance be illustrated by examples such as “There’s a circus in town” (= in our town). Type (2) would be illustrated by PPs such as “in prison” or “at sea”. Finally, type (3) would be illustrated by cases in which the bare noun can be replaced by a generic plural (e.g. “There were protests on campus everywhere in the country” = on campuses). Type (2) corresponds to the “activity” line of analysis described above. Stván’s work, however, is concerned with bare nominals rather than with prepositions. Therefore, she does not attempt to distinguish between the various prepositions that can be followed by bare nouns or to articulate a fully developed theory of the relation between prepositions and articles.

In the literature about French locative prepositions, the question of determination in PPs has been addressed indirectly in analyses of the preposition en, which, as noted, is always followed by a bare noun. However, most of these analyses (L. Waugh 1976, C. Guimier 1978, J.-J. Franckel and D. Lebaud 1991, E. Katz 2006, W. De Mulder 2008) have focused on the opposition between en and its close counterpart dans. This has eclipsed the fact that en also alternates with other prepositions in cases of article deletion. For example, if the article is dropped in sur la terrasse “on the terrace”, *sur terrasse will be unacceptable but en terrasse will be correct. It has also eclipsed possible similarities between en PPs and locative
determinerless PPs headed by other prepositions, such as, in the locative domain, à table, sur scène or sous terre (“at table”, “on stage” and “below ground”).

Apart from the analyses conducted by L. Stvan and a few examples studied by Busuttil (P. Busuttil 1999), it should also be pointed out that most of the analyses of determinerless PPs proposed have, thus far, been based on artificially constructed examples rather than on corpus data.

4. Methodology

The present paper will summarize the early results of the first part of my research project, which bears on locative examples of determinerless PPs. More specifically, I will present here the first results of a corpus-based analysis carried out on the British National Corpus and the Frantext corpus.

The BNC is a 100 million-word database of British English (late twentieth century), containing 90% of academic, literary and newspaper written English and 10% of spoken English. The Frantext corpus is a diachronic database of literary and academic written French (16th century to the present). The section I have used (1975 to the present) contains 313 texts. I have used examples that cover a slightly longer time span for Frantext in order to partly make up for the discrepancy between the number of examples available in each corpus. In the second part of my analysis of locative PPs, I plan to constitute a complementary corpus of newspaper French. Because Frantext is mostly made up of literary texts, there were no occurrences of a number of constructions that are well attested in other types of sources.

I started out by establishing a list of potentially relevant locative nouns using monolingual dictionaries. I then established a list of determinerless PPs in the two languages based on the use of the corpora Frantext and British National Corpus as well as complementary web searches in certain cases. I eliminated irrelevant occurrences such as cases where the preposition is licensed by the verb such as transformer en “transform into”, binomial constructions of the type aller de pays en pays (“to go from country to country”), or cases where the preposition does not have a locative meaning.

Apart from Busuttil’s analysis, which only bears on a very limited set of PPs (P. BUSUTTIL 1999), no analysis has so far combined an analysis of determinerless PPs with a systematic comparison of their counterparts with determiners. When applicable, I have compared instances of en PPs with instances in the corpora of the corresponding dans/à/sur PPs with a determiner (for example, en forêt “in forest” versus dans la forêt “in the forest”).

5. Preliminary results

5.1. Distribution and characteristics of determinerless PPs in my data

5.1.1. Distribution of determinerless PPs after locative prepositions

The contrastive analyses mentioned above have shown that not all prepositions are equally likely to be the heads of determinerless PPs (N. Himmelmann 1998, T. Baldwin et al. 2006). In French as well as English, not all locative prepositions are equally compatible with the use of bare nouns.
A number of prepositions never permit the use of a bare noun: *dans* is a typical example in French, but this is also the case with examples such as *vers* “towards”, *devant* “in front of” or *derrière* “at the back of”, in addition to almost all complex prepositions. In English, I have found no examples of bare nouns after prepositions such as “underneath”, “in front of”, “beside”, “along”, “by” or “behind”.

Other prepositions can be followed either by a bare noun or by a noun preceded by a determiner: *sur terre/sur la terre* “on earth”/“on the earth”. I have listed 24 such prepositions in English², and 9 in French³.

The most striking characteristic of modern French is the existence of specialized prepositions that can only be used with bare nouns: *en*, *hors* “out of”, *jusqu’en* “until” and *en milieu de*, “in middle of”.² There is a great discrepancy between the great productivity of *en* constructions and the relatively limited number of bare nouns occurring after other prepositions: *en* collocates with 136 different nouns in the Frantext corpus, while *sur* and *à*, the most frequent prepositions in determinerless PPs after *en* in the corpus, each collocate with only 12 nouns. Furthermore, determinerless PPs headed by prepositions other than *en* are subject to more constraints on syntactic function, collocations and modifiability.

Overall, my findings illustrate T. Baldwin et al.’s claim (2006: 172) that, “primary adpositions (short monomorphemic adpositions with grammatical meanings) are more likely to be involved in [determinerless PPs] than secondary adpositions (longer or complex adpositions with concrete meanings).” Few complex prepositions, especially in French, and few *coloured*, i.e. concrete and specific, prepositions like “in the middle of” allow the use of the bare form. Very abstract locative prepositions such as “in”, “to” and “at” (or *à* and *en* in French) are used much more often in determinerless PPs. To be precise, 29 different bare nouns collocate with “to”, 28 with “in” and 23 with “at” in my data as opposed to, for instance, only one noun with “across”, “through” and “in the middle of” respectively. In French, however, the opposition between *en* and the other prepositions is much stronger than the opposition between *general* and *specific* prepositions.

### 5.1.2. Syntactic function

Syntactically, the determinerless PPs in my data occur as adverbials as well as noun postmodifiers⁵. In French, and especially after prepositions other than *en* and *hors*, certain determinerless PPs only occur as postmodifiers in the formation of compound nouns (*hockey sur glace* “hockey on ice”, i.e. “ice hockey” vs *jouer sur glace* “play on ice†). Determinerless PPs headed by *sur* are particularly constrained syntactically: *sur berge/gazon/glacier/herbe* (“on embankment/lawn/glacier/grass”) are only used as noun postmodifiers, and *sur glace/piste/rue* (“on ice/track/street”) are also used predominantly with this syntactic function.

Certain English PPs can also be used as noun modifiers, the most obvious locative example being “out of court” (i.e. an “out-of-court settlement”), but there seems to be no particular subclass of PP restricted to this use. Hence, the vast majority of the constructions I found are used adverbially.

### 5.1.3. Modifiability

As shown in T. Baldwin et al. (2006: 166), determinerless PPs constitute a continuum ranging from freely modifiable PPs (e.g. “per recruited student that finishes the project”) to unmodifiable fixed sequences (e.g. “of course††).
In the majority of cases in my data, the PP can either not be modified, as shown by examples such as à table/*à table familiale “at table”/*at family table”, or can only be modified by classifying nouns or adjectives, as opposed to descriptive ones (e.g. en hôpital psychiatrique/*en hôpital délabré meaning “in psychiatric hospital”/*in dilapidated hospital”). This applies to French as well as English.

In French, however, there are a number of cases where other types of modification are possible or even compulsory. Some of them are fixed expressions (e.g. arriver à bon port “to arrive at good port” meaning to arrive safely at one’s destination), where the deletion of the adjective is impossible (*arriver à port).

Another class that seems to be highly productive in present-day French is the one of postmodified abstract location nouns. With a number of abstract locative nouns, the postmodification of the noun by a classifying adjective is not only possible but obligatory: en milieu humide “in humid environment”, en zone occupée, “in occupied zone”, en climat tempéré “in temperate climate”/*en milieu, *en zone, *en climat. English will normally resort to a plural form (e.g. “in rural areas/*in rural area”), although a few similar constructions can be found (e.g. “on dangerous ground, on enemy territory”).

Lastly, a limited set of nouns (banlieue “suburb”, brousse “bush”, forêt “forest”, gare “station”) allows modification by a de PP containing a proper noun or by an adjective based on a nationality or town. Examples include: en gare de Limoges “in station of Limoges”, en forêt de St-Germain-en-Laye “in forest of St-Germain-en-Laye”, and en brousse dahuéenne “in Dahomean bush”. There is no English equivalent.

5.1.4. Collocations: the question of lexicalization

In the en PPs in my data, the only PP that seemed fully frozen was en foire “at fair”, which only occurs in the fixed expression (e.g. s’entendre comme larrons en foire “to get on like thieves at fair”), which is the idiomatic equivalent of the English “to be as thick as thieves”. Other PPs, especially en scène “on stage” and en gare “at/in station”, predominantly collocate with a given noun or verb even if they can also be used in other contexts. Only 6% of the 481 instances of en scène, for instance, occurred outside the sequences mettre en scène/mise en scène “to put on the stage/stage putting” (i.e. “to stage/the stage a production”) and monter/entrer/entrée en scène “to go on stage/entrance on stage”. In the other examples, en scène was used like sur scène, which came up with greater frequency, however. In the absence of any diachronic data, it is difficult to interpret these figures, but one might hypothesize either that the sequences above are becoming more and more lexicalized or, on the contrary, that a certain degree of delexicalization is taking place because of the perceived similarity between en scène and other locative PPs. This, in turn, is generating an increase in its autonomous use.

5.2. A case study: preliminary results of an analysis of en locative PPs in the Frantext corpus

5.2.1. Semantic distribution

As noted above, there are 136 locative nouns occurring after en in the Frantext corpus, and I found 194 others via web searches. These, however, are more problematic methodologically. The nouns attested in Frantext cluster into a very wide range of location subclasses: abstract topological locations (en arrière “at back”), postmodified abstract location nouns (en zone rurale “in rural zone”), natural settings (en forêt “in forest”), administrative subdivisions (en
banlieue “in suburb”), types of housing (en appartement “in apartment”), rooms (en cuisine “in kitchen”), floors of a building (en rez-de-chaussée “on ground floor”), workplaces (en laboratoire “in/at laboratory”), educational (en université “at/in university”) or medical (en clinique “in clinic”) institutions, detention facilities (en prison “in prison”), shops (en librairie “in bookshop”), locations within a shop (en vitrine “in shop window”), and a variety of other buildings or institutions.

A comparison with the English constructions attested in the BNC reveals that there are few cases of one-to-one correspondences between French and English. The only examples involving en are en classe/ in class, en mer/ at sea, en prison/in prison, en scène/ on stage, en stock/in stock and en ville/ in town. The few other cases of close correspondence concern prepositions other than en (sur scène/on stage, à table/at table, à bord/on board).

As we just observed, a number of the nouns attested after en are abstract topological nouns (en altitude “in altitude”, en arrière “at the back”, en surface “at the surface”). They have no English equivalents, but a parallel can be drawn with a number of at determinerless PPs (e.g. “at base/bottom/core/root”).

While both English and French reserve a specific linguistic treatment to medical and religious locations or to institutions related to childcare, French resorts to à followed by a déterminer (à l’église ”at the church”, à la clinique “at the clinic”, à la garderie “in the day nursery”) more often than to bare forms. The few examples with en in my data are very infrequent: there are 587 occurrences of à l’hôpital “in/at the hospital” in Frantext versus 7 of en hôpital psychiatrique/hôpital de jour “in/at psychiatric hospital/day hospital”, and only one occurrence of en cathédrale “in cathedral”. Many other examples to be found in my list of English determinerless PPs will similarly be translated by [à det N] PPs (“at court” au tribunal, “at home” à la maison, “at reception” à la reception, etc.).

English determinerless PPs seem to refer in general to institutions or smaller geographical entities rather than to larger natural settings (like en montagne “in mountain” or geographical/administrative subdivisions, such as en banlieue “in suburb”. There are also few, if any, examples in English of rooms (apart from “in class”), types of housing, floors of a building and workplaces (apart from “at work”, which is less marked, however since “work” is not a count noun).

There is one last important semantic distinction between the constructions in the two languages concerns the selection of trajectors. While both French and English have a number of PPs that are used to locate a ship (en rade “in dock”), French has a broader range of PPs used to locate an inanimate trajector. The most productive subclass is the one denoting the availability or location of an object in a shop (e.g. être en stock “to be in stock”, être en vente en supermarché “to be on sale in supermarket”). Other examples are en cage “in cage”, en fourrière “in dog pound”, en gare “in station” (usually with a train as a trajector), and en serre “in greenhouse”.

5.2.2. Pragmatic typology of en PPs

5.2.2.1. Functional readings

As noted above, one of the analyses that comes up most often in connection with determinerless PPs is the notion of a stereotypical activity associated with a location. In all such cases, the sequence [verb +PP] can be paraphrased by another predicate: e.g. to be in prison/to be a prisoner, to be at sea/to sail or go fishing. All the cases of one-to-one correspondence between French and English PPs that I have found involve PPs of this type.
Rather than using the term “activity”, I have preferred the term “functional”, a term used by Katz (E. Katz 2006), which also covers cases in which the PP denotes a status (e.g. in prison), or cases in which the trajector is an inanimate, as in (1).

[V]oilà bientôt deux ans que j’ai fini d’écrire Le Voile noir, un an que le livre est en librairie et que vous avez commencé à m’envoyer vos paroles, à me tendre la main à votre tour. (Frantext corpus)

“It has been two years since I finished writing Le Voile noir, one year since the book is [lit. in bookshop = on sale in bookshops] and since you have started sending me your words, reaching out to me.”

The use of the bare noun, rather than suggesting one particular activity or status associated with the location, points more broadly to the location in its functional dimension. The range of possible trajectors is restricted accordingly: le professeur est en classe/*l’élève est en classe/*la chaise est en classe (exact equivalent of English “the teacher is in class/the student is in class/the chair is in class”).

A distinction should also be drawn between cases like (1), where the function of the location is so immediately identifiable that the sequence [être/be PP] will be unambiguously understood and other cases where the PP collocates with a more specific verb or noun. Therefore, it could be said that the en PP has an affinity with a functional context rather than being responsible for the functional interpretation. In 6 out of 18 examples, for instance, en usine “in/at factory” collocates with travailler/bosser (a noun and two verbs for “work”).

As has already been explained, in cases where the use of a bare form in a PP conveys a particular pragmatic meaning in English, French often resorts to [à det N] PPs. This is particularly true of functional readings (e.g. in bed/au lit, at church/ à l’église). A few “at” PPs seem to serve a comparable function (“at the till”, “at the bar”), but further corpus-based research would be necessary to establish the degree of closeness of the constructions. Further analysis would also be needed to establish a possible semantic distinction between determinerless PPs in both languages and à/at PPs with determiners conveying an activity meaning. The list of en PPs seems to suggest a strong tendency for them to be used in a work context rather than, for instance, in a context of leisure or social entertainment where [à det N] PPs will be used (au cinéma “at/in the cinema”, à la gym “at/in the gym”), a tendency also observed for English.

5.2.2.2. Generic readings: en N= prep [plural N]

One of L. Stvan’s main pragmatic categories of English PPs is the generic type where the noun refers to a class, as shown by the possibility to substitute a plural form (L. Stvan 1998, L. STVAN 2007). This type may superficially seem to be descriptively adequate for a number of French PPs, but the plural test mostly functions in generic utterances such as (2):

(2) Ensuite toute végétation disparaît -comme en montagne au-dessus d’une certaine altitude- quand on entre dans le pays des cent collines blanches. (Frantext corpus).

“Then all vegetation disappears- like it does [in mountain= in the mountains] above a certain altitude- when you enter the land of the hundred white hills.”
In (2), the substitution of a plural noun (*dans les montagnes*) is acceptable, with little difference in meaning. The choice of the *en* PP with a bare noun, however, conveys an even greater sense of emphasis on the generic features of the type of location described.

The distinction between generic and specific reference is of particular relevance in cases where *en* alternates with *à*. While certain *à* PPs always have a specific meaning (e.g. *à la maison* “at home”), others are ambiguous and can be interpreted generically or specifically depending on the context. In such cases, *en* can function as a disambiguation device and impose a generic reading. An utterance like *Toute sa vie, elle a travaillé à l’usine* can have a dual interpretation (“one specific factory/in a factory environment”). *Toute sa vie, elle a travaillé en usine* is unambiguously generic, as shown by the following contrast:

(3a) *Toute sa vie, elle a travaillé à l’usine, tu sais celle qui est à la sortie de la ville.*

(3b) *Toute sa vie, elle a travaillé en usine, tu sais, celle qui est à la sortie de la ville.*

“All her life, she worked [at/in factory], you know, the one that is just outside of town.”

5.2.2.3. Specific non-referential PPs: *en* N = prep [indefinite article] N

A large number, if not the majority, of the examples in my data, however, do not permit the substitution of a plural form, as illustrated in (4):

(4) *Ce jour-là donc, le curé qui se trouve au repos, Dieu n’ayant rien à voir avec la prise de la Bastille, emmène les pipalas faire un pique-nique en forêt.* (Frantext)

“So that day, the priest, who is on vacation, as God has nothing to do with Bastille day, takes the pipalas on a picnic [in forest].”

In (4), the bare form can alternate with an indefinite article: *le curé emmène les pipalas faire un pique-nique dans une forêt*. In this particular case, a definite article is also possible and stylistically more felicitous (*faire un pique-nique dans la forêt*), but the identification of a particular referent is not relevant in this discourse context.

My use of the terms *specific* and *referential* corresponds to the definitions summarized by C. Lyons (1999: 172). In [referential uses of nouns] the speaker intends to communicate something about a particular individual and intends the hearer to realize which individual is intended. In [specific uses of nouns] the speaker has a particular individual in mind corresponding to the description but does not expect the hearer to pick out any individual. In other words, there is no intention to communicate something about the individual that provides the grounds for the assertion.

In all similar cases, therefore, even if the reading of the noun is specific, the individuating properties of the entity in question are irrelevant in the discourse context. What seems to matter is still the generic characterization of a type of space rather than its individual characteristics. Non-classifying modifications of the noun are impossible: *le curé emmène les pipalas faire un pique-nique en forêt vierge/* *en grande forêt* (“in virgin forest”/”in big forest”). E. Katz (2006: 42) suggests that *en* “dematerializes” the location it refers to, a claim that seems to be supported by the fact that, in my data, PPs such as *dans la forêt* “in the forest” or *dans la brousse* “in the bush” can collocate with very concrete verbs associated with a three-dimensional conceptualization of the landmark, while the corresponding *en* PPs cannot (*s’engouffrer dans la forêt* “to make one’s way through the forest” / *s’engouffrer en forêt* “to make one’s way through forest”).
A closer look at corpus examples and recent PPs found in web searches shows that a great number of specific non-referential PPs conveys a marked contrastive sense effect, another characteristic that distinguishes them from their counterparts with an article. The two PPs in (5) illustrate this contrastive use of *en* PPs, where two types of location are opposed:

(5) Votre meilleur, pourtant, à mon avis. Mais trop poivré, je vous avais prévenu. Le coup des lettres érotiques... Il faut faire ça en kiosque, mon vieux, pas en librairie... La littérature dépend des magazines, et les magazines sont de plus en plus roses. (Frantext)

“And yet it is your best, I think. But too daring, I had warned you. The idea of the erotic letters...You have to sell it [in newsagent], old sport, not [in library]...Literature depends on magazines, and magazines are more and more interested in erotic literature.”

A PP like *en kiosque* is rather unusual, as shown by its lack of frequency in my data (only 1 occurrence). What licenses the use of *en* here as opposed to the usual *dans* is the expression of locative contrast. In (5), the contrast is expressed explicitly (*kiosqu/librairie*), but it is often implicit: *faire du sport en salle* “to practice sport in room” (i.e. “to practice sport indoors”) implies an opposition between practising sport inside a club and practising a sport indoors. Such locative contrasts can also be found in most of the *sur* PPs used as noun complements (*hockey sur gazon* “hockey on lawn” or “field hockey” / *hockey sur glace* “hockey on ice” or “ice hockey”, so that it could be argued that the contrastive dimension is to be related to the bare form rather than to *en* specifically. Such contrastive readings are not restricted to specific non-referential PPs and are equally compatible with certain generic PPs.

**5.2.2.4. Definite readings: en N = prep [definite/possessive determiner] N**

Stvan’s *familiarity implicature* subtype, in which the nominal in the determinerless PP is “used much like a definite referring expression” (L. Stvan 2007: 177) and where the zero article can alternate with a possessive or determiner, is the one that seems least applicable to French. She lists ten nouns that can be used in *familiarity* PPs (i.e. bed, camp, campus, church, class, college, home, school, town, work), whereas, strictly speaking, *en ville* “in town” is the only corresponding case in French. Definite readings of *en ville* are very similar to definite readings of “in town” found in my BNC data, as shown by (6) and (7):

(6) Avec Dominique Cazenave, un ami photographe, à peine arrivés, nous apprenons que Blondie est en ville! (Frantext)

“With Dominique Cazenave, a friend of mine who is a photographer, we had only just arrived when we heard that Blondie was [in town = in our town]!”

(7) “Even the Chancellor of Oxford University, Roy Jenkins, has to wait outside on the steps of the Clarendon buildings on a cold November morning, when the Sultan of Brunei is in town.” (British National Corpus)

It should be noted, however, that not all occurrences of *en ville* have a definite reading.

The case, mentioned in section 5.1.3, of *en* PPs postmodified by a specifying *de* PP, is specific to French. In most of my examples, the substitution of a *dans* PP is perfectly acceptable and conveys little, if any, straightforwardly recognizable difference in meaning. In the case of *dans la forêt de N/en forêt de N*, the use of *en* will have a more archaic ring, which suggests that stylistic parameters could be investigated.
In the case of *gare* “station”, the use of the bare form ties in with a functional reading. *En gare de N* and *dans la gare de N* have clearly differentiated meanings: *être en gare de N* means to be in a train making a stop in the station, the functional reading associated with *en gare*, while *être dans la gare de N* will mean to be anywhere in the station. The use of such referential postmodified *en* PPs is, however, restricted to the set of nouns listed above and, therefore, unacceptable in a number of cases where it might seem semantically warranted: *en ambassade de Rome* “in embassy of Rome”, *en scène de l’Olympia* “on stage of the Olympia”.

6. Preliminary conclusions and directions for further research

The analysis of the *en* PPs in my data suggests that the use of the bare form of the noun in locative PPs can be used to express a variety of locative contrasts. In the first three types of *en* PPs I have described, the bare form marks the shift from a simple localization function to a type of localization that places greater emphasis on the prototypical characteristics of the location either in order to evoke a stereotypical function associated with it or, in the case of generic and specific non-referential PPs, to highlight the class characteristics of the location. The latter is more relevant in discourse than the selection of an individual entity. The fourth category, in which the PP has a definite reading, is more heterogeneous for reasons that have to be investigated but may be of a diachronic or stylistic nature.

Prior to exploiting my English data, I can only draw tentative conclusions about possible directions for contrastive analysis. These are based on the first observations I made on my BNC examples as well as previous descriptions of these constructions in English. The analysis of the examples I have studied so far would seem to suggest that the more specific and referential the PP, the more English and French tend to differ. French PPs with a functional reading seem to have a number of counterparts in English, even when semantic categories differ. Generic PPs also show a degree of parallelism. However, non-referential specific PPs as well as PPs postmodified by proper nouns seem to be specific to French, while unmodified *familiarity* PPs are much more widespread in English. The contrastive sense effect often conveyed by *en* and by other French determinerless PPs also seems specific to French.

Once I have completed the treatment of Frantext examples by analyzing determinerless PPs headed by locative prepositions other than *en* more closely, this analysis will have to be extended by the exploitation of my English data. It will also have to be extended by a closer investigation of stylistic and sociolinguistic parameters based on the use of non-literary sources. The second part of my research project will bear on subsets of non-locative PPs.

Bibliography


GUIMIER, Claude. 1978. «En et dans en français moderne: étude sémantique et syntaxique».


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1 It should be noted that French does not distinguish between directional and stative locative prepositions: à, en and dans can all be used in both contexts (Je vais à Paris “I am going to Paris”/ Je suis à Paris “I am in Paris”).

2 Above (2), across (1), around (2), at (23), away from (8), below (2), close to (5), down (3), far from (4), from (17), in (28), inside (4), in the middle of (1), into (14), near (4), off (7), on (13), outside (9), outside of (5), to (29), towards (3), through (1), up (2). The number between brackets indicates the number of different count locative bare nouns attested after each preposition in the BNC.

3 À (12), à travers (4), contre (1), en bord de (10), en bordure de (10), hors de (1), jusqu’à (1), sous (1), sur (12). The number between brackets indicates the number of different locative bare nouns attested after each preposition in Frantext.

4 There are 136 different types of locative determinerless PPs headed by en in Frantext, 6 headed by hors, 5 by jusqu’en and 2 by en milieu de.

5 I leave aside here very rare cases of nominal uses of locative PPs, such as French hors-piste “off track”.

6 In most cases, I have opted for a literal (abbreviation lit.) translation of French PPs, so that it would be clear to the reader whether an article was used or whether the noun was in the singular or the plural. It should be pointed out, however, that no French preposition has an “exact” English counterpart.

7 In the terminology used by Tyler and Evans, the “trajector” is the located entity and the “landmark” is the location (A. Tyler and V. Evans 2003).