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Prepositional Transfer from Sara to English: A Study of L1-Induced Errors Among Chadian Learners of English

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Abstract: This study examines how Sara prepositional phrases influence the English produced by Chadian learners who speak Sara as their first language. Previous research on first-language influence in Chadian learners' English has focused mainly on pronunciation, leaving the syntactic use of prepositions relatively underexplored. To investigate this issue, 50 Sara-speaking learners translated selected Sara sentences into English. The task yielded 95 items across six semantic categories: place, time, direction, cause, manner, and possession. Two ambiguous items were excluded, leaving 93 items for analysis against Standard English usage. Overall, 36 items (38.7%) did not contain the target preposition. Error rates differed across categories, reaching 58.8% for place and 55.0% for cause, while no errors were recorded for manner. The analysis points to four recurring Sara morphemes (k', t', lé, and mbata). Each can express a wider range of relations than its closest English equivalent. Learners often appear to choose an English preposition that matches a morpheme's basic meaning, even when the context calls for a more specific form such as on, to, among, or because of. The findings suggest that these errors are linked to differences in how Sara and English divide up semantic relations, rather than to random confusion. They also point to the value of contrastive, category-specific instruction in English classes in Chad.

Keywords: language transfer, prepositional phrases, prepositions, Sara languages, learner errors

Résumé: Cette étude examine le transfert des syntagmes prépositionnels du Sara vers l'anglais chez des apprenants tchadiens dont le Sara est la première langue. Les travaux antérieurs sur l'influence des langues premières dans l'anglais des apprenants tchadiens se sont surtout intéressés à la phonologie, tandis que le transfert syntaxique dans l'emploi des prépositions reste peu étudié. Pour explorer cette question, 50 apprenants saraphones ont traduit des phrases ciblées du Sara vers l'anglais. Les réponses ont fourni 95 items répartis en six catégories : lieu, temps, direction, cause, manière et possession. Deux items jugés ambigus ont été écartés ; les 93 items restants ont été évalués au regard de l'anglais standard. Au total, 36 items (38,7 %) ne correspondaient pas à la préposition attendue. Les taux variaient selon la catégorie : 58,8 % pour le lieu et 55,0 % pour la cause, contre 0 % pour la manière. L'analyse fait ressortir quatre morphèmes Sara récurrents (k', t', lé et mbata), dont les valeurs couvrent plusieurs relations que l'anglais exprime au moyen de prépositions différentes. Les apprenants semblent souvent choisir une préposition anglaise correspondant au sens de base du morphème Sara, même lorsque le contexte exige une autre forme, comme on, to, among ou because of. Ces résultats suggèrent que les erreurs observées tiennent en partie à une différence dans la manière dont les deux langues organisent les relations sémantiques. Ils invitent à privilégier un enseignement ciblé sur les contrastes entre le Sara et l'anglais.

Mots-clés : transfert linguistique, syntagmes prépositionnels, prépositions, langues Sara, erreurs d'apprenants

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INTRODUCTION

Chad is highly multilingual. Many local languages are used alongside French and Arabic, both official languages, while English is increasingly taught in schools and universities and used for wider communication. Sara, spoken by communities across southern Chad, is one of the major first languages represented among learners in the country's education system. For many of these learners, English is acquired as a third or fourth language, after Sara and French and, in some cases, Chadian Arabic.

Learning English in this setting brings several challenges. Research on Chadian learners has largely examined phonological difficulties, including the pronunciation of sounds that are absent from local language systems and the simplification of English consonant clusters that do not occur in the same form in Sara or related languages.

This focus is understandable since pronunciation errors are easy to hear and often attract immediate attention. However, it has left another area less well documented which is the transfer of Sara structures into English syntax, particularly in the use of prepositions.

Related patterns have been reported in other African contexts. Al Mubarak (2017), for example, examined English preposition learning among Sudanese university students, while Mbangwana and Sala (2009) discussed the influence of local languages

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on Cameroonian English syntax. More generally, prepositions are difficult for many second-language learners because the meanings expressed by a form in one language do not always match those of a single form in another (Odlin, 1989). The challenge is especially clear when one Sara morpheme covers several relations that English marks with different prepositions. Previous studies have described similar mismatches in other language-learning contexts (Gvarishvili, 2013; Yuan, 2014). This study therefore examines Sara-to-English transfer directly, asking which Sara morphemes are involved and in which semantic categories the mismatch is most evident. It focuses on six categories: place, time, direction, cause, manner, and possession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Transfer in Second Language Acquisition

Research into the influence of previously learned languages has a long history. Weinreich (1953) used the term "interference" for departures from language norms that arise when speakers know more than one language. Lado (1957) developed this idea into contrastive analysis, proposing that similarities between languages would make some features easier to learn, while differences would create difficulties. Later evidence showed that this strong version could not explain all learner errors: some predicted difficulties did not occur, and some errors could not be traced to the first language.

Corder (1967) argued that learner errors should be treated as evidence of a developing language system, not simply as failures. Selinker (1972) likewise identified language transfer as one of the processes that shape interlanguage. Kellerman (1979) later showed that transfer is selective: learners do not transfer every difference between languages, but are influenced by how distant or transferable a form seems to them.

Taken together, this work suggests that the first language is one influence among several, and that its effects are especially visible when languages organize meaning differently (Ellis, 2008). Contrastive analysis is used in the present study in this limited sense as it helps identify where errors may occur and interpret patterns once they appear, rather than assuming that every difference between Sara and English will lead to an error.

Odlin (1989) defined transfer as the influence of similarities and differences between a target language and any language acquired earlier. Such influence can affect pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and meaning. Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) further argued that transfer involves not only linguistic forms but also the conceptual patterns people use to organize experience. This perspective is relevant to prepositions because they express spatial, temporal, and other relations, and languages do not always divide these meanings in the same way.

Prepositional Transfer as a Distinct Error Category

Prepositions are a persistent source of difficulty for second-language learners because their meanings rarely match exactly across languages. Gvarishvili (2013) found that learners' knowledge of prepositions in their first language can shape their use of English prepositions. Yuan's (2014) corpus study similarly found that one form in a learner's first language may cover meanings that English expresses through several prepositions. Learners may then overuse a single English form across contexts where another form is required. These findings suggest that prepositional errors can reflect a mismatch between the semantic systems of the two languages rather than arbitrary confusion.

Prepositions are also useful for studying transfer because their meanings are related but not identical across contexts. Tyler and Evans (2003) describe English prepositions as networks of senses built around a central spatial meaning, with further uses extending into areas such as time and cause. Two languages may share a similar basic meaning but differ in how far that meaning extends. When a Sara morpheme is used in a context where English selects another preposition, a learner may choose the English form that matches the morpheme's basic meaning. The distinction between basic and extended meanings used in Table 2 draws on this account.

Transfer Research in African and Chadian English Contexts

Although language transfer has been widely studied, comparatively little research has examined Sub-Saharan and Central African varieties of English, and even less has focused on Chad. Work in nearby contexts has nevertheless reported related patterns. Al Mubarak (2017) documented difficulties with English prepositions among Sudanese university students and linked them to Arabic influence. Mbangwana and Sala (2009) showed more broadly how local language structures shape syntax in Cameroonian English.

This research confirms that first-language influence on syntax and prepositions is relevant in comparable settings. However, the literature reviewed here does not examine Sara-speaking learners in Chad. Research on Chadian learners has focused mainly on phonological transfer, leaving prepositional transfer largely unaddressed. The present study takes up that gap.

Transfer in Multilingual Learners

Many studies of transfer consider learners who are moving from one first language to one second language. This is not a complete picture of language learning in Chad, where English is often a third or fourth language. Research on third-language acquisition shows that influence can come from any language learned earlier, not only from the first language (Cenoz, Hufeisen, & Jessner, 2001; De Angelis, 2007). Bardel and Falk (2007), for example, argue that a previously

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learned second language can sometimes have a stronger syntactic influence on a third language than the first language does.

This has two implications for the present study. First, French as the main language of schooling for most participants, may also have influenced their English, and this possibility cannot be ruled out. Second, the task itself makes Sara especially salient because participants translated Sara sentences, so the Sara structure was present while they produced the English version. The findings should therefore be understood as evidence of Sara-related transfer under elicitation conditions that favor it, not as a measure of the relative influence of Sara and French in spontaneous English.

Summary and Research Gap

Three expectations follow from the literature. First, transfer is selective rather than automatic (Kellerman, 1979). Second, prepositional errors are likely to occur where one form in the first language covers meanings expressed by several forms in English (Gvarishvili, 2013; Tyler & Evans, 2003; Yuan, 2014). Third, in multilingual learners, the source of transfer needs to be investigated rather than assumed (Cenoz et al., 2001; De Angelis, 2007). The present study examines these expectations among Sara-speaking learners of English.

Background: Sara and Its Prepositional Morphemes

Sara in the Chadian linguistic landscape

Sara languages comprise roughly a dozen Bongo-Bagirmi languages within the Central Sudanic family and are spoken in southern Chad. Participants in this study, recruited at the University of Doba, spoke one of four Sara varieties: Gor, Laka, Mongo, or Ngambaye (Djarangar, 2000). For most participants, English is not the first additional language. It is learned after French, the language of schooling, and often alongside Chadian Arabic, a regional lingua franca. Sara nevertheless remains the language of early socialization for many learners.

This multilingual background matters when interpreting transfer. French prepositions such as “à”, “dans”, and “de” may also shape learners’ English, and the present study cannot exclude that possibility. The design focuses on Sara because the prompts were written in Sara and the analysis traces errors to particular Sara morphemes. However, the non-target forms were not systematically compared with French equivalents; this remains a limitation.

The four prepositional morphemes

A preliminary analysis of the elicited sentences identified four Sara morphemes with prepositional functions. Their meanings extend beyond those of their closest English equivalents, as summarized in Table 2.

T’/t’ has the basic meaning “in/inside”. It combines with other words or morphemes to express location or destination, as in “touweu’t” (‘mat’) and “ndoh’t” (‘farm’). Its extended uses include relations that English expresses with “on, to, near, among, under,” and “in front of”. When learners map t’ directly onto “in”, they may produce forms such as “lying in a mat” or ‘people are in the farm”, where Standard English uses “on”.

K’ has the basic meaning ‘with/toward’ and precedes the noun it governs. In “Si awi k Ndjamena”, for example, the intended meaning is “They are going to Ndjamena”. Its extended uses include “at, on,” and the temporal meaning “when”. The translation “got married with a new woman” illustrates a non-target-like choice: English requires “to” in this context.

Lé has the basic meaning “of” and can mark possession, as in “Doh key lé baba” (“The roof of baba’s house”). It also appears in causal contexts. In one response, “they died of hunger” was rendered as ‘they died from hunger’, although the expected English form in the example is “of”.

Mbata means ‘because’. It often combines with lé to form “mbata lé”, as in “Oyi mbata lé kindeu man” (‘They died because of water’). Because English does not have a single-word equivalent for this compound, learners may find it difficult to decide how to represent the two elements in English.

Contrastive expectations and research questions

A contrastive account predicts that errors will not be evenly distributed. When a Sara morpheme corresponds closely to one English preposition, transfer may not produce an observable error. When one Sara form covers meanings that English expresses through several prepositions, learners may rely on the basic meaning and choose it even in contexts that require another form. Errors should therefore be more common at the boundaries between the extended meanings of Sara morphemes and the more differentiated English system. This study addresses three questions:

1. In which semantic categories do Sara-speaking learners depart most often from Standard English prepositional use? 2. Which Sara morphemes account for the non-target-like productions? 3. Do error rates track the degree to which a Sara morpheme’s semantic range is partitioned by English?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study used a cross-sectional elicitation task and combined quantitative descriptions of accuracy by category with a qualitative analysis of errors. Translation was chosen because it keeps the Sara source structure visible during English production, making it easier to

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examine possible links between Sara forms and learners' choices of English prepositions.

Participants

The participants were 50 learners of English enrolled in the Department of English at the University of Doba. All spoke Sara as their first language, were between 20 and 25 years old, and represented four Sara varieties: Gor, Laka, Mongo, and Ngambaye. All participants gave informed consent before data collection. They were in the third year of the University's three-year Bachelor of Arts programme in English.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of Sara sentences containing prepositions from six semantic categories: place, time, direction, cause, manner, and possession. Each sentence was designed to elicit a particular prepositional relation so that the Sara source form could be compared with its expected Standard English equivalent. The sentences were drawn from informal, natural conversation and were validated by an expert.

Procedure

Each participant was asked to translate two Sara sentences into English. Sentences were assigned by preposition category to ensure that all six categories were represented across the sample; assignment was not random. Data were collected in writing on 11 June 2026 during a session lasting no more than two hours. Although 50 participants translating two sentences each could have produced 100 items, only 95 were collected because some participants were unable to complete both items. The 95 responses were distributed as follows: place (18), time (17), direction (16), cause (20), manner (13), and possession (11).

Coding and analysis

Each response was coded manually as correct, incorrect, omitted, or unclear in relation to Standard English prepositional usage. The categories were developed inductively rather than imposed in advance, allowing recurring patterns to emerge from the responses. Two unclear items, one in the place category and one in direction, were excluded because their meaning could not be interpreted reliably. The final analysis therefore included 93 items. A response was considered correct when it contained the target preposition and showed no identified transfer error.'

The analysis had two parts. First, accuracy and non-target-like rates (incorrect forms plus omissions) were calculated for each category. Second, the incorrect responses were examined qualitatively to identify possible links with Sara. This analysis looked beyond whether a preposition had been substituted or omitted and considered how the meanings of Sara morphemes matched, or failed to match, the more differentiated English system. Four recurring morphemes were identified: K', T'/t', Lé, and Mbata.

Reliability

A single researcher coded all responses, and no independent second coding was carried out. This limits the assessment of coding reliability and is discussed in the Conclusion.

RESULTS

Overall accuracy and differences between categories

Of the 95 items collected, two were excluded because they were coded as unclear, leaving 93 items for analysis. Table 1 shows the numbers of correct, incorrect, and omitted prepositions in each semantic category.

Table 1. Distribution of Preposition Use by Category (N = 93)

N°	Category	N	Correct	Incorrect	Omission
1	Place	17	7	9	1
2	Time	17	9	8	0
3	Direction	15	11	4	0
4	Causal	20	9	11	0
5	Manner	13	13	0	0
6	Relation/ Possession	11	8	3	0
	TOTAL	**93**	**57**	**35**	**1**

Across all categories, learners used the target preposition in 61.3% of items (57/93). The remaining 38.7% (36/93) were non-target-like: 35 involved an incorrect preposition and one involved an omission. Accuracy varied by category.

Place had the lowest accuracy, with 7 of 17 responses correct (41.2%); it was also the only category in which a preposition was omitted. Cause followed, with 9 of 20 responses correct (45.0%). Accuracy for time was 52.9%, while possession and direction were higher at 72.7% and 73.3%, respectively. In terms of non-target-like responses, the rates were 58.8% for place, 55.0% for cause, 47.1% for time, 27.3% for possession, and 26.7% for direction.

Manner was the only category in which no errors were recorded: all 13 responses were correct. One possible explanation is that the Sara forms used for manner may correspond more directly to English and may not involve the four morphemes identified as likely sources of transfer. This interpretation should remain tentative, however, because the category contained only 13 items. The contrast with cause and place is striking, but the sample is too small to establish that manner prepositions are generally unproblematic for Sara-speaking learners.

Type and distribution of non-target-like items

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Substitution was much more common than omission. Of the 36 non-target-like responses, 35 (97.2%) involved an incorrect preposition and only one involved an omission. In other words, learners generally supplied a preposition, but not always the one required in Standard English. This pattern is consistent with possible transfer because the Sara source form was present in the prompt and may have encouraged learners to select an English form with a similar basic meaning.

Errors were also concentrated in a few categories. Place, time, and cause accounted for 29 of the 36 non-target-like responses (80.6%), although together they represented 54 of the 93 analysed items (58.1%). Direction contributed four errors, possession contributed three, and manner contributed none.

The four Sara morphemes

Table 2 summarizes the four Sara morphemes identified in the responses, their basic and extended meanings, and examples of how learners rendered them in English.

Table 2. Sara Prepositional Morphemes: Base versus Extended Values and English Divergence

N°	Morpheme	Base value	Extended value	Sara / learner-of-English example	Standard English
1	T'/t'	In / inside	On, to, near, among, under, in front of	M'toh me touweu't = I am lying in a mat Dedjé ayi dan ndoh't = People are in the farm	I am lying on a mat People are on the farm
2	K'	With / toward	At, on, when	Tahâ dene k sig = He got married with a new woman Si awi k Ndjamena = They are going to Ndjamena	He got married to a new woman (correct; extended value matches English "to")
3	Lé	Of / possessive 's	Because of	Oyi koy le bohô = They died from hunger Doh key lé baba = The roof of baba's house	They died of hunger
4	Mbata	Because	—	Oyi mbata lé kindeu man = They died because of water	They died because of water (hybrid; mbata + lé stacked)

Note. 'Learner production' refers to the English response elicited from a participant. "T'/t'." In both examples involving T', learners used "in" where Standard English requires "on": 'I am lying in a mat' and 'People are in the farm'. English distinguishes containment ("in") from contact with or support by a surface ("on"), whereas T' appears to cover both relations. The table also lists "to, near, among, under," and "in front of" among its extended meanings.

The responses illustrate how learners may select the English form that matches the morpheme's basic meaning, even when another preposition is required.

"K'." The examples show that the same Sara morpheme can lead to both target-like and non-target-like responses. In 'They are going to Ndjamena', the English preposition "to" is appropriate. In 'He got married with a new woman', however, English requires "to", not "with". The second response reflects the basic meaning associated with K', while the first happens to align with English usage.

"Lé." Lé marks possession in the example 'The roof of baba's house'. In the causal example, however, the response 'They died from hunger' differs from the target 'They died of hunger'. This case does not fit a simple account in which learners always choose the English preposition matching the basic meaning of the Sara morpheme. It suggests that the proposed pattern is a tendency, not a rule. The manuscript would benefit from additional examples and counts for Lé-related errors, if these data are available.

"Mbata." The Sara sequence "mbata lé" was rendered as 'They died because of water'. This response is target-like, although it reflects a word-by-word mapping: "because" for "mbata" and "of" for "lé". The example therefore does not itself demonstrate an error. To support the claim that the causal category involves structural transfer, the manuscript needs two or three examples of the 11 non-target-like causal responses, if the original data are available.

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Base-value versus extended-range contexts

The results can also be considered in relation to the distinction between basic and extended meanings introduced earlier. For this comparison, direction, possession, and manner were treated as aligned contexts: the relevant Sara morpheme was considered to match the basic English meaning, or the category did not involve one of the four transfer-prone morphemes. Place, time, and cause were treated as extended-range contexts, where a Sara morpheme may cover relations that English expresses with different prepositions. Table 3 presents the comparison.

Table 3. Non-target-like Production in Aligned versus Extended-Range Contexts (N = 93)

Context	Categories	N	Correct	Non-target like	Non-target like %
Aligned	Direction, possession, manner	39	32	7	17.9
Extended range	Place time, causal	54	25	29	53.7
Total		93	57	36	38.7

Non-target-like responses were about three times as common in extended-range contexts (53.7%) as in aligned contexts (17.9%). Fisher's exact test indicated a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$). Manner also differed from the other categories: there were no non-target-like responses among its 13 items, compared with 36 among the other 80 items (Fisher's exact test, $p = .001$). Because the grouping was developed after the data had been examined and some cell counts are small, these tests should be treated as exploratory rather than confirmatory.

DISCUSSION

Answering the research questions

For RQ1, the highest non-target-like rates occurred in place (58.8%) and cause (55.0%), followed by time (47.1%). The rates were lower for direction (26.7%) and possession (27.3%), and no errors were recorded for manner. For RQ2, the analysis linked the recurring errors to four Sara morphemes: T'/t' was most evident in place, K' appeared in place and time contexts, and Lé and Mbata were associated with causal relations. For RQ3, non-target-like responses were much more common in extended-range contexts than in contexts where Sara and English were treated as aligned.

Semantic range as the source of the pattern

The category differences appear to be related to the semantic range of the four Sara morphemes, rather than to a general difficulty with all English prepositions. When the Sara form corresponds closely to an English form, transfer may not result in an error. All 13 manner items were correct, for example. By contrast, errors were more frequent when one Sara morpheme covered several relations that English distinguishes. T'/t', with its basic meaning of 'in/inside' and extended uses corresponding to "on, to, near, among," and "under", helps explain the low accuracy in place. K', whose basic meaning is 'with/toward' but which also covers other relations, may help explain the errors found in place and time.

The Causal category

Cause presents a more complex case. Lé, which can mark possession and correspond to "of" or possessive "'s", and mbata, meaning 'because', can occur together in the compound "mbata lé".

Some responses may reflect a word-by-word transfer of the two Sara elements rather than treating the compound as a single expression. This would make the difficulty structural as well as lexical. However, the current examples do not fully demonstrate this explanation, so it should be tested against the original causal responses before a firm conclusion is drawn.

The limits of the base-value default

The semantic-range account helps explain the overall distribution of errors, but it does not explain every response. The example 'They died from hunger' shows that learners do not always select the English preposition associated with a Sara morpheme's basic meaning. The error-free manner category also shows that transfer is not inevitable when learners work across languages. These observations are consistent with the view that transfer is selective (Kellerman, 1979), rather than mechanical. Since each participant produced only two sentences, the data cannot show whether individual learners used the same prepositions consistently across contexts. Further research should include more examples for each morpheme and category.

Relation to previous research

The category-specific pattern is consistent with earlier research suggesting that prepositional errors arise when the forms and meanings of the first and target languages do not align neatly (Gvarishvili, 2013; Yuan, 2014). It also resembles findings from other African contexts (Al Mubarak, 2017; Mbangwana & Sala, 2009). The present study adds an initial account of Sara morphemes among Chadian learners. The error-free manner responses are also noteworthy, although the small number of items means this result needs to be checked in a larger sample. Overall, the findings are compatible with the view that cross-linguistic influence involves both linguistic forms and the ways speakers organize meaning (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

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Pedagogical implications

The findings suggest that prepositions should not be taught only as a long list of separate forms. For T'/t' and K', teachers could use contrastive tables to show how one Sara morpheme corresponds to several English prepositions in different contexts. The compound Lé/Mbata pattern should be taught separately, with attention to expressions such as "because of". Since all 13 manner items were correct, classroom practice could initially focus more on place and cause, where errors were most frequent, while still checking whether the pattern holds in larger samples.

Three practical classroom activities follow from these results:

Use examples from learners' own responses, such as 'lying in a mat', to practise the contrast between "in" and "on" and between "with" and "to". Discussing why the Sara form led to a particular English choice may help learners notice the difference.

Teach "because of" as a unit and contrast it with "because" followed by a clause. This may help learners avoid translating the elements of the Sara compound separately.

Use short diagnostic translation tasks to identify which categories cause the most difficulty, then allocate practice time accordingly.

These teaching suggestions are based on the present findings; their effectiveness has not yet been tested in classroom settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Sara prepositional structures may influence the English of Sara-speaking learners in Chad and whether the resulting errors show a consistent pattern. The results suggest that they do. Four Sara morphemes; K', T'/t', Lé, and Mbata, cover semantic ranges that English often expresses through several different prepositions.

Non-target-like responses were most common in categories where this mismatch was expected to be greater, particularly place and cause. By contrast, all 13 manner items were correct. The examples involving Lé and Mbata also raise the possibility that some errors reflect transfer of a multi-part structure rather than the choice of a single preposition.

These findings need to be interpreted in light of several limitations. Because participants translated Sara sentences, the source-language forms were directly available and may have encouraged more transfer than would occur in spontaneous speech or writing. Each participant translated only two sentences, which was sufficient to describe category-level patterns but not to assess individual learners' control of particular morphemes. In addition, one researcher coded the responses, with no independent check of coding reliability. Finally, the analysis did not systematically compare the errors with French equivalents, so French influence cannot be excluded. Future studies should use independent coders, include more items per participant, and compare translation tasks with freer forms of production.

Despite these limitations, the findings suggest that prepositions are not equally difficult across all semantic categories. English teaching informed by learners' existing languages could make better use of classroom time by focusing on the contrasts that produce the most errors, rather than treating every preposition as equally problematic. Further research with other Sara-speaking groups and spontaneous English data would help determine whether the patterns identified here extend beyond this sample.

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