

Literal vs metaphorical nature of English prepositional phrases: types of combinations

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This paper is aimed at analyzing the literal or metaphorical nature of English prepositional phrases. Special attention will be paid to some predicative prepositional phrases (PPPs), that is, those phrases which consist of a preposition followed by a noun phrase (NP) acting as its complement and which perform the function of subject complement since they express a condition, feature, quality or state which is attached to the subject by means of a copular verb.

From the semantic point of view prepositional phrases can be classified into different types after analyzing the meaning of both prepositions and NPs. Thus, a distinction is drawn into “pure” and “mixed” combinations. The former consist of those sequences in which both elements either convey a literal meaning or a metaphorical one. The latter, however, include those phrases in which the preposition is literal whereas the NP is metaphorical or just the other way round.

Obviously enough, these descriptions also involve different syntactic analyses. So, whereas the preposition “under” and its complement (“the microscope”) are literal in [1], both “under” and “the weather” are metaphorical in [2]. Therefore, the PP in italics in [1] is described as an Adverbial, but the one in [2] is a PPP and performs the function of Subject Complement:

[1] Sometimes, for accurate identification, the fungal spores have to be examined *under the microscope* (ICE-GB:W2B-030 #27:1).

[2] Former chairman of the Poetry Society, Alan Brownjohn, said: ‘I had heard that Ted was *under the weather*’ (ICE-GB:W2C-020 #93:5).

Further examples from corpora such as the *BNC* and the *ICE-GB* as well as their descriptions in different dictionaries will be provided throughout the paper in order to illustrate all these ideas.

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