



THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN THE INTERPRETATION OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN PREDICATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Ergasheva Gulnoz Alimovna

Senior teacher of Karshi State University;

Karshi, Kashkadarya, Uzbekistan;

tel+998914615053;

E-mail: Gulnoz2112@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of context in interpreting prepositional phrases (PPs) functioning in predicative constructions in English. While prepositions are often treated as fixed relational markers, their meaning in predicative positions demonstrates profound flexibility, shifting between literal, metaphorical, evaluative, and institutionalized uses depending on context. Drawing on literary, political, journalistic, and conversational discourse, the study highlights how syntactic form alone is insufficient to determine meaning. Instead, interpretation is anchored in the interaction of structural, semantic, and pragmatic factors. The findings confirm that prepositional predication is highly context-sensitive, with implications for theories of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis

Introduction

Prepositional phrases occupy a complex position in English grammar. While their canonical function is to express relations of space (on the table), time (at midnight), or cause (because of the storm), in predicative constructions they often acquire abstract or metaphorical readings. Consider the following:

“The negotiations are on the brink of collapse.”

“The minister is under fire from the opposition.”

“Civilization itself is at stake.”

These examples illustrate the elasticity of PP interpretation. In each case, the phrase resists literal understanding: there is no physical “brink,” “fire,” or tangible “stake.” Instead, interpretation depends on the surrounding discourse, cultural frames, and shared knowledge.

This study investigates how prepositional phrases in predicative constructions derive their meaning from context, asking:

1. What contextual layers (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) guide interpretation?
2. How do PPs shift between literal, metaphorical, and evaluative readings?
3. What do these shifts reveal about the nature of predicative semantics?

Methods

Data Sources

To capture interpretive diversity, data were drawn from:

1. **Literary texts** (e.g., T. S. Eliot, George Orwell, Margaret Atwood).
2. **Political discourse** (parliamentary debates, presidential speeches).
3. **Journalistic writing** (The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC).
4. **Academic and technical prose** (scholarly articles, policy documents).
5. **Spoken interaction** (interviews, debates, recorded conversation).

Analytical Procedure

Predicative constructions with prepositional complements were identified. Each was analyzed along three contextual dimensions:

Syntactic (grammatical role, type of copula, complement structure). **Semantic** (selectional restrictions, thematic roles).

Pragmatic (discourse situation, speaker intention, genre conventions).

Interpretations were categorized as **literal, metaphorical, idiomatic, or evaluative.**

Results

1. Literal Predication with Contextual Anchoring

Literal uses remain but are often layered with discourse-specific relevance.

“The manuscript is on the editor’s desk.” → literal spatial placement, but in an academic context it implies the stage of peer review.

“The embassy is under surveillance.” → literally monitored, but carries political implications of suspicion and international tension.

Even seemingly literal PPs take on additional meanings in context.

2. Metaphorical and Figurative Readings

Predicative PPs often serve as metaphors that reframe abstract states.

“The economy is on life support.” → biomedical metaphor indicating fragility and dependence.

“The coalition is in ruins.” → architectural metaphor for political breakdown.

“The project is at a crossroads.” → spatial metaphor for critical decision-making.

Here, interpretation relies not on preposition semantics but on broader metaphorical frames.

3. Idiomatic and Institutionalized Predications

Many predicative PPs are institutionalized, requiring cultural knowledge.

“The prime minister is in office.” → denotes tenure, not physical location.

“The contract is under review.” → bureaucratic idiom of evaluation.

“The athlete is on probation.” → legal-institutional formula with specific procedural meaning.

Without contextual awareness of political or bureaucratic discourse, these cannot be interpreted correctly.

4. Evaluative and Pragmatically Charged Uses

Context frequently injects evaluative or euphemistic meanings.

“The leader is at peace with his decision.” → pragmatic context indicates moral resolution, not external tranquility.

“The victims are at rest now.” → euphemism for death.

“The team is under immense pressure.” → evaluative stance rather than physical burden.

Evaluation is supplied not by preposition semantics but by pragmatic framing.

5. Register and Genre Variation

The same PP can acquire distinct meanings across genres:

Literary: “The soul is in exile.” (symbolic, existential).

Political: “The nation is at risk.” (strategic warning).

Academic: “The theory is under revision.” (disciplinary convention).

Conversational: “I’m in trouble.” (personal admission).

Register guides interpretation, showing how discourse context frames semantic possibilities.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that prepositional predication is best understood as **contextually underspecified**. Three contextual layers interact:

Syntactic Context

Copular verbs establish PP predication.

Construction type affects interpretation: *be under attack* differs from *remain under attack* (durative aspect adds nuance).

Semantic Context

Selectional restrictions narrow possibilities.

“The committee is in session” is coherent, while “The stone is in session” is only interpretable as surreal metaphor.

Pragmatic Context

Discourse situation supplies decisive interpretive cues.

“The empire is in decline” in a history lecture vs. in political commentary invokes distinct temporal and evaluative frames.

These observations align with Talmy’s (2000) theory of **cognitive semantics**, where spatial schemas extend metaphorically to non-spatial domains, and with Fillmore’s (1982) **frame semantics**, which emphasizes background knowledge in interpretation.

Notably, idiomatic predications show **semantic bleaching**, where prepositions lose their spatial sense and encode abstract states (*in charge*, *under pressure*, *on trial*). This suggests that prepositional predication evolves toward discourse-specific conventionalization.

Conclusion

Prepositional phrases in predicative constructions exemplify the central role of context in linguistic interpretation. While prepositions provide relational templates, their predicative use requires contextual anchoring for meaning to emerge. Three key conclusions arise:

Syntactic form alone is insufficient: the same PP can support radically different interpretations depending on context.

Semantic restrictions guide plausibility but can be overridden in figurative or poetic contexts.

Pragmatic context determines final interpretation, often embedding evaluative or institutional meanings.

Prepositional predication is thus a fertile site for studying how grammar and discourse co-construct meaning. The findings have implications not only for linguistic theory but also for applied domains such as translation, discourse analysis, and natural language processing, where context-sensitive interpretation is indispensable.

Future research should pursue corpus-based studies to trace distributional patterns across registers and psycholinguistic experiments to test how speakers resolve ambiguities in real time.

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