

**“The economy principle  
and English predicative Prepositional Phrases”**

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“[...] the act of speaking always requires some exertion, muscular as well as physical, on the part of the speaker, and that he is therefore apt on many occasions to speak with as little effort as possible” (Jespersen, 1922: 262).

# OUTLINE

- **1. Introduction**
- **2. PPPs and the economy principle**
- **3. PPPs to avoid redundancy**
- **4. PPPs as counter-examples:  
subtle nuances and euphemisms**
- **5. Lines for future research**
- **6. Conclusions**
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# 1. Introduction

- This paper is aimed at analysing the relationship between the economy principle and English Predicative Prepositional Phrases (henceforth, PPPs).
- [1] “The vessel remained *under arrest* from September the twenty-sixth until October the nineteenth” (ICE-GB:S2A-065 #18:1:A).

# 1. Introduction

- Definition: phrases headed by prepositions followed by their complement.
- The complement of the head of PPs can be realized by a high number of structures although attention will only be paid to NPs.

# 1. Introduction

- Predicative PPs are the ones performing the function of SC at clause level.
- Intensive relationship between the S and the SC since the latter predicates something of the S, thus expressing a condition, feature, quality or state which is attached to the S.

# 1. Introduction

- Methodology: corpora (*ICE-GB* and *BNC*) and dictionaries.
- *International Corpus of English-Great Britain.*
- One-million word corpus which is both morphologically and syntactically annotated.
- British English from the 90s.
- Consists of both spoken (60%) and written material (40%).

# 1. Introduction

- *British National Corpus.*
- One-hundred-million word corpus which is morphologically annotated.
- British English from the 90s.
- Consists of both written (90%) and spoken material (10%).
- To increase the number of examples in our subcorpus.



# 1. Introduction

- Monolingual dictionaries were also used.
- Aim: to analyze the description of PPPs and to obtain further information about their use.
- Usage labels proved crucial for this purpose.
- Different editions consulted to check their evolution.

## 2. PPPs and the economy principle

- The economy principle and the principle of least effort.
- Vicentini (2003) studied the origin of these theoretical notions (Zipf, 1949).
- Different examples confirm the hypothesis according to which the selection of certain PPPs will allow speakers to convey a given meaning by means of a more reduced number of words (examples [2] – [6]).

## 2. PPPs and the economy principle

- At stake => “that can be won or lost, depending on the success of a particular action” (Turnbull, 2010<sup>8</sup>: 1501).
- Close to the bone => “telling the truth about a subject that people prefer not to think about, in a way that may offend or upset people” (Rundell, 2007<sup>2</sup>: 156).
- In clover => “to have enough money to be able to live a very comfortable life” (Turnbull, 2010<sup>8</sup>: 278).

## 2. PPPs and the economy principle

- In hand => “receiving attention and being dealt with” (Crowther, 1995<sup>5</sup>: 537).
- In the red => “with more money being spent than there is available” (Rundell, 2007<sup>2</sup>: 1242).
- In clover => “to have enough money to be able to live a very comfortable life” (Turnbull, 2010<sup>8</sup>: 278).
- PPPs which are formally simple can express complex ideas (“at stake” => prep. + N).

## 2. PPPs and the economy principle

- Scholars such as Moreno Cabrera (2002: 4) refer to the “economy principle”, which is basic in communication.
- Jespersen (1922: 262) underlined the speaker’s inevitable tendency to that principle: “[...] the act of speaking always requires some exertion, muscular as well as physical, on the part of the speaker, and that he is therefore apt on many occasions to speak with as little effort as possible”.

# 3. PPPs to avoid redundancy

- However, on some occasions certain PPPs are chosen to avoid redundant structures such as “be being”.
- In fact, the use of “at issue” and “under construction” in [7] and [8] prevents speakers from saying “may be being dealt with” and “which will be being built”, respectively.

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- There are other reasons why PPPs are selected in certain communicative contexts.
- There are PPPs which can be replaced by less complex units.
- “In the club” is defined as “pregnant” (Rundell, 2007<sup>2</sup>: 273; Turnbull, 2010<sup>8</sup>: 279).
- “Off your chump” means “crazy” (Rundell, 2007<sup>2</sup>: 240).

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Nevertheless, these PPPs also convey some other subtle nuances. For that reason “in the club” and “off your chump” are labelled as “*British informal old-fashioned*” (Rundell, 2007<sup>2</sup>: 273 and 240, respectively) and the former only as “*British informal*” (Turnbull, 2010<sup>8</sup>: 279).
- Counter-examples: speakers may opt for more complex structures (one-word adjectives vs three-word PPPs).



## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Different communicative principles apart from that of “linguistic economy” => the use of “in the club” adds a nuance of informality which the adjective “pregnant” lacks.
- Leech’s (1983: 146) “Interest Principle”: “[...] conversation which is interesting, in the sense of having unpredictability or news value, is preferred to conversation which is boring and predictable”.
- Examples [9]-[17]: “crazy” or “mad”.

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Different editions of the same dictionary: Rundell (2002) already labelled “off your chump” as “*old fashioned*” and 5 years later this use is not even included in the second edition of that dictionary.
- Moreover, Scriven (2009<sup>9</sup>: 1106) classifies it as “*very informal language or slang*” and Simpson (2014) as “*vulgar*”.

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Contexts in which language users choose PPs even though they are more complex: [18].
- Neither “being done” nor “in progress” (that could replace it) perform a predicative function in these sentences.
- Aim: will to avoid using three PPs in a row following the Noun Phrase “the work”.
- Focus on “work” vs “subject”.

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Euphemisms as the opposite of the “economy principle”.
- Rees’ (2006: v) definition: “[...] the word or phrase has the specific function of concealing something of the nature and meaning of what it describes. A true euphemism holds something back. It does not come right out with it. It is, if you like, mealy-mouthed for whatever reason – taste, decency, politeness, unwillingness to offend. A euphemism says something in an intentionally indirect, obscuring or obfuscatory way”.

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- Some PPPs can be classified as euphemisms.
- “Down on their luck” [19] and “in Abraham's bosom” [20] could be replaced by the adjectives “impecunious” and “dead”, respectively.
- Chosen for a given communicative purpose.
- PPPs may be euphemisms and illustrate the economy principle: “at it”, which Rees (2006: 24) defines as “engaged in SEXUAL INTERCOURSE”.
- Description and example from Rees (2006: 24).

## 4. PPPs as counter-examples

- “Since the early 17th century. As in ‘to be at it all night’ or ‘at it like rabbits’. One of the several applications of it meaning ‘sex’. ‘Five times a night! Are you thinking what I’m thinking? It’s hardly surprising that our prime minister [Tony Blair] feels tired all the time and needs his eight hours’ “sleep” if he’s going **at it** [my own emphasis] all night like a jack rabbit and has been in the grip of this habit for fully quarter of a century’ – The Sunday Times (8 May 2005)”.

## 5. Lines for future research

- Lexicographical description of PPPs to make our research as comprehensive as possible [cross references].
- Other corpora to retrieve a higher number of examples of the structures under study.
- A comparative analysis will be carried out after taking into account the results obtained from a similar analysis of the examples in the other components of the *ICE*, i.e. different varieties of English such as Canadian, Irish and Jamaican English.

## 6. Conclusions

- It is necessary to study these structures in depth.
- Metaphorical nature of these PPPs.
- English is alive: obsolete examples vs new structures.
- Further research is required to draw more conclusions based on the analysis of PPPs by means of corpora and monolingual dictionaries.



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***Thank you  
very much  
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