

English 'at': investigating its conceptualization by native speakers and Polish advanced learners of English

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This paper is an attempt to analyze spatial *at*-constructions which concern the location of one physical object in relation to another, using the framework of image schematic analysis of prepositions. The theoretical analysis is juxtaposed with an empirical investigation discriminating between the conceptualization of *at* by English native speakers and advanced Polish learners of English.

There is a common assumption among cognitive linguists that each spatial preposition forms a network of interrelated prepositional senses. The analysis of the preposition *at* points out to such radial image-schematic structure, with the distinction of the prototypical and peripheral members. In an attempt not to exaggerate the number of the peripheral senses, Tyler and Evans's methodology (2003) has been adopted. Apart from the theoretical investigation, a study on a control group of native speakers has been carried out. Their task was to complete a questionnaire containing 12 sentences, mostly infrequent instances of 7 main distinct senses identified in the foregoing theoretical analysis. The way particular sentences are conceptualized by the native speakers is assumed to reflect their image schematic mental representations of *at*. The same questionnaire was conducted among 76 fourth-year Polish students at the School of English, UAM, Poznań and aimed to show differences in conceptualization of the same image schemas by the two groups.

It is eventually concluded that the results of the study are indecisive; however, several interesting tendencies can be discovered, including a relatively high certainty about some uses of *at* by the non-native speakers, as compared to the treatment of this variable by the native speakers.