A Typological Study of Adpositions: English Prepositions and Telugu Postpositions

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Abstract

This article analyses the syntactic distinctions between English prepositions and Telugu postpositions within a syntactic and typological context. The study emphasises structural variations in head-directionality, morphological realisation, genitive placement, stranding and stacking based on descriptive grammars, particularly within the framework of Distributed Morphology and Minimalist Program, typological surveys, and applied linguistic analysis. Instances from both languages demonstrate that English, characterised as a head-initial SVO language, constantly uses prepositions, whereas Telugu, identified as a head-final SOV language, utilises postpositions and relational nouns. The research contextualises these results concerning Greenbergian word-order universals and provides insights into their significance for second language acquisition and the theory of linguistics.

Keywords: prepositions, postpositions, structural variations, typological survey, linguistic analysis

1. Introduction

Adpositions are crucial indicators of geographical, chronological, and abstract relationships in several languages. They differ in form and function, manifesting as prepositions (preceding their complement) or postpositions (succeeding their complement). The syntactic function and morphological realization of adpositions showcase a significant domain in both typological and structural investigations. Adpositions belong to a universal category, P. There is a significant overlap between the functions of adpositions and morphological cases across languages, suggesting syntactic homogeneity between some cases and adpositions, with their primary contrast lying at the post-syntactic morphological level. Through the lenses of a comprehensive syntactic and typological context, this article thoroughly analyses the adpositions of Telugu and English.

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English, a Germanic language, has fundamentally head-initial ordering, which functions within an SVO framework, and it always utilizes prepositions. In this system, the prepositions are typically realised as free-standing and they precede the noun phrases, i.e., P+NP. On the contrary, Telugu, a Central Dravidian language, operates in a head-final system with an SOV structure, employing postpositions and relational nouns, where the postpositions usually follow the nominal phrase, i.e., NP+P. Unlike English, Telugu is heavily inflectional. These fundamental dissimilarities cause syntactic and semantic difficulties for Telugu learners acquiring English.

This research highlights five specific structural differences between English prepositions and Telugu postpositions. Firstly, this study compares the typical head directionality found in both languages. Then it analyses the physical realisations of adpositions, i.e., in English prepositions are separate and independent words, whereas in Telugu, postpositions are often suffixed directly to the nouns or they are blended with case markers. Thirdly, this article investigates the position of the genitive element, relating its placement to the structure of the NP or DP to be more specific. Finally stranding and stacking features of adpositions are analysed. This investigation relies on contemporary theories like Distributed Morphology, Minimalist Program syntax, and draws on information from cross-linguistic surveys and applied linguistic analysis. These structural differences are framed by referencing Greenbergian Word-Order Universals. These frameworks treat adpositions and case markers as the outcome of the spell-out stage of different functional projections of the noun, i.e., P, D, and Ø.

Recognising these distinctions helps us provide significant insights for SLA as a rigorous contrastive analysis is extremely important for predicting and correcting learner errors that often result from L1-L2 interference.

2. Review of Literature

Greenberg's major work (1963) established a link between basic word order and adposition type: VO languages frequently use prepositions, while OV languages prefer postpositions. English (SVO, VO order) represents the prepositional type, while Telugu (SOV, OV order) represents the postpositional type.

According to the theories like Principles and Parameters, and Distributed Morphology adpositions belong to the universal category whereas another hypothesis posits that

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morphological cases and adpositions are syntactically identical and their primary distinction lies only at the post-syntactic morphological level. (Asbury, 2008)

Modern syntactic analysis often considers case morphology and adpositions as the elements of spell out functional projections within the NP, i.e., genitive and partitive case markers are linked to D projection, semantic or peripheral cases typically spell out the P head, etc.

The Antisymmetric syntax (Kayne 1994) suggests a universal deep structure order of Specifier-Head-Complement (S-H-C). Within this system, the surface structure of Telugu postpositional phrase, ought to be derived by obligatory leftward movement of the NP complement to precede the adpositional head. (Bhattacharya, 1991)

Descriptive grammars of Telugu provide comprehensive evidence of its postpositional system. Krishnamurti and Gwynn (1985) delineate case-like postpositions like -lō ("in"), -tō ("with"), and -nundi ("from"), alongside relational nouns such as daggara ("near"), tarvāta ("after"), and mundū ("before"). Steever (2019) classifies Telugu within the Dravidian language family, highlighting its head-final syntax and agglutinative morphology. Subbarao (2012) expands this analysis to a comprehensive South Asian typology, juxtaposing Telugu's postpositions with those of other Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages.

Dryer (2013) and The World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS) empirically validate these connections, categorising English as prepositional and Telugu as postpositional. Applied research, shown by Rao (2018), underscores the difficulties of instructing Telugu speakers in English prepositions, emphasising disparities in semantic breadth and syntactic realisation. Collectively, these sources provide a thorough context for the current investigation, which utilises both descriptive specifics and typological generalisations.

3. Methodology

This research employs a comparative descriptive technique. Data are sourced from authoritative grammars of Telugu (Krishnamurti & Gwynn, 1985), typological databases (Dryer, 2013; WALS), and applied contrastive analyses (Rao, 2018). Examples have been formed from various sources, annotated using normal linguistic practices, and matched with corresponding English phrases for comparison. The study also draws upon Greenbaum (1996), Leech and Svartvik (1994), and Cowan (2008) for English grammar resources. The theoretical analysis lies mainly within Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky 1981; 1986; 1995) and employs the mapping principles of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz, 1993).

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The study examines seven syntactic parameters: head-directionality, morphological realisation, genitive location, stranding, stacking, case versus adposition distribution, and clausal complementation. Furthermore, for the applied aspect, a semantic comparison utilizing the categories proposed by Quirk et al. (1972) has been incorporated to represent the semantic divergences between English and Telugu adpositions systematically.

4. Comparative Syntactic Analysis:

4.1 Head-Directionality

There is a fundamental typological contrast between the head directionality of the adpositions in English and Telugu. English is head-initial, where the NP or complement follows the P head (P+NP), employing prepositions. On the other hand, Telugu, like most South Asian languages, employs postpositions. Thus, it is head-final, where the NP or complement precedes the P head (NP+P).

The word order is more rigid in English, whereas Telugu is highly inflectional in nature, and postpositions are suffixed to nouns or verbs. The presence of the adposition in Telugu determines the grammatical and semantic nature of the constituents.

Example:

The English construction inside the park is shown as

in the park → [P [NP the park]]

where P = preposition (in), and NP = Noun phrase (the park)

The equivalent in Telugu is:

udyānavanam	lo
park.3S	in.LOC
in the park	

[[NP *udyānavanam*] [PP[P lō]]]

NP = *udyānavanam* ('park)

P = -lō ('in') (a postposition/locative marker)

The sequence is [NP P], indicating the postpositional (head-final) structure of Telugu. This discrepancy corresponds with Greenberg's (1963) universal that OV languages use postpositions.

4.2 Morphological Realisation:

English adpositions are analytic markers, i.e. they are realised as separate and free-standing words, not bound with inflections. Thus, the adpositional head, determiners, and nominal features are spelt out as distinct words within the NP structure.

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For example:

to the village → *[P to] + [NP the village]*

in the park → *[P in] + [NP the park]*

with my friend → *[P with] + [NP my friend]*

Here, *to, in, with* are independent lexical items that precede the noun phrase.

While the prepositions in English are free morphemes, in some pronominal contexts, the prepositions are followed by bound morphemes, e.g., to him/ her.

Telugu, being classified as an agglutinative language, has adpositions that are realised as synthetic markers, i.e. affixes or bound morphemes. In cross-linguistic perspective, the morphological case affixes and adpositions are syntactically linked and they are generally spelt out together as P category while the surface difference can be identified morphologically. Telugu also incorporates independent words as postpositions as well that function as adverbial nouns, denoting time and place. But in all cases, regardless of the adposition type, the markers get attached to the oblique stem of the nominal element. (Krishnamurti & Gwynn, 1985)

For example:

to the village (*grāmāniki*)

  grAmAm-ki

  village.3S.ALL

  to the village

in the park (udyānavanam*lō*)

  udayAnAvAnAm-lo

  park.3S.LOC

  in the park

  with my friend (*nā snēhituni-tō*)

  nA   snehituni-to

  my.1S.GEN   friend.3S.COM

  with my friend

Here, -lo, -ki, -to are suffixed to the nominal items.

4.3 Genitive Placement:

Genitive markers are syntactically identified as an inherent case on the nominal complement. It is usually associated with the functional category D (determiner) rather than a P head. In

head-initial languages, genitive phrases follow the preposition, whereas in head-final languages, genitive markers precede the postposition (Greenberg, 1963).

English, being a head-initial language, also uses a genitive clitic attached to the final position of the noun. Although the preposition 'of' is often used as a genitive marker in several contexts. It is semantically weak and sometimes realized in a lower functional category (Genitive D). But still, it precedes the noun.

For example,

the book *of the student*

The student's book.

In Telugu, mirroring the pattern observed in South Asian languages, the genitive case marker is usually placed on the nominal category, and the postposition follows it, i.e., NP+ Case D+ P. For example:

vidyArt^{h}i-yokA   pustAkAm

Student.3S.GEN   book-3S

The student's book

4.4 Adposition stranding and Pied Piping:

English has a less rigid word order. Therefore, it permits preposition stranding where the nominal complement moves out of the prepositional phrase leaving the preposition stranded. This stranding ability of English represents a looser structural relationship between the P head and its complement (NP).

For example:

What are you waiting *for*?

Which country is she *from*?

As an alternative to preposition stranding, pied-piping is also often employed in English, which is associated with stylistic choices.

For example:

With whom did you go to the market?

In the contrary, Telugu, maintaining a rigid word order, does not permit adposition stranding. In case of relative clauses, where the nominal complement is covert or extracted, the postposition in Telugu remains absent rather than left stranded. This shows that postpositions in Telugu can not be left in an unbound position after the movement of their object.

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Pied piping in Telugu is mandatory only if the nominal phrase movement occurs while P head is present.

inti-lo

Domicile.3S.LOC

in the house

4.5 Adposition Stacking:

The adposition stacking principle primarily showcases how relational meanings and combinations are represented in English and Telugu.

English, maintaining its analytic marking of functional heads, places single-word compounds, such as *into* and *onto*, etc.

Also, by juxtaposing separate words that function as P heads or particles, English obtains complex functional relationships.

Example:

Up in the air.

Out of this world.

In Telugu, stacking is rare but may arise in certain constructions. Telugu classifies its postpositions into two types that determine their capacity for combination. The Type 1 postpositions are suffixes that get attached to the oblique nominal stems, and the Type 2 postpositions are originally independent words that usually function as adverbial nouns. (Krishnamurti & Gwynn,1985)

Stacking or combining adpositions in Telugu is achieved by attaching Type 1 postpositions to the Type 2 ones, typically to show a combination of location and direction.

For example:

kinda-ki

under-to

downwards

Here [kinda] is a Type 2 postposition, whereas [ki] is a Type 1 postposition.

These stacked postpositions in Telugu can be expressed in English by employing idiomatic phrases or directional particles.

For example:

[dAgga-rA] is equivalent to English *near*.

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The examination of stacking and combination in English prepositions and Telugu postpositions uncovers both parallels and differences in the expression of spatial and directional links in both languages. English mostly utilises prepositional stacking and combinations, while Telugu largely employs postpositional combinations. Grasping these patterns improves our understanding of syntactic constructs in many languages.

4.6 Case vs Adposition Distribution:

English is a neutral case-marking language; it does not use overt case marking for syntactic cases. Due to the shift in case marking during Old English, the modern English language relies heavily on prepositions, like other languages that have lost their overt case marking feature. It usually occurs in semantic or peripheral contexts (Asbury, 2008).

Prepositions are used analytically to express morphological cases, i.e., instrumental (by, with), dative (to), locative (on, in, at), ablative (from), etc. Pronouns are also used for overt inherent case marking, i.e., genitive (*my*, *your*, *their*), dative (*me*, *him*, *her*), which reflect the internal difference in the functional structure.

 Telugu case markers are of two types, i.e., highly bound suffixes and lexical postpositions. The case suffixes are also termed as Type 1 postpositions, and they function as grammatical case markers in Telugu; they are always found to be attached to the oblique nominal stem. These postpositions are often realised as the Accusative and Dative cases. The Telugu postposition for the accusative case, marked as *ni* or *nu*, indicates an animate direct object of the verb (optionally shows inanimate objects), and *ki* or *ku,* on the other hand, shows dative marking denoting the experiencer, receiver, or goal (Krishnamurti & Gwynn, 1985).

The lexical postpositions or Type 2 postpositions in Telugu indicate a larger range of thematic roles, i.e., instrumentality (*to* as with), location (*miiDA* as above), association (*to* as along with), time (*tArwAtA* as after), etc.

The distribution of Type 1 postpositions is more restricted than the other type. On the contrary. Type 2 postpositions allow the Type 1 postpositions to get attached to them.

This comparison shows a heavy typological contrast between English and Telugu adpositions. English relies on independent prepositional lexemes for relational marking. Telugu, on the other hand, employs synthetic markers for structural cases and stackable postpositions for semantic relations.

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4.7 Clausal Complementation:

The mechanisms for linking subordinate clauses to the main predicate, employed by Telugu and English, are fundamentally different.

English actively uses prepositions for subordinating conjunction (because, while) roles. The prepositions, being abundant in the English inventory, are analysed to be taking the close entirely as its ground complement, independent of its main predicate.

Telugu, instead of using direct postpositional extension, incorporates a unique verb-derived element as the final complementizer or quotative to govern the clausal complements (Subbarao, 2012). The final complementizer follows the matrix clauses (S2+FC, where S2 is the subordinate structure and FC is the final complementizer). It is linked using the post-sentential complementizer' Ani (a grammaticalized form of "to say"), maintaining its head-final structure intact.

5. Conclusion:

This study, fundamentally relying on the principles of Contrastive Analysis, illustrates how adpositions reflect the overarching syntactic characteristics of a language. This research identifies several domains where the syntactic differences between English and Telugu adpositions can cause negative transfer during second language acquisition. English, a head-initial language, corresponds with the prepositional type, while Telugu, a head-final language, exemplifies the postpositional type. This micro-comparison supports the typological generalisations established by Greenberg (1963) and Dryer (2013). The distinction presents difficulties for Telugu speakers acquiring English prepositions. Rao (2018) notes that learners often overgeneralise case-based patterns and have difficulties with the more flexible semantic applications of English prepositions. In contrast, English speakers acquiring Telugu must adjust to a system in which postpositions engage with case morphology. These results further enhance theoretical discourse about the division of labour between morphology and syntax. The Telugu language has a strong integration of case and adpositions, whereas English mostly depends on prepositions. As there is no one-to-one correspondence between the adpositions in these two languages, the learners must be taught the large inventory of semantic equivalents separately to prevent misapplication. Furthermore, the utilisation of a verb-derived complementizer in Telugu also contrasts with English's dependence on prepositions as subordinators, makes the Telugu speaker abandon a verb-rooted subordinating system while learning English as L2.

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Considering these findings, the observed differences can highly interfere with L2 acquisition, making the production of supplementary teaching material mandatory that can explicitly highlight the structural contrasts.

This research has examined the syntactic characteristics of English prepositions in relation to Telugu postpositions, revealing systematic differences in head-directionality, morphology, genitive placement, stranding, stacking, and clausal complementation. The findings validate typological hypotheses and underscore strategies that are unique to specific languages. Future investigations could broaden this comparison to encompass studies on psycholinguistic acquisition, the intricacies of bilingual processing, or the phenomena of cross-linguistic transfer in the context of second language learning. This endeavour would enhance our comprehension of the ways in which syntactic typology influences language acquisition and communication.

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APPENDIX

List of Abbreviations:

Abbreviation	Description
1	First Person
2	Second Person
3	Third Person
S	Singular
NOM	Nominative Case
GEN	Genitive Case
ABL	Ablative Case
COM	Commitative Case
LOC	Locative Case
ALL	Allative
D	Determiner
P	Preposition
NP	Noun Phrase
FC	Final Complementizer
S2	Subordinate clause

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