COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES IN THE PREDICATIVE POSITION: FROM GRAMMAR TO PRAGMATICS

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Abstract

This article explores the communicative functions of prepositional phrases (PPs) when used in the predicative position, bridging the domains of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. While traditional grammar often treats PPs as peripheral modifiers, their role in predicate structures reveals significant implications for meaning-making and discourse function. This paper analyzes how PPs convey locative, temporal, modal, and evaluative meanings in English, focusing on both their grammatical behavior and pragmatic functions in authentic discourse. The study employs a corpus-based method, supported by functional grammar and speech act theory, to illustrate how prepositional predicates contribute to contextual relevance, speaker stance, and information structuring. Ultimately, this research affirms that PPs in the predicative slot serve dynamic communicative purposes, challenging static views of grammatical roles.

Keywords: Prepositional phrase, predicative position, communicative function, pragmatics, grammar, information structure, functional syntax

1 Introduction

Prepositional phrases (PPs) are typically defined as structures consisting of a preposition followed by a complement, usually a noun phrase. In English grammar, PPs are often relegated to the role of modifiers—adjuncts or complements to verbs and nouns. However, their occurrence in the predicative

position—following copular or linking verbs (for example, The book is on the table)—demands further scrutiny.

This article addresses the underexplored area of PPs functioning as predicates and aims to evaluate their grammatical construction and communicative roles. It asks: What pragmatic functions do prepositional phrases serve when they act as the main predicate of a sentence? We begin with a grammatical overview, followed by a semantic categorization, then move toward pragmatic interpretation grounded in discourse analysis.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Prepositional Phrases in Grammar

Traditional grammar identifies the predicative position as one that follows a linking verb and contributes essential information about the subject. While adjectives are canonical in this role (for example, She is happy), PPs are also frequent and syntactically valid: She is in the kitchen.

According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002), a predicative PP functions as a subject complement, conveying the location, condition, or identity of the subject. In systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), the predicative PP serves as a process or relational clause participant, often forming an intensive or circumstantial process.

2.2 Pragmatic and Functional Approaches

From a pragmatic standpoint, language is action (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Predicative PPs are not mere grammatical constructs; they position the speaker's stance and shape how information is received. For instance, That's out of question communicates a refusal or assertion, performing a speech act.

Functionalists like Dik (1997) emphasize how syntactic choices reflect communicative intentions. A PP in predicative position is often context-sensitive, indicating spatial deixis, temporal placement, or speaker evaluation.

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3. Methodology

The study combines a qualitative and corpus-based analysis. A sample of 200 sentences with PPs in the predicative position was extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC). Sentences were categorized by:

1. Preposition type
2. Semantic role (locative, temporal, modal, evaluative)
3. Pragmatic function (assertion, stance-taking, politeness, etc.)
4. Discourse contexts were analyzed to infer speaker intention and listener interpretation, following Grice's maxims and relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995).

The analysis of corpus data revealed a rich diversity in how prepositional phrases (PPs) function in the predicative position. The findings are structured along two main axes: (1) their semantic roles, which classify the types of meaning conveyed by the PP; and (2) their communicative functions, which highlight how these meanings are used in discourse to perform specific pragmatic purposes.

4 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Semantic Roles of Predicative PPs.

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4.1.1 Locative

Examples:

The keys are on the desk.

The children are in the garden.

These PPs provide physical location and often serve as deictic references, enabling spatial orientation in discourse.

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4.1.2 Temporal

Examples:

Our meeting is at three.

The deadline is in two weeks.

Temporal PPs act as temporal frames and influence the information structure by placing the subject in time.

4.1.3 Modal or Evaluative

Examples:

That is beyond me.

His behavior is out of order.

These express judgment or modality, encoding stance and evaluation—pragmatic functions vital to interpersonal meaning.

4.2 Communicative Functions in Context

Predicative PPs often organize information according to what is already known (the theme) and what is being introduced (the rheme). By placing a PP after a copular verb, speakers can strategically delay or foreground particular elements.

4.2.1 Informational Structuring

PPs often introduce new information or foreground known entities.

Example:

What about the money? — It is under the mattress.

4.2.2 Stance and Evaluation

PPs allow speakers to express feelings or judgments implicitly.

Examples:

This is out of my control.

The plan is under review.

4.2.3 Politeness and Indirectness

Example:

The documents are with the manager.

This implies someone else's responsibility without direct accusation.

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4.2.4 Discourse Cohesion

Predicative PPs anchor the subject in a narrative.

Examples:

She was in shock.

They were at odds over the proposal.

These constructions support topic continuity and signal shifts in narrative focus.

5 Discussion

The data confirms that prepositional predicates are grammatically flexible and pragmatically potent. Their ability to frame the subject in relational, spatial, or modal terms enables nuanced communication. Moreover, the choice of preposition (on, in, under, beyond, within) subtly alters the meaning and implicature of the sentence.

This aligns with Halliday's metafunctions: ideational (content), interpersonal (stance), and textual (flow). A single PP can contribute to all three simultaneously. Furthermore, such usage challenges the notion that predicates must be verbal or adjectival to be meaningful. In communicative settings, the PP often is the message.

6 Conclusion

Prepositional phrases in predicative position are not marginal grammatical artifacts—they are central to how speakers construct meaning, assert stance, and manage discourse. Their communicative power lies in their flexibility, context sensitivity, and ability to encode nuanced relations between speaker, subject, and situation.

Future research should explore cross-linguistic patterns in predicative PPs and their cognitive processing in real-time conversation.

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