

# A CONTRAST BETWEEN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE PREPOSITIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Knowing how to appropriately use prepositions in general, prepositions of place or location has been considered a challenge for Vietnamese students wanting to acquire English as a foreign language because they are one of the complicated structures in English grammar. Due to limitation of time and scale, the author would like to give a brief description of prepositional characteristics; analyze English and Vietnamese prepositions in a contrastive view, especially those showing directions and locations so that learners can find it easier to use them. To be more specific, she will reveal several differences in syntactics and semantics between them. Then some implications in teaching prepositions will be also suggested in the paper

**Keywords:** Vietnamese prepositions, English prepositions, differences between Vietnamese and English prepositions

## PHÉP ĐỐI CHIẾU GIỮA GIỚI TỪ TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

**TÓM TẮT:** Nắm vững cách sử dụng các giới từ tình nói chung, giới từ chỉ hướng và địa điểm nói riêng được coi là một thử thách không nhỏ đối với những người thụ đắc tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ bởi lẽ giới từ là một trong những hiện tượng ngữ pháp khá phức tạp trong tiếng Anh. Do giới hạn về mặt thời gian và phạm vi nghiên cứu, tác giả bài báo sẽ đưa ra những đặc tính của giới từ một cách súc tích, phân tích sự tương phản giữa giới từ trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, đặc biệt là các giới từ chỉ phương hướng và vị trí để người học có thể sử dụng chúng một cách dễ dàng. Cụ thể hơn, tác giả sẽ đưa ra sự khác biệt về cú pháp cũng như ngữ nghĩa giữa các giới từ chỉ phương hướng và vị trí trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt. Một số gợi ý trong giảng dạy giới từ cho sinh viên cũng sẽ được tác giả đưa ra trong bài viết này.

**Từ khoá:** Các giới từ trong tiếng Việt, các giới từ trong tiếng Anh, sự khác biệt giữa giới từ trong tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An emphasis on learning English has been seen in Vietnam these days for its important roles at work and daily life. Therefore, the number of people who are interested in doing this is increasing sharply. However, English, like any other language is full of problems for learners. Undoubt-

edly, grammar is one of the most complicated aspects of English language since it is rules that tells learners the way words are combined.

“Prepositions” is regarded as one of the most difficult barriers faced by Vietnamese students. During the process of learning, they may be confused about

using prepositions. Likewise, they tend not to be accurate enough in terms of syntactics when expressing themselves in the target language or vice versa. In order to help them to deal with this, I would like to have a study on the subject by making a contrast between English and Vietnamese prepositions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. English prepositions:

#### 2.1.1. Definition

Many researchers have advanced definitions of preposition in numerous ways. According to McIntosh et al (2004) a preposition “is a word or group of words used before a noun or pronoun to show place, position, time or method”. However, standard grammars often assign them a rather vague definition, such as “words that show the relation of a noun or pronoun to some other words in a sentence” (Warriner et al, 1965). Also, Loughheed (2010) seems to share the same viewpoint. He refers a preposition to a connecting word showing the relationship of a noun or a noun substitute to some other words in the sentence. Take the following as examples. The first noun phrase - “the bird” is linked to the second “ the sky “ by the preposition “in” (The bird in the sky - Con chim trên bầu trời ). One more instance is that the two nouns are joined by the preposition “ of “ in the noun phrase “ the teacher of English”. In most general term, a preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the

prepositional complement (Quirk, 2010). Grammatically, prepositions formally recognizable by the fact that they are usually followed by a noun phrase or a nominal clause which may be a nonfinite Ing-participle or a finite nominal clause (Delahunty and Garrvey, 1994 ). Such can be illustrated in the following:

a) an increase in car-owners (before a noun phrase)

b) we thought about giving a present to them (before a nonfinite nominal Ing-participle clause);

c) We thought about giving a present to whoever worked for us. (before a finite nominal relative clause)

(Loughheed, n.d, 2010)

#### 2.1.2. Classification

Prepositions are divided into several groups according to two criteria such as composition and semantics. That is to say, they are put into various subdivisions based on the way they are formed and their meanings.

In terms of compositional classification, there are two types like simple prepositions, which are made up with only a root morphemes such as *up, on, to, for, in* while compounds consist of at least two roots, with or without derivational morphemes (Quirk, 2010). The structure can be a preposition or adverb plus another preposition (as in *onto, throughout, along with, as for, away from, out of, ...*) or a verb/ adjective/ conjunction with another preposition (as in *owing to, due to, because of, ...*) or a preposition with a

noun and one more preposition (as in *by means of, in comparison with, in front of, in accordance with, on account of*. Another form is prepositional phrase, which consists of groups of words that begin with a preposition and end with a noun or pronoun. Some are used commonly and in a number of situations such as “acting as an adjective or adverb, locating something in time and space, modifying a noun, or telling when or where or under what conditions something happened. Examples of these prepositional phrases are *out of work, at any rate, by means of, in person, under orders, from now on* and so forth. Finally, there are some called marginal prepositions which are verbal in forms, such as *concerning, considering, including, pending*.

Delahunty and Garvey (1994) states that the semantics of prepositions covers a wide range of meanings. First, a preposition of time describes when or for how long something occurred or will occur. The three most common prepositions of time are *at, in, and on*. Each preposition of time refers to a different increment of or point in time. Likewise, they can be used to refer to exact, approximate time or duration of time.

a) The sun shines *by* day; the moon *by* night

b) He arrived at 4 pm just *in* time for the train

c) She stayed there *for* two weeks

Second, a preposition of place describes where something is located in reference to something else, or where something

occurred or will occur. There are many such as *in, at, on, next to, beside, behind, in front of, opposite, near, on top of, under, above, beneath, around* and so on. Such prepositions are illustrated in these sentences:

a) They walked round the statue

b) The sun rises in the East and sets in the West

c) The house is between two low hills

Third, a preposition of Manner is all about how a certain thing happened or is done, sometimes even referred to as Prepositions of Method. These include words like *on, by, with, like*. Let's take the following as examples:

a) He will die by the sword.

b) He faces danger with courage.

c) She left the room in tears.

A final type is a preposition of instrument is used when describing certain things work. These prepositions are *by, with, and on*. These are for illustrations:

a) She opened the locked door with an old key

b) Aunt Patricia returned home by ferry.

## 2.2. Vietnamese prepositions:

### 2.2.1. Definition

It is very necessary to understand what is known as prepositions in Vietnamese as it may help language learners, especially English ones to avoid mistakes when they would like to express their ideas in their acquired language or mother tongue.

As far as grammar is concerned, the Vietnamese language also has a category

of words which is similar to prepositions. This may be called Vietnamese equivalents of English prepositions. To make it simple, “preposition” is more preferable for some specialists of this field. Nevertheless, the notion of “prepositions” in Vietnamese is a quite complicated issue because some linguists have claimed that prepositions do not exist in the language. Yet, according to Tuc (2003), “although the distinction between prepositions and serial verbs in Vietnamese is not always clear-cut, Vietnamese prepositions do exist”. In his research, he also gave lots of examples to support his opinion. Moreover, nowadays, in many books of teaching Vietnamese to foreigners, the name “preposition” is often used. Thus, to be convenient, the name “Vietnamese preposition” is used for its equivalent of English preposition in this paper.

### 2.2.2. Classification

Tran (2007) says that there are two main types of Vietnamese prepositions, which are of time and place or location. Apart from that, there are some other prepositions called miscellaneous ones.

The first kind is the preposition of time, which is used to show when someone does something or something happens. This includes *vào* (in, on, at), *trong* or *suốt* (during), *trước* (before), *sau* (after), *kể từ khi* (since) and *cho tới khi* (until). For example, Chúng tôi học tiếng Anh vào các buổi sáng (We usually have English lessons every morning )

In addition, prepositions of location give information of places. They are

*trên* (on, above, over), *trong* (in, inside), *chung quanh* (around), *bên phải* (on the right of), *cạnh* (next to) and so on. Finally, miscellaneous prepositions conclude *cho* (for), *với* (with), *về* (about), *nhờ* (thanks to), *bởi* (by),

Here are some examples about how these prepositions are used in sentences. Their usage in Vietnamese is similar to those in English.

Of time:

a) Anh ấy thường dậy vào sáu giờ sáng (He usually gets up at six am)

b) Bạn ấy không nói gì cả trong giờ học. (She said nothing during the classtime)

Of location:

c) Bạn tôi sống ở thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (My friend lives in Hochiminh city)

d) Viện bảo tàng nằm bên phải tiệm sách cũ (The museum is located on the right of the used bookstore)

Miscellaneous:

e) Đi với tôi! (Come with me)

f) Nhớ mua hoa cho tôi nhé. (Remember to buy flowers for me, OK?)

g) Đôi với tôi, chuyện đó không quan trọng (That issue doesn't matter to me)

(Nguyen , 2010)

## 3.A CONTRAST BETWEEN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE PREPOSITIONS

The notion of prepositions is quite a difficult issue. It is believed that it would be complicated if English prepositions were compared to Vietnamese ones in a large scale. Instead, within this paper, only a contrastive analysis on the two

kinds such as prepositions of movement with directional verbs and locative (or place) prepositions will be made. In other words, differences in syntactics and semantics between them need identifying because it is observed that they are often big problems for Vietnamese students when getting to know how to use them due to the negative transfer or interference (Hoffman, 1991). As for him, “negative transfer occurs when the performance on the first language inhibits or detracts from performance in the second language”

### 3.1. Prepositions of movement with directional verbs

The biggest difference between English and Vietnamese prepositions is their usage with directional verbs. Similarly, prepositions can be found with these verbs in English while they are absent in the Vietnamese language.

In English, the directional verbs like *come*, *go*, *get* and *arrive* are of intransitive complementation. That is to say, they do not take direct objects. They are usually followed by prepositions or particles. Here are the examples of directional verbs with prepositions and their Vietnamese equivalents (in Table 1)

**Table 1: Prepositions of movement with directional verbs and their Vietnamese equivalents**

English	Vietnamese
(a) Sally has gone <i>to</i> New York.	Sally đã đến New York
(b) Catrin will come <i>to</i> Sheffield next month	Catrin sẽ đến Sheffield vào tháng sau
(c) They have just arrived <i>at</i> the airport.	Họ vừa đến sân bay

Obviously, the structure between the two languages in those sentences is not the same. Specifically, it is obligatory to use prepositions such as “to” or “at” after English directional verbs like “go” or “come” whereas the above Vietnamese verbs (đến) do not take any prepositions because they can take their own direct

objects showing places. Actually, in Vietnamese, there are no prepositions which are equivalent to those in English. Not surprisingly, the Vietnamese verb đến can be transferred to “ARRIVE” with the preposition “AT” or “IN”; “GO”, “GET” and “COME” plus “TO”, as in Table 2

**Table 2: Prepositions of movement with directional verbs and their Vietnamese equivalents**

English	Vietnamese
(d) I don't have time to go <u>to</u> the post-office	Tôi không có thời giờ đến bưu điện
(e) He arrived <u>in</u> Japan a few days ago	Anh ta đến Nhật bản cách đây vài ngày
(f) I want to get <u>to</u> Berlin before dark	Tôi muốn đến Berlin trước khi trời tối

### 3.2. Locative prepositions

One more distinguishable characteristics between the English and Vietnamese prepositions can be found in locative ones. Similarly, there is a semantic and pragmatic difference between them. (Tran, 2010). An English preposition of place is equivalent to more than one Vietnamese ones because it is thought that the concept of space and location is decided by its own culture and geographical features in different countries.

This can be clearly illustrated in Britain and Vietnam. In the former, such prepositions indicate the location of an object regardless the position of the speaker. For example, English people often say: “the plane is “*in*” the sky, the child is playing “*in*” the kitchen, cars run “*in*” the street”. (McCarty et al, 2004). On the contrary, the Vietnamese tend to take the position of the speakers into consideration. They say: máy bay ở trên trời (the plane is above him or her), đứa trẻ đang chơi trong nhà bếp (the child is inside the kitchen), những chiếc xe hơi chạy ngoài đường (cars are outside). As can be observed from the above, the preposition *in* can be translated into Vietnamese with three different meanings like “*trên, trong, ngoài*”

It would be imperfect if analyses were not made to contrast English from Vietnamese prepositions of locatives. For one, when referring to the higher position, the English take the contact meaning between trajector and landmark into account. For example, *on, above* and *over* are used in different situations while Vietnamese people almost do not consider this aspect. That is, they just use the only word *trên* for situations. Furthermore, in terms of the relation between “*above*” (*trên*) and “*under*” (*dưới*), English people are always aware of whether or not trajector is in the vertical reference of the landmark’s area. As a result, they employ these words like “*above / over / on* and *under / below / beneath/ underneath*” to show the position of an entity. In contrast, Vietnamese people only divide the space into two regions such as “*above/under*” (*trên/dưới*). A final discrimination of English from Vietnamese prepositions is that the English use “*in the middle of / between* (normally relating a person or thing to two other people/ things) and “*among*” (relating a person/ thing to more than two others) in order to indicate the middle position while the Vietnamese have the word *giữa* for all these cases. Such prepositions in both languages can be illustrated in Table 3 (Tran, 2010)

**Table 3: English Prepositions and their Vietnamese Equivalents**

Notion	English prepositions	Vietnamese prepositions
TRONG	in, inside	trong
NGOÀI	out, outside, out of	ngoài
TRÊN	on, upon, above, on top of, over, in	trên
DƯỚI	under, underneath, beneath, below,	dưới
TRƯỚC	before, in front of, ahead of,	trước



SAU	behind, at the back of , in the back of,	sau
BÊN	by, near, next to, close to, beside, to the right/left,	bên, cạnh, sát, gần, kề, bên phải, bên trái
GIỮA	within, among, between, in the middle of, in the midst of	, giữa,

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

All things considered, such differences in syntactics and semantics between English and Vietnamese prepositions mainly due to the notion of reference have caused some problems for learners of English, leading to their making mistakes when they express their ideas in the target language or vice versa. Similarly, they tend to produce wrong sentences by leaving out prepositions after such directional verbs as arrive, come, go or get”. In addition, they may choose the wrong preposition in terms of semantics due negative language transfer at grammatical and lexical levels. (Hoffman, 1991).

Thus, it is implied that teachers be accurate enough when providing their learners with knowledge of English prepositions. Likewise, they should show them that there is no exact one-to-one translation from English to Vietnamese and vice versa. For instance, the preposition “to” cannot be used with directional verbs in Vietnamese, but it is a must to have such a thing after the intransitive verb “ go”, ‘come”, arrive” or “ get”.

It is suggested that the students make themselves understood in their learning environment by avoiding literal translation and the way the Vietnamese express. Moreover, as discussed in the section *Locative*

*prepositions*, it is realized that a Vietnamese preposition may have several prepositions to which are equivalent in English. In other words, a Vietnamese preposition can be transferred to more than one English preposition (Ha, 2001) Therefore, it is essential that teachers should make learners fully aware of this so that they will be able to use the most appropriate one in the right situation. In my opinion, that both teachers and students work with each other will have better outcomes

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, prepositions, especially, of movement with directional verbs and locative (or place) are a hard category in English grammar because of differences in syntactics and semantics, which is considered a barrier for learners when acquiring the second language. Likewise, they are not skillful enough if they want to transfer such things from Vietnamese into English or vice versa . Consequently, they often make mistakes in dealing with those in the first and second language.

To my belief, it is very necessary to have my study on the prepositions of movement with directional verbs and locative (or place) ones. After having contrasted them, it is certain that English prepositions are more complex than those in Vietnamese. That is to say, the preposition is needed

after some intransitive directional verbs such as “come”, “go”, “get” or “arrive” while no prepositions are used after their Vietnamese equivalent “đến”. Moreover, a Vietnamese preposition can be translated into more than English ones. For example, “trên” can be expressed by “on”, “over” or “in” in the English language.

I hope that this paper will be a piece of useful referent material for those who are interested in teaching and learning English language.

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