From lexicalization to constructional generalizations.
On complex prepositions in French

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Much has been published on the problem of complex prepositions (= CPs) called *locutions prépositives/prépositionnelles* in the French linguistic tradition, i.e. phrases that behave externally like prepositions:

{under the (clear) influence of / because of / by alcohol}

Most of the discussion has focused on the question of lexicalization and the criteria for establishing lexicalization. As a consequence, the question what those CPs might have in common and which patterns may be identified in a family of formally related CPs has been somewhat neglected in the literature, except in the work of Gross (1986) and Dubois & Dubois-Charlier (2004), who have tried to establish a taxonomy of CPs, though from a purely syntagmatic point of view.

In this study we put the lexicalization issue aside and we will try to establish regular complex form-meaning patterns (= constructions) within a family of formally related CPs. In doing this, we will benefit from concepts like construction, inheritance and schematicity. To tackle this issue in more detail, we will examine (semi-fixed and fixed) CPs introduced by the preposition *sous* ‘under’ (e.g. *sous le contrôle de, sous la bienveillance de*, etc.). Starting from the most schematic constructions of the preposition *sous* (*sous un arbre ‘under a tree’*), we will focus on the construction *sous* + definite article + N + (adj.) + *de* + NP expressing ‘mediate dependency’: e.g. X (V) *sous le contrôle de la police ‘X is dependent on Y, more specifically X is subject to the control exerted by Y’*. Although the traditional approach inspired by the issue of lexicalization may have some doubts about the (semi-)fixed character of most of these *locutions prépositives*, they clearly display stable semantic and syntactic properties that relate to the construction as a whole, which make them instantiations of a more abstract construction (type): the obligatory presence of the definite article, invariably singular; an obligatory prepositional phrase introduced by *de* (*sous la botte --> sous la botte de quelqu’un ‘under the thumb [lit. boot] of’) that completes the central nominal element by which it is subcategorized. In most cases, the construction contains a slot for free adjectival modification, but in less schematic (or more idiomatic) constructions modification is blocked (e.g. *sous la coupe de*).

The construction as a whole has its own meaning and in some cases, coerces the semantics of the central noun, for instance in the case of nouns designating instruments (botte ‘boot’) and property nouns (‘willingness’). Admittedly, most of the coerced nouns that can be used in this construction are rather conventionalized, but the construction itself can be considered productive, since creative examples can be found with *baguette* (‘baton’ [of the conductor]) and *sifflet* (‘whistle’), for instance.

Finally, we will adduce some (clusters of) structures that do not fit in our hierarchy of constructions, but that are not entirely unrelated to it, for instance *sous l’angle de* (‘from the viewpoint of’) and *sous (là) condition de/que* (‘on condition that’).

References


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