

Applying Image Schemas and Cognitive Metaphors to Teaching/Learning Italian Preposition a in Foreign/Second Language Context

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Abstract : The learning of prepositions is a quite problematic aspect in foreign language instruction, and Italian is certainly not an exception. In their prototypical function, prepositions express schematic relations of two entities in a highly abstract, typically image-schematic way. In other terms, prepositions assume concepts such as directionality, collocation of objects in space and time and, in Cognitive Linguistics' terms, the position of a trajector with respect to a landmark. Learners of different native languages may conceptualize them differently, implying that they are supposed to operate a recategorization (or create new categories) fitting with the target language. However, most current Italian Foreign/Second Language handbooks and didactic grammars do not facilitate learners in carrying out the task, as they tend to provide partial and idiosyncratic descriptions, with the consequent learner's effort to memorize them, most of the time without success. In their prototypical meaning, prepositions are used to specify precise topographical positions in the physical environment which become less and less accurate as they radiate out from what might be termed a concrete prototype. According to that, the present study aims to elaborate a cognitive and conceptually well-grounded analysis of some extensive uses of the Italian preposition a, in order to propose effective pedagogical solutions in the Teaching/Learning process. Image schemas, cognitive metaphors and embodiment represent efficient cognitive tools in a task like this. Actually, while learning the merely spatial use of the preposition a (e.g. Sono a Roma = I am in Rome; vado a Roma = I am going to Rome,...) is quite straightforward, it is more complex when a appears in constructions such as verbs of motion +a + infinitive (e.g. Vado a studiare = I am going to study), inchoative periphrasis (e.g. Tra poco mi metto a leggere = In a moment I will read), causative construction (e.g. Lui mi ha mandato a lavorare = He sent me to work). The study reports data from a teaching intervention of Focus on Form, in which a basic cognitive schema is used to facilitate both teachers and students to respectively explain/understand the extensive uses of a. The educational material employed translates Cognitive Linguistics' theoretical assumptions, such as image schemas and cognitive metaphors, into simple images or proto-scenes easily comprehensible for learners. Illustrative material, indeed, is supposed to make metalinguistic contents more accessible. Moreover, the concept of embodiment is pedagogically applied through activities including motion and learners' bodily involvement. It is expected that replacing rote learning with a methodology that gives grammatical elements a proper meaning, makes learning process more effective both in the short and long term.

Keywords : cognitive approaches to language teaching, image schemas, embodiment, Italian as FL/SL

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