

THE CHANGING ROLE OF 'SUPPORT' AND 'CONTIGUITY'. THE HIDDEN FACET OF THE PREPOSITION 'ON' IN OLD ENGLISH

MARÍA DEL CARMEN GUARDDON ANELO
U.N.E.D.

ABSTRACT. *The simple relations model pervades most semantic treatments of the topological prepositions in, on and at. Concerning the preposition on, the pertinent literature has established two features, support and contiguity, which allegedly applies to all its uses. However, in Old English the preposition on categorises location in large geographic entities, i.e., nations. In the current paper we claim that such spatial relationships cannot be described in terms of support and contact and, therefore, the simple relations model is not adequate for a diachronic description of the preposition on. We also demonstrate that the selection restrictions that ruled the distribution of the prepositions in and on in Old English, in the locative relations derived from cognitive maps, are still partially active in present-day English. Thus, we conclude that the single relations model has to be reconsidered as a valid theoretical device to account for the current uses of the topological prepositions.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In most Old Saxon and West Saxon documents *on* excludes the preposition *in*. However, in *The Old-English version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (henceforth *Ecclesiastical History*) the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* have a rather restricted distribution. This can be viewed in part as a dialectal feature due to the Mercian character of the text. In fact, in Northern texts, the proportion of *in* to *on* rose significantly. We believe that in these texts the selection restrictions determining the distribution of these prepositions started to become fixed.

While the usage of the preposition *at* in Old English is quite similar to present-day English (Lundskær-Nielsen 1993), determining the uses of the prepositions *in* and *on* is a much more complex question. The preposition *in* started to be used at

a stage of the language when the preposition *on* was firmly established. In this new stage, both prepositions divided up the various types of spatial relations that so far had been expressed by the preposition *on*. From the beginning, the preposition *in* obtained a more relevant role in the expression of locative relations, its use resembled in general terms that of present-day English. However, that is not the case with the preposition *on* which alternated with *in* to express location in geographic entities such as countries, regions, cities and even buildings. Thus, it seems that of the three main topological prepositions *on* is the one that has undergone major diachronic developments. Consistently with the main postulates in cognitive linguistics, we claim that the alternation of the prepositions *in* and *on* with the same type of entities is not arbitrary but must respond to the speaker's need to express her implicit concerns. Therefore, this alternation, in our view, is the result of a restricted distribution, whose underlying selection restrictions must be established. As we will see, the establishment of these selection restrictions is not compatible with the simple relations model. The simple relations model underlies most work on locatives (Cooper 1968; Bennet 1975; Miller and Johnson-Laird 1976; Boggess 1978; Jackendoff 1983; Herskovits 1986). The basic features *support* and *contiguity* are generally assigned to the preposition *on*. We will show in this paper that these features do not exhaust all the uses that this preposition presents in Old English. Therefore, we recognise that latter changes in the use of *on* are more often limitations in the semantic range that it had in Old English rather than extensions of it. Another point at issue in this paper is whether the simple relations model suggested for *on* applies to all the uses of this preposition in present-day English, for which it has been primarily intended.

2. METHODOLOGY

On the methodological level, we have examined all the occurrences of the preposition *on* with a number of objects that denote a varied range of spatial categories in the Ecclesiastical History. Specifically, we have focused on the objects with which the preposition *on* does not collocate in present-day English. The entities studied fall under the general category "large geographic entity" and are the following: *Gallia* "Gaul", *Briten* "Britain", *eðel* "country", *mæggð* "province" and *ríce* "kingdom". For reasons of space, it is not possible to give a full analysis of all the examples in this paper, so I shall confine myself to exposing the results obtained from the examination of *Gallia* and *Briten*. I must note that the facts derived from the analysis of the other landmarks are consistent with those results.

We have used Miller's 1890 edition, as it is regarded as the most complete. This edition constitutes almost in its entirety a reproduction of the Tanner Manuscript. As a source to construct our corpus of spatial expressions containing the preposition *on*, the *Ecclesiastical History* offers a number of advantages. First, being a historic narration it is remarkably long, which allows us to obtain a reasonable number of examples, without having to rely on other sources. Second, its narrative character provides broad contexts against which to draw generalisations, specifically concerning the alternation of different prepositions in expressions which are apparently alike. This factor is particularly relevant taking into account that preposition alternation usually responds to unexpected context dependencies (Herskovits 1986: 15). These context dependencies are connected with the speaker's –in this case the translator's– viewpoint of a scene or situation. Third, it is a non-fiction prose text, which precludes the presence of some prepositions to respond only to stylistic motivations. Finally, the topological preposition *on*, whose usage is at issue, is well represented in the text.

For the sake of contextualising the spatial expressions analysed, the whole sentence where each expression occurs has been included in our corpus. However, for the sake of brevity not all these expressions will be included here, only some of them when we find that they are useful to illustrate an argument. The greater attention is paid to the object of the preposition, since, as it will be seen in the following section, they have the highest responsibility for segmenting prepositional senses.

In the next section, we offer an outline of how the advent of cognitive linguistics has affected the analysis of prepositions, particularly regarding the description of the categorisation properties of the preposition *on* in present-day English. A revision of the different semantic treatments which this preposition has been subject to will serve as a background against which we can compare the state of this category in Old English. Then, we expose the main guidelines followed in the examination of the corpus and the results obtained. Finally, we discuss these results and we attempt to account for motivations that led to the present organisation of the category, taking as a point of departure the evidence in Old English.

3. COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS AND THE CATEGORISATION PROPERTIES OF THE PREPOSITION *ON* IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

The advent of cognitive linguistics with its emphasis on the speakers' fundamental role in the organisation of spatial relations has brought the study of prepositions into a new light. Factors that were not even considered within the

standard linguistic machinery have acquired an active role in the description of the semantic content of these lexical items; for instance, the speakers' perception, their interaction with space and subsequent conceptualisation of the spatial relations. This means that when it comes to a diachronic study of prepositions dialectal factors or stylistic variance depending on the author are to be considered, but they are not the only relevant conditions when it comes to explaining apparently random uses.

The subject and object of the prepositions are syntactic notions that mirror the order that the relevant entities occupy with respect to these elements; the subject precedes whereas the object follows the preposition.¹ Nevertheless, in this paper we will use the terms introduced in Langacker's (1987) *Cognitive Grammar*, *trajector* and *landmark*. These notions involve perceptual features that are pivotal to the conceptualisation of spatial relations. The trajector is movable and of small size, when compared to the landmark, whose position is stable and is larger. The trajector is the thing whose location is specified. On the other hand, the landmark constitutes an excellent reference, it is the background against which to locate the trajector, which receives the higher focus of attention. These two notions can also be paralleled with the figure and ground distinction advanced by Talmy (1978).

Regarding the semantic treatment of the preposition *on* in the literature, it is worth noting Annette Herskovits' (1986) work on the topological prepositions *in*, *on* and *at*. In her account, the ideal meaning of the preposition *on* is defined by the spatial features *support* and *contiguity*. One of the fundamental use-types this linguist proposes for the preposition *on* is "spatial entity supported by physical object". She explains that this use emphasises the important role played by force and resistance to force in the organisation of grammar. We believe that these two notions, exertion of force and resistance to force should be considered as the central characteristics of this preposition, since it is inherent to a large number of relationships encoded by *on*. Even the relationships for which Herskovits suggests distinct use-types, show these relevant notions. For instance, *the children on the bus* is, according to Herskovits, a case of "physical object transported by a large vehicle" or *do not put your dirty fingers on my clean suit* is an example of the use-type "physical object contiguous with another". In our view, in both the weight the trajector applies on the landmark and, therefore, the notions of exertion and resistance to force are also involved here.

Herskovits identifies one use-type of the preposition *on* as being "spatial entity located on geographical locations". As noted above, location on geographi-

1. With the exception of the phenomenon known as preposition stranding.

cal entities as expressed by the preposition *on* is one of the focuses of attention of this paper. Herskovits argues that the notions of support and contiguity are not central to this use-type. We contend that this is due to the fact that support in particular is a relationship that we learn through bodily experience and can only be attested to by means of visual input. Concerning contiguity, as Piaget and Inhelder (1956: 8) put it: "it has not been shown in any particular field, such as the visual, that perceptual continuity retains the same character at all levels of development".² In other words, as the cognitive development of the child progresses, the relationships of contiguity obtains a higher degree of schematisation. However, there are two different types of abstracted contiguity, which vary according to their liability to comprehension. For instance, let us think of a map, we are used to characterising two countries as contiguous because they share part of their boundaries. However, we would hardly speak of a point standing for a town situated in a country as contiguous to the country. To sum up, vertical contiguity that we find between a book and a table, when the book is on the upper surface of that table, is not to be extrapolated to geometric relationships such as that of a point lying on a plane, let alone support.

In present-day English, the competing roles of surrounding versus support in relationships perceived visually is what determines the activation of a specific preposition in the codification of a scene. Consider the following examples from Herskovits (1986: 143):

- (1) a. *the potato on/in the dish*
 b. *the man on/in the chair*

The degree of applicability of one of the options depends on the extent to which surrounding or support are relevant to the situations. However, when it comes to geometric relations such as the ones that build up mental maps, surrounding and support are not really the competing notions motivating the choice of one of these two prepositions. There are geographic entities that can be preceded by any of these prepositions, for instance: *prairie*, *land*, and *continent*. The cases of alternation of the prepositions *in* and *on*, to express location in these landmarks cannot be misunderstood with situations like 1a. and 1b. These landmarks cannot be apprehended visually in their totality, therefore location in them is conceptualised through the help of cognitive maps (O'Keefe 1996). In other words, to decide

2. The topological notion of continuity as Piaget uses it is synonymous with that of contiguity. Here, in order to be consistent with the terminology used within the framework of cognitive linguistics we will use the latter.

whether an entity is *on the prairie* or *in the prairie* is not a question of either support or surrounding being more salient. In fact, surrounding and support even after reaching a remarkable degree of schematisation are not the type of relationship that one is likely to include in a mental map of a locative situation. In present-day English, the number of landmarks denoting an area that can be preceded by both prepositions is relatively low. In contrast, in the Old English dialects in which these two prepositions show a restricted distribution, the number of spatial relationships in which they can alternate is remarkably higher. As support and surrounding are not the parameters defining this alternation, we have studied the contexts in which these spatial expressions occur to find the motivations underlying their distribution.

4. EXAMINATION OF CORPUS AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

As mentioned above, we have examined all the instances of the preposition *on* in the *Ecclesiastical History* with complements denoting large geographic entities. This choice is not random since we attempt to find the contextual factors that motivated the collocation of the preposition *on* with entities it no longer occurs with in present-day English. Our working hypothesis is that the semantic content of these expressions must show characteristics that are somehow connected with the present usage of the preposition. It goes without saying that in order to set up the selection restrictions that determine the choice between *on* and *in* in the relevant phrases it is also necessary to study the examples with the preposition *in*.

For the analysis of all these categories, we have established a number of common procedures. First, we have verified that the distribution of *in* and *on* did not respond to specific morphosyntactic surroundings. Concerning case, both prepositions govern dative and accusative, and, as expected, in the *Ecclesiastical History* they appear with the two cases. It must be noted that even though the accusative is usually associated with motion and the dative with location, in this literary work there is not a regular correspondence between the cases and these meanings. As a consequence, both prepositions participate in motion and locative expressions, then this factor was disregarded as playing any role in their distribution. In none of the expressions studied does the presence of one preposition depend on the case frame of a verb. These examples would have not been included in our corpus because in those situations there are often special conditions on prepositional choice. We have also taken into account the presence of determiners in the complements of the prepositions to see whether the presence of a definite or indefinite entity pointed to differences in preposition usage. In this

sense, we must say that the names of countries have to be considered as inherently definite landmarks, thus particular attention was paid to common nouns such as *ædel*, *mægð* and *rice*. As the others, this factor did not seem to be decisive in the distribution of these prepositions either. The next step was to look into the semantic content of the sentences and of the broader context where these prepositions occur.

Someone could make two basic objections. First, that the choice of these prepositions does not necessarily respond to any selection restriction, but rather to changes of hand. In this sense, it must be pointed out that the pages of the *Ecclesiastical History* where these two prepositions alternate is too high to attribute their distribution to the randomness of individual variation. Although we do not want to affirm that one-hundred per cent of the cases are exempt from the individual's choice influences. The second objection is the fact that the *Ecclesiastical History* is a translation from a Latin original. In order to check whether such dependence has biased the use of *in* and *on*, we have compared all the expressions that compose our corpus with their Latin equivalents and we have not found any repeated synchronicity in this sense, for example, the Latin preposition *in* motivating the presence of *in* and thus the absence of *on* in the Old English text.³ In his study of the case values governed by prepositions in Old English, Belden (1897) also confirmed that the Latin work had not determined the choice of prepositions in this literary work.

Once all these questions had been settled we started studying the data consistently with the trends posited for prepositional analysis within the framework of cognitive linguistics (Dirven 1993; Herskovits 1982, 1986; Brugman and Lakoff 1988; Sandra and Rice 1995; Wilkins and Hill 1995; Regier 1996; Rice 1996; Levinson 2002). Therefore, in our analysis, we have considered questions such as the perspective the speaker takes of a scene and the modalities involved in the conceptualisation of a spatial relationship, i.e. visual input versus cognitive maps.

There are 47 instances of *Briten* preceded by the prepositions under analysis; 22 with the preposition *in* and 25 with the preposition *on*. Considering the parameters provided by the standard linguistic machinery nothing in the semantics of the sentences where these expressions occur seems to motivate this difference. But when looking more thoroughly at the broader context, sometimes even the sentence was enough, we have noticed interesting regularities in the usage of both.

When the story includes a lot of visual details of the actions happening in one place, this place is introduced with the preposition *in*. This accounts for 17 examples where this preposition occurs. Significantly, in chapter XII of the First

3. The Latin version used for this comparison is that by Goold (1930).

Book, the military conquest of Britain by the Picts, the Angles and the Saxons is narrated in a very descriptive and visual way. In connection with this passage, consider the following example:

- (2) *ƿa heo micel wæl on Ongolcynne geslogon, ymb feower feowertig wintra Ongolcynnes cymes **in Breotone** (1 12.54.17).⁴*

“there they made a great carnage of the Angles, about forty-four years after the arrival of the Angles **in Britain**.”

In the rest of the examples with the preposition *in*, five, we have attested the presence of a recurrent factor, in all of them the boundaries of the landmark were particularly salient. For instance, in the First Book the cruel tactics of Æthelfrith, king of Northumbria, used against the Britons are narrated. By so doing two spaces are clearly opposed Britain versus Northumbria. The salience of the limits separating these two regions within the same island is self-evident.

As regards the preposition *on*, it is certainly not coincidental that it occurs in all the expressions where the narrator takes a remote perspective of the facts and, thus, of their location. The first use-type identified can be designated “enumeration of events”. In fact, when lists of events are provided their location is systematically expressed with *on*, in the case of *Briten* we have found four examples with the preposition *on* and none with *in*. There is a section of the *Ecclesiastical History* known as *Headings*, there the contents of all the chapters that make up the Five Books are summarised in a telegraph-like style:

- (3) *XI. Dæt se arwurƿa wer Swiðbyrht **on Breotone**, Wilbrord æt Rome biscopas wæron Fresna ðeode gehalgode (BedeHead 5.22.32).*

“XI. That the venerable Swithberht **in Britain** and Wilbrord at Rome were consecrated as bishops for Friesland.”

The preposition *on* also occurs with *Briten* when the location in this region is accessed through a cognitive map. As Herskovits (1986) explains, maps represent the geometric idealisations that speakers use to conceptualise some spatial relationships. In this kind of conceptualisation, a higher degree of abstraction holds and thus, spatial entities are represented as points, lines or planes. This situation applies to the rest of the examples in which the preposition *on* occurs with *Briten*. However, within this general state of affairs we have found three different circumstances in the 21 examples where a mental map is needed

4. These numbers indicate book, chapter, page and line of Miller's edition. The line being that containing the relevant preposition.

to account for the preposition *on*. It is reasonable therefore to assume that they constitute three further use-types of these prepositions in Old English. First, there are four examples where the narration is located in a region and at some point they refer to a case of location in a different place using the preposition *on*, while the point of observation is still kept in the same region. Our thesis that the location with the preposition *on* does not play a central role in the discourse situation is supported by the fact that in one of the examples this information is presented between commas in Miller's edition, which emphasises its non-defining value. We have included here the whole paragraph where this case occurs, because we believe it serves to better illustrate this use-type:

- (4) *Da gecas him geferan, ða þe aeghwæðer ge on hiora dædum ge on gelærdnesse frome scearpe wæron Godes word to bodienne to lærenne, ealle ða þing gearwada ða ðe scipliðendum nedðearflicu gesewen wæron, þa com sume dæge on ærmorgen to him an þara gesewen wæron, þa com sume dæge on ærmorgen to him an þara broðra, se wæs iu **on Breotene** Bosles discipul ðegn Gode þæs leofan sacerdes, mid ðy he ða se ilca Bósel wæs regoluweard in ðæm mynstre in Mailros, under Eatan þem abbude, suæ sue we beforan scægdon* (5 9.410.3).

“When he had chosen companions, who both in conduct and learning were energetic and sagacious to teach and preach God's word, and when all things had been prepared which seemed necessary for voyagers, there came to him one day early in the morning one of the brethren, who formerly **in Britain** had been a pupil and attendant of Boisel, the priest well beloved of God, when prior of the monastery at Melrose under abbot Eata, as already mentioned.”

This use-type can be defined as “cognitive map indicating an external perspective”. We are using the phrase *external perspective* to emphasise that the location at issue is accessed from another location, where the narrator's view is placed. I have designated the second use-type identified in this connection “cognitive map indicating neutral perspective”. There are nine examples of this use-type. In one of them Bede is telling that a ravenous hunger started in Constantinople and from there it extended to *Briten*. The activation of a mental map is immediate to the reading of the passage, so that it is possible to understand the process of the development of the trajectory. Once Britain is conceptualised as a plane, further localisations in this land are expressed using the preposition *on*, as the example below shows:

- (5) *Æfter þyssum com gód gear, swa eac micel genibtsumnys wæstma **on Breotone** lond, swa nænig æfterylde syððan gemunan mæg* (1 11.48.25).

“After this came a good year, and such abundant crops **in Britain**, as no age since can record.”

The main distinction to be drawn between this use and the former is that in this case the reference to the location is not made from a place previously stated, rather it seems that the narrator is viewing the facts as he points at the different sites where they take place on a map. The third use-type connected with the activation of cognitive maps is defined as “multiple location”. The peculiarity of this use is that the trajector is made up of many individual elements, thus it is conceptualised as a set of points located over a plane. Consequently, no visual details are provided either of the trajector or of the landmark. We have just found one example of this use-type:

(6) *Deos sibb áwunade on Cristes cyrican, ða fe on Brytene wæron, oð ða tide fe se Arrianisca gedweolda aras* (1 8.42.11).

This peace ever continued in the churches of Christ, which were **in Britain** up to the time when the Arian heresy arose.

The last use-type we have identified in relation to this landmark responds as well to an idealisation of spatial relationships. We will call this use-type “idealisation of large-scale motion”. This motion is to be distinguished from the one that we effect inside a house, for example, where we are aware of crossing the thresholds that bound the different rooms and of the operations involved in performing that motion, such as opening doors or avoiding obstacles in the way.⁵ Instead, motion through miles of kilometres is viewed in a different manner, it is obviously more easily conceived as a line. This is related to general knowledge of the world, for instance, using the map analogy, if one draws the trajectory to be run between two countries we cannot represent its exact form or predict the obstacles that we may come across on the way. Also the trajectory exhibits a high degree of stylisation as corresponds to our creation of maps. This stylisation holds as well to the points that segment the trajectory, namely the source and the goal. In the *Ecclesiastical History* there are seven occurrences of this use-type with *Briten*. For the sake of example, we include one below:

(7) *Ða Angel feod Seaxna wæs gelaðod fram fram forespreccenan cyninge, on Breotone com on frim myclum scypun;* (1 12.50.20).

“At that time the Angels and Saxons were called in by the aforesaid king, and arrived **in Britain** with three great ships.”

5. In spatial cognition these operations are designated *navigation*.

As regards the second landmark analysed, *Gallia*, we expected before examining the different spatial expressions where it occurs, that geometric conceptualisation and context dependencies would yield the same use-types identified for the preposition *on* in connection with *Briten*. In total there are 19 cases of this landmark in collocation with the prepositions *in* and *on*. The examples of *in*, 13, outnumber considerably those of *on*, six. Consistently with our findings regarding *Briten*, the preposition *in* occurs in those cases, 11, where the opposition between two different spaces obtains particular saliency. For instance, at one point, Bede relates the story of a Gaulish bishop who enraged by a British king decided to leave Britain and come back to *his agene leode*. The opposition between those two countries establishes the difference between a foreign land and where *his own people* reside, which is made evident by the presence of the preposition *in*. Besides, the characterisation of a geographic place by referring to their inhabitants contributes to enhance a feeling of proximity:

- (8) *gewat þa of Breotone hwearf eft in his agene leode in Gallia rice* (3 5.170.5).
 “he left Britain and returned to his own people **in Gaul**.”

There are two examples where close perspectives to the facts that occur in Gaul are taken, accordingly, the narrator provides a detailed visual description of the existing characters, their physical properties and interactions in the world. One of the examples is inserted in a short story about a mother who in an attempt to save her children from a certain death in Britain sends them to Gaul. The narrator gives us access to a great deal of information concerning what happened to the children once in Gaul. Furthermore, Gaul opposes Britain as a safe place, this opposition may also act as a relevant factor motivating the choice of the preposition *in*. This indicates that constraints from context on preposition choice do not operate in isolation but they concur, even though, with different weight.

Concerning the use-types under which the examples of preposition *on* in collocation with *Gaul* fall, as predicted, they show a remarkable coincidence with those posited after the examination of *Briten*. As many as three examples are present in an enumeration of events. As noted earlier, this kind of narration is quite rough and deals with events in a punctual way, they are not developed, just mentioned. Consider the example below:

- (9) *VIII. Dæt ricsiendum Gratiano Maximus se casere wæs on Breotene acenned, eft mid micle weorede ferde on Gallia rice* (BedeHead 1.6.21).
 “IX. That in the reign of Gratianus the emperor Maaximus was born **in Britain**, and again proceeded to Gaul with a vast host.”

There is another example that is part of a biography. In biographies narrators usually take a remote perspective of the spatial and temporal locations referred to. The example belongs to a digression made by Bede to narrate the life of Wilfrid:

(10) *Done he eft nalæs æfter miclum fæce sende **on Gallia** rice mid geðobte geðafunge Oswioes his fæder* (5 17.456.30).

“And after a short time he sent him **to Gaul** with the counsel and consent of his father Oswio,”

It is of interest to note that all the cases of spatial and temporal location that we have found in that biography show the preposition *on*. The scarce provision of details presented of Wilfrid’s life is announced in advance by Bede:

Be fýsesses bysceopes lifes stealle foreweardum we sculon feaum wordum gemyngian, f̆a f̆e be him gedon wæron (Book V, chapter XVII, page 450).

“With regard to the early circumstances of this bishop’s life, we shall mention in a few words what befell him.”

The cases of location in digressions such as biographies that are included by an author in a narration to provide further details about one of the characters are peripheral to the central description of facts. In biographies, the relevant aspects are the character’s deeds and achievements, dates and places usually play a lesser role. This factor motivates a smaller involvement of the speaker with the locative expressions at issue, which is consistent with a remote perspective. This can be considered as a further use of the preposition *on* in the *Ecclesiastical History*: “locatives in peripheral accounts”.

As in the case of *Briten*, we have found with *Gallia* one example of the use-type *cognitive map indicating an external perspective*. The narrative focus is in Rome and the return of one character to Gaul is conceived from that primary location, which emphasises the remote view underlying this spatial relation. Note in the following example that the visual details of the actions correspond to what is going on in Rome, where the point of observation is located:

(11) *mid f̆y be f̆a fela monf̆a f̆ær gesæligum gelesum geornlice abysegad wæs, f̆a hwearf be eft **on Gallia** rice to Dalfino f̆am bysceope his freonde,* (5 17.454.27)

“And when he had zealously occupied himself for many months there in successful study, he returned again **to Gaul** to his friend bishop Dalfinus”

Finally, as in the case of *Briten*, we have also found an example of location of one point of a trajectory. The source of such trajectory has been established by Bede at Rome, the goal at Britain and the landmark at issue here is a point in between:

(12) *Mid þy he þa wæs eft hweofende to Breotone, he becom on dælas Gallia rices, þa wæs he gebrinen gestonden semninga mid untrymnesse* (5 17.462.1).

“When he set out on his return to Britain, on arriving **in the districts of Gaul** he was suddenly seized and attacked with illness.”

5. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUDING ISSUES

The previous section as a whole makes it clear that by the first half of the 10th century in some dialectal areas *in* did not dominate the category *large geographic entities*. Rather, the analysis reveals a surprising situation, the preposition *on* in Old English is used to express location in nations. This contradicts the most commonly accepted ideas associated with *on*, which is contiguity with a surface or with a line and support of the trajector by the landmark. However, if we consider that in present-day English *on* is also used to locate in geographic entities, i.e., *island, peninsula, land, continent, plain, prairie*, etc. we may not find those cases in Old English so surprising after all. We, cognitive linguists, in our attempt to demonstrate that even the lowliest grammatical morpheme is meaningful, usually posit multiple senses for these items and treat them as complex lexical categories. The reaction to this situation is to establish a single sense or core from which all the other senses of the category originated, this core sense is called by Herskovits (1986) *ideal meaning*. According to Herskovits, the ideal meaning, with a certain degree of tolerance, should apply to all the use-types of a preposition. As for other linguists, for her the ideal meaning of the preposition *on* is defined by the features support and contiguity. But Herskovits (1986: 147) is forced to acknowledge that these two features as far as location in a geographical entity is concerned, “though not very remote, are not central”. In our view, these two features do not apply to most cases of location on a map, rather they are inherent to the spatial relationships encoded by *on* that are apprehended visually. Therefore, attempting to put all the use-types of a preposition under a single definition may be artificial. Boggess (1978) already noted that support and contiguity basically apply to the prototypical case of *on*, where the trajector rests on a free, horizontal, upward facing surface of the landmark. According to Boggess, other uses of *on* must be regarded as deviations from the prototype, therefore, we should consider carefully whether the two features mentioned above really apply to these semantic extensions. We believe that the prototype is generated at the perceptual level since the characteristics that

it shows are more salient. Lundskaer-Nielsen (1993: 102) in his study of the prepositions *in*, *on* and *at* in Old and Middle English already pointed to the determinant role of visual relationships in establishing the meaning of these prepositions: “Although quantitatively this category is rather insignificant, it is nevertheless here that the beginning differentiation of spatial meaning between the three prepositions is seen most clearly, viz. *æt* (‘close to/ near by’), *in* (‘inside’) and *on* (‘on top of a surface’); this remains an important distinction in ModE.”

The prepositions *in* and *at* in present-day English have inherited from Old English part of their capacity to alternate to encode the different perspectives that a speaker can take from a situation (*John is at the shop* vs. *John is in the shop*). We claim that the distribution of *in* and *on* with some landmarks is also governed by the need to express different views of, perhaps, objectively the same scene. Herskovits (1986) pointed out that in contrasting pairs such as *the potato on/in the dish* what matters is the extent to which *surrounding* is relevant in the relation. In the same fashion, in Old English, the alternation of *in* and *on* in the expression of location in geographic entities depended upon the activation of relevant facts associated to the interior of the landmark, i.e. its internal structure versus its consideration as a plane. In other words, the relevant question was whether the speaker took a remote or a close-up perspective of a situation. The historical development of these two spatial categories has constrained their flexibility to adapt themselves to the speaker’s perspective in present-day English. With some geographic entities such as *countries* the alternation that we found in Old English would yield ungrammatical constructions if preceded by the preposition *on*. However, the constraining action of time has not gone so far as to make this phenomenon reach the level of the exceptional. Boggess (1978: 55-6) noted that the alternation between these prepositions is more frequent than we may think in principle: “[T]his tendency of contact locatives to signify two-dimensional restriction of location and little else accounts for the ease with which in and on can be interchanged in many such cases”. However, we only agree partially with Boggess when she asserts that all the relations derived from mental maps that are categorised by *in* and *on* signify location in a two-dimensional landmark. This is true in the case of countries where the degree of salience of their boundaries constrains the choice between *in* and *on*. For example, due to the familiarity of maps we are usually aware of the shape of countries. The salience of their boundaries accounts for the use of the preposition *in* when referring to location in one of them. In contrast, other geographic entities such as plains are not so clearly drawn in maps, sometimes they are just represented by assigning a section of the map a different colour from the background, with no boundaries delineating its exact extension. Therefore, there is much more in this distinction than just *two-dimensional*

restriction of location, which is almost like saying that these prepositions are in free variation. Lindkvist (1978) was already concerned with the consequences of the familiarisation of the speakers with maps in the conceptualisation of geographic spatial relations. According to Lindkvist, when geographical knowledge was slight distant lands were apprehended by most people in a vague way. This may account for the freedom of the users of the Old English language to use both *in* and *on* when locating in countries. As the boundaries of a remarkable number of countries have progressively become clear for speakers, the preposition *in* has taken over the function of locating in these entities.

But the alternation of the prepositions *in* and *on* is still governed in some cases by the same factors that were active in Old English. Consider the following examples from Herskovits (1986: 147):

- (13) a. The players on the football field
- b. The grape pickers in the field

According to her, with football field “one cannot substitute *in* for *on* to express general location, for no discernible reason other than convention.” However, if one thinks of the typical context in which one interacts with a football game, we can find the motivations underlying this use. When watching a football match it is usually seen from a certain height or on television, the football players are often seen as moving points over a surface. In fact, visual details play a peripheral or limited role, what matters is the potential trajectory of the ball to the goal. This implies a high level of schematisation that we have attributed to the historical use of this preposition. Regarding 13.b, the speakers are likely to have a more visual apprehension of the scene.

Finally, the prototypical use of the preposition *on* was already quite established in Old English (Lundskær-Nielsen 1993), therefore, we should be able to find some features in that use motivating its behaviour concerning location in a geographic entity. Consider when one happens to be *in* a city, one feels surrounded by all the elements that compound the internal structure of that city –buildings, parks, trees, or cars–. Definitely, we feel located *in* the interior of a geographic entity. However, when looking out of the window of an aeroplane that has just taken off, the same city will appear to us as a planar entity with some elements placed *on* its surface. Then the relationships encoded by the preposition *on* are connected with a perspective that is more remote than that characterising the situations encoded by *in*. More to the visual level, from a certain distance we can see that a book is on a table, whereas to be able to affirm that an object is inside a box we need to be quite close of the box in order to attest the existence of such relationship of enclosure.

We claim that these factors played a conclusive role in determining the selection restrictions of *in* and *on* regarding location in large geographic entities in Old English and to a lesser extent still today. Regarding future developments of this alternation in geographic locations, it is beyond the task of a linguist to foresee whether it will continue to decrease in favour of the preposition *in*. As a matter of fact, the process has already started, as the data in Old English shows. This was also already noticeable in Middle English, as Lundskær-Nielsen (1993: 140) stated. Some 13th century texts show that the frequency of the preposition *on* expressing location in large entities was progressively being restricted and challenged by the preposition *in*.

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