A Cognitive Linguistics approach to teaching Spanish *por* and *para*

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The traditional method of teaching the Spanish prepositions *por* and *para* is to provide a laundry list of the multiple uses of each preposition and to present them in contrast, since both roughly translate to the English *for*. However, Pinto and Rex (2006) found that students generally did not improve in their understanding of the two prepositions even after four years of university level classes, which suggests that this traditional approach is ineffective. Lam (2009) empirically tested a Cognitive Linguistics (CL) approach to the teaching of *por* and *para* in a two-day intervention study with pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest. Her experimental lesson was based on the textbook descriptions provided by Lunn and DeCesaris (2007) and presented a number of the different uses of *por* and *para* as embodying their prototypical meanings, "an object aimed towards another object" (*para*) and "an object passing through another object" (*por*). Lam found some evidence in support of the CL teaching approach in terms of students' confidence, accuracy in free writing, and accuracy on delayed posttests. Lam's presentation was simplified for the intermediate students and omitted several important uses of the prepositions as well as idioms. Even so, students in that study described the CL materials as less clear than the traditional materials, and Lam suggested that the novel CL approach may take more time for students to process.

Our study empirically tested the efficacy of an expanded CL approach to the teaching of the Spanish prepositions *por* and *para*, while addressing the limitations of prior studies both by improving the analysis of the prepositions as well as improving its pedagogical presentation. We used the semantic networks of *por* and *para* proposed by Curry (2010). Key to Curry's analysis was the notion that each distinct sense represents a spatial scene which could be represented by accessible diagrams. Moreover, Curry's analysis involved a constrained set of principles of meaning extension that highlighted embodied experience and well documented cognitive processes, such as experiential correlation. The novel analysis incorporated a number of senses not covered by Lam, e.g. employment and use for *para*, inclination and proportion for *por*, as well as several idioms.

The lessons were taught to third-semester Spanish students (n=40) at a North American university. New senses were presented a few at a time, in semantically connected mini-clusters, over the course of the semester rather than presented all at once, to avoid cognitive overload. A comparable control group received lessons that covered the same senses and were strictly controlled for the amount of time on task, but maintained the traditional list presentation. Students were assessed by means of pre- and immediate post-tests in the form of fill-in-the blank exercises, multiple choice item questions, and free writing. We found that students in the experimental group were more accurate in their use of *por* and *para* on the immediate post-test, as well as in their free writing. Furthermore, we discovered that the most common error was not a replacement of one preposition for the other, but over and under use of each preposition separately. These results give strong support for the application of CL-based polysemy networks to create more effective teaching materials.

Keywords*:* polysemy networks, por para, prepositions, teaching materials, experimental study