

Semantic Features of Prepositional Temporal Expressions with the Prepositions *u* and *na* in Croatian

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Abstract

The system of prepositional temporal expressions in Croatian is exceptionally rich. This paper focuses on temporal expressions involving the prepositions *u* and *na*. The aim is to investigate the syntactic features and semantic extensions of Croatian prepositional expressions with these prepositions, with particular emphasis on the transition from the spatial to the temporal domain and the constraints of semantic selection that influence the combinability of prepositions and dependent words. The theoretical framework is based on locative assumptions positing that the core meanings of prepositions and cases are spatial, while temporal and other abstract meanings develop through metaphorical and metonymic transfer from the spatial domain, in accordance with conceptual metaphor and metonymy theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), e.g., *u grad* 'into the city' : *u ponedjeljak* 'on Monday', *na koncert* 'to a concert' : *na proljeće* 'in spring'. The study draws on a corpus collected as part of the project Croatian Prepositions in Use – Semantic and Syntactic Analysis. Examples with *u* and *na* are extracted, and in the first analytical step, the semantic features of the dependent word are described with respect to whether the noun has temporal (*u ponedjeljak* 'on Monday', *na proljeće* 'in spring') or non-temporal meaning (*u ratu* 'during the war', *na predavanju* 'at the lecture'). Building on the theoretical foundations of conceptual semantics (Jackendoff 1990), according to which linguistic meaning can be modeled via conceptual structures reflecting cognitive phenomena, it is demonstrated that a temporal reading requires a specific conceptual structure. This explains why certain combinations are neutral, while others are unacceptable or marked (e.g., **u ponedjeljku*, **na proljeću*). Semantic constraints on noun selection arise from conflicts between the noun's conceptual structure and the preposition's schematic meaning, with the case's categorial meaning playing a crucial role: the accusative marks the endpoint of an action, while the locative delineates the frame of the action, extended metaphorically to temporal meaning. Differences in case selection are also determined relative to the semantic and syntactic features of the governing word, which proves relevant for temporal expressions with *na*, where future actions are more frequently denoted, and boundary aspects and orientation toward the onset of a time period are emphasized (*doći ću na proljeće* 'I will come in spring'). In contrast, accusative expressions with *u* typically profile the internal structure of a time period as the locus of the action (*trava je zelenija u proljeće* 'the grass is greener in spring'). The resulting insights are thematized within the broader context of figurative language and potential computational linguistic applications.

Keywords: preposition *u*, preposition *na*, semantic extensions, time, Croatian

References:

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