Polish equivalents of spatial *at*

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Abstract

This paper explicates how English and Polish select different aspects of a spatial situation to express coincidence or proximity. Spatial relations verbalized by different senses of *at* in English are reflected primarily by means of *w, na, przy* and *u* in Polish. First, *at* is presented as conceptualizing the relation of coincidence or proximity with the whole Landmark (LM) when it is conceived as a point. Then, the Polish prepositions are investigated – how they differ with respect to the specific part of the LM that is involved in a topological relation. Although the prepositions are available to the speakers of the respective languages to render different types of relations, their senses overlap in a complex way.

1   Introduction

Although speakers of English, Polish, Spanish, Korean or any other language encounter the same spatial relations and configurations, in reality they may conceptualize them in different ways because of the language they speak. As Bowerman (1996, page 160) observes, space is structured in different ways in different languages because "[l]anguages use surprisingly different criteria to calculate similarities and differences among spatial configurations, and this means that their spatial categories cross-cut and intersect each other in complex ways". Thus, the disparate division of space in particular languages arises from the divergent culture-determined conceptualization of entities in the description of spatial relations and the role assigned to the Trajector (TR) and LM in certain contexts. In addition, cross-linguistic differences emerge because the amount and kind of information that spatial descriptions routinely convey, and the situations that can be characterized readily in spatial terms, differ from language to language.

Taking into consideration the way spatial relations are expressed by *at* in English, one may claim that few languages possess an equivalent of this preposition, with the rare exception of the French preposition *á*, analyzed by Vandeloise (1991, pages 157-185). Such a claim is expressed in the title of Cuyckens's (1984) paper: "*At:* A typically English preposition". Also, Cienki (1989, page 128) defines *at* as a "particularly English preposition". Certainly, the semantic distinctions made by English speakers that require the use of *at* are not made by Slavic languages, such as Russian, analyzed by Cienki (1987, 1989) or Slovenian and Croatian, investigated by Šarić (2001). Neither are they made in Polish. As Cuyckens (1984, page 49) remarks, there is no close correspondence between the English *at* and its Polish translations, as there would be for the English prepositions *in* and *on*, expressed in Polish by *w* and *na.* The point-like quality of the LM and the generality[1] of the TR's coincident location with regard to the LM are non-existent in Polish; the function that the LM serves seems not to be expressed by any preposition in Polish, either.

If this is the case, one is tempted to investigate how the point-like LM is reflected in Polish and whether it has any regular exponents in the system of spatial relations or whether it is reflected in a rather irregular manner. Undoubt-

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[1] Obviously, the concept of 'generality' is subjective to a certain extent. Maciejewski (1996: 76f.), for example, considers Polish, English, German and Russian as languages equally specific in defining spatial relations, as compared to Turkish, which does not communicate directly the external, ('adessive') or internal ('inessive') relation at all.

edly, Polish speakers must specify the spatial relation between the TR and the LM more explicitly from the start. The translations of *at* in Polish include the prepositions *w, na, przy* and *u*. Convergences and divergences between *at* and its Polish equivalents follow the section presenting sense distinctions of *at*.

2 The cognitive approach to *at*

In order to avoid the 'polysemy fallacy',[2] against which Sandra and Rice (1995, page 89) warn, Tyler and Evans's (2003, pages 47-50) methodology has been followed to determine the primary sense and distinct senses of *at*. Their list of criteria includes the occurrence of the earliest attested meaning, predominance in the semantic network, use in composite forms and relations to other spatial prepositions. Several others, such as domain basicness, depiction of *at* in the entries of monolingual dictionaries, and frequency of the use, have been added by the author.

What seems to matter in the identification of distinct senses is an additional layer which is not apparent in any other senses associated with any particular form: a distinct sense must involve either a non-spatial relation or a different configuration between the TR and LM. Second, instances of the new sense must be context-independent, that is, the distinct sense cannot be inferred from another sense and the context in which it occurs (Tyler and Evans 2003, pages 42-45).

Having considered all the aforementioned criteria, the primary sense is assumed to depict a spatial relation between a TR and a point-like LM regarded as a point of reference, as in (1) (Figure 1):
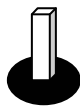
(1) *I'm at my grandma's.*

Figure 1. The primary sense – Subschema 1

The LM has its interior and the TR can be situated either within the LM's interior or its region;

the dimensionality, size and shape of the LM are not important. Important, however, is the fact that we can localize the TR with regard to the LM.

Once the primary sense of AT has been established, distinct senses can be identified. Although (2),

(2) *Paul is at the dentist's*,

depicts inclusion in the LM's confines or region, and hence the same spatial relation as in (1), it indicates some function that the LM performs. LMs such as *the dentist's* include information about the reason why the TR is at that particular place. In other words, the place that the TR visits implies its special function and/or the person who provides the service:
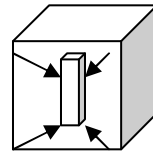

Figure 2. Subschema 2

In Figure 2 the LM's function is depicted by means of arrows directed at the TR; they are an indication of the influence the LM has on the TR. The LM takes a cubical, not a point-like, shape in order to convey its interaction with the TR.

Example (3) qualifies for the distinction of another sense represented by the subschema in Figure 3:

(3) *Mark is sitting at the computer.*

In examples (1) and (2) we dealt with the TR oriented somewhere inside the LM, and hence with 'internal proximity'. In (3) the TR is outside the LM, and therefore the relation depicts 'external proximity'. Subschema 3 depicts the TR oriented externally in the front region of the LM, with some interaction taking place between the TR and LM, indicated in Figure 3 by the arrows. The TR, *Mark,* is situated in front of the computer because he is probably using it. It is important to notice that the TR is in the front region of the LM.
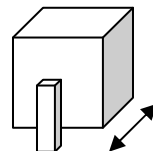

Figure 3. Subschema 3

When we consider examples in (4):

(4) a. *Mary is at the gate.*
   b. *I have a small table at the side of my bed.*
   c. *They met at the corner of West Street and Park Street,*

again they depict externally located TRs, *Mary, a small table* or *they*, with regard to two- or one-dimensional LMs, *the gate, a small table* or *the corner*, but the LMs perform no function here. In this case, the TR does not have to be oriented in the LM's front region. It suffices that it is in the LM's proximity. Neither the dimensions nor the LM's size or shape are important. The subschema of this sense represents only the external location of the TR in relation to the LM. The smaller the LM, the more precise the TR's position becomes. The possible configurations of Subschema 4 are depicted in Figure 4:

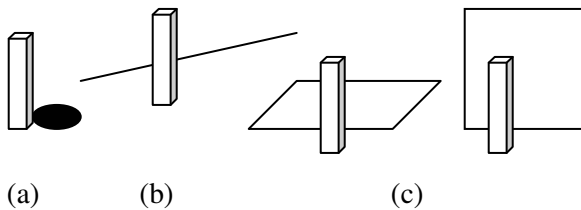

(a)   (b)   (c)
Figure 4. Subschema 4

In Figure 4, the cuboid-shaped TR is located close to the point-like LM taking the form of a black dot in (a), one-dimensional LM represented by a line in (b), and the two-dimensional LMs, oriented horizontally or vertically, in (c).

Another sense of static *at* involves the part-whole relation. Thus, Subschema 5 depicts a relation between the TR located with regard to a part of the LM, as in:

(5) *Soon we were at the edge of the woods.*

Usually, in such cases the front-back or top-bottom orientation is evoked. Because the LM as a whole is too extensive or too imprecise to locate another entity, a part thereof is designated for this purpose. In Figure 5, the designated part of the LM, with respect to which the TR is located, is highlighted in the elongated spherical shape. The TR is represented by a cuboid shape.
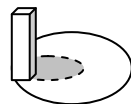

Figure 5. Subschema 5

Yet another distinct sense evokes the concept of scale. Consider example (6):

(6) *There are fewer fish at 2,000 metres below sea.*

Figure 6. Subschema 6

Subschema 6 construes the TR in space with precise or approximate measurement of distance. Thus, the LM is a point on the metric scale, as is depicted in Figure 6.

The choice of the term *dynamic* for the last subschema of *at* can be justified by the TR's movement towards the LM, as opposed to the static sense of *at*. Consider:

(7) *The tall man is aiming a dart at the bull's eye*.

Also, it expresses the force dynamics aspect which is involved in the relation (cf. Talmy 1988).
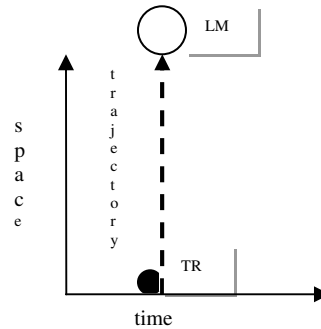
Figure 7. Dynamic *at*

In Figure 7, the TR is distant from the LM, but is moving in its direction along the trajectory marked with a broken arrow. The diagram does not indicate whether the TR reaches the LM; the arrow is coincident with the circular LM: although dynamic *at* does not indicate that the TR accomplishes the goal, it does not exclude such a possibility. The dynamic *at* relation construes a complex atemporal relation, as it is not reduced to a single consistent configuration, as was the case with the static scene (Langacker 1987, pages 220- 221).

3   *At* vs. *w* + LOC

Polish *w* + LOC can serve as a translation of *at* in a considerable number of instances belonging to Subschemas 1 and 2. However, certain restric-

tions are imposed on the container in the position of the LM for such translation to be possible. Firstly, the locations construed in English as one-dimensional reference points are conceptualized in Polish as containers with boundaries delimiting the position of the TR on all sides. Entities feasible in the position of the LM include all types of buildings and institutions, such as hotels, night clubs, etc. Consider the following example:

(8) *We spent a night at a motel.*
 'Spędziliśmy noc w motelu.'

A motel represents a LM which constitutes an idealized cubical container. Sometimes, institutions are represented metonymically by the proper names of cities, in which they are located. However, the whole community must associate the city, with the institutions located in them. In (9):

(9) *He're at Oxford.*
 'On studiuje w Oksfordzie.'

the LM, *Oxford,* stands for, a university which is well known to the British public. In Polish, names of cities often collocate with *w* + LOC; hence, the translation is 'w Oksfordzie'. However, if the phrase was stripped of the metonymy, *w* + LOC would no longer be possible although *at* would still be used in English. The translation of *at* in the non-metonymic sentence, *He's at university in Oxford* would be: 'On studiuje na uniwersytecie w Oksfordzie', i.e. *na* + LOC.

Some instances of Subschema 1 conceptualize the LM as a point rather than a multi-dimensional entity, but in Polish such cases are still depicted by means of *w* + LOC. By way of example consider the following sentence:

(10) *He had his leg amputated at the hip.*
 'Amputowali mu nogę w biodrze.'

The LM, *the hip,* is conceptualized as the point where the entity begins, its part used metonymically to represent the whole. In Polish, by contrast, it is still conceptualized as a three-dimensional volume characterized by thickness and boundaries.

Alternatively, a place can be conceptualized as a point on the map in order to be translated with *w* + LOC, as in:

(11) *her estates at Balmoral*

'jej posiadłości w Balmoral'

In (11) the Queen's properties were being enumerated, and the concept of Great Britain as an island on the map was bound to appear in the speaker's mind.

As Sysak-Borońska (1980, page 39) observes, "with 'point-apprehensibility' being totally alien to the Polish system of locative concepts, there is at least one such discipline for which the notion of 'point' is fundamental and unavoidable." Geometry appears to be the only discipline dealing with points, lines, planes and intersections in Polish. Below is an example quoted after Sysak-Borońska (1980, page 39):

(12) *Two circles cut at A and B.*
'Dwa okręgi przecinają się w punktach A i B.'

Apparently, the TR's location is that of an idealized point both in English and Polish. Yet, in Polish the point is rendered as the LM which encloses or envelops the TR, a relation conveyed by *in.* In English, on the other hand, the relation is that of coincidence and hence *at* is used.

Apart from the LMs belonging to Subschema 1, conceived as mere reference points, one should mention those which perform some function and constitute members of Subschema 2. Their relation with regard to the TR is also rendered by *w* + LOC in Polish:

(13) *He is still at school.*
 'On jest jeszcze w szkole.'

Like (8), example (13) depicts inclusion within the confines or region of the LM. Again, the point-like LM in English corresponds to the conceptualization of a three-dimensional LM in Polish. In both languages, the sentence additionally indicates some function that the LM performs.

The functionality of particular LMs is not equally spread across cultures. Schools have functional associations in both English and Polish. However, in Polish on many occasions it is the context which specifies the LM's function rather than the LM itself. In English the sentence *Mark is at the office* implies some work that must be done by the TR in the location of the LM. The Polish translation of the sentence, 'Marek jest w biurze', only indicates the TR's location but not the reason why the TR is there. Only the context could fill in the information.

The use of *w* is also present in translations of dynamic *at*. A certain class of verbs tends to ap-

pear in such contexts which denote movement by the hand or a leg aiming at some point located on somebody's body or on an object. The movement is rather violent and abrupt; hence, all types of throwing actions are involved: *to throw sth at someone/something* 'rzucić czymś w kogoś/coś'. In all these cases a point-like target is presupposed for *at*. However, in Polish the LM is construed as a container regardless of the limited amount of contact between the TR and LM. Sysak-Borońska (1980, page 42) remarks that it is the verbs that presuppose a point-like target.

4   *At* vs. *na* + LOC

Na + LOC seems to constitute the closest Polish equivalent of the sense of *at* which indicates general internal location. This sense of *at* is represented by Subschema 1, where the LM, whose dimensions, size and shape are ignored, and which is conceptualized as a point, coincides with the TR. The coincidence of the two entities may involve the TR's location within the LM's interior or its region. Important is the fact that we can localize the TR with regard to the LM. Just as *at* conceptualizes the LM as a point of reference for the TR, so *na* + LOC indicates the general location of the TR with regard to the LM (Sysak-Borońska 1980, page 70; Cienki 1989, pages 110-111.; Dancygier 2000, page 30). This sense of *na* does not necessarily imply contact between the TR and LM, a characteristic feature of the preposition, but rather forms some association between the two entities. Thus, it is the most appropriate equivalent of *at* in the following sentence:

(15) *He is waiting at the airport*.
    'On czeka na lotnisku.'

In the above sentence we do not know where precisely the TR is located; what is known is only its approximate location with regard to the LM as the point of reference. This type of relation works for both *at* and *na* + LOC.

The tendency to indicate general location by means of *na* + LOC, as Sysak-Borońska (1980, page 70) notes, has grown since the 1960s in colloquial Polish, particularly with reference to the place of work. In such occurrences reference to buildings and institutions is made. Consider:

(16) *Mój tata pracuje na poczcie.*
    'My father works at the post office.'

If the functional aspect of such use of *na* + LOC were present, as maintained by Awdiejew (1977, page 107), the verb *być* 'to be' instead of *pracować* 'to work', etc., should also bring some associations with an activity undertaken in the location. However, the sentence becomes rather ambiguous then:

(17) *Mój tata jest na poczcie.*
    'My father is at the post office.'

Unless some context is provided, (17) will indicate general location of the TR, *mój tata* 'my father', in the region of the LM, *poczta* 'the post office'.

Understandably, not all occurrences of *na* + LOC in such contexts are translatable with *at*:

(18) *Mój tata pracuje na kolei*.
'My father works for/*at the railway company.'

Therefore, the use of *na* + LOC to indicate general location translatable into *at* in English is restricted. Clear rules of its occurrence are hard to formulate, though.

Na + LOC is also appropriate as a translation of *at* in a number of topographical and geographical locations. As for the first group, *na* + LOC is used when the LMs are construed as devoid of clear boundaries, e.g.:

(19) *Men are working at the construction site*.
    'Mężczyźni pracują na placu budowy.'

In that case, LMs are usually two-dimensional entities constituting a part of the city.

Finally, *na* + LOC constitutes a translation of *at* in some part-whole relations. An extreme part of the LM is the location of the TR:

(20) *The house was at the end of the street.*
    'Dom znajdował się na końcu ulicy.'

To a certain extent, *na* + LOC shares this function with *u* + GEN, e.g.:

(21) *Soon we were at the edge of the woods*.
    'Wkrótce byliśmy na/u skraju lasu.'

Sometimes *na* + LOC functions as an equivalent of *at* in the case of the external proximity of Subschema 4, and then it often alternates with *przy* + LOC. The TR bears a lateral relation to the LM, but the position is not precise, and it may be considered as coincident or rather

contiguous with the LM, contiguity being usually reflected by means of *na* + LOC in Polish. Hence, the substitution of *przy* for *na* is possible:

(22) *They met at the corner of West Street and Park Street.*
 'Spotkali się na/przy rogu ulic West Street i Park Street.'

Similar to the English *at* of Subschema 6, *na* + LOC is also used with points of a scale. This subschema includes cases where the distance of a journey is involved. Consider:

(23) *At 2,000 metres below sea level there are fewer fish.*
 'Na głębokości 2000 m poniżej poziomu morza jest mniej ryb.'

Again, this usage of *na* + LOC is limited, and other prepositions, including *pod* (e.g. *at an angle* 'pod kątem'), are applicable.

5   *At* vs. *przy* + LOC

Subschemas 3 and 4 of *at* represent external proximity, a feature characteristic also of the Polish *przy*. Generally, the preposition conceptualizes a TR situated in proximity to a three-dimensional LM, where direct contact is possible. The TR can be situated very close to the front, back, or one of the sides of the LM. However, the sense of *przy* overlaps with that of *at* only when the TR is related either to the LM's front or back. What is more, in the majority of instances the function of the LM is implied, as in (24a), or some connection when the two entities are inanimate, as in (24b):

(24)a. *Mark is sitting at the computer.*
 'Marek siedzi przy komputerze.'
 b. *a chair at the table*
 krzesło przy stole'

In (24a), the examples involve a TR oriented in very close proximity to the LM. As indicated by Klebanowska (1969, page 185), the TR is oriented towards the functional side of the LM, and hence is capable of using it. The functionality of the LM is present both in English and Polish. If there is no function present, the relation is still rendered by means of *przy* in Polish and *by* in English. Consider:

(25) *Martha is standing by the car.*

'Marta stoi przy samochodzie.'

A distinction must be made, however, for the relation where the TR takes the lateral position towards the LM, and when the LM is construed as a linear entity. The TR and the LM must be oriented towards each other vertically not horizontally, and both *at* and *by* are applicable:

(26) *He parked the car at/by the kerb.*
 'Zaparkował samochód przy krawężniku.'

According to Przybylska (2002, pages 496-497), the LM can also be idealized as a point in the *przy*-relation, which appears to be the most characteristic feature of *at*. All geometrical features of the LM are irrelevant – only the closeness of the TR to the LM, or their contact, is at issue. Consider the following example:

(27) *We met at the monument.*
 'Spotkaliśmy się przy pomniku.'

However, the extent to which the TR is used as a one-dimensional point in English with the use of *at,* and in Polish with *przy*, differs considerably, one-dimensional LMs being much more common in English.

6   *At* vs. *u* + LOC

Occurrences of the preposition *at* which can be rendered in Polish by means of *u* + GEN belong predominantly to Subschemas 1 and 2. Some additional but rare instances can be found in the translations of Subschema 5 representing the part-whole relation. The first subschema, an instance of which is provided in (28), takes the Saxon genitive in the position of the LM:

(28) *Let's meet at Tom's.*
 'Spotkajmy się u Tomka.'

English *at* and Polish *u* + GEN in this type of occurrence may indicate either the owner of the place or its user. The name of a person collocating with the English preposition, or its Polish equivalent, metonymically stands for the place they own or live in.
 Subschema 2 also takes the Saxon genitive. Here, the person metonymically stands for the place where they provide some service related to their occupation. The function of the place is usually implied, as in instances (29):

(29) *Marie is at the butcher's.*
   'Maria jest u rzeźnika.'

Sentence (29) indicates the reason why the TR, *Marie*, is at the butcher's; namely, she wants to buy some meat. It is worth mentioning that the person indicated in the Saxon genitive does not have to be the one who provides the service. Instead of the butcher, it can be his assistant who sells meat.

Understandably, some regular uses of *u + GEN* turn out to be untranslatable by *at* in English. As Topolińska (1984, pages 282-284) notes, there are a number of instances where *u + GEN* collocates with the name of a person, which implies the service that person provides but not the location. Consider (30):

(30) *Uczę się angielskiego u profesor Kowalskiej.*
'I study English with professor Kowalska.'
*'I am taught English at professor Kowalska's.'

In the above example *profesor Kowalska* is the person who provides the service. Nevertheless, no implication of the LM of the service is made. Thus, the sentence can be interpreted as 'Professor Kowalska teaches me English' rather than 'Professor Kowalska's place is where I am taught English'. The service provider does not even have to be a professional for *u + GEN* to be applicable in Polish, as in:

(31) *Czeszę się u pani Smith.*
'I have my hair done by Mrs Smith.'
*'I have my hair done at Mrs Smith's'.

Thus, it is not the location but the agent which is indicated in the *u*-construction in the two examples. It is rendered perfectly in English by the preposition *by* whose primary function is to introduce the agent. Of course, it is the verb that reveals the type of service that is provided in a particular location.

Another less frequent occurrence of *u + GEN* refers to the extreme part of the LM. In the majority of cases the part-whole relation of the LM is involved, where the contact between the TR and LM is apprehended as involving merely a point. Thus, the most prominent part of the LM is the location of the TR. Contact between the TR and LM is a possible but not a necessary element of the configuration. Consider:

(32) *She came with two little dogs at her heels.*

'Przyszła z dwoma małymi pieskami u nogi.',

where the TR, *two little dogs*, is rather unlikely to touch the LM, *her heels*. Regardless of the degree of contact in the real world, it is assumed that little contact is involved.

U + GEN is not the only translation of this relation; *na + LOC* is also a frequent rendition of the part-whole *at*-relation in English. However, a number of instances of *u + GEN*, such as *u sufitu* 'at the ceiling', constitute stylistically marked individual instances of this occurrence which is also possible with *przy + LOC*: *przy suficie* 'by the ceiling'.

U + GEN is also applicable when the TR constitutes a part of the LM, but the contact between them is limited to an idealized point:

(33) *klamka u drzwi*
'a handle on the door'
*'a handle at the door'

As indicated in the translation of the examples in (33), the part-whole relation cannot be rendered by means of *at* in English.

7   Conclusion

The degree of similarity displayed by the respective pairs of equivalents has been investigated in the paper, as well as the points which are a source of divergences between the two spatial systems. It has been observed that the closest equivalent of *at* disregarding the dimensional properties displayed by the LM is *na + LOC*. Sysak-Borońska (1980, pages 730-731), who has observed this regularity, does not hesitate to stress, however, that the preposition does not have an equal status with *at* in English. The restriction arises from the fact that this use of *na* is not well-established in all contexts, nor is it equally well received in all varieties of Polish. Thus, it must be noted that *at* from Subschema 1 and the colloquial *na + LOC* play a similar role in the respective spatial systems only to a limited extent.

As for the conclusions ensuing from the comparison of external relations, although *at* constitutes the first translation of *przy* in bilingual Polish-English dictionaries (e.g., *NKFDPE*), the Polish preposition has also such English equivalents as *by, near, beside* or *next to*, implying a position on the side of a three- or two-dimensional LM.

To sum up, the two languages fail to coincide in the application of the concept of the proximous location, interior or exterior, which is connected with a different manner of conceptualizing the point-like LM in the two systems. Primarily, a different scope of reference of the general internal location in the two languages becomes the source of divergence displayed by a larger amount of details included in the spatial relation of the Polish system. Also, the external relation turns out not to possess ideal synonyms, which this time stems from a wider scope of reference of the Polish preposition. All in all, there is no strict translation equivalence between *at* and any of the posited Polish translations. The above cognitive account seems to be tenable at least so much as to systematize the use of *at* in relation to its main Polish counterparts and to make the use of *at* easier for advanced Polish users of English.

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