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THE SYNTACTIC AND LEXICAL NATURE OF PREPOSITIONS: EVIDENCE FROM ALBANIAN

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to support the thesis that prepositions, as linguistic units with descriptive content, function as lexical heads, sharing the same structural and syntactic features characteristic of other lexical heads, namely N, V, and A. The analysis is grounded in the hypothesis that the category P, in terms of syntactic opposition, constitutes a lexical category with [-N, -V] features, and that its nature cannot be fully explained or restricted solely to the case feature within an NP. By integrating empirical evidence from the Albanian language, this study evaluates the limitations of traditional frameworks that equate prepositions with mere functional tools or case markers. The study of prepositions should thus extend beyond their relationship to nouns in the traditional P–NP configuration, recognizing them also as XP categories generated through minimal X⁰ projections. The existence of intransitive prepositions challenges the traditional framework, raising the question of whether prepositions can be merely defined as case markers for nouns or described analogously to determiners within noun phrases. In our view, prepositions, in addition to functioning as case markers, primarily serve as semantic markers of their objects, a role closely tied to their capacity to assign theta roles to their complements, an essential feature that justifies their classification as lexical heads. Ultimately, this research argues that treating prepositions as lexical heads provides a more comprehensive account of their syntactic distribution and semantic autonomy in contemporary linguistic theory.

KEYWORDS: preposition, lexical head, functional head, prepositional phrases, intransitive preposition, theta theory, Generative grammar

Introduction

Structural linguistics conceptualizes prepositions as governing categories, clarifying the relation within preposition–noun constructions, where the preposition functions as the head and the noun as its complement. As Huddleston & Pullum (2002, p. 598) note, defining category P as a governing category entail

determining the case of the noun. Traditionally, prepositions have been understood as realizations of a noun's case feature. For example, in constructions such as *me miq* (with friends), *për punë* (for work), *mbi tavolinë* (on the table), and *në rrugë* (on the street), prepositions precede nouns primarily to satisfy Case-Theoretical Configurations in a particular language. When we mention case, from the generative perspective, we are referring to abstract case and not case morphology. Another important assumption is that an overt NP must have abstract case. This principle is known as Case Filter (Chomsky, 1995). Abstract case is either structural or inherent. Structural case has some connection with structural positions and inherent case is associated with theta roles (Chomsky, 1981).

Generative linguistics advances this view by treating prepositions as maximal XP projections, thereby placing them syntactically on the same level as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Nonetheless, their categorial status remains debated. Some approaches, such as Grimshaw's (2005) extended projection model, align with traditional perspectives, treating prepositions as functional categories analogous to determiners in noun phrases. Others, however, consider prepositions a hybrid category, resisting classification within the lexical versus functional head distinction. Models by Chomsky (1986), Radford (1997), and Jackendoff (1973), in contrast, consistently classify prepositions as lexical heads.

In Albanian linguistics, prepositions are often defined as grammatical tools that establish syntactic relationships between nouns and other constituents. Çeliku (2012, p. 88) equates them with conjunctions, reflecting the traditional focus on denominating words, while Domi (2013, p. 132) emphasizes their role in expressing dependency relations between sentence constituents.

Contrary to these traditional Albanian grammarians, the generative framework (Chomsky, 1995) assumes that each lexical unit consists of a complex of syntactic features that underlie an XP projection and are characterized by categorial and semantic properties, a phonological matrix, and internal semantic features, yielding full interpretation (FI). Within this framework, prepositions are analyzed as lexical heads with [-N, -V] features (Chomsky, 1986, p. 2), distinct from nominal categories (e.g., determiners with [+N, -V] features) and verbal categories (e.g., inflectional verbs with [-N, +V] features).

Literature review

In Albanian syntactic studies, prepositions have been analyzed along three dimensions. First, they are treated as case markers equivalent to inflectional morphemes, expressing the syntactic relationships of nouns or pronouns within a sentence (Demiraj, 1988, p. 683). Second, prepositions are understood as relational words that connect two syntactic constituents, functioning similarly to conjunctions. Third, they are considered words with semantic content, akin to lexical categories, many of which exhibit polysemy. Traditionally, the first two perspectives—as case markers and as functionally relational words—have predominated in defining prepositions (Çeliku, 2012, p. 88). However, Çeliku (2012, p. 91) emphasizes that prepositions retain lexical meaning, positioning

them as a distinct category comparable to primary lexical categories. He further argues that prepositions exercise not only grammatical control over nominal constituents but also semantic control, assigning theta roles to their complements within the generative framework.

From a traditional linguistic standpoint, prepositions serve as syntactic tools for marking noun case. In inflected languages such as Albanian, they function analogously to morphological case inflections and, as subordinating words, connect nouns to verbs or, less frequently, to other nouns, typically preceding their complements. A. Martinet (1974, p. 149), a prominent functionalist, defines prepositions as functional monemes that mark the grammatical role of a noun.

In generative linguistics studies worldwide, Grimshaw's (2005, p. 39) model of Extended Projection proposes that prepositions (P) and determiners (D) relate to nouns similarly to how Tense Phrases (TP) relate to verbs. Under this framework, prepositional phrases (PPs) are conceptualized as extended projections of noun phrases (NPs). This approach assumes [-V, +N] features for prepositions, which contradicts Chomsky's (1986) classification of P as [-V, -N]. A. Mardale (2011, p. 62) counters that not all prepositions exhibit [-V, +N] features, as Grimshaw's extended projection primarily accounts for prototypical prepositions selecting NPs, but does not address instances where PPs select categories other than nouns, such as PPs, APs, or ADs. In such cases, P does not inherit [+N] features from its complement, and thus cannot be fully explained as an extension of NP.

When prepositional features and functions are explained solely in relation to nouns, the broader role of P remains unaccounted for, particularly when it precedes non-nominal elements (Jackendoff, 1973, p. 345). Empirical data show that PPs selecting non-nouns are not rare; examples in Albanian include *nga brenda*, *nga jashtë*, and *nga brenda shtëpisë*, while in English, comparable expressions include *right down* and *within inside*. Many of these PPs are formed through minimal X⁰ projections.

Mardale (2011, p. 63) further proposes that prepositions comprise at least two distinct groups—functional prepositions (+F) and lexical prepositions (–F)—reflecting both functional and lexical dimensions. Similarly, Zwarts (1997) categorizes German directional prepositions into functional and lexical types. For instance, *van* (prej) and *naar* (to) are functional, whereas directional prepositions such as *jashtë*, *përreth*, and *nëpërmjet* are lexical (Grimshaw, 2005, p. 41).

Huddleston & Pullum (2002) approach PPs syntactically on the same hierarchical level as NPs, VPs, and APs. Within generative frameworks, Chomsky (1986), Radford (1985), and Jackendoff (1997) consistently classify P as a lexical category with [-V, -N] features.

1. Research questions

This analysis is grounded in the hypothesis that category P, in terms of syntactic opposition, constitutes a lexical category with [-N, -V] features, and that its nature cannot be fully explained or limited solely to the case feature within an

NP. Based on this premise, the study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Can prepositions, within the traditional framework, be defined solely as case markers?
2. Does the syntactic opposition induced by prepositions reflect semantic opposition, grammatical opposition, or both?
3. Do prepositions possess argument structures (argument structure in the sense of Theta roles) analogous to those of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs?
4. The central question of this paper: Are prepositions best classified as lexical heads or functional heads?

2. Methodology

This theoretical study employs several complementary methods:

- Direct observation: Used to support the hypothesis regarding the feature values of category P and to determine the syntactic status of prepositions within the lexical/functional head distinction.
- Statistical method: Applied to determine the frequency of prepositions that select complements beyond nouns—the most common type in Albanian PPs—including those that select PPs with [+compl.] or [-compl.] features. The latter category gives rise to constructions commonly referred to as intransitive prepositions in modern linguistic literature.

3. Data collection and analysis

The research corpus consists of both theoretical and illustrative data. For Albanian, sources include online news portals such as *Telegrafi* and *Gazeta Express*, as well as literary works by Ismail Kadare, including *Hija*, *Pasardhësi*, and *Përballë pasqyrës së një gruaje*. English examples are drawn from various authors and linguistic studies focusing on prepositions. Data from these sources were analyzed to illustrate the syntactic and semantic behavior of prepositions, particularly in contexts where their complements are not limited to nouns.

4. Results and discussions

In traditional linguistics, syntax was primarily concerned with the combination of denominating words, while elements considered non-phrasal categories—units incapable of forming phrases—were largely excluded from discussion. Accordingly, the study of syntax focused on denominating words (Çeliku, 2012, p. 19). In Albanian syntactic studies, prepositions have been treated as grammatical or functional categories rather than lexical ones, marking noun case and expressing relations between constituents in simple sentences. Yet, prepositions exhibit a distinctive characteristic compared to other functional categories: they retain semantic content, akin to core lexical categories such as nouns, verbs, and adverbs (Çeliku, 2012, p. 91).

Historically, prepositional phrases (PPs) in Albanian have received limited attention. Most grammars treat prepositions as a closed class of words expressing syntactic relations between nouns, pronouns, or numerals and other constituents

(Rugova & Rugova, 2013, p. 43). Structural grammars, by contrast, emphasize the phrase-level analysis, identifying the preposition as the head of the constituent and the noun as its complement. Quirk (1985, p. 657) asserts that prepositions express relations between two entities, one represented by the complement of the preposition and the other by another element in the sentence. This perspective conceptualizes prepositions as subordinating words connecting lexical items without obstructing their syntactic relationship.

Martinet (1974, p. 141) similarly describes prepositions as grammatical morphemes marking the function of a noun (e.g., *me veturë* “with a car”; *me valigjet e mia* “with my suitcases”). Prepositions are a reduced category, belonging to the set of words with primarily grammatical functions.

Contemporary structuralists, including Huddleston & Pullum (2002, p. 602), elevate the study of prepositions to a more advanced theoretical level. They highlight features overlooked by traditional linguistics, particularly the ability of prepositions to select non-nominal complements, making PPs structurally comparable to other syntagmatic categories such as NP, VP, and AP. Different prepositions select different complements, a property characteristic of syntactic categories governed by nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Huddleston & Pullum (2002, p. 599) also reclassify certain traditional “subordinating conjunctions” and “adverbs” as intransitive prepositions, demonstrating that the preposition class is not as limited as traditionally assumed. For example in Albanian:

a) *Brenda në sallë të ftuarit i prisnin të tjera surpriza* (Inside the hall, the guests were waiting for other surprises).

b) *Përpara se ajo të pyeste “Ç’po behet” ai tregoi me krye nga dera e dhomës* (Before she could ask “What’s going on”, he pointed to the bedroom door).

In these cases, elements like *brenda* or *përpara* can function alternately as prepositions, adverbs, or conjunctions, indicating that prepositions do not form a completely closed class, though they remain relatively restricted compared to nouns, verbs, or adjectives (Pullum & Huddleston, 2002, p. 603; Rugova & Rugova, 2013, p. 148).

Some theories argue that prepositions cannot be fully categorized within the lexical head–functional head dichotomy due to their contradictory syntactic features. For instance, English prepositions such as *to* and *of* are semantically empty and [+F], whereas *under*, *over*, *inside*, and *outside* carry lexical content (–F). Albanian presents a different scenario, as the genitive is expressed via the article and the modern dative is non-prepositional. Therefore, English prepositions like *to* and *of* are language-specific parameters rather than universal features. Consider the examples:

Mësuesi i dha një libër Agronit (Teacher gave the book to Agron).

Pikëpamjet e Besnikut janë liberale (Besnik’s points of view are liberal).

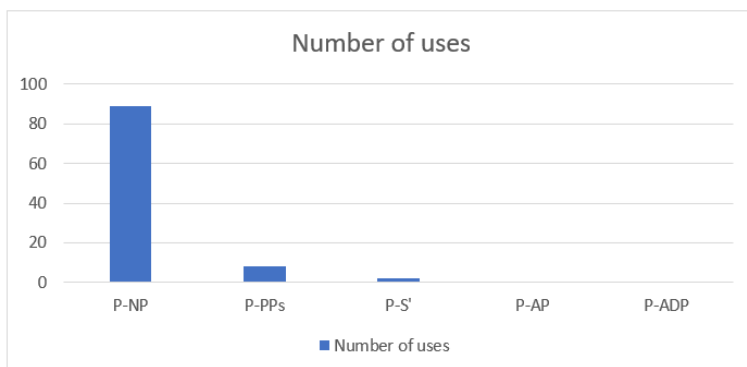
Mardale (2011, pp. 63–64) proposes that prepositions are a semi-lexical

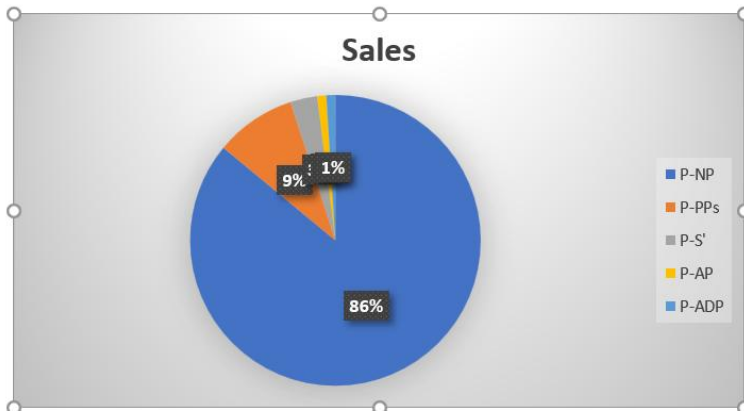
category, combining functional [+F] and lexical [-F] elements to varying degrees. Functional features include being a closed class, morphophonological dependence (clitic behavior and lack of stress), and obligatory complements. Lexical features include semantic meaning and the ability to assign theta roles to their arguments, such as instrument, purpose, agent or location:

- a) E preu mollën *me thikë* (He cut the apple *with a knife*).
- b) Topi u godit *nga Ardiani*. (The ball was hit *by Ardian*).
- c) Të gjithë shkuam *në fshat* (Everyone went *to the village*).
- d) Këtë e bëj vetëm *për vëllanë* (I do this only *for my brother*).

Accordingly, prepositions can be divided into functional and lexical types. Functional prepositions, typically monosyllabic and unstressed (e.g., *me, pa, në*), exhibit clitic-like properties and do not create barriers between lexemes. Lexical prepositions, often disyllabic with stress (e.g., *jashtë, brenda, afër, ndërmjet, përtej*), possess semantic weight and can create barriers between constituents. Littlefield (2005, p. 56) supports this hybrid categorization, noting that prepositions' seemingly contradictory characteristics reflect their dual functional and lexical nature. Similarly, Smith (1999, pp. 83–84) places prepositions in both lexical and functional categories, distinguishing them from purely nominal, verbal, or adjectival classes.

Zwarts (1997) provides a clear framework for German directional prepositions: functional prepositions (*van, naar*) are never intransitive, compound, or allowing extraction, always precede their complements, and never select PPs; lexical prepositions (*jashtë, përreth*) may be intransitive, compound, allow extraction, and select PPs (Grimshaw, 2005, p. 41). In Albanian and English, PPs can have complements beyond nouns (e.g., *nga brenda, nga jashtë, nga brenda shtëpisë*; English *right down, within inside*), and such constructions, though less frequent than NP complements, are not negligible. In Kadare's *Pasardhësi*, 11 out of 100 PPs have non-nominal complements; online portals show similar trends.





Grimshaw (2005, p. 4) treats PPs as extended projections of NPs, paralleling the DP and TP structures. However, her assumption that all PPs select NP complements contradicts Chomsky (1986, p. 2), who classifies P as [-V, -N]. Mardale (2011, p. 63) argues that P can project adjectival, prepositional, and adverbial phrases, illustrating that P is not confined to nominal extensions.

Emonds (1985, p. 247) further asserts that only lexical P and V categories directly assign theta roles, while N and A assign them indirectly via grammatical tools like prepositions. When P is “empty,” its NP complement assumes theta roles from higher lexical heads. P can also function equivalently to a complementizer (P = C) when taking a subordinated sentence (P – S') as its complement.

Jackendoff (1997) challenges traditional claims that prepositions merely realize case features (Fillmore, 1968; Postal, 1971). The existence of intransitive prepositions reinforces that prepositional function extends beyond:

- a) He didn't play the harp *inside the hotel*.
- b) He didn't play the harp *inside*.

In this contrast, *inside the hotel* is analyzed as a PP headed by a transitive P bearing a [+complement] feature, whereas *inside* instantiates a PP headed by a P specified as [-complement]. This contrast indicates that a purely configurational account of PP structure in terms of P–NP combinations is insufficient to capture the full range of prepositional projections.

The view that certain items traditionally classified as adverbs are more appropriately analyzed as **intransitive prepositions**, i.e. prepositions that do not select complements, can be traced back to early generative work associated with Edward S. Klima (1960s), and is explicitly developed in Ray Jackendoff (1973). Further support for this analysis is provided by Joseph Emonds (1985), who treats English adverbs and verb particles (e.g. *downstairs*, *afterwards*, *give out*, *look up*, *show off*) as instances of intransitive prepositions. Taken together, these

observations reinforce the conclusion that prepositions constitute a syntactic category with a level of structural and functional complexity comparable to that of other major lexical categories.

5. Conclusions

The structure of prepositional phrases (PPs) can be described according to two fundamental patterns: (1) **P + complement**, the most common type in Albanian (as shown in Figure 1), and (2) a reduced **PP** consisting of **P**, without an overt complement. This demonstrates that PP structure cannot be reduced to the **P–NP** relation alone (Emonds, 1985; Jackendoff, 1997; Pullum & Huddleston, 2002; Rugova & Rugova, 2013), and that the analysis and definition of prepositions should not be considered exclusively in relation to nouns.

In languages such as Albanian and English, the number of prepositions exceeds what traditional linguistics suggests, as evidenced by intransitive prepositions. Some prepositions never select a noun—for instance, the English *afterwards* with a [-complement] feature or *while*, which always selects a clause (CP), e.g., *while he is working*.

Based on examples such as *mbi tavolinë – nën tavolinë* (above the table – under the table) and *me laps – pa laps* (with pencil – without pencil), it is evident that prepositions can create lexical oppositions independent of the noun, in the same way that pronominal determiners create grammatical oppositions, e.g., *një djalë – djali* or *një mik – miku*. This indicates that the opposition projected by prepositions is lexical, whereas that projected by determiners (- *një*, - *i* and - *një*, - *u* with the function of definiteness) is grammatical. Consequently, Grimshaw's (2005, p. 39) claim that P and D share the same syntactic values [-V, +N] and that P + NP parallels D–NP is not supported.

Further analysis confirms the antonymic character of prepositions, a general feature consistent with other lexical categories such as adverbs (*shpejt – ngadalë*, *mirë – keq*) and adjectives (*i madh – i vogël*, *i gjatë – i shkurtër*, *i mirë – i keq*). Examples illustrating this include:

- a. afër shtëpisë – larg shtëpisë b. votoj kundër – votoj për
(close to home – far from home) (vote against – vote for)
- a. brenda shtëpisë – jashtë shtëpisë b. hyri brenda – doli jashtë
(inside the house – outside the house) (went inside – went outside)
- a. Përpara nesh – pas nesh b. ecte përpara – rrinte prapa
(in front of us – behind us) (walked forward – remained behind)

Radford (1997, p. 38) emphasizes that antonymic relations are indicative of lexical content: for instance, the adverb *herët* (early) has the antonym *vonë* (late), and the preposition *brenda* (inside) has *jashtë* (outside). This supports the classification of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions as lexical words.

Emonds (1985, p. 247) argues that prepositions can select any type of complement and assign theta roles directly, reinforcing their status as lexical heads. In generative theory, a phrase is formed according to the schema **SX = X + SY** (Chomsky, 1988, p. 69), where X represents the head (lexical or functional)

and SY its maximal projection complement.

The distinction between lexical and functional heads is fundamental:

- Lexical heads have variable complements (NP, AP, ADP, S', etc.) and assign theta roles, reflecting semantic selection.
- Functional heads have fixed complement types (e.g., I always selects VP; D always selects NP) and primarily serve grammatical functions, reflecting categorial selection.

Albanian grammars recognize that prepositions generally precede nouns, pronouns, or other nominal words, and occasionally adjectives or adverbs. While traditional grammars attempt to reduce prepositional features by categorizing adjectives and certain adverbs as nominal or compound prepositions, prepositions clearly retain lexical meaning and express semantic relations (Çeliku, 2012, p. 88).

Traditional grammars often treat prepositions as semantically weak, dependent units realized only through their complements. However, the Projection Principle posits that no lexical head can be syntactically realized without saturating its valences. Consider the following examples:

- 1 (a) *Agroni ujit (Agron is watering...) – ungrammatical, valence not saturated.
 (b) Agroni ujit lulet (Agron is watering the flowers) – grammatical, valence saturated.

- 2 (a) *Era vendosi lulet mbi...(Era puts the flowers on.....) – ungrammatical, valence not saturated.

- (b) Era vendosi lulet mbi tavolinë (Era puts the flowers on the table) – grammatical, valence saturated.

Intransitive prepositions, such as Albanian *brenda*, *jashtë*, *against*, or English *afterwards*, demonstrate that PPs can project from the head P alone, independent of an NP complement:

Ne votuam *kundër* (*We voted against*).

Iku *larg* (*She ran away*).

Vështroi nga *brenda* (*She looked inside*).

Ajo ecte *përpara* (*She walked forward*).

Doli *jashtë* (*She went out*).

This revision expands the prepositional class quantitatively while contracting the adverbial class.

Finally, considering the open vs. closed class distinction (Martinet 1974, p.47), nouns and verbs are fully open and productive, whereas prepositions cannot be equated with functional heads (e.g., tense, inflection, determiners, auxiliaries, complementizers), which are limited in number and serve to grammatically specify lexical heads.

Moreover, lexical heads, by the Projection Principle, can be realized from the X head alone (Graffi, 1994, p. 111), whereas functional heads require the presence of a lexical head as their extended projection. Thus, functional heads cannot exist independently, while prepositions, as lexical heads, can project

maximal phrases and assign semantic roles, reinforcing their status as a core lexical category.

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