Native Swedish Speakers’ Problems with English Prepositions

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates native Swedish speakers’ problems in the area of prepositions. A total of 19 compositions, including 678 prepositions, written by native Swedish senior high school students were analysed. All the prepositions in the material were judged as either basic, systematic or idiomatic. Then all the errors of substitution, addition and omission were counted and corrected. As hypothesised, least errors were found in the category of basic prepositions and most errors were found in the category of idiomatic prepositions. However, the small difference between the two categories of systematic and idiomatic prepositions suggests that the learners have greater problems with systematic prepositions than what was first thought to be the case. Basic prepositions cause little or no problems. Systematic prepositions, i.e. those that are rule governed or whose usage is somehow generalisable, seem to be quite problematic to native Swedish speakers. Idiomatic prepositions seem to be learnt as ‘chunks’, and the learners are either aware of the whole constructions or do not use them at all. They also cause some problems for Swedish speakers. Since prepositions are often perceived as rather arbitrary without rules to sufficiently describe them, these conclusions might not be surprising to teachers, students and language learners. The greatest error cause was found to be interference from Swedish, and a few errors could be explained as intralingual errors. It seems as if the learners’ knowledge of their mother tongue strongly influences the acquisition of English prepositions.
INTRODUCTION

All second and foreign language learners have one thing in common. They have already learnt a first language. For better or for worse, this will affect their learning. At least, it is generally agreed that the process of acquisition is somehow altered. Native Swedish speakers learn English as a foreign language in school. As they struggle to acquire English they encounter specific problems, due to the fact that they are born and bred in Sweden and that their mother tongue is Swedish. It seems as if some of their main problems are subject-verb concord, the use of prepositions and the use of the definite article (Ruin 1996, Karlsson 2002). The incorrect choice of prepositions is considered one of the most serious error types (Johansson 1978, Hultfors 1986). Therefore, this area is an important area of investigation. The aim of this essay is then to investigate the problems that native Swedish speakers have with prepositions. This essay states what types of prepositional errors are typical for Swedes, and, as far as it is possible, it says something about why these errors occur.

BACKGROUND

2.1 Second Language Acquisition

Theories on second language acquisition form a background to the study of errors made by native Swedish speakers learning English. Therefore a few concepts related to these theories are explained. In this study, no distinction is made between second and foreign language learning. Rather, in accordance with Ellis (1997), second language learning is simply seen as the learning of any language after the mother tongue has been acquired. Thus, the second language learner has already acquired at least one language. Lightbown and Spada (2006) point out some implications of this fact. The learner already has an idea of how languages work and this can be an asset. Simultaneously, they may make incorrect guesses about how the second language works due to their knowledge of their mother tongue.

The nature of the theories and approaches to second language acquisition has been affected by the general psychological theories persistent at the time of their origin (Lightbown & Spada 2006). Language learning, both first and second, was considered a formation of habits in the 1940s and 1960s, due to the fact that behaviourism was the dominant psychological theory. Contrastive Analysis (CA) sprouts from behaviourism (Lightbown & Spada 2006). CA claims that learners will easily acquire structures that are similar to the structures of their mother tongue, but will encounter difficulties where there are differences. The advocates of CA claim that they can predict learner errors. Since this is an approach that is especially interesting to this study, it has been given a separate heading below (2.1.1). In the 1970s,
Error Analysis (EA) became the popular approach to learner errors (Lightbown & Spada 2006). It arose partly as a criticism of CA, which had proven unable to predict all learner errors, in a time when behaviourism lost ground. The investigation made in this essay is a form of error analysis so that has also been given a separate heading below (2.1.2).

### 2.1.1 Contrastive Analysis

The formal definition of CA is that it is an activity which describes the differences and similarities between two or more languages (Jörgensen 1982). Thus, error prediction is not seen as an integral part of CA, but rather as something which follows it. This is contradicted by James (1998), who considers error prediction part and parcel of CA, even as one of its greatest assets. Neither Jörgensen, nor James seems to reject CA totally, as many scholars did when behaviourism lost in popularity. Both see CA as a complement to EA; it offers explanations for some learner errors. In accordance with James (1998), this essay will consider CA the comparative studies of the learner’s mother tongue and the target language, i.e. the foreign language that the learner aims to acquire, and not just a comparison between any two languages.

It is within the area of error prediction and error explanation that CA becomes relevant to this study. CA has contributed to the understanding of learner errors, mainly through the concepts of ‘transfer’ and ‘interference’ (Jörgensen 1982). Transfer can be defined as the projection of rules from the mother tongue to the target language. Interference is negative transfer, where the learners erroneously assume that features of their mother tongue are also present in the target language. It is hypothesised that the learner will have the greatest difficulties where the two languages are the most different, as interference then will increase. Traditionally, similarities are not seen as causing problems, but great similarities can also trigger the use of mother tongue structures (di Pietro, according to Jörgensen 1982).

In this study, interference is hypothesised to be a great source of errors. Thus it is believed that learners will draw on their knowledge of Swedish, which is their mother tongue, as they produce phrases and sentences in English.

### 2.1.2 Error Analysis

This investigation will execute a type of error analysis. In short, EA is the investigation of learner errors: their frequency, nature, causes and consequences (James 1998). Initially, the term ‘error’ needs to be defined. A distinction between an error and a mistake is made (Corder, according to James 1998). An error is committed unconsciously, and the learners
cannot correct themselves no matter the amount of time given to do so. A mistake, on the other hand, is either a deliberate or an unintended short coming, which the learners are able to correct by their own means.

This study is a type of error analysis in the sense that the frequency of prepositional errors is investigated. The nature of these errors is analysed in that they will be categorised. The causes of the errors are touched upon, but their consequences are not discussed. Even if ‘errors’ vs. ‘mistakes’ are important notions, they are not easy to tell apart in real life situations. In the present study, it is not possible to determine whether a prepositional error is, in fact, a true error, or simply a mistake.

Lack of knowledge in the target language can be expressed either through avoidance or through some form of substitution (James 1998). ‘Avoidance’ is when learners simply avoid a language feature that they are either ignorant or uncertain of. ‘Substitution’ stands for the use of another form than the correct or most preferable form. Substitutional errors can be divided into various groups. One such division consists of, among other error types, so called ‘interlingual’ and ‘intralingual’ errors (James 1998). This division builds on the different strategies the learners employ to deal with their ignorance.

Interlingual errors occur when the learners fill a gap in their target language knowledge with the knowledge of their mother tongue (James 1998). It is thus the case that interlingual errors and interference, as defined by CA, are more or less the same thing.

Intralingual errors are caused by an erroneous interpretation of the target language (James 1998). The learner has picked up a feature that belongs to the target language, but uses it wrongly. Two types of errors that belong to this group are ‘overgeneralization’ and ‘incomplete rule application’. Overgeneralization is when learners restrict themselves to one form, even when another form should have been used. Incomplete rule application is when a rule is applied only in part.

Even if these groups of error types are not used to categorise the errors in this investigation, they still provide useful explanations of the errors committed. Avoidance is not easy to ‘see’, since it an absence of language features, but is nonetheless viewed as an important concept in the context. Interference has already been suggested as a reason for errors. Overgeneralization is thought of as another important explanation.

2.2 How to Define Prepositions

This essay only deals with prepositions, since it is the form of adpositions used in the English language. Certain languages, such as Japanese, use postpositions rather than
prepositions (Finegan 2004). The difference between the two is that in the former case, the adposition follows, rather than precedes, a noun phrase.

Prepositions in the English (and Swedish) language have a wide variety of meanings and functions, and it is not easy to pin down what prepositions are. According to Cuyckens and Radden (2002), English prepositions can be seen from two different perspectives. One point of view is the syntactic-semantic perspective, where prepositions are defined by their function as head of prepositional phrases. The other is the cognitive-semantic perspective, where the polysemy (many meanings) of prepositions is explained as a network of meanings. The basic meaning is spatial, and other meanings can be derived from this one. To make this distinction even simpler, this essay accounts for ways of describing prepositions that are either syntactic or semantic.

2.2.1 Syntactic Perspectives on Prepositions

2.2.1.1 Syntactic Descriptions

The grammars that were consulted for this essay take on a syntactic perspective to explain prepositions. Prepositional meanings are accounted for, but it is their function in a sentence that is of interest to their distinction. Quirk et al (1985) state that a preposition expresses a relation between two entities. One of these entities is called the prepositional complement and it relates to another part of the sentence. The prepositional complement is often a noun phrase, a nominalised wh-clause, a nominalised ing-clause, or rarely, an adjective or adverb. What other part of the sentence the complement relates to is not stated, and is thus not restricted. The preposition and its complement compose a prepositional phrase, which usually functions syntactically as a postmodifier in a noun phrase or as an adverbial. Moreover, a prepositional phrase can function as a complement to a verb or an adjective. As an example of adjective-complementation, Quirk et al (1985) offer the sentence *I’m sorry for his parents*, where the prepositional phrase *for his parents* complements the adjective *sorry*.

Instead of giving an all-covering definition of prepositions, Quirk et al (1985) provide three tests to distinguish them from other word classes such as conjunctions, adverbs, and adjectives. These are negative, so that a preposition cannot have these three things as its complement:

1. a that-clause.
2. an infinitive clause.
3. a subjective case form of a personal pronoun.
There are nonetheless some cases where the preposition is not followed by its complement. One such occurrence is the so called deferred preposition (Quirk et al 1985). In certain passive constructions and with infinitive-clauses or ing-clauses with thematisation of the prepositional complement it happens that the preposition is deferred to the end of the sentence or clause. Similar to this phenomenon is the ‘prepositional adverb’ (Quirk et al 1985) or the ‘adprep’ (O’Dowd 1998). The two different names refer to the same thing, i.e. instances where the prepositional complement is elided and the preposition therefor is left alone.

In this investigation, the syntactic perspective on prepositions is used to distinguish prepositions from other word classes. ‘Particles’ is in this essay a common label for adverbs, conjunctions and other ‘small words’ that can be confused with prepositions. Sometimes, prepositions are included in the term, but it is then evident from the context. Particles, i.e. these small words including prepositions, require a complement to be considered a preposition. Thus, deferred prepositions are included, but not prepositional adverbs/adpreps, since they do not have a complement. The given restrictions on what can be a prepositional complement, both positive and negative, as well as the function of prepositional phrases aid the analysis of which words are prepositions.

2.2.1.2 Further Syntactic Characteristics

From the syntactic point of view, prepositions have additional characteristics. They can take on certain forms. For example, simple prepositions are those consisting of one word, and complex prepositions as those consisting of more than one word (Quirk et al 1985). The complex prepositions are then further subdivided into groups of two word sequences and three word sequences. The two word sequences typically consist of an adjective/adverb/conjunction + a simple preposition as in e.g. out of, whereas the three word sequences consist of a simple preposition + a noun + a simple preposition (what can be called a PNP-sequence) as in e.g. in spite of. Some nominal middle elements can be preceded by a determiner, e.g. in the light of (Hoffmann 2005).

It is acknowledged that there is a gradience between ‘true’ complex prepositions and free noun phrase sequences, so that some behave like simple prepositions, and are therefore considered true complex prepositions, while others behave like grammatically separate units, and are therefore considered free noun phrase sequences (Quirk et al 1985, Hoffmann 2005). Hoffmann (2005), who argues that complex prepositions undergo a process of grammaticalisation, further investigates this. He looks at different criteria, such as the frequency by which PNP-sequences are fronted as in the sentence Of which proposal do they
seem in favour?, where part of the sequence in favour of is fronted. This would support the view that in favour of is not treated as a simple preposition when it is used, and is thus no true complex preposition. In his corpus-based study Hoffmann (2005) shows that it is rare that PNP-sequences are treated as in the above example, and e.g. in spite of must be considered a complex preposition and not a free noun phrase sequence. However, this is not the case of all PNP-sequences in his material, and the present study evaluates each potential three word complex preposition separately to decide whether it is to be treated as a true complex preposition or a free noun phrase sequence.

The two word complex prepositions, as defined above, permit sequences that resemble preposition + preposition to be considered complex prepositions, such as out of, where out is an adverb. Where true preposition + preposition sequences are found, they can be analysed as instances where a prepositional phrase itself functions as a prepositional complement (Quirk et al 1985), as in We didn’t meet until after the show. Here the prepositional phrase after the show is the complement of the preposition until. In this way, until after should not be considered a complex preposition, but as two independent prepositions.

In some instances, the preposition is closely knit to the verb. This is a construction that also looks like the two word complex prepositions. There are three cases, i.e. prepositional verbs, phrasal verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs (Svartvik & Sager 1996). They consist of a verb + a particle, the particle being a preposition in the prepositional verb, an adverb in the phrasal verb and a combination of the two in the phrasal-prepositional verb. Since one and the same particle can often function as both a preposition and an adverb, it is essential to tell these apart. Svartvik and Sager (1996) provide four characteristics of prepositional verbs:

1. The word order is intact, so that the preposition follows directly after the verb, and can only be broken by an adverbial.
2. The preposition usually carries no stress.
3. Only a preposition, not an adverb, can be followed by a relative pronoun.
4. English prepositional verbs can usually take the passive construction.

In this study, both simple and complex prepositions are considered. As stated above, three word complex prepositions are analysed separately, and this is also the case with two word complex prepositions. When it comes to verb + particle constructions, only prepositional verbs are investigated, while phrasal verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs are not. The four characteristics given by Svartvik and Sager (1996) are used to distinguish prepositional verbs from e.g. phrasal verbs.
2.2.2 Semantic Perspectives on Prepositions

The semantic perspective on prepositions is somewhat trickier to account for, since it is possible to draw an intricate network of meanings around each preposition. This mapping of meanings and their relationship to each other soon becomes insurmountable, but the underlying concepts are related here. As was written earlier, the basic meaning of each preposition is spatial, and to describe these spatial meanings, the *trajector* (TR) and the *landmark* (LM) are defined. Lindstromberg (1998) calls the trajector the Subject, with a capital S, but he also acknowledges the name trajector. The TR is defined as the element that is located, and the LM as the element in respect to which the TR is located (Tyler & Evans 2003). In this way, *the cup* in the sentence *The cup is on the shelf* is the TR, while *the shelf* is the LM, and *on* is the preposition which describes the spatial relationship between the two.

From this basic meaning, other meanings are drawn. Lindstromberg (1998) talks about a literal meaning, rather than a basic meaning, that is extended metaphorically. As an example, he mentions the literal meaning of *in* as found in the sentence *He’s in bed*, which is extended metaphorically in the sentence *He is in trouble*. In the latter case the meaning of *in* is not that of physical containment as in the first case; rather, trouble is metaphorically seen as a state in which one can be. This literal meaning is the one that is learnt earliest by native speakers and it often refers to the physical world. Tyler and Evans (2003) talk about a primary sense around which a semantic network can be drawn, and it is distinguished as a combination of, among other things, the earliest meaning that is attributed to the preposition in question, and the meaning which is predominant in its usage. However, the literal, the primary, and the basic meaning all seem to refer to the same thing - it is a spatial meaning that relates the trajector and the landmark to each other.

Lindstromberg (1998) further divides prepositional meanings into the two categories secondary literal meaning and idiomatic phrases. The secondary literal meaning is less psychologically fundamental than the primary literal meaning, and the idiomatic phrase is one whose meaning cannot be guessed from the meaning of the individual words. The secondary literal meaning can be explained by metaphorical extension, whereas the idiomatic meaning cannot. However, truly idiomatic usage of prepositions is rare. According to him, learners of English would find prepositions a less problematic area if they just understood the logic behind their usage. Taylor and Evans (2003) also show that the way the spatial meaning of prepositions can be used to describe non-spatial relations is highly motivated.

The analysis of this investigation uses the semantic perspective on prepositions, when it comes to division into different prepositional categories, as is further developed in 2.2.3.
below. The basic meaning of prepositions is thought of as the easiest for native Swedish
speakers to learn. However, it is not of interest to this study to define the related meanings of
all prepositions used, or to define the TR or LM in the material.

2.2.3 Prepositional Categories

Prepositions can be divided into three categories, i.e. basic prepositions, systematic
prepositions and idiomatic prepositions (Karlsson 2002). This categorisation draws on, among
other things, Lindstromberg’s (1998) explanation of prepositional meanings, and is thus based
on a semantic perspective on prepositions. The categories are illustrated by Karlsson (2002) in
the subsequent examples:

(1) **standing on the table**
(2) **come on Friday**
(3) **comment on a speech**

The basic prepositions are exemplified by **on** in example (1), the systematic prepositions
by **on** in example (2) and the idiomatic prepositions by **on** in example (3).

The category of basic prepositions is based on predictability. Generally, these prepositions
can be explained spatially (Karlsson 2002), and they have the same literal or basic meaning as
discussed by Lindstromberg (1998) (c.f. 2.2.2 above). To be considered a basic preposition,
the English preposition that is required must also be the same as the nearest equivalent
Swedish preposition in the corresponding Swedish phrase or sentence (Karlsson 2002). For
example, the English preposition **on** is mostly associated with the ‘direct’ translation **på** in
Swedish. As the example of **on** in (1) yields **på bordet** in Swedish, **on**, in this example, is
considered a basic preposition. Leaning on the concept of predictability, Karlsson (2002) also
adds some abstract spatial prepositions, such as **in**, as found in the phrase **in trouble**, to this
category.

Although the systematic prepositions are less predictable than basic prepositions, the
category of systematic prepositions is based on the possibility to generalise their usage
(Karlsson 2002). These prepositions have affinities with, but are not the same as,
Lindstromberg’s (1998) prepositions of secondary literal meaning. They are, among other
things, prepositions whose usage is governed, or described, by rules (Karlsson 2002). The
example of **on** in (2) follows a rule that says that **on** must be used when referring to days as a
period of time. Some construction dependent uses also belong to this group, such as **for the first/second/third time**. When the frame is acquired, i.e. **for the … time**, it can be used for a
number of similar phrases.
The category of idiomatic prepositions consists of the least predictable prepositional usages (Karlsson 2002). These prepositions correspond to Lindstromberg’s (1998) prepositions called ‘idiomatic phrases’. They are often part of prepositional verbs (Karlsson 2002), where the choice of preposition depends on the verb in question, and combinations like *comment on* in the given example (3) must be learnt as a lexical unit. Karlsson (2002) also acknowledges that a preposition can be dependent on a noun or an adjective. According to this description, the idiomatic prepositions must consist of some complex prepositions, even if all complex prepositions are not idiomatic. This is understood by the fact that the definition of idiomatic phrases, as entities which cannot be understood simply by the meaning of the individual words, implies that they consist of more than one word.

This categorisation of prepositions fits well with Karlsson’s (2002) investigation of native Swedish speakers’ prepositional errors. It is also a categorisation suitable for the present study. Karlsson (2002) hypothesises that native Swedish speaking learners of English will have the greatest difficulty with idiomatic prepositions, and the least difficulties with basic prepositions. In this way, she has a perspective on second language acquisition that resembles that of Contrastive Analysis. As Contrastive Analysis predicts, she also assumes that those uses of prepositions that are similar to Swedish usage will not create problems. It is accordingly hypothesised, also in this investigation, that basic prepositions are the easiest for native Swedish speakers to learn, and that idiomatic prepositions cause the most difficulties.

2.2.4 The Perspective on Prepositions in this Investigation

To summarise, this study considers syntactic and semantic perspectives on prepositions to be complementary. As has been stated, the syntactic perspective is used to distinguish prepositions from other word classes. The categorisation of the prepositions, on the other hand, draws on the semantic perspective in that the prepositions are categorised as basic, systematic or idiomatic. It can be noted that this division also relies on some understanding from Contrastive Analysis, as it relies on predictability, as experienced by the native Swedish speaker learning English. The term ‘prepositions’ is seen as including both simple and complex prepositions. However, only prepositional verbs are considered, and not phrasal and phrasal-prepositional verbs. This is in spite of the fact that Karlsson (2002) includes phrasal verbs in her category of idiomatic prepositions. In this study, they are excluded because most often they consist of a verb + an adverb, and no preposition. In a similar manner, other so called multi-word verbs are excluded, such as combinations of a verb + a verb + a preposition.
2.3 Prepositions vs. Particles in this Investigation

Prepositions are not easy to define, as has already been shown, and that together with the fact that prepositions share features of other word classes contribute to the difficulties in telling prepositions apart from other particles, such as conjunctions and adverbs. A preposition, a conjunction and an adverb can, for example, not only ‘look’ the same, but also share the same meaning; thus only differ in function. Three fabricated sentences can exemplify this:

(4) Tell me, before you leave.

(5) I am gone, before tomorrow.

(6) I have done it before.

In this way, before serves as a conjunction in example (4), but as a preposition in example (5). The meaning of before is the same in both examples. In example (6) the meaning of before is different, but its form is the same. Here it functions as an adverb. To deal with this problem, this study relies on syntactic functions (see also 2.2.1. above) to distinguish prepositions. Ten tests are applied to dubious cases, and they are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Prepositions vs. Particles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only prepositional (not particle) constructions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Conjunction-reduction</td>
<td>We turned off the road and onto the highway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*We turned off the light and on the stereo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Verb-gapping</td>
<td>He sped up the street, and she, up the alley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*He sped up the process and she, up the distribution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Adverb-insertion</td>
<td>We turned quickly off the road.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*We turned quickly off the light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. P-fronting</td>
<td>Up the hill John ran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*Up a bill John ran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NP-ellipsis</td>
<td>We turned off (the road).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*We turned off (the light).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only particle (not prepositional) constructions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Passivisation</td>
<td>The light was turned off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*The road was turned off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Verb-substitution</td>
<td>The light was extinguished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(=The light was turned off).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. NP-insertion</td>
<td>We turned the light off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*We turned the road on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. P-stress</td>
<td>The button was sewed ON (particle).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The dress was SEWED on (preposition).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. V-nominalisation</td>
<td>His looking up of the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*His looking into the information.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tests in Table 1 are viewed as a good help in telling prepositions and other particles apart, both in cases where they are strongly dependent on a verb, and in cases where they are less so. The tests are compiled by O’Dowd (1998), from more than 15 different studies. However, she herself discards them. In her book, she desires to show that these tests cannot sufficiently explain the ‘category P’, as she calls prepositions and particles. Her point of view
is not adopted for this study, as her goal to discard the division between prepositions and particles altogether is seen as something impractical and irrelevant. It might be the case that these tests are not water-proof, but since “categorality is flexible” (O’Dowd, 1998:25), i.e. between the categories of prepositions and particles, it might be the case that no tests will ever be all-covering. These tests then have the asset of being a compilation of results from many studies, and not just one.

2.4 Earlier Studies of native Swedish speakers’ errors

Native Swedish speakers’ learner errors have been investigated earlier. The results of these studies are relevant to the present study, and therefore they are accounted for in short. Only the results concerning the use of prepositions are related, even though several studies investigate other areas as well. The significance of these investigations is discussed below (see 5). For now, it is sufficient to note that they are important.

2.4.1 Prepositional Development Investigated

Karlsson (2002) investigated advanced Swedish students’ development of the use of prepositions. Her material was nearly 200 compositions and 250 translations written by university students at different levels. Her results showed that the students developed positively in all prepositional categories, i.e. basic, systematic and idiomatic prepositions. Her hypothesis that basic prepositions would not cause any problems is supported by the fact that the most frequent developmental pattern within this category was not to make any errors at all. Some students showed a pattern of regression within the category of systematic prepositions, and more students did so within the category of idiomatic prepositions, even if the overall pattern was that of positive development.

2.4.2 Prepositional Errors Investigated

Köhlmyr (2003) investigated grammatical errors committed by Swedish 16-year-old learners of English. She analysed errors found in approximately 400 compositions from two national assessment programs, and attempted to explain these errors. The prepositional error types she found in the material were substitution, omission and addition. Substitution was the most frequent error type. In total, the prepositional errors accounted for 12% of all errors. The majority of all errors occurred with the same set of prepositions, namely with to, in, at, of and for.
The three causes of errors that Köhlmyr (2003) distinguished were transfer (i.e. interference) errors, overgeneralization and simplification. She determined an error to be caused by transfer when the ‘literal’ translation was used incorrectly. With ‘literal’ translation she meant the use of the Swedish preposition that is perceived to be the closest semantic equivalent to the English preposition. When the error could not obviously be connected to the ‘literal’ Swedish translation, she instead assumed the error to be caused by overgeneralization. *At, in, of, to, about* were prepositions that were often employed where another preposition would have been correct. As an explanation to this, she offered the thought that *at* can be perceived as a very English preposition, so that the learners therefore would overgeneralize its use. Where a preposition was required in both languages, but the learner still omitted it, Köhlmyr (2003) assumed that the error was caused by simplification. Half of the errors were seen to be caused by overgeneralization, while 40% were transfer errors.

**2.4.3 Effects of Grammatical Instruction Investigated**

Ruin (1996) followed a group of 72 Swedish learners of English at the university, to see whether grammatical instruction enhanced their learning process. The material she used was compositions, translations, and a survey. She found prepositional errors to be the third most common error type in the compositions, and the most common type in the translations. In the compositions, Ruin claims that most of the incorrectly used prepositions are direct translations from the Swedish prepositions in the corresponding phrases.

**3 MATERIAL**

The material that was used in this investigation are compositions written by senior high school students in Örebro. The students are in the second grade. The compositions are written by 19 native Swedish speakers and their compositions amounts to more than 400 words each on an average, the longest containing over 2000 words, and the shortest containing just below 200 words. The students have written more or less freely on a subject. About half of them were asked to tell about their time in school, and the others were asked to write stories, only restricted by having to start with *Once upon a time* or having to mention the numbers three or seven, or some other alternative word.

A number of English teachers from different senior high schools in Örebro were contacted, and from them these compositions were collected. Since most teachers did not have compositions at hand, because they had not filed old material, it proved difficult to find as many compositions as desired. It was also difficult to find coherent material. Some texts that
were collected had to be discarded. For example, all texts that relied on a secondary source, such as book reviews, were not considered. This is because the students tended to re-tell a story written by someone else, and therefore did not produce the language independently, i.e. on their own. To use their compositions would bias the results and error counts.

The most obvious disadvantage of the material is its size. However, this study investigates error types, and does not aspire to draw general conclusions on error frequency. The small number of compositions investigated is not considered fatal, as the focus of this investigation is qualitative rather than quantitative, so that the interest in error types overweighs that in frequency.

No reference group was used in this study, as it was not seen to be necessary. The investigation is made of native Swedish speakers’ behaviour. Here, the comparison is between different categories, not between e.g. different speakers of different backgrounds.

An advantage of using material composed by native Swedish speaking senior high school students is its relevance to student teachers and native Swedish speakers learning English. The results therefore have a broad relevance, and the material is authentic.

4 METHOD

In this investigation, all the prepositions that are used in the material were found and counted. They were distinguished in the way that is explained above (2.2.1, 2.3). They were then divided into the three categories basic prepositions, systematic prepositions and idiomatic prepositions, as described by Karlsson (2002) (see 2.2.2, 2.2.3). All prepositional errors were found, corrected and counted (see 5.2.2, 5.2.3). However, certain errors were not included, as they were considered irrelevant to this study. Only prepositional errors of substitution, omission and addition were counted. The excluded errors were of four different types. They are illustrated below.

(7) Abib was preparing everything fot the big night out.
(8) … the night was going to it’s end.
(9) There can be.. hard words in the air.
(10) We do have respect, when they show us some back.

Spelling mistakes, such as in example (7), where for has been misspelled as fot, were considered correct. This is because the correct preposition was used even if it is not spelled correctly. Errors with vocabulary, such as when going has been used instead of coming in (8) were considered correct for the same reason. Other expressions, such as example (9), had to be excluded altogether. Even if the correct preposition is used, the whole construction is
wrong. In Swedish, it is possible to talk about *hård ord i luften*, but there is no such expression in English. It is a case of so called ‘Swenglish’. Finally, errors where substitution occurs between different word classes were also excluded. This is because the present investigation only deals with prepositions. Thus, example (10) was not included, since the adverb *back* is used instead of the correct prepositional phrase *in return*. The error scores were calculated by dividing the number of errors within each category with the total number of prepositions within that category. These scores were subsequently multiplied by 100, to yield a more clear presentation. The errors committed were also divided into the three categories of substitution, addition and omission, just as it was done in Köhlmyr’s (2001) study. Since the number of errors within the material was rather small, it was also possible to analyse each error separately to see if it can be explained by interference overgeneralization or incomplete rule application, three of James’ (1998) error types (c.f. 2.1.2).

## 5 Results

When speaking about the errors of the material, it must be noted that there were quite a number of spelling mistakes. However, these were not considered, but are only mentioned because of their rather great number, as compared with other error types. Below the categories, types, and possible causes of the errors found are discussed. Something is also said about the weaknesses of the categorisation used for the prepositions.

### 5.1 Errors within their Categories

#### 5.1.1 Analysis of the Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of all the prepositions found in the material between the different categories of basic, systematic and idiomatic prepositions. It also shows the distribution of all the errors committed, and gives the error scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Basic Prepositions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Systematic Prepositions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Idiomatic Prepositions N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the material</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepositions in the material</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error Score</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 shows, there were 677 prepositions in total in the material, with 42 errors committed. The number of errors in the category of basic prepositions is very small, as the table also shows, especially considering the fact that so many basic prepositions are used in
total. This yields the low error score 2.3. As was hypothesised, the students have the least problems with basic prepositions. The basic prepositions compose roughly half of all the prepositions in the material (50.4%). As avoidance is considered to be a strategy used by the language learners, this is yet another sign that they master the basic prepositions. According to James (1998), learners may avoid language features that they are unsure of. The high frequency with which the basic prepositions occur suggests that they are not avoided. The claim that basic prepositions are more or less simple to the learners is also supported by the fact that Karlsson’s (2002) study showed that basic prepositions caused no problem to her students either. The number of systematic (prepositional) errors is greater than the number of idiomatic errors; from Table 2 it becomes obvious that they constitute as much as 50% of all the errors, but there also exist more systematic prepositions than idiomatic ones in the material. Therefore, the error score of the systematic prepositions becomes smaller than the error score of the idiomatic prepositions. This is also in line with what was predicted. However, the difference between the two is very small: 9.8 compared to 10.6. Thus, the hypothesis that says that idiomatic prepositions are more difficult to learn than systematic prepositions is not as clearly verified as would be desired. A fact that gives greater weight to this claim is that a number of questionable cases were categorised as idiomatic prepositions. Since the number of errors is so small, it is the case that if only a few correct or erroneous prepositions would change category, it would alter the error scores. It also becomes clear, from looking at Table 2, that systematic prepositions constitute 31.6% of all the prepositions, while the idiomatic prepositions constitute only 18%. This fact could either suggest that the students are ignorant of many of the idiomatic prepositions, and have not learnt them yet, or that they avoid them, because they are unsure of them. For example, there exist no three-word complex prepositions in the material. It is an avoided construction. It was said earlier that complex prepositions can be idiomatic, as they consist of more than one word. The only PNP-constructions found in the material are in the middle of, at the end of and at the outskirts of, none of which are considered complex, but rather as combinations of free noun phrases. This is partly due to their transparent meaning, as compared with e.g. in spite of, which carries an idiomatic meaning, and partly due to the fact that the prepositions are rule-governed in each case. Most likely, the students have not yet acquired more sophisticated complex prepositions. The idiomatic prepositions must be learnt as lexical units, which was mentioned in the definition of the category, and the fact that it is only in 13 cases out of 122 that the students connect the wrong preposition to a construction suggests that, in most cases, the students either know, or do not know, the whole construction. It does not seem as if they use e.g. a
verb and then consider which preposition should go with it. Rather, it seems as if they use the entire combinations that they have acquired. The idiomatic prepositions are learnt as ‘chunks’. When it comes to the rather high frequency of systematic errors, as compared with the idiomatic ones, this suggests that the students do have some problems to master these generalisable rules. The rules are not as simple to native Swedish speakers as they might seem. In her longitudinal study, Karlsson (2002) found that some students actually regressed in their correct usage of systematic and idiomatic prepositions. The developmental pattern of regression was the strongest with idiomatic prepositions. This further strengthens the claim that neither systematic, nor idiomatic prepositions are simple to the Swedish language learner.

5.2.2 Phrasal Verbs vs. Prepositional Verbs

A great difficulty with the categorisation was to tell phrasal and prepositional verbs apart. Here the characteristics given by Svartvik and Sager (see 2.2.1 above) were tested, together with the tests given in Table 1 (see 2.3). It is illustrated in the example below.

(11) … the signs turn up somewhere else.

The verb phrase turn up in (11) is considered a phrasal verb. When compared with Svartvik and Sager’s (1996) list, it is found that it behaves like a phrasal verb in that, for example, its particle is stressed (turn UP). Looking at Table 1, it is found that it also fulfils a majority of tests 6-10. Therefore, it is considered phrasal, and thus excluded from the investigation. In a similar fashion, other verb phrases were tested and judged as either phrasal or prepositional, according to where they had their closest affinities. Cases like I got in! were not tested at all, because they are not followed by a complement. Even though got in could be tested, since it is a verb-particle construction, in would be a prepositional adverb/adprep if the construction would turn out to have affinities with prepositional verbs, and it is thus not of interest to this investigation.

5.2.3 Questions on the Category Membership

The type of categorisation of errors that was used is explained above (2.2.3). As the material was analysed, it was discovered that, in many instances, the category memberships of the prepositions are not clear-cut. Even here, there exists gradience.

The difficulty in determining category membership can easily be illustrated. An example of this is:

(12) He bought a new jacket in green.
The preposition *in* found in (12) can be categorised as either basic or systematic. Karlsson (2002) considers, for example, *in trouble* and *in a situation* to be basic uses of *in*. They are fairly predictable, and the metaphorical extension of the meaning of the preposition is not too difficult to grasp. In Swedish, it is possible to say *en jacka i grönt*, but where one Swedish speaker finds this natural, another might prefer to talk about *en grön jacka* instead (i.e. *a green jacket*). It is thus not clear-cut what ‘directly corresponding to Swedish’ means. Furthermore, the English construction *in* + *a colour* can be ‘generalised’, which indicates that *in* is a systematic preposition here. However, *in* as found in (12) is considered a basic preposition in this investigation. This is because there exists a similar construction in Swedish, and resembling constructions such as *in the colours of the rainbow*, and *sprayed in fakegold* also have a similar construction in Swedish.

Complex prepositions of spatial meaning, such as *out on* and *out of* were considered basic or systematic, depending on their correspondence to Swedish. This can be illustrated by the following examples.

(13) *Aida…pulled him out on the dancefloor.*

(14) *I want you out of my office right now!*

*Out on* in (13) is considered basic, but *out of* in (14) is considered systematic. The meaning of the adverb *out* is considered sufficiently predictable in both cases; the Swedish translation would be *ut*. The Swedish preposition *på* usually corresponds to the English preposition *on*, when it expresses location (Brorström 1965). Therefore *on* is thought to correspond to *på* in Swedish. Since the Swedish equivalent expression of example (13) is *ut på dansgolvet*, this complex preposition (i.e. *out on*) is considered corresponding to Swedish. Thus it is considered a basic preposition. But *out of* in (14) is considered systematic, since the translation into Swedish is *ut ur mitt kontor* while the nearest equivalent to *of* is the Swedish preposition *av* (Karlsson 2002), and not *ur*.

In a few instances, Karlsson (2002) tells explicitly what she considers to be the Swedish prepositions directly corresponding to English prepositions. These are, apart from those mentioned elsewhere: *at* (English) corresponds to *vid* (Swedish), *by* to *av*, with the meaning of an agent, *in* corresponds to *i*, *on* to *på* and with to *med*. She also notes that the prepositions *after*, *before* and *since* are treated as basic.

In this investigation, cases where *by* is used with the meaning of ‘means’ or ‘manner’, and not agent, are regarded systematic prepositions. This is because ‘means’ and ‘manner’ seem to be meanings that can be learnt, connected to the preposition and subsequently used in different contexts where different Swedish prepositions would be required. Brorström (1965)
and Hargevik (1989), two Swedes attempting to give rules for English prepositions from a
native Swedish language learner’s perspective, acknowledge the meaning of ‘means’
connected to by. Hargevik (1989) attempts to provide regulations for nearly all English
prepositions, even the idiomatic ones, and therefore his rules cannot exclusively be considered
the proof of by being a systematic preposition. However, the meaning of ‘means’ is recurring
as an explanation for the translation of various Swedish prepositions into English, which is a
sign of its broader generalisability. Brorström (1965) includes a section on prepositions
connected to verbs and adjectives in his book, and is thus not as prone to offer farfetched
rules. He suggests that by expresses means and manner. Leaning on these two, by is
considered systematic e.g. in the example provided below.

(15) Jimbino celebrated by making a stupid dance

In example (15), dancing is the means by which Jimbino celebrates. Therefore by is
considered a systematic preposition here.

However, Karlsson (2002) does not mention the correspondence to a number of
prepositions, such as about and for. In this investigation, it was not possible to determine
which Swedish preposition corresponds directly to about, while för is seen to correspond
directly to for. Some examples of the uses of the two prepositions are:

(16) Who said anything about revenge?!
(17) We could just go to the principal about this.
(18) It was impossible for me to carry on.
(19) … he have some stuff for you.

The meaning of the English preposition about in example (16) is not basic, but a
metaphorical extension, according to Lindstromberg (1998). As already mentioned, its
correspondence to Swedish was not possible to pin down. The preposition about is not dealt
with by Brorström (1965) at all, and Hargevik (1989) offers several optional translations for
the preposition. However, the most frequent meaning that is connected to about is that of
‘angående, rörande’, i.e. ‘concerning’ in English. According to Hargevik (1989), e.g. med,
omkring, på, över and om can be translated into about when the preposition carries the
meaning of ‘concerning’. This is a meaning that can be used in a generalised manner once it is
learnt; therefore about in examples (16) and (17) is considered systematic. The case of for
was a little trickier to deal with. The choice of för as the corresponding preposition to for is
based on the quotation “… for, som är den egentliga motsvarigheten till vårt ‘för’.”
(Brorström 1965:61). When this sentence is translated into English, it says that for is the
equivalent to för. Since for is then corresponding to för, för is also considered corresponding
to *for*. In examples like (18), *for* is considered a basic preposition as this expression is translated into *omöjligt för mig*. It corresponds to Swedish. In cases where *for* is used with the basic English meaning of ‘ear-marking’ it is instead regarded a systematic preposition. The basic meaning is exemplified by Lindstromberg (1998) in:

(20) *This piece of cake is for Jane.*

(21) *Dan’s responsible for this mess.*

While ‘ear-marking’, as exemplified above in (20) and (21), can be expressed by the three Swedish prepositions *åt, till* and *för*, and therefore cannot be considered a basic preposition, it is nonetheless a ‘sense’ that can be learnt and generalised. The use of *for* in (19) is then systematic, since it has the meaning of ‘ear-marking’. The uses of *for* with the meaning of aim, purpose and cause are also regarded as systematic. This conclusion is based on the rules provided by Brorström (1965) and Hargevik (1989), in a similar fashion to the treatment of *by* as a systematic preposition, as described above.

Furthermore, the prepositions *into* and *off* were dealt with. It was not as simple as it might seem to determine corresponding prepositions to these. Some examples illustrate their usage.

(22) *I went into the old cottage.*

(23) *... Henry said... without taking his eyes of Mary* (with *off* misspelled as *of*).

(24) *He... got off the hook.*

*Into* in example (22) is considered basic. The basic meaning of *into* is that of having crossed an enclosing boundary (Lindstromberg 1998:28). Therefore, *into* is considered a basic preposition when it carries the meaning of *in i* in the equivalent Swedish expression where it is found. In example (22) the Swedish translation yields *Jag gick in i den gamla stugan*, and it is therefore considered basic. To an advanced English learner the use of the preposition *off* might seem ‘basic’ and simple enough, but its correspondence to Swedish, and therefore its potential status as a basic preposition, is not obvious. The only meaning of *off* that is depicted by Brorström (1965) is *bort från*, and it is also a meaning that Hargevik (1989) uses to explain the translation of different Swedish prepositions into *off*. In example (23), the meaning of *off* is that of *bort från* (i.e. away from), but a translation rather yields *ta sina ögon från Mary*, and not *bort från Mary*. Similarly, the meaning of *off* in (24) is that of *bort från*, but no similar expression exists in Swedish. Since the meaning is generalisable enough, *off* was considered a systematic preposition. It does not have a single corresponding preposition in Swedish.

To determine which prepositions are to be considered idiomatic was one of the most difficult tasks to carry out. Karlsson (2002) uses two of Quirk et al’s (1985) syntactic criteria
for prepositional verbs to determine whether a preposition is dependent on a verb, noun or adjective. These are as follows:

1. When the passive is formed, the preposition is deferred, e.g. *The dean was called on.*
2. When *wh*-questions are formed, *who(m)*, *what* is used rather than *where*, *when*, etc.

Even if Karlsson (2002) says that there is a degree of idiomaticity, she does not note that there are different types of prepositional verbs. Criterion 1 cannot be used without further thought, since there are a number of prepositional verbs which do not even form the type of passive described. Quirk et al (1985) give different types of prepositional verbs. Some types of prepositional verbs never take the so called ‘regular’ passive and some never take the ‘irregular’ passive, while yet others “frequently” do so (Quirk et al 1985:1156). The different types of passive constructions are exemplified by:

(25) *She was robbed of her necklace.*
(26) *The children were taken care of.*

The examples use the prepositional verbs *rob* *N(oun) of N* and *take care of N*, both being the type of prepositional verbs that must be followed by two noun phrases (type II, according to Quirk et al 1985). The regular passive is where the direct object becomes the subject, as in example (25). And the irregular passive is where the prepositional object becomes the subject, as in example (26) and criterion 1. The word ‘frequently’, as quoted above, implies that not all prepositional verbs take a passive, and it is also admitted that the criterion is not water-proof. Likewise, criterion 2 cannot be used without further consideration. Quirk et al (1985) also give explanations as to why this criterion is not clear-cut.

Furthermore, Karlsson (2002) relies on semantic criteria as described by Quirk et al (1985), in that she counts prepositions in idiomatic constructions (verb + preposition) as idiomatic prepositions. Quirk et al (1985) distinguish between wholly free, non-idiomatic constructions, semi-idiomatic constructions and wholly idiomatic constructions. The semi-idiomatic constructions are characterised by the fact that their variability, i.e. the possible combinations that can be made of a verb and a particle/preposition, is limited. Many of these semi-idiomatic constructions also retain their verbal meaning, while the meanings of their particles are more difficult to pin down. In this study, the two criteria (1 and 2 above) were primarily applied to combinations which were not found in *The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (Cowie & Mackin 1975). The variability of the construction was also checked. For example, *belong to* was not found in the dictionary, and the tests could not easily be applied, but when the verb’s variability with other prepositions was checked in the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Procter 1995) it was found to have a separate
entry. Thus, it is considered idiomatic, because the construction has no variability. In general, the combinations did not have separate entries, but the possible combinations with prepositions were checked in the entry of the simple verb.

As an additional criterion of idiomaticity, Karlsson (2002) claims that many prepositional verbs can be paraphrased by one word, however admitting it is not true of all prepositional verbs. In this investigation, this criterion was not used to determine whether prepositional verbs are idiomatic or not. It was not considered a useful criterion, because the very same criterion was used as a sign that the verb-particle combination in question was phrasal and not prepositional, and thus discarded in the investigation (see 2.3, test 7 of Table 1).

Prepositions that are part of idiomatic or metaphorical expressions, but themselves are not idiomatic, are counted as basic or systematic. However, in cases where the meaning of the preposition itself is idiomatic, it is regarded as an idiomatic preposition. The examples given below illustrate this.

(27) … that is just like the frosting on the cake.

(28) The cafeteria busted out in laughter.

Like and on in example (27) are parts of a metaphorical expression, but the prepositions themselves carry basic meaning. The use of out in as in (28), where burst is erroneously substituted for busted, is an example of a complex preposition with idiomatic meaning.

Prepositions in set phrases, such as in fact, at least, are considered idiomatic, as the meanings of these expressions are not evident from the meaning of their parts. However, prepositions in set phrases such as a couple of and kind of are considered systematic, as they correspond to the use of of as a ‘default’ preposition after nouns. In accordance with Karlsson (2002), this usage is considered systematic, because it is possible to generalise. The preposition like, as found in the expression feel/look like it/that, is furthermore considered basic. In Swedish, one would say känna så and se så ut, without using a preposition, but a formal construction with a preposition, känna som så and se ut som så, is possible. Finally, in cases where the dependency on a verb, an adjective, a noun or a construction was dubious or impossible to determine, the prepositions were put in the category of idiomatic prepositions. However, there were only a small number of such cases.

5.2 Error Types

5.2.1 Analysis of the Results

The different error types that were investigated in this essay are substitution, addition and omission. Table 3 shows the distribution of all the errors between the different error types.
Table 3 Error Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Substitution</th>
<th>Omission</th>
<th>Addition</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number (N)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent (%)</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is obvious from the numbers in Table 3 that the most frequent error type is substitution. Even if the figures are somewhat biased by the fact that a few errors of addition and omission were excluded from this study, substitution occurs so often that the numbers would only be marginally altered if they were included. An example of an excluded error of addition is found below.

(29) All the guys sat in the bar, showing off with (Ø) their money.

In example (29), the preposition with is added to the phrasal verb show off. Even if the error involves a preposition, it is not a prepositional error that can be called basic, systematic or idiomatic. Therefore, it was not considered relevant to this investigation. Only a few similar instances were excluded, and substitution is by far the greatest error type in this investigation. This is in accordance with Köhlmyr’s (2003) findings.

5.2.2 Correction of the Errors

To find and correct prepositional errors is not as simple as it might seem. There is no grammar with an exhaustive list of all possible prepositional usages. The impossibility of such a suggestion is obvious from the fact that such a list would be far too lengthy for a book to contain it. Some grammars give rules to guide usage, but these cannot cover all prepositions either. As seen above, e.g. idiomatic prepositions are not rule-governed in the same way as systematic prepositions are, and thus cannot easily be explained in grammars. However, an advantage with grammars is that they are authoritative for non-native speakers, as language learners need to rely on standardised language rather than intuition in the process of learning.

Even if authors of grammars are also subjective, second language learners can benefit from standardised varieties as they are described in dictionaries and grammars. Where it was possible to apply rules from grammars, this was done to correct errors in the material.

Language constantly changes, which means that grammars can be out of date. What was considered an error e.g. in the 15th century is not necessarily considered an error today. It is in the present-day language use that one can find what is actually considered an error. Thus, the Internet was used as a corpus of contemporary English language usage. Potential errors that were found were searched on the Internet, together with alternative, potentially correct usages.
The number of scores, i.e. the number of occurrences of the particular prepositional usage on the net, was briefly considered, but more importantly, the sources of the different usages were investigated. If the prepositional usage was found e.g. on the BBC’s or some other authoritative institution’s official website, it was considered correct. If, on the other hand, the source was an individual of non-native English speaking background, the usage was considered erroneous. For example, to correct the phrase *get my revenge of that idiot* the two phrases *get revenge of him*, and *get revenge on him* were searched on the net. The former yielded 1 score and the latter 929, including an article of *BusinessWeek*. Thus, the choice of the preposition *of* in the original phrase is marked as an error.

Together with what is already mentioned, a native English speaker from Ireland and a native Swedish speaker who lived in England for more than 10 years were also asked to judge the dubious usages. Both have taken courses in English at Swedish universities. Since the judgement of individual speakers is subjective, this was not used as the single method to judge errors. Rather, it was used as a good complement, especially when it comes to the correction of idiomatic prepositions, whose usage is rather ‘intuitive’ to native speakers and near-native speakers.

### 5.2.3 Error Count

The errors in a material can be counted in at least two ways (Karlsson 2002). The number of errors can either be counted per the number of words in a text, which is called error density, or the number of errors can be counted per the number of possible errors of that particular grammatical feature in a text, which is called error score. Karlsson (2002) is an advocate of error score, but she admits that a limitation is that the score will be a very small number, often given in hundredth parts. However, these numbers can simply be multiplied by e.g. one hundred, for the sake of a clear presentation of the material.

The present investigation makes use of error scores. Even if the material is small, it is important to decide on which way to count errors. If the individual learners’ prepositional efficiency were compared to each other’s efficiency, the use of error density would bias the results. This is because error density is affected by the individual author’s writing style; a higher error density can simply be caused by a writing style with more prepositions, and need not signify greater ignorance. In this investigation, however, all prepositions used and errors committed by the different learners are first added and then divided into the different categories. Thus, the contribution of the different individuals is not considered separately when error scores are calculated, and the results are not biased.
5.3 Examples of Error Causes

The predominant error cause in the material is interference from Swedish. This is also a fact supported by Ruin (1996), who claimed that most of the prepositional errors in her study were direct translations from Swedish. Nearly half of all the errors in the present material have their roots in the learners’ mother tongue, i.e. 19 out of 42 (about 45%). A few examples are provided.

(30) I remember that I was very nervous for (about) this test...

(31) a man named Jimbino who was on his way to his job on (at) the local post-office

The combination of an adjective + a preposition in example (30), where about is substituted for the preposition for, has the Swedish translation nervös för. Since för corresponds to for in English, this preposition is used erroneously. In (31), the Swedish expression is sitt jobb på postkontoret. På corresponds to on, which is the preposition that is used erroneously. It can be noted that there is no obvious connection between the students using ‘Swenglish’ expressions that were deleted from the material (as in example (9)), which itself is caused by interference, and those who committed prepositional errors of substitution caused by interference. However, this does not imply that the cause of the errors in the compositions where ‘Swenglish’ is not present cannot be interference. The degree of ‘Swenglish’ expressions in the material was not looked into in a purposeful way, rather, some of these expressions were ‘bumped into’ when the material was analysed. Most likely, there are more of these within the material, not connected to prepositions and thus not counted.

To further investigate the presence of interference, certain expressions where two prepositions can be used alternatively, with just a slight semantic change, were analysed. Two examples are given.

(32) knock at/on the door

(33) in/at the beginning

These examples are difficult to judge as wrong, even if a certain choice might feel a little awkward, since it is not easy to know what the writer intended to say. The semantic difference is so small that it is hard to distinguish whether the writer is aware of it and uses it or not. In all these cases, one of the prepositions corresponds to Swedish and the other doesn’t, so that e.g. the choice of on in (32), which corresponds to knacka på dörren in Swedish, is a basic preposition, while the choice of at in (32) is a systematic preposition. It was the case that only 4 times out of 14 the preposition not corresponding to Swedish was used. The preference to use a Swedish equivalent is thus rather strong. And it strengthens the hypothesis of interference affecting errors, and second language learning. It can further be noted that one of
the students using the systematic prepositional choice is also the very same person who
overuses the preposition at (the overuse will be argued below). That particular student’s use
of at in at the beginning must not necessarily depend on an understanding of the semantic
difference between the use of at or in with beginning.

Since interference is such a great error source, Contrastive Analysis must still have
something to contribute to the understanding of second language learning. If nothing else, it
surely can help to give explanations of errors.

As already mentioned, one student is believed to overuse the preposition at. The same
person has committed three errors of substituting the correct prepositions with at. The errors
are provided below.

(34) I was very nervous at (on) the first day.

(35) The hardest time at (of) the year was at (in) spring.

If the examples are analysed, it becomes evident that all uses of at in (34) and (35) are
systematic errors, and they all involve time in some way. It might be that this person has
interpreted the rule of at as ‘a point time’ wrongly, or it might be pure overgeneralization. In
either case, it is an intralingual error, caused by incorrect interpretation of the target language.
The latter explanation, i.e. the case of overgeneralization, is supported by the fact that the
person uses at the beginning and not in the beginning, as was said earlier. Moreover, it
becomes evident that more than half of the prepositions used are instances of at, i.e. 12 out of
23, when the whole body of prepositions in the composition is analysed. Of course, this might
be because the subject treated requires this high frequency of at, but it suggests that this
person has a predilection for this preposition. This is the only student who is seen to verify
Köhlmyr’s (2003) thought that at is viewed as a very English preposition and is therefore
overused.

Other causes of errors are not as easy to distinguish, but they were nonetheless looked at.
Quite a few of them seem to be intralingual. Four examples are given below, and they are
subsequently discussed.

(36) I will get my revenge of (on) that idiot.

(37) I was going to change for (to) a new class.

(38) it’s going to be hard to leave in spring (the ... of ...) 2008.

(39) I belong at (to) (name of school).

Example (36) can be an overgeneralization of the preposition of, since many Swedes learn
it as a ‘default’ preposition after nouns. However, when the composition this example comes
from is analysed, it becomes obvious that this student makes no other error with the
preposition of. Rather, this person uses the preposition correctly a number of times. This is the longest essay in the material, so it cannot be that the error cause is overgeneralization. The use of for in the example in (37) can be compared to the expression a change for the better. Since the Swedish counterpart is byta till and not *byta för, this error is clearly not caused by interference. Neither is for used because the meaning of the preposition is the generalisable ‘ear-marking’. One explanation can be that change for has been learnt as a unit, drawing on the expression to which it is compared above. In that case, this is also an example of intralingual errors, since it is an erroneously drawn conclusion that the verb change takes the preposition for just because the noun change is followed by for in the expression above. The example in (38) can be an example of incomplete rule application. Where the student has learnt that the English version of the Swedish phrase våren 2008 is expressed with the preposition in, and not without a preposition as in Swedish, the person still fails to use the determiner and the preposition of. This example can also be viewed as a confusion of the fact that English uses in with years, i.e. in 2008 would be correct, while the specification of the spring requires another construction. In either case, it is an incorrect interpretation of the target language, and thus, an intralingual error. The example in (39) suggests that the learner overgeneralizes the use of the preposition at with buildings and institutions, so that the person fails to use the idiomatic preposition to as found in belong to. This example can be used to claim that systematic prepositions are more easily acquired than idiomatic ones. It is supported by the fact that at in at (name of school) is a systematic preposition, while to in belong to is an idiomatic preposition. In (39), the systematic preposition is used erroneously. However, it can also be that ‘at (name of school)’ is learnt or perceived as a lexical chunk, and that this is the reason why it is erroneously connected to belong. This is supported by the fact that the phrase ‘at (name of school)’ is used twice more by the same learner, within the same or the next paragraph. The proximity of these expressions suggests that the learner has connected the two as a lexical unit within his or her mind, so that it is the lexical unit ‘at (name of school)’ rather than the lexical unit ‘belong to’ that is most closely at hand and therefore used.

A salient error is that of into written as in to. The errors with basic prepositions number only 8, and of these 6 are cases where this substitution occurs. See example (40) below.

(40) Greta... showed the boys in to (into) the kitchen.

In the whole material, into is used correctly 8 times. Of these, two are instances where into is part of an idiomatic prepositional verb. Since prepositional verbs are learnt as units, it is more likely that the preposition is used correctly when it is part of such a unit. Roughly, half
of all the times into is used, it is used erroneously. This suggests that this preposition is not as ‘basic’ as it might seem. This preposition is categorised as basic when it corresponds to in i in Swedish, and it seems as if its meaning of ‘in + containment’ comes rather naturally to Swedish speakers, as in to is used in the right context, but it seems a lot more difficult to write the two prepositions together as one word. This can be because there exists no preposition in Swedish which from the beginning was, similarly to into, two separate prepositions which then merged into a single preposition; at least there exists no such counterpart to into. This can be seen as further evidence that the learners depend on their mother tongue.

Finally, quite some errors seem awkward both in English and in their Swedish translation. This investigation does not attempt to explain or label all error types, therefore these errors are left uncommented. An example is:

(41) The only negative thing (about) to go in school is…

In (41), the student has omitted the preposition about, which ought to be followed by an ing-clause. The Swedish translation also requires a preposition, i.e. med, so there is no obvious reason why the student omits the preposition. In view of Köhlmyr (2003), it would be considered a simplification, but there is no clear reason why the learner uses this strategy.

It can also be noted that in this material, only the prepositions of and into ‘collected’ more than five errors each. This can be compared to Köhlmyr’s (2003) study, which found the prepositions to, in, at, of and for to be the prepositions with which most errors occurred. Since the present investigation uses such a small material it is not considered relevant to make a deeper investigation of this. It can just be noted that 11 out of 42 errors occurred with the preposition of. In all these instances it is used as a systematic preposition, primarily after nouns. The case of into has already been discussed. Furthermore, it was found that the prepositions most often misused in this study are for, in and at. Köhlmyr (2003) found that at, in, of, to and about were the prepositions most frequently misused in her material. Again, the size of the material in this investigation makes it impossible to draw conclusions from the results of this; it can merely be pointed out that for seems to be a problematic preposition as well, even if it was not found in Köhlmyr’s study.

5.4 Weaknesses of the Categorisation

As shown earlier (c.f. 5.2.3), the division of the prepositions into the given categories was a very difficult task. There are several causes for these problems. The criteria used to e.g. distinguish between prepositional verbs and free combinations, as described by Quirk et al (1985), were not intended as a means to divide all prepositions into two distinct groups.
Instead, it is stated that this is a matter of degree. Nevertheless, Karlsson (2002) uses these criteria to base one of her prepositional categories, i.e. the idiomatic ones, on. Moreover, the matter of how to determine the ‘directly corresponding’ Swedish preposition was complicated. It also influences the categorisation. It was no simple task to determine what prepositional meaning ought to be considered basic. To take just one example that is discussed above (see 5.2.3), it does not go without saying that the English preposition for corresponds to the Swedish preposition för. When the preposition is used for the basic English meaning of ‘ear-marking’, it can be translated into åt or till also. It might be that some English prepositions have more than one corresponding preposition in Swedish, and then it is not easily decided which one of these should be considered the corresponding preposition. Karlsson (2002) herself does not discuss these questions at all, and she does not even mention how she treated such common prepositions as, for example, for, about and into. Thus, all these categories are subject to some extent of subjectivity or arbitrariness. However, as the total number of prepositions in the material is quite large and all prepositions were considered thoroughly, it is likely that a few prepositions put in the ‘wrong’ category even out in the end. The results must not necessarily be biased, even if there is a risk for it.

Karlsson (2002) claims that her categorisation is based on predictability as experienced by native Swedish speakers, or at least that the category of basic prepositions is so. She claims that her categorisation mirrors the difficulty that the Swedish speaker experiences when learning them. Still, she makes no difference between systematic and idiomatic prepositions that correspond or do not correspond to Swedish. This is nothing that is investigated in this essay, but it must be noted that there ought to be a difference in the experienced difficulty here as well. Especially since interference is shown to be such a great error cause.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate the prepositional errors made by native Swedish speakers. It says something about what prepositional errors occur, and it offers some explanations to why they occur. All second language learners already have knowledge of at least one language, and in this study it is accordingly hypothesised that this influences the native Swedish speakers’ learning of English prepositions. Thus, it is believed that the learners will make fewer errors with basic prepositions than with systematic prepositions, and fewer with systematic prepositions than with idiomatic prepositions.

This investigation shows that the learners do not seem to have problems with basic prepositions, with the exception of the preposition into, which is commonly written as in to.
The erroneous use of *in to* is seen as something which suggests that the learners depend on their mother tongue when acquiring English. Moreover, it is significant that it is the basic prepositions, which correspond directly to Swedish, that are so well mastered. This further suggests the dependency on Swedish. The category of systematic prepositions was seen to be more difficult to the learners than was hypothesised. Even if this category has a lower error score than the idiomatic prepositions, the difference is very small. When all the different errors were analysed, it was discovered that most errors occurred with the preposition *of*. In all these instances, its usage was systematic, and it is the error that the greatest number of learners have in common. This suggests that the learners do have problems with the systematic prepositions. The learners seem to have problems with idiomatic prepositions as well, even if the number of errors is remarkably small. The fact that so few idiomatic prepositions are found in the material suggests that the learners either are ignorant of the whole idiomatic prepositional construction, or use it correctly. The idiomatic constructions are learnt in ‘chunks’, or as ‘lexical units’ as Karlsson (2002) describes it. It is thus not a matter of first selecting, for example, a verb or an adjective, and then pondering on what preposition goes with it.

The predominant error cause in this investigation is interference. It can explain about 45% of all the errors. In cases where there is a choice between two alternative prepositions, one corresponding to Swedish and one not corresponding to Swedish, it is seen that the corresponding preposition is used in the majority of all these cases. This further supports the hypothesis that the learners depend on their mother tongue. The excluded examples of Swenglish (e.g. example (9)) do the same. A few of the other errors can instead be explained by overgeneralization, or can at least be labelled as intralingual errors of some sort. The fact that Köhlmyr found that as many as half of all the errors in her material was caused by overgeneralization, which is not the case in this investigation, can be explained by the fact that she simply put errors that were not interference in this category. Intralingual errors were nonetheless found in the present material, but to a lesser extent. They are those caused by an erroneous interpretation of the target language, and many times with an erroneous interpretation of the rules that govern them. Even if these errors are more difficult to distinguish, and even if they can not be counted in the same way as the interference errors, their existence points at the difficulty with systematic, i.e. rule governed, prepositions.

The results of this essay, then, strongly point at the important role of the learner’s mother tongue when learning prepositions. It is something that many laymen, students and language learners might not perceive as surprising, as the use of prepositions is viewed as rather
arbitrary without simple rules that can explain all their usages. The results also suggest that language is learnt in chunks, rather than word by word. Further studies are needed to investigate how languages, and prepositions in particular, are learnt. This study suggests that idiomatic prepositions are learnt as lexical units, but the example belong at (name of school) (example (39)) suggests that systematic prepositions might also be learnt as lexical units. This needs a closer examination, especially since the material in this essay is not large enough to draw fully reliable conclusions. With its results, it rather points in a direction which needs further investigation. Thus, there is a need for more similar studies with a larger material, and for other types of studies on the process of learning prepositions. Should this type of investigation be repeated, there is a need for a better characterisation of the different categories. A good definition of ‘the preposition directly corresponding to Swedish’, and an accompanying method of how to go about finding it, solves many problems. The course of action for the categorisation must at least be systematised, so that potential subjectivity and arbitrariness can be eliminated. It might be of interest to create a new categorisation which shows consideration to what systematic and idiomatic prepositions correspond to Swedish ones, as the present investigation does with the basic prepositions. Especially since the influence from the mother tongue is seen to be so great.

REFERENCES


