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Citation	言語文化共同研究プロジェクト. 2023, 2022, p. 21-30
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/91595
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Locative Sense “Point” of the English Preposition *At* - A Comparison with the French Preposition *À* - *

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1. Introduction

Prepositions deliver locative information that extends to other related meanings, such as temporal senses. As for the English preposition *at*, it has the locative sense “point,” which is often regarded as its central meaning.¹ Examples are presented in (1): In (1a), *at* introduces the designated place, *10 Victoria Street* as if the speaker of the sentence targeted it on a route map. In (1b–1d) see *the station*, *a party*, and *home* comprehensively, including both the inside and the near outside of the building or room.

- (1) a. They live at *10 Victoria Street*.² (Ando 2012: 12)
b. I arrived at *the station* just in time. (*ibid.*)
c. We met at *a party*. (*ibid.*)
d. I would rather stay at *home*. (*ibid.*)

Similar to the English preposition *at* in (1), it is often said that French preposition *à* has its central meaning “point,” as in (2).

- (2) a. Ils habitent au *10 rue Victoria*.³ (French translation of (1a))
b. Je suis arrivé à *la gare* juste à temps. (French translation of (1b))
c. Nous nous sommes rencontrés à *la fête*. (French translation of (1c))
d. Je préfère rester à *la maison*. (French translation of (1d))

It seems that the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à* are equivalent in terms of their locative sense “point,” but there are some differences of the way they construe a point. Although (3a, 3c) show that other English prepositions such as *in* or *on* rather than *at* are suitable, their French translations (3b, 3d) use the French preposition *à*.

- (3) a. He lives in *London*. (Ando 2012: 42)
b. Il habite à *Londres*. (French translation of (3a))

* This work was supported by JST SPRING, Grant Number JPMJSP2138. We would like to thank Editage (www.editage.com) for English language editing as well.

¹ However, the discussion of the central sense of English preposition *at* is controversial. For example, Tanaka et al. (2006: 55, 58) insist that the core meaning is “place,” which covers the usages of *at* more exhaustively.

² All underlining and italicizing were done by the authors.

³ *Au* is composed of French preposition *à* and French masculine singular definite article *le*.

- c. There was a fly on *the ceiling*. (Ando 2012: 72)
 d. Il y avait une mouche au *plafond*. (French translation of (3c))

Accordingly, this paper discusses the dissimilarity in the locative usages of the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*, and clarifies each range regarding “somewhere” or “something” as a point.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 surveys previous studies on the locative meanings and usages of the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*. This section also presents the main issue discussed in this study. Section 3 analyzes the difference in the construal of the locative point between the two prepositions. In particular, we focus on the size and particularity of a place. Section 4 concludes that in comparison with *à*, the locative point introduced by *at* tends to require a concrete or specific place with extra context or information to infer its surrounding area.

2. Previous Studies

2.1. Locative Meanings and Usages of the English Preposition *At*

Many researchers say that the English preposition *at* means a certain point with regard to place. Consider the example (4) below. Examples (4a–4d) show the exact single point of two overlapping lines (*the crosswalk*), top (*the summit of the mountain*), end of a line (*the end of the street*), or current page of a book (*page ten*). In addition, *at* can refer to the area around a point (cf. Saito (2015: 484–485)).⁴ In (4e), the person (*I*) who waits may not stand right on *the ticket gate* but near the gate. (4f) indicates that *the back door* is a kind of entrance to a house or building and not just *the back door* itself. Furthermore, (4g–4h) can express the adjacent outside of the designated area (i.e., *the station* or *home*) as well as the inside.

- (4) a. She stopped at *the crosswalk*. (Tanaka et al. (eds.) 2003: 96)
 b. There is a temple at *the summit of the mountain*. (Saito 2015: 484)
 c. There is a police-station at *the end of the street*. (*ibid.*)
 d. Let us begin at *page ten*. (Ando 2012: 12)
 e. I'll wait at *the ticket gate*. (Tanaka et al. (eds.) 2003: 96)
 f. The burglar entered at *the back door*. (*ibid.*)
 g. I arrived at *the station* just in time. (= (1b))
 h. I would rather stay at *home*. (= (1d))

Interestingly, compared with (5a), contextual conditions make the use of the preposition *at* more appropriate, as shown in (5b). Herskovits (1986: 131) states that the context that first comes to mind is not fully sufficient.

⁴ In this respect, Saito (2015: 484) points out that *at* is more “indefinite” than *in*.

- (5) a. ?The restaurant is at *the village*. (Herskovits 1986: 131)
 b. There is a good restaurant at *a village 6 miles from here*. (*ibid.*)

However, as in (6a–6b), when the place is a town or country, the preposition *in* is more suitable than *at*. This is partly because they tend to be regarded as a broad place, but (6c) exemplifies that *at* can be used when the place is seen as a point, such as a relay point or destination (Taishukan’s Unabridged Genius English Japanese Dictionary).⁵ Herskovits (1986: 129) also says that (6d) is acceptable, but it needs “the selection of a bounded part of *the freeway*.”

- (6) a. He lives in *London*. (=3a)
 b. *at *England/California/the county/the neighborhood/...* (Herskovits 1986: 130)
 c. We arrived at/in *Tokyo* – at *Shimbashi* – in *Japan*. (Saito 2015: 484)
 d. The gas station is at *the freeway*. (Herskovits 1986: 129)

Thus, the English preposition *at* allows us to view a contextually restricted place as a point and assume a larger area near that point.

2.2. Locative Meanings and Usages of the French Preposition *à*

Similar to the English preposition *at*, it is said the French preposition *à* refers to a spatial point. (7a–7b) indicate the position of the post-office (*la poste*) or the present page of a book (*page 5*) as a point, respectively. In (7c), the house (*la maison*) expresses the place where someone currently exists, regardless of whether the person is inside or closely outside the house. Conversely, (7d) refers only to the interior of a house. This is why (7c) is treated in the same way as its English equivalent in (4h).

- (7) a. La poste est à *cent mètres d'ici*. (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 the post-office is at one-hundred meters from-here
 “The post-office is 100 meters away from here.”
 b. Regardez à *la page 5*. (Shogakukan Robert Grand Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 look at the page 5
 “Look at the page 5.”
 c. être à *la maison* (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 be at the house
 “be at home”

⁵ In other words, we can assume a route that contains Tokyo station when we say, “*we arrived at Tokyo*.” Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 651) propose the concept of “implicit paths.”

- d. être dans *la maison*
 be in the house
 “be in the house”

À also introduces a place in a general way. Examples (8a–8b) see the cities *Tokyo* and *Paris* as general places. By contrast, (8c) means that someone has lived in many specific places in *Paris*. Furthermore, the restaurant in (8d) is a general one, while that in (8e) is a specific one (as depicted by the adjective word *célèbre* “famous”).

- (8) a. Il est né à *Tokyo*. (Shogakukan Robert Grand Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 he is born at Tokyo
 “He was born in Tokyo.”
- b. habiter à *Paris* (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 live at Paris
 “live in Paris”
- c. habiter dans *Paris* (*ibid.*)
 live in Paris
 “live all over Paris”
- d. dîner au *restaurant* (Shogakukan Robert Grand Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 eat at-the restaurant
 “eat at the restaurant”
- e. dîner dans *un restaurant célèbre* (*ibid.*)
 eat in a restaurant famous
 “eat at a famous restaurant”

Therefore, the French preposition *à* provides a way of looking at a general place as a point.

2.3. Summary and the Issue at Present

The English preposition *at* and French preposition *à* are alike in the locative sense of a point. However, it can be thought that the ways of construing a place as a point are different from each other. This dissimilarity is exemplified in example (9), and the main issue is why English expressions (9a, 9c) do not use *at*, while French expressions (9b, 9d) use *à*. This study addresses this issue from a cognitive semantic perspective.

- (9) a. He was born in *Tokyo*.
 b. Il est né à *Tokyo*. (= (8a))

c. live in/*at *Paris*

d. habiter à *Paris*

(=(8b))

3. Difference in Construal of Locative Point between the English Preposition *At* and French Preposition *À*

This section investigates the difference between the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*, with special reference to their methods of locative point construal. Section 3.1. discusses the size of the places to which these two prepositions can refer. Section 3.2. focuses on the particularities of a place. Finally, section 3.3. provides a reconsideration of the points made by the two prepositions.

3.1. Size of a Place

In English, the preposition *in* matches a broader place and allows the speaker of the sentence to feel its spatial extension. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 650) point out that *at* in (10b) becomes more suitable as the speaker or viewer moves further away from the situation. This is because the speaker does not perceive the spatial extension of the supermarket from a distance.

(10) a. John is in the supermarket.

(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 650)

b. John is at the supermarket.

(*ibid.*)

In French, however, the preposition *dans*, which seems to be equivalent to the English preposition *in*, is not used in the same way. In (11a), *Tokyo* is a place whose spatial extension can be felt, but its French translation in (11b) uses *à* instead of *dans*.

(11) a. He was born in *Tokyo*.

(=(9a))

b. Il est né à *Tokyo*.

(=(9b))

À is used in the following example (12) as well. We can say that *à* is not incompatible with spatial extensions.⁶

(12) Le soleil se lève à l'est.

(Hakusuisha Larousse Dictionnaire Français Japonais)

the sun oneself raise at the-east

“The sun rises in the east.”

Meanwhile, when using *dans*, the additional meanings “the clearly distinguished inside” or “all over”

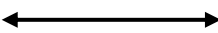
⁶ Therefore, French preposition *à* can be translated into English prepositions *to*, *at* or *in* (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais).

can be given like in (13b, 13d, 13f).

- (13) a. Mon frère est à *Paris*. (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 my brother is at Paris
 “My brother is in Paris.”
- b. Il doit être dans *le coin*. (ibid.)
 He should be in the neighborhood
 “He should be in the neighborhood.”
- c. Le soleil se lève à *l’est*. “The sun rises in the east.” (=12))
- d. Ce quartier se trouve dans *l’est de Paris*. (Nouveau Petit Royal Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 this district oneself find in the-east of Paris
 “This district is located in the east of Paris.”
- e. habiter à *Paris* “live in Paris” (=8b))
- f. habiter dans *Paris* “live all over Paris” (=8c))

It can be said that *dans* needs the spatial extension and then focuses on the components within the space, which can cause the additional meanings “the clearly distinguished inside” or “all over.” However, spatial extension alone does not fully explain the differences between *à* and *dans*. This also gives us a cue to discover the discrepancy between the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*. *At* is inconsistent with the spatial extension, whereas *à* is consistent. Table 1 summarizes this relationship.

Table 1: A Comparison of the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à* in terms of the spectrum of construing a place as a point

prepositions	size of a place	
	small	large
English <i>at</i>		
French <i>à</i>		

3.2. Particularity of a Place

The English preposition *at* is different from the French preposition *à* in the particularity of indicating a place. In that respect, *at* is similar to the French preposition *dans*. First, let us consider the usage of *at* in the following examples (14) and (15): The conditional context of *6 miles from here* is added in (14b), and the whole sentence is more acceptable than a sentence without such context.

Moreover, it is not preferable for the pronoun *it* to follow *at*, as shown in (15).

- (14) a. ?The restaurant is at *the village*. (=5a))
 b. There is a good restaurant at *a village 6 miles from here*. (=5b))
- (15) a. (He is at the station.) *She is at *it*, too.
 (Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English Japanese Dictionary)
 b. (He is in the station.) She is in *it*, too. (*ibid.*)

It is also important that in (16), the route is presumed, and *Tokyo* and *Chicago* are seen as one of the stops when *at* is used.

- (16) a. We arrived at/in *Tokyo* – at *Shimbashi* – in *Japan*. (=6c))
 b. The party stopped at *Chicago* on its way to New York.
 (Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English Japanese Dictionary)

As for the English preposition *in*, it is normally assumed that the place introduced is where events or activities are conducted, and it does not matter whether the place is large or small (Taishukan's Unabridged Genius English Japanese Dictionary). Therefore, *at* tends to require a supplementary conditional context or restricted situation.

- (17) a. He lives in *London*. (=6a))
 b. The baby is sleeping in *the cradle*. (Herskovits 1986: 149)

However, the French preposition *à* does not require such a context as the English preposition *at*. The sentences in (18) indicate that *dans* rather than *à* is likely to refer to concrete and individual places. For example, the expression *à université* is used in (19a) when we want to discuss a university in general (Hakusuisha Larousse Dictionnaire Français Japonais).

- (18) a. dîner au *restaurant* “eat at the restaurant” (=8d))
 b. dîner dans *un restaurant célèbre* “eat at a famous restaurant” (=8e))
- (19) a. Il étudie à *université*. (Hakusuisha Larousse Dictionnaire Français Japonais)
 he study at university
 “He studies in university.”
 b. Il étudie dans *une université de province*. (*ibid.*)

he study in a university of provinces
 “He studies in a university in the provinces.”

It can be thought that the meanings “the clearly distinguished inside” or “all over” possibly added by using *dans*, which was discussed in the previous section, are related to this restriction.

- (20) a. Ce quartier se trouve dans l'est de Paris. “This district is located in the east of Paris.” (=13d))
 b. habiter dans Paris “live all over Paris” (=13f))

The discussion in this section is summarized in Table 2. The English preposition *at* and French preposition *dans* tend to require specific locative information. Considering Table 1, *at* and *dans* can cover a shorter spectrum of the size of a place than *in* and *à*, respectively.

Table 2: A relationship between the English prepositions *at*, *in* and French prepositions *à*, *dans* in terms of the particularity of a place (the shade parts show the semantic restriction)

English prepositions	<i>at</i>	<i>in</i>
French prepositions	<i>à</i>	<i>dans</i>

3.3. Reconsidering Locative Sense “Point” by the English Preposition *At* and French Preposition *À*

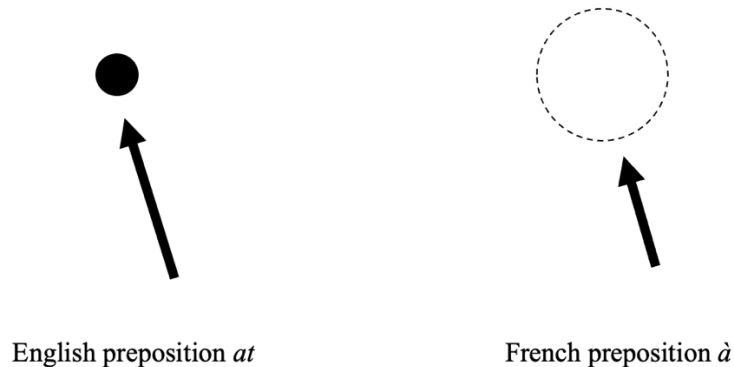
We now focus on the difference in the locative sense “point” between the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*. It is true that these two prepositions indicate a locative point, but what is regarded as this point differs. The English preposition *at* selects and restricts a place as a point concretely, so that it is likely to need extra context or information, as in (21b) and (22).

- (21) a. ?The restaurant is at the village. (=14a))
 b. There is a good restaurant at a village 6 miles from here. (=14b))
- (22) (The speaker is away from the situation) John is at the supermarket. (=10b))

The French preposition *à*, however, indicates a place as a point abstractly or generally, like in (23). Thus, the ways of making locative sense “point” are different between *at* and *à*, as illustrated in Figure 1.

- (23) a. Mon frère est à *Paris*. “My brother is in Paris.” (= (13a), cf. (13b))
 b. dîner au *restaurant* “eat at the restaurant” (= (18a), cf. (18b))
 c. Il étudie à *université*. “He studies in university.” (= (19a), cf. (19b))

Figure 1: Difference in construal of locative point between the English preposition *at* and French preposition *à*



4. Conclusion and Prospects

From the above discussion, this paper concludes that the English preposition *at* has a locative sense “point,” which is brought by the concrete restriction of a place possibly with conditional contexts or extra information. In contrast, the French preposition *à* does not have such restrictions. However, this paper does not consider the other meanings and usages of these prepositions, such as in their temporal sense. This discussion needs to be refined for future research.

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