

Why Don't They Bury You in the Prairie?: Notes on Conceptualization and the Selection of Prepositions in English

Ohashi, Hiroshi

University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Japan : Associate Professor

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Why Don't They Bury You *in* the Prairie?

Notes on Conceptualization and the Selection of Prepositions in English*

Hiroshi Ohashi

Oh bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild coyotes will howl over me
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the wind blows free
Oh bury me not on the lone prairie

1. Introduction

The above lines are from an American traditional folk song. Here, the verb *bury* co-occurs with *on* rather than *in*, the preposition that collocates with it most frequently. Regarding the prepositional phrase, a more familiar collocation would be in the title of the TV series called *Little House on the Prairie*. This article is a case study of conceptualization involved in the choice of prepositions with a verb and a noun phrase in English. I will focus my discussion on the collocations of the verb *bury* and the noun phrase *the prairie* with prepositions and examine how they are motivated by the way we conceive objects and situations involved. First, in Section 2, in order to lay the foundation for the subsequent discussion, I will take a brief look at the functions of three basic spatial prepositions, *in*, *on*, and *at*, and observe differences in conceptualization they evoke. Next, in Sections 3 and 4, I will observe the collocations of *bury* and *the prairie* with prepositions, respectively, and examine ways of conceptualization that motivate the choices, using spontaneous examples from the British National Corpus (hereafter referred to as

BNC). Then, in Section 5, I will discuss how the coding by *bury ... on the prairie* and its related strings are motivated. Section 6 is for the short summary of the discussion and concluding remarks.

2. The Functions of *In*, *On*, and *At*

Before starting the analysis of our examples, it would be helpful to look at the functions of the prepositions that I will be concerned with in the following discussion.¹ Since I will be focusing on their spatial meanings, the description is not going to be comprehensive, but limited to their basic function which is to denote spatial relations. I will also look at replaceability of one preposition by another in certain cases and, if replaceable, the difference in implications from different modes of conceptualization.

I adopt cognitive approaches to language and postulate that the meaning of a linguistic expression resides in the conceptualization of a given situation. Following Langacker (1987) among others, I assume that prepositions express an atemporal relation and refer to a thing situated in a relation as the “trajector” and the reference object that situates it as the “landmark.”

Employing these basic concepts, I take the function of *in* as expressing that the trajector is included or contained in the landmark.² The inclusion or containment relation can be three-dimensional as in (1a), two-dimensional as in (1b), or one-dimensional as in (1c).

- (1) a. the bird in the cage
- b. the man in the mirror
- c. the gap in the border (Herskovits 1986: 44)

(1a) represents a prototypical example where both the trajector and the landmark are three-dimensional. While (1b) also depicts a “normal” way of conceptualization, here, the three-dimensional

mirror is abstracted to a two-dimensional plane with the profile on its surface that assumes the most important role in terms of function. By contrast, as Herskovits (1986: 45) notes, (1c) does not illustrate "a widely useful conceptualization," since it involves "an inclusion in a one-dimensional object."

On represents "contiguity" or "contact" between a trajector and landmark.

- (2) a. the book on the desk
- b. the café on the street

To be precise, in (2a), the lower surface of the book is contiguous with the upper surface of the top plane of the desk. In (2b), the region where the café stands is conceived of as being in contact with the street.

In addition, *on* implies "support" of a trajector by the landmark, as perceivable in (2a). The implicature may be more obvious in the following examples.

- (3) a. the picture on the wall
- b. the coat on the hanger

At is used when the landmark is conceptualized as a geometric point. However, with physical objects, the trajector nor the landmark need not actually be points, but only be close enough to be viewed or conceptualized as points, as illustrated in the following examples.

- (4) a. I will be waiting at the school gate.
- b. The coffee shop is at the next corner.

One implication to be noticed here with examples such as (4b) is that they evoke a motion along an imaginary path. For example, (4b) is appropriately used when the speaker is driving along a street that intersects with another street, where the coffee shop stands. The same kind of movement is implied in the following examples.

- (5) a. John is staying at London tonight.
b. The marchers converged at Times Square. (Lee 2001: 28)

Although these prepositions denote different spatial relations, it often happens that one can replace another, since we conceptualize “the same” things and events in different ways. Thus, to take an often-cited contrast as an example, as Herskovits (1986: 132) holds, one will say (6a) as well as (6b), depending on the view one takes or the type of knowledge one employs.

- (6) a. Jonas is at the store.
b. Jonas is in the store.

(6a) suggests that the speaker is taking a close-up view or his or her knowledge is direct or precise, while (6b) implies that the speaker is taking a remote view or his or her knowledge is indirect or imprecise. Herskovits (1986: 132) also claims the same contrast applies to the following pair, including *at* and *on*.

- (7) a. John is at the beach.
b. John is on the beach.

Needless to say, there are many more implications than the ones introduced above that are evoked by the uses of these prepositions. However, the above mentioned basic functions as well as different implications derived by different prepositions will suffice as a preliminary description for the subsequent discussion. Other uses and implicatures of both these and other prepositions will be presented when deemed necessary in the course of discussion. Now, let us turn to a detailed examination of the collocations of the use of *bury*, and suggest some of the conceptualizations involved.

3. *Bury*

The central meanings of *bury* is, according to LDCE⁴, is “to put someone who has died in a grave” and “to put something under the ground,” as illustrated in the examples (8) and (9), respectively.

- (8) a. He was buried in the churchyard of St. Mary's. (LDCE⁴)
- b. He was buried in Highgate Cemetery. (OALD⁷)
- c. ... soldiers who helped to bury the dead in large communal graves... (COBUILD⁵)
- (9) a. Electric cables are buried beneath the streets. (LDCE⁴)
- b. ... be buried under four feet of snow (KDEC)
- c. The dog had buried its bone in the garden. (OALD⁷)
- d. They make the charcoal by burying wood in the ground and then slowly burning it. (COBUILD⁵)

In the first sense, the verb collocates with *in*, whose complements refers to the spaces where the bodies are put, such as the churchyard in (8a), a cemetery in (8b) and graves in (8c), which are conceived of as three-dimensional. In the second sense where the “containers” are not so specific as in the cases of (8), one has more variety in the choice of prepositions, depending on the co-occurring noun phrase. In (9a) in which the landmark is “the streets,” abstracted away here as a plane that covers the space where the trajector is placed, one would use *beneath* to refer to the underground space. Likewise in (9b), the container is a deep layer of snow, of which the surface is profiled as the active zone of the landmark, thus motivating the use of *under*. On the other hand, in (9c) and (9d), *in* is used, which suggests that both “the garden” and “the ground” are conceptualized as three-dimensional with their surfaces being the top planes of the underground “containers.”

These central senses, together with the most frequent collocation, is metaphorically extended to mean “to give all your attention to

something" (LDCE⁴), as in sentences such as (10).

(10) After the divorce, she buried herself in her work. (LDCE⁴)

The three prepositions that are coherent with the prototypical conceptualization of the verb *bury* appear frequently in spontaneous text and speech. I examined the frequency of the verb's collocation with prepositions within five words after its appearance in the BNC. The result shows that *bury* co-occurs with *in* in a total of 1149 instances where it is used to express the two central meanings illustrated above, as well as other meanings.

In is also followed by body parts in which one covers his or her face, as shown in the following examples (underlines mine; the same is true in the following corpus examples).

- (11) a. I start crying and bury my face in my father's shoulder.
b. She wanted to ... ; to bury her face in the soft mat of curly hair which covered his chest.
c. Laura placed her elbows on the dressing-table, leaning forward to bury her face in her hands for a moment.

It also appears very frequently in the above mentioned metaphorical usage, depicting the targets of one's attention, as illustrated in the following examples.

- (12) a. When I was at college I used to bury my nose in a book rather than join one of the societies.
b. The quickest way to absorb a distant culture is to bury yourself in a novel.
c. And he knew he'd be more keenly aware of her loss than ever because he wouldn't be able to bury himself in his work.

Under appears in 101 instances, some of which are shown in the following.

- (13) a. The newspapers say Mills was half buried under branches and leaves ...
- b. ... now I had a flimsy suspicion that I might be buried under snow and never rise again to the surface.
- c. Suddenly all she wanted to do was get home and bury her head under her pillow.
- d. I am buried under the paper-work.

Beneath occurs 55 times and two examples are shown below.

- (14) a. So, Arthur now lies buried beneath the Abbey.
- b. Only 20% of electric cables are buried beneath the streets in Tokyo, compared with 100% in London and Paris.

In addition to the above prepositions that are coherent with the prototypical meanings of the verb, other prepositions co-occur with it, although in relatively fewer instances. There are 25 examples that include *against*, in which *bury* is used in the same sense as those in examples (11), as shown below.

- (15) a. He lowered his head to bury his mouth against her neck.
- b. She wanted to turn to face him, to bury her face against that broad chest ...

Now, let us turn to look at examples that include *at*. The data from the BNC include the second most frequency of 156 instances of *at* used with *bury*. As mentioned with example (6) in Section 1, how we perceive the situation and objects within that situation is related to our way of conceptualization. Interestingly, in some examples, the motivation for choosing *at* could be inferred from the context. To take a look at examples, allow me long quotations to more easily demonstrate the context.

- (16) a. ..., they paused by the grave of Eugen of Savoy, buried at the west end of the south aisle chapel.

- b. After sorely abusing the corpse, they buried it at the foot of the gallows, intending the burial as a final disgrace.
- c. He thought of the children buried alive at the bottom of the mineshafts.
- d. I have fallen in love with American names. The sharp names that never get fat. The snakeskin-titles of mining claims, The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat, Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

SO WROTE Stephen Vincent Benet, who also penned the immortal line, “Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.”

- e. His last expedition was to the volcanoes of Indonesia and the Philippines. On the return voyage he became ill with heat apoplexy or enteric fever, and died 26 August 1913 on the Red Sea. He was buried at Suez.

In each of the examples in (16a-c), there is a path related with the place for the burial. The south aisle chapel in (16a) is abstracted as a horizontal axis, while “the gallows” in (16b) and “the mineshaft” in (16c) are abstracted as vertical axes. Thus, the places at issue are naturally conceived of as points on the paths, motivating the coding by *at*. The line quoted in (16d) is part of lyrics that read “I shall not be here / I shall rise and pass / Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.” Thus “Wounded Knee” is conceptualized here as one of the points on the path the author follows, as in the cases of (4b) and (5a-b), which makes the coding by *at* quite natural. The same account could be applied to (16e), where Suez is conceptualized as one of the points on the imaginary map that displays the track of the man’s journey.³

On the other hand, other examples include nothing explicit that suggests the motivation for different conceptualization, as illustrated in the following.

- (17) a. Ealdred died 11 September 1069 and was buried at York.
b. He will be buried at City Cemetery.
c. He was buried at St Cross church, Oxford.

At seems to be likely to be found in the description of a life history of a person, which could be deemed as a type of “indirect” knowledge, but it has to be left for further investigation.

Still other examples involving *at* do not seem to accept other explanation than convention. The examples include the following.

- (18) a. “... She could have had his body taken back to Liverpool and buried at home,” Maureen said.
b. “Did I ever say I wanted to be buried at sea?”

At home and *at sea* are conventionalized collocations and, though there might have been motivations for seeing home and sea as points, I have no ready systematic data to prove it. Therefore, I will leave these examples as just due to convention.

Lastly, there are 31 instances of *bury* co-occurring with *on* in my data, as cited in (19).

- (19) a. Before 1765 Protestants were not allowed to be buried on the island and had to be buried at sea off Garaja.
b. He died 4 December 1304 at his manor at Wolvesey, close to his newly founded college dedicated to St Elizabeth of Hungary, and was buried on the north side of the choir of his cathedral church.
c. ... a story of a mate who buried his “hash” on a beach in Morocco, ...
d. His head was cut off, buried on Tower Hill facing France ...
e. “So I was, sir, but I thought my bride had better see something of what’s s goin’ on in town before I take her back and bury her on the Moor.

The above examples include nouns that appear with *on* more than once. Here again, we may be looking at conventional collocations. Herskovits (1986: 147) puts forward a partial list of landmark areas

that can be used both with *in* and *on*, and those that can be used only with *on*. According to the list, *beach* allows only *on*, whereas *island* allows both. A BNC search for the collocation of *island* with prepositions presents far more occurrences with *on* than *in*. Therefore, *on* could be regarded as a primary collocation of *island*. Other words in my data that collocate with it are: *site*, *shore*, *seabed*, *mound*, *brain*, *parish*, *page*, *mouth*, *outskirts*, *path*, *land*, *foot*, *chest*, and *shoulder*. Most of the collocations seem to be motivated by viewpoint shift or due to convention, but discussing each example is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, it will suffice to notice that in many situations contiguity is profiled or foregrounded, thus well-motivated coding by *on*. Other examples where the motivation is not noticeable with full certainty have to await further investigation. The example in (16e) is directly related with discussion of the collocation *bury ... on the prairie* and I will deal with it in Section 5.

In this section I looked at the central meanings of *bury* and the prototypical scene that associate with them. That motivates the use of *in* more naturally than any other prepositions. My quantitative analysis of corpus examples demonstrates that *in* is the prototypical collocation with the verb. It also presents examples with other prepositions that involve similar modes of conceptualization, such as *under*, *beneath*, and *against*. Then, I examined examples where the landmark is coded by *at* and *on* that involve different modes of conceptualization from *in*. By looking at the contexts, however, I showed the different modes are naturally motivated in many examples. On the other hand, in others where the motivation is not so obvious, convention seems to be the dominant factor. Next, I turn to the meaning and conceptualization involved in *the prairie* and the selection of prepositions.

4. *The Prairie*

The complement of the preposition *the prairie* has a distinctive feature in its spatial configuration that is crucial pertaining to the selection of prepositions. It is its vastness. The vastness implies no inherent boundaries that would motivate the conceptualization of the region as a container. The same point is indicated in Talmy (2000) when he discusses the existence of “cracks” in English expressions depicting certain types of spatial configuration. He argues that *prairie* expresses “a roughly horizontal plane without boundaries in the region of consideration” and thus would render collocations with a certain types of prepositions not fully appropriate, as seen in the following examples from Talmy (2000: 234).

- (20) a He walked across the prairie.
- b. He walked along the prairie.
- c. He walked around the prairie.

(20a) is considered as slightly appropriate because “*across* implies the presence of two opposite borders,” which is lacking in the conceptualization of *prairie*. Likewise, *prairie* is incompatible with a narrow-strip plane that is required for the use of *along* and *around*.

Another aspect that seems to be involved in the conceptualization of the space depicted by *the prairie* and is relevant to the choice of prepositions is the “point of view” that is evoked by its vastness. In order to identify a space as vast, one seems to need to have a bird’s-eye view from above as a virtual point of observation. If this is the case, it will be inadequate for viewing the prairie as the burial site as three-dimensional and will more naturally profile its surface and motivate to perceive the region as two-dimensional.

From these two considerations, *the prairie* is predicted to be prototypically incompatible with *in*, which collocates with *bury* most frequently. This prediction is borne out by the fact that there is no

instance of *in the prairie* either in the BNC or Collins Wordbanks Online. However, as mentioned above, a different mode of conceptualization could be predicted to be possible here, too. In fact, Herskovits (1986: 147) includes *the prairie* in the list of items expressing regions that can co-occur with both *on* and *in*. Since there is no instance of the string of *in the prairie* in both corpora, I searched for examples on Google. The following excerpts from a passage titled "PRAIRIES OF ILLINOIS" that claims the need to restore the deteriorating prairie in Illinois offers good examples of how "the prairie" is naturally conceptualized as consisting of bounded regions.

- (21) These surveys delineate the boundaries of the prairies and timber about the time of settlement in the 1820's and 1830's.

(<http://dnr.state.il.us/conservation/naturalheritage/prairie/ESTAB.HTM>)

When the author writes about prairie restoration, he or she refers to some parts of the land as "remnant prairie," which is conceptually delineated from other regions. Therefore the passage reads as follows.

- (22) Never dig any prairie plants from any remnant prairie unless it is about to be destroyed. Most prairie plants can be propagated easily from seed. Leave the plants where they are growing so others can enjoy them in the prairie. Prairies continue to be lost in Illinois due to development, road construction, herbicides, woody invasion, and neglect. Taking plants from these prairie remnants makes these sites less diverse and forever diminishes the experience of visitors.

"Prairie" is suggested to be viewed as having boundaries and being delineated from other "prairies."

In this connection, it would be instructive to compare the

collocation of *in* with that of a word that describes a similar configuration, such as “plains.” The result of a BNC search shows six instances of the string, *in the plains*, as cited below.

- (23) a. “These are the commandments and the ordinances which the Lord commanded by Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.”
- b. “I thought he liked all that warrior business, you on a horse and your old grandfather and all that? “
“Cripes, yes, on a horse with a spear in the plains of the Punjab ...”
- c. In desert and hilly regions, where agricultural production is low, people obtain two-thirds of their energy from firewood. In the plains, its contribution drops to 37 per cent, and that of crop residues goes up to 31 per cent .
- d. In the Auvergne, the major agriculture/conservation conflict is clearly in the plains, especially the extensive limagne north of Clermont, ...
- e. But the Romano-British liked to live, or were made to live, in the plains, where water was plentiful and no natural defences hindered the rule of legionaries.
- f. The first of its kind, LOFT is a 50 megawatt thermal, scaled-down PWR located at the heart of a vast experimental reactor station in the plains of Idaho.

At a glance, one will notice that the noun phrase in each example of (23a-e) refers to a flatland in a place different from the United States: it refers to a region in Jordan in (23a), India in (23b-c), France in (23d), and England in (23e). This fact exhibits a striking contrast to *the prairie* in the BNC being used exclusively to refer to the area in the United States. There are at least two ways to account for the difference in collocation between the two synonyms. One is to

interpret that *the prairie* is granted so special a status as to make it very unusual to evoke boundaries with it, while *the plains* is not. The other is to think that the difference is due to convention. The chances are that it is not the choice of one or the other. Rather it might be that the referentially proper-name like use of *the prairie* associated with a special way of conceptualization of the space has promoted conventionalization of its collocation. However, there is no way of confirming this at the moment and it has to be left for further consideration.

In this section, I examined the conceptualization pertaining to *the prairie* and maintained that it is reflected in its collocations with prepositions.

5. *Bury ... on the Prairie*

Now I am in a position to give an account for how the string *bury ... on the prairie* is motivated. As discussed in Section 3, while the place for burying is most frequently coded as three-dimensional as suggested by the use of *in*, different modes of conceptualization are possible, as suggested by the use of *at* and *on*. From the discussion in Section 4, the conceptualization of the spatial configuration of the prairie does not fit for the coding by *in*, the most frequent collocation with *bury*.

By contrast, the collocation with *on* is quite natural because it does not imply the existence of boundaries. It is also well-motivated because burying can be conceptualized as contiguous with the surface of the land that is abstracted as a two-dimensional plane and the buried body is supported by the land so schematized. This conceptualization is quite natural if my assumption is correct that *the prairie* evokes a bird's-eye point of view that has access to the surface of the land but not to the three-dimensional underground

space that would require a closer view. I claim that this is the reason why *on* but not *in* collocates quite naturally both with *bury* and *the prairie*.

Let me examine related examples that will lend indirect supporting evidence to the claim just made above. First, look at example (19e), repeated in the following.

- (19) e. “So I was, sir, but I thought my bride had better see something of what’s s goin’ on in town before I take her back and bury her on the Moor.”

According to LDCE⁴, *the Moor* is “a wild open area of high land,” thus the same account seems to hold with the collocation of *the prairie* with *on*.

Next, I would need to consider a different mode of conceptualization pertaining to *bury* + preposition + *the prairie*. It comes as no surprise that the most natural coding of the space is by *on*. But a different mode of conceptualization could be predicted to be possible here, too. Although there is no instance of *bury ... in the prairie* in my corpus data, one will find examples on Google. The following are quoted from the first three websites that came up as the result of the search for the string “buried in the prairie.”⁴

- (24) a. More and more caravans pass through the territory. One day, a strange Norwegian couple arrives with a tragic story. The wife, Kari, is insane with grief because her son died and had to be buried in the prairie.

(<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/giants/summary.html>)

- b. The 150 nuclear-tipped Minuteman ICBMs buried in the prairie around Minot Air Force Base, ND, remain as much on alert today as during the Cold War.

(<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/facility/minot.htm>)

- c. Another woman, Kari, goes insane due to the loss of her son who was buried in the prairie without a coffin or funeral service.

(http://www.literarytraveler.com/authors/laura_ingalls_wilder.aspx)

(24a) and (24c) happen to be part of plot overviews of a novel about pioneer families. As *in* implies that the landmark is three-dimensional, these examples seem to induce an implication that *her son* was buried in the soil of the prairie and evoke a closer view. The close-up viewpoint seems to be more obvious in (24b), where the feature of the buried entity is elaborated.

A thorough inquiry into other examples would be beyond the limit of this article. However, from the above observations, it would be fair to say that the collocation is not completely arbitrary nor completely conventional. Rather it proves to be at least partially motivated by conceptualization.

6. Summary and Concluding Remarks

In this article I presented a case study of how a particular collocation may be motivated by conceptualization. Unlike the prototypical case, burying is conceptualized as being involved with the surface of the ground when the region it takes place is a vast area with no boundaries evoked with it. This conceptualization motivates the collocation of *on* with the verb *bury* and the noun phrase *the prairie*.

In the course of discussion I have tried to explore alternative ways of conceptualization that motivate the use of other prepositions. As Talmy (2000: 230) notes, when an alternative is available, “it is ... the speaker that determines the highlighting of one group of factors or of another.” “But,” he further writes, “the determinants of, and the degree of consciousness involved in, the selection await investigation.” I hope I have shed some light on factors that motivate

for choosing one or another mode of conceptualization, using specific linguistic items.

Notes

- * I thank Joseph Tomei of Kumamoto Gakuen University for invaluable comments on the data and argument of the draft as well as for suggestions for style improvement. Needless to say, all remaining errors are my own.
- ¹ The description of the functions of the prepositions in this section draws heavily on Herskovits (1986).
- ² For the use of the notion “containment” as referring to the functional aspect, see also Vandeloise (1991, 1994) and Tyler and Evans (2003). Although this is a very important distinction to account for implicatures inferred in the uses of *in*, I will not be strict with it in this article, since it is not directly relevant to the subsequent discussion.
- ³ Joseph Tomei (personal communication) has suggested to me regarding (16e) that alternatively, *at* signals a sufficient distance from the location to blur details. He has further pointed out that, in fact, all of the examples of *at* I give are historically distant and that it sounds very strange to discuss burying a contemporary using the preposition *at*. If this is the case, *at* might be interpreted as suggesting the “indirectness” of the writer’s knowledge, as mentioned with regard to example (6b).
- ⁴ Needless to say, I disregarded instances functioning as modifiers, as illustrated in such examples as, “... the artifacts buried in the prairie soil,...” and “Buried in the Prairie Vine Cemetery....”

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Dictionaires

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- LDCE⁴=*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 4th ed. (2005) Pearson Education, Harlow
- OALD⁷=*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 7th ed. (2005) Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- COBUILD⁵=*Collins COBUILD Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, 5th ed. (2006) HarperCollins, Glasgow.

Corpora

- BNC=British National Corpus
- WB=Collins Wordbanks Online