Prepositions vanishing in Kenya

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A case of syntactic simplification in a variety of East African English

ACCORDING to Schmied (1991a:52), 'there is some evidence that language learners in general use simplification strategies at an early stage and try to reproduce memorized phrases from the target language later, irrespective of the linguistic and pragmatic context.' The English prepositional system is well known for its complexity and language learners might well be inclined to simplify in order to reduce such complexities. Indeed, there is evidence from the East African component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-EA) of such a process of simplification in the use of prepositions in the English of Kenya. As a result, some prepositions might well disappear from use in this second-language variety of English.

Both a trap and a nightmare

Connell acknowledges that "prepositions have always been a trap for the unwary, and something of a nightmare for the foreign learner" (1991:42). In addition, however, he notes that some prepositions, particularly *in* and *at*, are losing out to *on* in British English (BrE), through a process of simplification in which different uses of similar phrases are being, as it were, ironed out. If such simplification is found in a native variety of English, then one might well also expect second-language speakers to try and simplify the language, particularly the complex prepositional system, to an even larger extent. This is in fact the case with prepositional usage in Kenyan English (KenE), where simplification, among other factors, is leading to the gradual disappearance of certain prepositions.

This paper looks at how prepositional usage in KenE differs from BrE usage by comparing the occurrence of a selection of prepositions in two components of the International Corpus of English (ICE): the British (ICE-GB) and the Kenyan (ICE-K) components. (The second of these components is is a slightly modified version of the larger East African component of the international corpus (ICE-EA). It contains one million words from written and spoken Kenyan texts and spoken Tanzanian texts. The complete ICE-EA contains spoken and written texts from both Kenya and Tanzania.)

In vs. *into*; *on* vs. *onto*

One of the ways in which the prepositional system is simplified in KenE is the failure to make distinctions between prepositions of location and direction, in which the former are used where the latter would be expected.

Quirk *et al*. (1985:675) indicate that the function of a preposition to express location is associated with stative verbs such as *be, stand* and *live*. Prepositions of direction, on the other hand, accompany verbs of motion such as *walk*, *swim* and *fly*. Causative verbs such as *place*, *sit* or *lay* can use prepositions of both location and direction. They also argue that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between prepositions of location and those of direction, with the latter indicating the cause and the former the effect. For instance, the relationship between the sentences *She jumped into the water* and *She is in the water* is one of cause and effect. But the sentences below, taken from ICE-K, indicate that these restrictions in the use of such prepositions are not always followed, the tendency in KenE being to use *in* with stative as well as dynamic verbs to express location as well as direction:

1 For guys you just wash Now imagine like

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Flo's hair yeah if that thing just decides to *go in it*. (S1A001K)

2 … but let us take the length and the width of Zanzibar island and the people who are there What do you think if there are so many people just *coming* in the country. (S1A018T)

3 And in some government meetings we have a tendency of defending our status as countries I hope the NGOs will not *fall* in that problem We have to be open and be united as East African. (S2B030T)

These examples indicate that the cause and effect relationship between prepositions of location and direction is not always maintained in KenE. For example, in [1], the verb *go* is dynamic and the preposition *into* would therefore obtain in Standard English, especially because hair (the hair of a lady called Flo is the intended meaning here) should be seen as a volume into which something goes. In [2], the preposition *into* is not obligatory because, "when a place is being regarded as a destination rather than a position, it is more natural to see it vaguely as a geographical point than as an area. Hence the more frequent use of *to* than of *into* in reference to countries" (Quirk *et al*., 1985:677). This means that in BrE, only the prepositions *to* or *into* may be used in such a context.

The preposition *in* as used in [2] is not therefore an option in Standard English, but is common in KenE. In terms of metaphorical expressions such as *get into trouble*, the preposition *into* is obligatory (according to Quirk *et al*., 675). Example [3], which has a similar but non-standard metaphorical expression *fall in that problem*, would therefore be expected to have *into* and not *in*. This preference for the preposition *in* for *into* in KenE partly explains why the former occurs with a higher relative frequency in ICE-K (19.3%) than in ICE-GB, (16.4%). It also explains why its counterpart *into* occurs with a lower frequency in the GB than in the K corpus. A similar scenario is also found with the prepositions *on* and *onto*, which also have a cause-and-effect relationship and are used with similar restrictions as *in* and *into* in Standard English. Corpus evidence shows that *onto* occurs more than twice as often in ICE-GB, (74 times), as in ICE-K, (34 times). One way of explaining this variability of occurrence is that (like *in*) *on*, a preposition of location, is used in place of *onto,* a preposition of direction, in KenE. The two examples below illustrate this overlap of functions.

4 What happens when light *falls* on the breaking surface? Well there is a tension somewhere. (S1B005T)

5 The Flywhisk Fling it sharply and growl Rebels hide their heads Wave it gently and smile Flies flit from pus-drooping eyes *Sling it on* the arm finally Empty stomachs will drum for you. (S2B078K)

The use of prepositions of direction for both location and direction is an attempt by second language learners to simplify the target language. Literature on second-language acquisition cites both generalization and simplification as strategies employed by learners in the process of acquiring a second language.

Another reason for overlap in the use of these prepositions is influence from local Kenyan languages. Most of these languages make no distinctions between prepositions of location and direction. Instead, they have one preposition of general direction, which is used for a wide range of semantic functions. For instance, in Kiswahili, the lingua franca in East Africa and Kenya's national language, the prepositional suffix *-ni* means *in* and *into,* and in certain contexts *on* and *onto*. Thus, it serves as a preposition of direction and location depending on the verbal context. The same case applies to Kikuyu, one of the most widely spoken local languages in Kenya. It has a prepositional suffix *-in*, which is used to indicate direction as well as position. The overlapping functions of the English prepositions of location and direction in KenE could therefore be due to the carrying-over into English of prepositional patterns in local languages that are spoken widely in Kenya.

Expressing dimensional properties

Another area of simplification has to do with the use of prepositions to express the dimensional properties of a location. In Standard English, the preposition *in* is used with entities which are considered to be three-dimensional, *on* is used with two-dimensional locations, while *at* is used for dimensionless entities. However, *in* can also be used with locations which are two-dimensional (such as a field), when they are considered as enclosed entities (cf. Quirk *et al*., 1985:676).

In KenE there is a tendency to iron out the semantic distinctions denoted by the use of

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Table 1: The distribution of the semantic functions of *off* in ICE-K and ICE-GB

Semantic functions	ICE-K		ICE-GB	
	Frequency	%age	Frequency	%age
Negative position	17	5%	37	21%
Source	16	33%	81	46%
Metaphorical	12	25%	39	22%
Idiomatic	3	6%	19	11%
Total	48	0.48%	176	1.76%

prepositions with, for example, *at* and *on* losing out in various contexts to *in*. We find that the preposition *in* is used instead of *at* in phrases such as *in the meeting*, *in the party*, and *in the conference*, and in place of *on* in expressions such as *in the island* or *in the coast*. The following sentences from the ICE-K illustrate this overlap in the choice of prepositions:

6 There was drought all over It was so dry he says he says uh even the palm tree could not produce liquor I believe this should have been somewhere *in the coast*. (S1B001K)

7 Earlier the co-ordinator of the workshop told the minister that the workshop would reflect on key issues that would be discussed *in the Cairo conference*. (S2B020AT)

8 I hope that your brief stay in Zanzibar has been both fruitful and enjoyable and especially because you are *in an island* of perfume. (S2B053T)

The use of in regardless of the dimensional properties of a location is an attempt to simplify the prepositional system without interfering with intelligibility. This extension of the use of in leads to its higher frequency in ICE-K than in ICE-GB.

Other prepositions which are rare in KenE, and could eventually go out of use, include *off*, *down*, *underneath*, *beneath* and *past*. These occur with very low frequency in ICE-K compared to ICE-GB. In looking at the distribution of their semantic functions in the corpora, we also discover that in ICE-K these prepositions do not perform some of the functions for which they are used in BrE. Such functions are performed by different and or roughly synonymous prepositions, which therefore have a more expanded functional load than their counterparts in BrE (cf. Shields 1989). Each of these prepositions is examined below.

The main functions of *off* in English are the expression of the source or negative location of an entity (i.e. saying that something is not on a particular line or surface). There are striking differences between the frequencies with which this preposition occurs in the two ICE corpora compared in this paper. *Off* occurs 48 times as a preposition in the Kenyan corpus but the British corpus contains 176 tokens: over three times more often in the latter than in the former. This frequency difference suggests differences in the usage of this preposition between KenE and BrE. The distribution of the semantic functions of this preposition in each corpus is also quite different, as Table 1 demonstrates.

Here we notice that *off* in KenE is used mainly as a preposition of negative position and slightly less as a source preposition. It is also used less in idiomatic expressions in KenE than in BrE. However, by looking more closely at the uses of the preposition to express negative position in ICE-K one observes that this usage is also not widespread in KenE. It is concentrated in a few text files in the corpus and is used in specific collocational patterns. For instance, out of the 17 instances expressing this semantic function, 12 are used within the collocational framework <*off* + ? + coast or *off* + ? + road>. Four of the sentences with the latter framework are found in one text category. This means that this spatial function of *off* cannot be called widespread at all in KenE because of this concentration in a specific text category and an apparent restriction of usage. One of the reasons *off* is not used as a source preposition seems to the tendency in KenE to use *from* for this function, in such expressions as *she was pulling things from tables* which in BrE would be *she was pulling things off tables*.

An elicitation test administered to a group of university students in Kenya showed that although some people would use *off* in such

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Table 2: Distribution of semantic functions of down in each corpus

Semantic functions	ICE-K		ICE-GB	
	Frequency	%age	Frequency	%age
Movement	17	47.2%	62	39.2%
Literal	1	2.8%	19	12%
Implied/non-literal movement				
Orientation	14	38.9%	49	31%
Metaphorical	2	5.6%	19	12%
Idiomatic	2	5.6%	9	5.7%
Total	36		158	

contexts, *from* is more common, suggesting that the two co-exist in KenE. The use of *from* in place of *off* may be seen as a process of simplification in which two source prepositions are reduced into one, which consequently has an expanded functional load in KenE. Interestingly though, we sometimes find the two prepositions used together as the following sentence taken from the corpus shows.

9 We are there to educate members of public including the drivers themselves If we find a vehicle to be overcrowded it is our duty to ask these members of public politely to get off from this vehicle to wait for another vehicle. (S1B046K)

In Standard English the expression *get off this vehicle* would be used instead of *get off from this vehicle* which would be considered redundant use of a preposition. The fact that *from* occurs with higher frequency in ICE-K than in ICE-GB partly reflects this taking over of some of the functions of *off*, which also means that *off* could easily go out of use in KenE.

DOWN

This is another preposition with very striking frequency differences between ICE-GB and ICE-K. Although *down* functions prototypically more as an adverb than as a preposition in Standard English, and is, therefore, not expected to perform many prepositional functions, evidence from ICE-K seems to suggest that *down* could also go out of use as a preposition in KenE. It occurs only 36 times as a preposition in the entire Kenyan corpus while it occurs 158 times in the British corpus. The distribution of semantic functions in table 2 shows some of the areas of difference in the usage of *down* between KenE and BrE.

Table 2 shows that *down* is used in KenE mainly to express literal movement and hardly ever to express implied or non-literal movement. There are 17 tokens of *down* expressing literal movement in the corpus (47.2%), and only one instance of non-literal movement (2.8%). Thus, literal movement accounts for nearly half of all the occurrences of *down* in ICE-K. Although this function of *down* is also widespread in the British corpus (39.2%), there are relatively more instances of *down* indicating non-literal movement in ICE-GB than in ICE-K. There are 19 tokens of *down* expressing implied motion in ICE-GB (12%) compared to only one in ICE-K, (2.8%). From this, it becomes clear that the preposition *down* in KenE is restricted to literal movement, in contrast to BrE, where the expression of both literal and non-literal movement is common.

There are also important differences in the collocational patterns of *down* between the two corpora, which point to interesting differences between BrE and KenE. The expression *down +?+road*, for instance, occurs 17 times in the British corpus, eight of which (47%) have metaphorical meanings. Quirk *et al* (1985:683) note that *up* and *down* can be used with reference to horizontal movement, in which case there are no vertical implications in *I walked up and down the platform*. The Kenyan corpus has only three instances of this kind.

This confirms the claim made earlier that *down* in KenE is conceived of only in its vertical sense. When no vertical implications are involved, the preposition *along* is the one used in KenE where *down* might be used in BrE (as in *down the street*). For instance, there are 26 instances of *along +? +road* in the Kenyan corpus spread across six different text categories. These make up 20% of all the occurrences of

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along in ICE-K. The British corpus, on the other hand, has only seven instances of this usage of *along*, which make up only 5.07% of the total number of its occurrences in the corpus. This seems to suggest that *along the road* is used in KenE instead of *down the road*. However, this means that the idiomaticity in the expression *down the road* is completely lost through the replacement with *along*. The results of an elicitation test do indeed confirm that idiomatic use of prepositions is unfamiliar to most Kenyans. For instance, the following sentence taken from ICE-GB was used to test the use of *down*:

10 So, while this mid-term election has not been a disaster for the Republicans it does spell trouble for them further _____ the road.

Out of 46 informants, 28 (61%) indicated that they would use *along* while only 30% chose *down*. The extensive use of *along* in KenE could therefore lead to the disappearance of the prepositional functions of *down* with, the exception of the expression of locations involving vertical inclination.

BENEATH and *UNDERNEATH*

According to Quirk *et al*. (1985:679) b*eneath* and *underneath* are rare formal synonyms of the more common *under*. In comparing the frequencies of these prepositions in the LOB and Brown corpora, they show that the use of the two words varies considerably, *under* being used much more frequently than *below, beneath*, and *underneath*. This pattern is also observed in the two ICE corpora compared in the present study. There are fewer occurrences of the prepositions *beneath* and *underneath* in comparison to *under* in both ICE-GB and ICE-K. But, despite this apparent similarity in general usage, the differing frequencies of occurrence of *beneath* and *underneath* in ICE-GB and ICE-K raise interesting questions about the possible causes of such variability.

As shown in table 3, *beneath* is seven times more frequent in ICE-GB than in ICE-K. One possible conclusion from such variation in frequency is that this is a preposition which is going out of use in KenE. It would be interesting to find out if this preposition (and the others discussed above) was ever used more in KenE than the ICE-K indicates. Unfortunately, there is no earlier corpus of KenE available to provide a basis for comparison.

Table 3: Distribution of semantic categories of *beneath*

Semantic category	ICE-K	ICE-GB
Position – contact	0	14
Position + contact	1	6
Metaphorical	2	6
Idiomatic	1	2
Total	4	28

The other preposition closely related to *beneath* is *underneath*, and corpus evidence suggests that it has vanished from KenE. While there are 22 tokens of *underneath* as a preposition in the British corpus, there are none at all in the Kenyan corpus. In fact, the word itself, whether as preposition or adverb, does not appear to form part of KenE: while it occurs 32 times in the British corpus it is found only once in an adverbial function in the entire one-million-word Kenyan corpus. These differences in frequency may be explained by looking at the synonymous *under,* which is less formal and can be used in place of both *beneath* and *underneath*. This preposition seems to be used in KenE where either *beneath* or *underneath* is chosen in BrE. Consequently, there are more occurrences of *under* in ICE-K than in ICE-GB. Comparing these prepositions, Boers (1996) says that *under* is less specific than *underneath* in indicating contact or separation between related entities.

This means that the use of *under* in place of *underneath* fails to capture the fine semantic distinctions which the latter introduces in locating an entity relative to a referential object. In KenE, the subtle differences that exist between these prepositions are levelled out through a process of simplification such that one preposition of general meaning is used instead of the other more specific ones. Consequently, KenE has fewer synonymous prepositions than BrE.

PAST

Past is another preposition which can also be said to be threatened with disappearance from KenE. The three main functions of this preposition in Standard English are the location of an entity or the expression of the path it follows. *Past* is also used for the expression of time. But

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in KenE only the latter function of this preposition exists. A frequency count shows that it is a very rare preposition occurring only 9 times in the entire ICE-K while it occurs 72 times in ICE-GB. The table below shows the differences in the distribution of the semantic functions of *past* between ICE-K and ICE-GB.

The difference in the frequencies between the two corpora indicates that *past* is almost non-existent in KenE. The distribution of semantic functions also shows that it is a preposition used for various semantic functions in BrE but in KenE it is restricted to time reference. For instance, of the nine tokens in ICE-K six are used to express time. It is striking to note that there is not a single use of *past* to indicate position, with the meaning 'beyond', in ICE-K, and that it is used to express passage only twice, as opposed to 32 times in ICE-GB. From these frequencies, it is clear that *past* has lost its spatial senses in KenE and, if it survives as a preposition, it will remain restricted to time reference. This semantic restriction of *past* in KenE is another attempt to simplify the English prepositional system. This is made possible by the presence of other prepositions which can be used to express the same spatial meanings as *past*. Quirk *et al* (1985: 683), for instance, argue that *past* and other prepositions, like *over* and *across*, contain the meaning of *beyond* but they go further to provide specific information about dimension. This indicates that there is a closeness in meaning between the prepositions *beyond* and *past* and one could easily be used in place of the other. The frequency of *beyond* in ICE-K shows that it is used much more often than *past* in KenE and it also occurs with higher frequency in ICE-K (92 times), than in ICE-GB (69 times).

It therefore appears plausible to argue that the fewer entries of *past* in ICE-K are taken care of by the high frequency of *beyond,* which is used instead of *past* in certain contexts. But as indicated above, *past* is more specific as a locative preposition than *beyond*, which has a more general meaning. As noted earlier, this tendency to use prepositions of general meaning instead of more specific prepositions of location is a kind of simplification of the complex English prepositional system in a second language context. By levelling out some of the semantic distinctions between or among prepositions, the second language speaker is left with fewer prepositions, thereby simplifying the language-learning process.

Table 4: The distribution of semantic functions of *past* in ICE-K and ICE-GB

Semantic category	ICE-K	ICE-GB
Position	0	8
Passage	2	32
Time reference	6	27
Metaphorical	1	5
Total	9	72

Conclusion

In general, we observe that although KenE uses the general English prepositional system, it has simplified it. This is mainly through the ironing out of the subtle semantic distinctions between closely related prepositions, thereby strengthening prepositions of general meaning at the expense of prepositions with specific meanings, which consequently fall out of use. This means that there are fewer synonymous prepositions in KenE than in BrE. Through semantic restrictions in usage, some prepositions perform very limited functions in KenE and this could lead to their eventual disappearance from this developing variety of English. ■

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