1. BACKGROUND

**Spanish prepositions**

- 17 basic prepositions, hundreds of compound prepositions (*NGLE*).
- The compound prepositions have appeared (historically) to specify certain meanings and relieve the basic prepositions of excessive usage workload.
- The topic meaning ("about") is one case in point (Halliday 1967).

**Basic prepositions de and en** have always used this meaning (DE CIYATE DEL, SED HAC SUPER RE NIMI DES) (Bassols de Climent 1967, I).

- *Acera de* and *en torno a* appear later as alternatives.
- Further expressions: en cuanto a, (con) respecto a/de, en relación a/con, en lo tocante a...

**The four prepositional topic expressions**

- *de* (of, from) polysemous, topic only one out of dozens of senses.
- *sobre* (on, over) polysemous, topic only one out of a dozen or so senses.
- *acera de* (about) monosemous, formally related to locative *de* (near, close to).
- *en torno a* (around) polysemous: locative, approximative vs. abstract (*to* meaning).

**Aim of the study**

- Address the differences in usage between four near-synonymous prepositions.
- Are the expressions synonymous or not? What degree?
- What can corpus analysis tell us about synonymy?
- Compare the results of corpus analysis with questionnaires.
- What other information might be used and/or needed in order to reach a "full" account of this issue?

2. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

**Corpus analysis**

- Annotation of examples.
- Individual characterization of each expression.
- Quantitative analysis: multinomial logistic regression (SPSS).

**Questionnaire data**

- Quantitative and qualitative data analysis.
- Comparison of the results.

**Corpus del español (Davies 2002-)**

- Large diachronic corpus of Spanish (100 million words).
- Comparable to the COCA-corpus.

**Syntactic factors**

- HEAD/GOV word class (N, V, A, O / N, pron, V, com),
- HEAD/GOV complexity (NP(1-3) vs. N),
- HEAD/GOV number (sg vs. pl),
- HEAD/GOV definiteness (def vs. indef),
- HEAD/GOV causative (def vs. indef),
- HEAD/GOV modification (modif vs. unmodif),
- HEAD/GOV attributive (attr vs. no attr).

**Semantic factors**

- Head/GOV action (of HEAD and GOV element).
- Head/GOV cognition/action/general Animacy of (HEAD / GOV element).
- Human/Non-human/Collective/Unspecified Presence of other topic expression (e.g. de and sobre) in the same clause.
- Abstract/figurative vs. concrete reading.

3. DATA

**Corpus del español – overview**

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**Characteristics of Head (HEAD)**

- N: 37%
- V: 54%
- A: 5%
- O: 1%
- S: 100%
- P: 100%

**Characteristics of Government (GOV)**

- N: 61%
- V: 24%
- A: 5%
- O: 1%
- S: 100%

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Preliminary observations**

- *De* and *sobre* are highly frequent, despite relatively low percentages of use as TE.
- *Acera de* only functions as a topic expression.
- *En torno a* is the least frequent.
- Based on general frequencies de and sobre are the unmarked pair of TEs, acera de and en torno a are stylistic alternatives.
- But, only acera de and en torno a can be used as sentence-level topicalizers.
- Only de and acera de are used with adjectival heads and take inferences as complements; they are also combined with clausal complements.
- *Sobre* is most restricted, taking only N and V as heads; and N and pronouns as complements.
- *En torno a* is similar to *sobre*, but has a few cases without lexical head and clausal complements.

**What do the different approaches tell us about the synonymy relations between the four TEs?**

- Different approaches yield different kinds of results, e.g. the TEs can be distinguished on different levels, depending on what one looks at and for.
- De and sobre support the default, acera de and en torno a are alternatives.
- *De* is lexically more restricted than *sobre*, but syntactically more independent.
- **Multinomial regression analysis** brings forward very detailed information.
- *De* and *sobre* are best described by the model.
- *De* and *sobre* are best described by the model.
- *Sobre* is never used as preferred verb (vs. nouns in log rank).
- *Acera de* is preferred in more "formal" contexts.
- *En torno a* is not preferred.

**References**