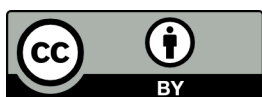


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NORWEGIAN PREPOSITION «PÅ»: SEMANTIC CATEGORIES AND TACTICS OF TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

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The article presents research on Norwegian preposition på semantics and the ways of rendering it into English. The objective of our research is the semantic classification of meanings of på in the original Norwegian text and the analysis of corresponding translations in the parallel corpus. The corpus for the research is the novel “Snømannen” (“Snowman”, 2007) by Jo Nesbø and its official English translation. The results show that Norwegian preposition på encompasses at least 14 semantic categories (spatial, temporal, attributive, part-whole related, etc.) and is never rendered by the same equivalent. General conclusions prove that the Norwegian preposition på possesses a vast spectrum of meanings, which demands the flexibility of translation tactics. Our research suggests a consistent classification of meanings of på and gives practical recommendations to translators regarding the choice of English equivalents.

Keywords: preposition, prepositional phrase, polysemy, translation, Norwegian, semantics.

Павлюк А.В. Норвезький прийменник på: Семантичні категорії та прийоми перекладу англійською.

Стаття присвячена дослідженню семантики норвезького прийменника på та варіантам її передачі англійською мовою. Метою нашого дослідження є семантична класифікація значень på в оригінальному норвезькому тексті та аналіз відповідних перекладів в паралельному корпусі. Корпусами дослідження є роман Ю Несбьо “Snømannen” (“Сніговик”, 2007) та його офіційний переклад англійською мовою. Результати показують що норвезький прийменник på охоплює щонайменше 14 семантичних категорій (просторові, часові, атрибутивні, відношення частини-цілого тощо) та не мають сталого узгодженого відповідника у перекладі. Загальні висновки показують що på має широку різноманітність значень, що, в свою чергу, вимагає особливої гнучкості при перекладі. Відтак, наше дослідження пропонує

узгоджену класифікацію значень på та надає практичні рекомендації перекладачам щодо вибору відповідників в англійській мові.

Ключові слова: прийменник, прийменникова фраза, полісемантичність, переклад, норвезький, семантика

Introduction.

The object of our research is the Norwegian preposition *på* (literally *on*), which, in different contexts, may signify different meanings. In cognitive linguistics, prepositions are considered to be polysemantic units which possess a variety of prototypical and derivative meanings (Tyler & Evans, 2003). Previous studies show that prepositional meanings depend on contexts and often cross the boundaries of literal spatial meaning (Brugman, 1988; Lindstromberg, 2010). Previous studies have shown that prepositional meanings depend on context and often cross the boundaries of literal spatial meaning (Brugman, 1988; Lindströmberg, 2010).

In particular, it has been demonstrated that Norwegian prepositions are associated with a broad range of meanings (Tungseth, 2006; Johansson, 2007). Szymańska (2010) posits that *på* and *i* form different spatial concepts: the first one is typically associated with surface and physical contact, while the second one – with inner space. This contrast is especially relevant for the learners of Norwegian as a second language and for translators and interpreters.

Thus, *på* holds a special place among Norwegian prepositions: it's one of the most frequently used (Kristoffersen, 2008) and, at the same time, most challenging to translate due to its polysemy. Its meanings encompass special, temporal and abstract domains, which makes it a good illustrative example for the analysis of translation tactics.

The objective of this research is the selection of semantic categories, conveyed by *på* and the definition of ways they are rendered into English. For this purpose, the qualitative analysis of parallel corpora has been implemented, consisting of Jo Nesbø's novel «Snømannen» and its English translation.

Thus, the problem in question is formulated in the following way: how the polysemy of *på* manifests itself in a fiction text and what translation tactics are used to render it into English?

Theoretical background.

In cognitive linguistics, prepositions are considered to be the carriers of semantic multivalency: a preposition binds its complement with a certain place, time or abstract value and often broadens its semantics via metaphorical and

metonymic transitions. (Tyler & Evans, 2003). Thus, in Norwegian tradition, the preposition *på* serves as a basic signifier of a placement on the top of a certain surface. However, many of its meanings carry additional, transformational semantics.

Previous research on spatial prepositions in Germanic languages has proven that such grammatical units broaden their meanings onto temporal, attributive and abstract spheres. For instance, English prepositions *on* and *in* possess not only spatial but also temporal and aspectual meanings (Brugman, 1988; Lindstromberg, 2010). It showcases the development of polysemy as a feature of prepositional systems.

Studies dedicated solely to Norwegian prepositions also take into account this phenomenon. In her conceptual research, Szymańska (2010) analyzes the distribution of *i* and *på* in spatial context and comes to the conclusion that these prepositions form different cognitive categories, which should be taken into account both in language learning and in translation. Similar results are showcased in Kristoffersen (2008), demonstrating that the Norwegian preposition *mot* renders different imagery schemes and contrasts these schemes with *på* polysemy.

Tungseth's (2006) dissertation also made an important contribution. He analyzed the functional aspect of Norwegian prepositions in connection with verbs and showed that *på* may signify not only spatial relationships but also efficacy and focus of an action. The research in *Nordlyd* journal (Eide & Kvist, 2015) proves that pairing the verbal semantics with prepositional constructions (*på*, *til*) changes the interpretation of an event, including aspectual characteristics.

Comparative studies of the Danish language (Burholt Kristensen & Sørensen, 2023) demonstrate that *på* is one of the most problematic prepositions to understand for language learners, as it covers a multitude of functions. Taking into account the closeness of the Danish and Norwegian languages, we argue that these results are also relevant for our study.

Despite the availability of a large number of studies dedicated to the spatial semantics of prepositions, there is still a lack of works that immediately analyze the translation of *på* into English in fiction. Our study aims to close this gap.

Thus, we posit the following hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis of semantic multivalency: *på* forms the number of separate but interrelated semantic categories (physical, abstract, temporal, etc.)
2. Hypothesis of translation variety: English rendering of *på* changes depending on a category – it is not limited strictly by the literal *on*, but can be

rendered by either *in*, *at*, *of*, *for* or periphrastic constructions (Kristoffersen, 2008; Eide & Kvist, 2015).

3. Hypothesis of contextual dependence: the function of a verb or a type of an event (static/dynamic, spatial/temporal) correlates with a choice of translation tactics.

All in all, the theoretical background of our study is the cognitive semantics of prepositional polysemy (Brugman, 1988; Lindstromberg, 2010), contemporary works on Norwegian grammar (Tungseth, 2006; Kristoffersen, 2008; Szymańska, 2010), and studies on translation and interlingual influences.

Methodological notes.

The study is based on a comparative analysis of corpora, which includes the original text of the Norwegian novel “Snømannen” by Jo Nesbø and its official English translation. The corpus methods are widely used in contemporary translation and linguistic studies as they allow researchers to trace the systematic conformities between languages and reveal the patterns of rendering the meanings (Baker, 1993; Johansson, 2007).

Our sample includes 108 instances of sentences containing *på*, which were analyzed along with their respective English translations. As a result, we outlined 14 semantic categories that correspond to the approaches of cognitive semantics, where the polysemy of prepositions is considered to be a network of prototypical and derivative meanings.

The categorization was realized according to the principles of image schemas analysis (Lakoff, 1987; Szymańska, 2010). Every separate meaning was matched with the corresponding English translation, taking into account not only formal equivalence but also functional one in the respective context. Such an approach allowed us to preserve objectivity and reproducibility of the results, as other researchers will have the ability to conduct similar analyses based on the same corpora and methodology.

Results and discussions.

In this section, we present the results of the analysis of the corpora, which includes the original text of Jo Nesbø’s ‘Snømannen’ and its English translation. Overall, 14 semantic categories have been detected, including ones that encompass spatial, temporal, attributive and abstract meanings. Given examples showcase the variety of translation decisions: from the straight equivalency (*on*, *in*, *at*) to

periphrastic constructions or reduction of the preposition. Thus, we can witness how one short lexeme can represent a broad spectrum of relations – from specifically spatial ones to abstract characteristics, etc.

Although syntactically a preposition is considered to be a word, signifying the relation between two components, a lexical projection headed by a preposition (prepositional phrase) consists of only one of these components, namely its complement. The other component is usually a head of a larger lexical projection, containing a prepositional phrase. For convenience's sake, from here on, we will refer to this other component as *the outer component*, although, technically, it is not the constituent of a prepositional phrase itself.

Here follow the examples of usage of the preposition classified into 14 categories in accordance with their semantics.

Category 1 includes spatial meaning, physical disposition *on* the surface. For example:

(1.1) “«*Hei, du!*» Hagen ropte til føreren av landroveren og pekte på lyskasteren **på taket**.” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Hey, you!*’ Hagen shouted to the Land Rover driver and pointed at the searchlight **on the roof**.” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(1.2) “**På gulvet** var soppmannens verktøykasse og **på kjøkkenbordet** en lapp med beskjed om at han ville komme tilbake i morgen.” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “**On the floor** was the mould man’s toolbox and **on the worktop** a note saying he would be back the following day.” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

In all analyzed instances pertaining to this category, Norwegian *på* was rendered exclusively as English *on*.

Category 2 deals with spatial meaning. Used when complemented by a toponym, more specifically, a settlement, relatively smaller in size. (Contrastively, *i* is used in the same context, but with settlements relatively larger in size, like cities and countries, e.g. “Og ennå har vi ikke sett en eneste seriemorder **i Norge**” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “And still we haven’t seen a serial killer **in Norway**.” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(2.1) “Klokka to var brøytebilene i aksjon **på Lillestrøm**...” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “At two, the snowploughs were in action **in Lillestrøm**...” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(2.2) “...som en armada fra det ytre rom underla seg jordene, hagene og plenene **på Romerike**.” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “...and invaded the fields, gardens and

lawns of Romerike like an armada from outer space.” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

In the examples from this category, the Norwegian *på* was translated by English prepositions.

Category 3 refers to spatial meaning as well. The preposition is complemented by a location in which a certain event takes place.

(3.1) “*I tillegg til at han foreleser fulltid på Anatomisk institutt.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*At the same time as lecturing full-time at the Anatomy Department.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(3.2) “*På et møte i områdets vel hadde hun foreslått at man burde hugge ned noen av trærne for å slippe inn mer lys...*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*At a local residents’ meeting she had suggested that some of the trees might be cut down to let in more light...*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(3.3) “*Det er fremmet forslag og vedtatt å møtes på Fenris Bar klokka åtte for å drikke seg seriøst fulle.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*A motion has been put forward, and passed, that we meet at Fenris Bar at eight to get seriously drunk.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

In the examined instances pertaining to this category, Norwegian *på* was translated solely by English *at*.

Category 4 depicts the part-whole relations. In this case, the “whole” functions as the complement of a preposition, while “part” is present either immediately before the prepositional phrase, functioning as the head of a larger lexical projection, i.e. noun phrase (4.1; 4.2) or in another position within a sentence.

(4.1) “*...snø hadde lagt seg langs kanten på taket.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*...snow had settled along the edge of the roof.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(4.2) “*...det hang en klokke over inngangen, viserne pekte mot tallet tolv på skiven.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*...a clock hung above the entrance, the hands pointing to twelve on the dial.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(4.3) “*Vinduet over hodet hennes var for høyt på veggen til at hun kunne se ut der hun lå.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*From where she was lying, the window above her head was set too high in the wall for her to see out.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Rendered by various English prepositions, i.e. *in*, *on*, *of*.

Category 5 is used in phrases where the complement of a preposition is the body part. Translated via a variety of English prepositions (5.1; 5.2), as well as non-prepositional constructions (5.3).

(5.1) “*Harry våknet og ble liggende på ryggen i senga og stirre i taket.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Harry woke and lay on his back in bed staring at the ceiling.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011)

As we can see, this example was translated by the spatial preposition *on*.

(5.2) “*Sara dro seg opp på knærne.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Sara pulled herself up onto her knees.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Contrastively, here *på* was rendered by the preposition of direction *onto*.

(5.3) “*Harry ristet på hodet.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Harry shook his head.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

And here we can see the total omission of a preposition; a prepositional phrase is translated by a noun phrase.

Remark. While category 4 and category 5 may seem to have the same underlying basis (that is “part of something”), we decided to split them apart, as under closer examination, it becomes clear that they represent different types of semantic relations. Thus, in category 4 (part-whole relations), *på* signifies structural dependence of the outer component on the prepositional complement, namely, spatial relations between two objects. The translations naturally incline toward English *of*, *on*, *in*, which mark the incorporation of a part into a larger object. At the same time, category 5 marks the usage of *på* with body parts, which semantically function not as “part of something whole” but rather as “reference points for spatial positioning or movement of a subject”. Examples like *på knærne* signify the localization of a body in space, whereas *riste på hodet* is an idiomatic structure, in which *på* completely loses its connection with the “part-whole” relation and solidifies itself as a part of a stable expression. Therefore, we argue that merging these two categories into one would’ve caused the blending of two completely different meanings.

Category 6 deals with spatial meaning, that is orientation as “somewhere”, “on some side”, etc.

(6.1) “*På hver side av stua gikk det en liten gang til hver sin dør.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*On either side of the room ran narrow pathways, each leading to a door.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(6.2) “*Tyngden av tjenesterevolveren dro frakken ørlite ned på høyre side.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*The weight of his service revolver pulled his coat down on the right-hand side.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(6.3) “*Jeg mener jeg har sett det henger en plakat for billige rom på utsida av detstedet.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*I think I’ve seen a poster for cheap rooms hanging outside.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Here we can witness the variety of translation tactics implemented, from the literal translation by *on* (6.1; 6.2) to reduction (6.3), where a prepositional phrase is translated by a non-prepositional structure (an adverb).

Category 7 signifies the attributive function of *på* – marking the feature, property or characteristic of a complement.

(7.1) “*Harry så på den og tenkte på navnet på revefellen.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Harry watched it and was reminded of the name of the fox trap.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(7.2) “*Harry kunne ikke se rødfargen på Skarres ansikt i mørket.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Harry couldn’t see Skarre’s flushed face in the dark.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

While in (7.1) *på* was rendered via an English preposition, in (7.2) it was translated by a non-prepositional construction. While the literal translation of the phrase would look like “*redness of Skarre’s face*”, here, instead of translating with a prepositional phrase, the translator decided to use a past participle construction.

Category 8 signifies the logical function of *på* – providing an example, proof, etc. Here we can witness the case of a logical/abstract binding of the head of a larger lexical projection (typically a noun phrase) to the complement of a prepositional phrase.

(8.1) “*Det er det mest klassiske tegnet på stress.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*That’s the classic sign of stress.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(8.2) “*Hvis Katrine Bratt har denne blodtypen, er det et jævlig bra indisium på at hu har blødd i låven til Ottersen.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*If Katrine Bratt has this blood type it’s an excellent indicator that she bled in Ottersen’s barn.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(8.3) “*Brevet tyder på det, han henviser til Toowoomba.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*The letter would suggest that – he refers to Toowoomba.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

The translation tactics here vary from the translation by preposition (8.1) to reduction (8.2; 8.3). Worth noting that in (8.2) we can see that the corresponding

structure in English doesn't need a preposition whatsoever, while the Norwegian one does.

Remark. While at first glance categories 7 and 8 seem to have the same semantics, we argue that they should be separated. Thus, the principal difference between the two is that category 7 signifies the inner, immanent property of the object: color, name, size or other characteristics (*navnet på revefellen* → *name of the fox trap*). In this case, *på* is the marker of attributive dependence, similar to that of genitive constructions. However, category 8 does not reflect the property of an object, but mediates interpretation, creating a connection between the outer phenomenon and its manifestation. Thus, category 7 signifies “an intrinsic property of an object” while category 8 is about “a feature as a proof or signal of something separate”. We argue that this difference excludes the possibility of merging these two categories into one.

Category 9 refers to temporal meaning. The outer component signifies either clock time (7.1; 7.2; 7.3) or is an adverb, depicting a relative assessment of an event in the temporal context (7.4; 7.5). The complement is a word signifying the part of the day.

(9.1) “*Klokka var halv fire på morgenen og Harry stuptrøtt da han endelig låste seg inn i leiligheten sin.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*it was half past three in the morning and harry was exhausted as he finally unlocked the door to his flat.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(9.2) “*Klokka ni på kvelden var det fremdeles lys i annen etasje på Brynsalléen 6 i Oslo.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*At nine o'clock that evening night lights were still burning on the first floor of Brynsalléen 6 in Oslo.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(9.3) “*Klokka var to på natta...*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*It was two o'clock in the morning...*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(9.4) “*Det var tidlig på kvelden ennå, og de eneste andre gjestene ...*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*It was stillearly evening and the only other customers ...*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(9.5) “*En gang sent på kvelden.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Sometime late that night.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Translation tactics in this category also vary, from translation by preposition (9.1; 9.2; 9.3) to reduction of a preposition (9.4) and translation by a non-prepositional construction (9.5), where, in the translation, the function of the original preposition is carried by a demonstrative pronoun.

Category 10 deals with temporal meaning. The complement of a preposition is either a weekday (10.1; 10.2) or any other day that possesses a proper name (10.3).

(10.1) “*Anledningen var at Liberal **på lørdag** skulle feire at magasinet fylte tjuefem år.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “***On Saturday** we’re having the mother of all parties at the Plaza.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(10.2) “*Min mann står i butikken **på tirsdager og onsdager.***” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*My husband is in the shop **on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.***” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(10.3) “*Jeg fikk den av Mathias **på bursdagen min.***” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*Mathias gave it to me **for my birthday.***” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

In (10.3), context dependence conditions the choice of prepositions in translation – the focus is not on ‘when?’ the action was taken, but rather ‘dedicated to which event?’. Therefore, we can see the choice of corresponding preposition, different to the one in our previous examples.

Category 11 is yet another case of a temporal meaning. It signifies a state or an action that was active/ongoing as of the beginning of the mentioned timeframe.

(11.1) “*Men **på det tidspunktet** hun kunngjorde at han hadde gjort henne gravid...*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “***At the moment** she announced that he had made her pregnant ...*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Here, we can see that Norwegian *på* is translated as English *at*.

In category 12 *på* is added to a verb, signifying wearing (12.1) or the process of putting something on (12.2), i.e. clothes, accessories, etc.

(12.1) “*I vindfanget stakk han føttene i et par av de store skoene til far, **tok på seg** boblejakka utenpå pyjamasen og gikk ut.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*In the porch he stuffed his feet into a pair of his father’s large shoes, **put on** a padded jacket over his pyjamas and went outside.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

(12.2) “*Like blå som kjolen **Rakel hadde på seg**, den med små, hvite blomster.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*As blue as the dress **Rakel was wearing**, the one with the small white flowers.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Yet again, we can witness different approaches in translation towards various instances within one category, + literal translation in (12.1) and concretisation via a non-prepositional construction (verb) in (12.2).

Category 13 signifies the repeatability of a certain action. Rather idiomatic meaning.

(13.1) “*Og i årene som kom skulle Helle fortelle **gang på gang** om den beryktede førstebetjentens merkelige første reaksjon.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*And in the years to come Helle would tell the story of the infamous inspector’s strange first reactions **again and again**.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

Here we can see *på* being translated by a non-prepositional equivalent, namely by a conjunction.

In category 14, *på* is bound with a verb *å vente* (to wait). Stable verbal construction.

(14.1) “*«Pappa venter **på oss**,» sa hun.*” (Nesbø, J., 2007) – “*‘Dad’s waiting **for us**,’ she said.*” (Nesbø, J., & Bartlett, D., 2011).

As we can see, the results showcase a vast spectrum of translation choices. Our findings show that, in a fiction text, *på* can be rendered via:

- 1) Variety of English prepositions – *on, in, at, of, for, onto*;
- 2) Other parts of speech – pronoun *that*, conjunctions *and* and *that*, adverb *outside*.
- 3) Reduction of the preposition.

Also, in many instances, the translator resorted to periphrastic structures, which reflect functional rather than formal principles of equivalence.

Matching the results of our research with the findings of previous studies (Szymańska, 2010; Burholt, Kristensen, & Sørensen, 2023), we posit that the polysemy of *på* presents a challenge not only for translators and interpreters but also for language learners. It emphasizes the significance of our classification for teaching both practical translation related subjects and Norwegian as a foreign language.

All in all, our study proves that:

- polysemy of *på* isn’t chaotic but conforms to systematization;
- translation tactics depend heavily on the respective semantic category;
- the results may be applied both in theoretical (contrastive semantics) and in practical (translation studies) fields.

Conclusions and perspectives.

The analysis shows that, in the novel, *på* reflects at least 14 semantic categories, among which: spatial, temporal, attributive, logical, idiomatic, part-whole related ones, etc. It supports the findings on prepositional multivalency, discussed in previous studies in cognitive semantics (Brugman, 1988; Tyler & Evans, 2003).

Practical applicability.

Results can be immediately applied in teaching both translation and Norwegian as a language. Translators can use our classification as a handbook: it shows that adequate translation of *på* into English requires an individual approach. Moreover, the results are applicable in the development of linguistic resources (e.g. dictionaries or automated translation systems), which must take into account the context while choosing the right equivalent for *på*.

Perspectives.

Further studies should preferably include broader corpora (encompassing different authors and genres) and multiple translations of the same text (for the analysis of alternative decisions). An interesting option would be a reverse study, that is, analysing how the English preposition *on* may be rendered into Norwegian, while taking into account its semantic categories. Another relevant study would be one examining the analysis of other polysemantic Norwegian prepositions (*i*, *til*, *av*, etc.) using an analogous methodology, while employing statistical or automated methods for large corpora of texts. Thus, our study sets the stage for further research of Norwegian prepositions and improving the methods of their translation.

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