In most accounts of semantics, prepositions fly under the radar. I will argue that they should instead be put front and center given their crucial status as linkers of meaning—whether for spatial and temporal relations, for predicate-driven roles, or in special constructions. To that end, we have sought to characterize semantic functions expressed by prepositions in English, and similar markers in other languages. One central challenge is coverage: in order to comprehensively annotate prepositions in a corpus, we have found it necessary to develop and document a rich hierarchy of semantic functions (Srikumar & Roth 2013; Schneider et al. 2015, 2016). Another central challenge is cross-linguistic adequacy: we see that certain functions are expressed with adpositions in some languages but not others, and languages differ in how functions are grouped under each adposition (making them especially difficult for second language learners and machine translation systems). We have released an English corpus comprehensively annotated with preposition functions (http://tiny.cc/prepwiki), and are currently annotating parallel text in Korean, Hindi, and Hebrew to investigate cross-linguistic similarities and differences with respect to adposition/case semantics.

This is joint work with Vivek Srikumar, Jena Hwang, Archna Bhatia, Na-Rae Han, Meredith Green, Abhijit Suresh, Kathryn Conger, Tim O’Gorman, and Martha Palmer.

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