

A Contrastive Analysis Of The Spanish Preposition *En* And The Chinese Preposition *Zài*

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Abstract:

This study conducts a contrastive analysis of the Spanish preposition *en* ('in; on') and its Chinese counterpart *zài*, focusing on their spatial meanings as well as the syntactic positions of the prepositional phrases they head. Drawing on definitions from dictionaries, grammar manuals, and corpus data from both languages, the analysis reveals that *en* and *zài* share core functions, such as indicating temporary location and the endpoint of a movement. However, *en* can independently encode a wider range of spatial relations (e.g., 'on', 'inside', 'physical contact', or 'proximity'), while *zài* requires combination with spatial localizers (e.g., *shàng* 'above', *lǐ* 'inside') to express similar meanings. Syntactically, both prepositions can head phrases in three common positions (before the subject, between the subject and verb, and after the verb), but Spanish allows an additional structure where *en*-phrases intervene between the verb and its object—a configuration not permitted in Chinese. The findings highlight typological differences, with Spanish exhibiting greater syntactic flexibility and Chinese relying more on word order and localizers to convey spatial relations.

Key Word: Preposition, contrastive analysis, spatial meaning, syntactic position, Spanish-Chinese typology

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I. Introduction

The linguistic comparison of languages from distinct origins not only deepens our understanding of the intrinsic features of each language, but also facilitates the learning process for foreign language learners whose native tongue corresponds to one of the languages under analysis. This study undertakes a contrastive analysis of the Spanish preposition *en* 'in; on' and its Chinese counterpart 在 *zài* (hereafter *zài*), along with the prepositional phrases headed by them. According to Moliner¹, *en* is the second most frequently used preposition in Spanish—following *de* 'from' and preceding *a* 'to'. Similarly, *zài* ranks among the most frequently used prepositions in Chinese and is included in the top tier of the *Outline of the Essentials of Chinese National Proficiency and Common Lexicon*². These similarities make the comparison particularly relevant for identifying both shared and divergent characteristics.

In recent years, various studies have explored contrastive analyses of Spanish and Chinese prepositions. For example, Liu³ investigates the translation of *de* and its Chinese equivalents in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Penas and Zhang⁴, as well as Zhang⁵, examine the divergent behaviour of *a* and its Chinese counterpart through the lens of Talmy's⁶ typology of verb-framed and satellite-framed languages. Li⁷ analyses the use of complement clauses in Spanish and Chinese, while Penas and Zhang⁸ contrast conservative additive differences between prepositions in both languages. However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has specifically addressed the contrast between *en* and *zài*. This gap provides an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. Drawing on definitions from grammar manuals and dictionaries in both languages, this study compares the spatial meanings of *en* and *zài*, as well as their syntactic functions, using data extracted from relevant corpora.

II. Material And Methods

The Spanish data is drawn from the following sources: *Gramática Descriptiva de la Lengua Española* (1999)⁹, *Nueva Gramática de la Lengua Española* (2009)¹⁰, *Diccionario del Español Actual* (2011)¹¹, and the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* (2014)¹² published by the Royal Spanish Academy. For Chinese, the references consulted include *800 Words of Modern Chinese* (1999)¹³, *Practical Grammar of Modern Chinese* (2004)¹⁴, *Dictionary of Particles in Modern Chinese* (1998)¹⁵, and the *Dictionary of Modern Chinese* (2016)¹⁶. In addition, the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual* (CREA)¹⁷ and the *Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus* (CCL)¹⁸ are also employed as data sources.

The methodology involves compiling the spatial and temporal definitions of *en* and *zài* as provided in the aforementioned dictionaries and grammar references. These are then analysed to identify semantic and

syntactic similarities and differences. Examples from both corpora are used to illustrate and support the analysis.

III. Contrastive Analysis

Semantic Contrast between the Prepositions *en* and *zài*

Based on the definitions provided in the grammar manuals and dictionaries of both languages, this section outlines the similarities and differences in the spatial meanings of the two prepositions.

Similarities

Both *en* and *zài* may introduce a complement that indicates the temporary location or position of a person or object:

- (1) a. *Yo viví en Embajadas, dormí bajo puentes, y siempre he vuelto a Londres, esa isla de palomas.* (CREA)
‘I lived in Embajadas, slept under bridges, and I have always returned to London, that island of pigeons’

- b. 晚上他住在我们宿舍。(CCL)

Wǎnshàng tā zhù zài wǒmen sùshè
(At) night he sleep at our dormitory
‘At night, he sleeps in our dormitory’

In (1a) and (1b), the prepositions introduce the location complements *Embajadas* and *wǒmen sùshè* ‘our dormitory’, respectively, indicating where the subject is situated.

Both prepositions can also denote the endpoint of a movement or the result of an action:

- (2) a. *La pistola cayó en el suelo.* (CREA)

‘The gun fell on the ground’

- b. 身份证不慎掉在地上。(CCL)

Shēnfēnzhèng búshèn diào zài dì shàng
ID card carelessly fall at ground above
‘The ID card accidentally fell on the ground’

Here, *en el suelo* in (2a) and *zài dìshàng* in (2b) both indicate the endpoint of the motion described by *cayó* and *diào*, respectively.

Differences

Two principal differences can be identified. First, while Spanish allows prepositional phrases such as *en toda la ciudad* or *en todo el país* to carry both affirmative and negative meanings¹⁹, Chinese constructions headed by *zài* express only affirmative meanings:

- (3) a. *En toda la ciudad ha encontrado a María.*

‘She has found María throughout the entire city’

- b. *Abarcan geográficamente unidades territoriales en todo el país, que constituyen el Sistema Nacional de Áreas de Conservación, SINAC.* (CREA)

‘They geographically cover territorial units throughout the entire country, which constitute the National System of Conservation Areas (SINAC)’

- c. 霍乱已在整个城市蔓延。(CCL)

Huòluàn yǐ zài zhěnggè chéngshì mànyán
Cholera already at entire city spread
‘Cholera has spread throughout the entire city’

Second, *en* in Spanish encompasses a wide array of spatial relations—on a surface, inside an object, in physical contact with, or near to something. Conversely, Chinese *zài* cannot express these meanings independently. Instead, it must combine with spatial localizers such as 上 *shàng* ‘on’, 里 *lǐ* ‘in’, 中 *zhōng* ‘middle’, 内 *nèi* ‘within’, 旁边 *pángbiān* ‘beside’, etc., forming what Chen²⁰ refers to as prepositional frames: *zài* + noun + localizer.

In (4a), *en* denotes surface contact. Its Chinese equivalent in (4b) requires the frame *zài* + *cāochǎng* + *shàng*:

- (4) a. *Pero el brasileño duró muy poco en la cancha.* (CREA)

‘But the Brazilian stayed on the field for only a short time’

- b. 队伍解散后，大家都在操场上休息喝水。(CCL)

Duìwǔ jiěsàn hòu, dàjiā dōu zài cāochǎng shàng xiūxi hē shuǐ
Team disperse after everyone all at sports field above rest drink water
'After the group dispersed, everyone rested and drank water on the sports field'

In (5a) and (5c), *en* expresses containment. Chinese requires prepositional frames, e.g., *zài + jiā + lǐ* (5b) or *zài + kāfēitīng + lǐ* (5d):

(5) a. *Empieza a escribir el guion en su casa.* (CREA)

'He begins to write the script at home'

b. 妇人家如果不下田, 留在家里带孩子。(CCL)

Fùrénjiā rúguǒ bú xiàtián, liú zài jiā lǐ dài hái
Married women if not go to field stay at home inside look after children
'If married women don't go to the fields, they stay at home to take care of the children.'

c. *Unos músicos se agruparon en la cafetería para consumir alimentos.* (CREA)

'Some musicians gathered in the café to have some food'

d. 钱康仍和李绵宁坐在咖啡厅里亲密交谈。(CCL)

Qián Kāng réng hé Lǐ Miǎnníng zuò zài kāfēitīng lǐ qīnmì jiāotán
Qian Kang still with Li Mianning sit at café inside intimate converse
'Qian Kang and Li Mianning were still sitting in the café, engaged in an intimate conversation'

In (6a) and (7a), *en* indicates 'physical contact' and 'proximity', respectively. In Chinese, *zài* cannot express these meanings independently; instead, it relies on prepositional frames, such as *zài + shù + shàng* in (6b) and *zài + mén + biān* in (7b).

(6) a. *Lentamente, se recuesta en el árbol en el que se había apoyado.* (CREA)

'Slowly, he leans back against the tree he had previously rested on'

b. 强盗抢劫了一个商人, 将他捆在树上准备杀掉。(CCL)

Qiángdào qiǎngjié le yīgè shāngrén, jiāng tā kǔn zài shù shàng zhǔnbèi shādiào
Bandit robbed ASP a merchant, to put him tied at tree above prepare to kill
'The thief robbed a merchant and tied him to a tree, preparing to kill him'

(7) a. *Acompañada por su hermana Anne... fue recibida en la puerta del hotel...* (CREA)

'Accompanied by her sister Anne... she was received at the hotel entrance'

b. 主人不在, 两只可爱的小兔子守在门边。(CCL)

Zhǔrén bú zài, liǎngzhī kě'ài de xiǎo tùzi shǒu zài mén biān
Owner not present, two cute little rabbits stood at door side
'The owner was not present, and two cute little rabbits waited by the door'

Beyond the prepositional frames in which *zài* corresponds to the various senses of the Spanish *en*, *zài* in Chinese can also combine with a wide range of spatial localizers, such as 下面 *xiàmiàn* 'under', 左边 *zuǒbiān* 'left', 右边 *yòubiān* 'right', 前面 *qiánmiàn* 'in front', 后面 *hòumiàn*, 'behind', and 外面 *wàimiàn* 'outside'). In examples (8a) and (8b), *zài* is used in combination with *zuǒbiān* 'left' and *hòubiān* 'behind', respectively, to convey spatial meanings that are not directly encoded by *en* in Spanish.

(8) a. 在他左边露出一个高高的瞭望台。(CCL)

Zài tā zuǒbiān lùchū yīgè gāogāode liàowàngtái
At he left appeared a tall watchtower
'To his left, a tall watchtower appeared'

b. 走廊在教室后面。(CCL)

Zǒuláng zài jiàoshì hòumiàn
Corridor at classroom behind
'The corridor is behind the classroom'

Syntactic Position of the Prepositional Phrase Headed by *en* and *zài*

Both languages share three syntactic configurations for prepositional phrases. However, only Spanish permits Type D, where the prepositional phrase intervenes between the verb and the direct/indirect object. Each type is illustrated below.

Type A: *en* / *zài* + NP + S + VP

In both languages, when the prepositional phrase is positioned at the sentence's outset, it serves as an adjunct, its semantic scope encompassing the entire structure, including both the subject and the predicate. This may be regarded as an external structure, with its presence or absence having no impact on the main clause. Consequently, it is frequently separated from the remainder of the sentence by a comma. Furthermore, it can generally be omitted without affecting the sentence's grammaticality:

- (9) a. *En Barcelona Picasso hizo un retrato de grupo de La familia Soler.* (CREA)
 'In Barcelona, Picasso painted a group portrait of the Soler family'
 b. *En Portomarín, setecientas personas se reunieron en una comida-fiesta presidida por una vaca hinchable de gran tamaño.* (CREA)
 'In Portomarín, seven hundred people gathered for a lunch-party presided over by a large inflatable cow'
- (10) a. 在它们之间存在一系列的中介因素。(CCL)
Zài tāmen zhījiān cúnzài yīxiliè de zhōngjiè yīnsù
 At they between exists a series of intermediary factor
 'Among them, there exists a series of intermediary factors'
 b. 在第七届全运会上, 体育健儿取得了优异成绩。(CCL)
Zài dìqījiè quánànyùnhuì shàng, tǐyùjiànr qǔdé le yōuyì chéngjì
 At the 7th National Games, athletes achieved ASP excellent results
 'At the 7th National Games, the athletes achieved excellent results'

In the examples above, all prepositional phrases functioning as adjuncts—*En Barcelona* (9a), *En Portomarín* (9b), *zài tāmen zhījiān* 'among them' (10a), and *zài dìqījiè quánànyùnhuì shàng* 'at the 7th National Games' (10b)—precede the subject. In (9b) and (10b), these phrases are additionally demarcated by a comma, reflecting their adjunctive role.

Type B: S + *en* / *zài* + NP + VP

As with Type A, the prepositional phrase in this position acts as an adjunct in both languages. However, the scope of modification differs between them. In Spanish, despite being positioned between the subject and the verb phrase, the prepositional phrase's semantic scope extends across the entire sentence, encompassing the subject. Conversely, in Chinese, the prepositional phrase in this location modifies only the subsequent elements, leaving the subject unaffected²¹.

- (11) a. *Ella, en esos momentos, se encontraba sacudiendo los juguetes de porcelana de la sala.* (CREA)
 'She was at that moment dusting the porcelain figurines in the living room'
 b. 李鹏总理在使馆发表重要讲话。(CCL)
Lǐpéng zǒnglǐ zài shǐguǎn fābiǎo zhòngyào jiǎnghuà
 Li Peng Premier at embassy delivered important speech
 'Premier Li Peng delivered an important speech at the embassy'

In (11a), the phrase *en esos momentos* modifies the entire event, effectively functioning as though it were positioned at the sentence's outset. By contrast, in (11b), *zài shǐguǎn* 'at the embassy' modifies solely the action expressed by the verb phrase.

Unlike Spanish, the Chinese preposition *zài* frequently carries a temporal nuance, attributable to its affinity with gerund particles:

- (12) a. 他们在楼上开会。
Tāmen zài lóushàng kāihuì
 They at upstairs have meeting
 'They are having a meeting on the upper floor'
 b. *他们开会。
Tāmen kāihuì
 They have meeting
 (intended) 'They have meeting'

In (12b), the verb *kāihuì* 'have a meeting' lacks temporal or modal markers or additional modifiers, rendering it incapable of functioning as a predicate. However, its grammaticality is restored in (12a) when combined with the prepositional phrase *zài lóushàng* 'on the upper floor'. Shen²² attributes this to the temporal

significance imparted by *zài*, noting that in modern Chinese, the boundary between prepositions and gerund particles is often indistinct, thereby activating a temporal interpretation in such contexts.

Type C: S + SV + *en* / *zài* + NP

In Spanish, when the prepositional phrase follows the verb or verb phrase, it may serve either as a circumstantial complement or a complement of regime:

- (13) a. *Los ganaderos organizaron degustaciones multitudinarias en Portomarín y Santiago.* (CREA)
 ‘The cattle ranchers organised massive tastings in Portomarín and Santiago’
 b. *El Deportivo perdió en Murcia, por 2 – 0.* (CREA)
 ‘Deportivo lost in Murcia, by 2 – 0’
 c. *La implantación de estas licenciaturas ha redundado en una falta de espacio en las instalaciones de la Escuela Agraria.* (CREA)
 ‘The implementation of these degrees has resulted in a lack of space in the Agricultural School’s facilities’

In (13a) and (13b), the prepositional phrases *en Portomarín y Santiago* and *en Murcia* function as circumstantial complements, whereas in (13c), *en una falta de espacio* acts as a complement of regime. All these prepositional elements are positioned post-verbally.

In contrast, within Chinese Type C structures, the prepositional phrase operates as a complement argument of the predicate:

- (14) a. 钢笔掉在地上了。
Gāngbǐ diào zài dì shàng le
 pen fall at ground above ASP
 ‘The pen fell onto the ground’
 b. 一根巨木恰好砸在他的身上。
Yīgēn jùmù qiàhǎo zá zài tā de shēn shàng
 one log right strike at he of body above
 ‘A large log fell right onto his body’

The prepositional phrases *zài dìshàng* ‘on the ground’ (14a) and *zài tā de shēnshàng* ‘onto his body’ (14b) are semantically required by the verbs *diào* ‘fall’ and *zá* ‘hit’, respectively.

The immediate positioning of complement arguments after the predicate in both languages underscores the pivotal—perhaps dominant—role of semantic association in determining the syntactic distribution of prepositional phrases.

As previously noted, in Spanish, prepositional phrases functioning as arguments typically do not precede the elements they modify¹⁰. In Chinese, a prepositional phrase must follow the verb to serve as an argument; if fronted, its syntactic role shifts to that of a circumstantial adjunct:

- (15) a. *Ello lo pone en el lugar más expectante para llegar a la cima.* (CREA)
 ‘This places him in the most promising position to reach the top’
 b. 跳在马背上
Tiào zài mǎbèi shàng
 jump at horse-back above
 ‘(He) jumped onto the horse’s back’
 c. 在马背上跳
Zài mǎbèi shàng tiào
 at horse-back above jump
 ‘He jumps on horseback’

In (15a), the prepositional phrase *en el lugar más expectante* is semantically essential to the verb *pone* ‘puts’, and fronting it would be stylistically awkward. In (15b), *zài mǎbèi shàng* ‘onto the horse’s back’ functions as an argument of the verb *tiào* ‘jump’, whereas in (15c), when placed before the verb, it assumes the role of a circumstantial complement, thereby altering the sentence’s structure and meaning.

Regarding prepositional phrases functioning as arguments, a further contrastive feature merits attention: in Spanish, modifiers may be inserted between the verb phrase and the preposition *en*, as seen with *claramente* in (16a) or *en muchas ocasiones* in (16b). In Chinese, however, this is not permissible. Modifiers such as *quánbù* ‘all’ (16c) and *xiōnghěndì* ‘fiercely’ (16d) are typically positioned before the verb phrase:

- (16) a. *Penetra claramente en buena parte de la población catalana.* (CREA)
 ‘It clearly penetrates a large part of the Catalan population’
 b. *El problema reside, en muchas ocasiones, en que quien escribe, simplemente, no sabe escribir.* (CREA)
 ‘The problem lies, in many cases, in the fact that the writer simply does not know how to write’
 c. 这 295 吨储备油全部储存在下司油厂。(CCL)
 Zhè 295 dūn chǔbèiyóu quánbù chǔcún zài Xià Sī yóuchǎng
 this 295 ton reserve oil all store at Xià Sī oil factory
 ‘All 295 tons of reserve oil are stored at the Xià Sī oil factory’
 d. 歹徒疯狂的拳头凶狠地打在车金鼎的脸上。(CCL)
 Dǎitú fēngkuángde quántóu xiōnghěndì dǎ zài Chē Jīndǐng de liǎn shàng
 thug mad fist fiercely hit at Che Jinding of face above
 ‘The thug, like a madman, fiercely struck Che Jinding’s face with his fist’

Type D: S + SV + *en* + NP + DO / IO

In Spanish, prepositional phrases acting as circumstantial complements may occasionally be positioned between the verb and its direct or indirect object. In Chinese, however, such a placement is not permissible. For instance, in (17a), *en casa* is inserted between the verb *hizo* ‘made’ and its direct object *un “xató” memorable*, whereas in (18b), placing the prepositional phrase *zài bàngōngshì* ‘in the office’ between the verb *dǎ* ‘make a call’ and its object *diànhuà* ‘call’ renders the sentence ungrammatical. This contrast highlights the greater positional flexibility of Spanish prepositional phrases compared to their Chinese counterparts.

- (17) a. *Y este domingo el chef Joan Martínez hizo en casa, al aire libre, un “xató” memorable en homenaje a Knut Ahnlund.* (CREA)
 ‘And this Sunday, chef Joan Martínez made a memorable *xató* at home, outdoors, in tribute to Knut Ahnlund’
 b. *我打在办公室电话。
 Wǒ dǎ zài bàngōngshì diànhuà
 I call at office telephone
 (intended) ‘I make a call in the office’

IV. Conclusion

This study has conducted a semantic contrast of the spatial values of the Spanish preposition *en* and the Chinese preposition *zài*, based on a review of their summarised meanings. On the one hand, both prepositions share two core spatial meanings: (1) they introduce a complement expressing the temporary location of a person or object, and (2) they indicate the endpoint of a movement or the result of a process. On the other hand, *en* can also express meanings such as ‘on’, ‘inside’, and ‘physical contact or proximity’, for which *zài* must combine with localizers. Furthermore, there are spatial meanings that *en* cannot convey in Spanish, but which can be expressed in Chinese through *zài* in combination with localizers.

With respect to the meanings conveyed by *en* that are expressed in Chinese through *zài* + localizer, several observations are pertinent. Ameka²³ notes that the English preposition *in* corresponds to *zài...lǐ* and *on* to *zài...shàng* in Chinese, suggesting that English prepositions encapsulate both a marker of existence and a localizer. This difference reflects typological distinctions between Indo-European languages and Chinese. While spatial meanings like those of *in* and *on* are lexicalised as single prepositions in English and Spanish, this does not contradict the typological claim: in Spanish—also an Indo-European language—location and direction are similarly encoded in the single preposition *en*. From a lexicalisation perspective, Chinese separates the expression of location into two elements: one marking existence (*zài*), and the other denoting spatial orientation (*lǐ*, *shàng*, etc.). In contrast, Spanish and English integrate both elements into a single prepositional form, rendering their systems more synthetic, while Chinese remains analytic.

Additionally, a detailed contrastive analysis was undertaken regarding the syntactic positions of prepositional phrases headed by *en* and *zài*. It was observed that prepositional phrases introduced by *en* and *zài* can occur in three common syntactic structures:

- Type A: *en* / *zài* + NP + S + VP
- Type B: S + *en* / *zài* + NP + VP
- Type C: S + VP + *en* / *zài* + NP

Moreover, Spanish allows an additional structure not permitted in Chinese:

- Type D: S + VP + *en* + NP + DO/IO

It is also evident that when functioning as complement arguments, both languages exhibit a strong semantic dependency between the verb and the prepositional phrase, which typically requires close adjacency.

In Chinese, however, *zài*-phrases serving as arguments must immediately follow the predicate, without intervening elements. By contrast, *en*-phrases functioning as circumstantial complements in Spanish demonstrate considerably more positional flexibility, being able to appear in nearly any grammatical slot within the sentence.

In Chinese, the syntactic function of a *zài*-phrase is largely determined by its position. When it appears before the clause (Type A) or before the verb (Type B), it functions as a circumstantial complement; when it appears after the predicate (Type C), it functions as a complement argument. Notably, in Type B structures, *zài* may also convey temporal meanings.

Regarding the impact of phrase position on syntactic function, Penas and Zhang⁸ observe that, unlike in Spanish—where syntactic relations are marked more explicitly and formally—Chinese relies heavily on word order and contextual interpretation. As a result, the same *zài*-headed phrase can assume different syntactic roles and alter the overall meaning of a sentence depending on its position. In contrast, the syntactic function of *en*-headed phrases in Spanish tends to be more stable and less influenced by word order.

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