

The Department of Linguistics
is pleased to present

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speaking on

The case of French places

Friday, April 2, 2021

1:20 PM (PST) via Zoom

Zoom Information: Will be emailed on Thursday, April 1, 2021

Abstract:

An old puzzle about French country names (Cornulier 1972, Zwicky 1987, Miller 1992, and Miller, Pullum and Zwicky 1997) is that they show unexpected behavior in combination with the locative prepositions à 'at, to' and de 'from'. The definite article that they appear with in argument positions, as in (1), does not give rise to the expected combinations in the feminine and with country names starting with a vowel. Thus instead of à la/à l' in (2) we obtain en:

- (1) a. la France, la Mauritanie... feminine
- b. le Canada, le Pérou... masculine
- c. l'Irlande, l'Égypte... feminine/vowel
- d. l'Afghanistan, l'Angola, l'Iran... masculine/vowel
- e. les Philippines, les Indes plural

- (2) a. en France, en Mauritanie... feminine
- b. au Canada, au Pérou... masculine
- c. en Irlande, en Égypte... feminine/vowel
- d. en Afghanistan, en Angola, en Iran... masculine/vowel
- e. aux/*en Philippines/Indes plural

Nowhere else in the language is there an en/au allomorphy. The à la/à l' combination cannot be replaced by en if the meaning of the preposition is not locative:

- (3) lié à la France/*en France

A similar phenomenon occurs with the locative de: the article disappears in the feminine and with country names starting with a vowel:

- (4) a. de France, de Mauritanie... feminine
- b. du Canada, du Pérou... masculine
- c. d'Irlande, d'Égypte... feminine/vowel
- d. d'Afghanistan, d'Angola, d'Iran... masculine/vowel
- e. des/*de/*d' Philippines/Indes plural

Likewise, the article cannot disappear if the meaning of the preposition is not locative:

- (5) discuter de *(la) France

The realization of the "à+DEF" combination seems therefore to be simultaneously conditioned by syntax (gender features), semantics (locative meaning) and phonology (first segment).

I will argue that French country names should be treated as inherently denoting locations (as a separate semantic type) and that the en/au allomorphy results from locative case realization rather than a combination of two independent nodes. Evidence for this view will be provided from multiple sources, including modification, locative clitics and urban landmarks.