

L'insoutenable légèreté de la préposition *en*

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Abstract: Although the French preposition *en* has a very flexible meaning, it is possible to distinguish two broad classes of senses: (i) the “localizing” ones, where *en* expresses, roughly, ‘interiority’ in several domains of experience, and (ii) the “qualifying” ones, where the use of *en* implies a qualification of the first element of the relation expressed by the preposition. The localizing senses were commonly used in old French, but the relation between the two classes of senses mentioned above has shifted and the qualifying sense is by far the most frequent one in contemporary French. We argue, however, (i) that this “qualifying” sense gets different interpretations according to the contexts in which the preposition occurs, and (ii) that in some of its uses the preposition is part of larger constructions, so that its interpretation in these constructions can no longer be related to some kind of basic meaning.

Key words: preposition, semantics, diachronic evolution