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Prepositional Phrases in the Helong Pulau Dialect: A Syntactic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the forms, structures, and syntactic functions of prepositional phrases in the Helong Pulau dialect spoken on Semau Island, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Although previous studies have documented aspects of Helong vocabulary and grammar, the syntactic characteristics of its prepositional phrases remain insufficiently explored. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach involving five native Helong speakers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews, narrative elicitation, observation, and stimulus-based elicitation, including translation tasks. Utterances were transcribed, translated, and analyzed using phrase structure theory and three constituency tests: substitution, coordination, and movement. The findings identified four productive prepositions: se, ne, dengan/deng, and lolo, expressing locative, source, topical, and temporal meanings. The prepositions se and ne show an aspectual distinction: se is associated with perfective or past events, whereas ne indicates progressive or ongoing situations. Dengan/deng expresses source and topic relations, while lolo marks temporal inception, particularly the meaning of "since." Syntactically, these prepositions head phrases that modify nouns, pronouns, and verbs. Their complements include noun phrases, temporal adverbs, and clauses. The constituency tests confirm that these phrases can undergo substitution, coordination with preposition deletion under identity, and fronting for emphasis, contrast, or topicalization. The findings reveal interactions among prepositional meaning, aspect, definiteness, complement selection, and syntactic position. This study contributes to the documentation of Helong grammar and the study of Austronesian syntax in eastern Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

The Helong language is an Austronesian language spoken in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, particularly in Kupang Regency, Semau Island, and parts of western Timor. Previous documentation by Grimes (2000) provides preliminary descriptions of its lexical, grammatical, and sociocultural characteristics. However, its syntactic structures remain insufficiently investigated. This situation reflects broader concerns regarding the documentation and maintenance of minority languages in eastern Indonesia, particularly amid increasing language contact and intergenerational language shift. Moro (2021) demonstrates how multilingualism and language contact influence linguistic practices in eastern Indonesia, while Fatinaha et al. (2025) highlights the growing preference for Indonesian and Manado Malay among younger speakers. Similarly, Pramuniati et al. (2025) identify intergenerational language shift in North Sumatra, demonstrating the challenges faced by regional languages in maintaining transmission across generations. These developments emphasize the importance of comprehensive linguistic documentation to support language maintenance and revitalization.

Language documentation should extend beyond vocabulary and oral traditions to encompass phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic structures. Himmelmann (2006) emphasizes the importance of systematically documenting naturally occurring linguistic data to produce comprehensive linguistic descriptions. Similarly, Austin (2019) highlights the potential of existing language documentation, including grammatical descriptions and textual resources, to support teaching and learning endangered languages. In this regard, investigating the grammatical structures of Helong is essential not only for linguistic research but also for developing reference materials and educational resources for its community.

One grammatical aspect requiring further investigation is the structure of prepositional phrases. Prepositions express relationships involving location, direction, time, source, instrument, and manner. A prepositional phrase generally consists of a preposition and its complement, typically a noun phrase, and may function as a complement or adjunct within clauses. Understanding its internal structure, constituent relationships, and syntactic distribution is therefore important for describing how grammatical elements combine to construct sentences. Recent studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of prepositional constructions in syntactic research. Mußemann (2024) examines preposition placement across varieties of English, while Potts (2024) investigates the syntactic properties of English preposing-in-prepositional-phrase constructions. Duan et al. (2025) further explore preposition pied-piping and stranding in English relative clauses, demonstrating the relationship between prepositional constructions and syntactic processing.

Within the Austronesian language family, relational meanings may be expressed through prepositions, postpositions, relational nouns, and morphological markers. Ross (2002, 2004) discusses the morphosyntactic characteristics and typological variation of Austronesian languages, while Himmelmann (2005) provides a broader account of their grammatical diversity. These perspectives are particularly relevant to eastern Indonesia, where multilingual contact contributes to complex linguistic relationships (Moro, 2021). Nevertheless, the syntactic characteristics of Helong remain insufficiently described. Jonker (1915) provides valuable historical linguistic records, while Grimes (2000) document its lexical and grammatical characteristics. Jacob and Grimes (2011) also provide preliminary descriptions of Helong grammar, including prepositional elements such as i and ba. However, these studies do not systematically examine the internal structures, complement types, and

syntactic functions of prepositional phrases. Similarly, Klamer (2014) contributes to the typological understanding of eastern Indonesian languages through research on the Alor-Pantar languages, although these predominantly non-Austronesian languages have different grammatical characteristics. Tauk et al. (2022) investigate nominal structures and positional markers in Helong but do not specifically address prepositional phrases and their syntactic distribution.

Consequently, a research gap exists in the systematic description of prepositional phrases in Helong, particularly the Helong Pulau dialect. Previous studies have provided important foundations for understanding its vocabulary, historical development, and selected grammatical constructions, but the relationship between prepositions, their complements, and their functions within clauses remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap is important for expanding the syntactic documentation of lesser-studied Austronesian languages and providing contemporary empirical evidence of Helong grammatical structures.

Therefore, this study investigates two research questions: (1) What types of prepositional phrases are found in the Helong Pulau dialect? and (2) How are these prepositional phrases syntactically structured? Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, this research analyzes linguistic data collected from native speakers on Semau Island, focusing on prepositional forms, their complements, associated modifiers, and syntactic functions within clauses. The findings are expected to enrich Austronesian syntactic studies, contribute to the systematic documentation of Helong grammar, and provide foundational linguistic resources for future research, educational initiatives, and community-based language preservation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theoretical Category of Prepositions

Prepositions are grammatical elements that express spatial, temporal, directional, instrumental, causal, and possessive relationships between linguistic constituents. Crystal (2008) identifies prepositions as relational words typically preceding noun phrases or pronouns, while Huddleston and Pullum (2005) describe them as heads of prepositional phrases. As a broader grammatical category, adpositions include prepositions, postpositions, and circumpositions, distinguished by their positions relative to complements (Payne, 1997). This variation is particularly relevant to Austronesian languages, which exhibit diverse grammatical structures (Himmelmann, 2005; Ross, 2002, 2004). Furthermore, prepositions may express multiple related meanings through polysemy, particularly the extension of spatial meanings into temporal and abstract relationships (Tyler & Evans, 2003).

In eastern Indonesia, grammatical variation is influenced by linguistic diversity and language contact. Klamer (2014) documents typological differences among the Alor-Pantar languages, while Moro (2021) demonstrates the influence of multilingual contact on linguistic practices. Regarding Helong, historical and grammatical documentation has been provided by Jonker (1915) and Grimes (2000). Jacob and Grimes (2011) identify prepositional elements such as i and ba, while Tauk et al. (2022) examine nominal structures and positional markers. However, the classification and grammatical behavior of Helong prepositions remain insufficiently investigated. Recent studies by Mußemann (2024) on preposition placement and Duan et al. (2025) on preposition pied-piping and stranding further demonstrate the importance of examining prepositions through their syntactic distribution and contextual meanings.

2.2 Structure and Syntactic Functions of Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase (PP) consists of a preposition as its head and a complement, commonly a noun phrase, following the basic structure PP → P + NP (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Its construction may involve simple or complex prepositions, including multiword expressions such as in front of and because of (Quirk et al., 1985). Francis (1956) also discusses the structural relationships between prepositional constructions and larger grammatical units. Syntactically, PPs function as adjuncts, complements, predicative complements, or nominal modifiers, expressing circumstantial information or completing and modifying other constituents within clauses (Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston & Pullum, 2005).

Recent studies emphasize the structural complexity and language-specific characteristics of prepositional constructions. Potts (2024) examines English preposing-in-prepositional-phrase constructions, while Mußemann (2024) and Duan et al. (2025) investigate variations in preposition placement and syntactic preferences. Although these studies focus on English, they provide comparative perspectives for analyzing prepositional structures. In Helong, previous descriptions (Grimes, 2000; Jacob & Grimes, 2011; Tauk et al., 2022) have not systematically explained the internal structures, complement types, and syntactic functions of prepositional phrases. Therefore, this study adopts a descriptive structural-syntactic approach based on Payne (1997), Quirk et al. (1985), and Huddleston and Pullum (2005), supported by the typological perspectives of Himmelmann (2005) and Ross (2002, 2004). The analysis focuses on prepositional types, internal constituent structures, and syntactic functions within clauses to provide a systematic description of prepositional phrases in the Helong Pulau dialect.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a phrase-structure grammatical model (Chomsky, 1957; Radford, 2004) to represent the hierarchical organization of prepositional phrases. The following rules guide the structural analysis: PP → P + NP; VP → V + PP (PP as verbal complement/adjunct); NP → N + PP (PP as nominal modifier); AP → A + PP (PP as adjectival complement). These rules allow for the decomposition and labeling of syntactic constituents in Helong clauses.

To empirically identify and validate PPs in Helong, three classic constituency tests (O'Grady, 2000) are adapted. The substitution test holds that a suspected PP should be replaceable by a pro-form (e.g., locative here/there, temporal then). The movement test holds that a PP should be movable as a unit (e.g., fronting) without loss of grammaticality or core meaning. The coordination test holds that a PP should be able to be conjoined with another PP using conjunctions such as and or. These tests are applied to field data to confirm the phrasal status of preposition-like constructions.

Complementing the formal approach, a functional-typological perspective (Payne, 1997; Givon, 2001) is employed to classify PPs according to their semantic roles and discourse functions. This includes categorizing PPs as locative (indicating place), temporal (indicating time), instrumental (indicating means), benefactive (indicating beneficiary), and causal (indicating reason). This dual formal-functional framework ensures a comprehensive analysis that captures both the structural patterns and communicative uses of PPs in Helong.

The framework is applied to naturalistic and elicited Helong data. For instance, a sentence such as [Mol bolok] [de'u le'u] (He went to the forest) is analyzed to determine whether de'u le'u functions as a PP, what its internal structure is, and what semantic role it carries.

Integrating formal syntactic theory with functional-typological perspectives and established constituency tests provides a systematic theoretical and empirical foundation for

analyzing prepositional phrases in Helong. This integrated approach enables a rigorous, replicable, and comprehensive description of their structural characteristics, semantic roles, and syntactic functions, thereby contributing to the documentation of an understudied aspect of Helong grammar.

4. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to document and analyze prepositional phrase structures in the Helong Pulau dialect. This approach enables an in-depth examination of naturally occurring linguistic data within their sociocultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Primary data consisted of spoken Helong obtained through conversations, narratives, interviews, and elicited utterances, while secondary data included existing linguistic documentation and textual materials (Grimes, 2000).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, involving five native Helong speakers, consisting of four males and one female, aged 25 to 80 years. They were born and raised on Semau Island, regularly used Helong in their daily communication, and were capable of providing linguistic information. The participants included farmers, community elders, and a local educator, all of whom were bilingual in Helong and Indonesian. Fieldwork was conducted in Bungtilu, Semau Island, Kupang Regency, East Nusa Tenggara.

Data collection involved two phases: library research and fieldwork. Library research examined previous linguistic studies and compiled relevant lexical and textual materials. Fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews concerning spatial, temporal, and relational expressions; narrative elicitation through personal stories and descriptions of daily activities and traditions; and stimulus-based elicitation using pictures, objects, and Indonesian-to-Helong translation tasks. All spoken data were audio-recorded, transcribed orthographically, and translated into Indonesian and English. The research instruments included a digital voice recorder and structured interview and elicitation guidelines.

Data analysis followed four stages. First, recorded utterances were transcribed and translated. Second, the data were segmented into clauses and phrases to identify potential prepositional phrases based on their grammatical forms and syntactic distribution. Third, the identified phrases were classified according to structural types (simple and complex prepositions), semantic roles (locative, temporal, instrumental, benefactive, and causal), and syntactic functions (adjuncts, complements, and modifiers). Finally, three constituency tests, namely substitution, movement, and coordination (O'Grady, 2000), were applied to verify the constituent status of the identified prepositional phrases.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical data collected from native speakers of the Helong language, specifically the Helong Pulau dialect, and provides a descriptive-qualitative interpretation of these data. The first part presents the findings in the form of elicited sentences and their glossed transcriptions, organized according to each preposition identified. The second part provides an analysis of these constructions, drawing on standard syntactic tests such as coordination, substitution, and movement to determine constituent structure and grammatical rules.

5.1 Forms of Prepositions in Helong

Through elicitation sessions and cross-checking with existing lexical records, four distinct prepositions were identified as productive in the Helong Pulau dialect: se, ne, dengan, and

lolo. Each of these prepositions encodes different spatial, temporal, or relational meanings. Table 1 summarizes their forms along with their closest English glosses, based on the contexts in which they naturally occur in sentences. As with many Austronesian languages of eastern Indonesia, the semantic range of each preposition may extend beyond a single English equivalent, and the precise interpretation is often determined by the syntactic environment and the type of complement that follows.

Table 1. Forms of Prepositions in Helong and Their Meanings in English

No	Preposition	Meaning
1	Se	In, on
2	Ne	In, on
3	Dengan	From, about
4	Lolo	Since

5.2 Prepositional Phrases in Helong

a. The Prepositional Phrase of "Se"

The prepositional phrases in Helong function to modify nouns or pronouns and verbs. When the preposition se modifies a verb and is followed by an adverb of time, it indicates that the event already happened, while the determiner specifies the time of the event. From a theoretical perspective, the preposition se in Helong exhibits a characteristic that distinguishes it from many other Austronesian locative prepositions, namely an inherent temporal-aspectual function. Unlike prepositions that simply mark static location (e.g., English in or on), se carries a perfective or completive feature when combined with a verb phrase and a temporal adverb. This suggests that se is not merely a locative head but also a functional element that interacts with the aspectual properties of the clause.

In terms of syntactic position, se heads a prepositional phrase (PP) that can function either as an adjunct (modifying the verb) or, in certain constructions, as a complement. The requirement that a determiner often follows the noun phrase within the PP indicates that definiteness plays a crucial role in licensing well-formed PP structures in Helong. Furthermore, the ability to replace the entire complement of se with a single determiner such as nua or na demonstrates that these PPs exhibit constituent cohesion, a key diagnostic for phrasehood in generative syntax. The following examples illustrate the various syntactic environments in which se-PPs appear:

(1) Se taun buuk dua la – Prep n adj adj D – 'in year ten two the' – 'In nineteen twenty-two'
(2) Se Tasi Kua – Prep n D – 'in sea there' – 'In the sea'
(3) Se tasi auk net ikan na – Prep n pron v n D – 'I sea I see fish that' – 'I saw that fish there'
(4) Auk net ikan na se nau – Pron v n D prep D – 'I see fish that in there' – 'I saw that fish there'

Example (1) shows the construction of the prepositional phrase of se. The noun phrase that follows the preposition se carries the meaning of an adverb of time. However, when the NP taun buuk dua la is replaced with the single word na, this can yield two meanings: an adverb of time and an adverb of place. The construction in example (2) shows a noun, Tasi, and its determiner, Kua. This NP can also be replaced by a single word, nua, meaning 'there'. The sentence in (3) shows that the construction is understandable; however, the prepositional phrase se Tasi is semantically incomplete, because there should be a determiner after the noun Tasi. Example (4) shows a complete construction with a prepositional phrase, in which the

determiner nua is used to replace the phrase. This construction can also be changed by placing the PP se nua at the front of the sentence, in which case the final vowel a is reduced in pronunciation.

b. The Prepositional Phrase of "Ne"

This subsection examines the second preposition identified in the Helong Pulau dialect, namely ne. Unlike the previous preposition se, which typically signals a completed or past event, ne carries a distinct aspectual meaning related to ongoing or progressive actions. As demonstrated through the data below, ne functions primarily as a locative marker meaning 'in' or 'on', but its semantic contribution extends to the temporal domain by indicating that the situation described by the verb is still in progress at the time of utterance. This progressive-locative polysemy is cross-linguistically common but manifests in language-specific ways. In Helong, the behavior of ne is also subject to syntactic conditions: the presence or absence of a determiner following the preposition determines whether the complement is interpreted as a specific noun phrase or as an unspecified place name.

This kind of prepositional phrase has the same position as the others; it is usually placed as the modifier of a noun, pronoun, or adverb, and indicates that the situation is happening in progress. When a noun or pronoun follows the preposition ne, it should have a determiner; if the preposition is followed by an adverb of place, no determiner is needed. The word(s) that follow the preposition ne can be replaced by a single word as a constituent. This kind of preposition is included in the locative prepositions:

(5) Ne Uma Lua – Prep n D – 'in house the' – 'In the house'
(6) Ne Kopan – Prep adj – 'in Kupang' – 'In Kupang'
(7) Ne taun buuk dua la kaim dai – Prep n adj adj D pron v – 'in year ten two the we divorce' – 'In nineteen twenty-two we divorced'
(8) En keng apa ne kopang – Pron v adv prep n – 'they fight each other in Kupang' – 'They are fighting each other in Kupang'

The construction in example (5) can modify both nouns/pronouns and verbs. The phrase can also be moved to the front of the sentence; when it is placed at the front of the sentence, the determiner lua undergoes the same alternation as when the NP Uma Lua is replaced by the single word nua, which becomes nu when the phrase is placed at the front of the sentence.

From a syntactic perspective, the behavior of ne reveals several important features of Helong grammar. The obligatory presence of a determiner after ne when the complement is a common noun (e.g., Uma Lua in example 5) suggests that ne selects for a definite complement; in formal terms, the preposition ne bears an uninterpretable definiteness feature [uDEF] that must be checked against a determiner phrase (DP). When the complement is a proper noun or place name such as Kopan (example 6), no determiner is required because proper nouns are inherently definite. This pattern aligns with cross-linguistic tendencies observed in many Austronesian languages of eastern Indonesia.

The aspectual distinction between ne and se can be captured through the framework of lexical aspect (Aktionsart) and grammatical aspect. Example (8), en keng apa ne kopang, unambiguously conveys progressive meaning ('they are fighting'), whereas se would force a perfective or past reading. This indicates that ne is specified for the feature [+PROGRESSIVE, –PAST] in the functional head of the prepositional phrase. In Cartographic Syntax (Cinque & Rizzi, 2014–2020), such aspectual prepositions occupy a dedicated projection within the

extended VP shell, situated above the verb phrase but below Tense Phrase (TP). Finally, example (7) demonstrates an apparent exception: ne is followed by a temporal phrase (taun buuk dua la, 'nineteen twenty-two'), yet the preposition remains ne rather than se. This may reflect ne functioning purely as a locative with an elided noun such as taun ('year') serving as the literal location where the divorce event took place, suggesting that the temporal interpretation here is derived pragmatically rather than lexically encoded in ne itself.

c. The Prepositional Phrase of "Dengan" or "Deng"

The prepositional phrase dengan usually modifies nouns, pronouns, and verbs. It can be placed after the word it modifies or at the front of the sentence. The word(s) following this preposition can be replaced by a single word as a constituent. When it modifies a noun or pronoun, it carries the meaning 'from' in English, and 'about' when it modifies a verb. This kind of preposition is included among the prepositions of source:

(9) Dengan halin kliu kua – Prep n n D – 'from part left that' – 'From the left part'
(10) Dengan ingu lias – Prep n D – 'about village these' – 'About that village'
(11) Deng en hnuki kit boel kata – Prep pron n pron v – 'from their properties we can take' – 'From their properties, we can take'
(12) Kit boel kuat deng nias – Pron mod v prep D – 'we can take from these' – 'We can take from these'

The construction in (9) shows that the prepositional phrase is followed by the NP halin kliu kua. This NP can be replaced by the single word nua. However, when the PP dengan halin kliu kua is placed at the front of the sentence, both kua and nua undergo phonological alternation by deletion of the final vowel a. Construction (10) shows the NP ingu lias following the preposition dengan, meaning 'about'; this NP can be replaced by the single word nias, which is a plural marker. Construction (11) shows another form of the PP, in which deng is an alternative pronunciation of dengan; the PP is still well-formed even though there is no determiner after the noun hnuki. Construction (12) shows the PP dengan nias, which, like the construction in (10), can be placed both after the verb and at the front of the sentence.

d. Additional Examples of Prepositional Phrases

To further illustrate the syntactic behavior of the four prepositions (se, ne, dengan/deng, lolo), additional elicited sentences were collected from the same five native speakers during follow-up sessions and cross-verified for consistency.

Table 2. Additional Examples with Se (Locative/Perfective)

No.	Helong Sentence	Gloss	English Translation
1	Se mea lua auk nala	Prep house that I sleep	I slept in that house
2	Se sikola lua ana balajar	Prep school that child learn	The child studied at that school
3	Se foho kua kobi tunu	Prep mountain there coffee burn	The coffee was burned on that mountain
4	Se taun dua la ai muli	Prep year two the we return	We returned in 2002

Example (1) confirms that se + NP + determiner places the event in the past (auk nala 'I slept'). Example (2) shows a child's learning event completed at a specific school. Example (3)

illustrates a passive interpretation (kobi tunu 'coffee was burned') with se marking location. Example (4) further supports the perfective-temporal use of se with a year phrase.

Table 3. Additional Examples with Ne (Locative/Progressive)

No.	Helong Sentence	Gloss	English Translation
1	Ne uma lua auk nala nala	Prep house the I sleep REDUP	I am sleeping in the house
2	Ana balajar ne sikola lua	child learn prep school the	The child is learning at the school
3	En keng apa ne tasi kua	they fight each other prep sea there	They are fighting each other in the sea there
4	Ne kabun lua ai tuan tanam	prep garden the we corn plant	We are planting corn in the garden

The reduplicated form nala nala in (1) marks progressive aspect, contrasting with the simple form nala in the se example. Example (4) shows that the progressive meaning can also be conveyed without reduplication when the context is clear.

Table 4. Additional Examples with Dengan/Deng (Source/Topic)

No.	Helong Sentence	Gloss	English Translation
1	Deng nusa seong kua auk mai	from island other that I come	I come from that other island
2	Dengan nitu lua auk tao tida	about spirit that I know not	I don't know about that spirit
3	Deng ama ku auk nala tulung	from father his I receive help	I received help from his father
4	Kita omong deng suat lua	we talk about story that	We talk about that story

Example (1) shows deng (the short form) marking source with a place noun. Example (2) uses dengan for topic (nitu 'spirit'). Example (3) illustrates source with a human referent. Example (4) shows deng followed by a common noun with a determiner.

Table 5. Additional Examples with Lolo (Temporal Inceptive)

No.	Helong Sentence	Gloss	English Translation
1	Lolo ne fanan	Prep this year	Since this year
2	Lolo auk mai lua auk tinggal ne Kopan	since I come that I stay in Kupang	Since I came, I have lived in Kupang
3	Lolo uta nua un heda	since rain that he sick	Since that rain, he has been sick
4	Ana belajar lolo sikola lua	child learn since school that	The child has been learning since that school (started)

Example (1) shows ne fanan 'this year' as the complement. Example (2) uses a full clause, auk mai lua 'I came that', as the complement. Example (3) uses uta nua 'that rain' as an event nominal. Example (4) is ambiguous between a temporal-source reading (since attending that school) and a locative-source reading (from that school), showing semantic extension.

6. Discussion

a. The Prepositional Phrase of Lolo

The preposition lolo in Helong expresses temporal relationships, particularly the meaning of 'since', indicating the starting point or duration of an event or condition. Its complements exhibit structural variation, including temporal adverbs and clausal constructions. The following examples illustrate the different forms and syntactic distributions of prepositional phrases headed by lolo.

(13) Lolo fanan – Prep adv – 'since last year' – 'Since last year'
(14) Lolo ama ku mate lua – Prep pron poss v D – 'since father his/her die that' – 'Since his/her father died'
(15) Lolo fanan nua un heda – Prep adv D pron adj – 'since last year that she/he sick' – 'Since last year she/he is sick'
(16) Un heda lolo fanan – Pron adj prep adv – 'he/she sick since last year' – 'He/she was sick since last year'

Example (13) shows an adverb of time, fanan, following the preposition lolo. This construction modifies a verb, and the adverb of time can be replaced by the single word nua. Example (14) similarly shows an adverb of time following lolo, which can also be replaced by nua; both determiners share the same meaning and position in the sentence, but undergo phonological alternation by deletion of the final vowel a when placed in the middle of the sentence. Example (15) shows another form of the PP in Helong, consisting of the preposition lolo, the adverb of time fanan, and the determiner nua. While the adverb phrase following the preposition is well-formed and can be replaced by a single word as a constituent, the determiner nua in this construction is unacceptable both syntactically and semantically. When a sentence contains a PP headed by lolo as a complement, the construction can be reformed by placing the PP either at the front of the sentence or after the verb, as shown in example (16). The adverb of time following lolo can also be replaced by nua or na in this position.

The PP headed by lolo 'since' in Helong presents several interesting syntactic properties that merit close examination. Example (13) demonstrates the minimal PP structure: the preposition lolo directly precedes the adverbial time word fanan 'last year', yielding a constituent in which the complement slot is occupied by an adverb. Unlike English, which requires a full NP complement after since (e.g., since last year), Helong allows a bare adverb in this position, suggesting that Helong treats temporal adverbs as lexical heads that can function as the complement of P without additional nominal morphology.

Example (14) reveals a different complement type: a full clause, ama ku mate 'his/her father died', followed by the determiner lua 'that'. The presence of the determiner lua at the right periphery of the clause indicates that lolo can take a finite clause as its complement, with the determiner serving as a clause-nominalizer. This is typologically uncommon: most languages require a complementizer (e.g., English that) or a nominalizer after a preposition. Helong appears to use determiners (lua, nua, na) as multifunctional elements that can nominalize both NPs and clauses.

Table 6. Complement Types of Lolo in Helong

Example	Complement Type	Determiner	Grammaticality
(13)	Adverb fanan	None	Acceptable
(14)	Clause ama ku mate	lua	Acceptable
(15)	Adverb fanan + D nua	nua	Unacceptable (semantic)
(16)	Adverb fanan	None	Acceptable

A crucial observation from example (15) is that the sequence lolo fanan nua is syntactically well-formed but semantically anomalous. Native speakers reject this construction because fanan already specifies a definite past time ('last year'), and the determiner nua 'that' attempts to add additional definiteness, creating redundancy. This reveals a mutual exclusivity constraint: the complement slot of lolo can contain either an adverb of time or a determiner, but not both simultaneously. The determiner nua can replace fanan (giving lolo nua 'since that time'), but cannot co-occur with it. This constraint suggests that in Helong, the complement position of temporal prepositions is a single syntactic slot that hosts one temporal specification, whether lexical (adverb) or anaphoric (determiner), differing from English, where since last year that would be ungrammatical regardless of semantics.

When the determiners nua or na occur in medial position within a larger sentence (as opposed to utterance-finally), they undergo a phonological reduction in which the final vowel a is optionally deleted. This is observed when nua appears after lolo fanan in fast speech, becoming nu. Example (15) in careful speech is lolo fanan nua, but in connected speech becomes lolo fanan nu. This sandhi phenomenon is not merely phonetic but has syntactic consequences: the reduced form nu cannot host clitics or bear contrastive stress, unlike the full form nua.

Table 7. Phonological Alternation of Determiners in Lolo-PPs

Environment	**Full Form**	**Reduced Form**	**Example**
Utterance-final	nua	nu (optional)	Lolo fanan nu
Before consonant-initial word	nua	nu (obligatory)	Lolo fanan nu tata
Before vowel-initial word	nua	nu (resyllabification)	Lolo fanan n-ua

Crucially, the reduction does not apply to the adverb fanan, which remains invariant. This suggests that determiners in Helong are prosodically weaker than adverbs and are subject to cliticization onto adjacent hosts.

Example (16), Un heda lolo fanan, demonstrates that the PP can appear in two positions: preverbally (as in 15) or postverbally (as in 16). However, these two positions are not pragmatically equivalent. Preverbal PPs (sentence-initial) serve as frame-setters, establishing a temporal topic that the rest of the sentence comments on, as in (16a) Lolo fanan, un heda 'Since last year, he is sick' (topic-comment structure), whereas postverbal PPs provide new information about the time of the event, as in (16b) Un heda lolo fanan 'He is sick since last year' (neutral assertion).

The movement test confirms that the PP is a constituent: the entire sequence lolo fanan moves as a unit, and no extraction of lolo alone is possible. The sequence *Lolo un heda fanan (intended: 'Since, he is sick last year') is ungrammatical, showing that lolo must remain adjacent to its complement in surface structure, even under movement.

The analysis of lolo-PPs in Helong yields the following generalizations: lolo selects either an adverb (e.g., fanan), a determiner (e.g., nua), or a clause (e.g., ama ku mate plus the determiner lua); the adverb and determiner are mutually exclusive within the same PP; determiners undergo predictable phonological reduction in medial positions; PPs can be fronted or stranded, with discourse-pragmatic consequences; and the PP is an impenetrable constituent, in which no extraction of P alone is permitted.

b. Constituency Tests: Coordination, Substitution, and Movement

To strengthen the empirical basis, the three constituency tests – coordination, substitution, and movement – were applied to all four prepositions using the additional examples presented above.

With respect to coordination, the construction Se taun la nol taun buuk la kaim tutnaal apa ('In nineteen twenty and nineteen thirty we met one another') shows the coordination of a PP in Helong with the conjunction nola 'and'. The first conjunct is a full PP, se taun la 'in the year twenty', while the second conjunct, taun buuk la 'year thirty', lacks the preposition se. This is not an elliptical gap in the usual sense, because the second conjunct is an NP rather than a PP. The grammaticality of this construction suggests that Helong allows preposition deletion under coordination when the deleted preposition is identical to that of the first conjunct and a conjunction (nola) is present. This phenomenon is constrained: the construction Lolo taun la nol taun buuk la (intended: 'Since 1920 and 1930') is ungrammatical, because lolo 'since' and se 'in' are not identical.

Table 8. Coordination Test Results for All Prepositions

Preposition	First Conjunct (full PP)	Second Conjunct (no preposition)	Grammaticality
se	se mea lua	mea tilu la	Acceptable
ne	ne uma lua	uma tilu la	Acceptable
dengan	dengan ingu lias	ingu kua	Acceptable
lolo	lolo taun dua la	taun tilu la	Acceptable

Table 9. Possible and Impossible Coordination Patterns in Helong PPs

Pattern	First Conjunct	Conjunction	Second Conjunct	Grammaticality
A	Full PP	nola	Full PP	Unacceptable (redundant)
B	Full PP	nola	NP (no P)	Acceptable (standard)
C	NP (no P)	nola	Full PP	Unacceptable (no forward deletion)
D	Full PP_1	nola	NP (P_2 different)	Unacceptable (mismatch)

The proposed coordination rule can be formulated as PPcoord → PP [P XP] + (nola) + [XP], where XP is the complement of P, and deletion of P in the second conjunct is obligatory under identity with the first conjunct's preposition. This rule treats the conjunction as licensing the omission of the preposition under identity, reminiscent of gapping but applied to a functional head rather than a lexical verb.

The substitution test confirms that the head preposition is invariable, while its complement can be replaced by a determiner. For example, se taun buuk tilu la 'in the year 1930' can be reduced to se na 'in that (year)', and lolo fanan can be reduced to lolo na 'since that time'. However, not all complements are substitutable in the same way: lolo ama ku mate lua can become lolo lua 'since that (event)', but lolo na is ambiguous, since na refers to time rather than to the event itself. This suggests that na is specialized for temporal reference, while lua is more general for event reference, and that the complement of lolo is governed by more specific rules: PPtemporal → P + Dtemp (na); PPevent → P + Devent (lua); PPadv → P + Adv (fanan). The determiner nua appears to be neutral and can replace either, but at the cost of semantic generality.

Table 10. Substitution Test Results (Extended)

Preposition	Original Complement	Substitute	Resulting PP	Acceptability
se	taun buuk dua la	na	se na	Acceptable (temporal)
ne	uma lua	nua	ne nua	Acceptable (locative)
dengan	ingu lias	nias	dengan nias	Acceptable (plural topic)
lolo	ama ku mate lua	lua	lolo lua	Acceptable (event reference)

Table 11. Movement Test Results (Extended)

Preposition	Original (PP-final)	Fronted (PP-initial)	Grammaticality	Meaning Change
se	Auk nala se mea lua	Se mea lua auk nala	Acceptable	No, but emphasis
ne	Auk nala nala ne uma lua	Ne uma lua auk nala nala	Acceptable	No, but emphasis
dengan	Auk mai deng nusa seong kua	Deng nusa seong kua auk mai	Acceptable	No, but contrastive
lolo	Un heda lolo fanan	Lolo fanan un heda	Acceptable	No, but topicalization

With respect to movement, the prepositional phrase can be placed either after or at the front of the main sentence without changing its meaning, as shown in Kaim dai se tam buuk dua la 'We divorced in nineteen twenty', in which se indicates that the event happened in the past time. When the PP is moved, all of its components move together, supporting the rules S → NP VP PP', NP' → NP (pron), and VP → PP NP. When other prepositions are applied in the same construction, they exhibit the same pattern.

The additional data confirm and extend these findings in several respects. All four prepositions are productively used with a range of complements (NP, adverb, or clause), supporting the productivity of the system as a whole. The aspectual contrast between se and ne is robust across multiple speakers and contexts. Determiners are obligatory after common nouns for se and ne, optional for dengan, and required for clausal complements of lolo. Fronting is permitted for all PPs without truth-conditional change, although discourse effects such as emphasis, contrast, and topicalization are present. Finally, preposition deletion under identity in coordination is the norm rather than the exception.

Table 12. Semantic and Syntactic Properties of Helong Prepositions

Preposition	Primary Meaning	Aspectual Feature	Complement Type	Determiner Required?	Default Position
se	in, on, at	[+PERFECTIVE, +PAST]	NP (common or proper)	Yes (for common NP)	Sentence-final
ne	in, on, at	[+PROGRESSIVE, –PAST]	NP (common or proper)	Yes (for common NP)	Sentence-final

dengan/deng	from, about	[–ASPECTUAL]	NP (source/topic)	Optional	Sentence-final or initial
lolo	since	[+INCEPTIVE, +TEMP]	NP, Adv, or Clause	Varies (required for clause)	Sentence-final or initial

The analysis of the four Helong prepositions, se, ne, dengan/deng, and lolo, demonstrates that their grammatical behavior involves systematic interactions between semantic interpretation, complement selection, definiteness, and syntactic position. The constituency tests provide evidence that prepositional phrases function as identifiable constituents, although their internal structures and distribution vary according to the preposition involved. The findings also highlight the aspectual distinction between se and ne, the complement flexibility of lolo, and preposition deletion under coordination. Furthermore, PP fronting is possible across the four constructions, with potential effects on discourse emphasis, contrast, and topicalization. These patterns provide a descriptive account of prepositional constructions in the Helong Pulau dialect and offer a basis for further investigation of its syntactic and semantic characteristics.

7. Conclusion

This study identified four prepositions in the Helong Pulau dialect: se, ne, dengan (or deng), and lolo, each expressing distinct semantic functions. The prepositions se and ne convey locative meanings but differ aspectually, with se indicating perfective or past events and ne expressing progressive or ongoing events. Meanwhile, dengan expresses source ('from') when modifying nouns or pronouns and topic ('about') when modifying verbs, whereas lolo indicates temporal inception ('since'). Syntactically, these prepositions function as heads of prepositional phrases that modify nouns, pronouns, and verbs. Determiners also play an important role in PP formation, generally marking definiteness after common nouns, while proper nouns and place names do not require additional determiners.

The application of substitution, movement, and coordination tests confirms the constituent status of Helong prepositional phrases. Their complements can be replaced by determiners such as nua, na, and nias, while coordinated PPs may undergo preposition reduction in the second constituent. Furthermore, PPs generally occur postverbally but can be optionally fronted for topicalization or emphasis, sometimes triggering phonological alternations in determiners. The findings particularly highlight the previously undocumented aspectual distinction between se [+PERFECTIVE, +PAST] and ne [+PROGRESSIVE, −PAST], as well as the inceptive temporal feature of lolo [+INCEPTIVE, +TEMP]. Overall, Helong prepositional phrases demonstrate systematic interactions among semantic roles, aspect, definiteness, and syntactic position, contributing new empirical evidence to the documentation of Austronesian languages in East Nusa Tenggara.

Future research should expand the linguistic corpus through natural conversations, narratives, and procedural discourse, and compare Helong Pulau with other Helong dialects and neighboring languages, including Tetun, Kemak, and Rote. Further investigations could employ formal syntactic frameworks, such as the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 2015, 2021) and Lexical-Functional Grammar, to examine phrase structures, definiteness, and constituent movement. Additionally, experimental methods, particularly acceptability judgment tasks,

are recommended to investigate the pragmatic conditions governing PP fronting and the semantic constraints on the use of lolo with different temporal complements.

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Authors' Contributions
Maura Lasi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, and Writing – Original Draft.
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Statement of the Use of AI
Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist with English grammar checking and translation. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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