THE CLASS OF PREPOSITIONS IN ENGLISH. A CONTRASTIVE APPROACH[1]

Abstract: *The paper starts with a short account of the category of prepositions as traditionally understood, then extends this category by redrawing the boundaries between prepositions and subordinators, and between prepositions and adverbs. The syntactic properties of prepositions are to be compared with those of adjectives and verbs in order to reveal the differences between them.*

Key words: *lexemes, traditional class, prepositions head phrases, preposition phrases, constituents, non-gradable.*

Résumé*: Ce travail débute par présenter de façon succinte la catégorie des prépositions, selon les approches traditionnelles, et continue par tracer les limites entre prépositions et éléments subordonnateurs, prépositions et adverbes. Les propriétés syntaxiques des prépositions seront comparées aux celles des adjectifs et des verbes afin de rendre en évidence les différences.*

Mots-clés*: lexèmes, catégorie traditionnelle, éléments prépositionnels régents, locutions prépositionnelles, constituants, non classifiable.*

A preposition expresses a relationship of meaning between two parts of a sentence, most often showing how the two parts are related in space or time: *They sat on the bench*; *Mary left at five*. Most of the common prepositions consist of only one word, they have no distinctive ending and do not vary. There are prepositions which consist of more than one word.

Single-word prepositions include: *at, about, before, by, down, for, from, in, of, on, aut, over, round, since, through, to, under, up, with*. Multi-word prepositions include: (two words) *ahead of, because of, duet o, instead of, near to*; (three words) *as far as, by means of, in accordance with, in spite of, on behalf of.*

In English prepositions make up a much smaller class of lexemes than the categories of verb, noun, adjective and adverb. Although all words traditionally thought as prepositions are classified as prepositions in our paper too, we may recognise a good number of other prepositions, formerly classified as adverbs, or as 'subordinating conjunctions'.

In general, words are traditionally analysed as prepositions only if they have complements with the form of noun phrases. In the following pairs, for example, traditional grammar accepts the underlined words in [a] as prepositions, but not those in [b]:

a. Traditionally a preposition	b. Traditionally not a preposition
The sun sank below the horizon.	*I went below.*
I haven't seen her since December.	*I haven't seen her since she left town.*
He jumped out the window.	*He jumped out of the window.*

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Most prepositions have meanings to do with relations in space or time: *at the post office* identifies a spatial location, *into the garden* fixes a direction of travel, *after lunch* locates a time period as following lunchtime. Prepositions head phrases characteristically occur in a range of functions, notably dependents of either nouns or verbs, including as a special case the complement of the verb *be*:

Dependent of noun	Dependent of verb	Complement of *Be*
*a **house** at the beach*	*He **saw** her at school.*	*He **is** at lunch.*
*the **chair** in the corner.*	*She **fell** in the pool.*	*We **were** in the pool.*
*a **bottle** of milk*	*I don't **approve** of it.*	*That **is** of interest.*

If we intend to draw the boundary between prepositions and subordinators (*if, that, whether, although, because, provided, though, unless*), the major argument is that the latter function as markers of subordination, whereas the other words function as heads of the constituents they introduce:

1. a. I think [(that) she's probably right].
   b. I don't know [whether they have received our letter yet].
2. a. She stayed behind for a few minutes [after the others had left].
   b. They complained [because we didn't finish the job this week].

In [1] the constituents in brackets are subordinate clauses with *that* and *whether* marking the subordination: the main clause counterparts are *She is probably right* (declarative) and *Have they received our letter yet?*(interrogative). In this context *that* is optional: the clause is in the position of complement to *think,* so we do not have to mark its subordinate status in its own structure. *Whether* is not omissible because it marks the clause as interrogative as well as subordinate. *After* and *because* in [2] by contrast are not grammatical markers of subordination. They have independent meaning, so we can interpret the bracketed constituents as adjuncts of time and reason, respectively. This makes them like heads, just as *after* is head in the time adjunct *after the departure of the others.* They are not part of the subordinate clause. The subordinate clauses are just *the others had left* and *we didn't finish the job this week,* and these function as complement within the phrases headed by *after* and *because*.

End-position of prepositions, optional in the case of the direct questions (e.g. *What are you doing for?*) is obligatory in sub-clauses after relative *that* and *what*, and after *as* and *than*:

It's the very word (that) I was thinking of.
It all depends on what you are accustomed to.
Things turned out better than we had dared to hope for.

There are also many conjunctions which may function as prepositions. Some of those expressing time, indeed, are prepositions in the first place, conjunctions only in the second: *before, after, until, till, since. As, but* and *than* followed by a personal pronoun parallel with the subject may function either as conjunctions or as prepositions: *He is as tall as I – He is as tall as me.* It is true that the interpretation of the second *as* as a preposition is based exclusively on the fact that it is followed by an oblique pronoun in a context where a nominative would also be possible.

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Prepositions vs adverbs

It is difficult to say whether a word is a preposition or an adverb because there are so many similarities between prepositions and adverbs. For example, a preposition becomes an adverb after the removal of the word which it governs: *She looked about herself* and *She looked about.* Obviously, there are clear distinctions: adverbs always have a full lexical value, representing answers to definite questions, while prepositionsnever have a full lexical value, though there are differences in degree.

We are redrawing the boundaries between prepositions and adverbs by looking further at words like *before,* which can occur either with an NP complement (*We left before the last act*) or without a complement (*I had seen her once before*). There are a fair number of words of this kind: *above, across, after, along, behind, below, beneath, beyond, down, in, off, outside, over, past, round, since, through, under, up,* etc. These are traditionally analysed as prepositions when they have an NP complement, but as adverbs when they have no complement:

Traditional preposition	Traditional adverb
1.a She went *aboard* the liner.	b. She went *aboard.*
2.a. He sat *outside* her bedroom.	b. He sat *outside*.

Aboard in [1b] and *outside* in [2b] are not qualified as prepositions because prepositions are defined in such a way that they require NP complements. They are obviously not nouns, verbs, adjectives or conjunctions, so there is nowhere to put them except in the adverb category. It is important to see that these words do not satisfy the definition that traditional grammar gives to the adverb category. They typically occur, for example, in the three functions:

Dependent of noun	Dependent of verb	Dependent of *Be*
the temperature *outside*	He sat *outside.*	He is *outside*.

The first and the third of the functions are characteristic of prepositions, but not of adverbs. Adverbs do not normally occur as dependents of nouns: in related adjective-adverb pairs it is the adjective that appears in this function. No such restriction applies to prepositions. If we compare *He criticised them with tact* (PP) and *He criticised them tactfully* (Adv), the underlined words modify the verb, and we see that both the preposition phrase (PP) and the adverb are admissible. In *[A manager with tact] is needed* (PP) and *[A manager tactfully] is needed* (Adv) the underlined words modify the noun *manager* and here the PP is admissible, but the adverb is not. Instead we need an adjective: *a tactful manager*.

Adverbs cannot function as complement to *be* in its ascriptive sense: here we have adjectives in their predicative use. We are to compare:

PP as complement of *Be*	Adv P as complement of *Be*
1.a. *The key is under the mat.*	*b. Ann was enthusiastically today*.
2.a. *The meeting is on Friday.*	*b. Rain is again*.

The [a] examples, with a PP functioning as complement of *be*, are correct, but the [b] ones, with an adverb in this function, are ungrammatical. Instead of [1b] we have *Ann was enthusiastic today,* with the corresponding adjective. Since the adverb *again* has no

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adjective counterpart we can not correct [2b] in the same way. Thus, for this particular example we could have *It is raining again,* with *again* now functioning as modifier to the verb *rain*.

The classification of words like *aboard* and *outside* in the previous examples as adverbs is inconsistent with the traditional definition of that category. In order to remove this inconsistency we should amend the definition of prepositions so that they are no longer required to have an NP complement. *Aboard, outside* and similar words will then be prepositions both when they have NP complements and when they occur alone. This way we can get rid of the complication of a dual classification for these words, and words which differ radically in their syntactic properties from original adverbs are removed from the adverb class.

Prepositions vs adjectives

We take into account here the main characteristics which distinguish between the preposition and adjective categories in the great mass of cases, setting aside a very small number of exceptional words whose status as adjective or preposition is problematic and controversial.

Typical adjectives inflect for grade/ degree (with plain, comparative and superlative forms such as *short, shorter, shortest*) or else have comparatives and superlatives marked by the modifiers *more* and *most* (e.g. *beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful*). They are gradable, accepting a range of degree modifiers including *very* and *too*. On the contrary, prepositions are normally non-gradable. However, there are some PPs with specialised meanings that do permit certain kinds of grading such as: *out of order* ('inappropriate'), *out of sorts* ('unwell', 'discontented'), *in control*, *in the know* ('informed'), *at home with X* ('familiar with X'), *on top of the world* ('extremely happy'). Thus, we may say *You are more at home with mathematics than I am* or *She feels more in control of the situation than he used to*. Gradability does not apply to the preposition by itself but to the larger expression, and hence comparison in these cases is not marked inflectionally.

A high proportion of prepositions can head PPs functioning as complement to *be,* but they occur less readily with the other verbs. They do not normally occur with *become.* In general, if we take a PP that can be the complement of *be*, we will find it cannot be the complement of *become,* but with AdjPs there is no such restriction:

AdjP complements	PP complements
1.a. *They **are** grateful to you.*	b.*They **are** in your debt.*
2.a. *They **became** grateful to you.*	b.*They **became** in your debt.*

Even PPs like *in a bad temper*, which are semantically similar adjectives, do not appear with *become*: we get *The boss became angry* but **not** *The boss became in a bad temper.*

Prepositions vs verbs

As a rule, there is little difficulty in distinguishing verbs from prepositions. Verbs usually function as predicator in the clause structure, while in infinitival clauses they are easily

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recognisable as verbs by this function. We can not find any doubt about the status of *follow* as a verb in: *I always follow the guidelines*, or in *I advise you to follow the guidelines*. There are prepositions which have the same shape as the gerund-participle or past participle forms of verbs. The historical change led to a word taking on the properties of a preposition in addition to its original verbal properties and now it belongs to both categories:

Preposition	Verb
1 a *Following the meeting, the there will be a reception*	b. *Following the manual, he tried to assemble unit.*
2.a *Owing to the drought, many farms are going bankrupt.*	b. *Owing to the bank, farmers can't afford any luxuries.*
3.a *Sally did very well, given her inexperience*.	b. *Sally was given only six months to recover.*

In [1b] *following* is predicator in a gerund-participial clause functioning as adjunct. This clause itself has no overt subject, but an understood subject is retrievable from the subject of the main clause: the sentence implies that *he* is following the manual. In [2b] *owing* is interpreted in a similar way. It is the farmers who owe so much to the bank. In [3b] Sally is the subject, and we have a passive clause. In the [a] examples, there is no such predicative relationship to a subject. The underlined words derive historically from verbs, but they have meanings distinct from the verbal ones, and in this use these words belong to the preposition category: *following* means 'after', *owing to X* means 'because of X', and *given X* means 'if we take into account'.

One of the most complex problems is that of the use of certain prepositions in such verbal combinations as *to bring forth, to come off, to look out*, etc. In these verbal structures stress is laid on the non-verbal element: *to bring ' forth, to come' off, to look' out*. If we add the idea that the non-verbal element does not connect words, it is evident that it cannot be called a preposition, though some grammarians stick to the term. To call it an adverb is as inadequate, for the blending of the non-verbal element with the verb is so complete that no question is possible with reference to it.

Conclusion

The reason why the membership of the preposition class should be extended is that we can see no justification for restricting it to words that have NP complements. This extension of the preposition category involves redrawing the boundaries between prepositions and subordinators and between prepositions and adverbs. The differences between prepositions and nouns are too obvious to merit further discussion, but we consider it helpful to make a comparison between the syntactic properties of prepositions and those of adjectives and verbs in order to clarify the differences between them.

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