ON ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS

Tatiana IAȚCU[1]

Abstract

The paper presents, in a short chronological order, the evolution of English prepositions among the other parts of speech and its importance in the formation, development and semantic change of English compound verbs.

Keywords: semantic change, grammatical categories, preposition, grammatical constructions, compound verbs

Introduction

The analysis of compound verbs in English normally has to begin with the study of its components, that is the verb and its particles, which can be an adverb, a preposition, or a particle, when the context can't give a certain clue as to what grammatical category this component belongs to, variant preferred by more and more linguists. Trying to begin with the earliest grammar books, one is at first amazed to find out that these were written by non-native speakers of English – Germans, French, Danish and so on. Then we do find an explanation, as those who need to know more about a language, especially rules of formation and grammatical structures, are the people who want to learn the language as a foreign one. When studying the foreign language, they have in mind the rules and structures of their own mother tongue or, as it happened centuries ago, a model of a classical one, Latin. The big mistake with the English language was to try to squeeze it into foreign patterns, mainly those which described Romance languages, while English is of Germanic origin. Generations of students were forced to study and learn it according to these patterns without being given an explanation why it did not fit. One of the few among the first who realized this and did not try to conjugate verbs and find declensions for nouns and adjectives was John Wallis.

English grammars before the 20th century

Grammatica Lingua Anglicanae written by John Wallis and published in Hamburg in 1672 is analysed by Ilinca Constantinescu in *Linguistic Studies and Research* and considered one of the oldest grammars describing the English language structure. The grammarian emphasises in his work the different manners in which grammatical categories function in

[1] Conf. univ. dr., Universitatea „Petru Maior", Târgu-Mureș

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

comparison with other languages. Although an innovator in many respects, Wallis preserves the traditional terminology, having the advantage of dealing with known notions. The disadvantage occurs when he sometimes gives these terms special meanings, e. g. covering under the same umbrella of the adjective other adjunct elements, such as the inflectional genitive of the noun. (Wallis 1672: 82)

He notices the importance of the preposition in the structure of the English language, but he speaks about it in the noun chapter, underlining that the whole syntax of the noun is made clear if you know all its elements. Prepositions show the connection between an element and their dominant determinant. After giving the situations when the nouns are not accompanied by prepositions, the author lists the prepositions and their relations, indicating the parts of speech they go with (pre-positioned and post-positioned). He makes notes regarding the peculiarities of the spoken language, referring to similar situations in other languages. The importance of this grammar lies in the fact that its writer describes the linguistic phenomena based on the analysed reality. He does not take into account the traditional precepts that he considers inadequate for his purpose, but for our main concern, compound verbs, it is not so relevant.

When prepositions are mentioned, in Miège et Boyer (1761), especially *out* and *into*, the peculiarity of the English language of changing the meaning of the verb is emphasised, e.g. *to work a child out of his rogutsh Tricks* meaning 'faire quitter un Enfant ses mauvaises habitudes' or 'to whip him into better manners'. The fact that "these English idioms have a force not matched by the French language" (Miège et Boyer 1761: 172) is also stressed. The English prepositions have thus a particular usage in English, transferring their meanings without being incorporated into the word: *to look after, to look upon, to put out*. In these examples the prepositions exist together with the verbs, remaining detached from the verb, though. The label of phrasal verbs (compound verbs) is not stated and this group of English verbs is dealt with only in the chapter on prepositions. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of changing meaning due to a preposition is clearly asserted.

In *Eléments de la langue anglaise* ou *Méthode pratique*, published in 1845, by Siret, the preposition is associated with compound/idiomatic verbs. The new characteristic added is that whenever the verb is accompanied by the preposition that completes its meaning, they form a single entity in the passive e. g.,

[1] *He* ***was spoken to*** *on the subject.*

[2] *He got him* ***taken off***. (Siret 1845: 206)

Due to this phenomenon the prepositions are also called particles and are grouped into three: inseparable, *to undo, mistake*, separable and obligatory (they are linked to the words that follow):

[3] *He* ***is above*** *him in dignity*. (Siret 1845: 206)

The separable preposition limits the meaning of the verb, i. e., a certain particle, added to a verb, changes its meaning. For example, *down* means 'en bas'*, up* means 'en haut', *out* means 'dehors', *in* means 'dedans', *again* means 'encore', *near* means 'proche', *off*

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

means 'à distance', *back* means 'en arrière', *away* means 'au loin', etc. When you add these to a verb like *go*, you get the following meanings: *to go down* 'descendre'; *to go up* 'monter' etc. Other particles change even their meanings, e. g. *to keep* ***back***, *to take* ***away***, *to take* ***up***, *to pull* ***off***, *to put* ***off***, *to set* ***forth***. This easiness of changing the meanings of the verbs by adding a particle is peculiar to the genius of the English language and gives it much force. (Siret 1845: 227-8)

English grammars in the 20th century

In the introduction of *Longman's English Grammar*, 1905, the editor emphasises that "The study of grammar should be, rather, the study of language as the living expression of thought, the teacher continually harking back from forms to underlying meanings, and thus making Grammar a study of 'distinctions in thought'" (Smith 1905: VII) This sends us straight to the importance of semantics in changing, shaping and reshaping words in a language.

In the chapter mentioning the preposition, it is stressed that only "Proper nicety in the choice of Prepositions, as in the choice of other English words, can come only from care, practice, and much reading of good books and hearing of good spoken English." (Smith 1905: 201)

One of the functions of prepositions is to change an intransitive verb into a transitive one. The verb *look* is given as an example in:

[4] *We* ***look at*** *the person*

and

[5] *You* ***are being looked at,*** (Smith 1905: 201)

a passive construction. When prepositions are made part of a verb they should not be confounded with adverbs, which are sometimes used similarly:

[6] *These* ***were*** *carefully* ***picked out*** *from the whole lot.*

[7] *You* ***will be taken in*** *by that man.* (Smith 1905: 131)

Nevertheless, they are not treated as prepositions because they are not followed by an object when the sentences are changed into the active voice.

The situation changes with Delcourt, in *Grammaire descriptive de l'anglais parlé*, 1929. In the chapter about the English verb, the author deals only with the irregular verbs and the preposition is listed under the title of "words so-called invariable". They are described, together with the conjunctions, as having fixed forms and varying only in pronunciation when they are in a stressed position. English here is pitied for not having plenty of forms, giving rise to stereotypes and formulae. (Delcourt 1929: 87)

When discussing about word formation the author, mentioning again the vague character of the linkage between the particles, stresses the numerous compounds made without great care to analysis or logic. He goes on, saying, "[...] it's a freedom for the language, without being too clear an element". (1929: 90) We have combinations between an adverb and a verb, e.g., *to overtake, to upset,* and a verb and an adverb, e.g., *to take in, to give up, to pull out*, which is more important. This last combination is very frequent and the

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

possibilities of forming verbs of "give up type are countless" (Delcourt 1929: 91). Their initial, separate meanings are changed. Thus, *give up* does not mean 'donner + en haut' but to 'abandon'. The language uses verbs accompanied by prepositions as simple verbs,

[8]*That's what I* ***am looking for****.*

They can change their voice in the same way as a transitive verb can,

[9] *He* ***was listened to*** *most attentively.*

[10] *The old boots* ***had been got rid of****.* (Delcourt 1929: 138)

Through this device the language has acquired a direct and personal character.

English also uses post positioned words, which have a very expressive effect. Words like *in*, *out*, *up*, *down*, etc. have an important role,

[11] ***Show*** *him* ***up****.*

[12] *We are* ***to go up to*** *town tomorrow.*

[13] *I've got ten days* ***to do*** *Europe and I've* ***thrown*** *the Holy Land* ***in****.*

[14] *You've to* ***coax*** *the sauce* ***out****.* (Delcourt 1929: 140)

This post position formation has the same status as a French verb. In some constructions the meaning can be predicted partly because of the post position, e.g., *to creep in, to fly in, to run in,* but in others it is rather difficult to understand them, as in *to go in for*. The force of the construction is given mainly by the particle,

There is little difference between a verb followed by a post position and one followed by a preposition. They form a special compound where the preposition cannot be separated from the verb. These constructions can be frequently found in relatives and main clauses,

[15] *I see what you* ***are driving at****.*

[16] *The boy I* ***had come across*** *proved very friendly.*

[17] *You seem to be very well* ***looked after****.* (Delcourt 1929: 150)

In *Gramatica engleză* published in 1936, Violeta Lungulescu has a special chapter on the postposition, emphasising that this invariable particle is placed immediately after the verb and gets a stronger stress. It has the function of an adverb and the form of a preposition after which a noun is missing but understood,

[18] ***Put on*** *(your head) your hat.* (Lungulescu 1936: 125)

It also changes the meaning of the verb. For example, the verb *to get* means 'to arrive'*,* 'to obtain'*,* 'to become', but has other meanings in: *to get out, to get up, to get about, to get to, to get above, to get ahead, to get away, to get back, to get down, to get together, to get in, to get on (with), to get over*, etc. Generally, the meaning of the post position is the same as that of the preposition and thus we are directed to study the preposition mainly. The pronoun direct object is placed between the verb and the post position,

[19]***Put on*** *your hat.*

[20] ***Put*** *it* ***on****.*

[21] *I* ***put*** *my hat* ***on****.* (Lungulescu 1936: 127)

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

We should not take a preposition for a post position. The latter can be placed after the direct object, is stressed and has an adverbial meaning. The preposition links the object with the verb and is unstressed,

[22] *I* ***looked about*** *in the room* (post position);

[23] *I* ***looked about*** *the room* (preposition). (Lungulescu 1936: 127)

E. Schaap and A. Levy wrote in the preface of their book on English grammar of 1938, "The foreigner learning English is generally able to master the grammar in a very short time, and in comparison with French or German he finds it easy. It is only when he comes to the verbs with their particles that he finds himself faced with almost insurmountable difficulties when he comes across such sentences as,

[24] *His father* ***set*** *him* ***up in*** *business, and was upset when the business failed.* (Schaap & Levy 1938: IV)

He finds that there are no rules to guide him, and that he must rely on extensive reading, frequent recourse to the dictionary, and a retentive memory." (Shaap and Levy 1938: IV) In order to facilitate the access of students to their meaning, the idioms were arranged by the compilers of dictionaries under various verbs, explained by the context, and they add, "…the slang of yesterday may become the language of elegance tomorrow." (1938: IV)

Manual of English Grammar and Composition, published in 1939, was a modernised edition of the book first edited in 1898. Nesfield changed some examples and exercises but, as a whole, the book remained unaltered. Phrasal verbs appear mostly in examples of the kind:

[25] *He* ***blew out*** *his brains after bidding his wife good-bye with a gun.* (Nesfield 1939: 131-2)

The chapter about prepositions and objects deals with the place of prepositions in the sentence. When the object is a relative pronoun the preposition may be placed last in the sentence and its object first, e.g.,

[26] *That is the man whom we* ***were looking for***. (Nesfield 1939: 131-2)

When the object is the "Conjunctive pronoun *that*" the preposition must be put last, e.g.,

[27] *This is the man that we* ***were looking for***. (Nesfield 1939: 131-2)

In the chapter about prepositions Nesfield emphasises that there is no part of speech that "has lent itself more readily to metaphorical usage than prepositions" (1939: 258) Their main function is to express relations in space and then, applied metaphorically, to relations in time. But gradually they expressed other kinds of relations, e.g., *about* referring to occupation:

[28] *He* ***went about*** *his work in earnest;* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

after referring to likeliness:

[29] *He* ***takes after*** *his father;* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

on referring to dependence:

[30] *He* ***lives on*** *his father;* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

over referring to authority:

[31] *He* ***is placed over*** *me;* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

through referring to state, circumstance and motive:

[32] *He* ***has passed through*** *many troubles.* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

[33] *All this* ***was done through*** *envy.* (Nesfield 1939: 258)

Marriott (1944) the opens door to new formations in the language and leaves room for debates. In talking about prepositions he draws the difference between the preposition introducing an adverbial phrase as in,

[34] *The cyclist went* ***up*** *the road.* (Marriott 1944: 216)

and the word *up* which has a different function in,

[35] *The navvies broke* ***up*** *the road.* (Marriott 1944: 216)

The verb is a transitive one in the second example and thus the preposition changed its meaning. Certain verbs must be followed by certain prepositions as *prefer* by *to* and not by *than* or *differ* by *from* (Marriott 1944: 216).

He gives more attention than the other authors mentioned to colloquial English that is allowed a greater freedom in vocabulary and construction. He talks about the purists who advise us not to end a sentence with a preposition. But in everyday speech this is quite habitual and we are given as an example the sentence

[36] *What are you getting* ***at****?* (Marriott 1944: 217)

which would sound rather stilted if asked,

[37] ***At*** *what are you getting?* (Marriott 1944: 217)

In *Gramatica limbii engleze. Fonetica-morfologie-sintaxa* published in 1947, a translation from L. Duncan, we are told that some verbs are followed by certain prepositions which, in this case, are called post positions, at the same time modifying the meaning of the verb. A verb can be followed by different post positions and getting thus different meanings. And then a list is given comprising both verbs with obligatory prepositions and phrasal verbs, such as: *abstain from, account for, account to, accuse of, acquit of*, etc. Phrasal verbs are not dealt with separately but the phenomenon of semantic change is signalled.

In *Curs de limba engleza* 1958 the authors, Kastner, Farca and Cartianu, do not mention anything about the change of meaning when a post position is added to a verb, neither when speaking about the verb nor about the adverb or preposition. The only note observed is when the verb is studied and especially when it is part of an idiom. An example is given with the verb *to break* - the news/the ice/the mother's heart/the door open/the journey/the silence/up the clods of earth/up the party/out (the war). (Kastner, Farca and Cartianu 1958: 241)

Worrall Brown and the other co-authors, in *Form in Modern English,* 1958*,* stress the fact that the verb is the most vital part of speech in the English language, being also the most easily recognised. "Many verbs give themselves away by their permanent forms". They also stress that "no other part of speech has so many and such distinctive inflectional forms; no other has so many and distinctive function words in alliance with it;

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

and no other obeys a more rigid word order within its own group and within the sentence pattern as a whole." (1958: 30-31)

Many of the most common verbs are often followed by a number of small words such as *across, by, down, in, off, on, out, over, through, to, up* and *upon*. The verbs are usually of one syllable and form such expressions as *put across, get up, jot down, call off, catch on, peter out, put over, put out, blow up, side with,* and many others. He goes on explaining that some authorities consider these words as 'modifiers' of the verb. He finds another interpretation which seems to fit better with the facts: namely, that they are part of the verb itself (the basic vocabulary part) - just as if they were suffixes. These additional words and the verbs they follow may be thought of as being hyphenated to form single compound words. Thus we can speak of *pick-up trucks*, a *falling-out*, *knock-down-drag-out* fights, a *break-through*, etc. When used in this way, *up, out*, etc. are not separate parts of speech and not function words, but part of the basic vocabulary meaning of the verb itself. It is important to know the status of these words when they are used with verbs, because under different circumstances they function quite differently.

In examples such as,

[38] *She* ***puts up*** *preserves,*

[39] *They have* ***put by*** *a little money,*

[40] *Do not* ***put off*** *the cleaning,* (Worral Brown 1958: 40)

up, *by* and *off* are parts of the verbs and the nouns following them are verb-objects rather than preposition-objects. This means that when such words come between a verb and a noun the function of the noun is grammatically ambiguous. We cannot tell from the form of the sentence whether the noun is an object of a verb or of a preposition. We are given a method for solving this dilemma, which involves word order in

[41] *The sailors* ***blew up*** *the ship,*

and

[42] *The wind* ***blew up*** *the valley.*

While the first sentence can be rewritten as,

[43]*The sailors* ***blew*** *the ship* ***up****,*

the second cannot,

[44] **The wind* ***blew*** *the valley* ***up***. (Worral Brown 1958: 41)

In a simple assertive sentence a preposition precedes its object and this order cannot be changed, except under certain conditions. Thus a simple reasoning tells us that *up* in the first example cannot be a preposition. "These words function as prepositions in a simple statement only if the vocabulary meanings of the other words in the sentence do not allow a change in the order of the preposition-noun combination." (Worral Brown 1958: 42)

There are thirteen words that may be either adverbs or prepositions: *about, before, behind*, *below, but, down, in, near, on, out, over, since* and *up*. We can distinguish a preposition from an adverb by using them in declarative sentences. If they are followed by a noun, a pronoun or a noun phrase and cannot change order, they are prepositions. If they are not

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

followed by a noun structure or can be changed in another place in the sentence, they are adverbs. Prepositions: *They fell* ***down*** *the hill. I've never seen him* ***before*** *this. I've never seen him* ***since*** *the Christmas holiday.* Adverbs: *Jack fell* ***down.*** *I've never seen him* ***before*** *at our house. I've never seen him* ***since****.*

In 1960 John Millington Ward published *Peculiarities in English* which contains a chapter about prepositions, 'The Choice of Prepositions', where he underlines the strangeness of the English language, compared with other languages. "It is unlikely", he says, "for example, that any other language could produce, even as a joke, anything like:

[45] *I lately lost a preposition;*
It hid, I thought, beneath my chair;
And angrily, I cried: Perdition!
Come ***up from out of in under*** *there!*" (Millington Ward 1960: 159)

He, too, mentions the fact that there are very few rules to tell us for sure when a certain preposition must be used. The only way of speaking English correctly is through "persistent reading" (1960: 160). He defines prepositions only from a semantic point of view, explaining their meanings and matching them in pairs, like *beside* and *besides*, *before* and *after, on, in, in the*, *at* in expressions of time, *into* and *in*, *at* and *in* for villages and towns, *among* and *between*, *by* and *with*, *since* and *for*. Nothing is mentioned about their combinations with verbs to form other lexemes.

Otto Jespersen characterises the English language in terms of human features in *Growth and Structures of the English Language,* first published in 1905: "…just as an English lady will nearly always write in a manner that in any other country would only be found in a man's hand, in the same manner the language [English] is more manly than any other language I know" (1956: 2) He stresses the shortness of the English words which, without borrowings from other languages, would have made English sound as Chinese. Some such small words are weak and this is compensated by the absence of the definite article in many cases where we can find them in other languages, e. g., 'Merry old English', 'Heaven and Earth', 'life is short', etc. These 'short empty words' accumulate in meaning and avoid making the style "somewhat weak and prolix" (1956: 7).

The language reflects the character of a people. As the Englishmen, who are not too enthusiastic or too distressed, the English language "accordingly grows sober, too sober perhaps, and even barren, when the object is to express emotions." (1956: 8) The same idea of casual illogical usage of the language is also found in his *A Modern English Grammar. On Historical Principles* 1965, where he says that it was a frequent error of older grammarians to correct speech according to prescribed rules. "The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself." That is why English dictionaries comprise the largest number of words that can be met in the "four quarters of the globe". (1965: 16)

In volume II, Otto Jespersen says that a great number of verbs can be constructed either with an object or with a preposition plus its object. In the latter case the object is

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

governed by the whole composite phrase consisting of the verb and the preposition. The meaning of the two constructions is sometimes identical or nearly so, but in some cases there is a marked difference, and not infrequently the prepositions serve to make the whole expression more graphic. He goes on making a list of prepositions with their meanings and usage. Thus he speaks about obligatory prepositions after certain verbs, e. g. *about* in *mind about, think about*, *against* in *fight against, offend against*, *at* in *catch at, grasp at, strike at, clutch at, guess at, point at, get at, curse at, wonder at, envy at, visit at, play at*, *for* in *draw for, try for*, and so on.

Conclusion

We can conclude with Jespersen's words when he says that the English language is a "methodical, energetic, business-like and sober language" which does not take into consideration nicety and elegance but submits to logic and freedom of expression. (1965: 17) That is why so few Celtic words were taken over into English because there was nothing to compel the ruling class to learn the language of their inferiors. To these we could add many words preserved only in dialects, mostly in the north, such as the Danish *lede*, 'red up' meaning *to tidy*, Danish *rydde op*. (1965: 78) These most indispensable elements of the language underwent the strongest Scandinavian influence, and we become certain of it when we realise that a number of these small empty words have been taken over from Danish into English, as no other language has done.

As we have seen in this short survey, and in an ampler study (*A Semantics of Phrasal Verbs*) prepositions have played an important role, both as deictics and as a formation instrument for compound verbs. In most cases the present adverb or particle that makes full body, as the meaning is concerned, with the verb was initially a preposition.

References :

Delcourt, J. (1929) *Grammaire descriptive de l'anglais parlé*. Paris: Collection Armand Colin

Fleming, C. (1882) *Cours complet de la grammaire anglaise*. Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie.

Kastner, E., Farca, E., Cartianu, V. (1958) *Curs de limba englezã*. Bucuresti: Ministerul Invãtãmântului si Culturii

Jespersen, Otto (1965) *A Modern English Grammar. On Historical Principles*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

Lungulescu, V. (1936) *Gramatica englezã*, Craiova: Biruinta

Marriott, J. W. (1944) (1st published 1929) *Matriculation English*, London: George H. Harrap & Co. Ltd.

Miège et Boyer, Mrs. (1761) *Grammaire anglaise-françoise* Paris: Briasson

Millington Ward, J. (1960) *Peculiarities in English* London: Longman Group Ltd.

Nesfield, J. C. (1939) (1st published 1898) *Manual of English Grammar and Composition* London: McMillan and Co. Ltd.

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)

Shaap, E. and Levy, A. (1938) *The 'Warp and Woof' of Modern English*. London and Paris: Hachette
Siret (1845) *Eléments de la langue anglaise ou Méthode pratique*. Paris: Baudry, Librairie Européene
Smith, George J. (ed.) (1905) *Longman's English Grammar* New York: Longmans, Green, and Co.
Worrall Brown, D., Brown W. C., Bailey, D. (1958) *Form in Modern English*, New York: Oxford University Press,

BDD-A2817 © 2011 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:58:19 UTC)