

# PREPOSITIONS: AN OVERVIEW

Hossein Vossoughi

Ph.D

University For Teacher Education

**T**raditional grammarians have customarily regarded prepositions as one of the parts of speech. Otto Jespersen, who is one of the prominent traditional linguists and grammarians, reduces the number of parts of speech from eight to six and calls them "word-classes". He enumerates them as substantives, adjectives, verbs, pronouns, numbers and particles. Jespersen, then, groups prepositions as a subclass of particles and defines them very briefly as elements which signal different types of relationships in the sentence, as follows:

at, in, through, for, etc. (Prepositions, indicating relations of various kinds.) (1933, p. 69)

Charles C. Fries (1952), whose position epitomizes that of the structural linguists, divides the vocabulary of English into two major categories: (a) parts of speech (content words) and (b) function words. In this way, he reduces parts of speech to four classes and numbers them class 1, class 2, class 4, mentioning that these classes correspond to nouns, verbs, adjectives, and

advers respectively. He also differentiates fifteen groups of function words and labels them as group A, B, C, and so on. Prepositions are regarded as group F among the function words. (p. 95)

Function words, in the sense of Fric's structural theory, are a "closed" class of words while parts of speech represent "open" systems of vocabulary in a language. Moreover, a function word is recognized as an isolated item while each part of speech is identifiable in terms of structural signals of the context within which it occurs.

In pedagogical grammar, prepositions are looked at from the viewpoints of learning and usage. One textbook writer, Jean Prainskas, refers to prepositions as "Troublesome" function words and characterizes them in this way: "Among the most difficult things to learn about English is the proper use of function words." (1959, p. 240)

Concerning the usage of prepositions, Hayden, et. al. in their 1966 grammar textbook maintain that: "A preposition shows a relationship between its object and other words in a sentence... Some of the relationships that prepositions express are *place or position, direction, time, manner, and agent.*" (p. 171)

Paul Robert (1954), regarding the difficulty of prepositional usage, states with characteristic insight that: "Since more forms used as prepositions may also occur as other parts of speech, the prepositions must be defined syntactically. A preposition is a form which relates a substantive, its object, to some other word in the sentence." (p. 222)

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) look at prepositions not with respect to their usage but from the viewpoint of the hierarchy of difficulty in identifying and describing them. Quirk and Greenbaum are concerned about the relational meanings the prepositions establish among the constituents of the sentence and also about the fact that prepositional meanings are difficult to describe systematically. On this issue they say, "Of the various types of relational meaning, those of *PLACE, TIME* are the most prominent and easy to identify. Other relationships such as *INSTRUMENT* and *CAUSE* may also be recognized although it's difficult to describe prepositional meanings

systematically in terms of such labels. Some prepositional uses may be best elucidated by seeing a preposition as related to a clause, e.g. The man with the red beard ~ The man who has the red beard; My knowledge of Hindi ~ I know Hindi." (p. 143)

Charles Fillmore's view of prepositions differs from those of the other grammarians and linguists. In his article "Toward a Modern Theory of Case" (1968), Fillmore attributes a very distinctive role to English prepositions. He regards them as elements which specify the different *cases* of the noun phrases. Fillmore maintains that there is no distinction between Chomsky's "grammatical categories and grammatical functions" (Chomsky, 1965). Questioning "the deep-structure validity of the notion of Subject-Object" as was developed by Chomsky (1965), Fillmore proposes the suggestion that "something very much like grammatical *case* plays a role in the groundwork of grammar that is much less superficial than is usually recognized."

Fillmore, in his theory of case, subsequently assumes that the deep structure of the simple sentence is not NP-Aux-VP as has been postulated by Chomsky, but rather something similar to Aux Proposition and VP (predicate) is that "proposition includes what will end up to be the subject of the sentence."

Fillmore eventually concludes his discussion of sentence structure by taking the following position: "I regard each simple sentence in a language as made up of a verb and a collection of nouns in various 'cases' in the deep structure senses. In surface structure, case distinctions are sometimes present, sometimes not -- depending on the language, depending on the noun, or depending on idiosyncratic properties of certain governing words."

To account for the subject noun-phrase which is case free, Fillmore explains that one of the prepositional phrases in the preposition, in a particular case, may be "actant" and become the subject of the sentence in the surface and, thus, he generalizes the following rule: "all prepositions are deleted in the subject position."

Fillmore's discussion concerning the role of English prepositions leads to this conclusion: "An analysis of syntactic functions in English requires a

general account of the role of prepositions in our language." He maximizes the significance of the prepositional roles as a means to account for the English language.

It is, however, surprising that in 1954 (fourteen years before Fillmore's theory of case appeared) Paul Roberts voiced an opinion concerning replacing of prepositions for inflectional case-endings, which was exactly that of Fillmore. He expresses himself in this way:

Some grammarians view some prepositions as the Modern English substitutes for the old inflectional endings, now mostly lost. For example, they say that *of* is a new genitive inflection in "the top of mountain" replacing the older "mountain's top," *to* is a dative inflection in "Give the money to Sally," replacing the old dative ending. There would seem to be no reason to stop with *of* and *to*. One might find an instrumental inflection in *with*, a locative in *in*, an ablative in *from*. And in such prepositions as *before*, *under*, *up* we might recognize new inflections for which we find no counterpart in the case systems of the classical languages. We would have, indeed, as many inflections as we have prepositions. As a matter of fact, the analogy between prepositions and inflectional endings is not exact. Old English, Latin, and Greek had both inflections and prepositions, often with many prepositions governing the same case. We have simply lost the inflectional method of expressing relationship and in compensation have expanded the prepositional method." (p. 226)

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1988) open the chapter on prepositions in their book with this attitude: "This is an enormous topic -- we will consider only the basic meanings of some simple (i.e. one-word) prepositions and will ignore the following: (a) idiomatic usage (by the way 'incidentally'); (b) ..." (p. 99)

Focusing on the implications for teaching prepositions, Celco-Murcia and

Larsen-Freeman introduce the nine most frequent prepositions (i.e. at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, with) and recommend that "beginning student should master at an early stage the primary meanings of the 9 prepositions."

They then discuss the English prepositions from almost all aspects reviewed so far, namely: (a) the semantic case function (with reference to Fillmore's case theory). With this background, they introduce ten types of cases: agentive, means, benefactive, proxy, ablative, separation, dative, instrumental, comitative and joining, with contextual examples for each case, (b) the functional relationship of prepositions to *space, time, degree* and other, (c) the relational meaning of prepositions to *position* and *direction* with reference to Quirk and Greenbaum's matrix, (d) idiosyncratic meanings of a group of prepositions and finally (e) the usage of a number of confusing prepositions in clarifying contrastive contexts.

Looking into different prepositional properties, such as case structuring, function, meaning and establishing relationship among the other elements of the sentence, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman supply us with the most comprehensive and pedagogical evaluation of the English Prepositions. Their description is derived from traditional, structural, and transformational bases and their emphasis is mainly on teaching of prepositions.

**Conclusion.** We have reviewed a number of issues about English prepositions. There is no question that each view per se contributes a great deal to the identification and clarification of the prepositions. However, the different views regarding prepositions are so controversial and divergent that it is difficult to be convinced by any one of them. Although Fillmore's theory of case does not treat prepositions directly, it attributes a very substantial role to them in the basic structure of a given language.

There is no question that thus far linguistic science has not provided a single systematic, comprehensive and satisfactory description of prepositions. The reason lies in the fact that prepositions are so complicated, multifunctional, homonymous and multidimensional that much more linguistic study is needed to clarify their subtlety and complexity.

The occasional hesitation native speakers of English exhibit with regard to

proper usage of prepositions, and the serious problems the non-native speaker of English has with prepositional usage, even when he has mastered many other aspects of the language, can attest to the fact that prepositions are not mere empty elements (i.e. function words as they are currently assumed to be) whose role it is to relate a noun phrase to another component of the sentence.

My position is that prepositions are originally semantic elements of the deep structure which also act as structural constituents in the syntactic component of the sentence. This two-dimensional characterization requires that any serious study of prepositions should cover both their semantic and syntactic aspects simultaneously, which would be a difficult task, indeed.

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