PREPOSITIONS AND PARTICLES IN ENGLISH

How is there a gradient between the two?

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Introduction

Traditional grammar defines prepositions as a closed class of relational words assigning case to the NPs they take as complements. However, not only is the class of prepositions an open-class gradually including new members through a process of grammaticalization of some expressions, but it stands in a continuum with several other word classes, namely verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and above all, particles. In this paper I wish to explore in further detail the continuity between prepositions and particles, based on syntactic, semantic and pragmatic criteria.

I. What is a preposition?

A preposition is traditionally defined as a "closed class of uninflectable morphemes showing the link between its object and another word in the sentence" (Liles, 1987: 229). Right away, the fundamentally **relational** role of prepositions can be retained as a defining feature. Yet, as Huddleston and Pullum note (2002: 598), traditional grammar tends to reduce the definition of prepositions to their **grammaticised use**, which is for prepositions to assign cases to the nouns or pronouns following them.

A classical assumption derived from this simplified definition of prepositions being followed only by noun phrases, is that prepositions are heads of phrases while conjunctions are heads of clauses (Huddleston, 2002: 1011).

This is erroneous, since prepositions can take clauses as complements:

    (1)   He vanished on hearing her come in.

    (2)   Tom panicked about whether he would arrive in time for the meeting.

Prototypical members of the preposition category are: *about, above, across, after, along, around, before, behind, between, by, down, in, off, on, out, over, through, to, under, up*. A diachronic study of their semantics, which will not be carried here, shows that their meanings originally have to do with relations in **space**, or **time**.

Huddleston and Pullum, in their comprehensive descriptive approach to grammar, choose a **broader** definition of prepositions, as **heads** of prepositional phrases with specific characteristics:

> We include in the preposition category all of the subordinating conjunctions of traditional grammar, with three exceptions: *whether*, *if* with the meaning of *whether*, and *that* introducing a subordinating clause; since these markers indicate subordination, they are not heads of the constructions in which they are found. (Huddleston, 2002: 600)

Huddleston and Pullum note that a number of the most central and frequent prepositions do have **grammaticised** uses although they cannot be reduced to that. In a grammatical use, the preposition has no meaning independent of the grammatical construction in which it occurs. In such cases it serves the same kind of function as an inflectional case.

Compare:

(3) *They destroyed the city.*

(4) *Their destruction of the city.*

The main role played by *of* is that of a relator of the two NPs.

(5) *He was arrested by the police.*

(6) *I left the parcel by the back door.*

The first *by* is clearly grammaticised, it is used merely to introduce the agent in a passive structure, while the second *by* has a spatial meaning.

A. The properties of prepositions and prepositional phrases (Huddleston, 2002: 603)

Prepositions prototypically take **complements**, which are prototypically **NPs**, but not exclusively. A preposition can also receive as a complement a **non-expandable content clause**, that is, a clause which cannot receive a modification by a dependent that-clause.

> *(7) I live in a small house.*   NP.

> *(8) We left before the meeting ended.*   *Non-expandable content clause.*

A prepositional phrase can **function** as an **adjunct** or a **complement**: compare:

> *(9) I disagree on principle.*   *Complement (why I disagree is on principle).*

> *(10) I disagree, in principle.*   *Adjunct (In principle, I disagree).*

As a complement, a PP can complement a verb, compare:

> *(11) I put the box in the drawer.*

> *(12) *I put the box.*

It can also be a qualifier inside a nominal group, complementing a noun:

> *(13) The hole in the wall.*

(Compare with a restrictive relative clause; the PP here could be likened to a small clause, an elliptic restrictive relative clause).

Prepositions can receive as **modifiers** *right* or *straight*, which cannot modify verbs, adverbs or adjectives (in Standard English).

> *(14) They pushed it right under the bed.*

> *(15) */? They were right enjoying themselves.*

B. Prepositions as an open class

Far from being a closed class, the class of prepositions counts in new members through the diachronic process of **grammaticalization**. In their *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday and Matthiesen (Halliday, 2004: 359) lay emphasis on the distinction between a preposition group and a preposition phrase. **Preposition groups** are complex prepositions which have evolved from **prepositional phrases** through a process of grammaticalization, such as *for the sake of*.

Many expressions lie just in between the two, such as *by the side of, as an alternative to, on the grounds of*.

C. Prepositions contrasted with other word categories

Here is a series of examples of diverse uses of *up*, adapted from Elisabeth O'Dowd (O'Dowd, 1998: 4), and their likely traditional analyses:

> *(16) She'll try to climb up your leg, man.*

Up is a preposition.

> *(17) And I'm going to clean up the mess?*

Up is an adverbial particle, adding a spatial or (metaphorically derived from spatial) meaning to *clean* (see last section for more explanation), but the meaning of *clean* remains intact.

> *(18) After relentless efforts, Mary decided to give up trying to convince him.*

Up is an adverbial particle, altering the meaning of *give.*

> *(19) There used to be a place up in Toledo where...*

Up is an adverb, functioning as an adjunct to the verb.

> *(20) Now that's a bunch of really high up people.*

Up is an adjective.

It does not take long to note the obvious permeability between preposition as a class and many other classes of words. They need comparing and contrasting.

D. Prepositions vs. conjunctions (Huddleston, 2002: 1011)

The idea that prepositions take phrases as complements while conjunctions take clauses as complement is erroneous:

> *(21) She was excited about becoming a star.*

A **broad** definition of the preposition class is chosen by Huddleston and Pullum. The crucial distinction lies between prepositions, which include subordinating conjunctions, which are heads since they determine the function of the construction they introduce, and subordinators (*whether*, *if* meaning *whether* and *that*) which are never heads of constituents.

The crucial difference between prepositions and subordinating conjunctions in traditional grammar (or specifying the sub-type of subordinating conjunctions in the class of prepositions, within Huddleston and Pullum's classification) is that prepositions can take finite interrogative clauses or gerund-participials as complements while subordinating

conjunctions are the only ones to be able to take finite declarative clauses as complement.

> *(22) It depends on whether there is adequate consultation with the staff. Preposition*

> *(23) He burst out laughing on seeing her dressed up. Preposition*

> *(24) Bring in the washing before it rains. Subordination conjunction.*

E. Prepositions vs. adjectives (Huddleston, 2002: 606)

There are several properties distinguishing AdjPs from PPs and central adjectives from central prepositions. Basically:

- central adjectives take *too* and *very* as modifiers, while prepositions take *right* or *straight* as modifiers.
- AdjPs can occur after become, PPs cannot.
- Central prepositions licence NPs as complements, adjectives do not.

Borderline cases are:
- *worth*, because of its syntactic structure: it takes an NP as complement, yet it remains analysed as an adjective.
- *Like, unlike, due, near, close, far* can belong to both categories.
- There are cases of **conversion** of adjectives into prepositions:

> *(25) Right adjacent to the church there is a liquor store.*

F. Prepositions vs. adverbs (Huddleston, 2002: 612)

The ability of many prepositions to head phrases in complement function is an important property distinguishing them from adverbs, which very rarely appear in complement function.

Yet there is obvious continuity between the two classes, in the cases where the PP functions as an adjunct. Compare:

> *(26) She did it carefully.*

> *(27) She did it with great care.*

The difference is also blurred in the case of prepositions which take NPs optionally:

> *(28) He is not in.*

> *(29) He is not in the house.*

Yet, the fact that adverbs usually do not licence a complement while prepositions usually do constitutes a basic difference between adverbs and prepositions.

G. Prepositions vs. verbs

To Halliday and Matthiesen (2004: 277), a preposition functions as a sort of **minor process**, a mini-verb. Indeed, in the expression of a circumstance, there are close parallels between *be + preposition* and a verb:

(30) *The delay was because of a strike.*

(31) *The delay was caused by a strike.*

Furthermore, the class of verb is a major source of the extension of the class of prepositions, since some prepositions like *given* or *concerning* are derived from non-finite verbs through a **grammaticalization** process.

H. Prepositions and particles

1. What does traditional grammar refer to by the expression "phrasal verbs"?

The definition of the notion of a "phrasal verb" is something quite hazy in traditional grammar. It basically refers to an idiomatic verb-preposition, verb-adverbial particle, or verb-adverbial particle-preposition combination with a varying degree of **fossilization** in usage (Huddleston, 2002).

Hence a "phrasal verb" could invariably describe:

(32) *To look for someone.*

(33) *To look something up.*

(34) *To look up to someone.*

Or refer to any verb-particle collocation, some being separable, some non-separable:

(35) *To think over a problem*

(36) *To think a problem over*

(37) *To think about a problem*

(38) **To think a problem about*.

But "phrasal verb" could also be understood as meaning "lexical verbs which consist of more than the verb word" (Halliday, 2004: 351). Indeed, to some extent and on a semantic level, *to look up to* can be apprehended as a single lexical item, since it has a one-word near synonym, *to admire*. Yet, why

are such forms as to *make* something *up* or to *bring* something *up* while to invent and to mention, their quasi-synonyms, exist?

As Dwight Bolinger notes in *The Phrasal Verb in English* (1971), prepositions and particles are "the source of an outpouring of lexical creativeness that surpasses anything else in our language." Halliday and Matthiesen add that there is a **pragmatic justification** for the existence and widespread use of phrasal verbs for information focus. Indeed, pronouns do not usually add information, so the fact that adverbial particles can appear after pronouns lays special emphasis on the aspect of the process borne by the adverbial particle, compare:

(39) Stop it!

(40) Cut it OUT!

Still, the pronoun can also appear after the particle in context, for contrastive reasons:

(41) They rang up me, but apparently, nobody else. (Halliday, 2004: 353).

Yet, the several understandings of the notion of phrasal verb make it a loose label, difficult to use profitably. This is why, for their part, Huddleston and Pullum refuse to use the term "phrasal verb" on the basis of syntactic criteria. According to them, despite the frequency of their joint idiomatic use, the combination verb + preposition or particle never forms a constituent of its own, hence their combination does not require any such specific denomination.

Hence they choose to use the phrase "**prepositional verb**" instead, this notion referring exclusively to the verb itself when it selects a preposition as a complement (Huddleston, 2002: 273). Compare:

(42) Kim referred to your book.

(43) Kim flew to Boston.

Refer is a prepositional verb since it selects a **specified** preposition (refer combines with *to* exclusively to express the object of the reference). The second *to* is an **unspecified** preposition: *flew* could have been followed by another preposition as in *Kim flew from New York*.

In cases such as:

(44) She put in her application.

(45) I gave up the struggle.

Traditional grammar analyses *in* and *up* as adverbs or adverbial particles.

Yet, since they act as complement to the verb (they make the sentence agrammatical if removed), Huddleston and Pullum analyse them as **intransitive prepositions**.

2. What are particles?

Huddleston and Pullum analyse **particles** as one-word phrases, functioning as **complement** of the verb (they are never adjuncts) (Huddleston, 2002: 280). The most central particles are analysed as **intransitive prepositions**, that is, prepositions which take no complement. Some adjectives and verbs can also work as particles, but this is restricted to a small numbers of idioms.

(46) She took off the label.

(47) She took the label off.

(48) He made his intentions clear.

(49) He made clear his intentions of taking action.

(50) He cut her short.

(51) He cut short his opponent's intervention.

In the examples above, *clear* and *short*, which are originally adjectives, function as particles.

Central particles are a type of intransitive prepositions with special syntactic characteristics. Compare:

(52) She brought the bed down.

(53) She brought the bed downstairs.

*(54) *She brought downstairs the bed.*

(55) She brought downstairs the bed that she had inherited from her grandmother.

(56) She brought down the bed.

Usually, nothing can come between a verb and its direct object when the direct object is an NP constituted by a proper noun or a determiner + a common noun, though this is possible with long NPs. Particles are the exception: they have the distinctive ability to be placed between the verb and a direct object of such a form.

The lexicalization of certain verb + preposition or particle combination can be accompanied in varying degree by **fossilisation**, that is, the loss of the ability for the verb to combine freely with other prepositions or particles. It can hence be noted that the transitivity of a preposition and the degree of freedom/fossilization are two independent parameters.

Several syntactic tests can be used to distinguish prepositions from particles:

- Particles can precede the NP object but do not have to; prepositions cannot follow the NP:

> *(57) She jumped off the wall.*

> *(58) *She jumped the wall off. Off is a preposition.*

- Usually, only a transitive preposition can be followed by an unstressed pronoun, unless the pronoun is used contrastively:

> *(59) They rang up me, but apparently, nobody else. (Halliday, 2004: 353).*

- Only PPs can be fronted.

- A manner adverb can be inserted between the verb and a transitive preposition, not with the particle.

> *(60) ?/* I gave right up.*

> *(61) ?/* She put her application right in.*

3. The gradient between prepositions and particles

In *The Phrasal Verb in English* (1971), Dwight Bolinger defines a third type of element lying right in between prepositions and particles in V – P – NP structures, (with P this undefined element, which is at times a preposition, at times a particle). He calls it the **adprep** (between an adverbial particle and a preposition), since it "belongs" as much to the preceding verb as to the following NP. Compare:

> *(62) She swept off the stage (cleaned it).*

> *(63) →Particle.*

> *(64) She swept off the stage (did her sweeping elsewhere).   →Preposition.*

> *(65) She swept off the stage (departed majestically).*

> *(66) →Adprep.*

When submitted to tests, the adprep displays characteristics of both particles and prepositions. At first, it seems to belong more to the category of prepositions, since it fails the NP insertion test, but passes the adverb-insertion test:

> *(67) *She swept it off majestically.*

> *(68) She swept majestically off the stage.*

And yet, the adprep also passes the stress test, which should only work for particles.

>   *(69) Show me the stage she swept "off.*

Interestingly, one could also stress:

>   *(70) Show me the stage she "swept off.*

The fact that this sentence can be stressed both ways is analysed by Bolinger as pointing to the adprep's hybrid nature: "the in-between status of the adprep shows up in the possibility of accentuating either way". (Bolinger, 1971: 42).

In fact, Bolinger explains, adpreps are "portmanteau words, fusions of elements that are syntactically distinct but semantically identical" (1971: 31).

In other words, the third sentence should be interpreted as:

>   *(71) She swept off, off the stage.*

The adprep represents the **fusion** of a preposition and a particle, which are realized by the same linguistic sign, hence for the sake of economy and fluidity, only one is realized.

Cognitive semantics, which explains syntactic constructions in terms of underlying semantic relationships, also provides relevant tools to explain the gradient between prepositions and particles. In his *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*, (1987), Ronald Langacker lays the basis of a cognitive approach to language. Language is not an isolated cognitive ability, but is integrated in our cognitive activity as a whole, and indicates the structure of the way we think and conceptualize. Our conceptualization is based on our experience and perceptions, on what we see and how we relate to the dimensions of living, space, time. Langacker describes several different categories which allow us to conceptualize our experience. There are things, usually indicated by nouns, domains, things with respect to domains, that is, figures standing out on grounds (when you focus your attention on something, when you see it move for instance, it becomes salient in its context). There are relations: temporal relations are processes, usually indicated by verbs in language. There are also atemporal relations, which are often spatial, and usually oriented, that is, asymmetrical: there is a **trajector**, which is a figure moving, involved in some relation, and **landmark**, the point of reference used to locate the trajector (Langacker, 1987, 231).

On the basis of this distinction, cognitive linguists' claim about prepositions and particles is that "particles are not distinct from the class of prepositions: they are simply prepositions employed in grammatical constructions where the landmark happens not to be elaborated, as it otherwise usually is" (Langacker, 1987: 243).

In her cognitive linguistics account of prepositions and particles, Sue Lindner confirms that they do not constitute separate classes (Lindner, 1981); the only difference is that while a **preposition specifies a landmark**, a **particle "sublexicalizes" the landmark**, that is, leaves it implicit or unspecified (not salient).

> *(72) The cat climbed up the tree.*

On the representational/cognitive level, the cat is the trajector while the tree is the landmark of motion; *up* is a preposition.

> *(73) He rushed up and said hello.*

Here, *up* posits a non-specified landmark, me perhaps, as the goal of motion; *up* is a particle.

The sub-theories of cognitive semantics called **prototype theory** and **image-schema** also provide an interesting account of the continuity between prepositions and particles, based on semantic criteria. Work in this field includes Claudia Brugman and George Lakoff's study of the preposition *over* (Brugman, 2009: 109), or Andrea Tyler's and Vyvyan Evans' *The Semantics of English Prepositions* (Tyler, 2003).

Their approach of prototypical prepositions like *up*, *down*, *over* aims at challenging a traditional analysis in terms of semantic features of the different occurrences of the word.

In a traditional semantic feature approach, the two occurrences of *up* below would have distinct meanings and no link whatsoever:

> *(74) I gave up trying.*

> *(75) Drink up your glass.*

> *(76) Walk up the hill.*

Conversely, cognitive linguists advocate that all the occurrences of the same P-word (up, over, off…) are semantically **related**, and linked in a network-style cognitive organization.

Such **cognitive networks** are organized in terms of a centre and a periphery (with the central meaning of the P-word being something close to

an "invariant sémantique" of Culioli's Théorie des Opérations Enonciatives, and based on its **spatial** meaning).

Hence, the meaning of up in *drink up* or *give up* refers to the completion of a process, which is non-spatial in nature but metaphorically derived from conceptualized correlation between an upward trajectory and an activity being complete (Tyler, 2003: 141).

Likewise, the central sense of *over* is the spatial *above-across* sense (Brugman, 2009: 110). A sentence such as:

> *(77) She has power over me.*

rests on the primary metaphor correlating hierarchy and spatial direction: *Control is up* (Brugman, 2009: 129).

I will end with Elisabeth O'Dowd's *Prepositions and particles in English, a discourse functional account* (1998)*.* O'Dowd's work is based on a discourse approach, on the analysis of real conversations, and even if she draws largely from Bolinger's work in *The Phrasal Verb in English* and the findings of Lindner and Langacker, her central thesis is that **P-forms** (that is, encompassing both prepositions and particles) are best understood not as syntactic or semantic elements, but as **pragmatic, discourse-orienting elements**.

Indeed, P-forms specialize either as particles or prepositions in discourse. On the one hand, **particles situate**: they **predicate states or changes of states**. On the other, **prepositions link**: this means that they **introduce new contextual information**. Hence, the basic difference between P-forms realized as particles or prepositions is the presence or omission of the prepositional object, or contextual information, the choice of one over the other depending on issues of pragmatic focus.[1]

As an illustration, here is an account of an occurrence of the borderline case defined as *adprep* by Bolinger on the basis of her distinction.

> *(78) Whyncha 'just 'throw em out the window?*

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[1] And yet, even though the distinction between particles predicating a state or change of state and prepositions linking, that is, adding new information, the terminology chosen by O'Dowd is slightly unclear. Indeed particles are said to "situate," while the landmark remains unspecified which is slightly contradictory, while prepositions "link" since they add new information. I would have chosen: particles "predicate" and prepositions "locate" with respect to the specified, explicit landmark, but this is a mere suggestion.

(This is a transcription of a farmer talking about unwanted kittens, suggesting that his co-utterer throws them out by the window).

Since *adpreps* are of a hybrid nature, both particle and preposition, they both situate and link. The adprep situates, that is, predicates in the broad sense: it expresses something about a subject, a state or a change of state, here, out as an adverbial particle indicates for one part the process of going from inside to outside. But *out* also fulfils the linking role of a preposition by introducing new contextual information to the discourse context: it is through the window that the kittens are to go from inside to outside. So *out* is also a preposition, building a link between the rhematic and the thematic, between a trajectory and a landmark (the kittens/ the window). In all, the interpretation is: *why don't you throw them out, out through/by the window.*

Conclusion

Although as O'Dowd points out, certain prepositions never work as particles, like *of, at, from*, while certain particles never work as prepositions, like *away*, there is an obvious continuity between prepositions and particles.

Syntactically, particles can be analysed as intransitive prepositions; both particles and prepositions can appear in more or less fossilized verb/P combinations. The adprep is a case in point showing the continuity between prepositions and particles (Bolinger).

The possible realization of the same word as a preposition in some contexts and as a particle in others points to the semantic consistence of the P-word: these meanings are related in the word's semantic conceptual network (Brugman, Tyler). Being realized as a particle or as a preposition are for the P-word two sides of the same coin: P is a particle when the landmark is not specified, and a preposition when it is specified (Lindner), which is syntactically consistent with the analysis of a particle as an intransitive preposition. In pragmatic terms, this distinction can be accounted for as a difference of strategies (O'Dowd): both are discourse-orienting elements, yet while particles serve to predicate a state or change of state while leaving the landmark unspecified, prepositions locate the trajector with respect to the explicit landmark elaborated as a rhematic piece of information.

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