

## What Verbs and Prepositions Have in Common: Towards a Unified Treatment.

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### 1. Statement of the Problem

Probably it is part of the human nature that people tend to classify things. It is also part of the nature of all things in the universe to fall into categories. Classification, however, may distract the attention from the similarities that may well exist between things. Word classes and grammatical categories are no exception. Although transformational grammarians frequently criticize structural grammar for being taxonomic, or in other words, mainly concerned with classification rather than explanation, they often commit the same mistake when they censure traditional grammar. Traditional grammarians are often criticized for the notional definitions they have proposed for word classes and grammatical categories.

One such definition is the definition of prepositions. Thomas and Kintgen (1974: 12) point out that 18<sup>th</sup> century British grammarians who wrote traditional school-grammars give the following definition of a preposition: "a preposition is a word which expresses a relationship between its object and some other word in the sentence". Thomas and Kintgen comment on the definition saying that although the statement may be true, it applies not only to prepositions but also to all transitive verbs in English as they likewise have objects and express a relation between their objects and some other word in the sentence. However, as traditional grammarians are known of their heavy

reliance on their intuition, one has to think of the reason why they give a definition that may well suit both categories instead of merely attacking them.

### 2. The Aim

This study aims at looking for and pointing out the aspects of similarity and convergence between verbs and prepositions. This may pave the way to more studies on this track leading to a somewhat unified treatment of verbs and prepositions both semantically and syntactically.

### Introduction

It is to be noted that the attempt to find similarities between categories and subsequently incorporate them in major categories is by no means a new idea. Generative semantists, for example, proposed to subsume both verbs and adjectives under one major category which they call verbal. Some other grammarians also argued that pronouns can be incorporated under the category of articles. They tried to squeeze the number of grammatical categories as much as possible so that the remaining categories may have some real and substantial claim to universality. (Thomas and Kintgen, 1974: 112).

In our attempt to look for similarities between verbs and prepositions, we shall consider three linguistic aspects: form, meaning or semantics and syntactic distribution and behavior. These are dealt with one by one in three separate sections below although it is practically very difficult or even impossible sometimes to deal with any one of them with no reference to the others.

### 3. Form

As far as form is concerned, probably verbs and prepositions have but little in common. Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 135f), however, point out that there are prepositions that have a verbal origin. These take the form of present or past participles and they have historically developed from verbs, taking on properties of prepositions in addition to their verbal properties. Among these are *owing*, *given* and *following*. The pairs of sentences below illustrate their prepositional vs. verbal uses respectively:

- 1- a. *Following* the meeting, there will be a reception.  
b. *Following* the manual, we tried to figure out how to assemble the unit.
- 2- a. *Owing* to the drought, many farms are going bankrupt.  
b. *Owing* so much to the bank, farmers can't afford any luxuries.
- 3- a. Liz did remarkably well, *given* her inexperience.  
b. Liz was *given* only three months to live.

Concerning the above pairs of sentences, Huddleston and Pullum (ibid) note that when the aforementioned words are verbs, they are related to subjects that are given or understood. Yet when prepositions, they relate to no subject. Simply **following** means *after*, **owing to** means *because of* and **given x** means *taking x into account*. Similar examples may include *according*, *regarding*, *concerning*, *provided*, *providing*, *notwithstanding*, etc.

### 4. Meaning

#### 4.1. Relational words

It seems that the above mentioned definition of prepositions proposed by traditional grammarians may suit verbs as well since both verbs and prepositions are principally relational words that express relations as opposed to participants, which are normally expressed as nouns. Miller (2002: 135) notes that prepositions in English may signal a verb-noun, a noun-noun or an adjective-noun relation as in *went to Glasgow*, *the vase on the table*, and *rich in minerals* respectively.

Besides, concerning events and participants, Langacker (1991: 286) observes that whereas the former are conceptually dependent, the latter are conceptually autonomous. In other words, we cannot conceive events without thinking of the participants involved in them, whereas we can conceive participants

independently and without any reference to events. Of course, events are usually realized as verbs. Similarly, we would argue that, for example, the spatial and temporal relations expressed by prepositions are conceptually dependent like events.

Finally, Miller (2002: 133) points out that the acts that speakers carry out with different classes of words are referring, predicating and modifying. Among these three functions of word classes, verbs and prepositions seem to perform the predicating function both.

#### 4.2. Stative-dynamic distinction

As the *situations* expressed by verbs can be either stative or dynamic, the relations expressed by prepositions can be

classified in the same way. So, as we have verbs that are intrinsically stative or dynamic, this same distinction can be noticed in prepositions. Prepositions indicating location, for example, are stative whereas those expressing direction are dynamic. In addition to the typical concrete spatial relations, prepositions sometimes express abstract relations like *possession* or *temporary possession* such as *with* in the following sentences:

4- I met a man *with* small glasses/big ears, etc.

5- He left the train *with* somebody else's wallet in his pocket.

In the sentences above and similar sentences, the preposition *with* can alternatively be replaced by such verbs as *having, holding, carrying* etc. as they express the same relation.

#### 4.3. Semantic role assignment

Moreover, potentially prepositions, like lexical verbs, can function as the semantic clausal heads that take arguments and assign semantic roles in their sentences. They often do so when the only verb in the sentence is dummy like linking *be*, so the preposition has to carry the heaviest semantic burden expressing the exact sort of relation that holds between the participants involved in the proposition encoded by the sentence. This is exactly the case of the prepositions *in* and *for* in the following sentences from Hurford et al. (2007: 255f):

6- The bull is *in* the 40-acre field.

7- The book is *for* Louise.

Commenting on the above sentences, the authors consider the prepositions *in* and *for* as "*predicators*". They further state that

they conceive of prepositions as two-place predicates, and in the case of *between*, three place predicates. This means that the notion of *valency* can readily be applied to prepositions as it has long been applied to verbs. So we can say that prepositions in general are *bivalent* with the exception of *between* that is *trivalent*. Again as with verbs, we can apply the notions of *external* and *internal*

arguments to sentences where prepositions are the semantic clausal heads. These correspond to the subject and the object of preposition respectively.

It seems, however, that prepositions can assign semantic roles not only when they are the semantic clausal heads of their sentences, i.e. when the only verb in the sentence is dummy. Sometimes they can do so even when they function as what Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 136) call *grammaticized prepositions*, or in other words, when they are subcategorized and selected or licensed by a head word. So, in sentences such as:

8- John gave a book to Mary.

9- John bought a book for Mary.

Emonds (1985: 29) argues that the argument following the preposition is assigned its semantic role by the preposition directly, and only indirectly by the verb. This is probably because it is the verb in the above sentences that selects or licenses the preposition.

#### 4.4. Lexical content

Miller (2002: 35) considers prepositions as lexical words though not central lexical words like nouns, for example. He

further notes that although many accounts of word classes in English treat prepositions as grammatical words, they seem to be on the borderline. Similarly, Borjars and Burridge (2001: 282) observe that of all function words, prepositions have the heaviest semantic content and that is why their ellipsis is unusual in real discourse. So we would say that in this respect also, prepositions are similar to lexical verbs.

### 5. Syntactic distribution and behavior

#### 5.1. Case assignment

The most easily noticed syntactic similarity between verbs and prepositions is that they both take objects and assign case. In other words, the notion of transitivity can equally be applied to both verbs and prepositions. The case assigned by verbs and prepositions may be overt as with pronouns that are assigned the accusative case by both. However, when alternatively the nominative case is used in conversation, it is used again with both objects of verbs and of prepositions as shown in the following example from Biber et al. (1999: 214):

10- The most interesting thing about going, coming back to it is trying to work out who's got married *to who* and who's *divorcing who*.

The case verbs and prepositions assign to their objects may otherwise be covert as with full nouns and noun phrases. Haegeman and Gueron (1999: 136f) point out that whereas verbs and prepositions can assign case, nouns and adjectives cannot. They cite the following examples:

11- John envies Mary.

- 12- John is envious \*(of) Mary.  
 13- John's envy \*(of) Mary

Then commenting on 12 and 13, they observe that the preposition has to be inserted to insure that the complement of the adjective or noun is assigned case. Surely 11 is grammatical because the verb *envy* is a case assigner.

### 5.2. Complementation

What is more striking about the syntactic affinity between verbs and prepositions is the remarkably wide variety of forms complements of verbs and prepositions can assume, which, I think, is a natural consequence of their ability to assign case. This is probably uncontroversial for verbs. As for prepositions, Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 140) state that they can be followed by the following types of complements:

- a. Object noun phrase as in:  
 14- I was talking **to** *a friend*.  
 15- I'm looking **for** *my glasses*.
- b. Predicative as in:  
 16- I regard her **as** *a friend*.  
 17- I took him **for** *dead*.
- c. Prepositional phrase as in:  
 18- I stayed **until** *after lunch*.  
 19- **According to** *Ed*, it's a hoax.
- d. Adverbial phrase as in:  
 20- It won't last **for** *long*.  
 21- I hadn't met her **till** *recently*.
- e. Clause as in:  
 22- I left **because** *I was tired*.  
 23- We agreed **on** *how to proceed*.

The authors note that the complements in 14 and 16 above correspond to the complements of verbs in the following sentences respectively:

- 24- I was visiting *a friend*.  
 25- I consider her *a friend*.

It seems that the similarity between categories is sometimes blurred by some inaccurate and unrealistic treatment. For example, such words as *because* in 22, which are traditionally regarded as subordinating conjunctions, are empirically and beyond any doubt proved by the authors (ibid: 129f) to be prepositions, thus drawing the attention to more possibilities of preposition complementation that is equivalent to verb complementation. Moreover, although the italicized words in:

- 26- He walked *past*.  
 27- They ran *across*.

are treated as adverbs in traditional grammar, Quirk and Greenbaum (1973 :347) observe that they behave as "prepositions with some generalized ellipsis of their complements". This observation is in line with Huddleston and Pullum's (2005: 130f) treatment of such words as prepositions. They (ibid: 133) prove that even such words as *downstairs*, *overseas*, *overboard*, *outdoors*, *abroad*, *here* and *there*, which never take complements, are in fact prepositions. This makes the similarity between verbs and prepositions even clearer as we can now talk of intransitive prepositions equivalent to intransitive verbs.

As sentences 22 and 23 above respectively show, the complement of a preposition can be a finite or a non-finite clause. However, within these two major types, one can have finer distinctions. So within finite clauses, verbs and prepositions alike can take as complements nominal clauses with no complementizer as in 22 above and the following sentence:

28- I felt *he was tired*.

Alternatively, they can select *wh*- nominal clauses as in:

29- We discussed *how we should proceed*.

30- We agreed on *how we should proceed*.

The non-finite clauses subcategorized by verbs and prepositions, on the other hand, can have *to* infinitives as in 23 above and the following sentence from Haegeman and Gueron (1999: 30):

31- Thelma believes *Louise to have abandoned her husband*.

Commenting on the following sentences:

32- I consider *Mary to be a good student*.

33- \*Your consideration *Mary to be a good student* is preposterous.

Haegeman and Gueron (ibid: 440f) observe that 33 is ungrammatical since nouns, unlike verbs, cannot subcategorize infinitival complements with overt subjects as they cannot case-mark the *specifier* of their complements (i.e. *Mary* in the above examples). It is clear that the authors consider *Louise* and *Mary* in sentences 31 and 32 as the subjects of the

embedded infinitive clauses and they call the whole structure *small clauses*. However, Trask(2007: 242) notes that alternatively and more commonly, considering the relation of sentences 31 and 32 above to the ones below:

34- Thelma believes that Louise has abandoned her husband.

35- I consider that Mary is a good student.

they are considered as objects of the matrix verb that have originated in the subject position of the embedded clause and moved to their ultimate destination in a process known as *subject-to-object raising*.

Elsewhere considering the sentence:

36- I asked John to buy a new bicycle.

Haegeman and Gueron (1999: 35f) point out that the object of *ask* controls the interpretation of the subject of *buy*. I would argue that all the characteristics attributed to verbs and their objects in the discussion of the examples above can similarly be attributed to prepositions and their objects since prepositions can appear in similar constructions as shown in the following sentences:

37- For *us/you/people to buy a bicycle now* is very important. (ibid: 36)

38- For *Matt to create catch phrases* was fun. (Borjars and Burridge, 2001: 231)

Prepositions, like verbs, can alternatively select non-finite clauses with bare infinitives as shown in the following sentences

39- We can make *the characters act the way real kids act*.

40- Rather than *him leave his wife*, I think they should sell the dog. (ibid: 228f)

They can also both subcategorize non-finite clauses with present participles as illustrated below:

41- I imagine *popping in my coin*. (ibid: 233)

42- A temple is a building for *worshipping a god or gods*.

Haegeman and Gueron (1999: 109) observe that both verbs and prepositions can also select *small clauses* as their complements as in:

43- I consider *this proposal out of the question*.

44- With *Louise in hospital*, we had to cancel the meeting.

By contrast, they elsewhere (ibid: 441) note that nouns cannot take small clauses as complements as shown in the following sentence:

45- \*My consideration *Thelma a great friend* remains unaltered.

This is accounted for in the same way as sentence 33 above. Surely nouns, unlike verbs and prepositions, cannot subcategorize any sort of non-finite clause with an overt subject for the same reason given there.

Finally, both verbs and prepositions can take in complement position such dummy elements as *it* in such sentences as the following from Borsley (1999: 82):

46- Don't spread *it* around that I am giving you this assignment.

47- John will see to *it* that you have a reservation.

### 5.3. Interpolation ban

Perhaps another syntactic similarity between verbs and prepositions is that they both seem to form so compact a constituent with their objects that they cannot be interrupted by any other element. This is known as *interpolation ban*

and is especially applied to verbs in the literature. The rule states that no constituent can intervene between a verb and its object unless the latter has undergone *complex or heavy NP shift* (Anderson, 1984: 41). The sentence below is an example from Greenbaum and Quirk (1990: 339):

48- ?\*Many people examined disdainfully the picture.

When the object of the verb is a complex or heavy noun phrase, however, it is normally shifted to the end of the sentence with the result of possible interpolation between the verb and its object (Culicover, 1976: 154). The following sentence is an example:

49- John found in the garden *a book with lots of pretty pictures in it*.

It seems, however, that not only verbs have such a restriction with their objects, but prepositions as well, as shown by the ungrammaticality of the following sentence:

50- \*Many people looked at disdainfully/straight the picture.

Yet sometimes there seemingly appear to be some counterexamples as in the following sentences:

51- They concentrated on exactly the same issue.

52- His wife freely admits to regularly hiding his cigarettes.

53- He is committed to laboriously assembling all of the facts of the case.

The adverbs *exactly*, *regularly* and *laboriously* in the above sentences seem to intervene between the preposition and its object, but actually they do not as they constitute part of the object themselves. *Exactly* modifies *the same* in the noun phrase *exactly the same issue*, and similarly *regularly* and *laboriously* modify *hiding* and *assembling* in the non-finite clauses *regularly hiding his cigarettes* and *laboriously assembling all of the facts of the case* respectively.

### 5.4. Behavior of objects

#### 5.4.1. Subject- to- object raising and control

One other major similarity between verbs and prepositions is the syntactic behavior of their objects. We have already seen in the comment on sentences 31, 32, 36, 37 and 38 above how both objects of verbs and prepositions in sentences with non-finite clauses originate in the subject position of the non-finite clause and then raised to its ultimate landing site. So both objects of verbs and prepositions in such constructions are a result of the process of *subject-to-object raising*. They also both control the interpretation of the understood subject of the non-finite clause.

#### 5.4.2. Advancement to subject position

Another similarity in the syntactic behavior of objects of verbs and prepositions is their ability to advance to subject position. This happens in passivization and *tough* movement.



#### 5.4.2.1. **Passivization**

Passivization involves one such advancement. Both objects of verbs and prepositions can become subjects in the passive construction. It is to be noted here that prepositions may be followed by objects when they are part of a prepositional verb and when they are not. In the former case, objects following them are called *prepositional objects*. In the latter, however, they are simply called *objects of preposition*. In both cases, they can be passivized resulting in *preposition stranding*, and the whole construction is called *prepositional passive* (Leech et al., 2001: 367), (or alternatively *pseudo-passive* in traditional studies, though this latter term is used in a different way in Quirk et al. (1985: 169)). The following sentences are examples of prepositional passives:

- 54- *The information* was asked for by the dean. (Radford, 2004: 416)  
(Prepositional object)
- 55- I don't know where he is\_ *his bed* hasn't been slept in. (Swan, 2005: 435)  
(Object of preposition)
- 56- *The children* were well looked after. (Prepositional object)
- 57- *These cubs* can be played with quite safely. (Thomson and Martinet, 1986: 267) (Object of preposition)

#### 5.4.2.2. **Tough movement**

Another process involving advancement to subject position of objects of verbs and prepositions alike is a different kind of *raising* from the one discussed above called *tough movement* (or alternatively *object-to-subject raising* in traditional studies) (Trask, 2007: 242). The following sentences are examples from Thomas and Kintgen (1974: 123):

- 58- *Pancakes* are easy to cook on this griddle.
- 59- *This griddle* is easy to cook pancakes on.

The above sentences have an object of a verb and another of a preposition promoted to subject position respectively. The original sentence is:

- 60- It is easy to cook *pancakes* on *this griddle*.

The following sentences are further examples of advancement of objects of prepositions in *tough* movement:

- 61- *This pen* is difficult to write with. (Leech et al, 2001: 412)
- 62- *He's* impossible to work with. (Quirk et al, 1985: 664)

#### 5.4.3. **Omission of relative pronouns**

One further similarity in the syntactic behavior of objects of verbs and prepositions is that when relative pronouns function as such, they can be omitted as shown in the following sentences:

- 63- a. The shelf on *which* you put those books has collapsed. (Object of preposition)
- b. The shelf you put those books on has collapsed.

- 64- a. The old lady *whom* you met in the supermarket was robbed of all her money. (Direct object)  
b. The old lady you met in the supermarket was robbed of all her money.

### 5.4.4. Co-ordination

Finally the syntactic affinity between objects of verbs and of prepositions is shown in the fact that one constituent can function in both capacities in sentences involving co-ordination as in:

- 65- John met and talked to *the man next door*.  
66- Mary sat on and broke *the chair near the door*.  
67- John met and Mary talked to *the man next door*.  
68- Mary sat on and John broke *the chair near the door*.

*The man next door* in 65 and 67 above functions both as the direct object of the verb *meet* and the prepositional object of the verb *talk to*. Similarly *the chair near the door* in 66 and 68 functions both as an object of the preposition *on* (as *sit on*, unlike *talk to*, does not constitute a prepositional verb) and of the verb *break*. Sentences 67 and 68 are said to involve what is called *right-node raising* (See Borsley, 1999: 27). However, it seems that only constituents with equivalent grammatical relations can be co-ordinated and ellipted in this way. Notice the following sentences from Miller (2002: 90):

- 69- a. Ayala went to the ball. Ayala chatted to Jonathan Stubbs.  
b. Ayala went to the ball and chatted to Jonathan Stubbs.  
70- a. Ayala went to the ball. Jonathan Stubbs chatted to Ayala.

b. \*Ayala went to the ball and Jonathan Stubbs chatted to.

In 69, *Ayala* can be ellipted in the second clause when the two clauses are co-ordinated as it assumes the same grammatical relation in both clauses. In 70 the matter is different as *Ayala* is a subject in the first clause and a prepositional object in the second. This means that objects of verbs and of prepositions can be co-ordinated and ellipted in the way illustrated above only because they are intrinsically equivalent in one way or another.

## 7. The Findings of the Study

Throughout the study, it has been shown that there are remarkable similarities between verbs and prepositions, the most outstanding of which are the following:

- 1- As far as form is concerned, there are prepositions that are derived from verbs assuming their participial forms.
- 2- Semantically, both verbs and prepositions are relational words that express conceptually dependent relations between participants.
- 3- Verbs and prepositions both seem to perform a predicating function in the language.
- 4- The binary distinction *stative/dynamic* can be applied to prepositions in the same way it is applied to verbs.

- 5- Verbs and prepositions sometimes express the same relation in the sentence, hence they are mutually interchangeable.
- 6- Verbs and prepositions alike can function as the semantic clausal heads that select arguments and assign them semantic roles. Prepositions can do so not only when the verb is dummy, but even when they function as grammaticized prepositions.
- 7- Among all types of function words, prepositions have the heaviest semantic content, and that is why their ellipsis is very uncommon in real discourse. In this respect, they clearly resemble lexical verbs.
- 8- Syntactically, both verbs and prepositions take objects and complements and assign case to their objects and to specifiers of their complements. In other words, the notion of transitivity can equally be applied to both verbs and prepositions.
- 9- The case assigned by verbs and prepositions may be overt as with pronouns that are usually assigned the accusative

case, but also occasionally in conversation, the nominative case.

- 10- They may alternatively assign covert case as with full nouns and noun phrases. Nouns and adjectives, by contrast, do not have the ability to assign case to their complements.
- 11- Probably a direct consequence of their ability to assign case is the remarkably wide variety of complements they can subcategorize, which is considered another property in common between verbs and prepositions.
- 12- The similarity between verb and preposition complementation is blurred by some unrealistic treatment of a group of words that are traditionally considered as adverbs or conjunctions and that are empirically and unquestionably proved to be prepositions, consequently drawing the attention to even a wider range of preposition complementation that is equivalent to verb complementation.
- 13- Both verbs and prepositions seem to form very compact constituents with their objects that no outsider element can intervene between them.
- 14- Objects of verbs and prepositions alike can advance to subject position in passivization and *tough* movement.
- 15- When relative pronouns function as objects of verbs or prepositions, they can invariably be deleted.
- 16- The syntactic affinity between objects of verbs on the one hand and prepositional objects and objects of prepositions on the other hand is shown in the fact that sentences involving them can be co-ordinated ellipting any of them and retaining the other.

## 8. The Recommendations of the Study

Now looking at the findings of the study, it is particularly useful to try to suggest certain recommendations that might be of special significance to future studies in this particular area of English grammar. Among these recommendations are:

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- 1- It is crucially important when conducting a study in any area of English grammar to start with the traditional grammar view about the subject as traditional grammarians relied heavily on their intuition. This by itself does not count as a drawback, but for judgments made by intuition to be reliable, they have to be substantially proved by empirical arguments and tests. So it is very helpful to start with the intuitions made by traditional grammarians and try to find the appropriate empirical justifications for them instead of, following new trends, merely criticize them because their model is just an old one.
- 2- We should not be driven so far by our ardent interest in taxonomy that we unconsciously concentrate on the differences between grammatical categories and functions and pay no or, at best, very little attention to their similarities.
- 3- Viewing the striking resemblance between verbs and prepositions shown in this study, future studies should seriously try to find even more similarities with the ultimate goal of possibly having a unified treatment or a major category including both verbs and prepositions.

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