



ORIGINAL PAPER

The role and purpose of English prepositions

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Abstract:

English language has a structured grammar in which parts of speech like *the noun, the verb, the adjective and the adverb* help us express our ideas. *English prepositions* have the role of offering clarity, direction and sense in a sentence. Even if most of the English prepositions are the shortest words from this language, their role is essential for the syntax of every sentence or phrase. Most grammar books speak about English prepositions as linkers or bridges between other parts of speech. It is important to add that, in English we can encounter two or three prepositions one after another, having a similar communicative effect and functioning as a single unit/ preposition (e.g. *in front of, up to, out of, along with, from behind*, etc). These types of combinations in which 2 or 3 prepositions are used together, lead to prepositional phrases. Moreover, English, as a flexible and fluid language, gives us the chance to use the same preposition in different contexts but with distinctive meanings:

e.g. The bread is *in* the box. (The preposition *in* shows the place of the object)

He is *in trouble*. (In this case we have a collocation in which the preposition is fixed and cannot be translated separately. The sense of *in trouble* = to have problems)

Please, *come in!* (This is a phrasal verb where the preposition is mandatory. The sense of *come in* = enter)

English prepositions can be classified in *simple* and *complex or compound*. *Simple prepositions* are represented by one word: *in, on, at, for, to, by, about*, etc. *Complex or compound prepositions* are formed by a group of words: *as for, aside from, such as, in spite of, in favour of, from under, in addition to*, etc. Of course, *English prepositions* can also be classified depending on the purpose of their use. This means that in English, prepositions can help us express: **time, action, location, direction, space orientation or they can help us introduce an object**. In general, English prepositions are placed before nouns or pronouns in order to establish a relationship with the other words from the sentence. Besides this general use, we also find English prepositions in other situations that represent exceptions to this rule.

This article is meant to detail one important connector in English communication: *the preposition*.

Keywords: *English grammar, English prepositions, connectors, foreign language, communication.*

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Introduction

English grammar can be challenging for foreign learners. Even if they learn the main parts of speech (the noun, the verb, the adjective and the adverb) with all their exceptions; English learners should also know how to connect these parts of speech, how to give as many details as possible, in other words – to speak and write English fluently. In every stage of learning English, English prepositions have a vital role in establishing a correct connection between nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. As I mentioned in my abstract, prepositions are seen as connectors or bridges between words. An English sentence, in order to have a meaning and to express our ideas correctly, has to contain the right preposition/s.

Although it may be true that for English learners, this language, as any other foreign language, can have a lot of pitfalls, learning the appropriate connectors can help them achieve a satisfying level of English. In order to reach an advanced level of communication in English, one must practice this language for a long period of time. English grammar with all its components, rules and exceptions is fundamental for English learners. To learn English as a standard language means that learners should be aware of: "... the total ensemble of lexical, semantic and grammatical tools affiliated to the members of a linguistic group or community with the purpose of proliferating basic communication..."(Chirișescu, Păunescu. 2021: 95).

English prepositions give meaning to our communication and they help us link the words from our sentences/ phrases. Even if, in the beginning, it may be difficult, to choose the correct preposition, in time, the English learner will stop trying: "...to connect the syntax of the new language to the set of grammar rules that exist in his mother-tongue. This process will undoubtedly lead to syntax and grammar mistakes."(Stoian, 2021: 150)

Each language has its own difficulties and finesses that the learner should learn to master in time. In English we have three main types of prepositions: *simple, complex and phrasal prepositions*. The first category of English prepositions – the simple ones is represented by *monosyllabic or polysyllabic* words like: *in, at, of, to, from, since, to, etc and under, without, until, within, between, behind, against, despite, etc*. In the second category – complex prepositions – we can include combinations like: *throughout, alongside, as for, as to, up to, etc*. As for the *phrasal prepositions* we can include the ones used with verbs or other parts of speech: e.g. *in reference to, as long as, on account of, look up, turn off, come out, etc*. Nevertheless, the English prepositions that are used with verbs, form another important category in the English grammar – that of *phrasal verbs*. For Romanians who learn English, these special verbs are quite difficult because: "... in Romanian grammar we can't find direct equivalents." (Stoian, 2021:153)

Each English phrasal verb has a different meaning and one verb can take different prepositions. For example – the verb to break can be followed by the following prepositions: in, out, into, up:

The burglar broke in the museum. (The verb means to force the entry). / The dog broke out from his cage because the owner forgot the door open. (To escape) / The police had to break into the house in order to stop the violence. (Enter somewhere by force)/ The couple broke up after a terrible fight. (The relationship ended)

All these different meanings and different prepositions that can be added to a single verb can be learned, not necessarily by trying to memorize each of them (this would be impossible), but through practice.

General traits for English prepositions

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In English, prepositions have a wide range of meanings. As I mentioned in the abstract of this article, one preposition can express different things – depending on the context, e.g.:

I'm preparing a presentation for the meeting. (The preposition expresses the reason of my activity)

We have visited them for Easter. (The preposition expresses the time and the duration of our visit)

Other examples could include the preposition of. Its meaning is different but, at the same time, it could be confusing. In some English sentences there is a tendency of avoiding the preposition of – by changing the word order, e.g.:

I bought a book of grammar – I bought a grammar book. / They used glasses of good quality – They used good quality glasses. But:

Today, the lunch at the canteen consists of soup, chicken salad and fried potatoes. (Here, we have a phrasal verb and the preposition of is mandatory)

He is thinking of phoning you. (Again, in this case, the preposition is mandatory)

Jane told him those things out-of sympathy. (Here we have a combination of two prepositions and we cannot omit any of them)

Let's meet in front of the cinema. (Here we have 3 prepositions and each of them has different meanings separately, but, together – in front of – shows direction and a certain point, location or place)

Such examples of prepositions can continue because almost every English preposition has a wide range of meanings and uses. English prepositions are used to show: direction, transportation, location and time. The prepositions of direction are: along, through, across, around, to, over, above, from, etc. Here are some examples of such prepositions:

Mary will travel to Greece. / The cinema is across the park. / The map shows that we should go through this tunnel. / Take the bus from the next station.

English prepositions of transportation include: on, in, by. Some grammar books tell us to use the preposition on for big vehicles such as: bus, train, airplane, metro or anything else that can transport many people at the same time. The preposition in should be used for smaller vehicles:

E.g.: The employees were on the bus when they saw the accident. / He is planning to go on a cruise ship next holiday. / I was in my car when the storm began. / I can put your luggage in the taxi.

The preposition by is used to show how someone travels to different destinations: He travels by bus. / They go to Spain by plane. / I'm going in this business trip by train.

The prepositions that show the location are: in, on, at, under, between, inside, outside, etc.

e.g.: The present is in the black box. / You can find interesting dishes on this menu. / The statue is between two old trees. / The gallery is inside this building.

When we talk about time, we use certain prepositions like: at, on, in.

e.g.: We will meet at 4 o'clock. / The theatre play starts in 15 minutes. / The project will be presented on Friday at 10 o'clock in the morning.

All these examples show that English prepositions play an essential role in our communication. They not only link parts of speech, but they also help us express our ideas clearly. To learn every aspect of a foreign language, with all its particularities is a

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demanding task for the learner. He/ she should be motivated by:”... various factors, including personal goals, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and identity, also placing importance on social and cultural factors, such as the influence of family, peers, and the wider community, in shaping learners ‘motivation and language learning outcomes.” (Lăpădat, Lăpădat. 2023:142)

Therefore, the learners of a foreign language should be sufficiently motivated in order to surpass all the difficulties that may arise in the learning process. Coming back to my topic, English prepositions and their meanings can be learnt through examples, through writing, reading, listening and speaking tasks. The learner identifies the context in which the preposition is used and he/ she can reproduce a similar context only through practice. It is true that the learning process also means:”... to dedicate a certain amount from your personal time in understanding and learning the grammar of that language, practicing your vocabulary and grammar knowledge , developing your skills in using the foreign language in free speech and exercising the foreign language in written texts.” (Stoian. 2023:93)

Today, with all the technology that has developed in such a way that it is present in all the domains, as well as in education, students/ learners have access to information very quickly. Some even consider that they can extract all the necessary information in the right way so that:”...the attitude to learn autonomously and adaptively is paramount, it goes beyond the achievement of knowledge, it is aimed at fostering critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving skills crucial for accomplishment in a rapidly progressing world.” (Bărbuceanu, 2023:63)

Therefore, students/ learners feel the need to be independent, to try to learn on their own. This new tendency should take into account that foreign languages need special filters for the abundance of online information. To learn, for example, English grammar is a process that requires a teacher who is able to find the right sources and to guide the learner in a correct direction. When it comes to English prepositions, the learners of English need to study examples, contexts and afterwards create their own sentences/ phrases. Due to the fact that prepositions play a key role in the whole structure of a sentence, it is important to learn and to assimilate, as much as possible, all the meanings and uses of every English preposition.

Phrasal verbs – use of prepositions

Throughout the evolution of English language, several language specialists wrote about these special verbs that have appeared in English. According to Owen G. Mordaunt and Matthew McGuire, the definition of a phrasal verb is:”...an ordinary verb combined with a preposition or an adverbial particle that has at least one meaning which is unpredictable and different than what would be denoted by taking the literal meanings of the individual words separately and placing them together.” (Mordaunt, McGuire, 2020:1)

As mentioned before, English has a special type of verb – the *phrasal verb*. In English there are available many lists of phrasal verbs with examples and explanations. Phrasal verbs are formed from a simple verb to which we add prepositions or adverbs. Their complexity comes from the fact that, as they join a preposition or an adverb they also acquire different meaning. The English learner has to be very careful when using these verbs. If he mistakes the preposition or the adverb that goes after the verb, his entire communication will be a failure. Here are some examples of phrasal verbs which are formed by adding a preposition:

The manager *put off* the meeting. / The child *switched off* the computer. / The success of that project *turned out* to be the reason for his promotion.

“The meaning of a phrasal verb cannot be easily inferred from the basic meanings of its components. However, its meaning is not simply idiosyncratic. In very many instances it relates not to basic meanings but to extended meanings of the words making it up.”(Dixon, 2021:9)

English prepositions are also used with other verbs beside the phrasal verbs. These verbs are called *prepositional verbs*. The special trait of *prepositional verbs* is that the object is always placed after the preposition. This is the trait that differentiates them from the phrasal verbs. In the case of the phrasal verbs, the place of the object can be different. Examples of *prepositional verbs*: *count on, approve of, long for, apply for, result in, listen to, deal with, excuse for, search for, etc.* Anyway, some of these prepositional verbs can function as both: phrasal and prepositional depending on the context. It is true that the delimitation between the phrasal verbs and prepositional ones is often very subtle and it can be established if we take into consideration the stress placed on words and the intonation that we use. Besides their use with verbs, English prepositions are also found near adjectives:

e.g.: Greece is *famous for* its hospitality. / He was very *proud of* his achievements. (These examples illustrate how adjectives and prepositions go together. The list is bigger and it includes other combinations like: *thankful for, enthusiastic about, certain of, suitable for, bored with, familiar with, etc.* For these combinations there is no set of rules, so it is advisable that once the student learns the adjective to learn the preposition suitable for it.)

Can English sentences begin with prepositions?

The answer for this question is yes, English sentences can begin with prepositions. It is advisable to use prepositions as the word that starts a sentence when you want to show:

e.g.: (a beginning) – *In* the beginning his works were not appreciated by the audience. / *At* the beginning of the meeting we will have a small presentation from the Chinese team.

(An end) – *In* the end, the characters from the movie survived the earthquake.

(Other contexts in which we can start our communications with prepositions) – *By* the time he arrived home, the guests had left. / *From* Craiova to Bucharest there is a distance of approximately 250km. / *After* you finish your homework, you can go out and play. / *Over* the next few years, he got involved in different activities. / *Since* you have left, the manager tried to deal with your tasks.

Nevertheless, although there is no specific rule that forbids us to start our sentences with prepositions like: *but/ and*, it is advisably to look for synonyms that can replace them.

Conclusions

English prepositions play an important role in the syntax of a sentence/ phrase. In English, prepositions are the ones that link words and help us express: time, location, direction or to introduce a topic/ an object. English prepositions have their role in developing English proficiency for students. Despite the fact that English prepositions are one of the smallest words in English, they represent a difficult category when it comes to the part in which the teacher has to explain and show the different meanings and uses that one preposition can have. Even if, they are small words, English prepositions offer clarity and sense when they are used. In general, English grammar

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offers learners certain knowledge that can be used in: "...free speech and exercising the foreign language in written texts. When it comes to English, its learners have to be familiarized with the main parts of speech, with English grammar rules and they have to enrich their English vocabulary whenever it is possible."(Stoian. 2023:93)

English grammar offers the learner the possibility to express himself in a correct manner. Whether or not the English learner decides to combine online resources with the materials that he receives from his teacher, there are several things that he has to consider: "... English grammar's aim is to turn skilful pupils into skilful users of English language. Learning English grammar means to achieve the skill of building personal correct structures in English."(Stoian. 2022:47).

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