Prepositions in (English) Dictionaries

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Abstract: This paper explores the longstanding yet under-addressed divergence between the theoretical understanding of prepositions and their representation in published dictionaries. Tracing the development of the unified-preposition analysis from its historical origins to contemporary works, it examines various factors contributing to this divergence. These include lack of awareness or exposure, lack of interest, practical considerations, resistance to change from the community, and the perceived complexity of the new analysis. The paper also briefly presents a call for reconciliation, suggesting that aligning this theoretical reanalysis with practical lexicographical representation can enhance the coherence and simplicity of descriptions of English grammar.

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INTRODUCTION

Consider the following definitions for **preposition**.

1. in grammar, a word that is used before a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun, connecting it to another word. (*The Cambridge Dictionary*)
2. *Grammar*. An indeclinable word or particle governing (and usually preceding) a noun, pronoun, etc., and expressing a relation between it and another word. Also formerly used with reference to: such a word when combined as prefix with a verb or other word, and certain other particles of similar force which are used only in combination (also called inseparable prepositions).

(*The Oxford English Dictionary*, *OED*)

3. (grammar, strict sense) Any of a class of non-inflecting words typically employed to connect a following noun or a pronoun, in an adjectival or adverbial sense, with some other word: a particle used with a noun or pronoun (in English always in the objective case) to make a phrase limiting some other word. (*English Wiktionary*)
4. A preposition is a word such as 'by', 'for', 'into', or 'with' which usually has a noun group as its object. (*Collins English Dictionary*)
5. a function word that typically combines with a noun phrase to form a phrase which usually expresses a modification or predication. (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)

If these definitions are intended to capture the general conception of a preposition, then they do a very good job. But dictionaries also attempt to capture the meanings specialists have for technical terms, and it is notable that the definitions don't accord with that of a modern comprehensive grammar, such as *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (*CGEL*, Huddleston and Pullum 2002), though the last three are, perhaps, saved by their hedges.

The difference lies in the inclusion in the definition that a preposition is followed by or at least governs a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun (I will subsume all three under NP). The first two definitions are clear and explicit on this point. The last three hedge, but certainly give priority to the relationship between prepositions and NP objects. In contrast, the position taken in *CGEL*, is that prepositions cannot be defined by their complements, acknowledging the potential for a wide range thereof: NP objects (*in the room*), but also predicative complements (*viewed as correct*), clausal complements (*before they saw us*), and preposition phrase (PP) complement (*next to the door*). It also recognizes prepositions with no complement at all, which I'll call intransitive (*I've done it before*). As far as I know, no dictionary apart from *The Simple English Wiktionary* adopts this view of prepositions.

It's possible to argue that dictionaries from earlier centuries did not have the NP objects as such a central part of their definitions. Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* (1656), for instance, has no entry for **preposition** and doesn't provide information about lexical categories. For *The New World of English Words or a General Dictionary* (1663), a **preposition** is "one of the eight parts of Speech in Grammar, so called, because it is set before a Nown, or a Verb" (sic), but this dictionary, too, lacked lexical category information for its entries.

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. II (1825), has the following definition: "In grammar, a particle governing a case," case being something the applies to NPs. In the preface of Vol. I (1825), he wrote, "all prepositions require an oblique case" (p. 57). There are two entries for **before**: *prep.* and *adv*. The examples in the *prep.* entry all include NP objects. The *adv.* entry includes both what most dictionaries today would call a "conjunction", that is examples such as *before the Phrygian fleet is landed on the shore*, along with intransitive uses such as *though't so far before*. The same treatment is given in Noah Webster's *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806). The definition is "a particle governing some case," and **before** is categorized as a preposition and an adverb only. In his 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, a fuller definition is given, though it is not materially different in its stipulations and the examples of adverbs once again involve clauses, as in *before the hills appeared*. In the 1918 publication of Vol I of the *OED*, **before** has, perhaps for the first time, been assigned to three categories: *adv.*, *prep.*, and *conj.*

The traditional view of prepositions, rooted in the grammatical theories of Ancient Greece and Rome, has long held sway. Priscian, the renowned Latin grammarian, defined a **preposition** as "uninflected" and as something that "is placed before other parts either in juxtaposition or in composition" (Matthews 2019: 84). Notably, Priscian's definition does not stipulate that a preposition must precede a noun or noun phrase, a perspective that contrasts with modern thinking.

A REANALYSIS

English prepositions have long been understood as words that only and always take NP objects, but challenges to this analysis go back almost 240 years. In 1784, a paper of John Hunter's was read to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in which he argued the following:

> IN the English, however, and in other languages, certain words are classed by the grammarians as different parts of speech, according to varieties observed in the application of them, even when these varieties are merely *accidental*. Thus, in the sentence, "I came *after his departure*" the word AFTER is classed with the *Prepositions*; while, in this other, "I came *after he departed*" it is classed with the *Conjunctions*. The word AFTER is, however, the same in both sentences; its *meaning* is the same, and its *effect* precisely the same. The only circumstance of discrimination is, that, in the first example, it is prefixed to a noun substantive,—*his departure*; in the latter, it is prefixed to a nominative and a verb—*he departed*. (Hunter 1784: 113)

Jespersen's 1924 *The Philosophy of Grammar* picks up Hunter's argument and extends it explicitly to cases in which *after* has no complement. After observing that verbs license a wide range of complements, he notes,

> *sing*, *play*, *begin*, *can*, *grow*, *be* are always verbs, whether they are in a particular combination they are complete or incomplete.
>
> If we now turn to such words as *on* or *in*, we find what is to my mind an exact parallel to the instances just mentioned in their employment of "put your cap on" and "put your cap on your head," "he was in" and "he was in the house"; yet *on* an *in* the former sentences are termed adverbs and in the latter prepositions. Would it not be more natural to include them in one class and to say that that *on* and *in* are sometimes complete in themselves and sometimes followed by a complement (or object)! (Jespersen 1924: 88)

The argument was taken up again by Michael Geis in his 1970 dissertation, "Adverbial Subordinate Clauses in English" (Geis 1970). And then, in 2002, *CGEL* extends the argument to words that never license objects at all. Thus, most of the so-called "subordinating conjunctions" (*although*, *because*, conditional *if*, *once*, etc.) are reanalyzed as prepositions taking clausal complements. And words like *abroad*, *here*, *home*, *then*, and *west*, traditionally lumped in with the adverbs are also brought into the prepositional category.

The arguments for such an analysis are not limited to analogies with verbs. *CGEL* observes that a clausal complement can be coordinated with an object in sentences like *After* [*their rubber plantation failed, and her husband's death on the Upper Rewa in 1885*], *she maintained her three young children with a tiny store.* In such a case, the dictionary definitions of preposition and conjunction crash. The intransitive prepositions, for their part, are clearly unlike core adverbs such as *quickly* or *interestingly* in that that can't function as pre-head modifiers of verbs, but they can function as complements of *be*. There are more arguments, but they have been set out well in *CGEL*, particularly Chapter 7 Sections 1, 2.1, and 2.4 (see also Ch. 11 §§8.1 & 8.2). My purpose here is not to rehearse those arguments, but rather to bring them to the attention of lexicographers, to consider why they might have been ignored, and suggest why it might be a good idea to adopt these analyses.

WHY HAVE THESE ARGUMENTS HAD NO IMPACT ON DICTIONARY PRACTICE?

How could it be that no dictionaries have taken up this analysis? While what follows is speculative, I offer a number of possible answers. They need to be mutually exclusive and different answers might apply at different dictionary projects.

Flaws in *CGEL*. Leech, in his 2004 review of *CGEL*, sees the reanalysis as flawed. He claims that the recategorizations ignores the distinction between sequences that can occur in a prepositional phrase and an abbreviated clause. Examples of differentiation include *despite their arrival* vs. **although their*

arrival, *despite dating from the 1400s* vs. **although dating from the 1400s*. *CGEL* would see this as simply licensing different complements.

Leech argues that the expanded class of prepositions lacks morphological clues, leading *CGEL* to rely on unmotivated criteria, such as lack of *-ly* and ability to take a complement. The result is that *CGEL* sometimes has trouble telling whether a word such as *else* is an adverb or a preposition (p. 615). He also points out that preposition stranding, a distinctive property of prepositions, only applies when words like *before* and *after* are governing NPs: *the mirror I'm standing before* but not **you go I'm leaving before*, though presumably this could be infelicitous for processing reasons.

Leech concludes that *CGEL's* reanalyses do not entail a simplification of the grammar but rather a simplification of the lexicon. The complexity is passed on to the mapping between grammatical words and their grammatical functions, introducing further complexity into the grammar.

Again, my purpose is not to argue with Leech. Though I don't find his arguments compelling, perhaps lexicographers do, and perhaps that is why no dictionary has taken up this new analysis. This doesn't strike me as likely though.

Lack of Awareness or Exposure. A more plausible explanation for the divergence between theoretical understanding and lexicographical practice lies in a lack of awareness or exposure to certain key works and ideas. The contributions of Hunter and Geis, though significant, do not figure prominently in the history of English grammar. It is conceivable that lexicographers, focused on their own tasks and priorities, may have inadvertently overlooked these scholars.

Jespersen, a towering figure in the field, and *CGEL*, the pre-eminent comprehensive English grammar, might be expected to command attention. However, the reality may be more nuanced. Lexicographers, despite their engagement with language, may not necessarily delve deeply into grammatical theories. Their primary concern might be with the practical aspects of defining and

describing words, rather than engaging with complex grammatical structures and debates. In this context, even the influential works of Jespersen and *CGEL* might not resonate as strongly as one might expect. This disconnect is not entirely surprising. In large organizations, including academic institutions and publishing houses, silos often exist that hinder communication and collaboration between different departments or divisions. It is not far-fetched to imagine that, even within Cambridge University Press, the teams working on the *CGEL* project and those in the dictionary division might have operated in relative isolation from each other. Such organizational barriers can impede the flow of ideas and information, leading to missed opportunities for integration and synergy.

Furthermore, the arguments for reanalyzing prepositions might have remained confined to specialized academic circles. These ideas, though compelling to some grammarians and linguists, may not have been widely disseminated or accepted within the broader lexicographical community or even in the broader linguistics community. The channels through which these ideas are communicated might not align with those accessed by dictionary makers. The result is a gap in understanding and alignment that persists despite the availability of insightful analyses and arguments.

Lack of Interest. A third possibility is that the issue of categorizing words, particularly the addition of new lexical categories, may not generate much attention or interest within the dictionary-making community. A case in point is the introduction of the determiner category by the *OED*. It was added alongside—rather than in place of—the traditional *adj.* category for the Third Edition online (Edmund Weiner, personal communication, May 29 2008) and can be observed in specific entries, such as the March 2008 update for the word *many*. What is striking about this change is the apparent lack of response or commentary within the professional community. A review of *Dictionaries* and other lexicographical journals reveals that this significant alteration went entirely unremarked upon. This

silence extends beyond the specific case of the determiner category. A search for "lexical categories" in *Dictionaries* on the Project Muse website, for instance, yields no articles devoted to the topic.

This absence of discussion and analysis may reflect a broader trend within lexicography. Perhaps the task of categorizing words, while essential to the structure and function of many dictionaries, is not perceived as a subject of intellectual inquiry or debate. The focus of lexicographers might be directed more towards the practical aspects of definition, usage, and etymology, rather than the theoretical underpinnings of lexical categorization.

Practical Considerations. Lexicographers may be aware of the arguments for reanalyzing prepositions and may even find them compelling, but implementing such a change is a significant undertaking. None of the sources mentioned provides an exhaustive list of all the words captured by the unified preposition analysis.[1] As a result, executing this change would require the expertise of an English grammarian well-versed in the complexities of the language. This is certainly an issue, but it doesn't seem like the kind of thing that would stimy all dictionaries for decades.

Resistance to Change from the Community. Resistance to adopting a new perspective that challenges long-held beliefs might be encountered within the linguistic and educational community. This resistance could stem from various factors, including reluctance to alter established practices, scepticism about the new analysis, or preference for the familiarity of the traditional approach. The influence of certain prominent dictionaries or grammatical works adhering to the traditional view could further reinforce this resistance. These authoritative works might set a standard that others follow, making it challenging for innovative ideas to gain traction.

[1] *The Simple English Wiktionary* has made a good start.

Complexity of the New Analysis. The reanalysis of prepositions might be perceived as correct but as more complex or nuanced than the traditional view, potentially deterring lexicographers from embracing it, especially if their goal is to maintain simplicity and accessibility in their definitions.

It is worth addressing this concern around complexity more closely: Change can indeed be difficult, particularly for those who have spent their careers under a dominant framework. But the unified preposition analysis offers a compelling counterargument. Far from increasing complexity, it simplifies various aspects of grammar: It reduces the heterogeneity of the adverb category, streamlines the category of subordinators, aligns prepositional complements with verbal complements, unifies different types of adjuncts, and leads to a grammar with fewer exceptions. I believe that, for anyone approaching the topic with fresh eyes, this unified analysis is not only simpler but also more coherent and elegant.

CALL FOR RECONCILIATION

The divergence between the theoretical understanding of prepositions and their representation in (English) dictionaries is not merely an academic curiosity;[2] it has real-world implications for language education, policy, and the public perception of grammar.

Language Education: The divergence between the theoretical understanding of prepositions, at least as presented in *CGEL*, and their representation in dictionaries has direct implications for language education. The way prepositions are defined in dictionaries can shape how they are taught in classrooms. A traditional view that restricts prepositions to words that must precede an NP may limit learners'

[2] The parentheses around *English* are because, though I have only set out the case for English prepositions and English dictionaries, Hunter turned his arguments on Latin and Greek as well. It seems likely that prepositions are miscategorized in many European languages, and perhaps beyond.

understanding of the complexity and versatility of prepositions. For example, if students are taught that prepositions must always be "followed by a noun," they may resist cases like *Am I right in that it is a diminished triad without the third?* or doubt the competence of their teachers if they realize that there is no question that *for*, as *in leave a person for dead*, is a preposition even though *dead* isn't an NP. This can lead to confusion, doubt, mistrust, and misconceptions, hindering the development of a more nuanced understanding of English grammar.

Language Policy: The treatment of prepositions in dictionaries also affects language policy, particularly in the creation of standardized tests and curricula. If dictionaries adhere to a narrow definition, this may be reflected in educational standards and assessments. For instance, standardized tests that evaluate grammatical knowledge might penalize non-traditional uses of prepositions, even if they are accepted in theoretical linguistics. This can create a disconnect between what is taught and what is recognized as correct or acceptable in the broader linguistic community. In fact, an English teacher in Indonesia wrote to me about this very point in regard to Pearson's iPrimary Curriculum English (personal communication, Afandi Setiawan, Dec. 6, 2023).

Public Perception of Grammar: The public's perception of grammar is often influenced by authoritative sources such as dictionaries. If dictionaries present a limited view of prepositions, it may reinforce rigid or outdated grammatical rules in the public consciousness. For example, the belief that ending a sentence with a preposition is incorrect may be perpetuated by dictionary definitions that do not acknowledge the flexibility of prepositions in modern English. This can lead to misunderstandings and stigmatization of certain language constructions, affecting both everyday communication and broader attitudes toward language and grammar.

Overall, the discrepancy between these ways of looking at prepositions is not merely an academic issue. It has tangible effects on education, policy, and public perception, shaping how English is taught, assessed, and understood. Addressing this divergence is important for fostering a more accurate and inclusive understanding of English grammar.

The unified preposition analysis offers a simpler and more coherent approach that aligns with modern linguistic understanding. I urge lexicographers of English (and other languages) to, at the very least, consider revising their dictionaries in line with the unified preposition analysis. Begin with reading the arguments in *CGEL* and the other sources given here. And then have a look at the other lexical categories.

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