ENGLISH PREPOSITIONS EXPLAINED

by Seth Lindstromberg

Revised edition

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For Tessa

Acknowledgements

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Preface to the second edition

This new edition retains most of the structure of the first edition but virtually the entire text is new, partly to reflect the impressive amount of research done in the field since 1996 and partly to give more information about more prepositions. (Only one preposition has been dropped, the appealing but rare CATTYCORNER ~ 'diagonally opposite'.) All of the figures have been re-done, and there are many more than before.

Overall, this edition relies on corpora (including frequency data) to a far greater extent than before. Virtually all of the examples (which are almost entirely new) have been drawn from the World Wide Web after searches informed by analysis of concordances. The latter have been generously furnished online by or under the auspices of the British National Corpus (www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (www.americancorpus.org/), and the Collins 'WordbanksOnline' English corpus sampler (www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx).

I would like to mention two other differences between this edition and the first. One is that I have been much less concerned than before with identifying a prototypical (or most fundamental) meaning for each preposition. Given the purposes of this book, which do not include advancing the frontiers of research, it is not clear that very much depends being certain about which sense (if any) is prototypical in the technical sense of the word. My choices of so-called 'basic' senses are based on pedagogical rather than psycholinguistic considerations. Finally, in this new edition I refer less often to the different *senses* of prepositions and more often to their *usages* (~ types of use). While there is much good evidence that many prepositions do have two or more psychologically distinct senses (e.g. Beitel, et al., 2001), there is nowhere near enough space in a book of this size for all the evidence and argument that would be needed to say in a principled way where each sense of every preposition might begin and end.

Symbols, abbreviations and features of format

BrE	British English
Cf.	'Compare with'
BNC	British National Corpus
COCA	Corpus of Contemporary American English
CCCS	Cobuild Corpus Collocations Sampler
G	'Look in the Glossary (which precedes the bibliography in the back of the book).'
NAm	North American English
ODE	*The Oxford Dictionary of English. Oxford Dictionary of English.* 2005, 2nd revised edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary.* 1989. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
SOED	*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,* 3rd ed. 1972. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
ON[1]	ON as in, *a vase on a table*
ON[2]	*Adverbial* ON as in, *Don't stop. Drive on.*
NP	Noun or noun phrase
re	'regarding, with reference to'
Sb	'somebody', as in, *Throw a ball to sb.*
(T)ESOL	(Teaching) English to Speakers of Other Languages
W (superscript)	'This example was found on the Web via Google.'
w/w	'Both versions found on the Web', e.g. *Push on/against it.* W/W
x	'Someone or something', e.g. *See x = See someone or something*
ˣ (superscript)	'Ungrammatical or semantically odd, e.g. *ˣStep **away** the car.*
✓(superscript)	'This example is OK', e.g. *✓Step **away from** the car.*
~	'similar in meaning to'

Additionally:

SMALL CAPITALS denote a systemic metaphor such as UP IS MORE, as in: *high prices, put prices up.* They also highlight generic elements in constructions, e.g. NOUN + PREPOSITION + NOUN.

'Single quotes' denote meanings of words and phrases, and sometimes they highlight new terms.

ITALICIZED SMALL CAPITALS denote a preposition (its form, its meaning, or both). For example: *TOWARD* means 'in the direction of, nearer and nearer'.

Dates are given in the order day/month /year.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and orientation

1. Who is this book for?

English Prepositions Explained (EPE) is for people who have found that prepositions are not explained in dictionaries quite well enough. It is addressed to:

- teachers of English
- translators and interpreters in training
- undergraduates in English linguistics programs
- studious advanced learners and users of English
- EFL/ESL materials writers
- anyone who is inquisitive about the English language.

Because *EPE* was not written for researchers, the account of theory is relatively simple and, on some points, deliberately non-committal.

2. Why not just consult a grammar handbook or dictionary?

As for grammar handbooks, the name alone tells you that they are mainly about grammar, not meaning. As for dictionaries, most of them order their entries alphabetically, which means that information about prepositions is scattered across hundreds or even thousands of pages. Besides that...

1. Pairs of prepositions (e.g. *IN* & *INSIDE*) may seem to mean the same thing in some contexts. Dictionaries seldom explain that such appearances are almost always deceptive: Two prepositions rarely if ever have precisely the same communicative effect. A related weakness of dictionaries is they seldom explain the *limits* of a preposition's usage. For instance, if a pencil is completely covered by sheet of paper, we might say that the pencil is 'under' or 'underneath' the paper. But suppose now that the pencil is only half-covered by the paper. In this case it is more natural to say the pencil is 'under' the paper and much less natural to say it is 'underneath'. In short, *UNDERNEATH* is more limited in usage than *UNDER*.

2. Many prepositions have more than one usage. Almost all dictionaries list these, but rarely do they explain how the usages are related semantically even though such information can be very helpful to learners (Boers & Demecheleer, 1998) and to teachers as well. Consider, for instance, the preposition OUT in *Spit out that gum* and *I'm tired out*. What do these two usages of OUT have in common? A dictionary is unlikely to tell you. One dictionary which frequently does give some information of this kind (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, http://www.oed.com/) is expensive, huge, and quite evidently not written to address the particular needs of foreign learners.

All in all, the purpose of *EPE* is to present information that dictionaries and grammar handbooks typically omit and to do so in a relatively compact and surveyable form.

3. Prepositions covered in this book

EPE discusses over 90 different prepositions in current use throughout the English-speaking world.

Its main focus is on those short, high frequency words that people tend to think of first when asked to name a few English prepositions – e.g. AT, BY, DOWN, FOR, FROM, IN, NEAR, OF, OFF, ON, OUT, UP and TO. These short prepositions have on average been in the English language for a good deal longer than longer prepositions – since the very dawn of English in some cases. So much time has allowed most of them to develop a range of different usages and sometimes even quite different meanings. Also important are a couple of dozen of two- and three-syllable words which clearly belong in the family of prepositions as well: ABOVE, BEFORE, BEHIND, BENEATH, BETWEEN, BEYOND, OVER, TOWARD(S), UNDER, UNDERNEATH, and so on. Some of these, like OVER and UNDER, are also ancient and correspondingly varied in usage. Finally, there are phrases which behave more or less as if they were single-word prepositions – e.g. IN BACK (OF)^{NAm}, IN FRONT (OF), ON THE OTHER SIDE (OF), ON TOP (OF), and so forth.

EPE concentrates on the shorter prepositions – especially on those which are, or appear to be, 'polysemous' (~ 'with several meanings'). It is these prepositions which tend to be the hardest for *post*-childhood learners of English to master – even when their mother tongue is another Germanic language such as Dutch or Swedish (although this does seem to make the job easier). The difficulty of these prepositions resides only partly in the fact that they have multiple meanings and usages (e.g. AT, BY, ON). Problems are presented also by meanings which are difficult to demonstrate or visualize (e.g. AT, FOR and OF but sometimes also BY, TO and WITH).

But in order to bring out the meanings of these hard prepositions, it is necessary to show how they contrast in meaning with other prepositions, many of which are in fact

not particularly problematic in themselves. This is one reason why *EPE* covers over 90 prepositions instead of only a dozen or so.

4. Prepositions *not* focused on

There are a few medium frequency prepositions whose meanings and usages *EPE* does not discuss because they are satisfactorily covered in any good learner's dictionary (e.g. *ABOARD, ON BOARD...*). Nor does *EPE* say much, if anything, about:

- low frequency, archaic prepositions such as *BETWIXT* (= 'between').
- prepositions used only in an occupational jargon like *ABAFT* (~ 'toward the stern of a ship').
- ones used in a relatively small geographical area – e.g. Scottish *OUTWITH* (= 'without').
- words which are classed as prepositions on syntactic grounds but which have nothing much to do with talking about space or time – e.g. *AS, EXCEPT, LIKE, MINUS, PLUS, THAN, WORTH...*
- prepositions derived from verbs. English has a lot of these (e.g. *BARRING, FOLLOWING, INCLUDING, PENDING*), but I touch on only a few (*CONCERNING, REGARDING*). For more on these so-called 'de-verbal' prepositions (~ 'prepositions that *de*rive from verbs'), see König and Kortmann (1991).
- Latin prepositions used only by a few members of the educated elite – e.g. *CIRCA* (~ 'about [re time]'), *CUM* (~ 'with'), *QUA* (~ 'as') and *PER* (~ 'through, by means of'). Prepositions recently borrowed from French – e.g. *SANS* ~ 'without' – are also omitted.
- dialectal usages of standard English prepositions – e.g. the Irish usage of *AFTER*, as in, *I'm after hitting him with the car!* (~ 'I've just hit him...'). See 'Hiberno-English', *Wikipedia*.
- obsolete meanings – e.g. in Old English *ON* meant not only 'on' but also 'in'. For information of this kind, see the *OED* or an Old English dictionary such as Hall (1894/1960).
- Latin- and Greek-derived prepositional prefixes such as *CIRCUM-* and *PERI-* (~ 'around'), which are from Latin and Greek, respectively). However, Chapter 2 touches on senses of the prefix *EX-* while in Chapter 6 there is a section on *INTER-* (~ 'between, among'...), the latter in order to show how a single Latin or Greek prefix may express the meaning of more than one free-standing preposition of English.

Also, apart from this sentence, *EPE* says nothing about the fact that a small number of prepositions can be used as *post*positions – e.g. *five miles away; five years on/hence* (vs *five years ago*), *the whole night through*.

5. Where have the example sentences and phrases come from?

This book includes many 'found' examples of how particular prepositions are used. Most of these examples were collected in early 2010 from the Web (via *Google*), or from the British National Corpus (http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA: http://www.americancorpus.org/), or from the *Cobuild Corpus and Collocations Sampler* (CCCS) (http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx).

Examples found on the Web are marked with a superscript 'w' while those taken from BNC, COCA and CCCS are labelled accordingly. Additionally, I have used these four facilities (especially the last three) to informally survey typical collocations and gauge the relative frequencies of different usages – e.g. OVER and ABOVE in certain kinds of time expression.

From some of the examples, I have deleted irrelevant words. Thus, I reduced *The cat on the mat is flat*[w] to *The cat on the mat.* Square brackets indicate where I supplied a word that wasn't in the original excerpt but *was* elsewhere in the wider co-text, e.g.: *The very word [chemotherapy] conjures up images of suffering*[COCA].

It is only when a collected example is quite unusual that I have given fuller details of exactly who said it and why.

If an example is not marked as having been found, then it is one that I invented. It is sometimes necessary to invent an example in order to be able to show, for instance, how a preposition might occur in one position in a statement and in a different position in a closely corresponding question.

6. Prepositions in whose minds?

Our total experience of a word determines what it means to us. This meaning, in turn, strongly influences our uses of the word. Because no two people have ever had precisely the same experiences, we are all bound to understand and use many words differently. For common words – e.g. most prepositions – such differences are probably very slight. But the more two people differ in age, interests, education, class, ethnicity, home area, and proficiency in English, the more noticeable the differences will be between how each of them understands and uses certain words, prepositions included. Therefore, when I speak in this book about the meanings and usages of prepositions, I refer to meanings and usages that are *widely shared* rather than uncommon, let alone idiosyncratic. Further, the understandings and usages that I have tried to describe are those of native-speakers of more or less standard and contemporary British or North American English – by no means only ones who are well-educated. (Because I have no adequate familiarity with other varieties of

English such as Australian, Indian, Irish, New Zealand, or South African, I have said little or nothing about them.)

7. Collocations, strong collocations, fixed expressions

When two or more words combine quite naturally, we may say that they 'collocate' or that they form a 'collocation' (~ 'word partnership'), such as *heavy rain*. If these words co-occur a lot more often than would be expected by chance, we may say they form a 'strong collocation', such as *hearty laugh*.

Some combinations of words have their own particular meaning to such an extent that if any of the words is replaced – even by a near synonym – that meaning disappears and/or the new combination seems odd. For instance, replacing the IN of *in trouble* either with INSIDE or with WITHIN would produce a very odd result – i.e. **inside trouble* or **within trouble*. On the other hand, it is possible to *add* something into *in trouble*- e.g. *in ✓big trouble*. But there are also meaningful combinations (e.g. *at random*) which cannot be altered in any way, even by addition (e.g. **at extreme random*); these are said to be 'fixed'.

Prepositions are involved in a vast number of collocations, including many that are strong or fixed. In collocations which are (more or less) fixed, prepositions may occur at the beginning (*in trouble*), at the end (*depend on*), or in the middle (*one by one*).

Even though prepositions – especially the most common ones – tend to be small (both in writing and in sound), encountering an unnatural collocation can be very jarring. This can be true even when the wrong and the correct preposition are sometimes quite close in meaning (e.g. *✓by/✓at the seaside* but **by random, *at chance*).

Learners seem to make mistakes with prepositions for various reasons.

Some of these reasons have to do with English itself. For example, a learner may say **by random*, instead of *at random*, because BY and AT are sometimes similar in meaning, and/or because *random* and *chance* can be similar in meaning (e.g. *a random result ~ a chance result*), or because the phrases *by chance* and *at random* are similar enough in meaning to induce unintentional cross-association (~ 'cross-swapping') of words. To give another example, IN and ON might be confused in part just because they are phonologically and orthographically small and similar. In fact, in fast speech, they may sound virtually identical. Thus, the /n/ in *Don't sit 'n that chair* could be IN or ON.

More often perhaps, mistakes stem from differences between English and the mother tongue. For instance, Japanese has *post*positions not *pre*positions (and not many of them) while Korean has no such words at all. This must hinder learning the many *pre*positions of English. To give another example, Spanish speakers have trouble knowing when to use IN, ON and AT because the Spanish preposition EN encompasses common usages of all three English prepositions (and others besides).

Sometimes the source of L1-influenced mistakes can be very specific indeed. Let's take, for example, the expression *depend on*. If you know a bit of Latin or a Latin-derived language such as French or Italian, *-pend* may well suggest to you the meaning 'hang/hanging'. We may see this meaning in other expressions as well – *suspended from (the ceiling)* and *pendulum*, for instance. Since it is natural to speak of something hanging *from* something, it is not surprising that French and Italian speakers (among others) are quite likely to make the mistake of saying in English that one action 'depends **from*' another, because French *pendre* and Italian *pendere* mean '(to) hang'. In itself, this error is a very minor one, yet because the expression *depend on* is so frequent, it can become distracting to a listener. As we will see in Chapter 3, §9.1.6), there is a good reason why we say *depend on* instead of **depend from* or **depend of* (another common mistake). Indeed, one aim of this book is to help both learners of English avoid or overcome such errors through seeing *why* this or that preposition is conventional in particular strong collocations and fixed expressions.

8. The 'Subjects' and 'Landmarks' of prepositions

8.1 The basics

The most typical preposition is a word which says where one physical thing is located in relation to another:

(1) There is *a candle* ***on*** *the table.*[W]

About this example the following can be said:

- ON functions as a 'preposition of place'.
- The phrase *a candle* refers to a thing whose location the speaker wants to indicate. This thing I will call the *Subject* of the preposition.
- The phrase *the table* refers to another thing, the *Landmark* of the preposition. The preposition locates the Subject (the candle) in relation to the Landmark (the table).
- Thus, the preposition tells us about the *structure of a physical scene.*
- In (1) both the Subject and the Landmark are tangible things, so we can say here that ON is being used spatially, and also literally rather than figuratively (e.g. metaphorically).
- As is generally the case, the Landmark in (1) is bigger and less movable than the Subject. It would be possible – but less normal – to say, *There's a table under the candle.*[1]

1. See Talmy (2000, Chapter 3: 182–84). That chapter – first published as a separate paper in 1983 – introduced into linguistics a number of the most fruitful concepts now guiding the study of spatial language in general and of prepositions in particular.

Note that I have just used the words *Subject* and *Landmark* to refer to *things* in the world. For the sake of stylistic simplicity I also use these terms to refer to *words*. When I do this, I generally drop the capitalization and add a clarifying adjective – e.g. *grammatical* subject and *grammatical* landmark. For instance, about the phrase *in it*, I might say that the word *it* is the grammatical landmark of the preposition IN. Incidentally, I wish I knew of a better term than *Subject*. An alternative term used by many linguists, *trajector*, seems too abstruse for a book like this, whereas another term, *located object*, is nicely meaningful but cumbersome.[2] Another reason I have settled on the term *Subject* is that the word *subject* can mean 'topic' and the Subject of a preposition is, in a sense, its topic.

8.2 People as Subjects and Landmarks

People, too, can figure as Subjects and Landmarks:

(2) This [photo] is *her **with** her best friend.*[W]

8.3 Plurals

Both Subject and Landmark can be plural:

(3) There were *some candles **on** the tables.*[W]

8.4 Locating events in time

Examples (4a–b) have Subjects and Landmarks that are quite abstract:

(4) a. There's *a party **on** Friday.*[W]
b. *The day **before** Christmas...*[COCA] *our wedding...*[COCA]

Example (4a) shows ON being used as a so-called 'preposition of time'. Writers of *ESOL* course books and grammar guides have sometimes tried to distinguish sharply between prepositions of place and time. This distinction can be difficult to maintain consistently though because a temporal (~ 'time-related') usage of a preposition tends to develop from an existing spatial meaning that may remain robust, or at least linger on, for centuries after the temporal usage has become well established. Thus, one still occasionally comes across non-temporal expressions with BEFORE (e.g. *appear before the court*) even though BEFORE is widely regarded as a preposition of time rather

2. *Trajector* and *landmark* come from Langacker (e.g. 1987). Another current term for Subject, *located object*, is quite often paired with *reference object*, another term for *Landmark* (e.g. Herskovits, 1986). Further terms are in use as well (see, e.g. Levelt, 1996; Talmy, 2000: Chapter 3). The reason I capitalize *Subject* and *Landmark* is simply to make the words more visible in the text.

than place. That being said, there is evidence that distinctions between a preposition's temporal and spatial senses may sometimes be psychologically real (Rice, 1996: 159); Sandra and Rice, 1995).

8.5 Arrangements of grammatical subject and landmark

In examples (1)–(4) above, subject, preposition, and landmark are consecutive in that order. But this is not the only way that subjects, prepositions, verbs, and landmarks can be arranged, e.g.:

(5) a. A *fly* landed ***in*** *my soup.*[W] [S – VB – PREP- L]
b. ***In*** *our garden* there are *lots of birds.*[W] [PREP – L -VB -S]

8.6 Events, activities, and similar as Subject or Landmark

Often the Subject is a whole event, activity, action, or state of affairs. For instance, in (6a), what is near the Landmark ('a guest house') is not 'the bomb' or 'went off', but the overall event 'The bomb went off.

(6) a. The bomb went off ***near*** *a guest house.*[W]

As to (6b), it seems sensible to conclude that the Landmark is the overall activity 'researching your family history'.

(6) b. *First steps* ***in*** researching your family history.[W]

8.7 Grammatical subjects and landmarks in questions

In questions with *who, what, where*, etc., the question word may be understood as representing a Subject as in (7a); or a Landmark, as in (7b).

(7) a. *What* did you do ***at*** *school*?[W] [S – *did you do* – PREP – L]
b. *Who* did you see *her* **with**?[W] [L – *did you see* – S – PREP]

On grounds of semantic coherence, this seems preferable to considering the subject of (7a) to be 'What did you do' and the landmark of (7b) to be 'Who did you see'.

The question word *where* is an interesting Landmark. As we see from (7c), one of its functions is to elicit an answer which states not just a lexical landmark such as *town* but also a preposition such as IN.

(7) c. *Where* did you see *her*? [W] [L – *did you see* – S]

That is, in (7c) *where* can be inelegantly paraphrased as '*in* what location'. But in spoken North American English, the preposition AT may actually appear in the