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# DETACHED OBSERVATIONS ON PREPOSITIONAL USE IN MODERN, ESPECIALLY AMERICAN ENGLISH\*

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Some attention has recently been bestowed by grammarians on the use of prepositions in modern English. S. Brorström dealt with *The Increasing Frequency of the Preposition 'about' (as against 'of') during the modern English period, with special reference to the verbs say, tell, talk and speak* (Stockholm, 1963), and before this monograph appeared, J. Söderlind had treated some aspects of the preposition *over* in an interesting article in *English Studies* 41. 297—305 (1960). Exploring the use of this preposition from various angles, he complained that the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'sadly disappoints us as far as the modern usage is concerned; nor are other dictionaries very helpful'. Out of the large sphere of modern prepositional use we are going to select a few items of special interest.

## I. MULTIPLE PREPOSITIONAL USE

### A. In connection with verbs

#### 1. *to belong*

With eight prepositions (apart from zero usage), the verb *to belong* probably stands at the head of this group. According to Horwill<sup>1</sup> 'in England, when *to belong* is followed by a preposition, that preposition is invariably *to*'. This is confirmed by Foster<sup>2</sup>: 'In British the preposition used with this verb is traditionally *to*.' (355). This is also in agreement with the dictum of *O.E.D.* (1887), which noted incidentally an older construction with an indirect object, used e.g. by Addison: *what belonged them* (*Tatler* 100). In passing, *O.E.D.* mentions the American use of *with*, giving a quotation out of Elsie Venner (1961): *you belong with the last* (sc. *set*). *O.E.D.*, *Supplement* added a further example: *you belonged with each other* (1924), calling this usage 'originally U.S.' Krüger<sup>3</sup> quoted from J. R. Lowell: *Thoreau belongs with Donne and Browne and Novalis*. Horwill's two examples are: *cheese belongs with salad; he belongs for me with George Eliot*. I found *with* used for instance by the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1911) in the article on American Literature (I.841c) and in Bronson.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from *with*, the preposition *in* is mentioned by *O.E.D.* as occurring in America, no example being given. Horwill has the following American examples: *both books... belong in the notable group of English impressions which includes...; the elaborate treatises... belong in the study* (Henry S. Canby); *this letter belongs in the archives of New England*. My own examples are: *these things belong in a different classification;... in the same group*, etc. (*Saturday Review*,<sup>5</sup> 1927. 487, 515). According to Foster<sup>2</sup> the preposition *in* is today being used in Great Britain as well. He says: '*to belong to*

is now having to face competition from the American form to *belong in*'. He gives an example from *Observer*: *he belongs in the second category* (355). I found this statement confirmed: *Lawrence belongs in the great central tradition of the English novel* (TLC<sup>6</sup>). The preposition *among* is listed with two examples as American by Horwill<sup>1</sup>: *he belongs among those who habitually read book advertisements; it belongs among the small number of American medical schools to which great praise is due* (Dr. A. Flexner). I also found it used for instance in *NYT*<sup>7</sup>: *(it) belongs among...* (11 April 1926, p. 8), and elsewhere: *he belongs among the radicals* (evidence lost). Cf.: *do you think you belong among us?* (Hemingway, *Sun*<sup>8</sup> 157); *it belongs among the experimental comedies* (Spencer<sup>9</sup> 234).

Apart from the three prepositions (*among, in, with*) mentioned by Horwill,<sup>1</sup> there are four additional ones used in American texts — *around, at, on, under*: *he looks as though he belonged around a race track* (Hemingway, *Death*<sup>10</sup> 260); *Cummings does not belong at the Provincetown... but O'Neill indubitably belongs at the Provincetown, at the Guild, in the suburbs of London* (Zabel<sup>11</sup> 521); *the story belongs on a low plane of literature* (*NYT*,<sup>7</sup> 16 May 1926, p. 8); *(they) belong on its fringe* (Lapsley<sup>12</sup> 208); *the theories of Science generally belong under the second head* (*O.E.D., Supplement*).

Zero prepositional use is also to be found in American English in connection with *to belong*. This is somewhat loosely defined by *O.E.D., Supplement* as meaning 'to be related or connected; to have a certain connexion indicated or implied in the context'. Foster's<sup>2</sup> explanation is much more to the point: 'being in one's true environment, belonging to one's rightful group' (354). The hero of O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape* repeatedly exclaims for instance: *I belong!* Cf.: *Yuh wanter blow tings up, don't yuh? Well, dat's me! I belong!...*; *so dem boids don't tink I belong, neider* (Scene Seven). Again, this American use can be found spreading in Britain, according to Foster, who gives the following example: *Westminster gave him... the chance to mix, the feeling of belonging* (*Spectator*, 14 Jan. 1955).

*To belong* can also be used with an infinitive construction in American English: *why do I belong to do that? = why do I have to do that?* cf.: *do you belong to get up so early? I belong to go to town*, etc. I found this construction often used for instance by McCullers<sup>13</sup>: *we belong to be together* (413), etc.

## 2. to centre

According to Wood<sup>14</sup> and others, such as Haber<sup>15</sup> and Perrin<sup>16</sup>, this verb must be construed with the prepositions *on* and *upon* only (used for instance by Bacon 1622). The handbooks mentioned seem to rely on *O.E.D., Supplement*, which is castigating the 'wrong' use of *about, around* and *round*. They are admitted to be 'now very frequent', but are denounced as 'illogical phrases'.

As to *about*, one American example is listed already by *O.E.D., the real interest of the story centres about the lives of four personages* (*Harper's Mag.* 1878). I can add another example: *he felt that he had to make his novels center about aristocrats* (Blankenship<sup>17</sup> 236). *O.E.D.* also gives one example of *around*: *it is around the king... that the main storm of battle is made to centre* (Freeman 1868). *O.E.D., Supplement* has another: *...around whom centred her most precious memoirs* (1870).

Examples with *round* are to all appearances British ones. *O.E.D.* has five examples (1886—1929), including one from Kipling. The latest example is taken out of *TLS*<sup>8</sup>: *the group of gifted men and women who centred round Henry Adams* (1929).

Constructions with *in* are adduced by *O.E.D.* (sub 2) from 1691 onwards. One

modern American example is to be found in Blankenship<sup>17</sup>: *the whole creation centered in man, in each individual* (70). As to this *in*, cf. also section B.

### 3. to thrill

According to *O.E.D.* this verb is often construed with the prepositions *at* and *with*: *doth not thy blood thrill at it* (Shakespeare); *England was thrilling with excitement at the thought...* (1874); *she thrilled with understanding of the words* (Bell<sup>18</sup> 37).

*To thrill* is also used with the preposition *over* (*Saturday Review*,<sup>5</sup> 1929. 857). The preposition *to* seems today to be most frequently used in American texts: (*he*) *thrilled to the M. M. flags* (S. Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*<sup>19</sup> 188); (*he* *thought*) *every one would thrill to his tale of imprisonment, torture and escape* (ib. 399); *when the audience thrilled to his wondering cry, "O, she's warm"* (Spencer<sup>9</sup> 367); *generations of European children have thrilled to the novels of J. F. Cooper* (Pyles, *Words and Ways*<sup>20</sup> 34); *he thrilled to the promise of the age of canals* (Spiller<sup>21</sup> 168); *we learned to thrill to heroic deeds* (Mayer<sup>22</sup>) etc.

## B. In connection with adjectives

As an example of multiple prepositional use in connection with adjectives I select *sick* 'having a desire to vomit'.

*Sick at the stomach* is evidenced by *DAE*,<sup>23</sup> 1653, 1872 and 1918. In his doctoral thesis on the syntax of Hemingway (Jena, 1956), G. Gräf found three examples with *at*: (*he*) *stood there feeling sick at the stomach* (*Men Without Women*<sup>24</sup>), etc. According to Kurath<sup>25</sup> *at the stomach* is usual in all of the South and the Midland and is not uncommon in Greater New York City, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.—*Sick in the stomach* is, according to Kurath, current in two separate areas: 1. southeastern Pennsylvania, including Philadelphia, and 2. the tidewater area.—*Sick on the stomach* is, according to him, also current in two detached areas: 1. the Pennsylvania German settlement area of Eastern Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah Valley, 2. the Pennsylvania German settlements on the Yadkin in North Carolina, and from there all the way down to the coast.—*Sick to the stomach* is, according to Kurath, to be found predominantly in the New England settlement area. There is an American example in *DAE* (1830) sub *sick*. Cf. also: *he felt sick to his stomach* (Hemingway, *To Have*<sup>26</sup>). *DAE* uses it when elucidating *to spleen*, 'to feel angry or sick to one's stomach'. Cf. also preposition *to* further down.

## II. TYPICAL AMERICAN USE OF CERTAIN PREPOSITIONS

### 1. the preposition *to*

#### a) chiefly used locally

John Pickering had already castigated the American use of *to* (*A Vocabulary*<sup>27</sup>), which we found above in *sick to the stomach*, instead of *at* or *in*, as expressions 'very common with the illiterate': *he lives to York; he is to his store*, etc. J. R. Bartlett called this use 'an exceedingly common vulgarism in the Northern States' (*A Glossary*<sup>28</sup>). One of his examples, *men were to work*, corresponds to the modern *some 450,000 miners were back to work today* (*NYHT*<sup>29</sup> 6 Dec. 1948, p. 1). *O.E.D.* also lists as 'modern American': *you can get real handsome cups and saucers to Crosby's*,

and Mayer has the entry: *I got it to Perkin's*. Cf.: *he is frequently late to class* (NYHT, 31 July 1948, p. 4) and O'Neill: *his second year to college* (*Strange Interlude I*); this was corrected by Kemp Malone: *in college* in his article in *ASp.*,<sup>30</sup> Oct. 1930, p. 26); *my father had wanted me to start to college in September* (*Perspectives* 5, p. 136); *since they started to school together* (Caldwell); *opening a copy of 1576 to page 11, we find...* (Hotson<sup>31</sup> 127). This last example shows that we can no longer call this use 'illiterate' or 'vulgar'. It is today standard American colloquial usage. Very often *to* is found after local adverbs such as *down, out, over, up*: *he said he had business down to New York* (Metalious<sup>32</sup>); *he took French over to the high school* (ib.), etc.

It is also much used in phrases like the following: *he was a middle-aged man with a bald top to his head* (Hemingway, *Farewell*<sup>33</sup> 316); *there was a fishy flavor to the milk* (Melville, *Moby Dick* Ch. 15); *there was a real beauty to living* (Mitchell<sup>34</sup>); *there's a catch to it* (Jacobs<sup>35</sup>), etc. Especially frequent is the phrase: *that's all there is to it* (often used by M. Twain); *some of these old American words do have a kind of bully swing to them* (M. Twain; cf. my *Hauptverben*<sup>36</sup> § 390), etc.

The use of preposition *to* after a form of the verb *to be* in the past tense is confined to American usage. Sentences such as: *were you to the concert last night? I was to town this morning* are called 'dialectal' by Krapp,<sup>37</sup> who holds conservative views. We find for instance in M. Twain: *he said he was down to town* (*Huckleberry Finn*<sup>3</sup> 52).<sup>8</sup> But Krapp recognizes this construction in the perfect and pluperfect tenses as 'idiomatically used': *have you ever been to Chicago? we had been to a concert*, etc. He says: 'it strictly should be: *have you ever been in Chicago? we had been at a concert*' (72) but adds: 'the idiom is too firmly established at least in colloquial speech to be questioned'. That this idiom is also established in England is confirmed by *O.E.D.*, which (sub *be* B 6) comments: "'modern": *have you been to the Crystal Palace?*' The construction was, however, already used by Dickens: *I never found that any young lady had ever been to school there* (*Copperfield*; cf. my *Hauptverben* § 62). But we find examples of this typically American use of *to* even in the cases mentioned above in British texts of today: *he has been to great trouble to find out more about (his) personal life* (*TLS*, 13 Aug. 1964, p. 729).

#### b) used with respect to time

*You had come to time* (Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*<sup>38</sup> 12) 'punctually'; *what dress should she wear to the barbecue?* (Mitchell<sup>34</sup> 74); *it has to this day an appeal that his more placid verses lack* (Baugh<sup>39</sup> 1102); *to this day the book is widely read* (Schlauch<sup>40</sup> 183), etc. That this construction occurs in British texts, too, is attested by Poutsma (*A Grammar of Late Modern English* II 2, p. 276) and by *O.E.D.* sub *to* (example from Wordsworth); *to date, food aid has fallen short of its promise* (*Reader's Digest*, Aug. 1966, p. 70).

#### c) *to* used in connection with verbs and adjectives

*They admitted to inconsistency; we are being alerted to this development; they beat us to it; to cater to this type of clientele; to confess to germ warfare; to own up to...; he was agreeable to talks* (NYHT, 26 March 1953, p. 2); *oblivious to her tears*, etc.

This construction with *to* is occasionally met with in modern British texts: *I found... that the resulting interpretation was identical to the one I had reached before* (Muir<sup>41</sup>).

## 2. use of the preposition *in*

In American English *in* has sometimes retained the force of *on*. We find this for instance in the case of *to center* (see above). Further examples: *rules are based in reason* (Baugh<sup>39</sup> 843); *every state is founded in conquest* (*Analysis*, August 1950, p. 3); *to inculcate in the people a stern sense of duty and responsibility* (Blankenship<sup>17</sup> 6). This construction is considered 'obsolete' by *O.E.D.*

The preposition *in* is in America also used instead of *with*, as in the older language: *they were intensely disappointed in the Garbo film* (Hemingway): a usage to be found in Fielding. Further example: *disappointed in her look* (*Saturday Review*,<sup>5</sup> 1927, p. 526).  
3. the preposition *past*

The use of this preposition after a (generally negative) form of *to put* is a typical American construction. *EDD*<sup>42</sup> has a few Scottish and Irish examples (sub *put*). *O.E.D.*, *Supplement* has two additional ones (sub. prep. *past*), dated 1916 and 1921, and comments: 'to think (a person) quite capable of doing something'. American examples: *I wouldn't put it past him* (W. Saroyan, *Little Children*<sup>43</sup> 70); *I wouldn't put it past him nor anything else* (O'Neill, *Ah Wilderness!*). It was used by Galsworthy in *Over the River* (see my *Hauptverben* 527). There is an (exclusively Southern?) American variant not listed anywhere so far by any dictionary or grammarian with the preposition *beyond*, repeatedly used by Mitchell<sup>34</sup> (cf. my *Hauptverben* § 446 and p. 510).

## 4. the preposition *outside of*

*DAE*<sup>24</sup> lists *to be outside of (something)* = to have (something) in the stomach as a result of having eaten it, giving a quotation from G. O. Shields: *Big Game* (1890): *my wife said she knew, from (the raccoon's) full stomach and his sneaking look, that he was outside of her pet turkey*. *DAE* adds a quotation from Farmer (1889): *'to get outside a thing is to understand it, or to use an expression very common in the West Indies, to get to the windward of it.'* *DA*<sup>44</sup> adds another example: *directly he got outside of a few glasses of whisky, his manner was very different* (1886). Cf.: *get outside of a nice long cocktail and you'll have a new light on things* (Lewis, *Arrowsmith*<sup>45</sup> 232).

## NOTES

\* Professor Gustav Kirchner died in Jena on December 6th, 1966. There are a few cases in the present article in which references indicating the exact places of occurrence of the adduced examples could not be supplied by the author. These omissions, however, are of so little significance as not to invalidate his contribution in any way. For a tribute to Professor Kirchner, see p. 10 of the present volume. -*Eds.*

<sup>1</sup> H. W. Horwill, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (Oxford, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> B. Foster, 'Recent American Influence on Standard English', *Anglia* 73.355 (Tübingen, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> G. Krüger, *Syntax der englischen Sprache*<sup>2</sup> (Dresden-Leipzig, 1914-7).

<sup>4</sup> W. C. Bronson, *Short History of American Literature* (Boston, 1900).

<sup>5</sup> *Saturday Review of Literature*, ed. by H. S. Canby (New York, 1927).

<sup>6</sup> *TLS* = *Times Literary Supplement*.

<sup>7</sup> *NYT* = *New York Times*, European edition.

<sup>8</sup> Hemingway, *Sun* = E. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York, 1926).

<sup>9</sup> H. Spencer, *The Art and Life of W. Shakespeare* (New York, 1940).

<sup>10</sup> Hemingway, *Death* = E. Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York, 1932).

<sup>11</sup> D. Zabel, editor of *Literary Opinion in America*, rev. ed. (New York, 1951).

<sup>12</sup> Lapsley, *The America of Today*.

<sup>13</sup> M. MacCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (London, 1958).

- 14 F. T. Wood, *Current English Usage* (London, 1962).  
 15 T. B. Haber, *A Writer's Handbook of American Usage* (Ohio, 1942).  
 16 G. B. Perrin, *A Writer's Guide and Index to English* (Madison, 1944).  
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 26 Hemingway, *To Have = E. Hemingway, To Have and Have Not* (New York, 1937).  
 27 J. Pickering, *A Vocabulary* (Boston 1816).  
 28 J. R. Bartlett, *A Glossary of Words and Phrases* (Boston, 1859).  
 29 *NYHT = New York Herald Tribune*, European edition (Paris).  
 30 *ASp = American Speech* (Baltimore).  
 31 L. Hotson, *Mr. W.* (London, 1964).  
 32 G. Metalious, *Peyton Place* (New York, 1956).  
 33 Hemingway, *Farewell = E. Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms* (New York, 1929).  
 34 M. Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York, 1936).  
 35 N. J. Jacobs, *Amerikanische Umgangssprache* (Berlin, 1949).  
 36 *Hauptverben = G. Kirchner, Die zehn Hauptverben des Englischen* (Halle a. d. Saale, 1925).  
 37 G. P. Krapp, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* (New York, 1928).  
 38 M. Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Leipzig, 1884).  
 39 A. C. Baugh, *A Literary History of England* (New York, 1948).  
 40 M. Schlauch, *The English Language in Modern Times* (Warsaw, 1959).  
 41 K. Muir, 'Shakespeare's Imagery Then and Now', *Shakespeare Survey* 18. 56 (1956).  
 42 *EDD = English Dialect Dictionary*, ed. by J. Wright (London, 1898—1905).  
 43 W. Saroyan, *Little Children* (Leipzig, 1938).  
 44 *DA = A Dictionary of Americanisms*,<sup>3</sup> ed. by M. M. Mathews (Chicago, 1956).  
 45 S. Lewis, *Arrowsmith* (Leipzig, 1932).

## RESUMÉ

Několik poznámek o užívání předložek v moderní, zvláště americké angličtině

Článek probírá některá předložková spojení, která nejsou zachycena v odborné literatuře. Uvádí předložky, kterých se užívá se slovesy *to belong*, *to centre*, *to thrill* a s přídavným jménem *sick*. Dále se zabývá využitím předložek *to*, *in*, *past* a *outside of*.