

Lesson 4.6 - Prepositions

What to say about prepositions? Their main job is to relate or connect two parts of a clause. But that's vague - lots of categories do that. As mentioned here, many of them convey some kind of directional, spatial, or locational meaning. I mentioned there too that we have seen preposition meaning undergo changes, like all words, and that many of the original spatial relations have been extended, often metaphorically, to convey other kinds of meanings like time (until 6 o'clock, since I was four), manner (by train), accompaniment (with fries), among others. And consider the prepositions in the following examples.

I am standing by the pole.
The poem was written by my friend.
She wore a shirt with stripes.
They hit the ball with a stick

So their meanings are quite polysemous, which is cool, and is just one indicator of how they have lost some of their meaning, on the one hand, while gaining more subtle meaning distinctions on the other. Believe it or not, there's a great little 5-minute video from The Human Language Series by Gene Searchinger where Ray Jackendoff talks about the complexity of prepositions.

Prepositions' transition from being content words to function words means that that their "contentful" meaning is lost, which is why we find variation in which one can be used.

I waited in line for the movie.
I waited on line for the movie.

I picked up the wrong shirt on accident.
I picked up the wrong shirt by accident.

I feel sick to my stomach.
I feel sick at my stomach.
I feel sick on my stomach.

Prepositions have changed over time from being meaningful, content words to being more grammatical, function words. (See the Parts of Speech doc here.) And the fact that we can use varying prepositions also demonstrates this lack of specific meaning. Their presence is key, though. No one that I know of can have no preposition in any of the examples above.

Prepositions ride the line between being content/form/meaningful/open class words and function/grammatical/closed class words. Our main content words are nouns,

verbs, and adjectives. We can and do add new words to these categories all the time. The other classes of words (which includes determiners, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions, degree words, modals, pronouns, and quantifiers) have members that are fairly fixed, and new words do not join these categories very frequently. (One recent exciting new conjunction, though, is slash. Read what Anne Curzan says about it here. My students are in solid agreement on the new usage of this conjunction slash conjunctive adverb.) Prepositions haven't been added to the language in a very long time, so in that way they seem like a closed class. They, however, do still have some "real" meaning - *up* means up, *down* means down. But others are more ethereal.

As discussed in that other post, there are a group of prepositions, sometimes called **subordinating conjunctions**, which introduce clauses. Some don't like the "conjunction" part of this label since conjunctions join "like" things – NPs (dogs but cats), VPs (runs or jumps), PPs (in and out), APs (big and tall), clauses (We ate all the cereal, but then we bought some more.). And this subtype of preposition introduces subordinate clauses, so they are not equal to, but subordinate to or dependent on, the main clause. They include *after, as, before, since, until, because, while, (al)though, when, where*, and phrasal ones such as *even though, as much as, and as though*.

We arrived at school [after the doors were locked].

The squirrels simply looked at us [as we filled the feeder].

My relatives give me money [because they have no idea what I like].

If you feel more comfortable calling these subordinating conjunctions, I see no problem with that. Or, as I mentioned, my students prefer the term subordinating prepositions.

I haven't constructed a lesson plan for prepositions because the teachers I work with have seen no need for one. Students are able to identify them fairly easily, and there aren't many usage rules surrounding them (except the one about not ending a sentence with a preposition, which I can't bear to draw more attention to, especially since it's a faux rule, but if you want to read about it, there certainly are places you can do that. And in fact Merriam-Webster's online dictionary has a good short video about it). Common Core Standards want students to know about prepositions. Here's just one example from 5th grade, but there are several others. And I will post soon about how prepositional phrases correlate with subject-verb agreement. Oh, and there are a whole group of words, called particles, that used to be prepositions and now glom on to the verb. So I'll talk about those. They're cool - and they can be a pain in the neck for non-native English speakers. In the meantime, prepositions are interesting little beasts, so you should bring them up.