

# PREPOSITIONS AND CONJUNCTIONS IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

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A lengthy discussion has been taking place recently about the status of words which are usually termed prepositions and conjunctions, as well in the sphere of general linguistics, as in the sphere of individual languages. Since that is a moot question of general linguistic theory, it would seem to deserve a full treatment, taking into account the views hitherto propounded, and assessing their relative values, with the purpose of achieving a result that could be proved objectively and would not depend on any individual scholar's views or prejudices.

The questions that seem to impose themselves in this connection appear to be the following (the list does not claim to be exhaustive: as investigation proceeds, new problems are very likely to arise, and some of the old ones may have to be restated in a new way):

- (1) Do prepositions and conjunctions have a lexical meaning, or do they not?
- (2) If they do, what is the relation between their lexical and their grammatical meaning? Is it, or is it not, similar to the relation between the lexical and the grammatical meanings of nouns, adjectives, and verbs?
- (3) What exactly do we mean when we say that a word is a form word (or formal word)?
- (4) On what principle is the distinction between prepositions and conjunctions based?
- (5) What is the relation between prepositions and conjunctions, on the one hand, and adverbs, on the other?

These questions are not of course confined to the English language alone. In some shape or other they would have to be posed with reference to many other languages as well. In discussing them, we shall try to keep in mind the general aspects of the problems involved, while at the same time keeping an eye on the specific peculiarities of Modern English.

The first of the questions enumerated above deals with the lexical meaning of prepositions and conjunctions. Widely differing views have been expressed in this matter. We will start with a general statement of possible answers to this question. The possibilities here, then, appear to be the following:

- (1) Prepositions and conjunctions, being 'form words', differ from 'notional words' in that there can be no distinction between lexical and grammatical meaning in them. Thus, while, for example, in nouns, the grammatical meaning common to all nouns as such is that of 'thingness', the lexical meaning, characterizing every individual noun, refers to the idea denoted by that particular noun: thus, while both *house* and *necessity* share the common grammatical meaning of thingness, the individual meanings, that is, the lexical meanings, of these two nouns are widely different: the former denotes a certain material object, while the latter denotes a certain state of

things estimated by some human being, etc. With 'form words', according to this view, a distinction along these lines is not possible: they have no lexical meaning distinct from their grammatical meaning. Another reflection may be added to this: while notional words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.) denote some phenomena of the extralinguistic world (things, properties, actions etc.), 'form words' do not denote any extralinguistic phenomena, but merely serve to express relations between linguistic units (words, or parts of a sentence, etc.).

(2) The other possible view is this. The difference between 'form words' and 'notional words' does not at all follow the line indicated above. 'Form words', as well as 'notional words', denote some kinds of extralinguistic phenomena, and the relation between grammatical meaning and lexical meaning is the same with these words as with notional words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.): the grammatical meaning is something common to all words belonging to the given part of speech (or: class of words), while each individual word belonging to the part of speech (or class) has its individual meaning, a lexical meaning distinguishing it from other words belonging to the same part of speech. Thus, while both *in* and *on* belong to the same part of speech (they are both prepositions) and both share the grammatical meaning (that of relation between phenomena) each of them has its own individual lexical meaning distinguishing it from the other: *in* denotes one kind of relation (= inside), while *on* denotes another (= on the surface of), etc.

Now, the first of these views, though widely represented, leads on to inextricable difficulties and even absurdities. In the first place, if prepositions gave only information about the linguistic units themselves, it would be impossible to understand why there are so many of them. Take for instance, the phrases: *the picture on the table*, *the picture under the table*, *the picture above the table*, *the picture near the table*, *the picture in the table*, etc. There seems to be no reasonable ground for saying that each of these prepositions denotes a different kind of relation between the word *picture* and the word *table*. Indeed, the relation between them is exactly the same in all these phrases. It is this: the word *table* is subordinate to the word *picture*, in so far as it specifies the picture. This is all the information the preposition (in each case) supplies about the relation between the words *picture* and *table*. So, if prepositions only gave that kind of information, one preposition would do equally well for all cases. However, it is obvious that there is an important difference between, say, *the picture on the table*, and *the picture above the table*. This difference concerns the extralinguistic information supplied by the prepositions: each of them denotes a specific relation between the things denoted by the nouns *picture* and *table*, namely, their relative position to each other in space. There are, accordingly, different prepositions to be used according as the mutual spatial relation between the two things varies. Since each of the prepositions denotes a special kind of relation, different from those denoted by other prepositions, it is clear that each preposition has its own individual meaning, which is bound to be its lexical meaning.

This conclusion at the same time supplies an answer to the second problem we have formulated, namely that about the relation between the lexical meaning of an individual preposition and the grammatical meaning common to all prepositions as such. The answer is, these two meanings in prepositions stand in the same relation to each other as the lexical meanings and grammatical meanings of the so-called notional words: nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc. Thus there is no difference between the so-called form words and the so-called notional words from this point of view. This difference, if any, has to be found in some other sphere.

Our next question was: what exactly do we mean when we say that this or that word is a form word (or a formal word)? As we have already shown, the peculiarity of a form word cannot lie in its denoting merely something about words, not about extralinguistic reality. So its specific features, if any, must be found somewhere else. Where should they be found? The reasonable answer to this query would seem to be this: a form word (or formal word) performs some function or other in building up a syntactic unit, whether it be on phrase level or on sentence level. Now prepositions surely do perform a function of this kind. Thus (to repeat some examples we have already mentioned) the preposition in the phrases *the picture on the table*, *the picture above the table*, etc. certainly plays an important part in building up the respective phrases. It is perfectly clear that a phrase *\*the picture the table* (without a preposition) would not at all be possible. Hence a preposition is certainly a form word (in this sense) but this statement does not in any way preclude the possibility of its being a 'notional' word at the same time since it does denote some relation existing in extralinguistic reality.

In this connection we must also look into the question of the relation between the meaning of a form word and its grammatical function. Erroneous statements have been made concerning this question. Thus, it is sometimes asserted that the lexical meanings of form words and their grammatical functions coincide.<sup>1</sup>

Now, this statement is not merely erroneous; it asserts something which could not be true under any circumstances whatever: a sheer impossibility. The meaning of a word (whether lexical or grammatical) can never coincide with its grammatical function because meaning and function are two basically different notions, referring to different aspects of the word. Its meaning is its meaning, it belongs to the sphere of lexicology and morphology, and has nothing syntactical about it, whereas its function belongs entirely to the sphere of syntax. Meaning and function may or may not correspond to each other, viz. the function of a word may or may not be such as its meaning would lead us to expect; but it surely can under no circumstances coincide, that is, be identical, with it.

Now we come to the conjunctions, and the same reasonings should be applied here which we developed above with reference to prepositions. The question whether conjunctions do or do not denote any extralinguistic phenomena, or whether they merely indicate something concerning the language elements themselves, imposes itself in the same way as it did about prepositions. A very common statement has it that the meaning of conjunctions is to indicate connections between words, or clauses, anyway between language units. The same doubt should be expressed here as was raised concerning prepositions: why, then, are conjunctions (the subordinating ones) so numerous? Connections between words and connections between clauses obviously admit of only two variants: they can be either co-ordinating or subordinating. Thus, if the meaning of conjunctions were merely indication of connections between these language units, there could only be two conjunctions altogether: a co-ordinating one and a subordinating one. In reality, however, their number is very much greater. There is, for example, the difference between the conjunctions *before* and *after*, or that between *because* and *though*. Each of these has its own lexical meaning, and each of them denotes a certain connection between phenomena of extralinguistic reality. It would seem that examples are not really necessary here.

It is therefore imperative to draw a clear distinction between the meaning of conjunctions, which is to denote certain connections existing between phenomena in the extralinguistic world, and their syntactical function, which is to connect words,

phrases, and clauses (and, occasionally, sentences). Non-distinction of the two is sure to lead (as it frequently has done) to a hopeless muddle and to a complete misrepresentation of the rôle conjunctions play in the language system.

We have, then, established that prepositions as a part of speech have a grammatical meaning which is common to all of them: they denote relations between phenomena of the extralinguistic world; each individual preposition has its own lexical meaning, which is to denote a specific relation between phenomena. In a similar way, conjunctions as a part of speech all have one grammatical meaning; they denote connections between phenomena of the extralinguistic world, while every individual conjunction denotes a specific connection between those phenomena.

This conclusion does not however, exhaust the subject of this paper. The question imposes itself, whether the distinction between 'relations' and 'connections' is clear enough to form a reliable basis for distinguishing two parts of speech. This question seems all the more urgent because we have, in English, *after* the preposition (thus denoting a relation) and *after* the conjunction (thus denoting a connection), and the same applies to the words *before* and *since*. It is also evident that the lexical meaning of *after* the preposition is in no way different from that of *after* the conjunction, and the same, again, may be said about *before* and *since*.

Discussion of the notions of 'relation' and 'connection' as such is not of course a matter of linguistics. However, we may as well go into it by analysing definitions of both notions given in dictionaries, and draw some inference concerning the question we are dealing with. This, then, is what Webster's New World Dictionary has to say on this matter. **RELATION** (definition 3): 'connection or mode of connection, as in thought, meaning, etc.: as, the relation of theory and practice, the relation of the individual to society' (p. 1227); **CONNECTION** (definition 3): 'a relation; association; specifically, a) the relation between things that depend on, involve, or follow each other' (etc.) (p. 311). Since each of the two terms is, in these definitions, explained by the other, this seems sufficient reason to suppose that they can be taken together as varieties of one basic idea.

If the generalized grammatical meaning is considered essential in defining parts of speech, what we call prepositions and what we call conjunctions might be united into one part of speech with its grammatical meaning that of 'relation-connection', or whatever we might choose to term it. Now it remains to be seen whether any other criteria we apply in differentiating parts of speech yield any counter-instance seriously hampering such a solution of the problem. Since the morphological criterion is irrelevant here (prepositions and conjunctions being equally invariable) the only point to be considered is syntactical function. Prepositions are used to connect words (or, respectively, parts of the sentence), and conjunctions unite words and clauses. Prepositions have some bearing on the case system of personal pronouns and the pronoun *who*, combining (usually) with their objective case form, while conjunctions have no connection of any kind with any case. This difference on the syntactical level is certainly not important enough to prevent uniting prepositions and conjunctions into one part of speech, which is suggested by definition of their respective grammatical meanings. Thus the difficulties created by such union appear to be negligible, whereas its advantages are very great indeed.

It remains now to find an appropriate term for this united part of speech, and this is not an easy task to perform. Some such term as 'connective' might perhaps do the job. In any case, if the solution proposed be found acceptable a term is sure to be found which will do justice to the requirements of the case.

The last question of the five we enumerated at the beginning of this paper seems to be the most difficult of all. It is common knowledge that alongside the preposition-conjunctions *before*, *after*, and *since*, there are also the adverbs *before*, *after*, and *since*. It would obviously not do to call, for instance, the preposition-conjunction *before* and the adverb *before* homonyms, since their lexical meanings are the same. On the other hand, it would seem impossible to unite the preposition-conjunction and the adverb into one part of speech, since their grammatical meanings are so very different. No satisfactory solution of the problem seems to be in sight at present. The best thing to do appears to be to establish for words of this kind a special status, enabling them to belong to two basically different parts of speech at the same time. A new approach will have to be developed in the future to meet the requirements of a thoroughly consistent grammatical theory. It is such puzzling phenomena as this one that often stimulate a new venture in matters of principle.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, V. V. Vinogradov, *Russkij jazyk* 30 (Moscow, 1947).

## RESUMÉ

### Předložky a spojky v současné angličtině

Všechny předložky v současné angličtině mají jeden společný mluvnický význam — vyjadřují „vztah“. Všechny spojky mají jeden společný mluvnický význam — vyjadřují „spojení“. Je vhodné považovat anglické předložky a spojky za jeden slovní druh, protože jejich slovní význam je často podobný a rozdíl se projevuje pouze v syntaktickém užití.

