

# Re: prepositions

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- *From:* [sanlosinst@xxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:sanlosinst@xxxxxxxxxxxx)
  - *Date:* 18 Aug 2005 07:25:34 -0700
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lsulky@xxxxxxxx wrote:

- > "I put the cat in the box in the closet."
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- > Was the cat in the box, which I put in the closet, or was the box in
- > the closet, and I put the cat in the box? Putting aside the ambiguity,
- > would we say that the two occurrences of "in" are playing fundamentally
- > different roles (which being which being a matter of interpretation),
- > and if so, are there terms for those roles? One of them seems to be
- > *\_adjectival\_*, the other *\_adverbial\_*,

I think you're looing at positions in the head-attribute hierarchy.

(1) The tall man saw a little dog.

In (1) the clause is headed by a verb *\_saw\_*. This head has two attributes: its Subject is a NP *\_the tall man\_* and its Object is a NP *\_a little dog\_*.

Each of these NPs contains a head which is a substantive (*\_man\_* and *\_dog\_*) each with two attributes, an article and an adjective.

A PrepP may be an attribute of such a substantive in a NP, much as an adjective is.

(2) The man on the beach saw a dog in the sea.

In (2) the Subject is *\_the man on the beach\_*, an NP with the substantive *\_man\_* as its head and the PrepP *\_on the beach\_* as an attribute to that head. Thus, the PrepPs in (2) fall in a similar position in the head-attribute hierarchy to the adjectives in (1). This may be what you call 'adjectivial'.

(3) John had a car before.

Here the adverb *\_before\_* seems to qualify the whole clause. John, the car, and his possession of it were all in the time encoded by *\_before\_*. (Of course, there are many instances where the adverb does not qualify the whole clause.) We can substitute a PrepP for the adverb:

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(4) John had a car in England.

In (4) the PrepP seems to qualify the whole clause just as the adverb did in (3). This may be what you call 'adverbial'.

The verb `_put_` has three grammatic roles to code, which we might call Agent (the entity causing movement), Patient (the entity moved) and Goal (the destination of movement).

(5) I put the pen in the bag.

In (5) the Agent is coded as Subject `_I_`, the Patient as Direct Object `_the pen_` and the Goal as a PrepP `_in the bag_`. We might equally use `_into the bag_`, which specifies movement to the inside from outside, whereas `_in_` may also be used for stationary location inside.

This verb needs three roles but has only two core relations, so it has to call on a peripheral relation to do duty for the third. Now the choice of `_in_` or `_into_` may seem odd, because with verbs requiring three roles to be filled, English normally uses the Dative, which can be coded with `_to_` or transformed into an Applicative and coded as an Object lying before the Direct Object. This would give us:

(6) \*\*I put the pen to the bag.

(7) \*\*I put the bag the pen.

Why does this not happen? I suspect that the answer lies in the volition and cooperation of the Goal. The bag is just an inanimate object incapable of volition so we don't use `_to_`. (Of course, there are plenty of situations in which English uses `_to_` and `_for_` with inanimate objects that have no will.)

PrepPs in `_to_` (Datives) and in `_for_` (Beneficiaries) can take the Applicative: no other prepositions can. I suspect that at some deep level, we think of these prepositions as expressing entities which receive things deliberately and willingly. (Once again, we can come up with many real examples where this is not so.) Note the following examples:

(8) I threw the ball to Peter.

(9) I threw Peter the ball.

(10) I threw the ball at Peter.

(8) implies that I intend Peter to catch the ball, and may be transformed into an Applicative as in (9). But (10) implies that I intend the ball to hit Peter, and it may not be transformed into an Applicative.

Another probable reason for choosing `_in_` not `_to_` is that `_in_` specifically denotes position inside something else. Similarly we could say

(11) I put the pen on the table.

In (11) on denotes physical contact with the surface of an object.

Samuel

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- **References:**

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  - ◇ *From:* lsulky
- ◆ **Re: prepositions**
  - ◇ *From:* John Lawler
- ◆ **Re: prepositions**
  - ◇ *From:* lsulky
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