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Transitive vs. Intransitive Prepositions

Keiko Kakuta

0. Introduction

Those verbal idioms which are called two-word verbs, verb-adverb combinations or verb-particle combinations have been elucidated by a number of authors: Kennedy (1920), Bolinger (1971), Fraser (1974), etc., and their studies cover from the purely semantic observations to the syntactic ones. These investigators, however, have been keen to draw a distinction between standard prepositions and the non-verbal constituents of two-word verbs, which I shall refer to as transitive prepositions and intransitive ones respectively. In this paper, I will look into the relation between the two types of prepositions and clarify their function both syntactically and semantically.

To begin with, let us present a syntactic observation given by Fraser (1974). He claimed that post-verbal particles should be assigned to a category Particle (Prt) distinct from the category Preposition (P) or the category (post-verbal) adverb (Adv), on the basis of various syntactic tests, some of which are listed below.

Prt-Adv distinction tests

Action nominalization

- (1) a. His throwing of the ball up (instead of down) was stupid. (Adv)
b. *His throwing of his dinner up was stupid. (Prt)

Gapping

- (2) a. We've talked about this topic, and they about that topic. (Adv)

b. *You thought out your project carefully, and they out theirs. (Prt)

Insertion of degree adverbials

(3) a. The debater drew the lucky number only part of the way out. (Adv)

b. *The debater drew his opponent only part of the way out. (Prt)

Contrastive stress

(4) a. I said to carry the prop ON, not OFF. (Adv)

b. *I said to carry the deception ON, not OFF. (Prt)

P-Prt distinction tests

Movement around NP¹)

(5) a. He looked over the fence. (P)

b. *He looked the fence over.

c. He looked over the client. (Prt)

d. He looked the client over.

Passivization

(6) a. *The fence was looked over. (P)

b. The client was looked over. (Prt)

Insertion of adverbials

(7) a. He called furtively from the office. (P)

b. *You have filled incorrectly in the application. (Prt)

Topicalization

(8) a. In the street, the man reeled as if drunk. (P)

b. *Up your children you have brought well. (Prt)

Gapping

(9) a. He sped up the street, and she, up the alleyway. (P)

b. *He sped up the process, and she, up the distribution. (Prt)

Stress

(10) a. She ran off the stage. (P)

b. She ran óff the pamphlets. (Prt)

1) If the NP is a pronoun, the Prt should obligatorily follow it, as in (i).

(i) *He looked over her.
He looked her over.

Wh fronting²⁾

(11) a. What did he sit on? (P)
 b. On what did he sit?
 c. What did he put on? (Prt)
 d. *On what did he put?

Clefting

(12) a. It was into the house that John ran. (P)
 b. *It was in that John ran. (Prt)

However, a closer examination of the data tells us that these tests do not always show the alleged category-correlation. In the following discussion, we will examine some cases which are counter to Fraser's claim, and then argue for the plausibility of the claim that both Prt and Adv should be assigned to the category intransitive preposition, which is a sub-category of the category preposition.

1. Prt-Adv distinction tests

Though verb-Prt combinations vary with respect to idiomatenicity, those Prt-Adv distinction tests listed in the preceding section fail to separate the purely idiomatic combinations from the combinations which contain pure adverbial particles. In other words, Fraser's claim that two-word verbs can be classified into two, i.e., verb-Prt combinations and verb-Adv combinations, does not seem to be convincing. This is illustrated in the following sentences, (from Kroch (1979)).

(13) a. His filling of the tank up was wise precaution.
 b. *Wilma filled the pitcher up and Betty the form out.
 c. The attendant filled the tank part way up.
 d. *He filled the page UP {instead of } OUT.
 { not }

2) Wh-fronting and Clefting are not explicitly referred to in Fraser (1974), but they are treated as working tests in dealing with the structural difference in question by other authors: Emonds (1972), Jackendoff (1973), Horn (1974), Akmajian et al. (1978), etc..

(14) a. His tightening of the hatches down was essential.
 b. *Bill tightened the hatches down and Sam the screw up.
 c. The sailor tightened the hatches only part way down.
 d. *He tightened the screw DOWN { instead of } UP.
 { not }

(15) a. *The putting of the dishes out took only a minute.
 b. Sally put the dessert out and her husband the dinner dishes away.
 c. *Henry put the dinner dishes partly out.
 d. Put the dishes OUT { instead of } AWAY.
 { not }

(16) a. *The phasing of the program in took a week.
 b. Bill phased the new machines in and Sam the superfluous workers out.
 c. *They phased the machine completely in.
 d. As far as education is concerned, the president wants to phase money OUT { instead of } IN.
 { not }

The diversity of behavior which these combinations exhibit indicates that it is more likely that the degree of idiomacticity represents a continuum from those in which a consistent alteration of meaning results from the presence of the particle to those in which we have nothing but a frozen form. Thus those tests can only serve as indices of idiomacticity, and a unitary treatment of these combinations as verb-intransitive preposition combinations seems more plausible than the dichotomy claimed by Fraser.

More specifically, though the sensitivity of the tests is highly idiomactic, some semantic generalization may be possible. The gapping and contrastive stress tests depend to some extent on whether a given verb, when combined with two different particles, produces interpretations in polar opposition to one

another. The insertion of degree adverb test seems to depend, first, on whether the verb-particle combination as a whole can be modified by a given degree adverb, and then on whether the particle represents that part of meaning to which degree modification is appropriate.

2. P-Prt distinction tests

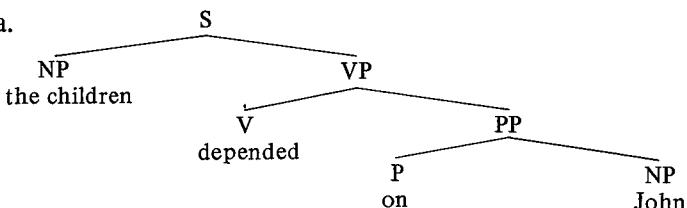
It is commonly observed that the syntactic behavior of the (transitive) prepositions whose occurrence is predictable from the choice of the verb differs from that of particles, (intransitive prepositions in our terminology), only in that they cannot trigger the movement around NP, i.e., the other “P-Prt distinction tests” do not work in this case. Observe the following sentences.

- (17) a. The children depended on John.
b. *The children depended John on.
c. John looked for the key.
d. *John looked the key for.
e. He commented on the news.
f. *He commented the news on.
- (18) a. John was depended on by the children.
b. The key was looked for by John.
c. The news was commented on by him.
- (19) a. ?On John, the children depended.
b. ?For the key, John looked.
c. ?On the news, he commented.
- (20) a. ?On whom did the children depend?
b. ?For what did John look?
c. ?On what did he comment?
- (21) a. ?It was on John that the children depended.
b. ?It was for the key that John looked.
c. ?It was on the news that he commented.

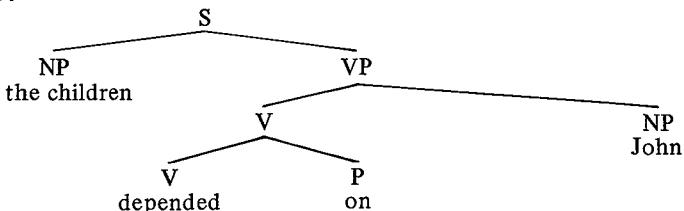
These are well-known examples of the structural ambiguity

between intransitive verbs followed by prepositional phrases, and transitive verbs, i.e., verb-intransitive preposition combinations, followed by direct objects and some change of the structures such as in (22) is necessary to deal with the ambiguity.

(22) a.



b.



To qualify for the movement around NP test, the corresponding structure of (17a) must be (22a), that is, the preposition *on* is a constituent of the prepositional phrase. On the other hand, as the passive sentences in (18)³⁾ are totally grammatical, we can also claim that the structure of (17a) is like (22b) in this case, that is, the preposition *on* is a formative of a verb-intransitive preposition combination whose function is that of a single transitive verb. The variedness of the grammaticality of the sentences in (19), (20) and (21) shows that those speakers who accept those sentences analyse the structure as in (22a), while for the other speakers who do not accept them the structure is like (22b).

3) These passive sentences are called "pseudo-passive" in the framework of the generative-transformational grammar, and it has been observed that they cannot be fully accounted for by purely syntactic formalization.

These facts clearly show that the "P-Prt distinction" is not so clear-cut as is claimed by Fraser and that the more closely related to the verb the preposition is, the more resemblance we perceive between the syntactic behavior of such prepositions and that of Prts (intransitive prepositions). I feel that the structural ambiguity observed so far can be given some semantic support, and I will discuss this point in the following section.

We have argued from the preposition side, and now let us turn to the particle side. In section 0, it was pointed out that Topicalization can be applied to prepositional phrases but not to particles. This does not hold under some conditions; there is a preposing rule for directional adverbs shown in (23) as well as for particles shown in (24) in sentences whose verbs are in the simple past or present tense. Like prepositional phrase preposing shown in (25), such preposing may cause the subject-verb inversion, if the subject of such a sentence is not a pronoun.

- (23) a. Into the opera house he raced.
b. Down the hill rolled the ball.
c. Up the tree climbed the monkey.
- (24) a. In he raced.
b. Down rolled the ball.
c. Up climbed the monkey.
- (25) a. In a white house lived two rabbits.
b. On the corner stood a girl.
c. On such gossamer threads does one's destiny impend.

Of course, not all particles may occur in this construction, particularly not those that give an idiomatic meaning to the verb as in (26).

(26) a. Mary gave up (abandoned).
 b. *Up gave Mary.
 c. He made out the words (understood).
 d. *Out the words he made.
 e. They fell out (quarreled).
 f. *Out they fell.

But there are adverbs and prepositional phrases which do not take part either:

(27) a. John left beforehand.
 b. *Beforehand left John.
 c. Bill went into detail.
 d. *Into detail went Bill.
 e. John jumped at the chance.
 f. *At the chance jumped John.

Again, the “P-Prt distinction tests” yields an inconsistent result in this respect, and some uniform treatment of prepositions and particles seems to be more attractive.⁴⁾

3. Semantic features of prepositions

In the preceding section, we observed that movement around NP is the only one crucial test to distinguish Prt and Adv from P. This is the strongest motivation for our analysis of Prt and Adv as belonging to the category intransitive preposition and P as belonging to the category transitive preposition, both as the sub-categories of the category preposition. Since the noun phrase preceding or following the Prt or the Adv is not the object of the Prt or the Adv but that of the verb-Prt or Adv combination as a whole, and since the noun phrase following the P is the object of the P itself, it is reason-

4) Those sentences in (23), (24) and (25), which result from a preposing rule, cannot be fully described within the domain of the semantic characterization of prepositions which will be discussed in section 3. I feel that these constructions should be analyzed in terms of a pragmatics or contextual analysis of the English language.

able to call the Prt and the Adv the intransitive preposition and the P the transitive counterpart. In this section we will elucidate what we call intransitiveness and transitiveness of prepositions in terms of the semantic relation between the prepositions and the noun phrases which follow or precede them.

The intransitiveness of those prepositions that are non-verbal constituents of two-word verbs can be analyzed into following four cases.

First, observe the sentences (28) where the two-word verb *stood up* as a whole takes the direct object *the chair*.

(28) He stood up the chair.

In this sentence, while *up* does not mean the upward movement of *the chair*, but that of the subject *he*, it is obvious that *the chair* means the source of that action but does never have the meaning of the object of the standard preposition *up*, ex., *up the hill* means 'go to higher place via the hill' and *the hill* is the path of the action, that is, the preposition *up* itself is not semantically related to *the chair*. This is why *up* can be taken out of the preceding position of *the chair* and can follow it as in (29), which we have referred to as movement around NP.

(29) He stood the chair up.

In this sense, we can claim that those prepositions which can be characterized like *up* in (28) and (29) should be treated as intransitive prepositions.

The second case is concerning the sentences which are treated as middle voice or pseudo-passive in Jespersen's sense of the term, an example is given in (30).

(30) Things piled up.

The corresponding active sentence may be (31).

(31) He piled up the things.

Thus, (31) can be paraphrased as ‘He caused the things to pile up’, and *the things* in that sentence cannot be the object of *up*; i.e., the preposition *up* in this case can be characterized as an intransitive preposition.

The third case is concerning the intransitive two-word verbs like *threw up* in (32).

(32) He threw up.

We can assume that (32) is derived from (33), where the direct object *his dinner* is deleted.

(33) He threw up his dinner.

In this sentence, *up his dinner* can not be interpreted as a prepositional phrase which means ‘to a higher place via his dinner’, and *up* can follow *his dinner* as in *He threw his dinner up*. Thus we can claim that *his dinner* is not the object of *up* but that of *threw up* as a whole, and that those prepositions like *up* in (32) or (33) can be also treated as intransitive prepositions.

Finally, there are two-word verbs which are basically intransitive, and an example is given in (34).

(34) It came up (in conversation).

Now let us consider transitive prepositions. The argument for the transitivity of standard prepositions is straightforward. Observe the next example.

(35) The old man lived in the house.

In with *the house* in (35) is a locative and indicates the interior of *the house*, that is, the preposition *in* has a close semantic relation to the noun which follows it. This is why movement around NP cannot be applied to (35); *in* cannot be taken out of the preceding position of *the house* and postponed as in (36).

(36) *The old man lived the house in.

Thus movement around NP can be the crucial test to distinguish transitive prepositions from intransitive counterparts, along with the argument given for (29).

Then why do the prepositions which are analyzed as transitive in (17) behave like intransitive prepositions in passive formation, as shown in (18), (parts of them are repeated below)?

(17) a. The children depended on John.
 b. *The children depended John on.
(18) a. John was depended on by the children.

One of the reasons can be sought in the relation between verbs and prepositions in question. While those prepositions have semantic relation to the noun phrase which follow them, we also observe idiomatic co-occurrence in those verb-preposition sequence, which is illustrated in (37) in comparison with (38).

(37) a. The children depended { on
*of
*over
*in
etc. } John.

b. John looked { for
*on
*over
*in
etc. } the key.

(38) a. John walked { on the street.
over the bridge.
down the hill.

b. John hit Bill { in the yard.
on the lawn.
at the party.

In (37), the idiomatic linkage between a verb and a preposition seems like that of a verb-intransitive preposition combination. This analogy may lead the verb-preposition sequence to behave like a verb in passivization as a verb-intransitive preposition combination does.

We further point out that the prepositions in (17) and (37a) do not have spacial meaning, even when the same preposition can have spacial reading in other contexts. Thus example (37a) does not mean that the children did anything on the surface of John, while the first example in (38a) means that John did do something on the surface of the street. Therefore, we may claim that for the speakers who do not accept the sentences in (19), (20) and (21), what we call transitive relation between a preposition and the noun phrase which follows it shown in (17) is weaker than that of spacial in reading. Thus those prepositions which do not have typical spacial or temporal readings in the given contexts tend to be neutral in terms of the transitiveness or intransitiveness of their function.

4. Conclusion

So far we have argued in favor of the category preposition composed of the category intransitive preposition and the transitive counterpart. Though the effect of this analysis to the grammar is left considerably open, we may claim that it is the most natural reflection of the facts, as far as we have observed.

Another important point we should mention in conclusion is that the syntactic behavior of prepositions in our terminology is not merely ruled by their syntactic relation but by their idiomatic linkage to another component in a sentence, as we have observed in section 3. I feel, however, that Topicalization or Passivization (mentioned in section 2 and section 3

respectively) which are applied to prepositional constructions should be described from another point of view, that is, it is indispensable to characterize the semantic status of the noun phrase which is placed at the head position in a sentence by those movements. Further research is required along this line.

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