

FROM ADAMS (1885) TO ZIMMERMANN (2009): IN, WITH, AND
UNDER THE SUBSTANCE OF PREPOSITIONS

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Abstract: A common closed-class feature of languages, prepositions connote spatial and logical relationships, often (though not always) preceding the noun to which they specify that relationship. Their use is highly idiomatic to a given language, such that their meaning may be best connoted by something other than a general translation equivalent. It is widely theorized that case-marking historically preceded the rise of prepositions, though in Hellenistic Greek (as in earlier forms of English) these have been employed simultaneously. Cross-linguistic consideration of this basic feature of language can be a helpful step toward understanding the role of prepositions in the Greek of the New Testament. (Article)

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1. *Introduction*

Consider the humble preposition: workhorse of spatial, temporal, and conceptual relations and possessing considerable diachronic consistency, it is nevertheless regarded by its many casual users as little more than conversational landfill, and despite its customary monosyllabic conciseness it can be upstaged by the insidious micro-precision of inflections. Undergraduates who can define nouns, verbs, and adverbs in their sleep actually stumble when it comes to defining a preposition—a plight hardly alleviated by one linguistically-informed English grammar this writer consulted a few years back which defined prepositions as “words that begin a prepositional phrase.” Perhaps just a little

more needs to be said about these compact artifacts of natural language.

Prepositions find their place among what de Jonge and Ophuijsen call “the most influential linguistic doctrine to survive from antiquity,”¹ namely, the eight *μέρη λόγου* ‘parts of speech,’ alongside nouns, verbs, participles, articles, pronouns, adverbs, and conjunctions. They proliferate throughout Indo-European languages, though other language families certainly have them as well. Dionysius Thrax (170–90 BCE) is credited with being the first to conceive of them as constituting a distinct category;² what Greeks classified as *πρόθεσις* ‘fore-placement’ was rendered *prae-positio* in Latin. As sometimes happens in a world punctuated by delicious irony—in which an otherwise unknown Frenchman decodes Egyptian hieroglyphics, and an irascible Russian philosopher can smoke away an entire manuscript and *still* command the attention of generations of scholars—one of the handiest angles on prepositions today comes from an unlikely source: from practitioners of elementary education come such handles as *Everywhere a cat can go—and then some* and *Everything you can do with a cloud*. Wisdom flows from the mouths of babes and, if J.S. Stewart is right, even “religion resides in the prepositions.”³

Prepositions are part of the broader landscape of *adpositions*, whose three subtypes all express some sort of relationship between nominals. One subtype, *postpositions*, shows up in languages like Hindi, Turkish, Korean, and Japanese following the ‘head noun,’ i.e. the defining word of a phrase. A few languages employ the second subtype, actually dividing the adposition morpheme and placing one piece of it before and the other after the head noun to produce a *circumposition*. The third subtype, *prepositions* in the strictest sense (from Latin *prae* ‘before’ and *ponere* ‘to put’), is the most common form of adposition, being so ubiquitous that the term often is used

1. de Jonge and Ophuijsen, “Greek Philosophers on Language,” 495.
2. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, 4.
3. Stewart, *Man in Christ*, 154–55. He is commenting on Deissmann at that point.

inclusively to designate all three types. Typologically, prepositional languages (in the strict sense) are head-initial and right-branching (cf. postpositional ones are head-final and therefore left-branching), and that tendency either way correlates with other syntactic features of the language in question. Whatever the syntactic tendency, prepositions (in the broader sense) typically pair up with one complement which is itself a noun/nominal or, in some cases, a “determiner” phrase, and the resultant prepositional phrase (PP) relates one nominal to another (e.g. *He walked with the dog*) and sometimes does so with adverbial implications (e.g. *He walked with confidence*), establishing a relationship on grammatical/structural and semantic levels.⁴

Prepositions are classified as *closed class* lexical items, along with definite articles, quantifiers and particles. Closed class items fluctuate minimally in number and meaning, appearing to be more resistant to diachronic semantic change than nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Prepositions in many languages, such as English, determine the case of the complement (e.g. *to her* instead of *to she*) or, like Greek, have meanings interconnected with the case of the head noun (e.g. $\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ + accusative = ‘according to,’ yet $\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ + genitive = ‘through’). In some languages a preposition can blend with a definite article (e.g. German: *im* < *in dem*); Greek has something similar, involving vowel deletion, e.g. $\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\nu \rightarrow \delta\iota'\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\nu$.

Broadly construed, prepositions indicate relationships, being functional cousins to conjunctions, adverbs, particles, and relative pronouns, among others.⁵ Given these overlapping purposes, Greek prepositions are often said to have derived from early adverbs—a claim that finds a parallel, at least in English,

4. Some other types of adpositions include *ambipositions*, which can appear either before or after complements, as in English *He worked right through the shift* and *He worked the shift right through*, as well as *inpositions*, which occur between pieces of complex complements, and *interpositions*, as in *They searched alley by alley*, the last being roughly analogous to infixational morphology, which is not common to natural languages.

5. Beale et al., *Interpretive Lexicon*, 6–7.

where certain prepositions function as particles in two-word or three-word verbs (e.g. *burn up*, *hunt down*; *run in to*, *meet up with*). The opposite tendency, it seems, is for a preposition to become stranded (e.g. *I hate being talked about*, *but I love being thought of*), which Winston Churchill is said to have quipped was “a bad habit, up with which I shall not put.” Prepositions can be prefixed orthographically (e.g. Hebrew *b-* ‘in/with’, *k-* ‘like’ and *l-* ‘to’) and postpositions can be suffixed (e.g. Latin *mecum* ‘me-with’)—apparent insurance policies against becoming stranded. Nevertheless, this offers no guarantee against the inevitability of grammatical role shifts: an English preposition can function adverbially (e.g. *ago*), or both spatially and adverbially (*He spoke before the court* and *It happened before the end of the week*), or as a conjunction and spatially (*He found it after she lost it* and *He laid down his Harley after the stop sign*), while some Mandarin prepositions reportedly moonlight even as verbs. Furthermore, they may participate in cross-linguistic influence, a preposition from a speaker’s second language being calqued on the idiomatic use of a similar one present in the first language, as happened with *ἀπό* under the influence of Hebrew *min* in Deut 1:29 (LXX), “do not be afraid of them” (*ἀπ’ αὐτῶν*).⁶

As if that were not enough complexity troubling the world of prepositions, there remains the historic issue of case-marking ‘versus’ employment of a preposition. Synthetic languages (such as Old English/Anglo-Saxon, 449–ca. 1100 CE) tend to express relationships via case marking while analytical ones (such as what began to emerge in the Middle English period, ca. 1100–ca. 1500 CE) tend to defer the task to prepositions. Greek, like earlier forms of English, allows both options and in many specific instances permits interchangeable forms with no discernible difference of meaning (e.g. *περιεπάτουں εἰς τὸν οἶκον / περιεπάτουں τῷ οἴκῳ*)—and furthermore combines these two morphological features so that the meaning/function of a preposition is in some way tied to the case of the head noun. Additionally, a preposition may call for a specific case—a

6. George, “Jewish and Christian Greek,” 270.

functional redundancy seen in Septuagint Greek, which preserves both the use of dative case and also dative combined with various prepositions,⁷ as well as modern English pronouns (*The visitor spoke with him*, not *with he*).

Conundrums populate this field like rabbits in a grassy paddock. Prepositional usage is notoriously idiomatic to each language and poses no end of headaches for second-language learners. In spite of this fact, or possibly because of it, prepositions are frightfully polysemous: a single one may carry a literal meaning and another by metaphoric extension (e.g. *He lay under the table, being under the influence*), or both spatial and temporal meanings (e.g. *He stood behind the desk as he ran behind schedule*), or spatial and conceptual meanings (e.g. *He sat silently within the courtroom, his refusal to speak being well within his rights*). And this is just the beginning of a convoluted picture. Prepositions may be directional (*He walked in the door*) or static (*He sat in the chair*), with clarification coming only from physical or conceptual context. Bortone observes that prepositional polysemy “verges on the chaotic.”⁸

However, neither syntax nor context offers any guarantee of semantic clarification: *of* may carry possessive, authorial, or legal implication in *That is a book of his*. And *by* could relay spatial or instrumental information (e.g. *The victim was felled by the post*), even as it fails to clarify whether the PP modifies verb or object. As if to add insult to injury, preposition usage sometimes varies between dialects: e.g. American English has *on the weekend* and *in the hospital* while British English has *at the weekend* and *in hospital*. Then, there are the many verbs that require prepositions even when their synonyms do not (e.g. *He looked at me* but *He observed me*) while some changes in preposition carry little discernible semantic difference (e.g. *He spoke with/to me* and *He looked at/toward me*).

7. Horrocks, *Greek*, 57–59; George, “Jewish and Christian Greek,” 271.

8. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, 41, citing Taylor, *Linguistic Categorization*.

2. Greek Prepositional Literature

In Greek, and some other languages, a distinction is often made between *proper/essential* prepositions in contrast with *improper/accidental* ones, the latter kind appearing to have been borrowed from other parts of speech. However, when referring to Ancient Greek, ‘improper’ prepositions specifically are those which never appear as a verb prefix, being forty-two in number by most counts. Harris lists them,⁹ and cites Bortone in support of the observation that they tend to be longer than proper ones, tend to replace older ones, and typically bear spatial, rather than temporal or logical, senses.¹⁰ In contrast, ‘proper’ prepositions can be prefixed to verbs, and are commonly numbered at eighteen. However, these labels are cross-linguistically confusing, functionally irrelevant for the most part, and terminologically unfortunate as they seem to imply a preferential value judgment, at least for ‘good’ speech.¹¹

Prepositions themselves, not to mention the terminology generated to codify and contain them, constitute a minefield of obstacles and opportunities. Grammarians who search for the heuristic key to this Pandora’s box must be rigorous and creative, and a certificate in alchemy wouldn’t hurt. Contributions to the field relevant to Ancient Greek include the following:

F.A. Adams (1885) was one voice in the chorus that proclaims prepositions to be “suggestive primarily of notions of space,”¹² explaining that “[t]he present work is an endeavor to clear somewhat this seeming jungle of the Greek Prepositions—to show that it is not a jungle, but a garden, whose alleys and paths have become overgrown through neglect, and lost to view.”¹³ With spatial notions established, one “seeks for the analogues of

9. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 241–42.

10. See Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, 194.

11. Moule offers this number, and others count similarly. He offers that “prepositions were originally adverbs, which in turn, may have originally been nouns crystallized indeclinably in one particular case” (*Idiom Book*, 48), and offers that *ἀντί* and *ἐπί* carry once-dative, and *χάριτι* accusative, suffixes.

12. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, v.

13. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, v.

these in human experience. Thus the whole field of human life, of thought, passion, and purpose, is laid open, and the Prepositions enter it in their own right.”¹⁴

In fact, Adams posits that all words, not just prepositions, “are derived largely from notions of things in space,”¹⁵ though he qualifies that “[n]o class of words in the Greek is more important than Prepositions; and none are more imperfectly understood . . .”¹⁶ He sees something primal in them, surmising that “[a] the ideas of space and the notions these carry with them were always present, it is reasonable to believe that they were operative in the formation of language from the first . . .”¹⁷ Since verb tense and aspect might also comprise a formidable jungle, and nouns do seem to hold some semantic import, it can be acknowledged that Adams’s refrain echoes into the present day in the form of interest in primary cognitive categories.

Herbert Weir Smyth’s *Greek Grammar* first appeared in 1920, yet even in its 1956 reprinting the editor’s preface claimed it was “by far the most complete reference grammar of ancient Greek to appear in English.”¹⁸ Identified there as “descriptive, not an historical, nor a comparative grammar,” the author states that “[o]riginally the preposition was a free adverb limiting the meaning of the verb, but not directly connected with it.”¹⁹ Smyth states that all prepositions specifically originated as adverbs of place. Subsequently, the adverb “was brought into closer connection with the noun . . .”²⁰ and the emergent preposition would “define the relations of a substantival notion to the predicate,” though he seems to overlook their potential relation specifically to a subject phrase. Smyth was an early advocate of the term ‘improper’ prepositions, i.e. those which “do not form compounds” and are never prefixed to verbs.²¹

14. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, v.

15. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, iii.

16. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, iii.

17. Adams, *The Greek Prepositions*, vi.

18. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, iii.

19. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 365.

20. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 365.

21. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 388.

A.T. Robertson's (1934) 1454-page tome also seems to be a suitable possessor of the 'most complete grammar' moniker. His chapter on prepositions, approximating the length of a short monograph,²² contrasts with Adams in its assertion that cases preceded prepositions "both in time and at first in order" and historically did not govern the case of the head noun "but rather helped to define more precisely the distinctions indicated by the case forms."²³ The accusative originally denoted direction, the genitive marked separation, and the dative indicated location, according to Robertson, and what later developed was that "cases found in prepositions a convenient means of sharpening their significance"²⁴—an interesting anthropomorphizing of grammatical 'intent' seemingly apart from cognitive, sociological, or pragmatic context (unless he had intended it only in a metaphorical sense).

Stanley Porter (1992), who identifies himself as holding a monosemic bias, describes prepositions as "indeclinable fixed forms or particles used to *enhance* the force of . . . cases . . ." ²⁵ and notes the stubborn fact that their diminutive number and immutability tendency do not prevent them from performing many different functions. He too comments on the suspiciously close relationship between prepositions and adverbs:²⁶ the former tend to modify nouns and the latter, verbs and other modifiers—hence the inference that prepositions historically developed from adverbs.²⁷ Porter cites ὑπὲρ ἐγώ 'I more [than they]' in 2 Cor 11:23 as an example of adverbial use of a preposition. It is best, he contends, to say that "*a preposition is governed by its case, in some way helping the case to manifest its meaning and to perform more precisely its various functions.*"²⁸ He notes that in

22. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 553–649.

23. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 28.

24. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 28.

25. Porter, *Idioms*, 139. Emphasis mine.

26. Porter, *Idioms*, 125–27.

27. Murray Harris notes that "[i]n the parent Indo-European language, cases probably stood alone, but later some adverbs came to be used as prepositions" (*Prepositions and Theology*, 27).

28. Porter, *Idioms*, 140. Emphasis his.

addition to comprising a prepositional phrase (customarily followed by a head noun), they may intensify meaning, be transformative of meaning, or just semantically retentive.²⁹ He upholds a consensus to the effect that one-time spatial meanings became extended metaphorically over time, but may have developed so far from their earlier, literal usage that a speaker would use a particular preposition simply because it was customary, or idiomatic, and not because he necessarily made a correlation with an earlier or original denotation; he adds, “[m]any of these extensions are far removed from their basic sense.”³⁰

Silvia Luraghi’s (2003) monograph, subtitled *The Expression of Semantic Roles in Ancient Greek*, offers a Cognitive Grammar approach which reaches beyond the ‘localistic approaches’ of the nineteenth century which “thought that the meaning of cases derived by abstraction from an original spatial meaning”³¹ and beyond European Structuralism with its ‘meaning-oriented’ approach. Cognitive Grammar posits that “grammatical forms are conceived as meaningful. The substance of their meaning is not different from the substance of lexical meaning: the difference lies in the degree of abstractness, rather than in substance. Furthermore, space is conceived as the basic domain of human experience, which serves as source for understanding other, more abstract domains.”³² The approach posits that semantic roles are prototypical categories, and assumes a localistic theory of the meaning of cases as well as prepositions.³³ Luraghi’s study aims to provide “a synchronic account of the meaning of each case, considering cases as instances of structured polysemy that developed diachronically by means of motivated semantic extensions” in Ancient Greek.³⁴ She continues her argument with a diachronic study of the

29. Porter, *Idioms*, 140–41.

30. Porter, *Idioms*, 142.

31. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 11.

32. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 11–12.

33. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 18.

34. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 49.

eighteen ‘proper’ prepositions (noting that in Homer they can be used as free adverbs)³⁵ and concludes, for example, that prepositions gradually become less spatially focused over time.³⁶

Pietro Bortone’s *Greek Prepositions: From Antiquity to Present* (2010), reflecting previous work, reaches for “the evolution of the Greek prepositional system in its entire history”³⁷ and specifically states that its “aim is not to formulate an abstract theory, nor to describe Greek usage strictly within a preconceived theoretical framework . . . ”³⁸ Bortone argues that the history of Greek prepositions is “entirely congruent with the ‘unidirectionality hypothesis’ that spatial meanings evolve into non-spatial ones, but not vice-versa.”³⁹ He continues:

Considering the varying degrees of meaningfulness of case forms, from semantic emptiness to extreme polysemy, it can however be argued that polysemy is not unprincipled—there are clear and demonstrable links between, for example, locative, comitative, and instrumental/modal meanings. The ‘localist’ interpretation of this is that the various non-spatial senses of cases or adpositions are related in a chain of semantic extensions which starts from a spatial notion.⁴⁰

Bortone suggests that “[t]he fact that cases and prepositions become less predictable and often less ‘meaningful’ when their sense is not spatial . . . fits well with the conjecture that the basic meaning is spatial and that other meanings are metaphors.”⁴¹

Murray Harris’s *Prepositions and Theology* (2012) expands upon his own previously published work and aligns in various ways with Bortone’s. Harris is heavily context-driven when it comes to their NT meanings,⁴² locating prepositions amongst what he calls the ‘big four’ zones of Greek grammar (along with the aorist, genitive case, and articles) “that produce the most

35. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 76.

36. Luraghi, *Prepositions and Cases*, 315.

37. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, xii.

38. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, xii.

39. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, xii.

40. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, xiii.

41. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions*, 43.

42. Harris quotes Robertson as saying “prepositions in composition often best show their original import” (*Prepositions and Theology*, 14).

handsome dividends when special attention is given to understanding them.”⁴³ Harris construes a tight relationship between prepositions and theological concepts, and cautions against any assumption that Classical distinctions necessarily hold in the Hellenistic period, and against disregard for the NT writers’ stylistic uniquenesses,⁴⁴ individually discussing the forty-two improper (though Porter numbers these at fifty) and what Harris numbers at seventeen, namely, the proper prepositions.

Ilse Zimmermann (2003) investigates Russian case marking with respect to sound-meaning correlation, drawing on Roman Jakobson’s mid-twentieth century work on characteristics of cases and Dieter Wunderlich’s more recent Decomposition Grammar Theory. Her technical study of this Indo-European language concludes cautiously that “[c]ases of noun phrases can have semantic import. No case is a structure or semantic case *per se*.”⁴⁵ To many theorists, case marking long prefigured the use of prepositions, though how Russian grammar may shed light on Greek prepositions is something yet to be identified; for the purposes of this paper, it at least facilitates handily an ‘A to Z’ scope of the literature survey. What *is* clear is the fact that the problematics of prepositions have been discussed in, with, and under the rubrics of the literature, and solutions to matters such as the relationship between case marking and prepositions, the productivity of the monosemy versus polysemy debate, and the potential role of linguistic frameworks, are all tasks awaiting the theorist.

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43. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 14.

44. See Harris, *Prepositions and Theology*, 39–44.

45. Zimmermann, “Semantics of Cases,” 371.

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