2. Semantic Functions of Prepositions
2.0. Introduction

Prepositions are semantically important syntactic elements in that they change the meaning of the phrase — noun-phrase or verb-phrase — and thereby the meaning of the sentence, eg.:

I reached in time.
(with enough time to spare, not late)

I reached on time.
(at exactly the right time)

As regards the meaning of prepositions, Sweet says that, although very numerous they are, they may be classed as those of "(a) space, including place, rest and motion, (b) time, and (c) other abstract relations, such as quantity, manner, cause, deprivation. All the three classes of meaning are often expressed by the same preposition. Each preposition generally has a certain fundamental meaning which runs through one or more of the above classes."
(Sweet, 1900 : 139 ; quoted in Sroka, 1972 : 112)

The varied functioning of a preposition calls on the problem of where and why a particular preposition be used. Most often the prepositional phrase derives an idiomatic meaning which changes with its wrong or improper use:

"Misuse of them, however, mostly results not in what may be called in the fullest sense blunders of syntax,
but in offences against idioms. It is often impossible to convince a writer that the preposition he has used is a wrong one, because there is no reason in the nature of things, in logic, or in the principles of universal grammar (whichever way it may be put), why that preposition should not give the desired meaning as clearly as the one that we tell him he should have used."

(Fowler and Fowler, 1970 : 170)

The semantic functions of prepositions can be discussed as follows:

1. Prepositions denoting time-relations,
2. Prepositions denoting space-relations,
3. Prepositions denoting manner-relations,
4. Prepositions denoting purpose, cause, etc.

2.1. Prepositions Denoting Time-relations

Time-expressions are in general related with verb-forms, tenses, temporal adverbs, and certain prepositions with temporal nouns, viz. about, after, around, at, before, between, by, during, for, from, in, on, since, till, to, until, etc.
Time-relations are of different types as follows:

(a) points in time,
(b) periods of time,
(c) approximacy of time,
(d) duration of time,
(e) relative position of time.

2.1.1. Points in time

In English, to express points in time, exactness of time (longer periods, such as holidays, the whole of the time-period), 'at', 'on', and 'by', are used generally, eg.:

**AT** : The train arrives here at 9.30

He is at sixteen.

He cannot see at night.

At the weekend, everyone is short of money.

**ON** : It is used with days and dates:

We don't go to college on Sundays.
British rule in India ended on August 15, 1947.

On Sunday morning we are going to Bhilai.

**BY** : 'By' refers to the point of time especially in the sense of 'not later than' or 'before the time', eg.:

We have to reach there by 6.30 p.m.

He can't do it by next Monday.

'By' specifies a commencement point of time (Quirk et al, 1990 : 156), eg.:

'By' that time he was exhausted.

"'By day' and 'by night' are idioms which can replace 'during the day/night' with some activities such as travelling."

(Leech and Svartvik, 1988 : 77), eg.:

We travelled by night.

**TILL/UNTIL** : 'Till/until' can be used to denote 'up to or before a specified time', eg.:

Wait until tomorrow.
Nothing happened until 5 o'clock.
It may last till Thursday.

"Until specifies a terminal point with positive and a commencement point with negative predications" (Quirk et al. 1990: 155), eg.:

We slept until midnight.
(= We stopped sleeping then.)

We didn't sleep until midnight.
(= We started sleeping then.)

"Until (always replaceable by till) marks the end of a period of time." (Close, 1977: 176)

UP TO: 'Up to' denotes the terminal point of time, eg.:

Up to last week, we hadn't received any message.

SINCE: 'Since' expresses the initial point of time, actually 'from a special event in the past till now', eg.:

I haven't seen him since last monday.
He hadn't met her since their quarrel.
BEFORE and AFTER : 'Before' and 'after' indicate relations between two points of time, eg. :

I get up before 6 O'clock.
He reached there after 6 O'clock.

2.1.2. Periods of Time

The period of time, unlike the point in time, is well denoted by prepositions, viz. in, during.

IN : 'In' is used for periods longer or shorter than a day, i.e. parts of the day, months, years, seasons, centuries, etc., :

I get up early in the morning.
My birth day comes in July.
Akbar died in 1605.
Trees shed their leaves in the winter.
Science has made tremendous progress in the 20th century.

DURING : 'During' (although similar in meaning to 'in') is used with known periods of time, i.e. periods known by name, such as Christmas, Easter, or periods
which have been already defined. (Thomson & Martinet, 1990: 95), eg.:

During the Middle Ages, man could do nothing except living by bread only.
During his childhood he always topped in the class.

Thus, 'during' is used to say when something happened. (Swan, 1988: 187). "'During' helps to stress the idea of duration: it means in that period of a certain length." (Swan, 1988: 188), eg.:

It rained during the whole of August this year.

2.1.3. Approximinity of Time

In English, both 'about' and 'around' show approximinity of time, eg.:

He arrived (at) about 5.30 pm.
See you around 7.30 pm.
'Around', in comparison to 'about', is used to denote a longer period of time, eg. :

The work will be finished around Christmas.

2.1.4. Duration of Time

'Duration' means the time during which something lasts or continues. Duration is denoted by two prepositions: 'for' and 'from ... to'.

**FOR** : 'For' denotes duration of time (cf Quirk et al, 1900 : 154). "For' is used to say how long it took." (Swan, 1988 : 187), eg. :

My father was in hospital for six weeks during the summer.

That is, "for" marks the length of time during which an action or state continues" (Close, 1977 : 175), eg. :

For a year we waited to hear what had happened to him.

The train will not arrive for two hours.

'For' shows the sense of 'as long as'.

(Leech & Svartvik, 1988 : 79)
FROM ... TO : "From ... to is another pair of prepositions whose locative meaning is transferred to duration." (Quirk et al, 1990 : 155), eg.:

We camped there from June to September.

2.1.5. Relative Position of Time

'Between' shows the interval (of time) in relation to two points in time, eg.:

You'll phone me between 3 and 5 o'clock.

2.2. Prepositions denoting space-relations

Certain prepositions used before spatial nouns show space-relations of the following types:

(a) position,
(b) direction,
(c) movement or motion,
(d) passage,
(e) relative position,
(f) orientation,
(g) resultative meaning,
(h) pervasive meaning.
2.2.1. Position

Prepositions denoting positions are: at, in, on, away from, off, by, beside, over, under, above, behind, beneath, below, after, in front of, etc.

AT

The preposition 'at' expresses exactness of location, eg.:

Mohan was at the door.
I will be at home this evening.
We stayed at an inn.
He lives at Shantinagar in Raipur.

Here, the position is positive and simple, i.e. static location, which indicates a point (a place is identified quite generally without being thought of in terms of length, width, or height — Leech & Svartvik, 1988 : 83). "In general 'at' is used when we talk about position at a point." (Swan, 1988 : 88)

IN

'In' expresses a broader location or place. "The place is seen as an area (usually an area of ground or territory closed by boundaries). (Leech and Svartvik, 1988 : 84), eg.:
I have a house in the city.

He lives in Bombay.

Here, the position is again positive, simple, and static (like that of 'at'). According to Swan (1988: 88), in general, "'in' is used to talk about position in a place that has three dimensions (length, breadth, and depth)."

Other prepositions with the same meaning, viz. 'inside' and 'within' can substitute for 'in' (Quirk et al. 1990: 147), eg.:

Stay in your room.
Stay inside your room.
Stay within your room.

But, 'inside' stresses the idea of sheltering or being enclosed in a space and 'within' suggests restriction to an area (Close, 1977: 171-2).

ON

'On' is used to describe the position of a thing when it touches the upper surface of an object and its weight is supported by that object, eg.:
Sit** on** the chair, not** on** the floor.

Patna is** on** the river Ganga.

There is an important programme** on** television tonight.

There were a large number of passengers** on** the bus/train/ship.

He was lying** on** the bed.

**OFF**

'Off' is used to denote the position of a thing when it is far from a location, eg. :

It is an island** off** the seacoast.

My house is** off** the road.

**BY/BESIDE**

'By' and 'beside' mean 'at the side of', but can also be used more generally to indicate the nearness of one object to another (Leech & Svartvik, 1988 : 87), eg. :

She sat in a chair** by** (=near) the door.

There are trees** beside** the road.
AWAY FROM

This compound preposition shows negative position, eg.:

Tom was away from the door.

(=Tom was not at the door.)

(Quirk et al, 1990 : 148)

ABOVE and OVER

Both these prepositions show the position (of a thing) higher than but not touching something, eg.:

The sun rises above the horizon.

There was a lamp over the table.

'Above' and 'over' express relative position vertically. (Quirk et al, 1990 : 149)

UNDER, BELOW, and BENEATH

These prepositions express relative position

1. "'Over' and 'under' as place prepositions are roughly synonymous with 'above' and 'below' respectively. The main differences are that 'over' and 'under' tend to indicate a direct vertical position and/or spatial proximity, while 'above' and 'below' may indicate simply 'on a higher/lower level than'. (Quirk et al, 1990 : 149)
vertically as opposed to 'above' and 'over' (cf. Quirk et al. ibid.), eg.:

- The horizon is **below** the sky.
- The table is **below** the lamp.
- The book is **under** the table.
- We had a cottage **beneath** the tree.

### IN FRONT OF and BEHIND

These prepositions show relative position horizontally and both are antonyms of each other, eg.:

- There is a garden **in front of** my house.
- My house is **behind** the temple.

### 2.2.2. Direction

Directional prepositions are **up**, **down**, **along**, and **across** which also represent motion (Leech and Svartvik, 1988: 88), eg.:

- I walked **up** / **down** the platform.
- He walked **along**/**across** the street.
- He ran **up**/**down** the hill.
2.2.3. Movement or Motion

Prepositions that express motion or movement are: to, on (to), in (to), away from, off, out of, towards, eg.: 

Mohan went to the door.
Mohan fell on (to) the door.
Mohan dived in (to) the water.
Mohan went away from the door.
Mohan jumped off the door.
Mohan came out of the prison.
He threw the stone towards the window.

"We can express repeated motion by joining two prepositions with 'and' (Leech and Svarfvik, 1988: 89), eg.: 

He walked up and down the room.
(in one direction then in another)
The oars flashed in and out of the water.
They danced round and round the room.

2.2.4. Passage

The sense of 'passage' is the primary locative meaning attached to 'across', 'through', and 'past'
(Quirk et al., 1990: 150), eg.:

He ran across the road.
I walk through the grass.
We drove past the town hall.
They passed across the bridge.

2.2.5. Relative Position

'Between', 'among', and 'amid' show the position of an object in relation to others as follows (cf. Leech & Svartvik, 1988: 87):

BETWEEN

It normally relates an object to two other objects, eg.:

The house stands between two trees.

AMONG

The house stands among trees.

AMID

It (means 'in the midst of') can apply to an indefinite number of objects, eg.:

The house stands amid trees.
2.2.6. **Orientation**

'Orientation' means 'view point'. The preposition 'beyond' makes reference not only to two objects, but to a third factor, the 'view point' at which the speaker is standing (or imagines he is standing) (Leech and Svartvik, 1988: 89):

I could see the town **beyond** the lake.

Here, 'beyond' means 'on the far side of'. Its primary meaning is one of orientation (Quirk et al, 1990: 151). 'Beyond', i.e. farther than, is less common and more literary than 'past' (Close, 1977: 171), eg.:

The village **past** the bus-stop...

2.2.7. **Resultative Meaning**

All prepositions which have motional meaning can also have a static resultative meaning indicating the state of having reached the destination (Quirk et al, 1990: 152), eg.:

I managed to get **over** the fence.

I managed to get **across** the river.
2.2.8. Pervasive Meaning

'Over' and 'through' can have pervasive meaning, especially when replaced by 'all' (Leech & Svartvik, 1988: 89), eg.:

He painted (all) over the walls.
The noise could be heard all over/through the building.

'Through' is restricted to areas and volumes. 'Throughout' can be used instead of 'all through', eg.:

The epidemic has spread throughout the country.

2.3. Prepositions denoting manner-relations

Manner-relations are expressed by prepositions as follows:

IN

'In' with (a certain) 'manner/way' indicates manner-relation, eg.:

He spoke in a confident manner/way.
The work was done in a usual way.
'With' and 'without' also express manner.

eg.:

He spoke with confidence.
I answered without hesitation.

2.4. **Prepositions denoting purpose, cause, means, instrument, etc.**

2.4.1. **Purpose or Destination**

**FOR**

This pen is for you.
They bought a car for me.
He can do anything for money.
The train for Delhi is late.

'For' also expresses 'exchange', eg.:

I bought it for ten rupees.

**TO**

'To' used before a verb expresses purpose
or destination, eg.:
I want to go.
There is nothing to bother.

'(In order) to' can also be used similarly:
I have purchased this house (in order) to save money.

2.4.2. **Cause**

Cause or reason can be expressed by prepositions like 'because of', 'on account of', 'for' etc., eg.:

*Because of* my illness, I could not join the ceremony.

*On account of* heavy rain the programme was postponed.

They quarrelled *for* money.

2.4.3. **Means, Instrument**

Prepositions showing means, instrument relations are 'by', 'with', 'on', 'in', etc., eg.:

*He came by* car.

*I always write* with *pen.*
Speak in English.
He goes to school on foot.
Write in ink, please.

2.4.4. **Recipient**

Generally, it takes 'to', eg. :

I gave a pen to my friend.
'To' is omitted when there is dative-movement, eg. :

I gave my friend a pen.

2.4.5. **Source, Origin**

'From' is used to express source or origin, eg. :

He comes from America.
The Ganga originates from the Himalayas.

2.4.6. **Agency**

Generally, agency is expressed either by 'ō' (zero) or 'by', eg. :

Mohan ō never speaks the truth.
The book was written by Pope.
2.4.7. Miscellaneous Relations

There are several other semantic relations that prepositions express, viz. stimulus, accompaniment, support, opposition, exception, concession, reference, condition, etc. (cf Quirk et al. 1990; Thomson & Mastinet, 1990; Swan, 1988; Close, 1977; Leech & Svartvik, 1988).

(i) stimulus

I was alarmed at/ by his behaviour.

He is interested in history.

I am delighted with your presence.

(ii) accompaniment

I go to school with my friend.

I take tea with biscuits.

(iii) support/opposition

Are you for or against my plan?

We must cope with the convention.

(iv) exception

None but you could do the work.

There was everybody except you.
(v) **concession**

In spite of/ despite all his demerits, he was selected for the post.

Besides cooking, he helps me in my study.

(vi) **reference**

This application is sent to you with reference to your advertisement No...

(vii) **subject-matter**

I can't speak about/on politics.

Don't talk of the problem.

(viii) **sequence**

Sunday comes before Monday.

Don't bathe after eating.

(ix) **genitive**

The windows of the house are open.

People of India are generous.
Apart from what has been discussed above, there are many more semantic functions of prepositions in different collocations with nouns, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, and verbs. It would be wise to say that prepositions do express as many functions as there are uses and it is difficult to enumerate all of them. The varied nature of prepositions puts even the native speakers in trouble. In brief, the use of prepositions always requires alertness and wisdom with a view to effective communication.