3. Syntactic Functions of Prepositions
3.0. Introduction

Prepositions, as already discussed, are semantically important syntactic elements, i.e. below the rank of a sentence, prepositions can't be as useful as they are. This is what is known as semantico-syntactic behaviour of prepositions.

Syntactically, prepositions are grammatical elements, i.e. they not only relate two words or phrases semantically, but also syntactically in terms of prepositional phrases as constituents of a sentence. That is, the function of a preposition is formally or structurally a phrase-constituent, semantically a case-marker, and syntactically an adverbial, or a conjunction. Thus prepositions play a much more extensive role in syntax than is assumed in traditional grammar. (cf. Emonds, 1976: 172-176; Radford, 1997: 363)

3.1. Prepositions as Structural Elements

Prepositions are used with different classes of words and thus form the following syntactic/structural units:
Preposition + Noun Phrase

Prepositional Phrases, e.g. 'in the room' as in 'He slept in the room'.

Verb + Preposition

Phrasal verbs, e.g. call on, run after, make off, etc.

3.1.1. Prepositional Phrases

The constitution of a PP normally follows the rule:

$$PP \rightarrow P + NP$$

e.g. 'in the garden' is a PP in the sentence: "I saw the boys in the garden". But, there may be more than one NP or PP in a PP, e.g.:

'I sat on the chair on the roof.'

Here 'on the chair' is the object of the V (= 'sat') and 'on the roof' is the attributive to the NP 'the chair'. However, they may be analysed as consisting simply of a P and an NP (Burton-Roberts, 1990: 62).
A 'preposition + NP' forms a PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE, which can be (cf. Close, 1977 : 25):

(a) an ADVERBIAL OF PLACE (POSITION) answering the question 'where?', as in

The headmaster's desk stood on a high platform.

(b) an ADVERBIAL OF PLACE (MOVEMENT) answering the question 'Where to?', as in

The headmaster walked slowly to the door.

(c) an ADVERBIAL OF TIME, answering the question 'When?':

I first met George in 1968.

(d) an ADVERBIAL OF MANNER, eg.:

Handle it with care.

(e) a POSTMODIFIER in an NP, eg.:

The desk on the platform was covered with books.

(f) the COMPLEMENTATION OF AN ADJECTIVE, eg.:

George was good at Arithmetic

(g) SUBJECT, COMPLEMENT, etc. : Also PPs may occasionally take the role of a noun phrase as subject, complement, prepositional complement, etc. (Leech & Svartvik, 1988 : 274):
Before breakfast is when I do my best work.

The view from above the shore is magnificent.

Regarding the dependency of a constituent on the other, there are differences of opinion. Structuralists treat the preposition as the 'head' which governs the NP, i.e. the NP is dependent upon the P (cf. Emonds, 1976: 172, Mathews, 1981: 162; see also 'Notes and References' in Matthews, PP. 165-166). To examine the fact, here is an example:

I saw the boys in the garden.

The tree-diagram is as follows:

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  S
   \-- NP
       \-- VP
          \-- VP
             \-- I
             \-- saw
             \-- the boys
             \-- in
             \-- the garden
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Here the PP 'in the garden' itself is dependent on the VP 'saw' and 'in' is the object of the verb. 'In' is complemented by the NP 'the garden'.

As it would be discussed later (Chapter - 5), the P is not that independent as is the V (Verb). Hence, the P and the NP in a PP are mutually dependent, taken the P as the 'governor' for granted. Moreover, a PP is an exocentric construction unlike an NP. "Phrases consisting of mutually dependent constituents are by convention named after the governing constituent." (Burton-Roberts, 1990 : 62). Hence we call them prepositional phrases (PPs).1

1. "This may give the misleading impression that the preposition bears the same relation to the whole Prepositional Phrase as a noun does to a Noun Phrase, as an Adjective to an Adjective Phrase, and as an Adverb to an Adverb Phrase. While the NP, for example, is centred on a noun, the Prepositional Phrase is not really centred on the preposition. Because the dependency that holds in a PP is mutual, the preposition is not the head of the Prepositional Phrase. In other words, PPs cannot be regarded as expansions of Ps in the way that NPs can be regarded as expansions of Ns." (Burton-Roberts, 1990 : 62).
3.1.2. **Phrasal Verbs**

Prepositions are constituents of phrasal verbs, but by virtue of their position they are sometimes confusing, eg.:

My car started rolling **down** the hill.

My car has just broken **down**.

Conventionally 'Down' in both the sentences above is called a 'preposition' and an 'adverb particle' respectively. The fact is that they are actually prepositions showing different functions in different structural contexts. "... the same words can act as both prepositions and adverb particles: **up, down, on, off, through, past, etc.**" (Swan, 1988: 491). Smith (1948: 172, fn. 2) already accepts phrasal verbs of this type with two prepositions. So it is wise to treat these types as PHRASAL VERBS. "The student need not try to decide whether the combination is 'verb + preposition' or 'verb + adverb', but should consider the expression as a whole." (Thomson and Martinet, 1990: 315). After all, prepositions are not lexical words. They are 'function words'.

The difficulty experienced by learners is the handling of verbs in combination with prepositions.
Because of their idiomatic nature the phrasal verbs puzzle the users who have good command of English. "However, perhaps the main source of difficulty is not so much knowing the meanings of the combination, but knowing how the combinations are used correctly in sentences." (Seidl and Mc Mordie, 1982: 114).

There are mainly three possibilities of phrasal verbs, (cf. Swan, 1988: 492), viz.:

(i) In some cases, the meaning of a two-part verb is simply a combination of the meanings of the two words. Examples are: come in, run away, walk across, sit on.

(ii) In some cases, the first word keeps its meaning, but the second has a special 'intensifying' sense — it means something like completely or thoroughly. Examples are: break up, tire out.

(iii) In other cases, the new two-part verb has quite a different meaning from the two separate parts: give up means 'surrender', and blow up means 'explode'.

Thus, there are three categories of phrasal verbs, the 'PHRASAL VERBS' being a cover-term for its wide range of use (cf. Close, 1977: 26), viz.:
3.1.2.1. Phrasal Verbs

These verb-forms are widely used in English. Here the verb is in its literal sense as well as the preposition following it is literally used, eg. :

- We ran across the road.
- He sat on the bench.
- They go to the roof.
- You stay away from the door.

3.1.2.2. Prepositional Verbs

The verbs of this type require certain prepositions with them otherwise the construction would be ungrammatical and unacceptable (although meaningful !), eg. :

- Look at me.
- Don't laugh at others.
- He looks after his old parents.
- They were longing for the holidays.
3.1.2.3. **Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs**

Phrasal verbs that form idioms are of this type. Here the verb and the preposition indicate a separate meaning different from their literal meaning (depending on the context), eg.:

- I *came across* an interesting example the other day.
- They always *run after* money.
- If you *held up* the work, I would be in trouble.

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3... **Prepositions as Adverbials**

Prepositions used as adverbials are 'prepositional adverbs'. A prepositional adverb\(^1\) is a preposition

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1. Leech and Svartvik (1988 : 275) define it as: "A prepositional adverb is an adverb which behaves like a preposition with the complement omitted."

Actually, the preposition here behaves like an adverb after the complement from the PP is omitted. Thus, the prepositional adverb is basically a preposition (not an adverb), which functions like an adverb.
which behaves like an adverb when the complement (of the preposition) is omitted:

A car drove past the gate. (Prep.)
A car drove past. (Prep. Adv.)

Like adverbs, prepositional adverbs are of three types, viz. adjuncts, disjuncts, and conjuncts. If they are integrated to some extent into the structure of the sentence, they are **adjuncts**; if peripheral, they are either **conjunctions** or **disjuncts** of which the former has a connective function (cf. Quirk et al, 1990: 207-208).

(a) **adjuncts**

They only want the car for an hour.
You can learn English by practice.

(b) **conjuncts**

I'd like you to do two things for me.
In the first place, phone the office and tell them I'll be late.
In the second place, order a taxi to be here in about half an hour.

(c) **disjuncts**

In brief, prepositions are functors.
Of course, they are traitors.

To my regret, he rejected the offer.

3.3. Prepositions as Conjunctions

Sweet (1900: 134) states that a few prepositions are used also as conjunctions (or conjunctional adverbs); eg. 'till', 'for'. These prepositions may be called 'preposition-conjunction words' (Sroka, 1972: 110), eg.:

You have to stay here till I come back.

They rejected the application for it was not complete.

Into this, some other prepositions, viz. 'after' and 'before' may be included. "'Before' and 'after' are then both conjunctions and prepositions, and so assigned to two distinct functions. But some grammarians have argued that, for English at least, the distinction is unreal. Even if we do not entirely follow them, we must recognise that the clausal and phrasal units can be very hard to keep apart." (Matthews, 1981: 181), eg.:

He reached home before I had finished breakfast.
He reached the station after the train had left.

3.4. Prepositions used at the end position

"According to Sweet (1900 : 138-139), the strong connection of the preposition with the verb can be seen in some construction in the passive voice (he was thought of) and in constructions in which interrogative and dependent pronouns and adverbs are used (who are you speaking of ?, I do not know what he is thinking of, where is he going to ?, I wonder where he came from ?) where the preposition is completely detached from the noun-word it originally governed, and for this reason it is called a DETACHED preposition. Such examples as 'he was thought of' and 'who are you speaking of' show that the detached prepositions are liable to be disassociated from their noun-words not only in position, but also in grammatical construction; they no longer govern the pronoun in the objective case. In spite of these observations, Sweet does not assign the adverbial status to the preposition in the final position: "Although the detached prepositions approach very near to adverbs, yet they cannot be regarded as full adverbs for the simple reason that those
prepositions which are otherwise never used as adverbs, such as 'of', can be detached with perfect freedom."
(Sroka, 1972 : 112)

M.B. Charnley (1949 : 270) prefers the term 'deferred preposition' to Fowler's 'preposition at end', because, as he says, the object of such a preposition is always explicitly or implicitly anticipated.

Radford (1997 : 497) terms them "stranded or orphaned" prepositions.

In English, there are many verbs, adjectives, and nouns which are used together with particular prepositions, e.g. : look at, afraid of, difficulty with, etc.
When these verbs, adjectives, and/or nouns are used at the end of clauses or sentences, the prepositions are often put with them. So it is quite common, especially in an informal style, to find a preposition at the end of a clause or a sentence (cf. Swan, 1988 : 488). Examples are as follows:

(a) Questions beginning with wh- words:

What are you looking at?
What are you afraid of?
Who are you talking to?
(b) Relative clauses, eg.:

You remember the boy I was going out with.

This is the house I told you about.

(c) Passive clauses, eg.:

I hate being laughed at.

They took him to hospital and there he was operated on.

(d) Infinitive clauses, eg.:

I have a house to live in.

He has a pen to write with.

(e) In answer to questions like 'Do you want to go to hospital?', eg.:

Yes, I want to.

(f) Imperative sentences with phrasal verbs, eg.:

Get out.

Come in.

Hurry up.

(g) When the object of the verb is a pronoun, the preposition of the phrasal verb is put at the end:
We will have to put it off.
Could you put her up?

3.5. **Prepositions 'to' and 'for' before Indirect Object**

The use of 'to'/ 'for' before an NP in the indirect object position is necessary, if it is in the usual order, eg.:

- I gave a pen to Ram.
- He taught English to students.
- I brought a book for you.

3.6. **Prepositions used after Adjectives**

Some prepositions are used obligatorily after particular adjectives, eg.:

- I am fond of music.
- He is dependent on his salary.
- The boy is interested in maths.