

A Note on Double Prepositions

From the present-day English perspective, double prepositions have been described as anomalous prepositions (Riley and Parker 1986), solecisms (Visser 1963-73:§416), instances of careless writing or speech errors (Denison 1993:134), downright ungrammatical (Denison 1981:213; quoted in Berg 1998:1), or, at their best, “as an occasional pattern in non-standard usage” (Bergh and Seppänen 2000:303; see also Riley and Parker 1986). Nevertheless, the truth is that the construction is already attested in Old English (under certain circumstances) and it can still be found nowadays (cf. data in Riley and Parker 1986 date 1970-74). In Old English they would occasionally be found with topicalised PPs (Bergh 1998:8). In late Middle English, they were “not uncommon” (Mustanoja 1960:347; Denison 1993:133), or, rather, they were “quite frequent” (Fischer 1992:390). In fact, double prepositions are “particularly frequent” still in the 16thc (Bergh and Seppänen 2000:303; cf. Rydén 1966:43-44,139-149). It is in the late Modern English period (18thc-19thc) that they decreased in frequency and are very sporadically found.¹ All in all, it is a rather “marginal” construction (Bergh 1998).

Various reasons have been called upon to explain this peculiarity of English syntax. The so-called ‘transitional wh-effect’ and syntactic reanalysis seem to act as main causes (Bergh 1998:5-8). Firstly, we can see double prepositions as “a sort of intermediate stage” between obligatory PrepPiping of Old English and incipient PrepStranding of early Middle English (Allen 1980:230). The increase in frequency of double prepositions matches time wise the transitional period in which PrepStranding was spreading in wh-relative and interrogative clauses (the 15thc and 16thc). Secondly, late Middle English was also the crucial period for the development of verb-units such as prepositional verbs. There was then a conflict between the older construction with preposition pied piping and the close connection between the verb and the preposition. Van der Gaaf (1930:11-12) said: “it seems as if writers, when they came to the end of a clause beginning with a preposition and a relative pronoun, suddenly remembered that the preposition ought to follow the verb, and so they added it”. Syntactic re-analysis

¹ Jespersen (1909-49:III.§10.5.1) provides a few examples from the early/mid 18thc and Denison (1993:134) found one exceptional instance as late as 1790, in Woodforde’s diary.

goes as follows: [P_NP ... V] > [P_NP ... V P].

For Jespersen, writers have the construction with PrepStranding in mind, but then they adopt the literary word-order with PrepPiping, i.e. Latin influence and formal style (1909-49:§10.5.1-3). Such stylistic account is partly ruled out by Riley and Parker (1986:296-297) and Bergh (1998:4-5,10). Not only Latin, but French might have played its part in translated works from the late Middle English period (Bergh 1998:6). For his part, Poutsma understands that the writer opens the wh-clause with a fronted-preposition and then repeats the preposition at the end, “apparently”, he says, “wanting an extra word for the sake of meter [rhythm]” (1914-29:I.i.chVIII.§92). Poutsma also suggests that the reason for having the ‘extra’ stranded prepositions is that the writer “[has] lost distinct remembrance of the way in which he has started his utterance” (1914-29:I.i.chVIII.§92; cf. also van der Gaaf (1930:11-12) above; and the ‘performance theory’ in Riley and Parker 1986:298-300). This may well account for repetitions in spoken language when the speaker is interrupted and/or distracted. It accounts especially for those instances which show a considerable number of words interspersed between the prepositional object and the stranded preposition, as in the passage quoted in (1) below from a private letter: no less than 33 words intervene between the fronted (*to what issue*) and the stranded preposition (*come to*). Interestingly, in the same passage there is one other instance with PrepPiping, *to whom ... due*, when the PP stands close to the word it modifies.

- (1) Having observed **to what issue** that hon=ble= and liberall intention of the late Parliam=t=, and since of yo=r= Highnesse and yo=r= Councell (towards widdowes and orphans whose respective arreares amount not to above 150), is like to come **to**, by reason of the indigency of the persons **to whom** such debts are due,

(CEECS_lett.priv_Jones 1654:pp253-254)

In transformational grammar the stranded preposition is understood as a ‘copy’ of the fronted-preposition (e.g. Grimshaw 1975:41-42; Allen 1980a:229-230), but Bergh and Seppänen (2000:303.fn9) dispute that as follows: “such a simple copying rule is not applicable to all examples of the construction, because the would-be copy is not always identical with the moved preposition” (see e.g. (2).b below).² This, in turn, lends support to the fact that the late Middle English period was a time of confusion in these

² Riley and Parker (1986:293) labelled the two types of the pleonastic construction as “matched prepositions” (pattern a) and “mismatched prepositions” (pattern b). In the latter it is the fronted-preposition that is regarded “inappropriate”.

syntactic matters. This can even be observed in the same author, e.g. Caxton, and in the very same text, e.g. (2).a-b respectively.

- (2) a. none **to whom** he hath gyuen his saufgarde **to**
b. of him **to whom** he had most his trust **on**
(Caxton.R.73/R.87; in Jespersen 1909-49:III.§10.5.1)

Bergh (1998) concluded that there are both syntactic and semantic factors at play, the former seem to have been stronger.³

With regard to **Geoffrey Pullum's post**, I don't think the movement theory can explain either examples such as (3) below (already posted on 4 May).

- (3) But if ye will sel it, send word to your son what ye will doe, for I know nothing els **wherwith** to help you **with**.
(HC_lett.priv_PlumptonIsabel 1500-70:s2,L.162,p.199)

³ Riley and Parker (1986:305) postulate a 'rule governed theory', and argue further for a "psychological reality of the case assignment paradigm".