Struggling with English Prepositional Verbs

It is widely acknowledged that certain verb-preposition combinations are idiosyncratic: *come across* and *refer to* are canonical examples of collocations known as **prepositional verbs** (PVs; Huddleston 2002: 274–280). Huddleston argues that PVs resemble non-prepositional verbs in the structure verb–[preposition–object]. This analysis is readily expressed in a Construction Grammar framework by hypothesizing a family of PV constructions that are motivated by the more general syntactic pattern while adding specific lexical information (e.g., that *come across* means 'encounter', but *come up with* means 'invent'). However, in developing a constructicon of prepositional verbs, we run into a formidable challenge: namely, that it is often difficult to tell PVs apart from non-prepositional verbs. Consider *talk with* (somebody): this is a highly frequent (and likely routinized) combination, and the object of the preposition is a highly salient participant, yet the expression exploits the normal meaning of *talk* and a co-participant function of *with* that is not specific to communication (e.g., *struggle with* (somebody)). Syntactic tests such as the prepositional passive have been proposed to distinguish PVs from non-prepositional verbs, but grammaticality judgments are difficult to make or yield slightly contradictory results (Vestergaard 1977, *inter alia*). Qualitative semantic criteria in the literature (e.g., Tseng 2000) are also quite difficult to apply.

We examine two approaches that may help distinguish prepositional verbs. First, because PVs are arguably idiosyncratic in meaning, we have sought to characterize the "ordinary" functions of prepositions in order to identify "extraordinary" functions that can be attributed to the influence of the verb. As part of an ongoing corpus annotation project, we have developed a coarse-grained hierarchical inventory of preposition functions, many of which correspond to thematic roles (Schneider et al., 2015). Where annotators consider the PP as the verb's THEME or are hesitant to assign another thematic role, this often indicates a PV. This may be a sufficient but not necessary condition.

Second, because the verb and preposition are tightly associated in PVs, we look for inspiration in the literature on the argument/adjunct distinction. While that distinction is also not resolved definitively with syntactic tests, the partially semantic accounts may be fruitful. Jolly (1993) proposes a ternary distinction between (a) semantically core participants of the verb that are marked with functional/case-marking prepositions—canonical arguments; (b) semantically non-core participants marked with a lexical preposition, so as to convey (e.g.) a spatial or temporal setting—canonical adjuncts; and (c) an intermediate category for participants in a second event that is related to the verbal event marked with lexical prepositions, e.g., *put on the table*—these are termed "argument-adjuncts" in RRG. We hypothesize that prepositional verbs are limited to prepositions functioning non-lexically, though this might not be a sufficient condition. Goldberg (2006: 42–43) accounts for PPs that are neither prototypical arguments nor prototypical adjuncts by dissociating the semantically core participants of the verb from those of the argument structure construction in which the verb is used: the argument structure construction can add arguments beyond those associated with the verb (*sneeze <u>the napkin</u> <u>across the table</u>*) or deprofile the verb's core participants such that they are syntactically optional (*load the wagon <u>(with hay)</u>*). Our hypothesis is that prepositional verbs are those for which a general-purpose argument structure construction fails to apply, and instead require a verb-plus-PP construction specific to particular preposition and a single verb or small class of verbs.

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