

## **SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES AND MEANING OF PREDICATE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES**

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### **Abstract**

This article investigates the syntactic configurations and semantic roles of predicate prepositional phrases (PPs) in English. It examines their structural integration within clauses, their functional roles, and the subtle interplay between form and meaning. Through theoretical frameworks and practical examples, we explore how these PPs contribute to predicate argument structure and semantic interpretation.

**Keywords:** Predicate, prepositional phrase, syntax, semantics, clause structure, argument roles.

### **Introduction**

Prepositional phrases are essential components in English syntax, often functioning as adjuncts or arguments within clauses. When positioned as part of the predicate, they can drastically affect the meaning and grammaticality of a sentence. This paper explores how predicate prepositional phrases function syntactically and semantically, shedding light on their formal features and meaning-making potential.

### **2. Theoretical Background**

The traditional grammar perspective treats prepositional phrases primarily as modifiers or adverbials. However, modern syntactic theories—particularly generative grammar—highlight the deeper structural involvement of PPs in predicate structure. Chomsky's early transformational-generative grammar acknowledged the importance of such elements in verb complementation [Chomsky, Syntactic Structures, 1957, p. 45].

More recent models, such as X-bar theory and the Minimalist Program, conceptualize PPs as part of complex verb phrases (VPs), where they may serve as obligatory complements or optional adjuncts depending on the governing verb [Radford, Transformational Grammar, 1988, p. 102].

### **3. Syntactic Configurations of Predicate PPs**

Prepositional phrases within the predicate can exhibit diverse syntactic behaviors:

#### **3.1. Complement vs. Adjunct**

The distinction between complements and adjuncts is central to understanding PP behavior. Consider:

Complement: She relies on her friends.

Adjunct: She sang in the morning.

In the former, on her friends is a complement required by the verb rely, while in the latter, in the morning provides extra-temporal information but is not essential to sentence structure [Huddleston & Pullum, The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, 2002, p. 645].

Tests for distinguishing these include:

Omission: Complements cannot be easily omitted.

Coordination: Only like constituents can be coordinated.

#### **3.2. Placement and Movement Constraints**

PPs can appear in various positions, yet their placement is often semantically and syntactically constrained. For example:

She put the book on the shelf (obligatory placement).

She slept under the tree (more flexible positioning).

Movement of PPs, especially in passive constructions, is telling. Compare:

A decision was made about the policy.

About the policy, a decision was made (topicalized PP) [Quirk et al., A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, 1985, p. 1132].

These patterns support the view that some PPs are tightly integrated into predicate structure, possibly projected from the verb's argument grid.

#### **4. Semantic Interpretation of Predicate PPs**

PPs carry various thematic roles such as location, source, goal, instrument, beneficiary, and cause. Their interpretation is governed by both lexical semantics of the verb and the inherent meaning of the preposition [Levin & Rappaport Hovav, Argument Realization, 2005, p. 56].

##### **4.1. Thematic Roles and Preposition Choice**

Verbs often select specific prepositions to realize particular roles. For instance:

depend on → experiencer–stimulus

consist of → theme–component

suffer from → experiencer–source

These pairings are not always predictable from surface syntax alone, indicating a need for deeper semantic mapping [Jackendoff, Semantic Structures, 1990, p. 142].

##### **4.2. Ambiguity and Disambiguation**

PPs can create ambiguity, especially when their attachment site is unclear:

She saw the man with the telescope.

Does the PP with the telescope modify saw or the man?

Predicate PPs, however, are less prone to such ambiguity when closely tied to the verb. Context and verb semantics aid interpretation [Carnie, Syntax: A Generative Introduction, 2006, p. 222].

#### **5. Cross-linguistic Considerations**

While English frequently employs prepositional strategies for expressing argument structure, other languages use case marking or verb inflection. However, English's reliance on prepositions has increased the functional load of PPs in conveying core grammatical relationships [Comrie, Language Universals and Linguistic Typology, 1981, p. 87].

For example, where Latin uses morphological case:

Amico credere (to trust a friend)

English uses a PP:

to trust in a friend

This shift underscores the structural importance of predicate PPs in analytic languages like English.

## 6. Predicate PPs in Copular and Resultative Constructions

PPs also figure prominently in copular constructions:

The book is on the table.

He is under pressure.

Here, PPs serve as subject complements, conveying states or locations rather than processes.

In resultatives, PPs indicate change or resulting state:

He hammered the metal into shape.

This construction combines verb semantics with a PP expressing outcome [Goldberg, Constructions, 1995, p. 47].

Such structures reveal how PPs interact with verb aspect, telicity, and argument structure to encode complex events.

## 7. Conclusion

Predicate prepositional phrases are far more than peripheral elements—they are vital components of syntactic structure and semantic interpretation in English. Their role varies from required complements to flexible adjuncts, always shaped by the interaction between verb selection, thematic role, and structural position. Understanding their function enriches our comprehension of English clause architecture and informs applied fields such as translation, language teaching, and computational linguistics.

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