

Degrees of constituency in English complex prepositions

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There is general agreement that there are linguistic structures that could be called “complex prepositions” – examples are *in spite of*, *in contrast to* or *with regard to* (see, for example, Hoffmann 2005).

However, there is less agreement as to how such structures should be analyzed. Some authors treat them as synchronically unanalyzable wholes (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985), some treat them as having internal but non-canonical structure (e.g. Huddleston and Pullum 2002), and some treat them as having canonical syntactic structure, arguing that they should not be regarded as linguistic units in their own right at all (Seppänen et al. 1994). All authors provide good arguments for their position.

On closer inspection, this is at least partly due to the fact that they consider different instances to be typical of the category. Some instances, like *in spite of*, are fully fixed expressions, with no lexical variation at any position and no possibility to modify any of the words they consist of (cf. **with spite to*, **in cruel spite of*), suggesting that they should be treated as internally unstructured units. Other instances, like *in contrast to*, allow variation at some positions (*by contrast to*, *in contrast with*) and modification (*in sharp/stark contrast to*), suggesting that they are best treated as having canonical syntactic structure.

In previous work, the existence of a “complex preposition construction” has been suggested (Stefanowitsch et al. 2020, Stefanowitsch 2022). In the present paper, I will build on this suggestion to show, first, that an analysis of complex prepositions in terms of a construction can account for the fact that some sequences of the type [Preposition-Noun-Preposition] behave like fixed expressions without internal structure while others behave like canonical prepositional phrases whose noun phrase contains another prepositional phrase. Put briefly, the former are fully lexicalized instances of the complex preposition construction, the latter are non-lexicalized instances (and in some cases not instances of the construction at all). Second, I will show that many instances of the construction fall in-between the two extremes outlined above, allowing some variation and/or some modification under specific circumstances. This implies of degrees of constituent-hood within the complex preposition construction and suggests that construction grammar needs to treat constituency within a construction as a continuum, such that instances of a construction can vary in the extent to which they inherit the constituency structure specified by the construction.

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