

Brief notes on prepositions

These useful but sometimes confusing words help draw relationships between the content words. The word “preposition” simply means something placed before or in front. In general, they define a relationship the following noun bears to an item that precedes or follows. For example:

“(available) to participants

“(borrowed) by Ken”

Prepositions may define relationships in a spatial sense:

“on ice”

“in tanks”

or a temporal sense:

“before breakfast”

“between seasons”

They can also show causal relationships:

“by perseverance”

“through effort”

And there is a range of other interconnections:

“despite hardships”

“against odds”

“among friends”

In a sense, a noun is “governed” by its prepositions. The nouns behave in certain ways depending on what the preposition makes them do – for example, not above or in ice, but “on ice”. They are, like so much of our language,

misused all the time. A common one I hear quite a bit these days is “I was bored of that”. Here the preposition “of” is used incorrectly – the correct preposition is “with”. Another increasingly common misuse is “what do you think *to* that?”, instead of “What do you think *of* that?”.

Examples of incorrect preposition usage from Moffatt:

Incorrect:

“...something else about which one is not familiar.”

“...a tussle against a roaring gale.”

“...we pride ourselves in having.”

“...scientists believe of their existence.”

“...this question had been asked solely to foreigners.”

These should be corrected as follows:

“...with which one is not familiar.” (not about)

“...a tussle with.” (not against)

“...we pride ourselves on (not in)

“...believe in.” (not of)

“...ask questions of someone.” (not to)

Because of the close and unequal relationship between prepositions and the nouns they govern, they should not be disrupted. For example, you can put the word “suddenly” in various places in the sentence “Ruth’s dogs sprang at him”, but not between “at” and “him”.

Prepositional phrases

A prepositional phrase is made up of a preposition, a dependent noun or pronoun, and any other words associated with the latter. Like adverbs, these

phrases provide more information about the central action of the sentence. For example:

The kids were singing on the bus.

I was in the supermarket.

This is an adjunct phrase, just as an adverb is an adjunct (and so is an adverbial phrase). Adjuncts are sometimes grouped under categories of place, time, means, manner, degree, circumstances and so on. You will have heard the saying “I categorically deny that I did X”, but may not have known the true meaning of the word “categorical” in that context. It comes from traditional grammar and means that the denial goes through all the categories: I did it in no place, for no reason, at no time, and so on.