Prepositions and particles in English: A discourse-functional account

By Elizabeth M. O’Dowd


Reviewed by E. Lou Hohulin
SIL International

Introduction

This book makes the unequivocal claim that the use of English prepositions and particles cannot be accounted for without a discourse-functional analysis. The chapters are argumentative discourse at its best:

- a clear presentation of the problematic forms,
- a description of the research methodology and data corpus,
- chapters describing previous research and their inadequate solutions,
- a presentation and explanation of the discourse-functional framework developed,
- and finally, good data illustrations of how this framework lucidly reveals patterns of use.

Readers of this review who are not particularly interested in or concerned about in-depth research of English forms might question the good of such a book as this one. In her final chapter, O’Dowd answers that question by stating the implications of her research for three groups of people.

1. Language Scholars. “The present work contributes to a growing body of research that encourages language scholars to dissolve the boundaries between lexical categories, across syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, and between synchrony and diachrony” (p. 186).

O’Dowd’s research on English “P-forms” gives the kind of evidence that should challenge those of us working on lesser documented languages to consider dissolving these boundaries in our own research, and asking some important questions. For example, ought we to compile dictionaries without writing a correlated grammar? Or ought we to write a grammar without compiling a dictionary? Questions could be asked about each of those arbitrary boundaries that we define in order to cope with the voluminous amounts of data we collect.
2. **Lexicographers.** She states that her work unveils certain problems in the traditional dictionary classifications of adpreps and adverbs. She says that although dictionaries will likely continue to list prepositions and adverbs as different parts of speech, she thinks that adding ‘adpreps’ (the P-forms that operate as either particles or prepositions) to the list, and then, defining adverbs with more specificity would result in more instructive works.

O’Dowd is specifying the problems with English dictionaries, but here is another challenge for those of us compiling dictionaries of lesser-known languages. One question for us is ‘How well are we handling multiple-functioning forms?’ Do we simply treat such forms as homonyms, without looking for patterns that would help explain their use?

3. **Language Teachers and Learners.** “Finally, the present approach to P-particles and prepositions has practical implications for those who teach English to native or nonnative speakers. Drawing on its insights, grammar textbooks could explain P-constructions in a way that helps learners understand their pragmatic purposes and see how syntax and semantics are manipulated for these purposes” (p. 187).

Again, there is a challenge for those of us working in English bilingual situations. English prepositions and particles are some of the most difficult forms for those who speak English as a second language to learn and use correctly. I intend to apply her insights to trilingual materials that we use in a special educational program in the Philippines.

**Review of chapters**

In Chapter 1, “The ‘P’ Phenomenon,” O’Dowd introduces the general outline of her research on what she calls English P-FORMS. “P-forms” is an inclusive term that she uses to refer to those prepositional forms that are also categorized as particles. Particles are defined as those forms that function as a part of a verb instead of a prepositional phrase. The two sentences below illustrate the difference between the two.

(1a) *Jack and Jill ran up the hill to fetch a pail of water.* (preposition)
(1b) *Jack and Jill ran up a huge bill on their credit card.* (particle)

*Up* in (1b) is a P-form, whereas *up* in (1a) is an ordinary preposition.

Chapter 2, “Syntactic Solutions to the Problem of P,” and Chapter 3, “Semantic Solutions to the Problem of P.” In these two chapters, O’Dowd discusses the syntactic solutions that have been put forward to handle P-forms. One of these solutions rests on syntactic categoriality tests that are supposed to classify problematic forms as either prepositions or particles. O’Dowd gathered a variety of these tests from various sources and summarized them in a table. There are 5 syntactic tests for prepositional constructions: conjunction-reduction, verb gapping, adverb insertion, P fronting, and NP-ellipsis. For particle constructions, she also shows five: passivization, verb-substitution, NP-insertion, P-stress, and V-nominalization.

O’Dowd argues that when one examines sentences using syntactic tests, the results are not consistent enough to justify an absolute syntactic categorical distinction. She agrees with
syntacticians that P-forms do, in fact, participate in constructions and collocations, which constrain their syntactic role. However, she believes the flexibility of categoriality that is evident in syntactic testing, is due to semantic and pragmatic considerations, not syntax.

In Chapter 3, “Semantic Solutions to the Problem of P,” O’Dowd discusses semantic solutions to the problems of P-forms. She says that early semantic accounts of P-forms have not been satisfactory, but acknowledges that some more recent theoretical models show more promise. One early one that she briefly discusses is that of Arthur G. Kennedy (1920). Kennedy studied sixteen prepositional adverbs (O’Dowd’s “particles”) in combination with different verbs. He produced a corpus of 900 constructions with several thousand meanings. O’Dowd says that Kennedy’s work is a precursor to later semantic models that look to cognitive principles to explain P-meanings. She describes several semantic models, shows that each model has problems and then, concludes that semantic models are inadequate for describing and explaining P-form characteristics and functions.

Chapter 4, “The Problem Revisited.” In spite of the fact that O’Dowd presented semantic models as holding some promise in Chapter 3, she argues in this chapter that, since the problem of P-forms goes beyond syntax and semantics, we need to reconceptualize the problem to “explain P’s versatility and idiosyncrasies” (p. 41). She believes that studying isolated, invented sentences obscures the facts about P-form use and states that her discourse-functional approach has brought about the emergence of one clear principle. “…grammar cannot be explained without reference to semantics, while semantics itself cannot be explained without reference to discourse pragmatics” (p. 43).

In her research, she used 1,245 utterances from 5 natural conversational texts. From these utterances she coded and statistically analyzed occurrences of 20 P-forms: about, above, across, after, along, around, before, behind, between, by, down, in, off, on, out, over, through, to, under, and up.

Chapter 5, “P in Discourse: Orienting, Situating, and Linking.” This chapter is the climax of the book. O’Dowd begins by defining ORIENTATION and claims that this is basic to human cognition. She says “Orientation has been defined in various ways according to different theoretical perspectives in the psychological, sociological, and phenomenological literature; but all approaches invoke the notions of space, of reference points, and of a subject’s relation to these points” (p. 55). She then relates orientation to discourse, saying that human language systems are embedded in human experience and since language is communication, we must make sense to others if interaction is to work. Her work is intended to show that prepositions and particles each have a specialized discourse function. They provide orientation for participants, events, episodes, and larger rhetorical units.

The next three chapters—Chapter 6, “Landmarks as Contextual Props,” Chapter 7, “Prepositions, Particles, and Pragmatic Focus,” and Chapter 8, “P in Construction”—consist of a detailed description and explanation of the framework that she has designed to tie together the various strands of the discourse functions of P-forms.
In Chapter 9, “The Historical Picture: P and Specialization,” O’Dowd answers two final questions: ‘Why are all prepositions not P-forms?’, and ‘Why do even P-forms seem constrained in their alternation as particles or prepositions?’ She presents her answers within a historical picture, and chooses four lines of argumentation: (1) from the typological literature, which reveals a similar pattern for P’s counterparts in unrelated languages; (2) from the diachronic literature on P’s Indo-European ancestors, which reveals the same patterns; (3) from the documented history of certain P-forms and (non-P), grammaticized prepositions; and (4) from the synchronic variation found in her text corpus.

Chapter 10, “The Big Picture.” In this final chapter, O’Dowd summarizes her study chapter by chapter, reiterates the questions and answers that she has given regarding P-forms, and briefly discusses other questions that have been raised through her study that remain unanswered, providing the basis for further research.

O’Dowd’s broad research into both past and current analyses and descriptions of adverbs, prepositions, and other linguistic structures that impinge on the interpretation of them is impressive. In addition to the contribution her book makes to English linguistic research, her work is a splendid model for language research, description and explanation. For that alone, it was well worth my studying the detailed data and argumentation, a task that is generally burdensome to me.

References