Adpositions and Other Parts of Speech
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 General Remarks

The only traditional part of speech which has no members (in some language) which could plausibly be confused with adpositions is interjections. In this book I will look at the question of distinguishing between adpositions and all of the other (traditional) parts of speech, and at items whose status as adpositions or one of these parts of speech has been disputed or is difficult to determine.

I do not wish to duplicate the work of others. Hagège (2010) deals with distinguishing adpositions from some other items in the section entitled “On Some Word-Types that Might Be Mistaken for Adps [= Adpositions]” (pp. 62-96), but he does not discuss the traditional parts of speech there. (He does have a subsection on “Adps and Conjunctions of Coordination” (pp. 93-96), but not one on adpositions vs. conjunctions in general.) Rather, he treats preverbs, “direction-pointers” (ibid.:66), “direct and inverse morphemes” (ibid.:67), and various other items, as well as particles such as up in to look up.

In contrast, I am limiting myself to the traditional parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and pronouns; to my knowledge, there is no extended work on the general issue of the distinction between adpositions and words of these classes. Note that some of the items that Hagège brings up, e.g. applicative affixes, would not be thought of as words, and would hence not belong to word classes or parts of speech; in this book I am concerned with adpositions and other word classes, not with adpositions as opposed to other types of items, such as affixes of various types. Hagège (pp. 155-160) later does discuss adpositions vs. verbs (in the context of grammaticalization) and adpositions vs. nouns (specifically “relational nouns”, pp. 166-8), but the range of arguments and data brought up by him is limited – since I will be devoting a chapter to each of these issues (as well as to adpositions vs. adjectives, and so on), I will have more room for examining them. The distinction between adpositions and case affixes is not always clear. However, I shall not deal with this aspect of defining adpositions; various authors have already done so. Another thing that I will generally avoid is the discussion of (putative) adpositions consisting of more than one word, such as in front of and contrary to.
Let us now see two examples where classification is difficult or disputed (there will be many more throughout this book). The debate about the set of adpositions in some languages is complex, with several positions having been taken. This is the case for Spanish; Plann (1988) posits the word classes preposition (e.g. sobre ‘on, above’), postposition (e.g. abajo ‘under, down’), and substantive (e.g. encima ‘above’), and says (p. 920):

Traditional grammars and textbooks of Spanish do not always agree in their analyses of these elements. For example, on occasion some of these elements are classified as prepositions while others (most notably, postpositions and substantives) are classified as adverbs. In other analyses, elements that I contend actually pertain to the same syntactic category (that of substantive) are classified sometimes as prepositions and other times as adverbs, depending on such criteria as whether or not they occur with a complement; and in still others, prepositions as well as substantives are grouped together as prepositions.

The West-Benue Congo language Òko (spoken in Nigeria) has both (words which might be) prepositions and (words which might be) postpositions, some of the former having connections with verbs and the latter resembling or being nouns; Atoyebi (2009:216) states:

With respect to prepositions in Òko, there are two clear cut prepositional markers, these are kàba ‘from’ and the locative i-, which in some environment is realized only as a high tone. […] However, there are a few other markers in the language which behave like verbs and sometimes as preposition[s]. These are ng – no, which sometimes means ‘give’, and at other times can translate as ‘for’, ‘to’, and wo, which sometimes functions as the locative verb, but at some other times it translates as ‘in’, ‘from’. It is therefore not clear whether to call them verbs rather than prepositions, or perhaps they are both. […] Postpositions on the other hand have the appearance of postposed nouns, but the meaning of these nouns describes a spatial or temporal relation.

In such situations we will see that various criteria and arguments have been used to assert membership of problematic words in one or another class. Here I will present two examples. Among the grounds that have been cited for the classification of words as something other than adpositions is the small size of a possible set of adpositions. In her book on Teiwa (spoken in Indonesia), Klamer (2010:29) states that the language “has no adpositions”. On p. 142 she discusses why she is dubious about the adpositional status of maraqai ‘up, above (from speaker)’ and yaqai ‘down, below (from speaker)’:

Maraqai and yaqai can also be used as predicates on their own …

Generally, adverbs cannot be predicates in Teiwa. As the properties of maraqai and yaqai … are not nominal and not adjectival either, they may be analysed as verbs, adpositions,
or as a special type of locational adverbs. The adpositional analysis is the least compelling, since in their predicative use they do not have “objects”. Furthermore, as Teiwa otherwise lacks adpositions, the class of adpositions would contain only these two members. It may be that *maraqai* and *yaqai* are a couple of locational adverbs that can be predicates while other adverbs cannot.

However, according to Everett and Kern (1997:347), the Chapakuran language Wari’ (spoken in Brazil) has only a single preposition, though there are some quite different forms depending on agreement with its complement.

Simon (1937:102), writing on Chinese, brings up stress, or rather the lack of it, as a criterion for adpositional status: “I should think we are entitled to speak of preposition and postpositions instead of verbs and nouns the moment these words have lost their proper word stress, which, however, can only be inferred for the ancient language.”

When faced with items that do not neatly fit into established categories, there are several strategies that one can take: 1) assert that there are not boundaries but there is rather a spectrum (as does J. R. Ross (1972)), 2) posit intermediate categories, but assert that these intermediate categories have firm boundaries; in the situations to be discussed in this book such categories might bear names such as “prepositional nouns” or “verbal prepositions”, or 3) maintain only the traditional categories, and assert that they have firm boundaries, e.g. if there are such things as prepositional nouns, they are either prepositions or nouns, though not prototypical examples of whichever class one places them in. My inclination is to follow the last strategy, though of course it might have to be abandoned if it turns out to be untenable.

One of the causes of the (apparently) fuzzy boundaries between adpositions and some of the other word classes, if not the main one, is that adpositions have often evolved from words belonging to other parts of speech; this is not an overnight process and for a long time they will bear features of their former word class. It is thus not clear when they have crossed the border into full “adpositionhood”. This point is made by Dryer (2011), who is liberal in classifying items as adpositions:

The words analysed here as prepositions or postpositions are often referred to by authors of grammars by some other label. [...] In many languages, the words treated here as adpositions share grammatical properties with nouns or verbs and are often for that reason referred to in grammars as nouns or verbs. These shared properties generally reflect the fact that it is common for nouns and verbs to grammaticalize as adpositions, while often still retaining grammatical properties reflecting their grammaticalization source. [...] Such situations can either be described by saying that prepositions share certain properties with nouns or by saying that prepositions are a subclass of nouns. It is assumed here that the difference between these two ways of describing the situation is terminological. [...] Thus, the fact that a set of words
with adpositional meaning arguably constitute a subclass of some other class, such as nouns or verbs, is not considered here as a reason not to treat them as adpositions.

On the other hand, the fact that certain nouns (or verbs) in a language sometimes translate into prepositions in English is not sufficient for them to be treated here as adpositions. There must be some reason to believe that they have grammaticalized to some extent, that they are to some extent grammatically distinct from other nouns (or verbs). For example, in languages with serial verb constructions, the equivalent of an instrumental adposition is often expressed by a verb meaning ‘use’, as in the example in (8) from Mandarin.

(8) Mandarin (Li and Thompson 1981:597)

tàmen yòng shǒu chī-fān
3pl. use hand eat-food

‘They eat with their hands.’

But in the absence of evidence of grammaticalization, an example like that in (8) is not sufficient to conclude that the word yòng ‘use’ functions as anything but a normal verb. Conversely, in Maybrat (West Papuan; Papua, Indonesia), there is a word ae ‘at’ which is morphologically and syntactically a verb. […] However, when ae is used prepositionally … it always occurs with a third person singular feminine subject prefix regardless of the person, number, and gender of the subject, indicating that it is grammatically distinct from normal verbs. It thus counts as a preposition for the purposes of this map [i.e. the map lined to this page which shows the distribution of languages with prepositions, with postpositions, with inpositions, and without adpositions].

Haspelmath (2000) seems to hold the position that boundaries between adpositions and other parts of speech are fuzzy, as shown by the following passage (p. 244), in which he uses the term (quasi-)prepositions:

While claims of prototypicality need to be made more precise before they can convince the skeptics, I find the evidence for fuzziness of word classes much more cogent. This is particularly the case for functional categories that have only recently become grammaticalized from lexical categories, e.g. (quasi-)prepositions like because of, in spite of, on top of, on account of, according to, concerning, considering, or (quasi-)conjunctions like while, albeit … In such cases it is impossible to draw a clear-cut line between nouns/verbs and prepositions/conjunctions. Descriptive grammars have long recognized this by introducing terms such as ‘prepositional location’, or ‘secondary preposition’, and these are no easier to delimit than the major word classes. The most straightforward theoretical solution is to assume a noun-preposition (or verb-prefix) continuum, although this does not immediately solve the descriptive grammarian’s practical problems.

Aside from the question whether adpositions exist in all languages (v. DeLancey 2005), there is also the question of whether the criteria used to distinguish adpositions from other word classes should be the same in all languages. The second question could bear on the first one, since certain criteria applied cross-linguistically might rule out some or all the putative adpositions of a language from being in that class. My goal is not to define adposition, although of course by trying to discover distinguishing properties of adpositions we may be a long way (if not all the way) towards reaching such a definition.
In addition to those who deny that one can classify words, or at least some words, into parts of speech, and those who claim that there are fuzzy borders between adpositions and at least one other part of speech (or between parts of speech generally), there are those who assert that there is no separate word class of adpositions, but rather that they are all members of some other word class. In the next chapter we will see that some authors claim that in some languages all adpositions are nouns, but Jespersen (1924/1965:87) takes a stronger view, arguing that prepositions and several other types of word make up a single class:

In nearly all grammars adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections are treated as four distinct “parts of speech,” the difference between them being thus put on a par with that between substantives, adjectives, pronouns, and verbs. But in this way the dissimilarities between these words are grossly exaggerated, and their evident similarities correspondingly obscured, and I therefore propose to revert to the old terminology by which these four classes are treated as one called “particles”.

Differences in what is considered an adposition will of course affect the supposed size of the inventory of adpositions of a language. In his book on Yiddish Jacobs (2005:200) says, “Providing a canonic [sic] list of prepositions in a language is difficult, since non-prepositions may, in certain situations, function syntactically like prepositions. Problems also arise at the boundaries between prepositions and other lexical categories, specifically conjunctions, verb particles, prefixes”. Kittilä, Västi, and Ylikoski (2011:10-11) state, “in many cases it is rather difficult to pinpoint the exact number of adpositions in a language … because it is very hard to make a clear-cut distinction between serial verbs, core verbs, relational nouns and adpositions”. Consider also the following remarks of Seegmiller (1996:29) about Karachay postpositions:

There are approximately 25 common postpositions in Karachay. The number that appears in previous works is often twice this number because most authors include a varying number of words that are nouns but which convey meanings similar to those of prepositions in German, Russian, or English. Pritsak (1959, p.358), for example, lists about 40 postpositions, but among them are ara ‘between’ and others which clearly retain their status as nouns. Pritsak’s example of ara is arabïzda ‘between us’, which is simply the noun ara ‘middle’ with the first person plural possessive ending bïz and the locative ending da. The literal meaning is something like ‘in our midst’. Baskakov (1966, pp. 235ff) also includes nouns like ara in his list of more than 60 “postpositions”, and Xabičev (1966, pp. 227-8) and Bayramkullany and Orushiylany (1965, pp. 179ff) similarly include non-postpositions in their discussion.

It is perhaps worth noting that although Pritsak (1959:358) does indeed list ara as one of the postpositions of Karachay-Balkar, he places it among the “Postpositionen nominalen Ursprungs” (ibid.), and glosses it with a noun, ‘Zwischenraum’.

We shall now look at some ways in which words that might be adpositions, or words which are similar to adpositions, have been described.
1.2 Words “Used as Adpositions” and Similar Phrases

It is not uncommon for authors to speak of words (of some class other than adpositions) being “used as prepositions”, “used as adpositions”, “used prepositionally”, etc. One might wonder why, if a word is used as an adposition, it is not classified as an adposition in the relevant instances. In the everyday world such reasoning does not seem to work: if I use a knife as a screwdriver, the knife is still a knife and not a screwdriver. However, one might be uncomfortable applying this kind of argument to word classes, perhaps because the ways of defining them differ considerably from the ways in which physical objects are defined.

Consider the following passage from Starosta (2001:79-80):

Non-generative approaches to grammar, including notional grammar and Chomskyan “generative” grammar, often confuse syntactic categories with grammatical function. This tradition goes back a long way, as reflected in a quotation from Warotamasikkhadit’s preposition paper:

… the class of prepositions hardly has a real existence [in Sanskrit], but is represented by certain adverbial words which are to a greater or lesser extent used prepositionally. (Whitney, 1889, p. 403, cited in Warotamasikkhadit, 1992, p. 70)

But what does it mean for a word to be “adverbial” but to be “used prepositionally”? W. D. Whitney was working in a tradition in which word classes were defined “notionally,” that is, semantically, which typically meant in terms of their translation into English or some other European language. Thus “adverbial” here probably means something like “answers the questions how, when, where, or how much,” whereas “used as” seems to refer to syntactic distribution. In modern linguistics, starting with the structuralists and followed with some lapses by transformational grammarians, syntactic classes are determined by distribution, and something which “is used as” a preposition is a preposition by definition in such constructions.

Within a modern and explicit framework, the statement “adverbial words which are … used prepositionally” is logically incoherent.

The situation described as involving words used as adpositions may come up particularly frequently in languages with little or no inflectional morphology, which can mark words as belonging to one or another class. It may be difficult (at least if one relies on form rather than function) to determine the part of speech to which a word belongs, since it can be used as various parts of speech. Haiman and Ourn (2003:505) speak of words of Cambodian as being “syntactically polyfunctional”, although of course another way of analyzing the situation is to posit homonymous words belonging to different classes, i.e. rather than saying that a word can be e.g. both a verb and a preposition, stating that a verb has a homonymous preposition. (If we take the latter stand, it is unlikely that we will claim that a word of one part of speech is used as another part of speech, since there would be two different words involved, although they would obviously be etymologically related (through zero-derivation).
Let us examine the following remarks of Haiman and Ourn (ibid.:506):

Khmer can be characterized as a prepositional rather than a postpositional language. But there really are hardly any dedicated prepositions, since most of the words that act as prepositions are conscripted from other categories. They are identical with either nouns (e.g. *muk* 'face' > 'in front of, facing') or verbs (e.g. *tov* 'go' > 'to')

If one holds the position on homonymous prepositions mentioned above, then it is irrelevant whether adpositions are "dedicated"; in fact all adpositions would be dedicated, although in terms of etymology some would clearly be derived from words of other classes. Later on p.506 Haiman and Ourn use the wording "verbs/prepositions" and on p.510 they describe "most" prepositions as "indistinguishable from verbs". Even in terms of function it might be difficult to determine whether some instances of words are adpositions or verbs (or some other type of word), but this is not the same thing as being "polyfunctional": in the latter case one word has two or more different functions, while in the former case a particular occurrence of a word has only one function, though what that function is may not always be clear.

The idea of homonymous prepositions mentioned above is expressed by Downing and Locke (2006:543) at the beginning of the section entitled "Classes of Words with the Same Form as Prepositions", although they use the term *homographs* for some reason:

Some of the one-word prepositions included in 57.3 [e.g. *down*, *in*, *round*] can also realise functions characteristic of verbs, conjunctions, adverbs and adjectives. Such items are considered here as words having the same form (homographs), but fulfilling different functions as a result of diachronic extension.

The first subsection of this section, "Prepositions and Verbs", begins as follows (ibid.): "The following participial forms can function either as prepositions or as verbs: *barring, considering, excepting, excluding, following, including, regarding, given, granted.*" This may be different from saying that a verb can function as a preposition (or vice-versa), as the words in question are not said to belong to one part of speech and only be used as another.

In my opinion, a nicely phrased informal description of a situation involving homonymous prepositions is given in the non-academic work Loberger and Shoup (2009:112): "Participial prepositions look like verbs (the *ing* form) but function as prepositions". Among the words which they list (ibid.) as belonging to this group are *assuming, beginning, following, including*, and *involving.*

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2 Loberger and Shoup (ibid.) then give some example sentences and say, "Note in the following sentences how these *ing* words function as prepositions". However, in two of these examples the prepositional status of the "*ing* words" seems dubious:

(iia) The witness recalling the details was quite specific.

(ii) All of the animals *seeking shelter* walked to the barn.
rejection of homonymous prepositions could be due to, or related to, one of what Grimes (1994:195) calls “discrepancies between principles and actual practice in lexicography”, or “‘temptations’ in assigning parts-of-speech that lexicographers experience to one degree or another, and to which some succumb”, namely his fourth one:

When a lexeme can function in two or more classes (e.g. both nominally and verbally, or as a preposition and a conjunction), lexicographers tend to assume that it must be primarily one class, and only secondarily the other, assigning primacy on the basis of external … criteria. This is the ‘flaw of the excluded middle’. (p. 196)

That is, in cases relevant for us, if a verb is sometimes used as an adposition, it may be considered a verb even in such contexts, due to the priority given to its verbal functions. This would be an error according to Grimes (and I would agree with him).

Robert (2005:129) gives the fact that “participles (such as considering) can be used as prepositions” as an example of “transcategorial functioning”. However, if two different lexemes are involved, is transcategorial functioning really involved? One might ask whether transcategorial functioning in a strict sense is ever possible, since arguably once a lexeme or morpheme starts to function as (the root of) a different part of speech, it has become a different lexeme or morpheme.

Subsection C of the section on pronouns in Ivens’ (1929) paper on the Malayo-Polynesian language Lau (of the Solomon Islands) is entitled “Pronouns Suffixed to Nouns or to Verbal Nouns used as Prepositions”; in this subsection Ivens says (p. 332), “Several words which are employed as prepositions or pronouns have these pronouns attached, thus proving that they are nouns: fua, to, for, falea fuagu, give it to me; sie, to, towards, at the house of; e dao siegu, he has arrived at my house”. Somewhat confusingly on p. 340 both fua and sie are listed among the “Simple Prepositions”. On the following page Ivens states, “Sie, sia, is a noun and is never used without a suffixed pronoun”. On the same page he says, “Certain verbs are used as prepositions: maasi, to await, maasia, while; garangi, to be near, garangia, near, close to”.3 4

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3 I do not know the function of the -a on these words, but I suspect that it may be the -a which is one of the verbal noun suffixes.

4 Ivens uses language similar to that in some of the quotations given here in his descriptions of a few other languages; v. Ivens (1927:602) on Oroha (Solomon Islands), Ivens (1931:687, 698) on Kwara ‘Ae (or Kwar’aæ, Solomon Islands), Ivens (1933:153-4, 169) on Bugotu (Solomon Islands), Ivens (1934:619) on Longgu (Solomon Islands), Ivens (1937:1089, 1098, 1105) on Florida (Solomon Islands), and Ivens (1940a:348) on Lobaha (Vanuatu).
Miltner (1963:337), writing about Hindi (specifically about the language of Tulsidas) says, “Some nouns, adjectives (including tatsama’ participles) and verbals take on the function of postpositions or similar morphologic [sic] modifiers”. In his paper on Bamanankan (Bambara) Diallo (2004) uses similar wording in French. On p. 2 he speaks of “nominaux exerçant la fon[c]tion de postposition ou d’adverbe”.

In her book on Ossetic Arys-Djanäéva (2004:78) says that postpositions of the language “sont souvent des noms qui sont employées comme postpositions, avec un sens voisin de celui qu’ils ont comme substantif[s]”. One of her (ibid.) examples is *cap ‘on’* from *cap ‘head’*.

On Modern Assyrian Tsereteli (1978:82) says, “It should be noted that not only substantives but also substantives with prepositions may be used as prepositions … Verbal forms can also function as prepositions, e.g. *šuq min ‘except’* (*šuq – Imperative of *šāviq ‘to leave’)“.

Similarly, according to Boutin (2006) some nouns in the Niger-Congo language Baoulé (of the Ivory Coast) “fulfill the function of postpositions”:

Le baoulé n’a pas d’adpositions abstraites grammaticalisées comme telles: l’insertion du groupe nominal dans la phrase baoulé se fait, le plus souvent, sans adjonction de morphèmes spécialisés. Cependant, dans le cas des constructions locatives, le baoulé utilise des noms qui, postposés à un autre nom et dépourvus des modalités nominales «défini», «indéfini», etc., marquent sa fonction locative dans la phrase. Les noms qui remplissent ainsi la fonction de postposition locative réfèrent, pour la plupart, à des parties du corps: *nyrún* (F: devant et visage), *sin* (F: derrière et dos) …

In their book on Biblical Hebrew Joüon and Muraoka (2011:442) we find a weaker statement, not that certain words are used as prepositions, but that they are used nearly prepositionally:

A clause, whether verbal or nominal, forms a block which may, in some cases, be regarded as a substantive …; it will therefore be possible to consider it as a genitive in relation to a preceding noun, which will act as its *nomen regens*. In fact the following are found as *nomen regens* in this position: 1) mainly nouns which have become prepositions; 2) some nouns used in an almost prepositional fashion; 3) (rather rarely) pure substantives keeping their full nominal value.

Consider the following sentences from the section “Postpositionen mit dem Genitiv” in Landmann’s (2010) book on Uzbek (p. 33): “Als Entsprechung deutscher Präpositionen mit lokaler Bedeutung wie *vor, hinter, neben*, etc. verwendet das Usbekische Substantive. Da sie mit einem vorausgehenden Substantiv eine Genitiv-Possessiv-Verbindung eingehen, können sie als Postpositionen mit dem Genitiv bezeichnet werden.” The words which she then (ibid.) lists are given both

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5 *Tatasama* words are words which have come from Sanskrit without having been changed.