The Meaning of "To"

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I recently attended a lecture given on this campus by the well-known classicist, Hugh Nibley, in which he asserted that prepositions cannot be defined. "Trying to define prepositions," he said, "is like asking a centipede how he manages with all those legs." Of course, his observations seem somewhat casual as far as scientific linguistic inquiry is concerned. Nevertheless, his assertion does merit our attention; for just as a centipede intuitively correlates the orderly movement of his many legs, we human beings intuitively insert prepositions into our syntagmatic strings hundreds of times each day without consciously having the ability to define what they mean. Consider the sentence:

The boys walks to the school.

Any native speaker of English could readily define "boy," "school," the idea of "walking," and the idea of definiteness as it relates to "boy" and to "school." Nevertheless, how would he define TO? Although the first impulse may be to say that TO simply means "directionality," cases in which TO does not mean "directionality" are myriad. (For example, the TO in the sentence

John is easy to please

has nothing to do with directionality.) Our native English speaker might next assume that TO does not mean anything. He would be quick to agree, however, that the sentences

The boy walks to the school, and

The boy walks the school

mean vastly different things. How, then, do we account for the effect that TO—or, for that matter, any preposition—has upon a sentence?

I propose that it is possible not only to "manage" with all of those prepositional legs that English has, but it is possible also to define them. In the present study we will demonstrate:

1) that prepositions have meaning, and

2) that a given preposition can be specifically defined both in terms of its several particular meanings which result from variations on its contextual usage, and in terms of its general (invariant) meaning, which pervades the uses of that preposition in all its contexts.

The vehicle which we will use for this semantic investigation is the preposition TO. Finally, we will suggest that the investigative methods used to arrive at establishing the invariant meaning and the contextual meanings of TO can be analogically applied to define any preposition.
Meaning in Prepositions

To support our initial claim that prepositions do have meaning, consider the following minimal comparisons:

The boy walked to the hill.
The boy walked over the hill.
The boy walked around the hill.
The boy walked from the hill.
The boy walked through the hill.

Each of these sentences provides us with a different mental image with reference to the boy's walking relative to the hill. The only thing that varies from sentence to sentence is the preposition chosen. Any preposition that we might have chosen would have provided us with a different interpretation of the sentence. The only rational conclusion we can reach, therefore, is that the element which changes the meaning from sentence to sentence in the above example is the preposition. If prepositions had no meaning, all of the above sentences would provide us with exactly the same mental image. We may further conclude from this exercise that not only do the members of the grammatical category which we label "preposition" have meaning, but also that each preposition has its own meaning which distinguishes it from all other prepositions. Hence, the sentences

The boy walked to the hill, and
The boy walked through the hill,

convey very different pieces of semantic information. Although contexts undoubtedly exist in which the meanings of more than one preposition overlap, this same phenomenon can be observed in so-called "content" words, like "apartment," "flat," "pad," "condominium," or "dwelling." This fact alone should alert us to the reality that words such as TO are not so different from "content" words, contrary to what we might have previously believed. Both have meaning. Neither are "fillers" that arbitrarily appear in language for inexplicable reasons; and certainly neither are empty sound combinations which, devoid of meaning themselves, are still empowered to mystically modify the meaning of sentences.

If each of us were asked to compile a list of English prepositions, we each could do so without difficulty, and would, by and large, produce identical lists. The lists might vary in terms of completeness, but they would vary little or not at all with regard to which words we labeled as prepositions. By producing such results, we would be acknowledging that prepositions all share a number of characteristics, namely the characteristics which label these words as members of the same grammatical category. It is only one step away to suggest that

1.2
if any one member of the class can be defined it follows that the possibility exists—and that it is likely the case—that all members of the class can be defined in similar terms.

Special Considerations for Defining TO

The *Oxford English Dictionary* outlines four categorical uses of *TO*:

-- as a preposition,
-- as an infinitive verb marker,
-- as an adverbial, and
-- as a conjunction.

We will omit the use of *TO* as a conjunction because this category is obsolete in terms of contemporary English usage. (To illustrate, the most recent attestation listed in the *O. E. D.* for the use of *TO* as a conjunction is A.D. 1626. In most recent dictionaries, this category is not listed at all.)

With reference to the forms that are a part of our living language, we will limit our discussion to the *TO* that is either actually or potentially reduced to *Ta* in elliptic speech.

Normally, the theory involved in our approach to definition would require that we consider the forms spelled *TWO* and *TOO*, since they have the same form as *TO* in spoken language. Nevertheless, they are omitted from this discussion because neither *TWO* nor *TOO* has the potential for reduction to *Ta* under any circumstances.

With this foundation, we can now proceed to define *TO* as a representative of the grammatical class, "preposition."

Contextual Meaning versus Invariant Meaning

To a great degree, the task of identifying the various contexts in which *TO* appears and of defining its meaning in each context has already been done for us. Dictionaries of the English language have historically organized their entries so as to present, to one or another degree of exhaustiveness, the definition of each word as it appears in its various contextual settings. For example, Samuel Johnson, in his dictionary of 1755, cites twenty-five contextual meanings for the word *TO*. Noah Webster, in his 1828 "American" dictionary, identifies twenty-eight contexts in which *TO* is used. More recent dictionaries have attempted to categorize these definitions under major contextual headings. The most complete example is, of course, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which devotes eight full pages to citations of *TO* as it appears in sixty-seven major contextual environments as a preposition, and thirty-six major environments in which it appears as an infinitive marker. Under these major headings appear numerous variations on the theme.
TO may well be the best example in the English language of a form which, at the hands of linguists, lexicographers, and traditional grammarians, has undergone nearly total atomization in terms of definition. Even recently published dictionaries have succeeded at generalizing the specific meanings of TO only to a limited degree. Webster's Third New International Dictionary, for example, classifies the definitions of TO into eight major contextual categories which seem to bear no close relationship to each other. The unavoidable consequence of this atomization is, in the words of Roman Jakobson, that

the relation between sign and meaning is lost and questions of meaning are wrongly eliminated from the theory of signs. . . Semantics, the very core of linguistics and of sign theory in general, is thus deprived of an object of inquiry, and we are left with such grotesque results as morphology which never refers to the meanings of forms.

Therefore, in order to understand what TO really means, we must set forth a general invariant meaning which will apply to TO in all contexts. Concerning the nature of this general meaning, Linda Waugh, of Cornell University, has observed the following:

[In order to] extract such an invariant, one must take a sufficiently abstract view of the meaning of the form in question—one cannot simply equate its meaning with any one usage nor with its interpretation in given contexts. The meaning of the preposition cannot contradict any one contextual usage, but neither can it be equated with any one contextual usage.

Based on these criteria, I propose the following as the invariant (general) definition of TO:

Given X, a morphological form which occurs before TO in a syntagmatic string, and given Y, a morphological form which occurs after TO in a syntagmatic string, X is shaped, fitted, adapted, or conformed to Y.

Notice that our definition does not require that X be the form immediately preceding TO, nor does it require that Y be the form immediately following TO. It simply requires that TO always signify the concrete or abstract adaptation of X to Y. We will now accept as "given" the various contextual definitions of TO that are provided in the dictionary, and we will apply the above invariant definition to several diverse contexts in which TO occurs. I emphasize "diverse" contexts, because due to the dynamic nature of language and its infinite possibilities, it would, in the ultimate sense, be ridiculous to assert that we could exhaustively apply TO to every context in which it could possibly occur. By selecting sufficiently diverse contexts as illustrative examples, however, we can demonstrate the validity of the aforementioned definition. Some of the examples we will use were taken from the 1971 edition of Webster's Third New International Dictionary and the 1966 edition of the Random House Dictionary.
TO as an Indicator of Spacial Relationship

Although it is difficult to classify types of contextual uses, there are a number of uses of TO which indicate various aspects of spacial relationship. In the following sentences, for example, directionality is signified:

He rode TO the city,

He ran TO the kitchen,

He sprinted TO the finish line.

Recalling our invariant definition, we see that in these sentences, the verbal action is shaped so as to result in the subject's arrival at the place mentioned. Note that in the shaping process which TO represents, the verbal action must be shaped differently in the sentence

He ran TO the kitchen,

than it is in the sentence

He ran TO the bathroom.

In other words, in the first example, the running is shaped so as to facilitate arrival in the kitchen and, in the second example, the running is shaped so as to facilitate arrival in the bathroom. Regardless of the destination, however, the important thing to understand is that directionality is given here by the contextual verbs of motion, and that TO is the word which indicates the shaping of the verbal action.

Let us now compare the sentences

Throw the ball TO Harry, and

Throw the ball at Harry.

In the latter case, the ball is simply thrown in the direction of Harry; in the former case, the action of throwing is specifically shaped so as to permit Harry to receive the ball.

TO also can be used to indicate directionality when movement is not an issue:

John spoke TO the monolingual German.

John spoke TO the monolingual Japanese.

Given that John's speech was intelligible to the German and to the Japanese respectively, let us here observe that John's speech had to be shaped one way to facilitate his communicating with the German (i.e., John had to speak German) and had to be shaped or adapted in a very different way to allow him to communicate with the Japanese (i.e., John had to speak Japanese) --but shaped it had to be! We recognize the
same kind of shaping in the sentences,

He talks TO the point, and
He leaned TO light verse and good humor.

In the following sentences, the context is one of direct contact or static position:

She stood with her hands TO her eyes.

He applied polish TO the shoe.

Notice how TO conforms the polish to fit the contour of the shoe. Compare:

He applied polish TO the shoe, and
He applied polish on the shoe.

The latter does not require that the polish be conformed to the shoe. This point becomes even more vivid in the phrases,

dancing cheek TO cheek, and
standing face TO face.

TO requires us to see a point-to-point conformance in the positioning of the cheeks and of the faces, even though the cheeks touch and the faces do not. We simply do not see this shaping process through the use of other prepositions. What would it mean if we were to say:

dancing cheek on cheek,
dancing cheek at cheek, or
dancing cheek with cheek?

"Relative position" is the context for the next phrases:

a beam perpendicular TO the floor,
furniture placed at an angle TO the wall,
a line parallel TO the curb.

In the last example, TO adapts the line so that a condition of "parallelness" exists between it and the curb. It is interesting to note that because of the lexical meaning of "line," and the lexical meaning of "parallel," we are able to bring the line and the state of parallel into a fitted relationship with the curb; but we would not say, parallel on the line,
parallel across the line, or
parallel through the line.\textsuperscript{13}

On, across, and through do not provide us with the shaping qualities that "parallel" demands. A marvelous example of this shaping principle as it applies to the context of relative position comes from a book entitled \textit{Theory and Practice of Presswork}:

"Stop the press if a sheet is not placed correctly \textsc{to} the guides."\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{TO as an Indicator of Temporal Relationships}

\textsc{To} likewise can be used to indicate temporal relationships:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a quarter \textsc{to} six,
  \item five minutes \textsc{to} six.
\end{itemize}

Why does "five minutes \textsc{to} six" always mean 5:55 and never 6:05? When the clock strikes six o'clock, that point in time becomes an immovable historical reality. Past time cannot be shaped because its becoming part of the past solidifies it into unchangeable fact. Hence, no shaping process can take place. In the context of \textsc{to} as an indicator of temporal relationships, substantives (nouns) and their evolutionary processes (verbs) can only be shaped in anticipation of a future point in time from the standpoint of the subject.\textsuperscript{15} Likewise, \textsc{to} can be used to express the idea of "until" because \textsc{to} forces the subject to be temporally shaped or adapted to fit into a given time segment that is bounded on its most recent extreme. That most recent extreme is always a future point in time anticipated by the context. For example:

\begin{itemize}
  \item He stayed on the sinking ship \textsc{to} the last minute.
  \item The office is open from eight \textsc{to} five.
  \item The ceremony dates \textsc{to} the first century A.D.
  \item The train runs according \textsc{to} schedule.
\end{itemize}

(Anyone who has operated according to a demanding schedule knows how much fitting and adaptation must literally be done in order to run according \textsc{to} schedule.)

\textbf{TO as an Indication of Purpose, Intention, Tendency, Result or End}

Consider the sentences:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bob lives \textsc{to} eat, and
  \item Bob eats \textsc{to} live.
\end{itemize}
In the first, Bob's living is shaped so that eating is the prime object for his living. In the second, Bob's eating habits are shaped and fitted so that he eats only enough to stay alive. Notice that same shaping process in the sentences,

He was trained TO a religious life,
Our curriculum is tailored TO your needs,
Enter TO learn, go forth TO serve.

Shaping is likewise seen in phrases where TO indicates some kind of result:

a flag torn TO shreds,
broken all TO pieces,
sharpened TO a point,
tulips going TO seed.

Particularly instructive is the following example of a regional usage wherein TO means "with":

The farmer planted the land TO wheat.

The farmer's actions were shaped so that his planting resulted in wheat. That is, he had to plant wheat seeds—not barley, not oats, and not alfalfa.

TO also indicates capacity, as in

He desired to have her TO wife;

a determined end or condition, as in

born TO riches, or
sentenced TO death;

or an object of right or claim, as in

a title TO the property, or
a pretender TO the throne.

In all these contexts, however, we see the adaptation or shaping of X, a form preceding TO, to Y, a form following TO.

Other Uses of the Preposition TO

There are, in the ultimate sense, as many contextual definitions for
TO--or for any word--as there are contexts. Because of overlappings in contextual meaning, it is really impossible to classify the uses of TO into contextual categories short of identifying the invariant. Rather, therefore, than continuing to group various uses under major contextual headings, let us simply continue by examining some other diverse contexts in which TO is used.

As an indicator of extent or degree, as in

beaten TO death, and

worn TO a frazzle,

we see TO as a shaper of the verbal action to fit a particular state.

As an indicator of relation to a given standard in

They compared him TO a god,

Jean wore a hat identical TO the one Mary had on, and

That happened when I was knee-high TO a grasshopper,

we are forced to see shaping as an element without which comparison could not be made.

In the sentences,

Add salt TO taste,

The truck was made TO specifications, and

This testimony is TO the best of my knowledge,

we see again that:

--salt will be added until the degree of salinity conforms to fit the desired taste,

--the making of the truck conforms to fit certain specifications, and

--the speaker's testimony will conform to his best knowledge.

"John fell off the horse and broke his leg. That also happened TO Bill."

Here, TO causes John's experience to be conformed to Bill's experience, Bill also having fallen from a horse and having broken his leg.

There are two monsoon seasons TO a year.

There are two pints TO a quart.
TO requires the quantitative fitting of the two monsoon seasons and the two pints so that they fit into the framework of a year and a quart, respectively.

Consider TO as an indication of possession:

a belt TO that dress

The belt may or may not fit any other dress, but TO positively tells us that the belt fits this dress.

A green spread TO the bed

TO can be used to indicate that the spread fits the bed dimensionally, and, depending on the taste of the owner, that the greenness of the spread fits the interior decor associated with the bed and the spread. If we say,

a green spread on the bed,

we can only be sure that the spread and the bed are in contact, but not necessarily that the spread in any way fits the bed.

Consider now this highly metaphorical use of TO:

She played Juliet TO the Romeo of an unknown newcomer.

"She" shaped her actions to become reminiscent of the actions of Juliet so that they would fit into the scheme of the "newcomer's" Romeonic overtures.

As a veteran of several typhoons in Japan, I have been intrigued by the sentence:

He lived in a flimsy wooden house that shook TO the wind.

I know all too well how, in a typhoon, a wood frame house adapts and fits its shaking to the blowing of gale winds.

Notice in these examples how TO shapes adjectival meaning to fit a given context:

agreeable TO everyone,
blind TO art,
unknown TO us,
necessary TO progress,
adequate TO our needs,
observable TO our senses.

Notice, likewise, how TO shapes two nouns so that they are fitted into some kind of relationship:

our attitudes TO our friends,
disaster TO the army,
a stranger TO the country.

Consider, also, how in the following examples, TO shapes verbal action:

He admits TO disappointment (His admission is shaped to conform with a state of disappointment),

Democracy succumbed TO dictatorship (Democracy is adapted, shaped, so that it becomes a dictatorship).

TO as the Infinitive Marker

Finally, let us consider TO as the marker of the infinitive, or uninflected verb form:

He wants TO go.

His wanting is shaped so that it can be expressed in the verbal action of going.

The water appears TO evaporate.

The water's appearance is so shaped that it can best be described in terms of evaporation.

Joe claimed TO hate Sousa,

Joe wanted TO hate Sousa,

Joe began TO hate Sousa,

Joe presumed TO hate Sousa.

In each case, the verbal action, of which Joe was a party, is shaped so as to manifest some aspect of hate for Sousa.

Conclusion

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the Apostle Paul set forth to defend his invariant definition of "faith." After citing multitudinous examples of divergent contexts (just as we have done) to all of which his definition of faith applied, he wrote, "What more can I say? for the time would fail me to [cite all applicable contexts]." At this juncture, this speaker likewise feels inclined to ask, for the same
reason as did Paul, "What more can I say?" Although we have not, in this short time, exhausted the reservoir of contextual possibility as it relates to TO, we have applied our invariant definition to an incredibly diverse range of contexts, including substandard regional usages; and, in every case, TO has indicated a shaping process, which would serve to validate our invariant definition. Perhaps the most valuable lesson we can learn from this investigation is not that TO has an invariant meaning, or even that all prepositions have meaning; but rather, that the potential exists for our finding an invariant meaning for all words. As G. D. Brinkerhoff, called by one historian America's greatest mathematician, once put it: "The central problem in science is to locate the invariant." As we come to the realization that invariance is the very foundation upon which all definition rests, we will most assuredly come to better understand how we as linguistic centipedes manage with all those morphological legs.
Lecture by Dr. Hugh W. Nibley, Professor Emeritus, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 20 January 1982.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed., s.v. "To".

There are, of course, contexts in which TO is typically stressed in order to show contrast. Consider the sentence: "Bob went TO the store, not by the store." Even in this case, however, dialects exist in which TO is reduced. For example, some speakers in the "southern" dialect region can be heard to say, "Bob went Tə the store, not by the store."

Only two cases can be found in which TO is not reduced to Tə even in elliptic speech:
1) He came TO. (from a state of unconsciousness)
2) He pulled the door TO. (so that it was completely closed.
   This is a regional usage which can be readily heard in Kentucky, for example.)

This can be attributed to the fact that in English phonology, the word in sentence-final position is stressed. There are fuller forms for both of the above examples:
1) He came TO a state of consciousness.
2) He pulled the door TO its frame.

TO can be reduced to Tə in both of these cases.

Consider the example: "He spoke TO TWO boys. I, TOO, spoke TO TWO boys." TO can be reduced to Tə in elliptic speech; but the context wherein one would say Tə to mean TWO or TOO is inconceivable. Therefore, TWO and TOO are really different forms from TO.

I wish to acknowledge Dr. John S. Robertson and Mr. Richard Bonforte of the Brigham Young University Linguistics Department for their helpful insights regarding this issue.


The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed., s.v. "To".

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, 1971 ed., s.v. "To".


13 There is, of course, one context in which these three examples could be heard in actual speech. If a linear object, such as a metal rod, were laid across parallel lines, such as would be formed by railroad tracks, then one could conceive of sentences in which the tracks could be said to be "parallel on, across, or through the line" formed by the rod. Notwithstanding this highly improbable case, the point made in the text is still a valid one as it relates to normal speech.


15 We might here observe that the shaping process occurs only in a forward, progressive direction in all temporal contexts. This even applies in contexts such as: "The practice dates back TO the 15th Century." The sense of retrogression that one feels upon reading this sentence comes from the lexical meaning of "back." TO still serves to shape the idea of the origin of the practice so that it fits the period of time designated as the 15th Century. TO causes our minds to be focused toward--or in the direction of--the 15th Century. Therefore, this type of progression can be labeled as "positive," even though it is proceeding against what we intuitively define as the forward movement of time.

It is important to remember that directionality is not necessarily a component of the invariant definition of TO. It is only discussed here because, in our three-dimensional existence, we cannot talk of special or temporal relationships without considering directionality. Hence, "directionality" itself is more closely associated, in the invariant sense, with the notions of space and time than it is with the meaning of TO.

16 The Holy Bible (King James Version), Hebrews, Chapter 11.

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