

Stress Assignment on Adverb-Prepositions

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the patterns of stress assignment on particles called adverb-prepositions, which are adverbs and prepositions that are identical in form. Section 1 compares the general stress patterns of adverbs and prepositions. Section 2 discusses prepositions which receive strong stress. In Section 3 we will discuss 'affirmation and default'.

§ 1. General Patterns of Stress Assignment on Adverb-Prepositions

We will begin with the descriptions of the general stress patterns of adverbs and prepositions, summarizing some of the earlier studies in this field. Archibald A. Hill says, "The most striking feature of forms like *by* and *to*, which we have called adverbs when they are relatively strongly stressed, is precisely that they are identical with forms called prepositions when they are relatively weakly stressed. The fact that stress (and secondarily, juncture) alone distinguishes adverb and preposition becomes important when we realize that in a number of situations the stress is fixed, so that no possibility of contrast exists."¹ From the standpoint of his "phonological grammar", A. A. Hill implies that it is stress that distinguishes adverbs from prepositions primarily. Although Hill regards stress to be the primary distinguisher of adverbs and prepositions, he is not the only person nor for that matter the first person to regard sound to be an important criterion in the distinction. Otto Jespersen regards stress to be an important criterion for the distinction, although he admits that we have to depend on other criteria than sound (i.e. stress).

Otto Jespersen in Vol. III (1927) of *A Modern English Grammar* says under the title 'Adverb or Preposition?' as follows: In some combinations of a verb + a particle + an object it may be doubtful whether the particle is an

adverb or a preposition. If we say "I couldn't get in a word", *in* is shown to be an adverb, not a preposition, both by the sound (stress on *in*, long [n]) and by the meaning. . . . But sometimes these criteria fail us. Word-order often serves to determine which of the two possibilities is the right one. When the particle comes after the object, this must be governed by the verb, and the particle accordingly is an adverb; but when the particle precedes the object, both alternatives are possible.²

With no one criterion working as a sure guide, it would be one solution to abandon the distinction between prepositions and adverbs and simply call them 'adverb-prepositions' as Hill suggests: It has become a firm tradition in grammatical analysis to distinguish adverb and preposition on the basis of stress. Yet, as we have seen, the positions in which stress makes a distinction between the two types are limited at best. The point is not one worth pressing very far, but it would seem that a preferable approach to the problem would be to set up a separate cover name for the group of segmental morphemes [i.e. prepositions and adverbs] which can occur under either type of superfix [i.e. either weak stress or strong stress], without insisting on referring the stressed type to the class of adverbs. Such a name might be a hyphenated form, adverb-preposition, which leaves the exact definition of each type of occurrence open. The stressed occurrences of the adverb-prepositions would then be adverbial uses, the weakly stressed occurrences prepositional uses.³

But this is not the stance adopted in this paper. Our stance is that the traditional distinction of prepositions and adverbs can and should be maintained in most of the cases by means of meaning, with the indirect help of word-order and sound, although it is outside the scope of this paper to describe the detailed criteria for the distinction. We are not so much interested in giving criteria for distinguishing prepositions and adverbs as simply examining and describing how stresses are assigned on prepositions and adverbs in actual situations. And if the situation makes it difficult to make the distinction we simply state the fact. We admit that prepositions do not always receive weak stress, although it can be stated as a general

principle that prepositions receive weak stress and adverbs, strong stress. Prepositions, however, do receive strong stress in certain situations. We maintain, however, that every seemingly odd stress assignment on a preposition has good reason for it, and can always be accounted for or predicted. This is the position taken by Dwight Bolinger in *Intonation and Its Parts* (1986) and many of his earlier writings. In fact, our basic view on stress assignment in general originates in Dwight Bolinger. It seems that in the mainstream studies on stress assignment in the 1990's, finding rules that govern stress assignment is the main work as is observed in generative phonology. Bolinger's view on stress assignment deviates radically from this, as is seen in his following description: 'The distribution of sentence accents is not determined by syntactic structure but by semantic and emotional highlighting. Syntax is relevant indirectly in that some structures are more likely to be highlighted than others. But a description along these lines can only be in statistical terms... Whether one tries to set up prosodic rules for syntax or syntactic rules for prosody, the result is the same: two domains are confused which should be kept apart.'⁴

Thus we hold the view that basically the stresses are the product of the free will of an individual speaker, reflecting the speaker's intent and emotion and only indirectly the syntax.

Our first step, then, is to examine attested examples from dictionaries and other sources which distinguish prepositions from adverbs and which give stress assignment to these words. It is expected that in many of the examples, adverbs receive strong stress and prepositions, weak stress, since this seems to be the major principle working behind actual stress assignment. The particle *over*, for example, is given strong stress when it is an adverb as in:

The plane flew *ó*ver. (adverb)

He is well-known all the world *ó*ver. (adverb)

but it is given weak stress when it is a preposition as in:

The plane flew *ò*ver our house. (preposition)

He is well-known all òver the world. (preposition)

In all of the examples that follow, in which strong stress is indicated by [´] and weak stress by [`], we find that they follow these basic rules: (See Note 22 below for the sources of example sentences.)

- (1) (1) The ship turned abóut. (about adv)
- (2) Books were lying abóut in the room.
- (3) They gathered abòut the fireplace. (about prep)
- (4) I was just abòut to go when the phone rang.
- (5) For the examples, see abóve. (above adv)
- (6) He heard a cry from abóve.
- (7) He is not abòve deceiving others. (above prep)
- (8) The plane flies high abòve the clouds.
- (9) The party was well alóng when I came. (along adv)
- (10) She drove alóng.
- (11) There are trees all alòng the banks. (along prep)
- (12) We walked alòng the street.
- (13) Her turn came aróund. (around adv)
- (14) I'd be delighted to show you aróund.
- (15) The earth revolves aròund the sun. (around prep)
- (16) He lives somewhere aròund Paris.
- (17) He left the key behínd. (behind adv)
- (18) He remained behínd.
- (19) Sit behínd the steering wheel. (behind prep)
- (20) They marched behínd the band.
- (21) You can see the village belów from the hilltop. (below adv)
- (22) Belów is a sample of adverbs.
- (23) People were dancing belów our window. (below prep)
- (24) These children are belów the age of seven.
- (25) The large river lay benéath. (beneath adv)

- (26) We looked down from the plane at the fields spread out
beneáth.
- (27) The shelf sagged benèath the weight of the books upon it.
(*beneath* prep)
- (28) The ship sank benèath the waves.
- (29) Stop bý for a little talk. (*by* adv)
- (30) Put the money bý for an emergency.
- (31) We passed bý the road.⁵
(= We overlooked the road.)
- (32) She is standing byè the window. (*by* prep)
- (33) The thief came in byè the back door.
- (34) We passed byè the road.⁶
(= We passed by means of the road.)
- (35) She pulled the blind dówn. (*down* adv)
- (36) She got dówn from the bus.
- (37) The story was handed dówn from father to son.
- (38) I have a pain dòwn my leg. (*down* prep)
- (39) I ran dòwn a hill.
- (40) Get ín. (*in* adv)
- (41) Which prisoner did they march ín?
- (42) He thrust ín his hánd.
- (43) I couldn't get ín a word.⁷
- (44) Which uniform did they márch ìn? (*in* prep)
- (45) He swam ìn the láke.
- (46) These clothes are easy to work in
- (47) The botton has come óff. (*off* adv)
- (48) He rode óff at full speed.
- (49) A botton is òff your coat. (*off* prep)
- (50) Keep òff the grass.
- (51) Take your eyes òff the girl.
- (52) She had very little make-up ón. (*on* adv)
- (53) There's nothing ón for this afternoon.

- (54) He had no shoes òn his feet. (*on prep*)
- (55) Òn hearing this I changed my plans.
- (56) Her book has just come óut. (*out adv*)
- (57) I was tired óut.
- (58) Stick your head òut the window. (*out prep*)
- (59) He lives òut Main Street.
- (60) She walked óver to the door. (*over adv*)
- (61) Think it óver before you decide.
- (62) He is well-known all the world óver.
- (63) He is well-known all òver the world. (*over prep*)
- (64) I heard the news òver the radio.
- (65) A car drove pást. (*past adv*)
- (66) A car drove pást the door. (*past prep*)
- (67) The train goes thróugh to London. (*through adv*)
- (68) He carried thróugh a plan.
- (69) He pushed his way thróugh the crowd. (*through prep*)
- (70) He walked thróugh a wood.
- (71) This is the place John came tó. (*to adv*)
(= regained consciousness)
- (72) We brought him tó.
(= made him regain consciousness)
- (73) This is the place John came tò. (*to prep*)
- (74) I went there because I wanted tò.
- (75) The traffic light changed tò green.
- (76) Plants come úp in the spring. (*up adv*)
- (77) He got úp from his chair.
- (78) We put úp a house.
- (79) She brought úp the subject.
- (80) She showed úp at last.
- (81) The fire burned úp.
- (82) The car pulled úp.
- (83) Gó úp to that door and knock.

- (84) She came úp to me and shook hands.
 (85) They advanced five miles further úp into the country.
 (86) We took the train from Brighton úp to London.
 (87) The river is úp.
 (88) The swing goes úp and dówn, úp and dówn.
 (89) We went ùp North. (up prep)
 (90) We sailed ùp the Hudson.
 (91) We walked ùp the drive to the gate.
 (92) My house is ùp the road.

The basic rules we saw in the examples above, which assign strong stress to adverbs and weak stress to prepositions, are comprised by the more general rules which give strong stress to 'content words' and weak stress to 'function words', as can be seen in the following example, in which content words like nouns, adjectives, adverb, and verbs are given strong stress and function words like articles, conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliaries and pronouns are given weak stress:

The bóy is interested in enlárging his vocábulary, and gréat prógress is máde dáily.

§ 2. Prepositions Receiving Strong Stress

Our next step will be to find examples in which these general patterns of stress assignment are reversed or violated, and to give account to such apparently odd stress assignments.

First, let us examine examples in which prepositions are given strong stress. It is expected that in situations where prepositions become rich in meaning for some reason or other, they receive strong stress. Concerning this point D. Bolinger says as follows:

... the parts of speech whose members are commonly referred to as "function words" may, if they are informative or otherwise

interesting enough carry accents. In the following,

There's a lot more *tó* it than that.

We don't know enough *abóut* it.

the prepositions carry the main information, as can be seen by paraphrasing them with content words:

There's a lot more than it can *cláim* (what is *to* it).

We don't know enough of its *particulars* (its aboutnesses).

The reason for the more usually subdued condition of prepositions is that their meanings are generally subordinate and more easily inferred from context.⁸

In the following paired examples, prepositions are given strong stress in (a) as they become high-content words, while in (b) they receive weak stress as is more usual with function words:

(2) (1) (a) He got *ín* a taxi. (prep)

(b) He *róde* in a taxi. (prep)

These two sentences are similar in meaning, but the stress patterns differ. The verb *ride* is a more content-full word which has a precise meaning than the verb *get* which is obscure in meaning. Therefore in (1a) the preposition *in* becomes the weightier element than the verb *got* and receives strong stress, while in (1b) the verb *rode* is the weightier element than the preposition *in* so that the verb receives strong stress and the preposition *in* remains weak. Similarly, in (2a) *down* receives strong stress as it is weightier than the verb *go*, while in (2b) the verb *run* is weightier and receives strong stress:

(2) (a) Go *dówn* the river. (prep)

(b) I *rán* down a hill. (prep)

Taking a pair of examples from D. Bolinger, *look* in (3b) is weightier than *get* in (3a) and the preposition *through* in (3a) receives strong stress while in (3b) it receives weak stress:

- (3) (a) Was that the opening you got through? ⁹
(b) Was that the telescope you looked through? ¹⁰

In (4a) the preposition *in* takes the noun *music* as its object, and the noun is the weightier element than the preposition as is usual; but in (4b) the function word *in* takes the pronoun *it* which is also a function word as its object. The comparative weight is then given to the preposition *in* rather than to the pronoun *it*.

- (4) (a) Does John have interest in music?
(b) Yes, he has great interest in it.

Quirk gives a similar pair of sentences, which are referred to as (5a) and (5b) here, and says, "The stress shift from the complement of the preposition as in [1] (= 5a), to the preposition, as in [2] (= 5b), is clearly conditioned by the desire to avoid stressing the pronoun *it*."

- (5) (a) There's nothing to this story.
(b) There's nothing to it. ¹¹

In (6a) the preposition *from* is given weak stress as is usual. But in (6b) the preposition *to* is in contrast with *from*, and thus receives a special interest of the speaker and is given strong stress:

- (6) (a) Is this the place John came from?
(b) No, this is the place John came to.

In (7a) and (8a), *like* is given weak stress as is usual with prepositions, but in (7b) and (8b) it receives strong stress:

- (7) (a) He sleeps like a dog.
(b) That's more like it.
(8) (a) This feels something like silk.
(b) What is it like in town?

Concerning *like* A. A. Hill says as follows: ¹²

In general, also, prepositional constructions which are fixed phrases, like *into*, *behind*, *between*, preserve tertiary stress on one of their members even in nominal phrases.

Thus, with a form such as *like*, occurrence under tertiary stress in final position in the sentence which follows is conclusive:

What did the picture *lók like*?

Like is here a preposition, and the fact that it occurs under tertiary stress in nominal phrases — *like father*, *like son* — does not contradict that classification. It should be mentioned, however, that *like*, as do a number of the adverb-prepositions, occurs also under stress after the verb *be*, a position which is adjectival rather than adverbial:

This picture is very *like*.

His number is *úp*.

New York is a good place to be *fróm*.

John is *óut*.

So prepositions may receive strong stress when they occur after the verb *be* and when they occupy a sentence final position, except when there is a noun near by which becomes a weightier element, as in:

He is like a father to me.

What's your new school like?

In (9a) and (10a), the prepositions *with* and *by* occur after the verb *be* and they receive strong stress, while in (9b) and (10b) they receive weak stress since there is a noun in its neighborhood which becomes a weightier element probably because of contrast:¹³

(9) (a) What firm is your brother with?

(b) What firm is your brother with? (not *your sister*)

(10)(a) Who is the novel by?

(b) Who is the novel by? (not *the review*)

The general principle of stress assignment on all of the examples given so far may, then, be summarized as follows: strong stress is assigned to the

content-full words, whether they be the so-called content words or the function words, which have become centers of interest or which carry the main information.

In the example sentences given by Quirk, repeated here as (11a) and (11b), the first one highlights the idea of 'near herself' (place) the meaning of which is conveyed by the preposition rather than the pronoun while the second one highlights the idea of 'written by' (agentive) the meaning of which is conveyed by the pronoun *her* rather than the preposition *by*:¹⁴

(11)(a) She wants to have a book by her.

(b) She wants to have a book by hér.

§ 3. Affirmation and Default

Stresses assigned by the general principle mentioned in § 1 and § 2, however, may be shifted or reversed when the speaker intends a special effect of 'affirmation,' that is to say, when the speaker insists that what he says be accepted, or the information be regarded as *true*.¹⁵

We obtain the special effect of affirmation by shifting the stresses assigned by the general principle mentioned above and making the accent of affirmation fall on the low-content words. To use another term from Bolinger, we make use of a 'default' accent¹⁶ for that purpose. It must be reminded that the term default is not so much used in the sense of 'unmarked' or 'the preset selection of an option' as in the sense of 'lack' or 'absence,' in this case, of content or substance.

Bolinger gives a number of examples of accents of affirmation or default accents on pages 128-136 in *Intonation and Its Parts*, and we will not repeat them here. Only we will quote a few important remarks concerning affirmation from Bolinger. The first one explains why low-content words are used for affirmation, and the second quote tells us that we usually do not find cases of 'pure default'. In other words, affirmation accents usually fall on low-content words and not on no-content words or content-less words.

(Bolinger gives *recognize* receiving stress on the final syllable as an example of 'pure default.' *Intonation and Its Parts*, p.131) The third quote reminds us that the so-called 'content words' may receive default accents after they are made colorless earlier by some means:

The best argument for "default" is that the sheer unexpectedness of an accent on a low-content item makes it more suitable for the intent not to highlight the lexical content of the word but to affirm it in its relationship to the whole.¹⁷

[I]t is not likely that the one [i.e., accent] used for affirmation will be one that falls entirely by default.¹⁸

The word to receive the accent need not be inherently colorless; it can be rendered colorless by its obviousness in the context, e.g. through repetition, and is then normally deaccented. Then, under the conditions described here, it can be reaccented, for affirmation.¹⁹

So our final step will be to give examples in which the special effect of affirmation is obtained by reversing or violating the general principle of stress assignment mentioned earlier and by giving default accents. In each of the following pairs, (a) is a case of the usual stress assignment, and (b) is a case of affirmation:

- (3) (1) (a) How come you didn't get through the door in back?
(b) Because it was too damned hard a place to gét through.²⁰
- (2) (a) No wonder you couldn't see anything through this telescope. The lens is dirty.
(b) But that's not the telescope I looked thróugh.²¹
- (3) (a) Get óut of here.
(b) Gét out of here.

In (3a) we find the usual stress pattern: the prepositional phrase *out of* is the weightier element than the verb *get* and receives the major stress; in (3b) we find the accent for affirmation falling on the low-content verb *get*: the speaker is emphatic in his utterance, insisting that what he says be accepted, emphasizing the whole sentence by the 'accent of power'.

(4) (a) We were abòut to start, when it rained.

(b) I'm nót abòut to pay 150 dollars for a dress like that.

Although in (4a) 'about to' may be paraphrased as 'just ready to', 'going to' or 'on the point of -ing', in (4b) it has a much stronger implication and 'not about to' may be paraphrased as 'very unwilling to' or 'determined not to'.

(5) (a) This feels something like sílk.

(b) That's something like a rose.²²

In (5a) 'like' may be paraphrased as 'similar to', while in (5b) more than sheer 'likeness' (resemblance) is intended and (5b) means 'That's a splendid rose.'

Notes

1. Archibald A. Hill, *Introduction to Linguistic Structures* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), p.226.
2. Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar III* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), § 13.9.11; p.273.
3. Hill, *Introduction*, p.227.
4. Dwight Bolinger, 'Accent is predictable (if you're a mind-reader)' *Language* 48 (1972), p.644.
5. Hill, *Introduction*, p.283.
6. *Ibid.*, p.283.
7. Jespersen, *MEG, III*, § 13.9.11; p.273.

8. Dwight Bolinger, *Intonation and Its Parts* (California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986), pp.105-6.
9. *Ibid.*, pp.132-33.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.132-33.
11. Quirk, R.,S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J.Svartvik., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, (London: Longman, 1985), p.668.
12. Hill, *Introduction*, pp.227-28.
13. Quirk *et al.*, *A Comprehensive Grammar*, p.1368.
14. *Ibid.*, p.668.
15. Bolinger, *Intonation and Its Parts*, p.128.
16. *Ibid.*, p.164.
17. *Ibid.*, p.133.
18. *Ibid.*, p.131.
19. *Ibid.*, p.130.
20. *Ibid.*, p.132.
21. *Ibid.*, p.133.
22. Most of the example sentences that appear in this paper are taken from the following dictionary and the grammar book:
 Konishi Tomoshichi (ed.), *Taishukan's GENIUS English-Japanese Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo : Taishukan Publishing Co.,1994)
 Quirk, R.,S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J.Svartvik., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, (London : Longman, 1985)