

Unit 38 - Prepositions (1)

1 Introduction

1.1 Definition

A **preposition** is a word like *in* in English or *dans* in French that is placed in front of another word referred to as a **complement** (usually a noun or infinitive) and which expresses the relationship between the complement and the rest of the sentence. Prepositions are always invariable, i.e. they do not change their form according to gender or number.

1.2 Functions

Prepositions have two basic functions :

- 1.2.1 (Usually *de* or *à*) To provide a transparent link between two words. The preposition may follow a verb :

Je n'ai pas **réussi à** convaincre notre patron
I didn't succeed in convincing our boss

It may follow an adjective :

Il ne sera pas **facile de** convaincre notre patron
It won't be easy to convince our boss

It may follow an adverb of quantity :

Beaucoup de gens pensent ainsi - *A lot of people think that*

Or it may follow a noun :

Le **taux de** chômage est à la hausse - *Unemployment is rising*

- 1.2.2 (All prepositions) Its second function is to express a distinct relationship between a noun / noun phrase and the rest of its sentence. Take, for example, the following sentence

Il a posé le livre **sur** la table
He placed the book on the table

Here the preposition *sur* expresses the relationship between its complement *la table* and the rest of the sentence.

1.3 English versus French

Prepositions in English often have counterparts in French which will serve as an adequate translation most of the time. For example, *of* is often translated by *de*, *to* by *à*, *in* by *dans* and so on. There are many exceptions, however ; often the counterparts fail to coincide :

Cela dépend **de** ton point de vue
*That depends **on** your point of view*

And often one language uses a preposition and the other does not :

J'ai besoin **d'un** ouvre-boîte
I need a tin opener

As such, prepositions are often best learned as part of a broader phrase, just as nouns are learned with their gender.

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1.4 Repetition

Where a preposition applies to two or more nouns linked by *and* or *but*, the preposition generally occurs before each noun. This is different from English :

J'ai besoin **d'un** ouvre-boîte et **d'un** tire-bouchon

I need a tin opener and a corkscrew

In the above circumstances, where there is a preposition phrase made up of two prepositions, one of which is *de*, only the *de* is repeated before each subsequent noun :

Nous nous sommes promenés **autour de** Notre-Dame et **du** Louvre

We walked around Notre Dame and the Louvre

2 Expressing *to*

2.1 *de* versus *à*

2.1.1 For an extensive list of prepositions used in verb constructions to introduce an infinitive (as in *mériter de faire* - *to deserve to do*), see the list on page 271.

2.1.2 When used with the impersonal pronouns *ce* or *il* with *être* plus an adjective (as in *il est difficile de faire* - *it is difficult to do*) see 19:3.1.2.

2.2 Using *à*

J'ai donné mes vieux vêtements **à** une oeuvre de bienfaisance

*I gave my old clothes **to** a charity*

au nord de Manchester - *to the north of Manchester*

aller **à** l'école / **au** bureau - *to go **to** school, **to** the office*

aller **au** Canada / **à** Paris - *to go **to** Canada / Paris* [see 27:2.4.2]

à sa grande surprise - *to his great surprise*

2.3 Using *en*

aller **en** France - *to go **to** France* [see 27:2.4.2]

2.4 Using *pour*

Il a dit ça **pour** impressionner son ami - *He said that (in order) **to** impress his friend*

garder qch **pour** soi - *to keep sth **to** oneself*

2.5 Using *avec*

être gentil **avec** qn - *to be nice **to** sb*

2.6 Using *dans*

aller **dans** un endroit intéressant / **dans** une université cotée

*to go **to** an interesting place / a prestigious university*

3 Expressing *for*

For is generally translated by *pour* in French. Note, however, the following exceptions :

3.1 Using indirect object pronoun :

Il **lui** est difficile de comprendre - *It's hard **for him** to understand*

but Il est difficile **pour** Pierre de comprendre - *It's hard **for** Pierre to understand*

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3.2 Using *de*

Most verb constructions ending *for having done* are translated using *de* :

remercier qn **d'**avoir fait - *to thank sb **for** having done*

sauter **de** joie - *to jump **for** joy*

des motifs **de** divorce - *grounds **for** divorce*

3.3 Using *contre*

un remède **contre** une maladie - *a cure **for** a disease*

3.4 Using *depuis* / *pendant* - see Unit 49

4 Expressing *at*

4.1 Using *à*

être **à** l'école / **au** bureau - *to be **at** school / **at** the office*

à neuf heures / **à** minuit - ***at** nine o'clock / **at** midnight*

au début/ **à** la fin de la journée - ***at** the beginning / end of the day*

à l'âge de six ans - ***at** the age of six*

4.2 Using *en*

être bon **en** maths - *to be good **at** maths*

en même temps - ***at** the same time*

en fin de semaine - ***at** the end of the week*

en haut / bas de la page - ***at** the top / bottom of the page*

en mer / guerre - ***at** sea / **at** war*

en jeu - ***at** stake*

4.3 Using *chez*

Je ferai les courses **chez** l'épicier du coin - *I'll do the shopping **at** the local grocer's*

5 Expressing *of*

Of is generally translated by *de* in French. Note, however, the following exceptions :

5.1 Using *à*

C'est très gentil **à** vous - *That's very kind **of** you*

C'est un ami **à** moi - *He's a friend **of** mine*

5.2 Using *en*

Cette table est **en** chêne - *This table is made **of** wood*

5.3 Using *d'entre*

La plupart **d'entre** eux étaient partis - *Most **of** them had left*

6 Expressing *from*

From is generally translated by *de* in French. Note, however, the following exceptions :

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6.1 Using *à*

emprunter qch **à** qn - *to borrow sth **from** sb*

boire **à** la bouteille - *to drink **from** the bottle*

6.2 Using *dans*

Boire son café **dans** un bol - *to drink one's coffee **from** a bowl*

Prendre qch **dans** un tiroir - *to take sth **from** a drawer*

6.3 Using *depuis*

Depuis ma fenêtre on aperçoit la mer - ***From** my window you can see the sea*

6.4 Using *sur*

copier / calquer **sur** - *to copy **from***

7 Expressing *on*

7.1 Using *à*

au rez-de-chaussée / premier étage - ***on** the ground / first floor*

à plusieurs reprises - ***on** several occasions*

à la page 17 - ***on** page 17*

à la radio / la télévision - ***on** the radio / **on** television*

frapper **à** la porte - *to knock **on** the door*

7.2 Using *de*

être **de** service - *to be **on** duty / **on** call*

Ça dépend **de** ce que tu veux dire - *that depends **on** what you mean*

7.3 Using *en*

en feu - ***on** fire*

en vacances / congé - ***on** holiday / leave*

en solde - ***on** sale*

en moyenne - ***on** average*

dépenser son argent **en** vêtements - *To spend one's money **on** clothes*

7.4 Using *par*

par une belle journée d'été - ***on** a beautiful summer's day*

jeter ses affaires **par** terre - *to throw one's things **on** the floor*

7.5 Using *sur*

sur la table - ***on** the table*

un débat **sur** l'immigration - *a debate **on** immigration*

7.6 Using *pour*

dépenser son argent **pour** ses enfants - *To spend money **on** one's children*