

## PREPOSITION "TO" AND ITS MEANINGS

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This article outlines the prototypical and other meanings of the preposition TO with an attempt to help learners make sense of the unfamiliar uses of it. A particular emphasis is given to the clearing of the confusion between TO as part of an infinitive and TO used as a preposition where most mistakes appear to be made. Attention is also given to a new trend in the use of TO adopted by the media, which may sometimes sound unusual to students of EFL.

### **Introduction**

This article is an attempt to deal with as many types of context as possible in which the preposition TO occurs. It is the result of a search for its meaning(s) through looking at different reference grammars and dictionaries as well as watching English language programmes over a period of time. Considering their prominent role in the sentences of English, remarkably little space is devoted to prepositions or directional adverbs in ELT coursebooks, reference grammars, and supplementary books of phrasal verbs. One of the reasons for it seems to be the assumption both of ELT grammarians and lexicographers that the semantics of prepositions are so complex and unsystematic that a thorough investigation is not warranted. (Seth Lindstromberg 1996).

I believe, however, that attempts should be made to present more than one or a very small set of meanings for any one preposition and thus help the student to avoid learning them narrow context by narrow context or often phrase by phrase.

The approach taken in this article is based on the view maintained by Lakoff that the tendency is for individual words, even ones so common and so variably usable as prepositions, to have a relatively small number or related meanings which combine with meanings of other words to form overall meanings.

### The aims of this article are the following

1. To clarify the prototypical meaning of TO comparing it to the semantically-related prepositions AT, FROM and TOWARDS.
2. To clarify the other meanings of TO.
3. To clarify its metaphorical meanings.
4. To clarify the confusion of TO as part of an infinitive and TO as a preposition.
5. To consider the media trend in the use of TO.

#### 1. The prototypical meaning: movement

TO expresses movement in the direction of a point; movement in the opposite direction is expressed by FROM. AT expresses no movement. Imagine two things, X and Y, occupying two different positions; and imagine the position of Y to be a point. If X moves so as to occupy more or less the same position as Y, then we say that X moves TO Y. So X is now AT Y. If we now remove X, we take it FROM Y. Thus



TO and FROM express movement; AT no movement. All three can be applied to a point both in space and in time:

This train goes from London to Edinburgh in four hours, stopping at York.

Your lesson is from nine to (or till) ten in the morning. It starts at PROMPTLY nine. (But your lesson will last till ten-not TO, when FROM is omitted. (R A Close A Teacher's Grammar).

Other examples: walk to the office, fall to the ground, on the way to the station, point to sth, turn to the right/left, travel from town to town, the next train to Birmingham, hundreds flock to Hampton Court, British birthrate falls down to its ever low, Tony Blair will accompany the Prince of Wales to the funeral.

TO expresses completed movement and suggest that X actually reaches Y. Movement in the direction of Y, without the idea of completion, is expressed by TOWARDS, which usually applies only to space, although it can also mean "near a point in time".

She walked TOWARDS the river.

It gets TOWARDS evening.

There are several related meanings to this one. Thus TO means

a) situated in a specific direction from sth.

Pisa lies to the west of Florence.

Other examples:

It's further to the north; the mountains to the west of here;

cars parked at an angle to the pavement; the photographers are central to the inquiry.

b) a resulting condition, state or quality

He tore the letter to pieces.

They brought her to tears.

She sang her baby to sleep.

Other examples:

She did it by shaking the five-month-old to death; rise to power inspire sb. to action; a move to the left; wait until the traffic lights change from red to green.

c) as far as sth

The garden extends to the river bank.

Other examples:

Her dress reached down to her ankles; soaked to the skin; cooked to perfection.

d) directed towards or concerning sth/sb.

Terrorism poses a threat to the whole country.

Other examples:

His claim to the throne; the speech contained a reference to King Hussein.

e) (used after verbs of motion go, come rush) the intention of giving sth.

Come to our aid/assistance/rescue

## 2. Other meanings of TO

TO is used to:

a) mark the indirect object of a verb in a sentence telling stories to children

Has any credence been given to it by the Arabic world?

(Note that when the indirect object in a sentence is placed before the direct object TO is omitted: He gave her a diamond ring).

b) introduce the second element of a comparison or ratio.

Sampras wins by three sets to one.

I prefer walking to climbing.

c) indicate equality

There are 100 pence to the pound.

There are 2.54 centimetres to the inch.

d) indicate a rate

This car does 30 miles to the gallon.

He got 9 francs to the pound.

e) indicate a possible range and appropriate value

20 to 30 years of age

3 to 4 centimetres long

f) indicate sb's reaction to sth

To my surprise/delight/disgust the Labour party won the election.

To my embarrassment, I forgot his birthday.

g) describe feelings towards sth/sb

The villagers are hostile to strangers.

She's devoted to her family.

h) indicate a relationship with sb.

She is married /engaged to an Italian.

She played Ophelia to Laurence Olivier's Hamlet.

TO also means

i) AGAINST, UPON, ONTO

Put your car to the wall.

The man put a gun to a policeman's head.

**j) OF** (belonging to)

The British ambassador to Croatia

I want to see an end to wars and any kind of conflict.

**k) accompanied by**

He left the stage to prolonged applause.

She sang to the accompaniment of a guitar.

**l) satisfying sb/sth**

Her new hairstyle isn't really to my liking.

**m) in the opinion of sb.**

It feels like velvet to me.

To the police, the burglary had a look of a poor job.

**n) in the honour of sb**

A monument to the soldiers who died in the war.

Drink to sb's health.

**o) close enough to be touching sb/sth**

Cars were bumper to bumper on the motorway.

Cance check to cheek.

Arrange tables end to end.

**p) BEEN TO** means visit

I've never been to Spain.

Have you ever been to a baseball match?

### 3. Metaphorical meanings

Expressions made of verbs that combine with one or two particles (a preposition and/or an adverb) have a meaning which is in some sense metaphorical rather than literal. Examples of such expressions containing the preposition TO are numerous:

- The new man is well-qualified but isn't up to doing the job properly.
- She put her success down to work
- Jane Wilson owned up to stealing Lstg. 15000 from the company.
- The government seems unable to face up to the problems created by its own policies.

TO BE UP TO (doing)sth in the above sentence means "to be capable of doing sth or be of a good enough standard;

TO PUT sth DOWN TO means "to consider sth to be the result of something else"; TO OWN UP TO doing sth means "to admit or confess to a crime or doing sth. wrong";

TO FACE UP TO means "to have the courage to accept or deal with sth difficult".

Most of the phrasal verbs containing TO combine with yet another particle. It is impossible to list all such expressions but a good dictionary can help with phrasal verbs.

Some other phrasal verbs: TO TAKE TO DOING sth, TO TAKE TO sb/sth, TO STICK TO sth; TO STAND UP TO SOMEONE; LIVE UP TO sth; FEEL UP TO; COME TO sth; COME TO ONESELF;

#### 4. Confusing usage

TO often causes confusion as it can be either part of an infinitive or a preposition. When placed after the modal auxiliary verbs BE, HAVE, OUGHT and USED it is part of the infinitive of the following verb.

You are not to leave this room.

I had to be very frank with him.

You ought to take more exercise.

You used to smoke a pipe, didn't you?

The full infinitive may be a complement of a verb.

His plan is to keep the affair secret

or the object of a verb (like, want, hope, promise, decide, etc.).

He wants to pay.

or it can express purpose

He went to the theatre to see Hamlet.

and other functions students are usually familiar with.

Otherwise TO placed after a verb, an adverb, an adjective or a noun will probably be a preposition and will be followed by noun/pronoun or gerund.

George would never admit to being wrong.

I strongly object to being charged a fee.

Now the emphasis moved to looking at now the meaning is generated

Other verbs followed by the preposition TO are: attend, conform (to or with) occur, refer, resort, happen, listen, speak, write, throw, shout, sentence, convert, etc.

Adverbs CLOSE and NEAR are also used with TO

Today we stand closer to receiving an answer.

We can be near to achieving success.

Some adjectives are followed by the preposition TO.

No one is more dedicated to keeping you in good health as we are.

I don't think I could get used to living in a big city.

Other such adjectives are: exposed, responsible, nice/kind/cruel etc., accustomed etc.

It is not unusual to find nouns followed by TO as in

Inspirational Kenneth and Parthenon torso were on the way to becoming Willy's nightmare.

The children had no objection to anybody's trying to teach them anything.

Some other nouns followed by TO: damage, invitation, solution, key, answer, reply, attitude, etc.

All the examples given contain the gerund to mark clearly the prepositional role of TO and it is here that students usually confuse it with the infinitive TO. A good way of finding out whether TO is a preposition or part of an infinitive is to see if it is possible to place a noun/pronoun after it. For example a noun/pronoun can be placed after I am looking forward to:

I am looking forward to my holiday/it.

## 5. Media usage of TO

Watching English language programmes on TV over a period of time some uses of the preposition TO could be encountered that are difficult to find in reference books.

These uses adopted by the media seem to be creeping in they may sound somewhat unusual to EFL students, who would probably use a different preposition instead. For example in

It's a dramatic finish to the match.  
they would replace TO with OF.

Other examples:

1. A lovely start/end to the day.
2. Gwyneth Paltrow was born to the role.
3. He loses the one-day captaincy to Ian Stewart.
4. Do you see any pattern to it?
5. A baby born to the woman who survived the crash.
6. She lost her mother to breast cancer.
7. It's a lovely home to the art.
8. There's an aspect to this divorce that has not been known so far.
9. There's a side to Scott which few people knew about.
10. Can Brazil make it to the record five World Cup wins?
11. Agassi lost to Korda by three sets to one.

In most cases TO is used instead of FOR as in 1, 7, 8 and 9. In 2 the meaning of TO is FOR while 4 would mean IN. In the remaining examples the meaning is metaphorical. 11 mean that Agassi was defeated by Korda and in 3 he was captain for a day and then replaced by Ian Stewart. In 5 TO is used to mark the indirect object in a somewhat unusual passive sentence. 6 means her mother died of breast cancer and 10 wonders if Brazil will succeed in winning the world cup for a record fifth time.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to give a fairly comprehensive outline of the preposition TO and point out some aspects that may cause confusion and therefore result in some typical mistakes as "I've been in Italy", or "I'm looking forward to see you". From the students' standpoint there is no doubt that some unavoidable rote learning still has to be done if students are to achieve a fairly unified understanding of a range of its common and metaphorical meanings. The lack of consistency in grammar references is one of the prime reasons why students find this a difficult area of learning. There is also a lack of guidelines on how this area of grammar should be taught for, as this paper has illustrated, this preposition has many meanings.

**REFERENCES**

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**Jadranka Ančić: PRIJEDLOG "TO" I NJEGOVA ZNAČENJA****S a ž e t a k**

Ovaj članak daje prikaz prototipnog i drugih značenja prijedloga TO kako bi pomogao učenicima da shvate ne tako uobičajene uporabe tog prijedloga. Poseban se naglasak stavlja na pojašnjenje zabune koja nastaje kada se TO koristi kao dio infinitiva i kada je on prijedlog, a čini se da ovdje nastaje najviše pogrešaka. Pažnja je također posvećena novoj tendenciji uporabe prijedloga TO prihvaćenoj od medija što ponekad može izgledati neobično studentima engleskog jezika.