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# The prepositions *at* and *to*: Opposite points of view

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present article is to describe the syntactic and semantic functions of the prepositions *at* and *to*. Starting from the false argument that *at* is associated with hostility, this paper tries to show that *at* and *to* are opposites of the same notion (i.e. have a common origin) and therefore their meanings depend on the position from which the action or state is viewed. *At* refers to the receiving end while *to* indicates orientation towards a goal seen from the origin of the act.

The hostility conveyed by *at* ultimately depends on the semantic realization of its complementation which implies reception and is related to stability (nouns or -ING forms). *To*, on the other hand, remains ambiguous and unstable as regards the aim to be achieved. As such *to* is apt to acquire a metalinguistic value and introduce a verb base.

## 1. Introduction

This paper follows a discussion I had a few years ago with a colleague who argued that the preposition *at*, unlike *to*, was connected with hostility in some way. I countered the argument by evoking the case of *smile at somebody* which he dismissed as an exception. From that point of view, there are many exceptions to which *hint at*, *gawp at*, *look at*, *gaze at*, and *wink at*, for example, belong. What he probably meant was that the prepositional object of *at* can be regarded as a target, and that hostility concentrates on that particular point, making the phrase extremely assertive (Lapaire – Rotgé 1991: 89). My impression, after delving into the subject, is that not only is the hostility conveyed by *at* one of the many semantic realizations of the prepositional phrase, but *at* and *to* must be paired as opposites of the same notion, denoting opposite viewpoints relative to a given landmark.

In fact, *at* and *to* have a common origin and can be used to express location and direction towards a place or an object, but they have developed various and seemingly opposite interpretations and meanings, ranging from stating where something is (*at*) to the generic notion of transition (*to*).

Before adding further comments on the hostile connotations of *at*-PPs (prepositional phrases headed by *at*), I suggest describing the syntactic and semantic functions that the prepositions *at* and *to* fulfill in speech, and showing how they can be linked to the position from which the verbal happening is viewed. To begin with, I will consider the etymology and linguistic definitions of both prepositions.

## 2. Etymology and definitions

According to Quirk – Greenbaum (1973: 143), “a preposition expresses a relation between two entities, one being that represented by the prepositional complement.” Its function then is to introduce a subordinate element (Rapatel 2010: 11-12) and determine various kinds of relational meaning (Jespersen [1933] 2002: 69). In addition, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 598) consider that prepositions are heads of phrases, which increases the set of words that are traditionally assigned to the category of prepositions, and allows them to take dependents other than noun phrases (e.g. *down by the riverside, until recently, for now, for less than \$ 40*).

Let us return now to the morphemes *at* and *to* whose description we are considering. They both derive from the IE base *\*de/\*do/\*dō*. The original meaning of the IE base is that of “putting in contact” which *at* and *to* still have (Bourquin 1990: 116). *At* was lost in Southwest dialects (and the Germanic dialect) and replaced by *to*.<sup>1</sup>

*At* can be defined as a preposition and verbal prefix (cf. *ado, at +do*: trouble, dealings) denoting position and motion towards. It is used to indicate a point or place occupied, a location, an amount, an occupation, a state or condition (Webster’s Dictionary). *To* is a preposition expressing motion or direction towards an object, addition, or the notion of the dative;<sup>2</sup> with infinitive meaning it bears the sense of “for the purpose of”, or “with the object of (doing something)”, hence serving without meaning as a sign of the infinitive. *To* can also be an adverb in expressions like *to and fro, pull*

<sup>1</sup> In Scandinavian *to* was lost and replaced by *at* (Hoad 1980: 26).

<sup>2</sup> Old English had a preposition *to* which took the dative: God cwæþ to þam wīfe, “God said to the woman” (cited in Freeborn 1998: 68).

*the door to*, or (*after*) *he came to*, and appears in compound *to-do* meaning a lot of excitement about something (e.g. *They made a great to-do over the dinner*). It should be noted that *ado* and *to-do* are very close in meaning.

It is instructive at this point to stress the fact that both definitions exhibit direction/motion towards (an object or a contact point). They indicate positive position and direction in the sense that they express movement or position with respect to a destination as opposed to the negative character of (*away*) *from*, for instance, which marks the source location (Quirk – Greenbaum 1973: 147-148).

We now turn to examples and the descriptions of the prepositions and prepositional phrases.

### 3. Examples and descriptions

Prepositions were present in Old English, and they were associated with inflectional cases, most often the dative (*to*, *mid*, *on*, *of*, etc.). In a prepositional phrase the noun was usually in either the dative or the accusative case, according to the preposition (Quirk – Wrenn 1957: 68; Mitchell 1985: 497-498). Prepositions originally have concrete meanings: they express locational relations in time and space. But through frequent use, the verbalization of experience (Croft 2010), and the speaker's desire for expressiveness (Meillet 1912), a number of the most common prepositions have acquired abstract/metaphorical (grammaticalized) meanings, serving the same kind of functions as inflectional cases (Huddleston – Pullum 2002: 601). That is, the process of grammaticalization involves a shift in status of the preposition from a less grammatical to a more grammatical function (Kuryłowicz 1965: 69), including their metaphorical usage.

With concrete meaning, one may say that *at* is already there, it is precise in time and place: *at 5 o'clock*, *at the door*, (*I'll meet you*) *at the crossroads*, (*I am*) *at the sea*, *he hasn't arrived at the station yet*, etc., and can be analyzed as being deictic when it substitutes for *here* or *there*, e.g. *at home*, *at work*. In example (1), *at window* can be interpreted as *at the window*:

- (1) I will go before sir.  
 Mistress, look out at window for all this, –  
 There will come a Christian by  
 Will be worth a Jewes eye.  
 (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II, v, 40)

The presence of the determiner (the definite article *the*) in the gloss signals that the preposition is referential for it has an identifying function. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the *at* complementation can have a resultative meaning, thus expressing the effect of the motion (cf. *for all this – There will come a Christian by*). Similarly, the sentence *we didn't see you at the party*, in which *at* heads a phrase of position, is the result of *you didn't come to the party* which indicates a destination.

With abstract (grammaticalized) meaning, *at* indicates the relation between emotion and stimulus: *I am surprised at his behavior, I am mad at him, I was annoyed at myself (for not exposing the problem), he is good/bad at mathematics*, etc. The following example exhibits a metaphorical meaning:

- (2) No attempt was made at improvement, for they neither knew how to set about it nor could have gone to the smallest expense if they had, ...  
(*Inverness Courier*, Aug. 1845)

In this sentence *improvement* is not a place or a position, therefore the preposition is used metaphorically to indicate a result which, according to the context, was not seen (resultative meaning).

Furthermore, *at* is also used to express an activity: *look at something, laugh at somebody, throw something at somebody, etc.* The verbs commonly used with this pattern (*aim, frown, gawk, glare, grab, grin, growl, hint, howl, laugh, leer, look, rush, shoot, shout, slap, smile, snatch, stare, swear, swing, wink, yell, ...*) suggest 1) that *at* reinforces the idea that the reference point is a target: *aim at the bull's eye, the teacher smiled at the new student*, and 2) that it is linked with "look" and semantically related with descriptive verbs (*stare, glare, gaze, gape, wink, ... Lindstromberg, 1998: 168*). Some of these verbs (e.g. *grab, shoot, snatch, ...*), however, can be used either transitively or intransitively, with a prepositional phrase, which entails a semantic difference. Compare:

- (3) a. The youth snatched the old woman's purse (and ran away with it).  
b. The youth snatched at the old woman's purse (but he could not take it).  
c. The hunter shot the deer in the head (the deer is dead).  
d. The hunter shot at the deer's head (the deer managed to escape).

In the transitive case (3a-c) the action is effective and achieved, while the intransitive construction (3b-d) alludes to an unsuccessful attempt.

*To*, on the other hand, indicates orientation towards a goal: it is not yet there, it is to be achieved (it may include an indication of a distance, concrete or metaphorical). This can be seen in expressions like: *go to* (locative, concrete meaning), *object to something*, *similar to*, *look to/look forward to*, *see to* (abstract meaning): *I'll see to it that everything's all right*, *Will you see to the outdoor chores?* *Give something to somebody* (dative), for example:

- (4) Later Apple has quietly handed out refunds to unhappy owners. (*Newsweek*, Aug. 2010)

Note that some of the *to* complements can be construed as causes in relation to the resultative meaning of *at* phrases: compare *He went to the party* and *He was at the party*: *He was at the party because he went to the party*. The *to* complementation plays a causative role and thus represents an aim; it is also deictic and can be replaced by *there*: *because he went there*.

Since *at* is associated with the idea that the landmark is a target and *to* an indication of an aim to meet, it follows that there must be a difference in terms of orientation and reception.

#### 4. Aim/target: What is the difference?

"An aim or purpose that you want to achieve is like a place that you want to get to or a target that you want to hit." This quotation, taken from the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2007: 34), illustrates aptly the semantic implications of *aim* and *target*.

*Aim* is ambiguous (cf. *a place that you want to get to or a target*) and can appear with either *at* or *to*: *aim at/to*, *aim a gun at somebody*, *a reform aimed at reducing our expenses*, *aim to do something*,... A target, on the contrary, receives missiles: *you manage to get your shots on target*, *nuclear missiles will no longer be targeted on cities*. The preposition *on* confirms the idea of touching a surface or an object (cf. *a target that you want to hit*). There seems to be a correlation between *at* and *on* in the following:

- (5) I have climbed Ladhar Bheim. [...] The view was glorious. And I threw a banana skin at it. I have stood on the magnificent Aonach Eagach ridge and gazed down on Loch Achtriochtan. And I threw a banana skin at that; too. In fact, there are few mountains in Scotland haven't thrown a banana skin on. (*The Guardian*, Sept. 2009)

In example (5), it is possible to replace *on* by *at* in such phrases as ...*and gazed down on (at) Loch Achtriochtan* and ...*a few mountains I haven't thrown a banana skin on (at)*. There may be a difference in precision, *at* being more direct than *on* (cf. *about, around*) in that context, owing to the fact that *at* makes the target a one-dimensional location while with *on* the mountain becomes a two-dimensional area (Quirk – Greenbaum 1973: 147). In addition, *on* suggests that the area is seen from above (cf. *gazed down*) and that only part of it is referred to; *at*, on the contrary, implies considering the whole thing. It may be noted that *on*, besides expressing place (*on Loch Achtriochtan*) and time (cf. *on Tuesday*), can also indicate direction (cf. *on the left*: in the direction of the left), destination (*He fell on the ground*), and be found with noun phrases denoting ongoing actions or states (*on fire, be on drugs, on a diet*). Metaphorically it expresses reason (*on your advice*), a disadvantage as in *he died on me* (Huddleston – Pullum 2002: 661-2), abjurations (cf. *on my life, 'Upon my reputation and credit'*, Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*, IV, iii, 130),<sup>3</sup> or criticism as in (6):

- (6) My family is always on me that I need to go back to college and get a real job. (Lady Gaga, *Newsweek*, June 6, 2011)

In the latter example, *on* can be analyzed as being close to *at* (cf. *my family is always nagging at me*) in that *me* is regarded as a target.

It is easy to see in what has been said in the previous lines that some of the additional meanings of *on* may be linked to, or clarify, the properties and interpretations carried by *at* (mainly position, destination, and the metaphorical uses of *on*). *On* also combines with *to* in such phrases as *be onto a good thing/something* or *be/get onto somebody* (e.g. *He knew the police were onto him for this crime*).

According to Boulonnais (2008), *to* expresses telicity, i.e. tending towards a goal envisaged as realized in a perfective sense, it involves an end-point (quantized). Does this imply that in the meantime *at* would be atelic in the sense that without it the *at*-complement would be incomplete? Of sentences (3a-d), for instance, (3a-c) appear to be telic, that is completely affected by the situation as presented by the speaker, while examples (3b-d) are only partially affected in the situation and may therefore be regarded as atelic. Yet, it appears that *at* phrases can be ambiguous given the context in which they occur and the semantic content of the predicate. The meaning of

<sup>3</sup> *Upon* is a formal equivalent to *on*.

*throw* in example (5) shows that the *at* complementation serves an implicit purpose, so there must be something else that comes into play to distinguish what the two prepositions cover.

As a matter of fact, *to* and *at*, I argue, denote motion towards the same reference point, but seen from a different angle. Compare (7a-c):

- (7) a. Everybody's talking at me, I can't hear a word they're saying.  
(*Macadam Cowboy*)
- b. Are you talking to me?
- c. He threw a stone at the dog.
- d. He threw a bone to the dog.
- e. Kate smiled to herself, and opened her eyes to see the anxious faces staring at her. (a fiction)

In (7a), *talk at me* means that I am treated simply as a target and I am commenting on the reception (cf. *I can't hear a word they're saying*), while in (7b) *talk to me* suggests that the talker is communicating with me. Note that the interrogative form lays the emphasis on the origin of the communication. As Lyons (1977: 755) has rightly pointed out, "when we pose a question, we merely give expression to, or externalize, our doubt", and in so doing we establish a direct relationship with the addressee. This relationship is a cause-and-effect one since an interrogation naturally expects and may obtain an answer. In that, *at* and *to* can be legitimately opposed. The question, *Are you talking at me?* would sound unnatural to an addressee as the origin of the communication cannot be the actual target. In the prepositional phrase *at the dog* (7c), *dog* is the target, the subject (*he*) wants the dog (i.e. the receiver) to go away, he expects a result; *to the dog* in (7d) indicates the direction and implies the sender's intention. He wants to play with the dog. It involves his point of view.

A schematic representation of the implications of *at* and *to* could be thus:

- (8) a. At:  $x < y$
- b. To:  $x > y$



(8a) suggests that the target is seen from the receiver's viewpoint (cf. *arrive at, at a distance: from a place near here* as opposed to *in the distance, at the center* different from *in the center*,<sup>4</sup> expressions like *at last, at all, at least* which relate to the speaker or the receiving end, *be at it* meaning *doing something here and now: Why don't you polish my shoes too, while you're at it?*), and in that sense the *at* phrase is telic since the event is presented as having an end-point. In (8b) the goal to achieve is seen from the sender's position. In example (7e), Kate produces the smile (*to*) and she receives the staring (*at*).

Now the idea of staring at somebody takes us back to the beginning of the story, back to the association of *at* with hostility, although *stare* does not necessarily imply unfriendly behavior. Furthermore, hostility may also be associated with *to* in the sense of "opposition to something": *There has been some hostility to the new conservative government.*

## 5. *At* and hostile intentions

I will end this discussion with a few more words about *at* associated with hostile intentions as shown in expressions like *laugh at, kick at, stab at, pull at, pluck at, shout at*. These are verbs which imply some kind of reception and their semantic dimension must not be ignored. Compare:

- (9) a. He threw a ball at my face.  
 b. He threw a ball to his partners.

Sentence (9a) can be interpreted as hostile: I receive the ball smack dab in the face, while (9b) does not convey any hostility (cf. *partners*). The subject (*he*) sends the ball. The noun phrase, *his partners*, is not a target.

However, this idea of hostility is contradicted by expressions like *smile at*, often labelled as an exception. Although exceptions are said to confirm a rule, it would be irrelevant to apply such a statement to the use of prepositions as the latter are semantically vacuous: they are function words.

In fact, the hostile intentions depend on the semantic content of verbs (*kick, stab, shout, throw*, etc.) which generally imply reception, and/or on the contexts (*throw a stone* vs. *throw a bone, partners, ...*) in which those

<sup>4</sup> *In* refers to either an area (in the center) or a volume (in the distance), and as such can be respectively two or three-dimensional. The notion of size may be taken into account: *at* is a spot *in* a larger space.

verbs occur. Some verbs, like *shout*, are ambiguous and may combine with *at* and *to*. With *to*, one tends towards a goal in order to establish a relation (communication):

- (10) a. He shouted at me.  
 b. He shouted to me not to cross the line.

In (10a) I receive the shouting, and only the context will determine whether the subject's intentions are hostile: he may be angry with me, afraid or in pain: *the patient shouted at the nurse in pain*, but he may also shout because the receiver is hard of hearing, or will not hear. In (10b) the subject is telling me something in a loud voice.

When the verb is semantically unmarked, that is only denoting direction, the interpretation of *at* and *to* will depend on the different contexts. Examples (11a-b) include the use of the verb *direct* with both prepositions. But while (11a) clearly shows that the *at* complementation can be regarded as a target (cf. the context: *but I would direct my ire...*), sentence (11b) deals with the sending of a signal, thus implying an aim to achieve:

- (11) a. What a vicious attack on Rebekah Brooks! Maybe she deserves it – I'm not a Brit, so she's new to me – but I would direct my ire **at Rupert Murdoch himself**. He's the one who hoisted gutter journalism to its current prominence. (*Newsweek*, the Mail, Aug. 15, 2011)  
 b. The news [of the resignation of the entire Turkish high command] shook Turks, but not Turkey's friends abroad **to whom** the military SOS signal was primarily directed. (*Newsweek*, Aug. 15, 2011)

In spite of the fact that in (11a) the speaker's meaning is somewhat hostile, his hostility is conveyed neither by the verb, nor by the use of the preposition *at*, but it can be inferred from the context: according to the speaker the attack is on the wrong target.<sup>5</sup> In (11b) the *Turkish high command* is, as it were, communicating with *Turkey's friends abroad* which can be construed as an end-point (telicity). The use of a passive construction, moreover, gives the status of topic to the direction (*to whom* = *to Turkey's friends abroad*) and the achievement of the objective.

<sup>5</sup> Again, note the closeness of *at* and *on* in this example (cf. section 3).

## 6. Conclusion

As we have seen *at* and *to* are locative markers, the meaning of which is inferred from the context and the way the act is viewed. Their usage does not depend on collocation (*look at/listen to*)<sup>6</sup> or syntactic/semantic constraints (descriptive verbs, for example).

The receiving-end hypothesis then may explain why *at* is only followed by a noun or an -ING form (nominalization) which are related to stability, while *to* remains ambiguous, unstable,<sup>7</sup> relevant to the idea of a hiatus between the trajectory and the landmark, something that has not been reached (Cotte 1982a and b), and which can precede a verb, thus acquiring a metalinguistic value.

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<sup>6</sup> *Listen at* and *look to* are possible occurrences.

<sup>7</sup> From a cognemic point of view, the vocalic formant /U/ signals uncertainty, a potential state of the interval between two entities whereas /A/ denotes separation and distance (Bottineau 2002).

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