Dr. Johnson's Treatment of English Particles in the Dictionary

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DR. JOHNSON'S TREATMENT OF ENGLISH PARTICLES IN THE *DICTIONARY*

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I. The Problem and The Audience

In writing the *Dictionary* Johnson learned that the most difficult words for a lexicographer to explain are not those "philosophic" words for which the *Dictionary* is so famous, but the simple words of ordinary discourse. In the "Preface" to the *Dictionary* Johnson reveals an acute awareness of a treacherous group of simple words which are fundamental to the English language but which are impossible to define: "The particles are among all nations applied with so great latitude, that they are not easily reducible under any regular scheme and explication: this difficulty is not less, nor perhaps greater, in English, than in other languages. I have laboured them with diligence, I hope with success; such at least as can be expected in a task, which no man, however learned or sagacious has yet been able to perform" (Par. 46). Johnson defines particle as "a word unvaried by inflection," a term Johnson and other eighteenth-century grammarians roughly comprehend as a group of words which fall into the traditional grammatical categories of articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. Closely related is the small group of auxiliary verbs (may, can, etc.) and quasi-auxiliaries (forms of have, be, and do). Such "function words" provide the glue which holds together a language. From a lexicographer's point of view, such words must be discussed primarily in terms of their appearance and functions in the structure of English sentences, and therefore they belong more properly to the study of grammar than of semantics. Yet the lexicographer must deal with these function words. Johnson's *Dictionary* makes the first coherent attempt to do so in English, and it comes as close to success as did the Dictionary of the French Academy in its analogous task.

In deciding on how to deal with function words, Johnson had to keep his reading audience in mind. Obviously the use of "the" and "but," and the formation of questions and negatives with "do," is so obvious and unconscious in the native speaker that he would have no need at all to look these words up in order to learn how to use them. A foreigner would need more help than even a relatively complete dictionary could supply. That Johnson and his publishers were quite

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aware of the audience for whom the *Dictionary* was to be written has often been remarked, but Johnson discusses the nature of his audience directly only in the *Plan*, and then he is concerned with the problems of selecting words, especially foreign words and terms of science, business, and law.[1] Johnson bases his methods on what will be of use to the widest possible range of readers. Johnson could not afford to direct himself too specifically to the needs and desires of lexicographers and grammarians: "But in lexicography, as in other arts, naked science is too delicate for the purposes of life" (*Works,* 5:3). Throughout the *Plan*, and indeed throughout the *Dictionary* itself, Johnson seems aware of at least four different audiences, all of whom he must appease in some manner. First there were the social dilettantes of language, especially Lord Chesterfield, who knew little of the nature of language and who saw English and English usage, particularly pronunciation, as an instrument of social class distinction. After all the *Dictionary* was itself to be a status symbol proclaiming England's equality with France in elegance of language and thoroughness of philological research.

Second, some professional linguists demanded rigid method and strict inquiry beyond Johnson's interests, but if the *Dictionary* were to become the English standard and the rival of the Dictionary of the French Academy the scholars must be satisfied. Consequently, Johnson aimed to surpass his fellow lexicographers and to match eighteenth-century grammarians, at least by including the results of their work if not by adding much of his own. Third, Johnson considered foreigners who must look to dictionaries and grammars to understand the English language, and for them an adequate discussion of function words was essential. This is especially true of prepositions and verb-adverbial combinations, as anyone who has studied a foreign language knows too well. Johnson was brilliant in meeting the needs of this audience in the area of prepositions and verb-adverbial combinations, but his treatment of auxiliary verbs and their uses is inadequate. Johnson, however, cannot be faulted as a lexicographer for not doing what even the best grammarians of the twentieth century do not. A standard college textbook introducing students to the current approaches to English grammar and syntax gives up any real attempt to discuss the semantic qualities of auxiliary verbs. Instead the author says simply, "on the whole, the meanings are many and subtly shaded, and you are lucky that, as a native speaker, you already have a command of them."[2]

Finally there is the mass audience for whom Johnson was writing the *Dictionary*. He notes that they are not really concerned with the structure or etymology of the language, but they are very much interested in the definitions of hard words. Johnson writes primarily for the new reading public which developed steadily throughout the eighteenth century. I think that the main concern of this group was not how to use words correctly but how to understand accurately what they read. Initially, Johnson's work on conjunctions and prepositions might seem useless to them, but much of the confusion in reading older writers stems from the gradual changes in the meanings and connotations of these basic words in English. For instance the average reader might have trouble in understanding the following passage from *Paradise Lost* quoted by Johnson: "He err'd not; for *by* this, the heav'nly bands/Down from a sky of jasper lighted now/In Paradise." Johnson explains this use of "by" as "as soon as; not later than; noting time." Prepositions are the most treacherous part of Western languages, and in taking such care with them Johnson was showing concern not just for the scholars and critics but for the utility of a *Dictionary* to a people who wished to understand and preserve their literary heritage.

The Preface to the *Dictionary* is interesting because it gives the first real statement recognizing the problem of defining function words. Johnson's sensitivity would seem to be the result of painful experience. His *Plan* takes note of the problems of selection of words and ordering of definitions, but it is the "Preface" which gives us the first discussion of those areas which gave Johnson the most difficulty in definition. The French Academy mentions in its Preface the problem of simple words but never the issue of particles. Johnson emphasizes his awareness of the difficulties he faced and his determination that he "laboured with diligence, I hope with success."

Johnson's degree of success is directly related to the particular category of function words with which he was dealing. For instance he adds relatively little to Bailey's *Dictionarium Britannicum* in dealing with articles and auxiliary verbs, but he is thoughtful and incisive in discriminating the various uses, occurrences and functions of conjunctions and prepositions. Indeed Johnson's treatment of prepositions, and especially of their occurrence with verbs (e.g., to fall on, to get out, to bring in), rivals that of the OED itself.

II. Articles and Auxiliary Verbs

The reason for Johnson's difficulties with certain classes of words

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is fairly obvious. Conjunctions and prepositions manifest relatively more semantic content than either articles or auxiliary verbs. Bailey defines "the" as "the demonstrative article in both Numbers and every Case."[3] Johnson's definition is perhaps a little more useful for the ordinary man, especially a person still learning English — "The article denoting a particular thing." Johnson also notes poetic forms in which the "t" or "he" is omitted, and he quotes without disapproval a passage from Addison in which "*the* is used according to the French idiom."[4] It would be more proper to look for a discussion of "the" in the Grammar of the *Dictionary*, and there we find that Johnson devotes about a column to a discussion of the article. In specific reference to "the" he notes that it is used before both the singular and plural forms, and finally Johnson discriminates three classes of nouns with which articles may not or cannot be used — 1) proper names; 2) abstract words such as blackness, anger (though Johnson does not state that articles can be used before these nouns in certain cases); and 3) "Words in which nothing but the mere being of anything is implied: This is not *beer* but *water*; this is not *brass* but *steel*."

Johnson's third category is significant because it reveals his method in dealing with both grammar and lexis, a method perhaps best labeled as eclectic empiricism. He has chosen to analyze the given illustration on the assumption that "brass" and "steel" are nouns and equivalent to "water" and "beer." Simply given the sentence, "This is not brass, but steel," we could not tell whether "brass" and "steel" are nominals or adjectivals, but by analogy to "water" and "beer" Johnson establishes them as nominals. Where possible Johnson sets up parallel constructions and analogues. He also argues clearly from the basis of observed usage in English. Every native speaker recognizes differences between the utterances, "This is not the beer" and "This is not beer," but it took Johnson to give the first succinct statement of the semantic difference.

Attempting to deal with auxiliary verbs Johnson is at least more sensible than his predecessors. Of "should" he says: "This is a kind of auxiliary verb used in the conjunctive mood, of which the signification is not easily fixed." Unable to deal with the impossible task of the meaning of "should," Johnson has recourse to a structural description. Such approach is of limited use because the reader consults "Grammar" in vain to see the appearance of "should" in the conjunctive paradigm of his scheme of the English verb. After this initial description of "should" come four examples of its use with the verb

"go" in order to give some sense of its semantic range. ("I *should* go. It is my business to go. If I *should* go. If it happens that I go. Thou *should'st* go. Thou oughtest to go. If thou *should'st* go. If it happens that thou goest. The same significations are found in all persons singular and plural.") Johnson demonstrates thereby the difference between the function of "should" in main clauses and conditional clauses. Further he notes colloquial and obsolete uses of "should," and is particularly helpful in noting the obsolete usage:

> There is another signification now little in use, in which *should* has scarcely any distinct or explicable meaning. *It should be* differs in this sense very little from *it is*.
>   There is a fabulous narration, that in the northern countries there *should be* an herb that groweth in the likeness of a lamb, and feedeth upon the grass. *Bacon's Nat. History*

Johnson did not wish to fix the language; he wished to record its usage within a given age so that future generations could read the authors of that age with understanding. This discussion of an obsolete usage is aimed at preserving authors and their works and not at embalming the language itself. Bailey's entry under "should" simply refers the reader back to "shall" where "should" is listed as the preterite form. (Some transformational grammarians, by the way, do likewise.) This approach is not particularly helpful in light of the fact that the only explanation Bailey gives for "shall" is "The sign of the future tense." — making sense only if "I should go" had the force of the future perfect "I shall have gone." Johnson's confusions generally result from his application of Latin grammatical categories to English — a fault he shared with almost every other grammarian of English well into the nineteenth century. Bailey's confusions, on the other hand, result from his inattention to the structure of English verbs and to his failure to consider the implications of his own definitions.

The difference between Johnson and his predecessors becomes even more evident if we look at Bailey's entry under "may" as an auxiliary verb. Bailey's entry reads: "to MAY *Irr. V.* or can [ma an, Du. magan, Sax. moegen, G]." He does not even attempt a definition. He also allows himself to give the infinitive form of a verb that has no infinitive form. This entry is of no use to the linguist, grammarian, historian of the language, or foreigner. Only the etymologist would find enlightenment, and even here Bailey fleshes out the etymology with an unnecessary parallel form in German. As Joseph Wood Krutch observes: "Bailey's purpose in including all English words,

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even the most familiar, was merely to give etymologies on the indisputable assumption that his readers would be ignorant of the origin of many words whose meaning would present no difficulty."[5]

Johnson deals manfully enough with "may," noting that its preterite form is "might" and giving five separate definitions (In the "Grammar" Johnson cites various uses of "may" and "might" in the conjugation of the "Potential" forms of the verb in English. "The potential form of speaking is expressed by *may, can* in the present; and *might, could* or *should* in the preterite, joined with the infinitive mood of the verb." Because Bailey omitted any attempt at a grammar he should not be compared to Johnson on this point.):

1. To be at liberty; to be permitted; to be allowed; as you may do for me
    [per me licet] all you can.
2. To be possible; with the words *may be.*
3. To be by chance.
4. To have power.
5. A word expressing desire.

There is a rational order here of different senses moving from permission to power to desire. This ordering is particularly useful in distinguishing "may" from "can." In defining "can" Johnson begins with the notion of power — "To be able; to have power." And in entries three and four under "can" Johnson distinguishes "may" and "can" semantically and structurally:

3. It is distinguished from *may*, as *power* from *permission;*
    I can do it; it is in my power: I *may* do it; it is allowed me;
  but, in poetry, they are confounded.
4. *Can* is used of the person with the *verb active*, where *may* is
  used; of the thing, with the *verb passive*; as, I *can* do it; it *may* be done.

As he noted in the *Plan*, Johnson intended distinguishing synonyms (*Works*, 5:16). Here he seems to follow a prescriptive rather than a descriptive approach to the distinctions between "may" and "can." He notes that already they are confounded poetically. Schoolmarms still continue the battle, but neither etymology nor usage supports the attempt. In fact the connotation of permission rather than of power for "may" is relatively late. The OED notes the first usage of it in this particular way as occurring around 1200. In this instance a better knowledge of Old English would have served Johnson well, but it is to his credit that he does list without censure "to have power" as one of the possible meanings of "may." One can argue that in distinguishing

between "may" and "can" Johnson simply described a developing literary convention, but he does not insist on the distinction in the face of authoritative usage to the contrary.

Johnson's supporting definitions are particularly apt. Under entry four for "may" he cites:

> This also tendeth to no more but what the king *may* do: for what he *may* do is of two kinds; what he *may* do as just, and what he *may* do as possible. *Bacon.*
> Make the most of life you *may. Bourne.*

One represents complex, abstract usage and the second a proverbial statement. The quotation from Bacon is particularly important because it demonstrates within itself the difference between power and permission and requires that the reader make fine but fundamental distinctions in order to understand the passage. Johnson also manages to give his reader a lesson in the semantics of power under constitutional monarchs.

Before leaving the area of auxiliary verbs we might investigate Bailey's and Johnson's discussions of one of the quasi-auxiliaries (have, be, do). They are interesting because they function both as main verbs and as auxiliary verbs in the complex verb structures of English. As main verbs they may carry a good deal of semantic value, but it is much harder to define their roles as auxiliary verbs. "Do" is a convenient example because it functions as an auxiliary in a number of limited and clearly defined ways. As an auxiliary "do" is essential in the formation of questions and negatives from statements in which there is no auxiliary already present. For example — I kicked the ball; I did not kick the ball; Did I kick the ball?; but, I can kick the ball; I cannot kick the ball; Can't I kick the ball? "Do" under the same conditions is also the main component in providing "tags" which indicate that the speaker expects agreement from the listener. For example — I kicked the ball, didn't I? Finally "do" functions emphatically (I *did* kick the ball.) and as a verb substitute (I finished the book, and so did he. Who ate the apple? I did.). Bailey gives only a brief definition of "do" as a main verb — "to make or perform, also to finish." He follows this with the usual assortment of proverbial sayings (e.g., "Do and undo, the Day is long enough.") and moral commentaries on them, but then Bailey adds a very succinct note on the syntactical uses of "do" in English: "The Pres. and Imp. Tenses of the erb To Do are us'd as auxiliaries to conjugate the same tenses of other

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verbs with their infinitives, (1.) in questions, (2.) in negatives, (3.) to give an emphasis." This is hardly an adequate discussion, but at least it recognizes the major functions of "do" as an auxiliary verb — something that Johnson never does in the body of the *Dictionary*.

   Johnson cites sixteen definitions of "do" as a transitive verb and nine as an intransitive verb. Of these nine citations, four concern its function as a quasi-auxiliary:

> 6. *To* Do is used for any verb to save the repetition of the word; as, *I shall come, but if I* do *not, go away;* that is, *if I* come not.
> 8. *To* Do is put before verbs sometimes expletively; as *I* do *love*, or, *I love*; *I* did *love*, or *I loved*.
> 9. Sometimes emphatically; as *I* do *hate him, but will not wrong him*.
> 10. Sometimes by way of opposition; as, *I* did *love him, but scorn him now*.

There is no mention in the *Dictionary* proper of the fundamental function of "do" in the formation of questions and negatives, but this is handled briefly at least in the "Grammar". There Johnson contents himself with such vague observations as: "It is frequently joined with a negative. ..." and "Its chief use is in interrogative forms of speech, in which it is used through all the persons ...." Johnson nowhere observes that when auxiliaries are used in a verb phrase it is always the auxiliary, or the first auxiliary if there is more than one, which carries the tense signal. Johnson apparently shared his age's disapproval of the use of "do" as a meaningless auxiliary. In his life of Cowley Johnson observes:

> The words *do* and *did*, which so much degrade in the present estimation the line that admits them were in the time of Cowley little censured or avoided; how often he used them and with how bad an effect, at least to our ears, will appear by a passage in which every reader will lament to see just and noble thoughts defrauded of their praise by inelegance of language:
>
> > Where honour or where conscience *does* not bind,
> >   No other law shall shackle me;
> >   Slave to myself I will not be;
> > Nor shall my future actions be confin'd
> >   By my own present mind.
> > Who by resolves and vows engag'd *does* stand
> >   For days, that yet belong to fate,
> > *Does* like an unthrift mortgage his estate,
> >   Before it falls into his hand.

> The bondman of the cloister so,
> All that he *does* receive *does* always owe.
> And still as Time come in, it goes away,
>   Not to enjoy, but debts to pay!
> Unhappy slave, and pupil to a bell!
> Which his hour's work as well as hours *does* tell:
> Unhappy till the last, the kind releasing knell.
> <div align="right">Cowley; Ode: Of Liberty.[6]</div>

Interestingly enough the first *does* italicized in the passage above is not a redundant auxiliary but part of the normal way of forming negatives in English. Apparently Johnson and his age would prefer the more "poetic" *binds not* to the normal prose formation of the negative. Johnson considered this, however, an issue of versification and not of general usage. Given a total of twenty-six definitions of "do," it is clear that Johnson is primarily interested in dealing with the various significations of "do" as a main verb and is interested in its function in the structure of English only to the extent of giving hints without providing a thorough investigation. Johnson wants his reader to be aware that "do" has many grammatical functions, but he does not take the time to explicate them.

Explicating articles and auxiliary verbs, Johnson manages to surpass his predecessors by squeezing out as much semantic content as these words possess. In addition he shows an awareness of the structure, history, and usage of English, and his method is essentially descriptive in an area of language which belongs more properly to the grammarian than to the lexicographer. As always, Johnson's criterion is usefulness, and his discussions of articles and auxiliary verbs are more useful than those of the other dictionary makers to foreigners and to students of the English language.

III. Conjunctions

If Johnson met only moderate success in discussing articles and auxiliary verbs, he excelled the standards of his age in dealing with conjunctions and prepositions. The words belonging to these groups have more semantic content than those previously discussed, but this in fact serves to make Johnson's task even more difficult simply because of the multiplicity of meanings which cannot be limited without being arbitrary and which cannot be explained without recourse to involved circumlocutions and circular definitions. In many cases Johnson must rely on his quotations to suggest the actual significa-

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tions he wants to bring out. By taking a close look at Johnson's approach to conjunctions and prepositions we can see the most significant contribution he made to lexicography of the eighteenth century.

"But" is an interesting conjunction because it occurs in so many different structural situations and has so many different shades of meaning. A number of its meanings have become obsolete or unusual, and therefore part of Johnson's task was to recover some of its less obvious meanings in order to keep the best writers alive for his contemporaries and for succeeding generations. There are two main issues in dealing with the conjunction which display the limitations within which Johnson had to work. First, one can get a better overall impression of the meanings and uses of "but" only if he is aware of its etymology. "But" seems to have begun its life not as a conjunction but as a preposition and adverb with the general meaning of "without, on the outside." The OED states that "in some of these [prepositional] uses, the conjunction is, even in modern English, not distinctly separated from the preposition ... In other words 'Nobody else went but me (or I) is variously analyzed as = 'Nobody else went except me' and 'nobody else went except (that) I (went)', and as these mean precisely the same thing, both are pronounced grammatically correct." Given the core of literature with which Johnson has chosen to deal, it is proper for him not to focus on "but" as a preposition since it seems to have become primarily a conjunction by the late Middle English period, but it is unfortunate that Johnson was not able to take its earlier history into account in his etymology. Instead he simply gives the two Anglo-Saxon forms, "bute" and "butan." Bailey's etymology notes that "bute"means "none besides or except him." This is slightly inaccurate, but it does make the prepositional nature of the early form a little clearer.

The second problem in analyzing "but" arises because its significations change as a function of its structural position. That is, "but" tends to mean different things depending on whether it occurs before words, phrases, or in compound sentences. The OED takes this approach to grouping its definitions, abandoning for the most part its attempt to arrange meanings historically. Bailey, as usual, avoids the whole problem of organizing definitions by giving only two — "except, besides" — both of which are prepositions and therefore not even equivalent parts of speech. Johnson, on the other hand, cites eighteen different meanings for the word. As set forth in his *Plan* and Preface, Johnson was committed to a logical, rational organization which

starts with fundamental, literal meanings. Such an organization is simply inapplicable in dealing with the "function words" of a language. Instead Johnson groups the more general meanings of the conjunction at the beginning and then delves into various consequential uses. Johnson, then, is limited in discussing "but" by his etymology and approach to grouping definitions, but within these limits his performance is first-rate.

Whenever we consider Johnson's explanations and their relationship to the illustrative quotations he selected, we must keep in mind the following statement from the Preface: "The rigour of interpretative lexicography requires that *the explanation, and the word explained, should be always reciprocal*; this I have always endeavoured, but could not always attain" (Par. 48). This very goal or requirement seems uniquely Johnsonian. It is certainly not proposed in any earlier English dictionary and is not mentioned in the Preface to the Dictionary of the French Academy, nor is it attempted in the practice of the Academy as far as I can see. The OED itself makes no such attempt, nor does it consider the worth of such a criterion for its explanations. It is certainly an interesting and rigorous test for any explanation, but more importantly it reveals that Johnson understood that words must be understood in particular contexts and not simply in themselves. There is no way to test if a word and its explanation are truly reciprocal short of substituting one for the other in a given passage. If the reader considers Johnson's explanations and quotations in the section of "but," he will see that Johnson has indeed made his explanations and the word reciprocal in almost every instance in the illustrative quotations. For instance, consider entry nine — "Not otherwise than." The quotation from Dryden makes equally good sense written: "A genius so elevated and unconfined as Mr. Cowley's, was [not otherwise than] necessary than to make Pindar speak English." The only instances where there is no chance of reciprocity occur in such cases as entries three and sixteen in which Johnson deals with the structural or syntactical function of "but" rather than with its semantic content.

The emphasis on reciprocity between word and explanation reveals two major points about Johnson's methodology and practice. First, it supports the assertions of Wimsatt, Fussell, and others that Johnson did in fact *write* the dictionary and that he began with the quotations and then constructed his dictionary from them. Johnson seems to have taken his quotations and then to have asked himself

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how he could rewrite them in such a way as to keep the same sense
while changing the key word in question. There is a sense in which
many of Johnson's definitions are not so much abstract considera-
tions of meaning as they are the results of empirical attempts at
rewriting. One wonders why Johnson gives as two separate entries
"Otherwise than that" and "Otherwise than" for "but". The reason
becomes evident when one looks at the supporting quotations. One
could not say in standard English: *"I should sin to think [otherwise
than that] nobly of my grandmother," and Johnson would not have
allowed "It cannot be [otherwise than] nature hath some director of
infinite power, to guide her in all her ways." Johnson clearly had the
quotations in mind before the explanations.

It is also evident from the two entries that "but" has a somewhat
different meaning and structural function in each of the illustrations.
These differences are not sufficiently clarified by Johnson's explana-
tions alone. This leads to my second point. Because of this emphasis
on reciprocity, Johnson's explanations can never be considered apart
from his quotations. In entry seven the real issue seems to be that
"but" is functioning as part of a double negative construction with the
"not" of "cannot." In entry fourteen "but" seems to be functioning in
an adverbial capacity modifying "nobly." Particularly in dealing
with function words, Johnson displays a very acute eye for recording
quotations which demonstrate a very wide and subtle range of mean-
ings and structural functions, but because of his emphasis on the
reciprocity of explanations and the words explained, his individual
explanations have to be considered in the light of the quotations
which follow them.

If one considers the entries with their illustrations, Johnson is
revealed as a man with a fine instinct for the subtleties of English
usage. For Johnson the purpose of conjunctions is really to conjoin
ideas, not just to link together various grammatical categories such as
nouns, clauses, phrases, etc. Therefore his attention focuses on the
effect of "but" on the ideas, whatever their syntactical configuration,
which are linked by that conjunction. Johnson seems to group his
entries accordingly. For instance, entries seven to ten deal in related
ways with the relationship of causality between one idea and another.
Entries twelve and thirteen demonstrate Johnson's occasional pres-
criptiveness as well as his ability to deal with "but" in particular
verbal contexts. He says of "but" as substituting for "that," "this
seems no proper sense in this place." By relating this explanation to

at in entry twelve, Johnson shows how the usage may have arisen, and his stricture against the use of "but" in this sense is not so much an attempt to rectify the language as to identify one of the areas where language is purely conventional and not logical. If "that" expresses the exact meaning intended, why use "but" with all its connotations of exception or contrariety?

The third entry is typical in that here the explanation is based on the study of logic. Johnson is much more at ease in writing about the structure of logic than of language. Furthermore, he places this as one of the basic entries, whereas it is relegated to entry twenty-five in the OED (That entry itself seems to derive from Johnson's *Dictionary.*).

Because Johnson's principle of order is meaning and not structure, it is important to note that where possible Johnson gives illustrative quotations under each entry which show "but" functioning in different verbal environments with the same meaning. For instance, consider the fourth entry. Each of the quotations presents "but" in a different structural context. In the first quotation it serves to introduce an inverted independent clause. In the second illustration it conjoins an infinitive phrase with an adjective. In the third quotation "but" serves as a subordinating conjunction, and so on. Johnson began his *Dictionary* by collecting quotations, but he reveals his genius in knowing how to group these quotations in such a way as to reveal semantic similarities in the midst of differing structures. The OED reverses the process and gives us more information about the structural function of "but" without giving us much more information about its meanings than is contained in the *Dictionary*.

In an absolutely splendid review of the *Dictionary* in the *Edinburgh Review*, Adam Smith makes a general acknowledgment of the magnitude of Johnson's achievement, but he then takes notice of a few defects.[7] One of them is that "different significations of a word are indeed collected; but they are seldom digested into general classes, or ranged under the meaning which the word principally expresses."[8] To illustrate his point Smith quotes Johnson's entry on "but," and then proposes his own arrangement. Indeed Smith's ordering is much more rigorous than Johnson's. As I have pointed out, Johnson grouped explanations generally around the nature of the way the term "but" links together ideas or propositions. The actual wording of his explanations, however, seems to be derived from the quotations cited, and so the nature of the relationships of the entries is not always clear. Smith, on the other hand, is much more systematic in his approach.

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He notes that " 'but' serves as a conjunction of four different species, as an adversitive, as an alternative, as a conductive, and as a transitive conjunction."[9] After a mistaken statement that "in its original and most proper meaning, however, it seems to be an adversitive conjunction," Smith provides a separate entry for each of the uses of "but" as a conjunction. Then he provides entries noting that "but" is also used as an adverb of quantity ("I saw *but* three plants."), a preposition ("They are all dead *but* three."), and as an interjection ("Good God, *but* she is handsome!")[10] Smith had the advantage of Johnson in being able to think out a system after examining Johnson's work. He was also free to approach the task with general speculations rather than with a pile of unorganized quotations. Nevertheless it must be admitted that Adam Smith has suggested a much clearer and more systematic explication for "but" than that provided by Johnson.

IV. Prepositions and Verb-adverbial Combinations

Conjunctions constitute a complex category of words, but they are simple creatures in comparison with prepositions. They have the characteristics of function words, and yet they carry a significant amount of lexical meaning in themselves. H. A. Gleason makes the sensible observation that "there are not two types of words [function and content] so much as two functions, semantic and grammatical, which are present together in most words, but in different proportions."[11] Gleason then demonstrates his point by reference to two sentences — "The man is at the corner" and "The man is near the corner." "These seem grammatically equivalent. The only difference is in the specific identity of the two contrasting function words, *at* and *near*. The sentences are grammatically identical because *at* and *near* in these sentences belong to the same class of function words. The two sentences mean different things."[12]

Two other problems arise immediately in trying to define or explain given prepositions. In the first place it is necessary to distinguish certain prepositions from their adverbial and adjectival homonyms. For instance "Near" is a preposition, an adjective, and an adverbial depending on its position in a given sentence. (That was a *near* miss. The Indians are *near*.) The final problem in dealing with prepositions can be illustrated by citing two sentences. (1) He turned down the street. (2) He turned down the offer. At first blush these two

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sentences might seem to be structurally identical, the predicate consisting of a verb and prepositional phrase. Yet every native speaker of English knows that these two sentences are not structurally alike. The fact that they are not can be demonstrated by easy transformations. It is possible to say: "He turned the offer down," but not *"He turned the road down." In example (2) "turn down" functions as a single semantic unit, and "the offer" is really the direct object of "turn down," not the object of the preposition "down." English abounds in these two-word verbal constructions. They are analogous to the separable prefix verbs in German, and they are often termed verb-adverbial composites (VACs). In handling both the semantic and structural problems of those words generally labeled prepositions, Johnson demonstrates a keen awareness of what words mean in different contexts, and though he did not have the grammatical vocabulary or technique to deal with them directly, he shows extraordinary skill in identifying and explaining many of the VAC combinations in English.

It may be helpful to begin the investigation with one of the most common prepositions in English, "for." The magnitude of Johnson's undertaking becomes evident when his discussion is compared with that found in Bailey. Bailey identifies "for" only as "a causal particle." He also notes that it occurs in the "composition of English words, as a Praef. or inseparable preposition, [which] signifies negation or privation." Then Bailey appends a graceful admission of defeat: "For as a separable preposition, has such a great number of significations that to enumerate them without giving examples would be to little purpose. It denotes chiefly for what *Purpose*, *End* or *Use*, or for whose *Benefit* or damage any thing is done." Perhaps this admission of human limitation spurred Johnson on to one of his strongest efforts. In the course of over five folio columns Johnson gives forty-two major entries to "for" as a preposition and four entries to it as a conjunction. The OED itself provides only thirty numbered entries under "for" as a preposition, although there are many subcategories under the numbered headings. The question of order and accuracy immediately arises in trying to cope with Johnson's discussion of this preposition. There seems to be no detailed overall plan of order for Johnson's forty-two entries. But there is the attempt to give the most general significations first and then to group the consequential meanings in units. Thus the first definition given is "because of" and the second is "with respect to; with regard to." Causality and relationship are proposed as the basic areas of semantic function for "for." Indeed the

second definition comes very close to suggesting that "for" is the ultimate, all-purpose preposition because it comes close to covering the statement by Clarke that "A preposition signifies some relation, which the thing signified by the word following it, has to something going before in the discourse." One could use a very crude structural diagram — A for B — and say that the semantic component of the preposition "for" expresses some relationship between A and B. It therefore becomes Johnson's obligation to explore all of the possible relationships that can be signified by "for." As an example Johnson devotes entries four through six to an investigation of the various shades of meaning in which the relationship between A and B is one of similarity or substitution. The distinction between "In the character of" and "With resemblance to" is not immediately obvious, and if one looks at the illustrations it would seem that the real shift is not so much one of semantics as of structure. In the first case B is a nominal and in the second series B is an adjectival. That Johnson could put the illustrative quotations in different entries reveals that he was aware of some distinction in the use of "for," but the explanation he gives is not as adequate as it might be because he focuses on meaning rather than structure.

Entries twenty-eight through thirty-two show Johnson demonstrating the range of meanings of "for" within the general area of B as the general goal or beneficiary of A. The distinctions seem just and well thought out, particularly when one remembers the process by which Johnson wrote the *Dictionary*. He collected a vast series of quotations transcribed by amanuenses onto slips of paper headed with the key word. He then had to arrange these quotations in some fashion and provide appropriate explanations for each grouping. Consider the quotations cited in entry twenty-nine:

> It were more *for* his honour to raise his siege, than to spend so many good men in the winning of it by force. *Knolles.*

> The kettle to the top was hoist;
> But with the upside down, to show
> Its inclination *for* below. *Swift.*

It is not immediately apparent that the quotation from Knolles is more properly glossed "Of tendency towards" rather than "In hope of; for the sake of; noting the final cause." The crucial point here is Johnson's sensitivity to the technical meaning of Aristotle's category of the final cause. Therefore he groups the elevated sentiment from Knolles with a

humorous verse from Swift rather than with the more elegant selections from Shakespeare, Bacon, Benham, Boyle, which appear in entry twenty-eight.

Johnson's passion for exact discrimination reveals itself also in entries nineteen and twenty. The first impulse of a reader might be to take the whole group of statements about the treatment of diseases (for a toothache, for a cold, for the gout) and put them under such a vague gloss as "for the sake of," since such a phrase can be substituted for the preposition "for" (e.g., for the sake of the gout). Instead Johnson notes the logical and specialized use of "for" in the context in which A is a remedy or treatment and B a disease.

As must happen in making such fine and complex distinctions, the wording of Johnson's explanations is sometimes vague, requiring the study of illustrative quotations. For instance the difference between entries seven and twenty-eight (both of which use the gloss, "for the sake of") appears to lie in Johnson's insistence, noted above, of distinguishing final causes from other types of causes. The preposition "for" does not contain in itself, or in its usage, such a fine distinction, but the *Dictionary* tries to provide for this failure of the language. This issue of final causes lies at the heart of Johnson's discussion of the construction "for to" (entry forty-two) which was obsolete in Johnson's time. He asserts that "in the language used two centuries ago, *for* was commonly used before *to* the sign of the infinitive mood, to note the final cause. ... Thus it was used in the Bible. But this distinction was by the best writers sometimes forgotten; and *for,* by wrong use, appearing superfluous, is not always omitted." It would be nice indeed if "for" were ever used with any consistency before the infinitives of verbs to indicate final cause, but the OED does not find any pattern of such usage, and therefore we must charge the distinction more to Johnson's quest for order than to the philosophic subtlety of the language of "two centuries ago." If nothing else, this entry shows Johnson's awareness of change in historical usage and his attempt to account for it semantically.

In only one area does Johnson's explanation seem to be wrongheaded. In entry twenty-two he deals with the quotation, "To make him copious is to alter his character; and to translate him line *for* line is impossible." Johnson glosses "for" here as "In the place of; instead of." The OED, by taking note of the structural situation, handles this usage more successfully: "Preceded and followed by the same sb. (without article or defining word), in idiomatic expressions indicating

equality in number or quantity between objects compared or con-
trasted. Bulk for bulk: taking equal bulk of each ...."

One of Johnson's goals in writing the *Dictionary* was to preserve
the sense of what the great writers of English said, as we can see in
entry twenty-seven: "Noting a state of fitness or readiness." This
usage is now obsolete when not preceded by the word "ready" or
"readiness." The quotation from Shakespeare — "Nay, if you be an
undertaker, I am *for* you" — is difficult to understand until it is
juxtaposed to the statement from Dryden: "If he be brave, he's ready
for the stroke." The naive reader of Shakespeare's line might be tempted
to think he meant "for" as the opposite of "against," as "He who is not
for me is against me." By considering all the possible connotations of
"for" Johnson could make sense out of a line in Shakespeare rendered
obscure by time and the requirements of meter.[13]

To anyone but a lexicographer or linguist, the word "for"might
seem very insignificant indeed. After all, every native speaker of
English "knows" what it means and can use it in an incredible variety
of contexts. Johnson, on the other hand, was acutely aware that he
was responsible for explaining those words which are basic to the
language but whose usage is so complex that it has yet to be fully
explored. Johnson's treatment of "for" is typical in that it is thorough,
his explanations are as clear as possible within the limits of his bias
toward semantics rather than structure, and his discussions are
founded on specific examples of usage. Johnson clarifies both the
word "for" and the meanings of the passages in which it occurs.

"On" provides Johnson with a different but no less challenging
problem, the issue of its usage with particular verbs to form verb-
adverbial composites (VACs). But first let us examine Johnson's gen-
eral approach to "on." A comparison with Bailey is again helpful. His
explanation of "on" states: "a preposition, relation both to time and
place, and signifying chiefly a superiority of position, of persons, or
things, with regard to one another; it is synonymous to, upon." John-
son, on the other hand carefully distinguishes between "on" as a
preposition and adverb, citing nineteen entries for the prepositional
use of "on" alone. Further, thirteen of Johnson's explanations are not
even comprehended by Bailey's attempt, however vague, to suggest
the general area of semantic meaning covered by the preposition. As
in the organization of "for," there is no overall, neat scheme of pro-
gression of explanations, and none is really possible. There is the
usual ability to make important but subtle distinctions as in entries
thirteen and fourteen:

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13. Noting imprecation.
    Sorrow *on* thee, and all the pack of you,
    That triumph thus upon my misery. *Shakespeare.*

14. Noting invocation.
    On thee, dear wife, in deserts all alone
    He call'd. *Dryden.*

There is also the occasional slip. In entry ten ("It denotes the time at which anything happens; as, this happened *on* the first day."), Johnson asserts, "*On* is used, I think, only before day or hour." On first reading this I suspected that Johnson's assertion would not stand up on many occasions.

The real strength of Johnson's approach to "on," however, lies in his treatment of its combinations with many verbs such as to "take on," "throw out," "pun on," etc. These constructions still give trouble to certain schoolmarms and college biology teachers who refuse to let their students write, "He turned the culprit in" on the basis that the sentence ends in a preposition and that this is not acceptable English style. Unfortunately they do not realize that "in" in this instance is not a preposition but an adverbial. These combinations of verbs and adverbials were obvious to Johnson, even if he had not worked out the structural details of their operation. He takes specific notice of them in his Preface:

There is another kind of composition more frequent in our language than perhaps in any other, from which arises to foreigners the greatest difficulty. We modify the signification of many verbs by a particle subjoined; as to *come off*, to escape by a fetch; to *fall on*, to attack; to *fall off*, to apostatize; to *break off*, to stop abruptly; to *set off*, to embellish; to *set in*, to begin a continual tenour; to *set out*, to begin a course or journey; to *take off*, to copy; with innumerable expressions of the same kind, of which some appear wildly irregular, being so far distant from the sense of the simple words, that no sagacity will be able to trace the steps by which they arrived at the present use. These I have noted with great care; and though I cannot flatter myself that the collection is complete, I believe I have so far assisted the students of our language, that this kind of phraseology will be no longer insuperable; and the combinations of verbs and particles,

by chance omitted, will be easily explained by comparison with
those that may be found.

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    To appreciate the magnitude of the undertaking and the care with
which Johnson worked, it is useful to consider his treatment of the
VAC combination beginning with "put" and to take a particularly
close look at his treatment of the combination "to put on." Under
"put" as a transitive verb Johnson lists sixty-six separate entries of
which forty-five deal with the various verb-adverbial forms. Under
"put" as an intransitive verb Johnson cites sixteen entries of which
thirteen are concerned with verb-adverbial combinations. For many
of the verb-adverbial combinations he gives more than one explana-
tion (e.g., see put forth, put in, put out). There are five entries (forty to
forty-four) concerned entirely with the meanings of the combination
"to put on." Johnson gives illustrative quotations to support each of
his entries except the first (To impute; to charge), and the quotations
he chooses are interesting particularly because they demonstrate in
practice the variable structure of these verb-adverbial combinations
in which the adverbial often may either precede or follow the direct
object. In entry forty-four ("To assume; to take") Johnson first cites a
passage from Shakespeare in which the adverbial precedes the direct
object and may give the impression of consisting of a verb followed by
a prepositional phrase: "The duke hath *put on* a religious life. ..."
Johnson follows this with a selection from Dryden in which the adver-
bial follows the object: Wise men love you, in their own despight, /
And, finding in their native wit no ease, / Are forc'd to *put* your folly
on to please." Although Johnson nowhere specifically discusses the
behavior of these verb-adverbial combinations, his choice of illustra-
tions is sufficient to show the student of English how in fact they
function.

    Entry forty-two ("To forward; to promote; to incite") contains
another example of Johnson's skillful use of quotations to make both a
semantic and syntactical point. Johnson here deals with one of the
meanings of "put on" as a transitive verb, and so one would normally
expect to find quotations in which "put on" has a direct object. The
first quotation is regular enough: "I grow fearful, / By what yourself
too late have spoke and done, / That you protect this course, and *put* it
on. Shakespeare. King Lear." The quotation further serves to illus-
trate and reenforce the explanation of "put on." But the second and

third illustrations have no direct object expressed and are the result of elliptical constructions: "Say, you ne'er had don't / But by our *putting on. Shakespeare. Coriolanus.*"; Others envy to the state draws, and *puts on* / For contumelies receiv'd. *Jonson. Cataline.*" Both passages might strike the reader as obscure without the aid of Johnson's skill in recognizing the rather unusual syntactical situation and in assigning the passages to the appropriate entry. If one were to give either of these passages to a graduate student in English for explication without benefit of footnotes, I suspect most would make a hash of the job precisely through not being able to understand the signification of "put on."

One could go on almost indefinitely citing examples of the detailed way in which Johnson went about handling verb-adverbial combinations, but I think the point has been made. Johnson, as demonstrated in the Preface and in his performance in the *Dictionary* proper, regarded this area as of major importance in the correct understanding of colloquial and literary English. He is the first man to deal with these combinations in either an English dictionary or grammar, and his work was to remain unequalled until the advent of Murray and the OED.

Those who have studied Johnson's *Dictionary* most closely seem to have concerned themselves almost exclusively with the Great Cham's ability to handle difficult technical words and to give scientific definitions to common words (Everyone seems to feel obligated to comment on Johnson's definitions of such words as "cough" and "network"). Excepting Fernand Mosse in a brief comment, no one seems to have examined the area which gives the lexicographers and linguists the most trouble — the range of function words or particles.[14] That Johnson himself became aware of the problems in the course of writing the *Dictionary* is evident from the fact that he dwells on them at length in the Preface, although he had not mentioned them in the *Plan.* Johnson might have learned something from the practice of the French Academy, but it was his willingness not to take the obvious for granted and his willingness to devote incredible trouble to the explication of shades of meaning which are almost inexpressible which lie at the heart of the greatness of the *Dictionary.*

NOTES

¹ *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (Oxford [England], 1825), 5:3-4. All subsequent references to and quotations from the *Plan* are taken from this edition and are cited in the text by volume and page.

² Norman Stageberg, *An Introductory English Grammar*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1971), p.137.

³ All quotations from Bailey's *Dictionarium* are taken from Nathan Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum*, 2nd ed. (London, 1736). Sir John Hawkins asserts that Johnson used the second edition of Bailey as a checklist for his own *Dictionary.*

⁴ "So it is a constitution *the* most adapted of any to the poverty of these countries. *Addison.*"

⁵ *Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1944; rpt. New York, 1963), p. 91.

⁶*Lives of the Poets* (London, 1925; rpt. London, 1961), 2;40-21. See also Johnson'scomments on *Waller (Lives,* 1:175).

⁷ *"A Dictionary of the English Language, by Samuel Johnson," Edinburgh Review,* 1 (1755), rpt. J. Ralph Lindgren ed., *The Early Writings of Adam Smith* [Reprints of Economic Classics] (New York, 1967), pp. 5-15.

⁸ Smith, p. 6.

⁹ Smith, p. 9.

¹⁰ Smith, pp. 10-12.

¹¹ Harold A. Gleason, Jr., *Linguistics and English Grammar* (New York, 1965), p. 187.

¹² Gleason, p. 188.

¹³ Even the most careful projects reveal occasional slips, and Johnson and his amanueneses can be forgiven for the duplication involved in entries eleven and thirty-nine — "In proportion to." Not only is the gloss identical, there is no difference in the meaning of "for" as it occurs in the two passages cited. This is probably just a case of not juxtaposing the two entries.

¹⁴ *Esquisse d'une historie de la langue anglaise, Collection des langues du monde.* [Série grammaire, philologie, litterature] (Lyon, 1947), 2: 163.