

Prepositions or Conjunctions: “after”, “before”, “since”, “till”, “until”

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The topic of the present paper was suggested by an article by S. Greenbaum “Adverbial -ing Participle Constructions in English”¹, where the author, when describing the structure of adverbial non-finite subordinate clauses in English, mentions, apart from other means of expressing the adverbial function, also those non-finite clauses introduced by *after*, *before*, *since*, *till*, and *until*, saying that these conjunctions “...differ from other conjunctions that introduce non-finite clauses, e.g., *while*, *though*, *when*, in that they appear to have a distinct prepositional use. ...they can take as object derived nominals (and other phrases with a noun as head) as well as gerundive nominals...”² According to Greenbaum, “...if a derived nominal is substituted for the nonfinite construction” after these conjunctions, they are “traditionally recategorized as a preposition. (*Since his refusal of the offer, John hasn’t been to see us.*)”³

It might therefore be interesting to find out what makes *after*, *before*, *since*, *till*, and *until* conjunction-like, and which factors support the prepositional function.

The *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*⁴ definition of central prepositions comprises three negative criteria: central prepositions cannot have as a complement (i) a *that*-clause, (ii) an infinitive clause, (iii) a subjective case of a personal pronoun.⁵ These criteria, however, do not apply in the case of “augmented” temporal adjuncts⁶, i.e., clausal adjuncts introduced by prepositions, which are the focus of our study: temporal adverbial clauses are not introduced by *that*, they are not infinitival, and personal pronouns, in whatever case form, are hard to imagine as expressing temporal modification, except where they can be treated as reductions of finite clauses.

1. a. **Before him** were bowed heads, inclined necks and outstretched hands. (A05,778),
- b. Anyone who opens **before him** Carte Michelin No. 75, can see the places named, ... (A1B,70).

Example 1.a. is locative 1.b. can be interpreted as a reduction of the finite clause: *Anyone who opens Carte Michelin No. 75 before he opens it,...* The pronoun is in the objective case *him*, which may be explained by the fact that it is not followed immediately by a finite form of a verb, thus falling in the object territory of the sentence, and *before* functions as a preposition. In the non-reduced form of the sentence, *before* is a conjunction, and the pronoun, being a subject of a clause with a finite verb predicate, takes the subjective form *he*.⁷

We shall therefore base our delimitation of prepositions as opposed to conjunctions on *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny*⁸: prepositions are characterized by the position preceding a syntactic noun⁹, they can also introduce a subordinate clause. They cannot introduce a *that*-clause. The main function of conjunctions is to link clauses, including non-finite clauses, or clause elements, and to express their mutual grammatical and semantic relationship.

The decisive criterion for distinguishing prepositions and conjunctions is which class the element following the preposition falls into. We have focused on the type of complementation of *after*, *before*, *since*, *till*, and *until*. The results seem to be rather interesting, and not quite straightforward. The examples have been extracted from the *British National Corpus*¹⁰.

Let us first consider *till* and *until*. As far as the complementation is concerned, both *till* and *until* are followed either by a temporal numerical expression or by a (syntactic) noun (with the exception of gerunds):

2. a. From the 1940s **till the early 1970s** the question asked was does social work work? (ALP,577),
- b. The two girls would not be back **till the following weekend**. (A6N,170),
- c. **Until the mid- and late 1970s**, there were simply no rules whereby groupings of parents could obtain a state-financed, multi-denominational school ... (A07,1337),
- d. ... had orders not to take in tea **until half past ten**. (A0D,2239),
- e. ... she had made no sound, from the minute of entering the tent **until now**. (A0D,922).

They can both introduce subordinate adverbial finite clauses. Here the main difference between the two is their position in the sentence: while *till* in its conjunctive function never appears in the initial position, *until* is used both

initially and finally (i.e., the subordinate clause introduced by *until* either precedes or follows its superordinate clause); its final placement, however, is much more frequent (9 out of 10 *until* clauses were final).

3. a. I used to cry **till my husband came home** at five o'clock. (A6V,337),
b. Why, even Peggy herself had been one of his targets **until he realized** there was no chance for him there. (A0D,1036).

Like other subordinate clauses, the *till/until* clause can be elliptical:

4. a. Cool **till tepid** or, better still, serve cold. (A7D,1518),
b. I've explained *that it's the King's personal property* **until safely delivered** to the addressee ... (A0D,612).

Out of a random sample of 100 sentences containing *till*, in 54 of them *till* introduced a finite clause and in 46 clauses it was followed by a syntactic noun or numerical expression; the respective figures for *until* being 47 and 53.

Till and *until* thus appear to behave either as prepositions or as conjunctions, the two functions being quite distinct.

Let us now consider the behaviour of *since*. Its study is complicated by the fact that apart from its temporal function, it can also introduce causal adverbials. The temporal function seems to be more frequent however: it takes 100 temporal uses of *since* to find 38 causal ones in the BNC. It is these 100 temporal *since* uses that we shall be interested in. 19 instances are followed by a finite clause (5.a.), 5 by a non-finite *ing*-clause (5b.), while the remaining 76 behave as prototypical prepositions, introducing a syntactic noun or a numerical temporal expression (5.c., 5.d.):

5. a. I think the pressures have changed enormously **since I started work**. (A6L,89),
b. **Since launching our UK service** we have received over 1,200 requests for practical help. (A01,222),
c. **Since May 1980**, nearly 1,250 applicants have been to the board. (A3T,66),
d. Detectives have been hunting him **since the discovery of a bomb factory** in a London flat shortly before last Christmas. (A23,61).

The causal *since* overlaps with the temporal only in the finite clause. In agreement with Greenbaum¹¹, we have not found any causal *since* introducing a non-finite clause or a nominal expression. The causal *since* clause may either precede its superordinate clause (6.a.) or follow it (6.b.):

6. a. Jack Lewis was about to embark on his professional career as a college tutor at Magdalen; and **since not everyone is familiar** with the way Oxford functions, it might be worth explaining exactly what his work was going to entail. (A7C,106),
b. Marcos had arranged the hand-out as a PR gesture he could easily afford, **since he largely owned the pharmaceutical companies**. (A2Y,122).

There are cases that may be difficult to class semantically as temporal or causal, e.g.,:

7. **Since John has refused the offer**, he hasn't been to see us.¹²

In these cases, however, it is largely possible to base the semantic classification on the tenses used. The most common combination of tenses used in sentences containing temporal *since* clauses is a perfect tense (typically present perfect) in the superordinate clause and preterite or perfect tense in the subordinate *since*-clause:

8. a. **Since we came into office, we have increased** the funds ... by 25 per cent in real terms. (BOM,17),
b. Herpes simplex virus infection ... can easily be transferred from the mouth to the genitalia, and **since doctors have started looking for them**, cases of gonococcal infection in the throat **have been found** in increasing numbers. (ARH,84).

Superordinate clauses with the form *it is* + temporal nominal expression, e.g., *the first time, ages, years*, are followed by a temporal *since* clause with present perfect:

9. She says **it's ages since she's done** any exercise, and it's good for her. (A74,411).

Such a configuration of tenses was not found in sentences comprising a causal *since* clause in our corpus. Another criterion suggested by Greenbaum, and supported also by the *BNC* data, is that "a *since*-clause that has only the causal sense cannot be nonfinitized ..."13: sentence 10.a. is therefore unambiguously temporal. "The same distinction applies if a derived nominal is substituted for the non-finite construction"14 as in example 10.b.

10. a. **Since refusing the offer**, John hasn't been to see us.¹⁵
b. **Since his refusal of the offer**, John hasn't been to see us.¹⁶

Let us now proceed to the use of *after* and *before*. We shall focus only on the temporal uses of these prepositions, disregarding the non-temporal prepositional uses of *after* (11.a.,b.). Nor will the locative use of *before* be taken into account (11.c.).

11. a. Cropping up ..., has been the story of the mongrel Merv, **named after Merv Hughes** the Australian cricketer, ... (FXT,73)
b. This is Amazonia as it used to be, before the coming of the settlers and the seekers **after gold**. (HE4,30)
c. ... shape a figure or a head from the scrutiny of the model **who sat before him**, was felt to be an impossible assault (A04,1229)

Like *till*, *until* and *since*, temporal *before* and *after* can introduce nominal and numerical expressions, and can therefore qualify as prepositions:

12. a. Because of changes in the use of coding systems in the Danish Cancer Registry, information about histology was obtained differently **before and after 1978**. (FSY,265),

- b. To answer this query we have compared the available NMR data with the values derived from the model conformations **before and after the B I-B II transition**. (H8K,241).

They are both also used in the position marking them clearly as conjunctions, viz. before finite subordinate clauses:

13. a. But anyway the baby's been born in the car **before he got home**. (HEL,245),

- b. Unfortunately, relapse occurred in at least half of the responders **after treatment was discontinued**. (FT0,31).

These are, however, the only similarities between the first three prepositions on one hand and *before* and *after* on the other. The interesting facts lie in between the prepositional and conjunctive uses.

Table 1

BNC	Type of complementation		
	Finite clause	Non-finite <i>-ing</i> clause	(syntactic) noun/numerical expression
<i>Till</i>	54	0	46
<i>Until</i>	47	0	53
<i>Since</i>	19	5	76
<i>After</i>	16	14	70
<i>Before</i>	35	25	40

The first difference is illustrated by Table 1, where the results for 100 random examples of each of the prepositions are shown. In 14% of the examples *after* is followed by a non-finite *-ing* clause, and the same applies to 25% of occurrences of *before* (example 14.a.,b.). The *-ing* gerund expressions are so to say half way between nouns and verbs. Syntactically they behave as nouns, which calls for classing the preceding *after* and *before* as prepositions. On the other hand, they are still verb forms, which is reflected in the adverbial or object-like complementation they require. The fact that *-ing* clauses are "describable in terms of clausal rather than phrasal structure"¹⁷ is the reason why CGEL treats them as clauses, distinguishing them from phrase structures related to clauses through nominalizations.

14. a. She then catches further caterpillars, ..., **before finally closing the nest and leaving her offspring to develop** by itself, ... (GU8,407),
 b. **After showing promising results** on 'fake' patients, it is now being used in a full-scale trial of more than 1,000 genuine sufferers. (AJS,29).

Where the *-ing* form is neither modified nor followed by any complementation, it may be difficult to decide whether to understand it as a deverbal noun or as a non-finite verb form, e.g.,

15. a. **After washing**, enzyme activity was detected in situ. (FTC,89),
- b. Normally half of this 'extra' height is lost in the first hour **after waking** but, if exercise is taken **on waking**, then the loss of height is more rapid. (A75,53),
- c. But the main culprits, ..., are private collectors ... and nurseries who buy more common types in huge quantities, most of which die **after flowering**. (A23,27).

In example 15.a., the form *washing* is more likely to be understood as a gerund because *washing* has been mentioned in the preceding cotext, which would probably lead to expressing the anaphoric reference by a definite article if it were a noun. The same may apply to example 15.b., considering the second occurrence of the gerund *waking* in the sentence.

Another verbal feature of the *-ing* clause is its capability to express the contrast of voice (active/passive) and anteriority/posteriority or simultaneity, though not temporal relations in the form available for finite verbs:

16. a. ... I knew many, many people **who after having had their children** would have breasts implants (FL8,111),
- b. A number of small mammal carcasses, ..., were exposed in sheltered conditions in Wales **after having been trapped and killed**. (B2C,143).
- c. Naturally she doesn't want to get off **before having looked** for it properly. (F9R,1013).

The number of examples where posteriority is expressed by a perfect gerund following *after* or *before* is very small¹⁸ compared to the number of those expressing the temporal relation merely by the meaning of the preposition.

Choosing the gerund as a complementation of *after* may be understood as a welcome solution of the dilemma of what tense to use in a finite clause, whether to express the temporal relation between the superordinate and the subordinate temporal clause both by the conjunction indicating the sequence of actions and by the tenses used (examples 17.c., d.), or to rely merely on the conjunction (exx. 17.a., b.). Both approaches have been found in the corpus, the use of non-perfect, rather than perfect, tenses with the temporal relation understood on the basis of the meaning of the conjunction being the preferred form, irrespective of the mutual position of the two clauses.

17. a. **After he gave up** the booze at Christmas 1977 – for good – **he gave** us his splendid Brian which is as clever and well-judged a piece of comic acting as you'll see. (A2Y,31),
- b. The Chancellor of the Exchequer **was given** a two-minute standing ovation **after he delivered** an uncompromising defence of his policies and declared (A59,147),

- c. **After he had driven** away, Nails **turned** to Nutty and said, Can I come up to yours? (AT4,2007),
- d. He sometimes claimed Jewish blood, sometimes denied it, and there is evidence that feelings about how Jews had been treated under the Nazi regime **troubled him after he had settled** in Germany. (ASC,275).

Even though the choice of the tense forms can be resolved by using the present gerund, this does not seem to be the only solution available. We think that it is due to the two-sided character of *after* that speakers may hesitate to use it before a non-finite, yet verbal form, for which the choice between expressing and not expressing the temporal relations by a verb form is still available. This may be the reason why the construction illustrated by the following examples is frequently used as an *after* complementation:

- 18. a. **After months of weeping and shouting and apologising**, she did not care enough. (A6J,119),
- b. **After years of playing the cinderella** of the media world, the potential of radio is at last gaining recognition. (A3S,163).

The construction displays interesting asymmetry between semantic and syntactic relations. What appears as the element directly governed by the temporal preposition (*months, years*) constitutes the head of the temporal adverbial modifying the verbal form in the underlying structure, where it is both syntactically and semantically dependent on the verb, cf. *after weeping ... for months, after playing the cinderella ... for years*). In the present form (examples 18. a., b.) the head of the verb-governed element from the underlying structure appears as the superordinate element of the verbal *-ing* form. It is this construction that makes it possible to avoid even the choice between the present and the perfect *-ing* form.

The same type of construction, representing one step further away from the conjunction towards the preposition, also occurs with a deverbal noun functioning as the syntactically dependent element:

- 19. a. ... one five-year-old jumper seen by *The Independent* is only just beginning to look broken in **after years of frequent machine washing and hard wear**. (A3M,14),
- b. A blatant attempt by South Africa to dictate the terms of next month's elections in Namibia has been reversed **after months of tough negotiations** with the United Nations. (A46,565).

These constructions should be distinguished from superficially similar ones, where the noun following *after* is not temporal and the semantic and syntactic dependence correspond, e.g.,

- 20. Tried using popgun **after fiasco of toy cannon**, he wrote, but that was too violent ... (A08,1000).

We are gradually moving towards the use of *after* as a prototypical preposition followed by a noun (a syntactic noun). There is, however, an intermediate step we have to take on our way, viz. *after* followed by a deverbal noun (formed by conversion or derivation):

21. a. There are other things he has, ..., not fully investigated, like ... which part of the DRG business he would keep **after the break up**. (A1E,7),
- b. The end result was that Tooheys won the day, with most of the drinkers still under the limit **after an hour's soaking**. (A14,107),
- c. Other large clinical trials have not described any increase in cancer **after treatment** with other blockers, but reporting of such unanticipated outcomes is often incomplete. (FT2,65).

It is interesting to note that *till*, being incapable of taking the *-ing* form as its complement, does not appear to be followed by deverbal nouns, the occurrence of these nouns after *until* being marginal. This type of noun is not found after *since* in its causal meaning, but it is possible, though not so frequent as with the preposition *after*, following the temporal *since* (which can also be complemented by an *-ing* form, albeit infrequently). *Before*, which is on the whole closer to *after* than any of the other prepositions/conjunctions, is frequently complemented by deverbal nouns (examples 22. a., b.). We have not found any example of *before* introducing the asymmetrical *of* construction described in connection with *after*.

22. a. And later in the war, ..., it was this imposing natural wall of shingle which was used by the famous Dambusters as a practice target **before their attack** on the Mohne and Eder dams in Germany. (A2B,11),
- b. After filling, the casks are bunged **before delivery** to the pubs (A0A,49).

Having gradually left behind one verbal trait after another, we moved to the truly prepositional uses of *after* and *before* illustrated above. It is therefore time to sum up what has been said and try to draw some conclusions.

Table 2 – Types of complementation and the conjunction – preposition gradient

	Conjunctions proper				Prepositions proper	
Type of complementation	Finite clause	Non-finite <i>-ing</i> clause	<i>Of</i> - construction with a formally dependent		Deverbal noun	Non-deverbal (syntactic) noun / numerical expression
			<i>-ing</i> form	deverbal noun		
<i>Till</i>						
<i>Until</i>						
<i>Since</i> (temporal)						
<i>Before</i>						
<i>After</i>						

We hope to have shown that apart from the prototypical prepositions (e.g., *over*, *between*) and prototypical conjunctions (e.g., *when*, *while*), constituting the centres of the respective categories, there exist transitional expressions that may fall either into one or the other category (*till*, *until*), or even represent a gradual scale between the two centres (*since*, *before* and *after*). Let us conclude with F. Daneš: "the correlative concepts of centre and periphery, as well as the continuous transition joining the two, can be profitably applied in analysing both the systemic and the sequential relations in language discourses."¹⁹

Notes:

- ¹ S. Greenbaum, "Adverbial -ing Participle Constructions in English," *Anglia*, 91 (1974): 1–10.
- ² Greenbaum, "Adverbial -ing Participle Constructions in English," 2–3.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ R. Quirk, et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Longman, 1985); henceforth *CGEL*.
- ⁵ See *CGEL*, 658–660.
- ⁶ See B. Kortmann, *Free Adjuncts and Absolutes in English* (London, 1991), 194ff.
- ⁷ See *CGEL*, 337 ff.
- ⁸ L. Dušková, et al., *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (Prague: Academia, 1994): 273–304.
- ⁹ See also *CGEL*, 660.
- ¹⁰ *The British National Corpus World Edition*, December 2000 Release (CD); henceforth *BNC*. The bibliographic data after each example refer to the code of the text in the *BNC* and the sentence number in the text.
- ¹¹ Greenbaum, "Adverbial -ing Participle Constructions in English," 1–3.
- ¹² *ibid.*
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *CGEL*, 992.
- ¹⁸ In the whole *BNC* there occurred only 237 examples of *after* followed by a perfect gerund and 2 examples of *before* preceding a perfect -ing form.
- ¹⁹ F. Daneš, "The Relation of Centre and Periphery as a Language Universal", *Travaux Linguistiques de Prague*, 2 (1966): 19.

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Sources

The data cited herein have been extracted from the *British National Corpus World Edition*, December 2000 Release (CD), Published by the Humanities Computing Unit of Oxford University on behalf of the BNC Consortium.