

# The Deletion of the Preposition in the Surface Structure

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## ABSTRACT

In English there are a lot of sentences with an intransitive verb which seems to work as a transitive verb with a direct object of a finite clause or to be modified by an adverbial finite clause and those sentences with an adjective which appears to be modified by an adverbial finite clause; however, those clauses are actually nominal finite clauses and the verbs are intransitive though a lot of dictionaries treat them as transitive. This confusion comes out because we only look at the surface structure. If we take the deep structure into consideration, this matter is solved. The present paper tries to explain those sentences more consistently by using the deep structure.

### 1. The Aim

The aim of this paper is to explore the deep structures of adverbial and adjectival clauses made up of a preposition and a finite clause. Since the preposition rarely appears in the surface structure, the clause and other words used with it are interpreted as what should not be in from academic grammar books to students' grammar books (Biber &c 1999; Biber &c 2002; Carter, Hughes and McCarthy 2000; Close 1975; Greenbaum and Nelson 2002; Huddleston and Pullum 2002; Leech, Cruickshank and Ivanic 1989; Quirk &c 1972; Quirk &c 1985; Thomson and Martinet 1986); thus, this causes learners of English more trouble than necessary. The present paper will clarify the deep structures of the adverbial and/or adjectival clause made up of a preposition and a finite clause and simplify part of English grammar.

### 2. A Preposition and a "That"-Clause

We tend to look at sentences like the following only in the surface structure and not to take the trouble to go into the deep structure:

- (1) I wasn't sure what to do at that time.
- (2) I don't know what to do.
- (3) I have an idea that he will come today.
- (4) I know that he will come today.

If we try to understand "what to do" in (1) only from the viewpoint of the surface structure, it should be an adverbial modifying "sure," although exactly the same part in (2) is interpreted as a nominal working as the object of the verb "know." The conjunction "that" in (3) is usually said to have the meaning of apposition, though exactly the same

thing in (4) does not. This causes quite a confusion for learners of English; all of these should be treated simply as nominals.

We can change (1) into the following without changing the meaning:

- (5) I wasn't sure of what to do at that time.

We interpret the parts "what to do" both in (1) and (5) as exactly the same nominals.

Let us look at the following sentence:

- (6) I'll see to it that you get your books as soon as possible.

The above sentence is interpreted as follows: the idiom "see to something" plus the "that"-clause. English does not allow a preposition to take a "that"-clause as its object directly but with the help of the anticipatory "it." This expression is established and rarely sees an omission from it though the following sentence with the omission is possible:

- (7) I'll see that you get your books as soon as possible.

Dictionaries and grammar books usually treat "see" in (6) as an intransitive verb and that in (7) as a transitive verb. The treatment seems logical considering only the surface structure; however, if the deep structure is taken into account, it is far better to understand that (7) is exactly the same as (6) in the deep structure and appears in the surface structure after the part "to it" is omitted. In

fact, (7) means the same thing as (6), but it probably sounds a little more colloquial or less formal.

From this observation, we can get the following formula:

- (8) The preposition must not take a "that"-clause as its object directly but with the help of the anticipatory "it"; however, the preposition and the anticipatory "it" may be omitted.

Let us take a look at some more examples in relation to a preposition and a "that"-clause. If the "that"-clause in (3) is rewritten into a non-finite clause, we get the following:

- (9) I have an idea of his coming today.

From (9), we understand the preposition in the deep structure of (3) is "of" and get the following:

- (10) I have an idea of it that he will come today.

Some more examples are taken here.

- (11) He never boasted of his success.  
(12) He never boasted that he had succeeded.  
(13) He never boasted of it that he had succeeded.  
(14) The committee decided that the match be postponed.  
(15) The committee decided upon it that the match be postponed.

- (16) My mother is always complaining of my room being messy.
- (17) My mother is always complaining that my room is messy.
- (18) My mother is always complaining of it that my room is messy.
- (19) I insisted that he attend the meeting.
- (20) I insisted upon his attendance at the meeting.
- (21) I insisted upon it that he attend the meeting.
- (22) Look to it that you do not make such a mistake again.
- (23) I reminded him of the importance of health.
- (24) I reminded him that health is important.
- (25) I reminded him of it that health is important.

The list goes a long way. Now we will see some examples used with adjectives.

- (26) Parents are strongly desirous that their children succeed.
- (27) Parents are strongly desirous of it that their children succeed.
- (28) I was ignorant that it had rained.
- (29) I was ignorant of it that it had rained.
- (30) I am sure that he is honest.
- (31) I am sure of it that he is honest.

As we have already looked at (3) and (10), the appositional preposition “of” can be widely observed as below:

- (32) Let’s talk on the assumption that the rumor is true.
- (33) Let’s talk on the assumption of it that the rumor is true.
- (34) He has a strong desire that he should go abroad.
- (35) He has a strong desire of it that he should go abroad.
- (36) I don’t have the slightest intention that I should quarrel with him.
- (37) I don’t have the slightest intention of it that I should quarrel with him.
- (38) There is a rumour that there will be a general election in the autumn.
- (39) There is a rumour of it that there will be a general election in the autumn.
- (40) Some scientists support the theory that the universe is continuously expanding.
- (41) Some scientists support the theory of it that the universe is continuously expanding.

In all the above example sentences, those with the preposition and the anticipatory “it” are seldom used in present-day English except for “see to it that”-clause in (6) and “look to it that”-clause in (22), in both of which the omission of the preposition and the anticipatory “it” would sound colloquial and rather informal.

Now we need to revise the formula (8) as follows:

- (42) The preposition must not take a “that”-clause as its object directly

but with the help of the anticipatory “it”; however, the preposition and the anticipatory “it” are almost always omitted in the surface structure except for “see to it that”-clause and “look to it that”-clause.

### 3. A Preposition and a WH-Clause

Now we will go back to (1) and (5) to observe the combination of a preposition and a WH-clause, whether it is finite or infinitive.

- (1) I wasn't sure what to do at that time.
- (5) I wasn't sure of what to do at that time.

In meaning we see no difference between the two though (5) probably sounds more formal than (1). As mentioned above, “what to do” in (1) has to be interpreted as an adverbial modifying “sure” unless the omission of the preposition in the deep structure is taken into consideration. If we accept the omission of the preposition in the deep structure from (1), however, the part “what to do” is certainly understood as a nominal just as in (5)

Let us look at some more example sentences using an interrogative.

- (43) I'm curious whether he passed the exams.
- (44) I'm curious about whether he passed the exams.
- (45) Have you decided where you will spend the holidays?

- (46) Have you decided upon where you will spend the holidays?
- (47) I am doubtful what I should do.
- (48) I am doubtful about what I should do.
- (49) I had no idea what to do.
- (50) I had no idea of what to do.
- (51) I had no idea what I should do.
- (52) I had no idea of what I should do.
- (53) I am ignorant what they intend to do.
- (54) I am ignorant of what they intend to do.
- (55) He informed me where to get it.
- (56) He informed me about where to get it.
- (57) The note reminded my son who he should ask for.
- (58) The note reminded my son of who he should ask for.
- (59) I am uncertain what he intends to do.
- (60) I am uncertain of what he intends to do.

From these examples, we can say as follows:

- (61) A preposition takes a WH-clause as its object directly without the help of the anticipatory “it” in the deep structure, the WH-clause may be either finite or infinitive, the omission of the preposition before the WH-word may occur, and the difference between the retention of the preposition and its omission is far smaller in a WH-clause than in a

“that”-clause though one may be much commoner than the other.

We can combine (42) and (61) into one and conclude as follows:

- (62) (a) If a preposition is used with a noun or gerund in the surface structure, then it is used even with the clause in the deep structure though it may not appear in the surface structure; (b) the preposition must not take a “that”-clause as its object directly but with the help of the anticipatory “it”; (c) the preposition and the anticipatory “it” are almost always omitted in the surface structure except for “see to it that”-clause and “look to it that”-clause; (d) a preposition takes a WH-clause as its object directly without the help of the anticipatory “it” in the deep structure; (e) the WH-clause may be either finite or infinitive; (f) the omission of the preposition before the WH-word may occur; and (g) the difference between the retention of the preposition and its omission is far smaller in a WH-clause than in a “that”-clause though one may be much commoner than the other.

If we see a preposition governing a clause in the deep structure regardless of its existence in the surface structure, we can always treat the clause as a nominal. In (63) below, students of English learn “be sure of

something” and put a noun or a “that”-clause in the place of “something”; then if the insertion is a finite clause, the anticipatory “it” is placed immediately after the preposition, and when it is actually used, the preposition and the anticipatory “it” may be, and usually is, omitted. This rule lightens the load of memorizing both “be sure of something” and “be sure that”-clause.

- (63) a. I am sure of his success.  
b. \*I am sure of that he will succeed.  
-Ungrammatical  
c. I am sure of it that he will succeed.  
d. I am sure \_\_ that he will succeed.

However, the structure containing a “that”-clause used with adjectives of emotion like “sorry” seems to be impossible to interpret as the omission of a preposition and the anticipatory “it”; in order to understand those sentences better, we have to wait for further researches.

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