# Functional Transposition of *ABOUT* in the 9th–21st Centuries

## Yurii KOVBASKO

Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University (Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine)
English Philology Department
y.kovbasko@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** The paper exemplifies a unique attempt to trace the evolution of the preposition and the adverb *ABOUT* as initial and transposed categories. The study focuses on the development of both interwoven categories since 850 and up to the early 21st century and covers 16 time spans. The paper proves that despite being registered during 850–950 as the representative of both categories, *ABOUT* initially represented the category of preposition. The research showcases that since its functional transposition in Old English, the category of the adverb *ABOUT* has been undergoing a continuous decrease, which is significantly enhanced in the second half of Late Modern English and reaches its peak in the early 21st century. The reasons for the growth of the preposition *ABOUT* lie not in the phenomenon of transposition but in the emergence of a new function: 'in reference to', which developed in Early Modern English and provided the impetus for a further increase of the preposition *ABOUT*.

**Keywords:** prepositions, adverbs, functional transposition, Old English, Middle English

## Introduction

The functional transposition of the lexical unit *ABOUT* and the subsequent overlapping between the categories of the preposition and the adverb are contingent on its morphological structure, which combines the Old English prepositions *A (in/on/at)*, *BE (near to)* and the adverb *UTAN (out, outside)*. Such morphological structure predetermines the formation of wide semantics of a newly coined lexical unit or the transformed unit. While analysing overlapping between the preposition and the adverb, it has been identified that the number of definitions, which fix the meanings of *ABOUT*, is higher for the category of the adverb than for the preposition – 11 and 6 respectively. The correlation between the fully institutionalized meanings is quite the opposite, as 83% of the definitions

are fully institutionalized for the preposition, whereas it is 45% for the adverb. These figures showcase higher versatility of the adverb concerning the represented meanings though the majority of them are not fully institutionalized, i.e. they are undergoing the process of either institutionalization or deinstitutionalization. A significant fact is that fully institutionalized meanings, which are shared by the prepositions and the adverbs, are of the same locative nature, can be represented directly or indirectly, and are additionally characterized by close ties with temporality and attributiveness. Therefore, I hypothesise that in the case of *ABOUT*, functional transposition starts on the basis of the seme of locality, and the transposed category has been shifting other meanings from the initial category or developing new meanings itself. The aim of the paper is to study the functional transposition of *ABOUT* by deducing its initial and transposed categories and establishing ties between them by tracing back the core meanings of each category and comparing the results of the diachronic corpus analysis.

## Previous studies

The evolution of any language is a continuous dialectical battle and accord of two tendencies – striving of the system for stability and sustainability and constant response to the impact of intra- and extralinguistic stimuli. Modification and development of the language commence not only as a result of its enriching with new lexical units or deprivation of the old ones but also by means of functional, formal, and semantic variations of the existing units. Thus, at any synchronous stage of any language, it is possible to register various elements of transient nature, lexical units whose linguistic status is dubious and obscure, phenomena that have not acquired regular and systematic character or have not been unequivocally defined in linguistics.

One of such ambiguous universals is transposition (Bloch-Trojnar 2013, Hacken 2015), which is observed in different languages (Braasch 2008, Sapir 1921, Tesniere 1959) and overlaps with such processes as conversion (Balteiro 2007, Valera 2017), zero derivation (Lipka 1990, Marchand 1960), transitivity (Aldai–Wichmann 2018, Komarek 1999), recategorization (Dubinsky–Williams 1995, Vea 2015), transcategorization/transcategoriality (Ježek–Ramat 2009, Robert 2016), and transfer (Tesniere 1959). The main thing in common with these processes is their word formation nature, which leads to the emergence of new lexical units with identical or changed (by affixation) forms, which actualize the syntactic and semantic functions of a transposed class of words. Following these approaches, transposition is interpreted as grammatical and morphological, syntactic and semantic changes of a lexical unit, which lead to the formation of a new lexical unit (Žele 2017: 245) and are applied to the processes between

open word classes. Nevertheless, in English, there are processes which are not subjects to the aforesaid approaches because they involve lexical units which represent open and/or closed word classes, i.e. notional and/or functional parts of speech (PoS); secondly, these lexical units do not obtain any morphological or syntactic markers either in the process of their transposition or as a result of it; thirdly, they do not form new lexical units (Kovbasko 2022a, b). Functional transposition shifts lexical units from one word class into another in order to actualize functions inherent in the transposed class, while the lexical unit itself remains within its initial class. Functional transposition is defined as a cognitively and communicatively preconditioned diachronic and synchronic process and its result, which presupposes the ability of lexical-grammatical units by means of grammaticalization and lexicalization, without morphological and/or syntactical markers, to implement functions of the transposed category, while the units themselves remain within their own initial category.

The paper is an attempt to test a hypothesis that functional transposition is an independent and unique phenomenon that does not belong to word formation processes but exists in parallel with them. The key difference between functional transposition and word formation is the shift of the morphological form of an initial lexical unit from the open class into the closed class or vice versa without a formal genesis of a new lexical unit. The additional factors to distinguish between the processes are the mechanisms of the shifts – grammaticalization or lexicalization; the absence of morphological and/or syntactic markers in the process of transposition and as a result of it; the presence of a common initial semantic category –, locality and/or temporality, and speakers' cognitive activity, which form the basis of functional transposition.

## Methodology

Traditional periodization (Hogg–Denison 2006) divides English into Old English/ OE, Middle English/ME, and Modern English/ModE. However, as "the historical development of a language is a continuous uninterrupted process without sudden breaks or rapid transformations" (Rastorgueva 2003: 49), it seems inadequate to study any linguistic phenomenon on the basis of such a generalized approach. Therefore, the research on functional transposition requires a meticulous analysis that is grounded on a detailed periodization of the language. The current paper traces back the evolution of functional transposition in 16 historical scopes.

| 1 | −850 | 5 | 1150–1250 | 9 | 1500–1570 | 13 | 1780–1850 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 850–950 | 6 | 1250–1350 | 10 | 1570–1640 | 14 | 1850–1920 |
| 3 | 950–1050 | 7 | 1350–1420 | 11 | 1640–1710 | 15 | 1920–1990 |
| 4 | 1050–1150 | 8 | 1420–1500 | 12 | 1710–1780 | 16 | 1990–2020 |

The OE period (−850–1150) is composed of 4 scopes, each equalling 100 years; the next 4 scopes cover the ME period (1150–1500) with the time spans from 70 to 100 years; the other 8 scopes constitute ModE (1500–2020), each of which is 70 years. The ModE period is divided into Early ModE/EModE (1500–1710), Late ModE/LModE (1710–1920), and Present-Day English/PDE (1920–2020). It has been proved that the span of 70–100 years is the most preferable, as it is enough for the lexical unit to appear in the language and start its institutionalization or disappear from it. The span of 100 years, used for the sub-periods before 1350, is explained by the necessity to collect a reasonable number of manuscripts and lexical units. The spans of 70–80 years, which are applied after 1350, aim at balancing the diachronic corpus research, taking into account a constantly growing number of manuscripts and texts under analysis.

The analysis of the empirical basis of the research, viz. *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts: Diachronic and Dialectal (HCET)*, *The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts (CLMET)*, *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*, and *The British National Corpus (BNC)*, made it possible to retrieve 46 examples from the OE texts, 341 examples from the ME texts, and 645 examples from the EModE texts, all of which have been manually extracted, analysed, and tagged as corresponding PoS; 42,942 examples from the LModE texts that have been automatically tagged by means of the corpus toolbox Lancsbox; 580,350 examples from PDE, the compiled statistics on which have been provided by the COHA and the BNC. The obtained data are represented in percentage correlations for each of the 16 historical scopes and are specified in tables. On the basis of the overall data, the corresponding graph, which illustrates the process of functional transposition of *ABOUT* in the English language, has been constructed.

# Results and discussion

## 1. Diachronic semantic analysis

*The preposition ABOUT*

Due to its morphological structure that combines three different units, all of which representing the seme of locality, *ABOUT* started acting as a locative unit that embodied in a single entity various semantic components of its morphological

constituents, viz. *A (in/on/at) + BE (near to) + UTAN (out, outside).* From the very beginning, it potentiated *ABOUT* to embrace numerous locative relations, for instance 'around', 'on the outside', 'on every side':

(1)    *Ond suǽ suǽ se here sceolde bion getrymed onbútan Hierusalem* [And so as the army should be arrayed about Jerusalem] (OED: K. Ælfred *Pastoral Care* xxi);

(2)    *Þu tæcst Israhela folce gemæro abutan þone munt & cwyst* [You transfer Israel people borders about the mountain and speak] (OED: Ælfric: *Exodus* xix: line 12).

   The examples showcase that since its emergence *ABOUT* has been used to designate movement, direction, and spatial arrangement. Along with the direct representation of the seme of locality, *ABOUT* is characterized by metaphorization and indirect representation of locality (see (3)) and temporality (see (4)):

(3)    *Abuten us he [beelzebub] is for to blenchen.* [About us he (Beelzebub) is in order to mislead us] (OED: *Lambeth Homilies*: line 55);

(4)    *Per efter in þe Lengten þestrede þe sunhe and te dæi, abuton non tid dæies, þa men eten.* [Thereafter in the Lent eclipsed the sun and daylight, about noontime, when people were eating.] (OED: *The AS Chronicle* (Laud. MS): line 1140).

   Metaphorization contributed to meaning extension, and *ABOUT* started to represent the 'relation towards something/somebody' or 'connection with something/somebody':

(5)    *Hu hire stont abuten vleschliche tentaciuns, ȝif heo ham haueð* [How it stands about carnal temptations, if she has them] (OED: *Ancrene Riwle*: line 344).

   By means of metaphorization, locative relations, which represented the mutual physical spatial arrangement of two or several objects/subjects, were transformed into abstract relations, which have become established and are currently dominating among other functions of *ABOUT*. Further on, only some superficial modifications have been registered within the range of the existing functions of *ABOUT* (see (6)) or the transposition of the adverb *ABOUT* into the preposition within the primarily adverbial meaning 'of a point in a scale of quantity' (see (7)):

(6)  *Vor hi zyeþ briȝtliche and ine hare herten, and al abote ham.* [For they see
     clearly into their hearts and all about them.] (HCET: Michel, D.: *Ayenbite of
     Inwyt*: line 150);

(7)  *How tall was she? Jul. About my stature.* (OED: Shakespeare, W.: *The Two
     Gentlemen of Verona*, iv: line 163).

As the functions implemented by both the preposition and the adverb *ABOUT*
are almost identical, I presuppose that their development did not occur in
parallel, within each grammatical category individually, but it is the result of
functional transposition from one category into another.

## The adverb ABOUT

According to *The OED*, the adverb *ABOUT* is registered around 1000 in the
meaning of 'round':

(8)  *Seo firmament tyrnð symle onbutan us … & ealle ða steorran … turniað
     onbutan mid hyre.* [The firmament turns perpetually about us … and all the
     stars … turn about with it.] (OED: Ælfric: *Manual of Astronomy*: line 10).

However, following the results of the current research, one of the first meanings
of the adverb *ABOUT* was 'all round/on every side':

(9)  *… ac oftrædlice he wæs mid hloþum on hi hergende, & onbutan sierwende oþ
     hie eft totwæmde wæron* [but frequently he was with troops on plundering,
     and scouting about, till they were separated] (HCET: Anonymous: Ælfred's
     *Orosius*: line 796).

It testifies that primarily the adverb *ABOUT* represented the seme of
locality, which at that time was intrinsic to the category of preposition (see
(9)). The fact that *ABOUT* was used in the language as a preposition and an
adverb does not let us draw categorical conclusions even on the basis of the
diachronic corpus analysis. To define the primary PoS *ABOUT* belongs to, it
is feasible to carry out the comparative semantic analysis of the OE lexical
units that contain the component *UTAN* in their structure, viz. *EMBUTAN*,
*YMBUTAN*, *BE-UTAN*, *ONBUTAN*, and *ABUTAN*. Apart from the common
element *UTAN*, they include locative prepositions: *EMB*, *YMB*, *BE*, *ON + BE*,
and *A + BE* respectively. It proves that *EMBUTAN*, *YMBUTAN*, *BE-UTAN*,
*ONBUTAN*, and *ABUTAN* not only comprise the seme of locality but also
represent the identical categories, as they all follow the same structure:
*preposition(s) (locative) + UTAN*. *ONBUTAN* and *ABUTAN* behaved both as

locative prepositions and adverbs, whereas *EMBUTAN* and *BE-UTAN* were used only as locative prepositions:

(10) *Guton embútan ðæt weofod* [They poured (the blood of the calf) round the altar] (BTASD);

(11) *Ða be-útan beóþ earce bordum* [That about are the boards of the Arc] (BTASD).

*YMBUTAN* represented both the preposition and the adverb; however, the seme of locality was inherent exclusively to the preposition (see (12)), whereas the adverb functioned in the meaning 'alone' (see (13)):

(12) *and ymbútan ðone weall is se mǽsta díc* [and about the wall is the great dike] (BTASD);

(13) *Fýr bið ymbútan on ǽghwylcum* [Fire is about on everyone] (BTASD).

The five lexical units under analysis function as the prepositions and represent the seme of locality, and only two of them are registered as the adverbs and aimed at the implementation of locative relations. It proves that *ONBUTAN* and *ABUTAN* were primarily prepositions, which later transposed into adverb.

At first, the development of the transposed adverb *ABOUT* was grounded on the seme of locality, which formed the frame for further functional transposition:

(14) *& se cyng mid his here ferde æfter & besætt þone castel abutan mid swiðe mycele here fulle six wucan* [and the king with his army went after and beset the castle about with a large force full six weeks] (OED: *The AS Chronicle* (Laud. MS.): line 1090);

(15) *Þa bi-sæh þat wif abuten; whar þe eotend come buȝen.* [Then looked the woman about, where the giant should arrive.] (OED: *Layamon's Brut*: line 26);

(16) *Arwen fluȝen ouer wal al abuten ouer al.* [Arrows fly over wall all about over all.] (OED: *Layamon's Brut*: line 12577).

Examples 14–16 showcase the locative relations within the meanings of 'around the outside', 'all round', 'on any side', 'near', i.e. they actualize the same functions as the preposition *ABOUT* does when its complement is already mentioned in the context or is abstract.

By means of metaphorization carried out on the basis of the locative meaning 'without defining the exact direction, location' (see (17)), a new generalized meaning, 'nearly', 'approximately' appeared and was used to provide undefined information concerning the number or the temporal relations (see (18)):

(17) *And þanon wendon in Wiht-land, and þær him ferdon on buton swa swa hi sylf woldon.* [And thence went into Wight land, and there they roved on about, even as they themselves would.] (OED: *The AS Chronicle* (Laud. MS.): line 1001);

(18) *Man slóh ðær mycel wæl, abutan feower hund manna, oðða fife.* [A major force was slain there, about four hundred men, or five.] (OED: *The AS Chronicle* (Cotton MS.): para. 1055).

In example (17), *ABOUT* represents the meaning 'in a circuitous, winding or indefinite course', and in example (18) it denotes an undefined number of people. The use of the adverb *ABOUT* for denoting undefined/ambiguous notions contributed to its functioning as a constituent of phrasal verbs, where the ambiguous semantics of the unit allowed it either to be used within the frames of the existing functions or to represent metaphorical meanings that have already been institutionalized in the language.

## 2. Diachronic corpus analysis

*ABOUT* emerged in the second stage (850–950) of the OE period as a representative of the categories of the preposition (see (19)) and the adverb (see (20)):

(19) *& foron west onbutan þæt hie gedydon innan Sæferne muþan* [and went west about till they entered into the Mouth of the Severn] (HCET: Anonymous: *Chronicle MS A Early* (O2): line 1530);

(20) *& foran to þære byrig æt Wigingamere, & ymbsæton hie utan, and fuhton lange on dæg on, & namon þone ceap onbutan* [and went to the stronghold at Wigmore and besieged it, and fought it long into the day, and seized the cattle about] (HCET: Anonymous: *Chronicle MS A Early* (O2): line 1604);

Despite the fact that the complement *WEST* precedes it, *ABOUT* functions as the preposition (see (19)), which is explained by the peculiarities of the OE word order in the sentence. In example (20), the semantics of *ONBUTAN* is sufficient enough to omit the repetition of the indicated place, *WIGINGAMERE*, or to substitute it with other nouns. Another option used for omitting the complement is the introduction of the desemantized *THERE* (see (21)) that contributed to the development of the lexical units *THEREABOUT/THEREABOUTS*:

(21) *& slogon monige men æt Hocneratune, & þær onbutan* [and slew many men at Hookerton and there about] (HCET: Anonymous: *Chronicle MS A Early* (O2): line 1521);

Therefore, the preposition *ABOUT* by means of lexicalization (activating its semantic components) and grammaticalization (applying the desemantized *THERE*) was undergoing functional transposition into adverb.

The second half of the OE period is characterized by a higher frequency of *ABOUT* and a parallel growth of the preposition and the adverb:

(22) *seo gæð onbutan ðæt land ðe is gehaten Euilað* [it goes about the land that is called Havilah] (HCET: Ælfric: *The Old Testament*: line 115);

(23) *… se ne gæð næfre adune under ðissere eorðan swa swa oðre tunglan doð. Ac he went abutan hwilon up hwilon adune* [… it never goes down under the earth, as other stars do. But it goes about sometimes up, sometimes down] (HCET: Ælfric: *De Temporibus Anni*: line 551);

In sentence (23), the adverb *ABUTAN* is actually used in the function of a modern particle. If one analyses the part of the sentence "Ac he went abutan hwilon up hwilon adune", it would appear that to interpret the phrase "went abutan" correctly, it is necessary to know the exact meaning thereof. Studying the sentence in discourse, it becomes clear that *ABUTAN* is not a particle but an adverb that was transposed from the category of the preposition by means of lexicalization, due to the extension and specification of its own meaning and the presence of the antecedent:

(24) *Seo firmamentum tyrnð symle onbutan us under ðyssere eorðan & bufon* [The firmament turns perpetually about us under the earth and above] (HCET: Ælfric: *De Temporibus Anni*: line 343);

(25) *Feower & twentig tida beoð agane, þæt is an dæg & an niht, ær ðan ðe heo beo æne ymbtyrnd & ealle ða steorran þe hire on fæste sind turniað onbutan mid hire.* [Four and twenty hours have passed, that is, one day and one night, before it is once turned round and all the stars which are fixed in it turns about with it.] (HCET: Ælfric: *De Temporibus Anni*: line 346).

The use of the adverb in example (25) is explained by the presence of the antecedent *US* in "tyrnð symle onbutan us" in example (24). It means that *ABOUT* in the word group "turn about" is not an adverbial particle but an adverb, the meaning of which can be reproduced from the context. Such structures are widespread, which can be explained by the high frequency of their verbal parts, as well as their idiomatization, i.e. such constructions have undergone lexicalization. Another factor that confirms the process of lexicalization is fossilization (see (26)), when the adverb loses the ability to express certain meanings; however, being already idiomatized, they are still functioning within certain phrasal verbs:

(26) *Þei gredyly gon abowt to geyt al þat þey may* [They greedily go about to gate
all that they may] (OED: *Apology for Lollard Doctrines*: line 113).

The phrase "go about" in sentence (26) is used to express 'to bestir', the
meaning which had been institutionalized and came into active use, but later it
has fossilized, and now is referred to as obsolete.

At the end of the OE period, the frequency of the transposed adverb *ABOUT*
hovers at the same level due to a frequent use of *ABOUT* in certain constructions:

(27) *Syððan he ferde abutan swa þæt he com to Lammæssan to Searebyrig*
[Afterwards, he journeyed about so that he came to Salisbury for Lammas]
(HCET: Anonymous: Chronicle MS E (Late): line 309);

(28) *Her on þissum geare ferde se here abutan Defnanscire.* [Then on this year
went the army about Devonshire] (HCET: Anonymous: Chronicle MS E
(Early): line 130).

The lexical item *ABUTAN* in "feran abutan" functions as an adverb and a
preposition, and this admittedly testifies to the absence of any preconditions for
the further introduction of the term particle. Moreover, the adverb and preposition
*ABOUT* are used in the sentences in which they are not connected with the verbs
of motion:

(29) *& se cyng lett awestan þæt land abutan þa sæ* [and the king laid awaste the
land about the sea] (HCET: Anonymous: Chronicle MS E (Late): line 271).

Over 50% of the examples, registered during this period, are the combinations
of the adverb or preposition *ABUTAN* with the verbs of motion *FERAN*, *WENDAN*,
and *CUMAN* or the verb *SITTAN*. It proves that the semantics of *ABOUT* was
limited to a certain group of verbs that propelled its usage in combination with
them. This fact stimulated the process of idiomatization of constructions where
both the adverb and the preposition *ABOUT* are used, preventing the semantic
expansion of *ABOUT*. The general correlation of the adverb and the preposition
*ABOUT* in OE is represented in *Table 1*.

**Table 1.** *Correlation of the preposition and the adverb ABOUT in Old English*

| PoS | –850 | 850–950 | 950–1050 | 1050–1150 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preposition | ---- | *57.1%* | *53.3%* | *53.8%* |
| Adverb | ---- | *42.9%* | *46.7%* | *46.2%* |

The data in *Table 1* fail to ascertain the initial category of *ABOUT* by means
of diachronic corpus analysis. Due to reconstruction of the historical semantics

of *ABOUT*, it has been discovered that *ABOUT* was initially formed as a preposition. In the first half of the OE period, the correlation of the adverb and the preposition *ABOUT* was almost the same, and this showcases a high level of institutionalization of both categories. At the end of the OE period, the frequency of the adverb *ABOUT* came close to that of the preposition, owing to the use of the former in combination with the verbs of motion.

The early ME period is characterized by a reduction of constructions in which *ABOUT* is directly connected with the verbs of motion due to the sporadic use of the adverb *ABOUT* in them (see (30)) and the further development of temporal meanings (see (31)):

(30) *Constu bulden a bur inwið þin heorte al abute bitrumet …* [Can you build a city within your heart, all about surrounded …] (HCET: Anonymous: *Katherine*: line 271);

(31) *… þe schal abute midniht makie þe to iwakien* [… which shall wake you up about midnight] (HCET: Anonymous: *Hali Meidhad*: line 724).

During the next stage of the ME period, temporality gained a foothold, and a reduced frequency of the preposition can be noticed:

(32) *Aboute seint ambrose day ido was al þis.* [about Saint Ambrose day was done all this] (HCET: Gloucester, R.: *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*: line 726).

The reduction is also explained by the functional transposition of the preposition *ABOUT* into adverb, which takes place due to the frequent use of the combination *verb of motion + ABOUT* (see (33)) and the emergence of the combination *verb of perception + ABOUT* (see (34)):

(33) *He bitok him sir henri is sone to be is compainoun Wiþ him to wende aboute to sywe him vp & doun.* [Sir Henri betook his son to be his companion with him to walk about to scatter with him up and down] (HCET: Gloucester, R.: *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*: line 944);

(34) *Þis guode sone souȝhte wide a-boute* [This good son searched wide about] (HCET: Anonymous: *The Life of St. Edmund*: line 164).

During the previous stages, the adverb *ABOUT* was used together with the verbs of motion only when there was an antecedent in discourse. The early ME period is marked by lexicalization of the adverb *ABOUT*, i.e. the extension of its semantics and the ability to denote personal deixis, which contributed to its development and enhancement within the category of the adverb.

The extension of the semantics contributed to the frequency growth of the adverb, as well as the lexical unit *ABOUT* in general. On the other hand, various changes and shifts in genres and types of discourse are observed, and they make the specification of the storytelling, time and place of action, etc. come to the foreground. Therefore, these changes in discourse and storytelling testify to the necessity to specify both the speech and certain constructions that have previously been characterized by the abstract semantics of the adverb *ABOUT*:

(35) *For ȝif þei ben born in right mariage the serpentes gon aboute hem & don hem non harm* [For if they been born in right marriage the snakes go about them and do them no harm] (HCET: Anonymous: *Mandeville's Travels*: line 271);

(36) *Therfor the Jewis camen aboute hym, and seiden to hym* [Therefore, the Jews came about him and said to him] (HCET: Anonymous: *The New Testament* (Wycliffe): line 908).

The adverb *ABOUT* is also developing new additional functions that cannot be introduced by the preposition:

(37) *we schul be aboute to make vs clene of cotidian defautes by* [we shall be about to make us clean of daily faults by] (HCET: Anonymous: *Aelred of Rielvaux's De Institutione Inclusarum* (3): line 107).

The extension of the semantics within the categories of the adverb and preposition *ABOUT* in ME contributed to the general growth of their use in discourse. However, the need to specify the discourse details made authors use more prepositions with the noun phrase complements, which caused the reduction of the transposed adverbs, which has been clearly testified by the statistics (see *Table 2*).

**Table 2.** *Correlation of the preposition and the adverb ABOUT in Middle English*

| PoS | 1150–1250 | 1250–1350 | 1350–1420 | 1420–1500 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preposition | *64%* | *54.8%* | *65.9%* | *62.2%* |
| Adverb | *36%* | *45.2%* | *34.1%* | *37.8%* |

An abrupt reduction in the use of the adverb *ABOUT* occurred at the beginning of the ME period. It happened due to the decline of the number of combination *motion verb + ABOUT*, which, in fact, contributed to the functional transposition. An increase in the use of the adverb is registered in the next stage, when the preposition *ABOUT* started being transposed into the adverb by means of new

constructions in which *ABOUT* was used with verbs of perception, and this led to a stabilization between the frequencies of both categories.

The development of the function 'in reference to' (see (38)), which took place in the ME period, significantly directed the correlation between the adverb and the preposition in the EModE period, whereas the function 'be ready to do smth' (see (39)) did not become widespread, and this has caused the dissonance between the categories:

(38) *Sey þus aboute þe hors* [Say in this way about the horse] (HCET: Anonymous: *A Treatise on Horses*: line 196);

(39) *… and put vs out of the trewth of the thynge or matter, that we be aboute to talke of* [… and put us out of the truth of the thing or matter, that we be about to talk of] (HCET: Colville, G.: *Boethius*: line 148).

In more than one third of all examples, *ABOUT* is registered in the function 'in reference to', which had a significant impact on the general correlation between the adverbs and prepositions. This tendency is observed throughout the ModE period (see *Table 3*).

**Table 3.** *Correlation of the preposition and the adverb ABOUT in Modern English*

| PoS | 1500–1570 | 1570–1640 | 1640–1710 | 1710–1780 | 1780–1850 | 1850–1920 | 1920–1990 | 1990–2020 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preposition | *77.5%* | *76.3%* | *73.2%* | *70.2%* | *68.7%* | *70.7%* | *75.7%* | *83.7%* |
| Adverb | *22.5%* | *23.7%* | *26.8%* | *29.8%* | *31.3%* | *29.3%* | *24.3%* | *16.3%* |

Therefore, due to the newly developed function 'in reference to', the frequency of the prepositions has increased by over 10% if compared with the ME period. In the second half of the ModE period, there is a slight decline in the use of the prepositions, which is connected with the rise in number of phrasal verbs, registered at that time. New functions or constructions – if they happened to be institutionalized in the language – were at first characterized by some growth, but later their frequency has stabilized. The same tendency can be observed within the category of the adverbs, namely between the adverbs and so-called particles. Their correlation at the end of the EModE period was 13% for particles and 87% for adverbs. A century later, this correlation has dramatically changed – 39% to 61% respectively –, but then the process of stabilization started, and the proportion 30% to 70% became fixed. Such burst of activity and frequency is a common phenomenon both within the category and between the categories.

As a result, the development of functional transposition in English is represented in *Graph 1*.
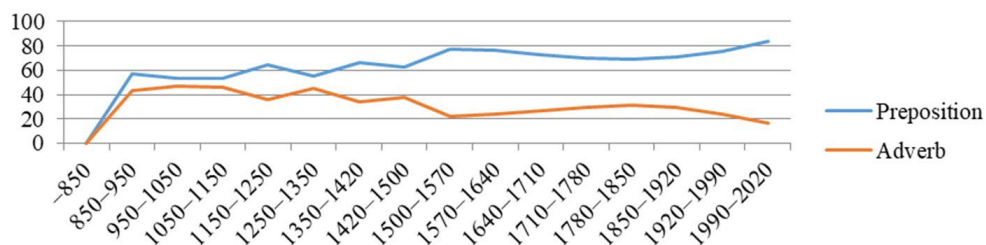
**Graph 1.** *Functional transposition of ABOUT in the English language*

The graphical representation illustrates the interwoven evolution of the initial and transposed categories of *ABOUT* since its emergence as a preposition and its transposition into an adverb. Despite minor divergences in their use throughout history, a turning point is registered at the beginning of the EModE period, when the development pathways of the categories became finally determined. From then on, the interdependent development has been undergoing subtle fluctuations and the transposed category of the adverb has been shrinking to the current figures of around 15%.

# Conclusions

The paper has confirmed the assumption that *ABOUT* was formed as a preposition of locality in early OE and forthwith was transposed into an adverb. It means that in 850–950, the adverb *ABOUT* was already institutionalized in the language, at least within its fundamental meanings and functions. In the OE period, the correlation between the initial and transposed PoS remained almost unchanged. This is explained by a repeated use of the adverb *ABOUT* in combination with verbs of motion, which frequently functioned in discourse.

In the early ME period, the abovementioned tendency started diminishing, and the number of adverbs decreased by 10%. Previously dominating and numerous constructions of *verbs of motion + adverb ABOUT* gave place to the constructions *verbs of perception + adverb ABOUT*, which at first increased the number of the adverbs *ABOUT* in discourse, but later the correlation between the prepositions and adverbs stabilized and returned to the previous indices. This can be explained by a general tendency that new meanings or functions of lexical units are exposed to some growth because the speakers test them considering whether to institutionalize or obsolete them. Such tendency is observed in the case of the adverb *ABOUT*, whose new functions found their place in the language; however, they did not change the overall statistics of the adverb against the preposition.

The beginning of the ModE period is marked by the introduction of a new function, 'in reference to', in the category of the preposition. Contrary to the previously described case, this function found its place among other functions and led to a substantial growth in the frequency of the preposition *ABOUT*. A new correlation between the categories has been roughly fixed and fluctuated within the range of -7% to +7% over the last 500 years.

From the beginning of the LModE period, the usage of *ABOUT* has started its rapid increase. Thus, the lexical unit *ABOUT* was registered 639 times in 1810; in 1820 − 6,211; in the 1870s − 26,147; in the 1920s − 45,850; in the 1970s − 54,008; in the 2020s − 70,946. So, the number of the unit *ABOUT* has increased by 10 times over the last 200 years. It is seen that the growth rate has been slowing down; thus, the use of *ABOUT* has reached its plateau.

Therefore, further research on functional transposition in the English language is to be focused on linguistic and extralinguistic factors that predetermine the use of *ABOUT* as preposition and as adverb throughout the most important stages of its development.

# References

Aldai, Gontzal–Soren Wichmann. 2018. Statistical observations on hierarchies of transitivity. *Folia Linguistica* 52(2): 249–281.

Balteiro, Isabel. 2007. *A Contribution to the Study of Conversion in English.* Münster–New York–Munich–Berlin: Waxmann.

Bloch-Trojnar, Maria. 2013. *The Mechanics of Transposition. A Study of Action Nominalisations in English, Irish and Polish.* Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.

Braasch, Anna. 2008. *Danish Monolingual Lexicon.* Copenhagen: CST.

Dubinsky, Stanley–Kemp Williams. 1995. Recategorization of prepositions as complementizers: The case of temporal prepositions in English. *Linguistic Inquiry* 26(1): 125–137.

Hacken, ten Pius. 2015. Transposition and Limits of Word Formation. In Laurie Bauer et al. (eds), *Semantics of Complex Words*, 187–216. Dordrecht: Springer.

Hogg, Richard–David Denison. 2006. *A History of the English Language.* Cambridge: CUP.

Ježek, Elisabetta–Paolo Ramat. 2009. On parts-of-speech transcategorization. *Folia Linguistica* 43(2): 391–416.

Komarek, Miroslav. 1999. Autosemantic parts of speech in Czech. In Eva Hajicova (ed.), *Prague Linguistic Circle Papers*, 195–210. Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing.

Kovbasko, Yurii. 2022a. Functional transposition of 'after' from a diachronic perspective. *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture* 12: 66–85.

—— 2022b. Functional transposition of 'on' from a diachronic perspective. *Studies about Languages* 40: 75–89.

Lipka, Leonhard. 1990. *An Outline of English Lexicology. Lexical Structure, Word Semantics, and Word-Formation*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer.

Marchand, Hans. 1960. *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation. A Synchronic-Diachronic Approach*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Rastorgueva, Tatiana. 2003. *History of the English Language.* 2nd ed. Moscow: Astrel.

Robert, Stephane. 2016. Transcategoriality: A functional explanation and some typological insights. *LLACAN – Langage, Langues et Cultures d'Afrique Noire*: 1–12.

Sapir, Edward. 1921. *Language. An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Tesniere, Lucien. 1959. *Elements of Structural Syntax*. Amsterdam–Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Valera, Salvador. 2017. Conversion and figurative extension of meaning. *SKASE Journal of Theoretical Linguistics* [online] 14(2): 1–17.

Vea, Raquel. 2015. Recategorization in the recursive formation of Old English nouns and adjectives. *RAEL: Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada* 1(14): 67–81.

Žele, Andreja. 2017. Conversion as an example of grammar in a dictionary (as exemplified by Slovene) [in Russian]. *Studia z Filologii Polskiej i Słowiańskiej* 52: 242–263.


**Dictionaries and corpora**

Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online. *https://bosworthtoller.com/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. *https://www.ahdictionary.com/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The British National Corpus. *http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. *https://dictionary.cambridge.org/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Collins English Dictionary. *https://www.collinsdictionary.com/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Corpus of Historical American English. *https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Corpus of Late Modern English Texts. *https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/clmet3_0.htm* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts. *https://www.helsinkicorpus.arts.gla.ac.uk* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. *https://www.ldoceonline.com/* (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Macmillan English Dictionary. https://www.macmillandictionary.com/ (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/ (Last accessed: 20 January 2022).

The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 2009. Oxford: Clarendon Press.