

An Uncouth Preposition

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Like all other infants, *at* was innocent at birth. A cognate of Latin *ad*, it bore mainly the same sort of spatial and directional connotations as its Latin and Germanic counterparts. In common with most other prepositions, its field of reference was anchored in the geometry of space, and its extensions were by fairly obvious metaphorical steps from the concrete world to the abstract: *at the corner*, *at the meeting*; *at the door*, *at the fight*; *to shoot at*, *to look at*. These senses are still with us: punctual location, as in *at the top*, destination as in *to arrive at*. If we say *They sleep at night* but not **They work at day* it is probably because the night, viewed as the time of sleep, is not a period of conscious activity and is mentally shrunk to a point.

But unlike other prepositions, *at* has been leading toward a rather strange outcome in recent centuries, a tendency that has become pronounced in our time: it has picked up an affective nuance that shades many of its uses and has helped to render obsolete certain others that do not conform to it. In terms of Osgood's semantic scales,¹ *at* has shifted toward the negative pole on the dimension of *e v a l u a t i o n*: if there is the possibility of a contrast between a neutral or a pleasant meaning and an unpleasant one, *at* tends to assume the latter.

As a form becomes ungainly, it becomes more so when highlighted. The most conspicuous position for a preposition in English is at the end of the phrase; it is not only exposed there, but it takes on its unreduced pronunciation. With *at*, this means [æt] rather than [ət],

¹ See for example Charles E. OSGOOD, "Interpersonal Verbs and Interpersonal Behavior", in J. L. COWAN (ed.), *Studies in thought and language*, pp. 133-228, Tucson, Arizona, University of Arizona Press, 1970.

and many speakers avoid it who would not avoid another preposition at that spot:

This is a good place to be in.
 ?This is a good place to be at.

Does the law say what subject I must talk about?
 ?Does the law say what speed I must pass at?

Polite English replaces the last example with *Does the law say at what speed I must pass?* Among the "aggressive" uses of *at* to be treated below, those with full [æt] are most effective, and in some cases are the only ones possible. Thus *At 'im!* or *At the bastard!* as a rallying cry to attack is normal but **At James!* is worse than ?*At Leander!* because of the difficulty of avoiding [ət] before a following stressed syllable. *Have át [æt] 'im!* is normal, but **Háve at [ət] 'im!* is not, despite the absence of any general phonological restriction (cf. *Lóok at [ət] 'im!*).

This effect of the full vowel makes one suspect some kind of phonesthematic tie. The rivalry between [æ] and [a:] is probably involved: [a:nt] is more "elegant" for *aunt* than [ænt] is —[æ] thus comes to be socially marked². But probably the strongest contribution is gestural: [æ] —and the jaw-dropping that accompanies it— is an expression of annoyance and disgust. This reinforces and is reinforced by the cluster of words riming with [æt], the majority of which have at least one sense that is negatively evaluative: *bat* (*that old bat*), *fat*, *gat*, *gnat*, *rat*, *brat*, *drat*, *prat*, *blat*, *splat*, etc. Even the more or less neutral ones are shaded somewhat: *mat* 'tangle', *hat* as in *old-hat*, *to pat one on the back* for 'lukewarm approval', *pat* as an adjective most often encountered in the phrase *too pat*, etc.

Still, the full vowel only heightens a negativity that pervades the uses of *at* regardless of its pronunciation. The vowel is reduced in the following, yet *at* is more negative than *to*:

I wondered about his acceptance of the job.
 I wondered at his acceptance of the job.

The first could be for any condition of curiosity; the second suggests that the acceptance has aroused suspicions. Similarly, *at* contrasts with zero before *any* referring to time. It would be contradictory to say

² See Leonard FORSTER, "The Symbolic Vowel in *ass*, *bastard*, *Catholic*, and *Others*", *English Studies* 30 (1949), 86-91.

• Come at any old time – we'll be glad to see you.

which is normal without *at*; but *at* is normal with a negative command:

You are not to come at any time.

Consequently the traffic signs, seen in many areas, which omit *at* to save space, are distinctly odd: *No parking any time*. Compared with *always* and *never*, *at all times* and *at no time* are markedly stringent:

You must always carry your identification with you; never be without it.
You must at all times carry your identification with you; at no time be without it.

For a more systematic look, it will help to key our observations to the definitions and examples provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). A good place to start is with definition 21, the phrases expressing 'mutual relations' – these, with their dates, almost seem designed to show the shift to negativity:

1305	all at one rede	1600	at mortal war
1369	at one accord	1671	at variance
1493	at debate	1853	at battle
1539	at contention	1868	at cross purposes
1559	at hate		

The literal senses (spatial nearness, approach, contact) and their close analogs do not necessarily show any evaluative contamination – like other prepositions, *at* is protected by being, up to a point, a formative in many fairly tight collocations; prepositions tend to resemble affixes in this respect, and not to show a consistent meaning of their own. So in addition to the purely locative *at home*, *at a wedding*, *at a mother's breast*, *at the rear*, *at right angles*, and the extended *at breakfast*, *at full speed*, *at five dollars each*, *at fifty* (age), we have neutral stereotypes like *at hand*, *at law*, *at work*, *at a time* (*two at a time*), *at leisure*. But without a careful study of contexts it is hard to say that even a number of these may be totally unaffected. Certainly there are a number of stereotypes that at first blush seem to be neutral but on examination turn out to be tinged with an unfavorable connotation. *At ease* apparently means 'relaxed', but its most familiar context of situation is as a military order, and

its most frequent verbal context is the phrase *ill at ease*. *At liberty* (*You are at liberty to do as you please*, *The crew is at liberty*) means 'free' but in a restricted and rather unpleasantly formal way. *At least* makes a grudging concession; *at most* and *at best* imply 'not as many' and 'not as good' as might be —we do not say * *At best it is wonderful*, but rather *At best it is only fair* (*In his finest moments he was wonderful* does not suggest the not-so-good other moments). Even the "neutral" expressions have a surprising tendency to lean leftward. A person desiring an interview who is told that the person he wishes to see is *at work* is less apt to insist than if told he *is working*: *He's at work but I guess I can interrupt him* is a bit incongruous by comparison with *He's working but I guess I can interrupt him*. (*At work* meaning 'away on the job' is more strongly locative.) And here we see the selective pressures that may eliminate a contrary idiom: no one would say, now, in American English, that the children are *at play*; we would say they *are playing*. (The larger expressions *at work* or *at play* and *hard at work* survive as sheltered collocations). The neutral *at this rate* in *At this rate the power can be safely cut off* becomes tendentious when used figuratively: *At this rate it will take us all night* (the favorable *At this rate we'll finish in a jiffy* is not quite so likely). *To be priced at* seems neutral, yet a bargain is more apt to be expressed with *for* (*You can get it for fifty cents a gallon*) and a stiff price with *at* (*What do you think of milk at two dollars a gallon!*); *at that price* is more likely an unfavorable price, whether high or low.

The more obviously unfavorable collocations are abundant. *At large* (apart from set phrases like *delegate-at-large*) is seldom used except to refer to criminals on the loose. *At random* suggests carelessness; there appears to be no antonym with *at*. *At a stretch* is used for an extremely unlikely possibility. *At an advantage* is seldom heard; *at a disadvantage* is commonplace. The phrases that refer to 'will or disposition' (*OED* definition 24) are mostly used for one person's being in subjection to another: *at one's will*, *pleasure*, *mercy*, *disposal*, *command*, *beck* and *call*. *To set at nought* is standard for 'to depreciate'; no antonym appears using *at*. Several expressions refer to conflict: *at odds*, *at loggerheads*, *at outs*, *at issue*, *at sword's point*. One may be *young in heart* but one is *sick at heart* and *sick at one's stomach*. One who is cornered is *at bay*. The seedily dressed are *out at elbows* and *down at heels*. One who is perplexed is *at a loss*. Desperate measures are taken *at all costs*, and there is no pleasure in what one is *at pains* to do. *At that* introduces a contingency that is worse than one expected (*At that* —'even though they provided **all the capital**

he needed'— *he made a ~~batch~~ of it*). The pro-tobacco forces implied that the proponents of the California no-smoking initiative were up to no good in their widely displayed billboard ad: *They're at it again*. We say *Look at you!* in strong disapproval of someone's appearance or stance.

So much for stereotypes. What of the more productive uses of *at*? These can more readily be identified through some specific content of *at* that contributes as much to the meaning of the verb phrase as the verb itself. Such a sense is the one defined by the *OED* (definition 13) as 'in the direction of, towards, so as to get *at*; often with hostile intent, "against"'. With *to be* or *to keep* and a personal object, this is the only meaning possible:

The midges are at me again. (*OED* definition 3 c).
Why do they keep at me all the time?

The preposition here usually has the full vowel [æ], and the resemblance to other verb-like particles such as *Out!*, *Up!*, *Back!* is obvious (compare *At 'im!*, above). The same use can be found with nonpersonal objects, and this creates a potential contrast with the purely locative, where either [æt] or [ət] is normal: *He's at [æt] that lecture again* can mean either that he is there or that he is attacking it; *He's at [ət] that lecture again* can mean only that he is there.

But the main effect of this "hostile" sense of *at* is in the way it collocates with verbs that are congruent in meaning, for example

run	aim	strike
rush	let drive	kick
go	let fly	hammer
throw	lunge	
shoot	thrust	

At is preferred by verbs that signify 'motion toward attainment' when the action is abrupt or desperate: one may *reach for* something gently, but to *reach at* it is in spite of odds—and similarly *snatch*, *clutch*, *catch at* (*OED* definition 14). *At* refers to aim, and the hostility arises from the intent embodied in aiming. Thus one can say

He intended the ball for the net, but accidentally hit it to the court.

but to say *at the court* here might be understood to contradict *accidentally*. Overtly physical hostility shades off to verbal, gestural, or

attitudinal: one may *shout to* or *at* someone, but the less polite *yell* normally calls for *at*, and *yak*, *scream*, *shriek*, *scold*, and *rail* demand it (*She railed at me*, **She railed to me*). One may *gripe*, *complain*, *grumble*, *grouse*, *fret*, *fuss*, *fume*, *chafe*, *growl*, *bellyache*, *crab*, or *clamor* ABOUT something TO someone, but with *at* the action is directed TOWARD the offending thing or person. There is a set of verbs that fall somewhere near this delocutive class which displays interesting correlations with degree of force and degree of unfavorableness. It includes *laugh*, *smile*, *scowl*, *sneer*, and their synonyms. The literally unfriendly call for *at* (unless they are transitive to begin with, like *pan*, *flout*, and *scorn*):

scoff	jeer	scowl
snort	gibe	frown
sneer	mock	hiss
sniff	fleer	hoot

These PROJECT an emotion (of disapproval). The others overlap with a large class defined by the *OED* (definition 36, but applying equally to 35) as 'introducing what is at once the exciting cause and the object of active emotions' —a cause turned backward on itself. *To be angry* is the paradigm case. One who is *angry at* something both has one's emotions aroused BY it and reflects those emotions back UPON it. And this duality is incorporated in *at*, whose original locative sense was adapted to the causal aspect (anger UPON THE OCCASION OF the cause) and whose aggressive tendencies have brought it increasingly toward the projective aspect. We can still say *I was startled at what they said*, but the *at* (unlike *by*) suggests an attitude of rejection. This is more pronounced with the verb that are more frequent and that yield more to the popular tendency: *to be surprised at* can be used in almost purely a projective sense:

I'm surprised at you! How could you behave that way!

* *I was agreeably surprised at her* is contradictory, in spite of the fact that one can say *I was agreeably surprised when I saw her performance*. The purely causal *They exulted at their triumph* sounds a bit quaint today, and if *rejoice at* is close to the purely causal, one must remember that it is not a colloquial expression. Nouns such as *joy*, *satisfaction*, *happiness*, and *pleasure* seem to be restricting *at* more or less to a temporal usage that relates to a point in time: here *at* is better able to defend its older meaning, given the kinship between point-in-time and point-in-space. So we can say *our pleasure (happiness, joy, satisfaction) at seeing them married*, but *our pleasure*

(etc.) *at their marriage* is now a shade off the mark. On the other hand, as might be predicted, the negations of these are fine with noun objects: *our displeasure (dissatisfaction, irritation, vexation, impatience, unhappiness, annoyance, sorrow) at their marriage*. The strongest of these, *annoyance* and *irritation*, can be used with personal objects as well: *our annoyance at John* is sharper than *our annoyance with John*.

Getting back to the *laugh-smile* class, we find these also embodying cause and projection. Since the emotion is externalized (a laugh is audible, a smile is visible), the notion of aiming it at an object—the basic directional sense of *at*—makes favorable as well as unfavorable senses possible:

They giggled (tittered, simpered, snickered) at the boys (at what the boys said).

Chuckle, as a less outwardly-directed manifestation of emotion, is closer to cause than to projection (*They chuckled at what the boys said*), and is not apt to be used with a personal object (?*They chuckled at the boys*). Similarly with *to split one's sides*. But despite the comparatively firm hold on the directional sense, there is a tendency here, too, for the verbs to be used more often for derision than for applause. Even the almost eulogistic *smile* can be used in this way—though *She smiled at him* is benign, *She smiled at his awkwardness* is mild ridicule. And though *They laughed (guffawed) at the clowns (at the joke)* is applause of a sort, *They laughed (guffawed) at the boys* is probably derision. Similarly *We were amused at them*. Here again, as with *annoyed, angry*, etc., *with* is softer: *We were amused with them*. In fact, *with* and *at* seem to have moved in opposite directions. *With* originally signified 'opposition', as it still does in some protected collocations: *to fight (contend, struggle, war) with*. The current state of affairs is embodied in the locution *We're not laughing at you, we're laughing with you*.

There remains a use of *at* typical of a particular verb, *to play*, originally employed in a neutral sense but with a developing negative bias that affects other verbs as well. This may be partly by contamination from *play at*, or *play at* may reflect what has happened to the other verbs. In any case they constitute an open class, though there are favored collocations: *work at, read at, saw at, study at*, etc. It appears that originally—as in French today—one might *play a game*, but if the name of the game was given, one *played at* it. The OED cites Chaucer (definition 16 of *play*): *For fals Fortune hath*

pleyd a game Atte ches with me; an earlier citation (definition 17) is to *play at bal*. If the surviving expression *Two can play at that game* is an indication, *at* might also be used with *game*; and there was no negative connotation. But—probably in part at least as a form of syntactic clipping—*play at* in the neutral sense has now been reduced to *play* as a transitive verb, and *play at* has taken on a trifling sense:

Do you like golf? —Oh, I've played at it from time to time, but I don't take it seriously.

So one may *read at* a book, *saw at* a piece of wood, *pick at* one's food, *write at* a letter. We see here the directional sense of *at*, which, by signifying an *a p p r o a c h* to something, comes to mean no more than an approach. Not all instances are unfavorable; some are merely iterative—a manner of acting that involves repeated approaches: one who is *working on* a thesis is doing so with concentrated attention; one who is *working at* a thesis is not necessarily trifling with it but may be coming back to it repeatedly from other responsibilities, perhaps *plugging away at* it. But the potential for triviality is there.

Finally, *at* cements its relationship to negativity by forming part of the standard negative intensifier, *at all*:

What do you think of it? — I don't like it at all.

Running through all the senses of *at* is the instability of something balanced on a point, threatening to tilt one's way, to escape one's grasp, to change for the worse.

It seems that the primary senses of *at* have caused it to fall in with a rough crowd of verbs that have little respect for their objects, and this, coupled with the phonetic misfortune of its ugly vowel, has cast a pall over *at* such as afflicts no other preposition. One rather expects affective nuances among the heavy "content" words, but it is a bit surprising to discover that even prepositions are not exempt.

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