

‘I got into the room *by means of* a picklock key and found him’

Complex Prepositions in Early Modern English

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Abstract

English complex prepositions can be subdivided into two-word and three-word sequences, the former containing an adverb, adjective or conjunction together with a simple preposition (i.e. *instead_{ADV} of_{PREP}*); and the latter being composed of a preposition + noun + preposition (i.e. *by_{PREP} means_{NOUN} of_{PREP}*) (Quirk et al. 1985: 669–670). The complex prepositions *BY WAY OF* and *BY MEANS OF* are the result of a process of grammaticalization in which they lost part of their lexical functions and later were reanalysed as functional elements expressing instrumentality (Hoffman 2005: 71–76). From an etymological point of view, these words have different backgrounds. The word *WAY*, on the one hand, can be traced back to the Old English period (c. 950), with the meaning of ‘road, path’ (*OED*). *MEAN*, on the other, is a French borrowing, first attested in 1374, with the meaning of ‘an intermediary agent or instrument’ (*OED*). As complex prepositions in English, *BY WAY OF* and *BY MEANS OF* were first attested in 1390 and 1427, respectively (*OED*).

The present paper has been conceived with the following objectives: 1) to assess the grammaticalization process by which nouns such as *WAY* and *MEAN* developed prepositional functions meaning instrumentality; 2) to analyse the use and distribution of *BY WAY OF* and *BY MEANS OF* in the History of English; and 3) to determine any likely preference in terms of the informants’ gender and social class. The source of evidence comes from the *the Corpus of Early English Correspondence* and the *Old Bailey Corpus*.

References

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