Adpositions from nouns, one way or another

Das war 'ne heiße Märzenzeit,
Trotz Regen, Schnee und alledem!

Ferdinand Freiligrath

Abstract

The standard assumption about the origin of adpositions is that they are grammaticalised from nouns or verbs in direct construction with nominal complements. But there is also a completely different kind of source and a completely different kind of reanalysis creating exactly the same kinds of forms. As here illustrated with the concessive preposition *trotz* in German, it is also possible for adpositions to be grammaticalised from extra-clausal material, namely interjections, through integration with parts of a clause – with exactly the same net result as intra-clausal grammaticalisation such as that of the English counterparts of *trotz*, *despite* or *inspite of*.

1.   SPITE

When adpositions are grammaticalised from nouns, such developments are expected to follow this canonical scenario:

(1)   ... [(Det) N$_{\text{head}}$ [NP$_{\text{dependent}}$]]$_{\text{NP}}$ ... > ... [Adp$_{\text{head}}$ [NP$_{\text{dependent}}$]]$_{\text{AP}}$ ...

The domain for the relevant reanalyses is a phrase containing a phrase: a containing phrase of the type NP (or if you will, a DP) is reanalysed as an AP (adpositional phrase). The head of this phrase, originally a noun, is reanalysed as an adposition – which essentially only entails losses: loss (or fossilisation) of inflection, loss of

modifiability and determinability, loss of aspects of lexical (concrete, particular) meaning. The dependent within this phrase remains an NP, but its relationship to the head is reanalysed as that of a "complement", from having been that of an "attribute": one concomitant of this change is that complements of adpositions are structurally obligatory, while attributes are optional.[1] Though now an adposition rather than a noun, the head remains head and continues to govern the dependent – with the overt coding of dependency, e.g., through case marking or linear order, either remaining unaltered or also remodelled from a nominal to a specifically adpositional pattern.

Concessive *in spite of* in English is a typical case of a denominal adposition grammaticalised in this way. The only additional complication, though one that is not untypical either, is that in the source construction the containing NP itself is part of an adpositional phrase where the adposition is more or less invariant; this "outer" adposition, *in*, is retained and now forms part of a complex adposition with the noun that it used to govern, itself taking an adpositional phrase with the default attributive preposition *of* as an attribute:

(1')   ... [Adp_{head} [(Det) N_{head} [$NP_{dependent}$]]$_{NP}$]$_{AP}$ ... > ... [Adp-Adp_{head} $NP_{dependent}$]$_{AP}$ ...

In due course, "outer" adpositions would be expected to merge with their adjacent ex-nouns in increasingly opaque combination or simply to be dropped.[2] Analogous cases in English, further advanced concerning the univerbation of the two adpositions and also concerning the marking of their complements, with "inner" adpositions tending to be dropped, are *instead of*, *because of*, *beside*, *behind*, *amid(st)*. In the case of *despite*, a Middle English borrowing from French and less thoroughly nativised than *spite* from the same source (which lost a syllable, and could also be verbalised, *to spite*), we have the same story, except that it also continued a bit further, with both the outer

---

[1] But then, many adpositions do dual duty also as adverbs, with adverbs syntactically distinguished from adposition by the absence of complements. Also, relational nouns, especially ones denoting inalienable possessions, may require the presence of attributes, and thus likewise blur the boundary to adpositions.
[2] Would they? With a clear majority of adpositions in English and German where such an origin is beyond doubt, at whatever diachronic depth, "outer" adpositions have been recognisably retained.

adposition (*in*) and that required by a noun head (*of*) being dropped from the original construction (*in despite of*).

Perhaps the universally most popular instantiations of this general scenario are local adpositions grammaticalised from body part nouns or other prototypical locality nouns (such as 'hut' or 'house', yielding *hos* 'at' in Scandinavian Germanic or *chez* 'at' in French).[3]

2.   TROTZ

2.1.   The German equivalent of *in spite of/despite* is *trotz*, and it is (ultimately) denominal, too. However, the way it has been transformed into an adposition is rather different, although it does exemplify typical elements of grammaticalisation. This must be common knowledge among Germanists, for it is all in Grimm & Grimm (et al.): the entire factual information for the history of *trotz* as summarised here comes from the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (vol. 11, 1952, with the relevant entries the responsibility of B. Beckmann), and there is no need for me here to reproduce chronological and dialectal details. My only aim in drawing attention to the story of *trotz* is to caution typologists – and especially those who expect constraints on crosslinguistic diversity to fall out from diachrony – against inferring UNIFORMITY OF DEVELOPMENTS from UNIFORMITY OF RESULTS.[4] If there are different pathways converging on the same destination, as if led by an invisible hand, then there must be something desirable about just being a this very place, whatever the points of departure and

---

[3] And for present purposes I prefer to remain agnostic as to the necessity of a "construct state" analysis (N-to-D movement of the erstwhile-noun-and-adposition-to-be) for such grammaticalisations and as to the plausibility of the assumption that syntax as such is diachronically completely inert, with all such developments driven by phonology and/or semantics, as proposed by Longobardi (2001).

[4] I am aware of one canonical text, Lehmann 2002: 71, where German *trotz* is in fact presented as exemplifying the canonical scenario as sketched in (1') – not on direct diachronic evidence, but on the strength of analogy, with *statt < an Statt* 'instead' and *kraft < in Kraft* 'by virtue of' as the supposed analogues. There is no doubt that *(an)statt* has come about in this way; and although I would not go so far as to suggest that each grammaticalisation has its own history, I would not take it for granted either that *kraft* and, for example, *seitens* 'on the part of' (with a de-genitival marker -*s* remaining, and with an outer-prepositional variant, *von seiten*) had exactly the same kind of history.

routes. But the points of departure and routes make for variety, and therefore bear retracing rather than only inferring.

2.2.   The ultimate origins of *Trotz*, firmly established as a noun only in Middle High German, appear to be unclear. With no plausible Germanic or Indo-European etymon, it has on phonological grounds been conjectured to be, or to have been perceived as, an expressive; and the playful coexistence of stem-vowel alternants *Trotz*, *Trutz*, and *Tratz* lends credibility to onomatopoeia as a creative or re-creative force.[5] Self-evidently *Trotz* is not cognate with English *(de)spite*, deriving from a participial or nominalised form of the Latin verb *dē-spic-* 'to look down on, despise', and borrowed from French at about the same time *trotz* made its appearance in German. Though convertible to verb (*trotz-en*) and adjective (with contemporary German here requiring a suffix: *trotz-ig*), *Trotz* is basically a noun. Its meanings, reflecting a rich web of culturally salient concepts, are given by the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* as *Herausforderung*, *Drohung*, *Widerstand*, *Mut*, *Stolz* 'challenge, threat, defiance, courage, pride', to which should be added 'rivalry' and 'being a match'. The concept of a contest or trial of strength would seem to be the *Grundbedeutung*: whether one is summoning someone to take part in such a contest or whether one's own strength is being put to the trial, the issue is one of a measuring of forces in antagonism. (Not coincidentally, *notwithstanding* is another English adposition, this time deverbal, employed in this semantic field.)

2.3.   There are indications, in the 16th century and later, of *Trotz* being an incipient complex adposition, semi-grammaticalised in essentially the same canonical manner as *in spite of* in English, except that it usually came after rather than before its complement. Not predisposed to be an agent, patient, or recipient, a subject, direct, or indirect object, *Trotz* would frequently appear in prepositional phrases; the preposition most commonly accompanying it was purposive *zu*; sometimes there would be a determiner (indefinite or definite and fused with the preposition), often there would be none: *zu einem Trotz*, *zum Trotz*, *zu Trotz* 'in defiance, nevertheless'.

---

[5] There are dialectal preferences for one or the other of these ablaut variants; and in Southern dialects the /a/ variant was to lead a life of its own later, especially in the corresponding verb *tratzen/trätze(l)n* 'to tease'.

When this adverbial phrase was amplified through a dependent, identifying the person or thing defied, this noun or pronoun would be in the dative case, like normally the object of the corresponding verb *trotzen* 'to defy', and would usually precede the entire prepositional phrase (2a) and rarely also follow it (2b).[6]

(2)   a.   *dem schrecklichen Wetter zum Troz fahre ich fort recht fleißig zu sein*
               lit. 'the horrible weather (DAT) in defiance I continue to be quite industrious'

        b.   *Lorbeerhaine ... die zu Trotz der Zeit bestehen*
               'laurel groves ... which in defiance of time (DAT/GEN) last'

Analogous instances of complex denominal postpositions, with alternative but dispreferred prepositional uses, are *zuliebe* 'in the interest of' and *zufolge* 'according to'. It is suggestive of subtle differences in grammaticalisation pathways that unlike these, other complex denominal adpositions – such as *zugunsten* 'to the benefit of, in favour of', *zu Lasten* 'to the detriment of, against', or *infolge (von)* 'as a result of', not semantically very different from those with postpositional preferences – invariably precede their complements.

2.4.   Its cultural salience predestined the noun *Trotz* to a number of conspicuous formulaic uses, usually without determiner or modifiers. Thus, it frequently appeared in various binomial expressions such as *Trutz und Tratz* (semantically vacuous ablaut repetition) or *Schutz und Trutz* 'protection and resistance'. Equally without determiner or modifier, *Trotz* formed a complex predicate with the light verb *bieten* 'to offer, bid, put up', not really differing in meaning from the zero-derived verb *trotzen* 'to challenge, defy, resist, be a match for'. For routine formulas of defiance or also of threatening, warning, or cursing, with the verb in the imperative or subjunctive (with this mood subserving optative or adhortative function), *Trotz bieten* (or *Trotz sein*) was used in passive or passive-like construction, with bare *Trotz* as the subject in the basic nominative case, identical with a noun's citation form:

---

[6] To emphasise the theme of antagonism, a further redundant word would sometimes be added: e.g., *zu trotz und wider* 'in defiance and opposition'.

(3)   a.   *Trotz sei dem geboten, der mich nicht dafür ansieht ...*
           'let defiance be shown to him who doesn't look at me as ...'
      b.   *Trutz sei dem Lerer, der Handt anleg, diß Evangelium anders ußzulegen*
           'let there be defiance to the teacher who undertakes to interpret this gospel differently'

Not contributing a great deal of meaning, the light verbs *bieten* or *sein* could here also be elided; and this ellipsis left the noun in basic form (nominative singular) and set off from the accompanying sentence (as sometimes indicated through punctuation), to emphatically convey the force of a challenge, threat, warning, or curse:

(4)   a.   *die Frauen lesen die Federlin ab und trutz! nit ein Stöblin muss an iren Cleidern sein*
           'the women pluck the little feathers and, beware!, not a speck must be on their clothes'
      b.   *hui nů, ihr Bildenstürmer, trotz und beweiset es anders*
           'ho now, you iconoclasts, take the challenge and prove it to be different'

In such uses, current from Middle High German times to about the 17th century, bare, uninflected *Trotz/trotz* has arguably been reanalysed from a noun to an interjection;[7] and it is this interjectional construction which occasioned the further reanalysis as an adposition.

Such interjectional *trotz!/trutz und tratz!/trotz und* could occur on its own, as in (4); or it could be followed by a vocative noun in juxtaposition (5); or the accompanying part of the interjection could be a noun phrase in the dative (6a) or an unheaded or headed relative clause (6b), designating the person or thing defied as in the elliptic passive-ish construction.

---

[7] Since the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* follows Jacob Grimm in his aversion against the capitalisation of nouns, it manages to orthographically evade questions of word class distinction. In conformity with contemporary and partly also older standards, I have re-capitalised (what I take for) nouns in examples taken from what is otherwise my sole Germanist authority.

(5)   *trutz, Tod! komm her, ich förcht dich nit*

        'I dare thee, death (NOM)! come here, I'm not afraid of thee'

(6)   a.   *trutz dem Teufel, trotz dem Drachen,*

        ich kan ihre Macht verlachen

        'damn the devil (DAT), damn the dragon (DAT),

        I can only laugh about their might'

    b.   *von Natur sind wir stoltz, und trutz der uns zeihen wölte, daß wir Sünder weren*

        'by nature we are proud, and let [him (DAT)] be damned who (NOM)

        would accuse us of being sinners'

        trutz eim, der euch ein Leid anthut, ich steh bei euch recht wie ein Man

        'defiance to him (DAT) who (NOM) does you harm, I stand by you like a

        man'

Whether simple or more complex, the interjection with *trotz* is NOT syntactically or semantically integrated with the clause to which it adds emphasis and emotional flavour. It typically precedes and very rarely follows this clause, and sometimes appears interjected in between two clauses equally applying emphasis to both; its relationship to what it pragmatically belongs with is paratactic rather than hypotactic (hence the occasional coordinative linker *und*, as in (4b)). Construing the interjection as syntactically and semantically part of that clause is the crucial step in the reanalysis which creates a preposition from ultimately a noun, via the stage of a widely used emphatic interjection.

Structurally, interjections with accompanying datives, as in (6), are the crucial environments triggering the reanalysis: they could be taken for instantiations of another type of construction already existing and far more common – prepositions with their NP complements. The interjectional parts in examples like (6) are extra-clausal; reanalysing them as circumstantial adverbial constituents of an adjacent clause, with perhaps an intonational break remaining, would not be such a drastic step, either – they are, after all, not to be upgraded to core clause membership as obligatory arguments. Semantically, antagonism and defiance are writ large over the interjectional contexts of *trotz*, and from there it is not a far cry to construe relationships between antagonists and agonists, be it people or circumstances, as concessive, as co-occurrences against expectations given the known strength of the

antagonistic forces – though on account of their inherent semantics some NPs-potentially-to-be-integrated and some potentially-integrating clauses will lend themselves to such re-construal more naturally than others.

To exemplify, in (7a), while the author's punctuation (exclamation mark inside a clause) still hints at interjectional status, on the evidence of verb-second the interjection has become structurally integrated with the clause as its first constituent; similarly in (7b), there is still a comma suggestive of some kind of separate, supplementary status, but what could seem an interjection also permits a semantic construal with the preceding clause as a concessive.

(7)   a.   *das Mädchen ist hübsch, und truz allen Teufeln! mus ich sie brauchen*
        'the girl is pretty, and defy all devils (DAT)! I must get her'
        (lit. ... must I get her, with V-2)
        >> 'and in spite of all devils I must get her'
     b.   *auf die Gefahr will ichs wagen, trotz dem Tod und Teufel!*
        'at my own risk I will venture it, in defiance of death and devil (DAT)!'
        >> 'in spite of death and devil'

Still, as long as NPs-potentially-to-be-integrated-as-concessives only refer to death and the devil or other such stereotypes of mighty antagonists as invoked on all conceivable, emotionally charged occasions, an interjectional construal would always remain a possibility, given its availability. There are sporadic examples of NPs in such ambiguous constructions from outside this stereotypical range in the 16th century, such as (8), combining references to people, dispositions, and activities:

(8)   *die Kunst bleibt wol in Ewigkeit*
     trotz Neidhart, Mißgunst, Krieg und Streit
     'art will last in all eternity
     despite enviers, resentment, war, and dispute'

But it was to take another couple of centuries for *trotz* to become entrenched as a concessive preposition, with more and more descriptive variety in the referential range of concessive circumstances and less and less emotional charge. Significantly,

the interjectional uses of *trotz* were simultaneously receding and ultimately disappearing.

Sharply distinguishing *trotz* from directly denominal *zu(m) Trotz*, as in (2a/b) above, this de-interjectional adposition only ever occurs as a preposition and never as a postposition.

The case governed by the new preposition was originally the dative, which was also the case of nouns or pronouns accompanying interjectional *trotz*. A later competitor was the genitive, a case not uncommon with adpositions in German, especially denominal ones;[8] but nowadays it is back to the dative, with the genitive moribund in modern German, or to a bare basic form of the noun (*trotz Löwe* 'despite lion', where one might expect a determiner and/or some case suffix: *trotz dem/des Löwe-n*, lion-DAT/GEN.SG).[9]

2.5. What has not caught on widely, and seems to have remained marginal even in the (southern) varieties of German where it is attested, and has been attested quite early, is a further use of *trotz* as illustrated in (9):

(9)   *er wußte trotz einem Grafen durch die Nase zu reden*
        'he could TROTZ a nobleman speak through the nose'

This is an exact structural analogue of the endpoint of the grammaticalisation of the concessive preposition *trotz*, as in (8) – except that here *trotz* does not mean 'in spite of', but 'as well as' or 'better than'. The same meaning is found with *zu(m) Trotz*,

---

[8] On corpus evidence, Di Meola (2004) claims that case selection is systematically reversed in the process of grammaticalisation: when ancestral words occur with the dative (as is the case with the interjection *trotz!*, and also the corresponding noun and verb), they would switch to genitive upon grammaticalisation, and vice versa.

[9] Such bare noun forms have also been interpreted as a new case in German, a prepositive (Keseling 1968). The dative has always persisted unchanged in combinations of *trotz* with the demonstrative and/or the universal quantifier: *trotzdem*, *trotz allem/alledem* 'despite (all) this'. The combination of preposition and demonstrative (sometimes also *trotz* on its own, sometimes accompanied by the default complementiser *daß* 'that') was reanalysed as a concessive adverb, 'nonetheless', and this adverb in turn as a concessive subordinating complementiser (*Es regnete; trotzdem kam er* > *Er kam, trotzdem es regnete* 'it rained; he came, though' > 'he came though it rained').

characterised above (2) as an incipient complex adposition (preferably postposed, but sometimes also preposed) semi-grammaticalised along the canonical denominal pathway:

(10)　a.　　*sie kocht einer alten Müllerin zum Trutz*
　　　　　　'she cooks as well as/better than an old miller's wife'
　　　b.　　*Käthi is e alti Fraü, awer s springt und tanzt zu Trutz im e jungen Maidle von achtzehn Jahr*
　　　　　　'Kathi is an old woman, but she jumps and dances as well as/better than a young girl of 18 years'[10]

Though on the face of it surprising, the notion of comparison of equality or inequality, with the two not sharply distinguished, can be traced to the ancestral noun *Trotz*, especially in the by now familiar complex predicate *Trotz bieten* and in the verb *trotzen* zero-derived from the noun. In the semantic domain of antagonism and competition, dynamic challenge and defiance are naturally partnered by the more static quality of being able to contend. And 'being (more than) a match for' indeed is one of the senses of *Trotz bieten* and *trotzen*:

(11)　a.　　*das Glas wird in Schlesien so rein und fein verfertiget, daß man denen Künstlern zu Venedig damit Trotz bieten kan*
　　　　　　'glass is made so purely and finely in Silesia that one can thereby be a match for the artists of Venice'
　　　b.　　*die Stadtschule trotzt den berühmten Gymnasien ...*
　　　　　　'the municipal school is a match for the famous gymnasiums ...'

　　　Now, the comparative sense of the incipient complex adposition *zu(m) Trotz* as in (10) is not difficult to account for, given the presence of a comparative sense, '(more than) a match', in the noun from which it derives directly. The relationship of the simplex preposition *trotz* to the noun, on the other hand, is only indirect and was mediated through an interjectional stage. Alas, no nuances of a comparison of

---

[10] *im* after *zu Trutz* is a prepositional marker accompanying datives in many varieties of Alemannic and Bavarian.

equality or inequality seem ever to have been conveyed by interjectional constructions with *trotz*, whose reanalysis yielded the preposition. It is as if the comparative sense attaching to the polysemous noun was able to hitch a ride as the challenge and defiance senses were passed on, via the interjection, to what was to become a concessive preposition: the grammaticalisation of a comparative preposition *trotz* would thus have been parasitic.

3.   Uniformity from diversity

What the genesis of the concessive preposition *trotz* shares with other developments of adpositions from nouns, and with other grammaticalisations, is the motif of structural integration, syntagmatically as well as paradigmatically: something extra-clausal, an interjection, gets reanalysed as an integral part of a single clause, not as a core part, but an adverbial phrase; and it is assigned a place in the semantic system of circumstantial relations (concessive). There is structural integration in the case of *in spite of* or *despite*, too; but here the domain for tighter organisation is smaller: it is the phrase, not the clause and extra-clausal material. The special syntactic relation of complement of an adposition has different origins, too: it is the dependent-relation of attribute which is reanalysed in the case of *in spite of/despite* and its congeners; it is the relation of a not-very-tightly-bound clausal adjunct (with the dative specialising in case-marking such non-arguments) which is reanalysed in the case of *trotz*.

But then, however differently adpositions have been reanalysed from nouns, even perhaps parasitically (like comparative *trotz*), their synchronic grammars – and meanings, in the cases of English *in spite of/despite* and German *trotz* – are essentially the same.

Which would seem to suggest that, if there are limits on structural diversity across languages – concerning word classes such as adpositions and phrase classes such as adpositional phrases, or whatever – then diversity will be limited through constraints on grammars rather than only through constraints on reanalyses. The question will always be, then, which of two truths is truer: Languages can only be what they could become; languages could only become what they can be.

References

Di Meola, Claudio. 2004. The rise of the prepositional genitive in German: A grammaticalization phenomenon. *Lingua* 111.165–182.

Grimm, Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm (eds.). 1952. *Deutsches Wörterbuch. Elfter Band, 1. Abteilung, 2. Teil: TREIB–TZ.* (Bearbeitet von der Arbeitsstelle des Deutschen Wörterbuchs zu Berlin.) Leipzig: Hirzel.

Keseling, Gisbert. 1968. "Irregularitäten" in der deutschen Substantivflexion. *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung* 35.233–243.

Lehmann, Christian. 2002. *Thoughts on grammaticalization.* 2nd, revised edition. (Arbeitspapiere des Seminars für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Erfurt, 9.) Erfurt: Universität Erfurt. Online: www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/DerivateServlet/Derivate-2058/ASSidUE09.pdf

Longobardi, Giuseppe. 2001. Formal syntax, diachronic minimalism, and etymology: The history of French *chez*. *Linguistic Inquiry* 32.275–302.