

THE STORY OF ZERO

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CHAPTER 11: ZERO AND THE PUZZLE OF STRANDED ADPOSITIONS

1. Introduction*

In October 2010, Fritz Newmeyer posted the following question on the functionally- and typologically-oriented linguistics network Funknet:

"Does anybody know of a functional explanation (published or not) for why preposition stranding is so rare in the languages of the world? (I am referring to constructions such as 'Who did you talk to?', 'Mary was talked to', etc.) As far as I know, it exists only in Germanic, marginally in French, and possibly in some Niger-Congo languages. There are a number of functionally-oriented accounts of P-stranding in English, but I wonder if anybody has taken on the question of its rarity cross-linguistically".

At the time, the response I gave Fritz on Funknet was a rather ungainly three-prong promissory note spread over a number of postings, suggesting that his two-part puzzle was no puzzle at all. Rather:

- The affixing of stranded adpositions to verbs is not a typological rarity.
- It is the consequence of zeroing-out adpositionally-marked nominal arguments ('obliques') in various contexts of co-reference.
- It is found in languages that possess no alternative means for preserving adpositional case-marking in well known zero-marking contexts, often following the diachronic loss of alternative means for preserving the stranded adpositions.

This chapter is a belated attempt to deliver on that old promissory note. In the process, I will try to show how Newmeyer's puzzle of stranded adpositions is part and parcel of the story of zero. A more general methodological lesson may be drawn from this discussion, touching on both the typological and functional aspects of Newmeyer question: That in order to solve some seemingly compact puzzles one needs to sometimes re-construe them in a much broader context.

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