

Omission of Prepositions in Time Adverbials in Present-day Spoken AmE

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Abstract This article aims to explore how and to what extent prepositions are left out in time adverbials in present-day spoken AmE. On the whole, *on*, *at*, *for*, *in*, and *during* are dropped before time adverbials, and of those prepositions *on* and *for* are omitted most frequently in informal styles. *For* tends to be dropped when it is used with continuity verbs. In present-day informal AmE, prepositions are omitted in time expressions to a considerable degree. In this article, the way and the extent to which prepositions are omitted in time adverbials are discussed based on a large number of examples.

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1. Introduction

This article tries to examine the way and the extent to which prepositions are dropped in time expressions in present-day spoken AmE. The material made use of here is a book published in the United States in 1988¹.

The omission of prepositions in time adverbials is dealt with, above all, in Quirk et al. (1985:692-95) and Alexander (1988:131). Intriguing and informative as their expositions are, they are far from comprehensive and the examples quoted are rather scarce. In addition, neither Quirk et al. (1985:692-95) nor Alexander (1988:131) refers to the extent to which the prepositions are dropped, and it is not shown which verb appears most often when *for* is left out in time adverbials.

Quirk et al. (1985:692-95) consider the omission of prepositions in time expressions from three perspectives: the absence of prepositions in point in time expressions, the absence of prepositions in frequency expressions, and the absence of prepositions in duration expressions. Broadly speaking, the order of discussion in this article is based on this categorization.

2. Omission of Prepositions in Time Adverbials

2.1 Omission of prepositions in point in time expressions

In point in time expressions, *on*, *at*, and *in* tend to be dropped.

2.1.1 Omission of *on*

As is well known, *on* can be omitted immediately before such deictic words as *first*, *next*, *this*, and *that*. In my examples the following are of this kind²:

- (1) a. The first of the month, when she gets her welfare check, she's in with her overdose.
- b. ...these replants can go bad the first day.
- c. She died the next day.
- d. So the next morning at six forty-five the phone rang.
- e. But anybody new walks in that first day....
- f. I had not become a third year resident that day.
- g. I was there that night.
- h. I planned to visit her this weekend.
- i. He traveled up to Massachusetts that weekend.

When *the day(s)*, *the night*, and *the evening* are immediately followed by a time modifier, *on* is optional. However, in informal speech *on* seems to be mostly omitted in such cases. In my examples *on* appeared in only one example:

- (2) But as of the last couple of years, it's been all year round, mostly on the days when the welfare check comes in.

And in many other examples *on* was dropped before time adverbials:

- (3) a. We happened to be on the elevator the

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- day he was leaving.
- b. The day I went over, I was introduced to the award-winning team.
- c. The husband only has to be here the day of the egg retrieval to provide us with sperm....
- d. Days like that, things just fall into place.
- e. Next, I look for the instruments that I sent to Central Supply to be gassed the day before....
- f. ...we had been up all night the night before....
- g. The evening of Jimmy's death, his mother and father went home....

Before *New Year's Day*, *on* was also dropped:

- (4) Then New Year's Day we transplanted another one.

Quirk et al. (1985:692) say that when a time expression contains a deictic word, *on* is always dropped. However, this is not always the case. There are cases in which *on* is not dropped before time expressions. Although in (5) *on* is left out before the deictic word, in (6) *on* is used before it:

- (5) When I came in that morning, one of the nurses said to me....
- (6) a. And that's the point we had reached with that little baby boy on this particular morning when I came in to care for him.
- b. On that particular morning, the phone rang real early and the doctors said to come right away....
- c. We'll have a schedule on that morning.

Before such adverbials as *Monday morning*, *Saturday night*, and *Friday afternoon*, *on* occurs:

- (7) a. I asked her to come in on Sunday morning, but she said no....
- b. For example, we had a patient who arrested on Friday afternoon.
- c. ...she was terribly concerned about what if something happened to him on Friday night or Saturday.
- d. The college girls come in on Thursday night to see which patients need visitation on the Sabbath.
- e. ...let's have fun with it on Saturday night.

Or *on* can also be omitted in such a case:

- (8) a. She was scheduled to come to clinic Monday morning.
- b. Her husband called me Saturday night.

c. I was on duty Monday night.

d. Mr. Kline was admitted Friday night.

In all, there were six instances in my examples in which *on* was used before such time adverbials as *Monday morning*, and *Saturday night*, as against five instances in which *on* was not used before them. Thus, it seems that in conversation *on* can be omitted approximately in half of those instances.

With respect to the names of the days of the week and the names of the days of the month, *on* was used in my instances like *on Monday*, *on Tuesday*, *on December 25th*, and *on July 1st*. However, instances were found in which *on* was not used in such cases:

- (9) a. We kept him in the hospital over the weekend and sent him home Monday. In clinic Thursday, Craig saw him and his wound was healed well.
- b. The list is posted March 15th....

In informal speech, in almost all such cases *on* is not likely to be omitted very often. In my instances, in the case of the names of the days of the week, only two instances were found where *on* was not used; in other six instances *on* was used. This was also true for the names of the days of the month, regarding which *on* was dropped in only one instance, whereas in the other four instances *on* was not dropped before them.

2.1.2 Omission of *at*

Before *o'clock*, *at* is optional. In (10) it is used:

- (10) a. At five o'clock the next afternoon I went by to see this man to make sure he was still okay.
- b. I got up at about five-thirty.

Or *at* is not used in such a case. In my examples there were two instances in which *at* was not used:

- (11) a. Meet me at the emergency room Saturday morning, eight o'clock, and wear your waders.
- b. I get up about four-thirty A.M....

At can also be dropped before *that time*:

- (12) That time it seemed like forever.

2.1.3 Omission of *in* and *during*

In can be "used with the names of months, years, seasons, etc. to say when something happens" (LDOCE). This use of *in* appears in point in time expressions:

(13) We met in the spring. (Quirk et al. 1985:693)

In (14) *in* co-occurs with *my third year, that year*, etc.:

(14) a. ...in my third year I had an experience that changed my mind.

b. When you're a fourth-year student, you start interviewing early in that year.

Although Quirk et al. do not say anything about this, *during* can also indicate a point in time. That is, *during* can mean "at some point in a period of time" (LDOCE). An example of this kind is to be seen in (15):

(15) During that third year, and in fact this year as well, I met so many patients who had such an impact on me'...

It is possible that in (16), *in* or *during* is omitted before *the year before last*:

(16) For example, I had planned to take Christmas week off the year before last....

2.2 Omission of prepositions in frequency expressions

Normally, such frequency expressions as *every Sunday, every month*, etc. lack prepositions. However, in cases like (17), *on* is optional:

(17) On Sunday(s)/ Sunday(s) we usually go for a walk. (Quirk et al. 1985:694)

In my instances, before the names of the days of the week, *on* was always used; there were no instances in which it was dropped:

(18) a. On Mondays and every other Tuesday I work in the diabetic class.

b. On Wednesdays I do the same thing in the amniocentesis class.

c. I worked in a gasoline station on Sundays.

This would not mean, of course, that *on* is always used in such a case in everyday conversation. Yet, it might partly show the tendency of the Americans to use *on Mondays*, or *on Sundays* rather than *Mondays* or *Sundays*.

2.3 Omission of prepositions in duration expressions

For, in, and during refer to a stretch of time. These prepositions are often omitted in time expressions.

2.3.1 Omission of *for*

2.3.1.1 *Be*

For can be used after the verb *be* to show duration:

(19) a. I was there for eleven years.

b. I've been there for about eight years.

c. I've been here for such a long time.

d. I have been glad to be here for that time.

e. We were here in their neighborhood for all these years.

The verb *be* used in this way carries the meaning "to remain in a place" (OALD). When *be* is used like this, *for* can be omitted:

(20) a. I was literally here in this hospital twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

b. I had been there five years....

c. I'll be here another two and a half hours!

d. I think we were up there about half an hour, forty-five minutes....

e. I had been there about a week....

f. Two weeks I'm here and I had to make a complete ass of myself.

When *be* carries this meaning, there were 16 instances in my examples in which *for* was not left out, as compared with 10 instances in which it was left out. That would suggest that in conversation, when *be* denotes a meaning of this kind, *for* can be dropped in about 40 percent of the instances.

2.3.1.2 *Work*

For can be used with the verb *work*, which implies a continuous activity:

(21) a. I've been working there now for fifteen years—Yonkers.

b. Originally I worked in the pharmacy for a couple of months.

c. My mother worked in Presbyterian for thirty years.

d. ... they didn't work together so well for a long time.

e. I've been here working around this institution for thirty years....

When *work* is used like this, *for* can be omitted in time expressions:

(22) a. They're both used to my working long hours....

b. A lot of us slept here, because we worked twelve hours a day....

c. All you have to do is stay here and work

twenty-four hours a day...

- d. I worked between eighty and a hundred hours a week.
- e. The worst experience I ever had working thirty-six hours straight was with a patient....

In my examples there were altogether 10 instances where *for* was not omitted in such cases, whereas in other nine instances it was omitted. Thus, when *work* suggests continuity, *for* can be left out in about 50 percent of the cases in conversation.

2.3.1.3 Wait

When *wait* or *await* has to do with duration, it can be followed by *for*:

- (23) a. It's a rotten feeling sitting there waiting for five hours.
- b. Mike Conner has been in the ICU awaiting a heart for six weeks.

For can be omitted when used like this:

- (24) a. They waited a long time for this heart.
- b. ...so the people who are waiting an hour to be seen are now going to have to wait three hours.
- c. She's been waiting two months.
- d. ...it was okay to wait a month to have it out.
- e. ...somebody should come into an emergency room and wait five or six hours.

When *wait* or *await* carries this meaning, there were two instances in my examples in which *for* was not omitted, while in other six instances it was omitted. (*Await* appeared only once in both instances.) This shows that when used along with *wait*, *for* tends to be often omitted in informal speech.

2.3.1.4 Last

For can be used with the verb *last*, which has a continuous meaning:

- (25) a. ...a couple of areas that...would be most likely to have an impact now that will last for the next fifteen years.
- b. It takes place in the chapel and lasts for half an hour.

When used in this way, *for* can be dropped:

- (26) a. The whole visit may have lasted maybe two minutes....
- b. It only lasted an hour and a half....

- c. They last twenty to thirty minutes and then they go away.
- d. That lasted about a month.

When *last* was used, there were two instances in my examples in which it was followed by *for*, as against four instances in which *for* was not used. Thus *last* tends to be used more often without *for* in conversation.

2.3.1.5 Stay

The verb *stay* is a continuity verb, and it can be used with *for*:

- (27) a. Things that happen here stay with you for a long time.
- b. I stayed with them for several hours.
- c. I...stayed in Warsaw for six more weeks....
- d. ...for months it can allow somebody's eyes to stay open....

In this sense, *stay* can be used without *for*:

- (28) Sometimes I think I should have stayed another year....

In my examples there was only one instance in which *stay* was used without *for*; in the other four instances, it was used with it. That might suggest that *stay* tends to be used with *for*.

2.3.1.6 Live

For co-occurs with the verb *live*, which has to do with continuity:

- (29) a. He lived for about two and a half years after the transplant....
- b. I've lived here for six years.
- c. He lived for only a couple of months after that.

In such examples, *for* can be omitted before time adverbials:

- (30) Her doctor had told me she would live several weeks.

However, *live* seems to be more often used with *for* than without it in time expressions in informal styles. In my instances, only one example was found in which *live* was used without *for*, and the other five instances were used with *for*.

2.3.1.7 Function, have, practice, and struggle

There were instances in which each of these verbs was used without *for*. In all of my examples, it was only once that each of these verbs appeared without *for* and there were no instances in which

they were used with *for*:

- (31) a. ...hormonal lab technicians plus a lot more who have to be primed and ready to function seven days a week.
 b. So my job is to see that we have it, twenty-four hours a day.
 c. If you're going to be a violinist you're supposed to practice violin a lot of hours a day.
 d. She's struggled a long time with the idea.

2.3.1.8 Kind of verbs that cause *for* to be omitted

Quirk et al. (1985:694) argue that *for* is often absent when it is used with verbs with a stative meaning, and that *for* is obligatory with dynamic verbs "where the action of the verb is clearly not continuously coextensive with the period specified." Naturally, they deal only with such stative verbs as *stay*, *last*, *live*, and *lie*. However, as can be seen from my examples, *for* can also be omitted when used with such dynamic verbs as *wait*, *work*, *function*, *practice*, and *struggle*, as well as when it is used with such stative verbs as *live*, *stay*, and *last*. All of this means that the omission of *for* does not depend upon whether the verb with which *for* appears is stative or dynamic. Verbs like *be*, *wait*, *work*, *last*, *live*, *stay*, *have*, *function*, *practice*, and *struggle* are continuity verbs with a continuous meaning, and accordingly, as Alexander (1988: 131) also says, it would be continuity verbs that decide whether *for* is omitted or not.

2.3.2 Omission of *in* and *during*

In carries the meaning "during a period of time" (LDOCE), and *during* "all through a length of time" (LDOCE). In (32) and (33), *in* and *during* have these meanings because the verbs *be*, *learn*, and *earn* have to do with duration.

- (32) a. I've been in my third year now for only a short time....
 b. ...I was on call during my general surgical rotation early in my third year.
 c. You learn early in that year about the special vulnerability between a medical student and a patient.
 (33) During my third year, I earned thirty-thousand and I'll make thirty-two this year.

Therefore, in (34), possibly, *in* or *during* is omitted before the time expressions, because all of the verbs used here denote a period of time:

- (34) a. The first year I had a wonderful time....
 b. Second year, you have a lot more responsibility.
 c. Fourth year you could choose one-month electives at any hospital....
 d. I made twenty-six dollars my first year and twenty-eight thousand my second.
 e. My mother's relative paid my tuition the first year....

2.3.3 Omission of *for* and *during*

In my examples, the *whole night*, *the whole time*, etc. appeared with no prepositions at all:

- (35) a. You'd rarely sleep the whole night up there, anyway.
 b. So then the mother, who was sitting there the whole time, says....
 c. The whole time I worked on Erna, I couldn't help but wonder what the woman was like.
 d. ...he's been my baby my whole life.
 e. I've been involved with the teenagers the whole eight years I've been here.

Should prepositions be used before these time adverbials, they would be *for* or *during*. Yet in all of my 115 examples that contain *for* or *during* that means duration, no instances were found in which *the whole night*, *the whole time*, etc. were used with such prepositions. This may suggest that in informal speech *the whole night*, *the whole time*, *my whole life*, etc. are likely to be used without prepositions more frequently.

2.3.4 Omission of *for*, *during*, *in*, and *over*

In time expressions that include *the first*, *the initial*, *the next*, and *the last*, the prepositions *for*, *during*, *in*, and *over* are used:

- (36) a. For the initial five or six days I slept in the waiting room of the railroad station....
 b. ...for the first three months he and his mother took an apartment in one of the New Jersey suburbs.
 c. For the first year or two of medical school, I thought I'd eventually go into orthopedic surgery.
 d. Neonatology is a medicine that deals with illness in the first twenty-eight days of life.
 e. The brain grows during the first eighteen months of life.

- f. We either walk around and see the patient...deciding what needs to be done over the next day or so.
- g. Over the next few months I continued to treat him....
- h. We just hired maybe eight guys in the last three weeks.

Therefore, it can be said that in (37), these four prepositions are dropped before the time adverbials:

- (37) a. We have one baby now whose mother used to come the first couple of weeks....
- b. The first two years you feel as though you're on a tiny little island....
- c. The first two months I seldom left here before nine-thirty at night.
- d. It had quite a resurgence for a while the last fifteen, twenty years, say.

(36h) and (37d) need to be explained further. When the time adverbials contain *last* or *past*, there were 14 instances including (36h) in which the prepositions *in*, *during*, *for*, and *over* were used before the time adverbials. (38) and (39) are further examples of this kind in which *last* or *past* occurs:

- (38) a. We've had about ten in the last six months, and they all look alike.
- b. HMOs have exploded on the market in the last two years.
- c. In fact on three or four occasions during the last four or five years, I think I've saved their lives.
- d. He'd been in the emergency room once every week or two for the last six months with exactly the same story.
- (39) a. I've seen a very rapid change in the past three years.
- b. Bone marrow transplantation is something that has come to the forefront in the past few years....
- c. ...she had traveled in South Africa in the past six months....
- d. ...it's been hard to find time to read for pleasure during these past four years.
- e. About two hundred fifty people have come through the program over the past three years.
- f. This profession, certainly for the past fifty years, had been relatively free of external influence on its decision-making.

When *last* is used in time expressions, there were altogether six instances in which *in* was used in

them. *During*, *for*, and *over* were used only once with *last*. When *past* is used with time expressions, there were in all three instances where *in* was used with them. *During* was used only once with *past*. All of this shows that in time expressions that have *last* or *past*, the prepositions are seldom omitted, and when they are not omitted, *in* is used most often, whether this preposition is followed by *last* or *past*.

3. Conclusion

How and to what extent the prepositions in time adverbials are omitted in present-day spoken AmE have been discussed. Quirk et al. (1985:694) say that *for* is omitted when it is used with verbs with a stative meaning rather than a dynamic meaning, yet it will be seen from my argument here that this is not accurate. As Alexander (1988:131) also says, it is when *for* is used with continuity verbs that this preposition tends to be omitted. Moreover, it was also seen that the omission of prepositions occurs in more verbs than those indicated in Quirk et al. (1985:692-95) or Alexander (1988:131).

NOTES

1. The book referred to is Ina Yalof's *Life and Death*, published by Random House, New York, in 1988. The author of this book, who is a medical sociologist, individually met with 74 people in 1985 who worked in a large hospital in Manhattan, New York City, and asked them to talk freely about their jobs, their everyday life, or their outlook on life. She tape-recorded what they talked, transcribed it afterward, and published it in the form of a 357-page book. The 74 people include physicians, nurses, the hospital administrator, a housekeeper, security officers, laundry workers, a grounds supervisor, and medical students. In the book each of these people's monologues is recorded over three or four pages. Although this book has a limitation as far as the study of a language is concerned because the situations in which English is spoken are limited, yet the book would be of much value in understanding the spoken English of the Americans because English is transcribed exactly as it is spoken.
2. All the quotations are from Ina Yalof's *Life and Death* unless otherwise stated.

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