Syntax and Semantics of of in the Construction
"It is A(djective) of NP to VP"
—— Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches——*

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1. Introduction

As a starting point, let us observe the following sentence in
Present—day English (PE):

(1) It is important for you to arrive on time.

The sentence (1) is two ways ambiguous in interpreting the syntactic
status of for. Thus, two interpretations are possible for (1) (cf. Silva
and Thompson (1977)):

(2) a. What is important is for you to arrive on time.
    b. What is important for you is to arrive on time.

This also receives support from the fact that the sentence (1) has two
possible intonation breaks, one before for, and one after for NP, as
illustrated in (3a) and (3b), respectively:

(3) a. It is important || for you to arrive on time.
    b. It is important for you || to arrive on time.

For in (2a) and (3a) functions as an embedded complementizer, C,
accompanied by an infinitive subject you, as shown in (4a), while for in
(2b) and (3b) serves as a matrix preposition, P, modified by the
adjective, as displayed in (4b):
(4)  a. It is important \( [_{cp} \text{for} \ [_{tp} \text{you to arrive on time}]] \).
    b. It is \( [_{ap} \text{important} \ [_{pp} \text{for you,}] \ [_{tp} \text{PRO, to arrive on time}]] \).
      (cf. Stockwell (1976), Lightfoot (1979), etc.)

By contrast, we often find the cases where for is not allowed and of is required to occur, when the adjective denotes evaluative attributes of both persons and their actions, as in (5): ¹

(5)  a. It is kind of you to take so much trouble.
    b. It is foolish of him to meet her again.

It is notable that of in (5) must be replaced by for, only when the adjective is interpreted to be predicate of person’s action only, as in (6): ²

(6)  a. It was kind for you to send me a nice present.
       (Wilkinson (1970))
    b. It would be foolish for us to quarrel.    (OALD³)
    c. It’s so stupid for us to be away from each other when we
       have so little time together,” he said.      (Jaffe, Woman)

The problem that we encounter here is whether of in (5) occurs in the same syntactic position as for in (2a), (3a), and (4a) or in the same syntactic place as for in (2b), (3b), and (4b). In other words, it is whether of in (5) qualifies as an embedded C or as a matrix P. The purpose of this paper is to clear up this matter and explore the semantic content of of in this construction by means of synchronic and diachronic analyses.

2. Synchronic Evidence

Here, I make the point that of is placed in the matrix clause, as for in (2b), (3b), and (4b), and has a very close relation to the preceding adjective; that is, of \((NP)\) is selected by the adjective as its complement.

To begin with, I can furnish evidence in favor of my claim that of
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NP is tightly connected with the matrix adjective from the fact that the intonation break is put after the string A(djective) + of NP, as illustrated in (7):

\[(7)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a. It is kind of you } \parallel \text{ to take so much trouble.} \\
&\text{b. It is foolish of him } \parallel \text{ to meet her again.}
\end{align*}\]

This fact suggests that of NP belongs to the matrix clause and not to the embedded one, because of the intonation break splitting of NP from the to–infinitive clause. Thus, we can see that of does not behave like for as C in (2a), (3a), and (4a), but like for as P in (2b), (3b), and (4b).

The second supporting evidence comes from the fact that, in addition to the intonation break, the comma or the intervening phrase occurs after the string A + of NP, separating of NP from the embedded to–infinitive clause, as exemplified in (8a–b), and from the fact that, as is often the case with this construction, the to–infinitive clause is omitted, as is evident from (8c):

\[(8)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a. That’s nice of you, to tell me.} \quad \text{(Bolinger (1977: 86))} \\
&\text{b. “I think it is very kind of you,” I said, “to lay flowers on my father’s grave.”} \quad \text{(Greene, Travels with My Aunt)} \\
&\text{c. That’s kind of you.}
\end{align*}\]

This situation also implies that of works as a matrix P, and not as an embedded C.

I can provide the third piece of evidence in support of my point that of NP establishes a very close relation to the preceding adjective from the fact that it cannot part from the adjective by any means, so that the string A + of NP must not be broken by any syntactic operations such as Fronting and Wh–movement of of NP, which induce of NP to jump over the adjective, as shown in (9a–c). By the same token, no phrases are allowed to intervene between the adjective and of NP, as in (9d):

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This argument leads us to a certain syntactic condition that of NP always has to satisfy in this construction. This is the following:

(10) Of NP occurring with the to–infinitive construction must be immediately preceded by the adjective.

(10) accounts for the ill-formedness of (9a–d) as follows; of NP in (9a–c) is not preceded by the adjective, and of NP in (9d) is not immediately preceded by the adjective, owing to the intervening phrase, I admit, so that the grammaticality of (9d) falls off. This enables us to regard of as a matrix P, which is selected by the adjective as its complement.

This conclusion is confirmed by further observations of similarities and differences in syntactic behavior between of and for as an embedded C and for as a matrix P. Let us first compare the grammaticality of (11a–c) which undergo the operation For/Of NP To VP Fronting:

(11) \langle for as C⟩
  a. [For you to visit your mother] is important.
  \langle for as P⟩
  b. *For you [to visit your mother] is important.
  \langle of⟩
  c. *Of you to take so much trouble is kind.

The contrast in (11) shows that of works as P, just as for as P.

Let us secondly compare the grammaticality of (12a–c) which undergo the operation To–infinitive Fronting:
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(12) *<for as C>*

a. *[t; To start work this week] is unnecessary [for him].

*<for as P>*

b. [To start work this week] is unnecessary for him.

*<of>*

c. [To take so much trouble] is kind of you.

The contrast in (12) implies that *of*, like *for* as *P*, serves as *P*.

Let us thirdly compare the grammaticality of (13a–c) in which the inanimate NP appears as an object of *for* as *C*, *for* as *P*, and *of* (cf. Silva and Thompson (1977: 120)):

(13) *<for as C>*

a. It is important [for dinner to be ready by six].

(cf. What is important is [for dinner to be ready by six].)

*<for as P>*

b. *It is important for dinner [to be ready by six].

(cf. *What is important for dinner is [to be ready by six].)

*<of>*

c. *It is absurd of the lights to flash all night.

((c) Silva and Thompson (1977: 112))

The contrast in (13) suggests that *of* functions as *P* in the same way as *for* as *P*.

Let us fifthly compare the grammaticality of (14a–c) where the expletive is selected as an object of *for* as *C*, *for* as *P*, and *of*:

(14) *<for as C>*

a. It is important [for there to be a fire-escape at the back of the building].

(Swan (1995: 266))

*<for as P>*

b. *It is vital for there [to be a conference soon].
The contrast in (14) represents that of, like for as P, qualifies as P.

The same result is also achieved by the contrast in (15) where some intervening phrases, I assume and I admit, surface between the adjective and for as C, for as P, and of (cf. Konishi (1989: 945)):

(15) \(\text{<for as C>}
\)
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. It's important, I assume, [for us to arrive on time].} \\
\text{b. *It's important for us, I assume, [to arrive on time].} \\
\text{<for as P>}
\end{align*}
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{c. *It's important, I assume, for us [to arrive on time].} \\
\text{d. It's important for us, I assume, [to arrive on time].}
\end{align*}
\]

(16) \(\text{It is [AP kind [PP of you]] [TP PROi to take so much trouble].}\)

3. Diachronic Evidence

Here, I argue that the conclusion I drew above is on the right track from the diachronic viewpoint. To do so, I adduce several historical pieces of evidence in favor of my position that of NP in the construction under discussion merges with the preceding adjective as its complement. This also enables us to clear up the core meaning of of NP.

First of all, according to the Oxford English Dictionary\(^2\) (OED\(^3\)) (s. v. Of 16), we see that of is used with the following elements:
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(17)  

a. adjective + noun:  
a cruel act, a cunning trick, a foolish fancy, a good thought, a kind deed, an odd thing  
b. qualified past participle:  
cleverly managed, ill done, well done, well thought  
c. adjective only:  
good, bad, right, wrong, wise, foolish; clever, stupid, rude, silly, unkind...  

What is more important here is to notice that, in the first example of this construction, which is attested in 1532, *of NP* originally merges with a noun head and not with an adjective head, as illustrated in (18a), where *of NP* is followed by a *that*-clause and not by a *to*-infinitive clause. Likewise, in the first example with *of NP* followed by a *to*-infinitive clause, which is attested in 1602, *of NP* connects with a noun head and not with an adjective head, as shown in (18b). In 1733, after more than a hundred years since 1602 (more than two hundred years since its origin, 1532), at length, *of NP* starts to relate to an adjective head, as exemplified in (18c). It is noteworthy that even after 1733, the examples in which *of NP* is preceded by a noun head are found well into the 20th century, as presented in (18d–e) ((18a–e) are cited from *OED* (s. v. *Of* 16)):  

(18)  
a. Is it not a blind thing of the world that either they will do no good works, ... or will...  
(1532, *OED*)  
b. It was a bruitle part of him, to kill so Capital’ a Calfe there.  
(1602, *OED*)  
c. Is it not very unfair of Equivocus to represent ?  
(1733, *OED*)  
d. It was not a proud thing of Paul to say, but a simple truth.  
(1849, *OED*)  
e. That was a bit of smart thinking on your part.  
(1930, *OED*)
Examples in (18) make it clear that of $NP$ is originally selected by a noun head as its complement.

It is also significant to note that, in Modern English after 1800, in is often used instead of of in this construction, as exemplified in (19) (cf. Hosoe (1942: 103, fn. 1)):

(19)  

a. It seemed culpable in Providence to allow such combination of circumstances. (Eliot, Adam Bede, XII)  
b. 'Tis honourable in ye.  

(Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge, XXXI)

This type of example in which in is used instead of of still remains in PE, although this type is rare:

(20) It is kind in you to make such a pretence...  

(BNC, HGV 302)

From this fact, Hosoe (1942: 35, fn. 1/103, fn. 1) points out that in and of used in this construction like (19a–b) and (20) denote Inherence and Provenance of actions, attitudes, thoughts, characters, etc. Hosoe's claim appears to be correct, since (20), for example, is paraphrasable with (21a–b) (cf. Close (1975), Quirk et al. (1985), Konishi (1989), etc.):

(21)  

a. You have the kindness to make such a pretence...  
b. You are kind to make such a pretence...

(21a–b) represent that the kindness is inherent in the subject you or that it originates from the subject you.

Hosoe's claim that of in this construction means Inherence and Provenance is tenable on account of the fact that of is paraphrasable with the expressions such as on one's part or coming from, which modify the noun or the adjective (cf. OED (s. v. Of 16)), as exemplified in (22) and (23a–b):

(22) That was a bit of smart thinking on your part.  

(=(18c))
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(1930, OED)

(23) It was tiresome of John to insist.  
    a. It was tiresome on John’s part to insist.  
    b. It was tiresome, coming from John, to insist.  

    (Bolinger (1977: 140))

Lastly, since of NP has a close relation to the adjective, the adjective is able to be predicate of the NP, as in (24a–b), but the same is not true for for NP, as in (25a–b):

(24) It is stupid of him to meet her again.  
    a. He is stupid to meet her again.  
    b. He is being stupid by meeting her again.  

    (Close (1975: 76))

(25) It is important for you to visit my mother.  
    a. *You are important to visit my mother.  
    b. *You are being important by visiting my mother.  

    From these arguments, we can summarize the semantic characteristics of of and the relation between the adjective and of NP in this construction, as in (26) and (27), respectively:

(26) The core meaning of of:  
    Of denotes Provenance and Inherence of something characterized by an adjective.

(27) The relation between the adjective and of NP:  
    Of NP is selected by the preceding adjective as its complement.

4. Agent PRO

I have demonstrated that of NP merges with the adjective in the matrix clause, as illustrated in (16), repeated here as (28):

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(28) It is [AP kind [PP of youi]] [TP PROi to take so much trouble].

The structure (28) implies that PRO is always a subject of the embedded to-infinitive clause, and that it is obligatorily controlled by (of) NP. These receive support from the fact that no overt subject NP can appear for PRO in the to-infinitive clause, as shown in (29), and from the fact that, when PRO in (30a) becomes explicit, it corresponds to the object NP of of, as is clear from (30b); both are coreferential:

(29) a. *It is [AP kind [PP of you]] [CP for [TP your sister to take so much trouble]].
   b. *It was[AP very kind [PP of you]][CP for[TP you to send me a nice present]]. ((b) Yasui et al. (1976: 130))

(30) a. It was [AP kind [PP of himi]] [TP PROi to help me].
   b. Kindly, hei helped me. (cf. Quirk et al. (1985: 625))

Accordingly, we can justify the structure (28) in which PRO is coreferential to (i.e. refers to the same person as) the object NP of of.

What is more, it appears that there will be a certain semantic restriction on PRO in (28/30a); that is, PRO must always serve as Agent in the embedded to-infinitive clause. Convincing evidence for this is that the predicate in the to-infinitive clause must always be dynamic, and not be stative, as is evident from the ill-formedness of (31a–e):

(31) a. *It was foolish/brave of Glimp to be tall.
   b. *It was foolish/brave of Glimp to resemble his horse.
   c. *It is odd of Fred to know the answer.
   d. *It is peculiar of Norm to hear the music.
   e. ?? It was stupid of John to be caught by the police.

((a)–(b) Wilkinson (1970: 433)), (c)–(d) Silva and Thompson (1977: 117), and (e) Rivière (1983: 18))

(31a–e) show that PRO in this construction is always assigned the semantic role of Agent.
Moreover, this argument makes it possible to provide a ready account of why _of_ is not able to take an inanimate object NP under any circumstances and always requires an animate object NP, as in (32):

(32)  a. *It is kind of dinner to be ready by six.
     b. *It is absurd of the lights to flash all night.  (= (13c))

This is because PRO controlled by and coreferential to the inanimate NP such as _dinner_ in (32a) and _the lights_ in (32b) cannot be recognized as Agent, which gives birth to the ill-formedness of (32a–b); PRO is not assigned an Agent role.

Historical evidence supporting my claim that PRO controlled by the object NP of _of_ functions as Agent lies in the definition of _of NP_ by _OED_ (s. v. _Of_ 16) that _of NP_ indicates the doer of something characterized by an adjective or that it is the logical subject of the statement. Accordingly, it is possible to paraphrase (33a) with (33b) and (34a) with (34b), as follows:

(33)  a. It was kind of you to help him.
     b. It was a kind act or thing done by you, on your part, to help him.

(34)  a. I took it kind of him to tell me.
     b. I took his telling me as a thing kindly done by him.

((33)–(34) _OED_)  

To sum up, we can state the relation between _of NP_ and PRO in this construction, as follows:

(35) The control relation between _of NP_ and PRO:
    _Of NP_ must obligatorily select and control a PRO subject in the following _to_-infinitive clause.

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5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have clarified the syntactic and semantic status of of (NP) in the construction It is A(djective) of NP to VP on the basis of synchronic and diachronic evidence. Let us now conclude this paper by saying that of works as P selected by the adjective as its complement, that it denotes Provenance and Inherence of something characterized by an adjective, and that PRO obligatorily controlled by (of) NP must always play a role of Agent in the following to–infinitive clause.

NOTES

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1. Evidence that the adjectives in sentences like (5a–b) denote evaluative attributes of both persons and their actions is provided by the following sentences (cf. Silva and Thompson (1977: 125: fn. 1), Bolinger (1977: 135–143), etc.):

   (i) *It was wise of Peter to go home, but I think Peter was stupid.

   (ii) *It was wise of Peter to go home, but I think his going home was stupid.

2. This is clear from the fact that of in (5), unlike for in (6), cannot co–occur with adjectives such as imperative, mandatory, etc., which describe actions but not persons (Bolinger (1977: 136)):

   (i) a. It was imperative/mandatory for Mary to go there.

   b. *It was imperative/mandatory of Mary to go there.
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In addition, of cannot co-occur with adjectives which describe persons but not actions, as follows (cf. Bolinger (1977: 139)):

(ii) *It is strong of you to have convinced them.

This situation suggests that of is required to co-occur with adjectives denoting evaluative attributes of both persons and their actions, as pointed out above in fn. 1.

3. As pointed out by Sadao Ando (personal communication), the existence of a comma in (8a) proves the to-infinitive clause, to tell me, to be added later as an afterthought.

4. In (18b), like in (8a–b), we also have to pay heed to the existence of a comma splitting of NP from the to-infinitive clause. This fact reveals that of historically behaves like P, which appears in the matrix clause, and does not behave like C, which should surface in the embedded to-infinitive clause. This is in accordance with the point I made in section 2.

5. According to OED (s. v. Of 16), of in (18a–e) indicates the doer of something characterized by an adjective and substantive.

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**DICTIONARIES AND CORPUS CITED**

*BNC* = *British National Corpus.*

*OALD*³ = *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.*

*OED*² = *The Oxford English Dictionary.*

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