

# The Status of Particles in Modern English

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**Abstract**—The problem of parts of speech is the one that causes great controversies both in general linguistic theory and in the analysis of separate languages. Authors of grammars published in the former USSR treat the particle as a separate part of speech, naming it “form-word”, “structural”, “functional” or “semi-notional” part of speech. In this paper we investigate the status of particles as a separate part of speech in Modern English. We concentrate our discussion on the morphological structure, semantic characteristics, place, polysemantic and homonymous particles. We consider the particle in Modern English as a separate part of speech characterized by the following typical features: 1) Its lexicogrammatical meaning of “emphatic specification”; 2) Its unilateral combinability with words of different classes, groups of words, even clauses; 3) Its function of a specifier.

**Keywords**—modern English, morphological structure, semantic characteristics, place, polysemantic, homonymous particles.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of parts of speech is the one that causes great controversies both in general linguistic theory and in the analysis of separate languages.

Grammarians approach this problem from different view-points and apply different criteria to the classification of words.

Hence there is a good deal of subjectivity in defining the classes of lexemes and consequently we find different classifications.

For instance, H. Sweet finds the following classes of words in modern English: nouns, adjectives, verbs and particles [13, pp. 35-38]. O. Jespersen names substantives, adjectives, verbs, pronouns and particles [7, pp. 58-60].

In both cases the term “particles” denotes the jumble of words of different classes that are united by the absence of grammatical categories. In the grammar books written by western grammarians we don’t find a separate part of speech called “particles”, but the authors of grammars published in the former USSR treat the particle as a separate part of speech, naming it

“form-word”, “structural”, “functional” or “semi-notional” part of speech.

We adhere to the point of view that the particle is a functional part of speech in Modern English.

## II. MORPHOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Particles are invariable. As far as their structure is concerned, English particles may be:

- 1) simple: *just, still, yet, even, else;*
- 2) derivative: *merely, simply, alone;*
- 3) compound: *also.*

## III. SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS

The meaning of particles is very hard to define. They denote subjective shades of meaning introduced by the speaker or writer and serving to emphasize or limit some point in what he says.

Particles have no independent lexical meaning of their own. They have no independent function in the sentence, no grammatical categories, and no typical stem-building elements.

They may be connected with any notional part of speech in the sentence. Thus, the particle is a part of speech giving modal or emotional emphasis to other words or groups of words or clauses.

In other words, they serve only to emphasize, restrict or make negative the meaning of separate words, groups of words or even the whole phrases.

According to their meaning English particles fall under the following groups:

- 1) Limiting particles: *only, just, but, alone, merely, solely, barely, etc.*

They single out the word or phrase they refer to, or limit the idea expressed by them.

I *only* wanted to ask you the time. He *barely* acknowledged the young fellow’s salute.

I want you to be happy and it is *solely* for this reason that I insist on your doing it.

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TABLE I  
ENGLISH PARTICLES, ACCORDING TO THEIR MEANING

Type of Particle	Particle
Limiting particles	<i>only</i> <i>just</i> <i>but</i> <i>alone</i> <i>merely</i> <i>solely</i> <i>barely, etc.</i>
Intensifying particles	<i>simply</i> <i>just</i> <i>only</i> <i>yet</i> <i>quite</i> <i>even</i> <i>still</i> <i>exactly</i> <i>right</i> <i>precisely</i>
Additive particle	<i>else</i>
Negative particles	<i>no</i> <i>not</i> <i>never</i>
Connecting particles	<i>too</i> <i>also</i> <i>as well</i> <i>either</i>

The particle *alone* very often refers to the word used in the function of subject.

John *alone* was left before the bedside.

The particle *merely* is closely connected with the predicate and is usually preceded by the negative particle *not*.

It was *not merely* a job, but a way of life.

2) Intensifying particles: *simply, just, only, yet, quite, even, still, exactly, right, precisely*. These particles emphasize the meaning of the word they refer to or make the meaning of the word or phrase more precise.

We had *yet* another discussion. *Even* the women were aroused to action.

These days we have been working with *still* greater efficiency.

My watch is *quite* right. I've said *exactly* what I mean.

They did not *even* know that he was married.

The particle *simply* is usually connected with the predicate, and as different from the adverb *simply*, it stands not after but before the predicate or its part.

You *simply* must see the play. That is *simply* not true.

*Still* and *yet* are used as intensifying particles when they are placed before the adjective in the comparative degree, i.e. they are used to emphasize an increase in the degree of something.

The next day was *still* warmer. You can manage to get two tickets that's *still* better.

It is a recent and *yet more* in probable theory.

3) The additive particle: *else*. It combines only with indefinite, interrogative and negative pronouns and interrogative adverbs.

It shows that the word it refers to denotes something additional to what has already been mentioned.

Concerning the word *else* it is necessary to note that in making a comparison between one person or thing and all others of the same kind, the word *else* must be used after *everybody*, *anybody*, *anything*, etc.

He is stronger than anybody *else*.

This word is also placed immediately after *wh-words* in special questions.

What *else* would you like to say?

4) Negative particles: *no*, *not*, *never*.

No, I was *not* afraid of that. I have *not* given up hope.  
We *never* know ourselves.

The negative particle *no* differs from the pronoun *no*. If *no* stands before adjectives and adverbs, it is a particle:

He is *no* better today.

The particle *never* is used to emphasize a negative statement instead of *not*:

I *never* knew that you had a twin sister (= didn't know until now).

Someone might find out and that would *never* do (=that is not acceptable).

I told my boss exactly what I thought of her. You *never* did (= Surely you didn't).

The expression "*Never fear*" means "Don't worry".

5) Connecting particles: *too*, *also*, *as well*, *either*.

*As well*, *also*, *too* – are used in affirmative and interrogative sentences. *Either* is used in negative sentences.

John's face *also* wore a pleasant look. I like you *as well*. I don't like him *either*.

James was silent. Tom, *too*, was silent (Tom was silent, *too*)

#### IV. POLYSEMANTIC PARTICLES

Most English particles are polysemantic, for instance: *only* and *just*.

They may be used both as a limiting and an intensifying particle.

##### A. Limiting particle: *only*

As a limiting particle *only* may be used with any part of speech and in this case it may stand in different positions in the sentence: *Only* Mary was at home.

L. Tipping writes that the word *only* is wrongly placed and the meaning of the sentence consequently rendered obscure. We can see from the following sentences that the position of the word *only* makes a great difference to the sense.

*Only* Mary passed in French (= no one else passed)

Mary *only* passed in French (= passed but did not get honours)

Mary passed in French *only* (= passed in no other subject)

The word *only* is very carelessly placed in ordinary language. Thus, we usually hear: *I only came back yesterday; I only gave him a penny* whereas the sense

really requires: *I came back only yesterday; I gave him only a penny.*

The tendency to place *only* towards the beginning of the sentence, regardless of the position of the word it qualifies, may perhaps be explained by the fact that the position at the beginning of the sentence is the emphatic one, and the word *only* when so placed heralds, as it were, a moderate statement.

Another explanation of the tendency to place *only* near the beginning of the sentence is that *only* is regarded as modifying, not a particular word, but a whole phrase or group of words [16, p. 182].

T. Fitikides notes that the particle *only* is often misplaced. We don't say: *I only saw him once after that.* We usually say: *I saw him only once after that.*

*Only* should be placed immediately before the word it qualifies. In the second sentence *only* qualifies the adverb *once*, and not the verb *saw* [2, p. 81].

#### B. Intensifying particle: *only*

As an intensifying particle *only* is generally used with the conjunction *if* and refers to the whole sentence:

*If only* she were here, I should speak to her now!

*If only* I had seen her yesterday, I should have told her everything.

#### C. Limiting particle: *just*

As a limiting particle *just* is usually used before numerals and other parts of speech having a numerical meaning:

The man gave the boy *just* 3 dollars. He gave me *just* a little.

#### D. Intensifying particle: *just*

As an intensifying particle *just* refers to the predicative and it often used in imperative sentences:

*Just* listen to me. We were *just* about to start our journey.

## V. PLACE OF PARTICLES

The question of the place of a particle in sentence structure remains unsolved. It would appear that the following three solutions are possible:

(1) a particle is a separate secondary member of the sentence, which should be given a special name;

(2) a particle is an element in the part of the sentence which is formed by the word (or phrase) to which the particle refers (thus the particle may be an element of the subject, predicate, object, etc.);

(3) a particle neither makes up a special part of the sentence, nor is it an element in any part of the sentence; it stands outside the structure of the sentence and must be neglected when analysis of a sentence is given [5, p. 160].

Each of these three views entails some difficulties and none of them can be proved to be the correct one, so that the decision remains arbitrary. The view that a particle is a part of the sentence by itself makes it necessary to state what part of the sentence it is.

Since it obviously cannot be brought under the headings either of object, or attribute, or adverbial modifier, we should have to introduce a special part of the sentence which ought then to be given a special name.

The second view would be plausible if the particle always stood immediately before (or immediately after) the word or phrase to which it belongs.

But the fact that it can occasionally stand at a distance from it (for example, within the predicate, while referring to an adverbial modifier) makes this view impossible of realization; compare, for instance, *I have only met him twice.*

The last view, according to which a particle stands, as it were, outside the sentence, seems rather odd.

Since it is within the sentence, and is essential to its meaning, so that omission of the particle could involve a material change in the meaning, it is hard to understand how it can be discounted in analyzing the structure of the sentence.

Since, then, the second view proves to be impossible and the third unconvincing, B. Ilyish adheres to the first view and states that a particle is a separate secondary part of the sentence which ought to be given a special name [5, p. 161].

In modern English particles may combine with practically every part of speech, more usually preceding it (*only five*) but occasionally following it (*for advanced students only*).

They enter the part of the sentence formed by the word or phrase to which they refer. For instance, *only* is placed next to the word to which it applies, preceding verbs, adjectives and adverbs and preceding or following nouns and pronouns.

*Only* you could do a thing like that. He had *only* six apples (not more than six)

He *only* lent the car (He didn't give it). He lent the car to me *only* (not to anyone else)

*Too* is placed either directly after the word which it serves to emphasize or at the end of the sentence.

I, *too*, should like to join in your excursion. I should like to see her, *too*.

In an informal style, *too* is often used after object pronouns (personal pronouns in the objective case) in short answers.

"I've got an idea!" – Me, *too* (in more formal English: So have I! I have *too*).

In modern English it is impossible to say *John hasn't come also* (or *too*). We must say *John hasn't come either*.

*Also* is generally placed before a simple verb-form after the auxiliary verbs, in case of any analytical form, after the first auxiliary, sometimes at the end of the sentence.

I cleaned the house and *also* cooked the dinner. This house was *also* built a year ago.

We were feeling very tired. We were *also* hungry.

When he looked back, the woman had vanished *also*.

It stands before *have to*: We *also* have to wait a long time for the bus.

However, *also* most often refers to the part of the sentence that comes after the subject. So: *John also plays the guitar* probably means *John plays the guitar as well as other things* not: *John plays the guitar as well as other people*.

To refer to the subject, we more often use *too* and *as well*. If you want to say that you have had the same experience as somebody else, you might say:

I have done that *too* but not: I *also* have done that (or I have *also* done that)

For this reason, we don't say "I also" in short answers.

*Just* precedes the word it qualifies: I'll buy *just* one. I had *just* enough money.

It can also be placed immediately before the verb:

I'll *just* buy one. I *just* had enough money.

But sometimes this change of order would change the meaning:

*Just* sign here means: This is all you have to do

Sign *just* here means: Sign in this particular spot.

The particle *not* deserves special attention. Like most particles *not* can be used with different classes of words or clauses: (*not he, not the student, not beautiful, not forty, not yesterday, not to see, not seeing, not when he comes*) [8, p. 219].

You may come any time, but *not* when I am busy.

*Not* wishing to disturb her, he tip-toed to his room.  
May I ask you *not* to cry at me?

It is placed after auxiliary and modal verbs and in other cases before the words or constructions to which it applies.

I am *not* tired. You must *not* start before ten. I *don't* think so.

At last she was silent, *not* knowing what to answer.

If there are some auxiliary verbs in the sentence it stands after the first one.

I shall *not* have written the letter by that time tomorrow.

Every predication can be either positive or negative:  
*He is – He isn't; It rains – It does not rain; Speak! – Don't speak!*

The *positive* meaning is not expressed. It exists owing to the existence of the opposite *negative* meaning.

The latter is usually expressed with the help of *not* (*n't*) which we might call the *predicate negation*. It is a peculiar unit differing from the particle *not* in several respects.

a) The particle *not* has right-hand connection with various classes of words, word-combinations and clauses.

You may come any time, but *not when I am busy*.

*Not wishing* to disturb her, he tip-toed to his room.  
May I ask you *not to cry* at me?

The predicate negation has only left-hand connection with the following 24 words and word-morphemes which H. Palmer and A. Hornby call *anomalous finites* and J. Firth names *syntactical operators*: *am, is, are, was, were, have, has, had, do, does, did, shall, should, will, would, can, could, may, might, must, ought, need, dare, used*. In the sentence all these words and word-morphemes are structural (parts of) predicates.

b) Unlike the particle *not*, the predicate negation is regularly contracted in speech to *n't* and is as regularly fused with the preceding structural (part of the) predicate into units differing in form from the sum of the original components *do + not = don't, will + not = won't, shall + not = shan't, can + not = can't*.

c) The predicate negation remains with the predication when the latter is reduced to its structural parts alone.

Is mother sleeping? She *isn't*. He has bought the book, *hasn't he?*

d) The predicate negation may represent the whole predication like a word-morpheme: Are we late? I believe *not*.

Here *not* substitutes for we are *not* or we *aren't* late. Hence we must regard the predicate negation as a special syntactical unit, as a syntactical word-morpheme of negation. It differs from other means of expressing negation:

He *didn't* return. There *isn't* any book on the table.

He *never* returned. There is *no* book on the table [8, p. 230-231].

Some grammarians think that *the* can also be used as a particle. M.Swan writes: "We can use comparatives with *the ... the ...* to say that things change or vary together, or that two variable quantities are systematically related. Word order in both clauses: *the + comparative expression + subject + verb*:

*The older* I get *the happier* I am. *The more* we study, *the more* we learn.

*More* can be used with a noun in this structure:

*The more* money he makes, *the more* useless things he buys [13, p. 123].

The particle *the* may be preceded by another intensifying particle *all*.

*All the* deeper investigation came to nothing.

## VI. HOMONYMY OF PARTICLES WITH OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH

Almost all particles in modern English are homonymous with other parts of speech, chiefly with adverbs, also with prepositions and conjunctions.

Very few particles (*else, merely, barely, solely*) are not homonymous with other words. The particles *barely, merely, solely* are the words that probably cause ambiguity or vagueness most frequently as a result of misplacement. Let's note the difference between *She merely whispered a word to me* and *She whispered merely a word to me*.

But most of them are identical in form with: adverbs (*exactly, simply, too, never, still, just, yet, right*); adjectives (*even, right, just, only, still*); pronouns (*all, either*), verb (*still*), interjection (*never*), stative (*alone*), conjunction (*but*), preposition (*but*).

We know that homonymous parts of speech are distinguished according to their meaning, combinability and syntactical function in the sentence.

Let's consider some of them:

TABLE II  
HOMONYMOUS ENGLISH PARTICLES

Part of speech	Example
Adverb	<i>simply</i> <i>exactly</i> <i>too</i> <i>but</i> <i>just</i> <i>never</i>
Adjective	<i>only</i> <i>just</i> <i>even</i> <i>right</i>
Pronoun	<i>either</i> <i>but</i>
Noun	<i>but</i>
Verb	<i>still</i>
Interjection	<i>never</i>
Stative	<i>alone</i>
Conjunction	<i>but</i>
Preposition	<i>but</i>

1) Particles, adverbs:

I *simply* do not understand you (particle). He did it quite *simply* (adverb)

He always said *exactly* what he thought (particle).

She knew *exactly* what she thought about the others (adverb).

She is lazy, *too* (particle). She is *too* lazy (adverb).

He is *but* a child (particle). Go *but* and wait (particle).

You are *just* the person I need (particle). He has *just* left the room (adverb).

He *never* looked back, he *never* hesitated (particle). I have *never* been to London (adverb).

2) Particles, adjectives:

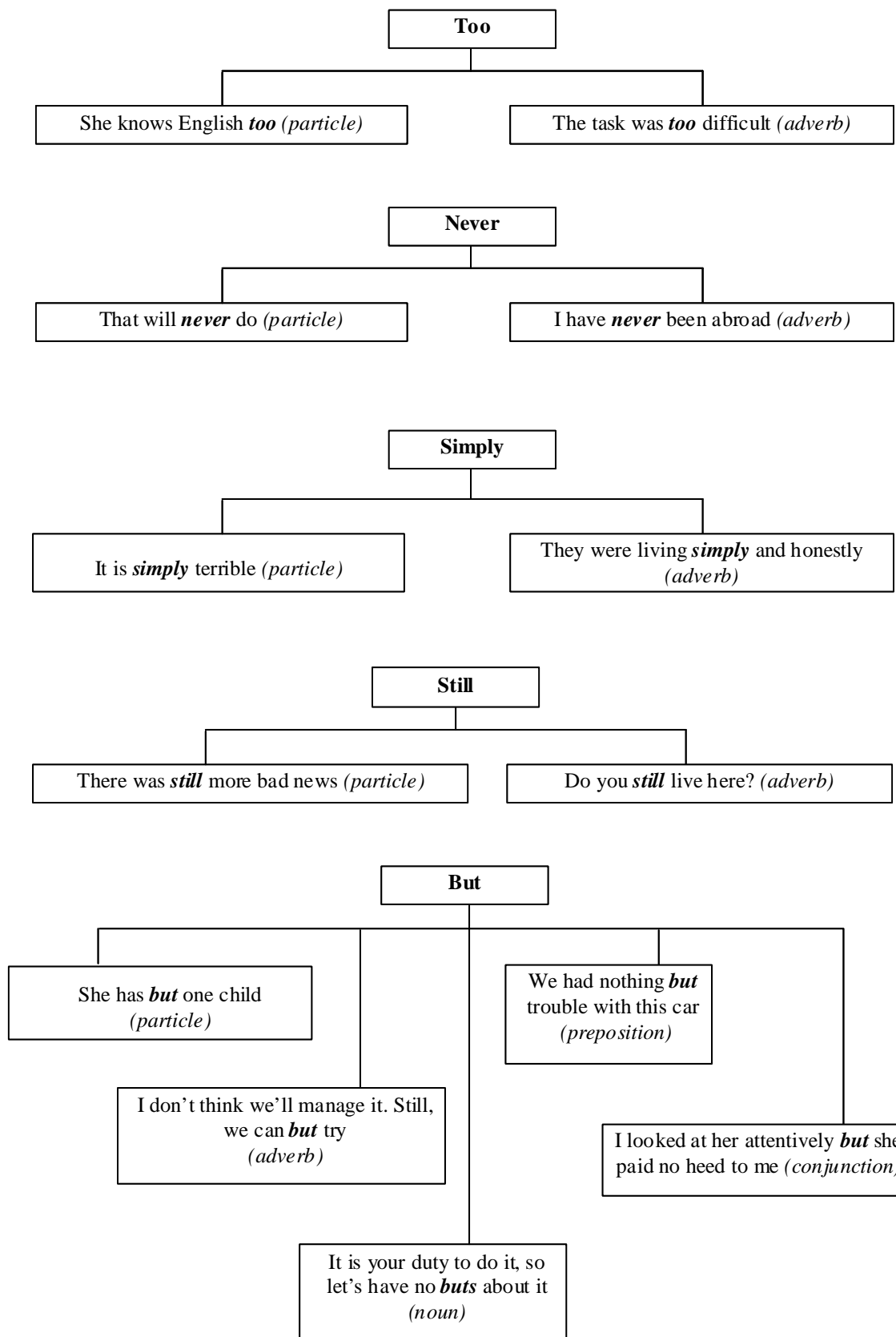
I have *only* two letters to send (particle). She is the *only* child in the family (adjective).

They are *just* about to leave (particle). He is a *just* man (adjective).

I can't cook. I can't *even* boil an egg (particle)  
I couldn't remember those *even* numbers on the wall (adjective).

You are coming *right* out into life, facing it all (particle). He is *right* (adjective).

TABLE III  
HOMONYMY OF SOME PARTICLES WITH OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH





3) Particles, pronouns:

Give me a pen or a pencil. *Either* will do (pronoun).

“I don’t advise you to go close to this cage, *either*” –  
he said (particle).

He is *but* 9 years old (particle). There is no one *but*  
heard it (pronoun).

In the last sentence *but* is used instead of the relative  
pronoun *who*.

4) Particle, noun:

She is *but* a child (particle). Your ifs and *buts* make  
me tired (noun)

5) Particle, verb:

These days we’ve been working with *still* greater  
efficiency (particle).

She could not *still* the child (verb).

6) Particle, interjection:

He answered *never* a word (particle). He ate the whole  
turkey – *Never!* (interjection)

7) Particle, stative:

He *alone* can do it (particle). He can do it *alone*  
(stative)

8) Particle, conjunction:

You are *but* a child (particle)

I looked at her *but* she paid no attention to me  
(conjunction)

9) Particle, preposition:

He told me *but* one letter of the word (particle)

The library is open every day *but* Monday  
(preposition)

10) Particle, stative:

He *alone* can do it (particle). He can do it *alone* (stative).

The homonymy of some particles with other parts of  
speech can be seen from the Table 2.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration all the aforesaid we, like  
most Russian grammarians, consider the particle in  
Modern English as a separate part of speech  
characterized by the following typical features:

1) Its lexico-grammatical meaning of “emphatic  
specification”;

2) Its unilateral combinability with words of different  
classes, groups of words, even clauses;

3) Its function of a specifier.

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