

Oblique predicative constructions in English with *for* and *as*: *qua* vs *qualitate qua*¹

BAS AARTS 

University College London

(Received 4 May 2022; revised 14 April 2023)

English has an OBLIQUE PREDICATIVE CONSTRUCTION in which the prepositions *for* and *as* license an OBLIQUE PREDICATIVE COMPLEMENT that is predicated of a noun phrase, as in *We took her for a friend* and *I regarded her as a genius*. The construction with *for* is the oldest, and is found in many other languages. This article traces the history of oblique predicative constructions involving *for* and *as*, and a number of other prepositions, from Old English to Present-Day English (PDE). Visser (1963–73) has suggested that predicative *for* and *as* were rivals, and that in PDE *as* is now dominant at the expense of *for*. I will argue instead that since around 1900 predicative *for* and *as* can clearly be distinguished semantically as expressing the meanings *qua* (‘as being’) and *qualitate qua* (‘in the capacity of’), respectively, and that the existence of these distinct meanings explains why constructions with both prepositions still survive in PDE.

Keywords: *for*, *as*, predicative construction, predicative complement

1 Introduction

English allows for two kinds of predicative complements: those that are related to a subject, as in (1) and (2), and those related to a direct object, as in (3) and (4). Both types of complements can take the form of a noun phrase or adjective phrase, and can express depictive or resultative meaning. In each case the predicand, in the sense of Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002: 217), is underlined:

- (1) I have known Professor Tyson for approximately a decade and she is *a friend*. (2019, *News on the Web Corpus* (NOW, Davies 2016–): US)
- (2) The vehicle’s engine became *very hot*, and Jackson had the electrical system checked. (2016, NOW: New Zealand)
- (3) I considered her *a friend*. (2010, NOW: UK)
- (4) Leave it on for 20 minutes, and then rinse it *clean*. (2022, NOW: [buzzfeed.com](https://www.buzzfeed.com))

¹ I am very grateful to Laurel Brinton, two anonymous referees and audiences in Poznań and Cambridge for their valuable comments. I am also indebted to Susan Irvine for reviewing my translations of the OE and ME examples.

Typically, subject-related predicative complements occur after copular verbs such as BE, BECOME, SEEM, APPEAR, etc., while object-related predicative complements are placed after the objects of verbs such as CONSIDER, DEEM, APPOINT, MAKE, or verbs that allow the expression of a result, such as WIPE, SCRUB, POLISH, etc.

English also permits a predicative complement in the shape of a noun phrase or adjective phrase after the prepositions *for* and *as* in what I will call the OBLIQUE PREDICATIVE CONSTRUCTION. As with the constructions in (1)–(4), such phrases can be predicated of a subject, as in (5)–(8), or of an object, as in (9)–(12):

- (5) Now, the mango chicken on its own would make *for a great meal!* (2016, *The iWeb Corpus* (iWeb, Davies 2018))
- (6) This is the sort of shot that might once have passed *for real*, before people got wise. (2022, NOW: pocket-lint.com)
- (7) For 22 years, he was a member of Spring Cove School Board, where he had formerly served *as president*. (2017, iWeb)
- (8) Corner Traction Control now comes *as standard*. (2013, iWeb)
- (9) Its lifespan was even threatened again when a DVD distribution company mistook it *for piracy*. (2010, iWeb)
- (10) And these people left me *for dead*. (2014, iWeb)
- (11) The rest of London, however, quite naturally regarded them *as spoiled twits*. (2003, iWeb)
- (12) Only 30 per cent of end users rated relationship *as important*. (2017, iWeb)²

In these cases, the phrases introduced by the prepositions *as* and *for* function as OBLIQUE PREDICATIVE COMPLEMENT. Notice that predicative complements that are realised as noun phrases are non-referential.

In the passive versions of (9)–(12) the oblique predicative complement is also predicated of a subject:

- (13) Its lifespan was even threatened again when it was taken *for piracy* by a DVD distribution company.
- (14) I was left *for dead* by these people.
- (15) They were regarded, quite naturally, by the rest of London *as spoiled twits*.
- (16) Relationship was rated *as important* by only 30 percent of end users.

Grammars of English generally regard the oblique predicative construction as more or less identical to the ‘ordinary’ predicative constructions shown in (1)–(4), or at least as ‘parallel’ (Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 375).

² Idiomatic variants and variants that involve a free relative construction with *for* also occur:

- (i) They say a man who represents himself has a fool *for a client*. (1991, *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA: FIC, Davies 2008))
- (ii) My reputation will suffer, and you played me *for a fool*. (2014, Woody Allan movie *Magic in the Moonlight*)
- (iii) [S]he thought everybody knew her *for what she was – a broken, forsaken, fallen woman*. (1894, Hall Caine, *The Manxman* 148; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 376)
- (iv) This shows Brexit *for what it is: an unsustainable farce, a lie*. (2023, *Twitter*)

In this article I will trace the history of oblique predicative constructions involving *for*, *as* and a number of additional prepositions, broadly following the standard analysis of these constructions outlined above, as found in for example Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1200), Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002: 255, 279–80) and Aarts (2011).³ As we will see in section 2, these constructions date from Old English (OE), but over time some of them have fallen by the wayside. Of all the prepositions that can occur in this construction *for* and *as* remain in Present-Day English (PDE). In section 3 I will propose a specialised semantics for *for* and *as*, which we can characterise as *qua* and *qualitate qua*, and I will ask whether predicative *for* is obsolescent, given Visser’s claim that predicative *as* is now dominant at the expense of *for*. I will argue that this is not the case: predicative *for* survives in English due to the productivity and persistence of a number of constructions involving this preposition. These will be discussed in sections 3.2–3.5.

2 The history of oblique predicative constructions

It is possible to reconstruct the history of oblique predicative constructions in the English language from the data in Visser’s monumental *Historical Syntax of the English Language* and a few other sources, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*).⁴ From these sources it becomes clear that a number of different constructions were in competition with each other, involving different prepositions. In the following sections I discuss *for*, (*swa*) *swa/as*, *to*, *unto* and *into*.

2.1 Constructions with *for*

The oblique predicative construction with *for* is one of the oldest, and is found in many languages, as Jespersen (1909–49, IV: 386) shows, including Gothic, Greek, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Dutch and German. In English it can be traced back to Old English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records this example from *Beowulf*:

- (17) Me man sægde þæt þu ðe *for sunu* wolde hererinc habban.
 me man said that for you for son want warrior have
 ‘It was said to me that you wanted to have yourself a warrior for a son’
 (*Beowulf* 1175 (2008); quoted in the *OED*, s.v. *for*, A, VI, 18, a, (a))

Visser (1963–73, I: 587–8) has many examples of the construction from across the centuries, which often share a common semantics. Here are some further examples from OE to PDE:

³ Other analyses of these constructions are also possible. For example, Dixon (2005: 293, 370) regards (MIS)TAKE FOR as a phrasal verb, which takes a direct object, and in generative analyses some constructions are dealt with in terms of the notion of a verbless or ‘small’ clause (Aarts 1992).

⁴ The usual caveats apply to tracing the history of a construction based on citations, but we can nevertheless get a good impression of the history of the construction from them.

- (18) habban deadne mon *for* *cwucone*.
 have a dead man for alive
 ‘regard a dead man as alive’
 (Boethius, From R. Huchon, *Histoire de la langue anglaise* 1.247; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 376)
- (19) I knowe you *for* *a trewe wyf*. (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales – The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 376)⁵
- (20) know me *for Brutus*. (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* V, iv; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 376)
- (21) he wouldn’t know her *for the same little girl* (1908, Frank Norris, *The Octopus*, 219; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 376)
- (22) He rumbles me *for a snitch*. I’m dead. (2018, BBC TV drama *Informer*)
- (23) Putin ‘is running a meat grinder *for an army* and is not going to stop’ (2023, *London Evening Standard* headline)

Visser (1963–73: 562–3) mentions a further construction, ‘more often used in literary than in conversational diction’, that lasted from Middle English onwards until at least the late nineteenth century, exemplified by (24) and (25):

- (24) There was scarce one of the ladies that hadn’t a relation a peer. (1847, Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 563)
- (25) A proud day for her to have a son a mitred abbot. (1879, R. L. Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 563)

These can be paraphrased with *for*: ‘There was scarce one of the ladies that hadn’t a peer for a relation’ and ‘A proud day for her to have a mitred abbot for a son’.

Visser notes that constructions with *for* ‘still predominated in the beginning of the sixteenth century, but that [o]nly a small number of the listed constructions have survived into Pres. D. English; among them are *know for*, (*choose for*), *have for*, *take for*, *mistake for*, *count for*, *set down for*, together with such combinations as *curse for*, *confound for*, *damn for*, *blame for*’ (1963–73, I: 587–8). The recent examples above, and further examples in section 3, show that predicative *for* is more widespread and productive than Visser suggests.

2.2 Constructions with *swa* (*swa*) and *as* in Old English

Mitchell (1985: 451) and Visser (1963–73, I: 587) cite OE examples with *swa* (*swa*), the ancestor of *as*:

- (26) do me *swa* *anne of þinum yrðlingum*
 take me as one of your servants
 ‘Take me as one of your servants.’
 (*Luke*, Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 140, 15.19; quoted in Mitchell 1985: 451)

⁵ See also Mustanoja (1960: 379–80) for some further ME examples. He notes that *for* ‘correspond[s] roughly to “as”’.

- (27) on ða tide þeoda æghwylc hæfdon heora hlaford *for* ðone *hehstan*
 at that time nation every held their lord for the highest
god, and weorðodon *swa swa wuldres cinig*.
 god and esteemed (him) as glory-GEN king
 ‘In those days every body of warriors held their lord for the highest god and esteemed (him) as
 king of glory.’
 (c. 900, Ælfred, *Meters of Boethius* (Krapp), 26, 43; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 587)

The example in (27) is noteworthy because it features both *for* and *swa swa*.

Constructions with *as*, the ‘successor’ of *swa (swa)*, seem to have originated in Middle English. Here is a selection of examples:

- (28) He sal hym feyn first *als haly*.
 he will him feign first as holy
 ‘He will feign him first as holy.’
 (1340, *Prick of Conscience*, 4233; quoted in Visser 1963–73: 586)
- (29) make me *as oon of thin hirid men*.
 make me as one of your hired men
 ‘Make me (as) one of your servants.’
 (c. 1380, Wyclif, *Sermons*, Luke XV, 19; quoted in Visser 1963–73: 586)
- (30) He was take *as a gret and a famous man* (1534, Whittington, *Tullyes Offices*, I (1540), 49;
 quoted in Visser 1963–73: 586)
- (31) [H]e treated all men *as his equals*. (1899, Rudyard Kipling, *Stalky and Co.*, 267; quoted in
 Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 375)
- (32) “I regard that *as democratically unacceptable*,” said Sturgeon at a news conference in
 Edinburgh. (2016, iWeb)

Visser suggests that *as* gradually took over from *for* in oblique predicative constructions and that in PDE it is the most common preposition.

In Old, Middle and early Modern English *for* and *to* were largely predominant. *As* was extremely rare in Middle English, remained the exception in early Modern English, to become, however, the favourite in Pres. D. English by gradually replacing the older rivals (Visser 1963–73, I: 586)⁶

In section 3.1 I will argue that *as* replaced *unto*, *to* and *into*, but should be distinguished semantically from *for*, which survives with a specialised meaning.

2.3 Constructions with *to*, *unto* and *into*

Constructions with *to*, *unto* and *into* were used from Old English up to the late nineteenth century, as testified by Visser’s and Jespersen’s data, to introduce what the latter calls a ‘predicative of becoming’, with nouns and sometimes adjectives following the

⁶ Mustanoja (1960) does not discuss predicative *as*.

preposition (see also Quirk & Wrenn 1957: 60–1). Jespersen, Visser and the *OED* record the following examples over time:

- (33) *paet hie him paet gold to gode noldon habban ne healdan.*
 that they him that gold to god didn't want have nor hold
 'that they did not want him to regard that gold as god'
 (OE unknown date; *Daniel*, 197; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 591)
- (34) *he wold haue vnto his wyf Gweneuer* (1485, Thomas Malory, *Morte D'Arthur*, 100; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 381)
- (35) I ... take thee ... *to my wedded wife*...for better for worse. (1549, *Book of Common Prayer*, Matrimony; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 594)
- (36) Or ... I will adopt a stranger *to my heir*. (1663, Philip Massinger, *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (Wheeler) III, ii, 59; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 588)
- (37) she would have taken him *to husband* (1869, H. Rider Haggard, *She*, 30; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 381)
- (38) The high-born poem which had Sackville *to father* and Sidney *to sponsor*. (1879, A. C. Swinburne, *Study of Shakespeare* (1880), i. 28; quoted in the *OED*, s.v. *to*, A, III, 11b.)⁷

Oblique predicative constructions with *to*, *unto* and *into* are largely obsolete in PDE, except archaically, for example in the marriage ceremony (*I take thee to my wedded wife/husband*).⁸

2.4 For and as combined

As we have seen, *as* increased in frequency in oblique predicative constructions. This raises the question when this occurred. A possible answer lies in a set of examples listed in Visser (1963–73: 587) and in the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) which combine *as* and *for*, followed by a noun or adjective. These range from the early fourteenth century to 1522:⁹

⁷ Jespersen (1909–49, IV: 383) also has examples with *off/from* with the meaning 'from being' and 'from the time when ... was, or were':

- (i) the Church, to whose service ... I was destined *of a child*. (Milton, *English Prose Writings*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 384)
- (ii) *From a child* I was fond of reading. (1905, Benjamin Franklin *Autobiography*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 383)

These seem to be less clearly predicative, and I have therefore excluded them here.

⁸ Jespersen (1909–49, IV: 381) also mentions the constructions *he dropped a flower-pot and smashed it to bits* and *pull something to pieces*, but these are perhaps best analysed as involving ordinary resultative prepositional phrase adjuncts.

⁹ The *OED* does not record this usage, but it does list the PDE use of *as for* as a 'complex preposition' with the meaning 'as regards, with respect to' (e.g. *As for Pete, he never arrived*).

Table 1. *The use of for, swa (swa)/as, as for, to, unto and into in oblique predicative constructions from OE to PDE, based on Visser (1963–73)*

	Old English	Middle English	14th century	Early ModE	19th century	PDE
<i>for</i>	→				' <i>for</i> predominant'	'small number of verbal constructions'
<i>as</i>	<i>swa (swa)</i>	' <i>as</i> extremely rare'		'exception'		'favourite'
<i>as for</i>						
<i>to, unto, into</i>						

- (39) I sal hir hald *as for þe best*.
 I shall her hold as for the best
 'I will regard her as the best'
 (c. 1300, *Cursor Mundi*, 3297; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 587)
- (40) The monk hym claymeth *as for cosynage*.
 'The monk claims him as a relative.'
 (c. 1386, Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales – The Shipman's Tale*, B1226; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 587)
- (41) In þee, lord, whom we desiren to haue *as for oure fynal eende*, is al maner of good. (c. 1443, R. Pecock, *The Reuele of Crysten Religioun*; quoted in the *MED*, s.v. *for*, 13a.(a)(a))
- (42) Her chaleng and blaming ... muste needis be had *as for vniust and vntrewe*. (c. 1449, R. Pecock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*; quoted in the *MED*, s.v. *for*, 13a.(a)(b))
- (43) we take it *as for a laughynge matter and a sporte*. (c. 1522, St Thomas More, *Works* (1557), 102 F5; quoted in Visser 1963–73, I: 587)

My explanation for the existence of these constructions is that they suggest that for a period of time writers were uncertain whether to use *for* or *as*: their meanings were not very different, and to avoid making a choice they simply used both at the same time.

We can summarise the history of the various constructions discussed so far as in table 1. We can see here that *as for* was used for around 200 years. Although the data are sparse, this looks like a transition period, when *as* slowly became more common, but perhaps requiring semantic reinforcement from *for*.

3 The semantics of *for* and *as*

The history sketched in the previous section provides a timeline for the various uses of the prepositions used in the oblique predicative construction, as viewed by Visser, who claims that predicative *for* became the less favoured option. Does this mean that it is obsolescent? I will claim that this is not the case. In section 3.1 I will discuss the

semantics of *for* and *as*, and I will argue that predicative *for* and *as* have acquired specialised meanings, which are preserved in a range of constructions, discussed in sections 3.2–3.5. The collective existence of these constructions explains why both predicative *for* and *as* persist in PDE.

3.1 *Qua and qualitate qua*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines predicative *for* as follows: ‘As being, as equivalent to, in the character of. Now chiefly restricted to use with certain verbs and in set phrases. Used especially to introduce the complement after copular verbs, where *as*, *as being*, or *to be* may generally be substituted’ (*OED*, s.v. *for*, A, VI, 18 a (a)). *As* is listed as an adverb or conjunction – not as a preposition – and is defined similarly: ‘in the character, capacity, or function of’ (*OED*, s.v. *as*, B, II, 11a(a)). Jespersen (1909–49, IV: 376) states that ‘[*f*]or with a predicative means practically the same thing as *as*’, and Poutsma writes: ‘[i]n some connexions we often find *for* as a variant of *as*’ (1914–29, I, first half: 349). But are *for* and *as* really the same, interchangeable, or one another’s variants? I would argue that there is a difference in meaning between predicative *for* and predicative *as*, which can be characterised as follows:

- (44) The meaning of predicative ‘*for* NP/AdjP’ is: ‘the referent of the predicand is considered *qua* NP/AdjP’.
- (45) The meaning of predicative ‘*as* NP/AdjP’ is: ‘the referent of the predicand is considered *qualitate qua* NP/AdjP’.

‘*Qua* NP/AdjP’ is a shorthand for ‘as being’ (‘in its existence as’) NP/AdjP’.¹⁰ By contrast, ‘*qualitate qua* NP/AdjP’ is shorthand for ‘in its capacity/identity/role as NP/AdjP’.

These differentiated meanings have a powerful explanatory force. Consider the following examples, which contain the pattern ‘TAKE NP *for*’:

- (46) They won’t take me *for* (**as*) a killer. They’ll let me go free. (1996, COCA: MOV)
- (47) Colonel Kinder concluded with the strongest compliment an officer can give. “I would take him *as* (**for*) a soldier in the Army,” he said. (1995, COCA: NEWS)

In (46) the person referred to as ‘me’ is considered ‘as not being’ a killer (‘They won’t take me to be a killer’). It is ungrammatical with *as* in the *qua* reading, but if an assassin were being contracted, the *qualitate qua* reading with *as* would be fine:

- (48) That gang won’t take me *as* a killer, but they will take me *as* a bruiser.

¹⁰ This definition is in line with one of the senses of *qua* listed in the *OED*, namely ‘as being’. We can relate the notion of ‘*qua*’ to the Aristotelian concept of ‘being *qua* being’ (ὄν ἢ ὄν, to on hê(i) on, *Metaphysics*, book IV, 1, lines 1003a21–22). Ross (1924) translates the relevant passage as ‘There is a science which investigates that which is, as being, and the attributes that belong to it in virtue of its own nature – i.e. as being.’ See also Shields (2012a,b).

Example (47) signals a meaning to do with ‘his’ role as soldier in the army. It is ungrammatical with *for* in the *qualitate qua* reading, but in the following example the *qua* reading with *for* is fine:

- (49) Considering his uniform, I would take him *for a soldier in the army, not for an officer in the police force.*

Consider next a recent example in which an author reflects on the end of her marriage:

- (50) Looking at the wooden tallboy my mum bought us *for a wedding present*, two of the drawers suddenly empty, it was the first tangible moment of realisation that it wasn’t just our marriage that was over, but the life we had created together and shared for 13 years. (*The Guardian*, 5 April 2023)

In this case *as* would also have been possible, but it would have meant that the writer was concerned with the item of furniture ‘in its identity/role as a wedding present’, whereas in fact she wishes to communicate that the tallboy’s existence *qua* wedding present made her realise that her relationship to her husband had ended.

Verbs such as *DISGUISE*, *REGARD* and *SEE* always take *as*:

- (51) When she accidentally ruins her father’s rickshaw she disguises herself *as (*for) a boy* and meets someone who will change her life. (2018, iWeb)
- (52) One’s attitude to him depends on whether you regard politics *as (*for) a job with serious consequences, or as (*for) status theatre.* (2019, NOW: UK)
- (53) My colleagues seem startled when I mention Freud, but I see him *as (*for) one of the few psychologists who failed to fall prey to physics envy.* (2023, iWeb)

In each of these cases the status, role or identity of the referent of the predicand is at issue.

Having established the different meanings of *for* and *as*, let’s return to the meanings expressed by examples (33)–(38) in section 2.3. Visser observed with regard to the verb *habban*:

The evidence shows that *habban to* and *habban for* had two meanings: (a) = to ‘possess’ in the quality of (‘he hæfde his sweostor to wife’, ‘I’m proud to have Cyril for a nephew’) and (b) = to regard as (‘hie gold to gode noldon habban’ [cf. (33) above], *habban deadne mon for cwycone* [cf. (18) above]); the two senses are, however, interrelated and discrimination is frequently difficult, as in ‘we han Abraham to fader’. (Visser 1963–73, I: 588)

This suggests that from Old English to late modern times *for* and *to* could both express meanings similar to *qua* and *qualitate qua* which were not easy to keep apart. Taken together the extant data suggest that until the early twentieth century, the *qualitate qua* meaning was expressed by *unto*, *to* and *into*. If this is correct, then *unto*, *to* and *into* perhaps did not so much express ‘predicatives of becoming’, as Jespersen would have it, but rather predicatives expressing ‘role/capacity’. The *qualitate qua* meaning was subsequently taken on by *as*.

We have seen that Visser presented the various predicative prepositions as rivals, and this was certainly the case for *unto*, *to* and *into* which were replaced by *as*. But was he right that predicative *as* and *for* were in competition? Maybe this was the case in earlier centuries, but an alternative way of viewing the later development of these prepositions, i.e. after roughly 1900, would suggest that *as* and *for* ceased to be rivals: the former did not replace the latter, but both prepositions were subject to a process of semantic specialisation, such that the *qua* meaning of *for* and the *qualitate qua* meaning of *as* emerged, and became more distinct. If it is correct that the meanings of *unto*, *into*, *for* and *as* were less easily distinguishable before the end of the nineteenth century, this would explain why early twentieth-century grammars view *for* and *as* as interchangeable. It may still be the case that the decline in use of predicative *for* was real, as Visser suggested, but quite plausibly it was not due to the perceived rivalry between *for* and *as*. A possible way of accounting for it might be that since the early twentieth century the *qua* meaning of *for* in English was simply expressed less often: there was less need or opportunity to express it. There is some evidence for this. Thus English had a construction with predicative *for* that is no longer used. This is the interrogative construction involving *what for* (*OED*, s.v. *for*, P2, c.; Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 379; Leu 2008; van Gelderen 2021). The earliest examples recorded by the *OED* and by Jespersen date from the sixteenth century, and the most recent ones from the early twentieth century:

- (54) “*What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness?*” (c. 1598, Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, I.iii)
 (55) you know *what the Micks are for a rough house?* (1914, Jack London *The Valley of the Moon*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 379)
 (56) How then shall our German industries flourish, if they not protected be? *What for a doctrine is that?* (1920, Hamilton, *The Days before Yesterday; The Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA, Davies 2010))¹¹

However, while the disappearance of the *what for*-construction entails that predicative *for* became less frequent, it does not entail that it became obsolescent. In the following sections I will discuss a number of constructions in which the *qua* and *qualitate qua* semantics of *for* and *as* can be distinguished clearly, *pace* Jespersen’s view that ‘[*f*]or with a predicative means practically the same thing as *as*’ (1909–49, IV: 376), and I will claim that the existence of these distinct meanings allows both constructions to survive in PDE.

¹¹ The *OED* records a Scottish example from 1988 *Whitna for a man’s that?* The *what for* construction is still very productive in other languages, mostly the Germanic languages (van Gelderen 2021: 259). Dutch and German examples are shown in (i) and (ii):

- (i) Wat is hij voor een man? (‘What is he for a man?’)
 (ii) Was ist er für einen Mann?

3.2 *Predicative 'for NP' and 'as NP' as adjuncts*

Consider the following examples in which the italicised subject-related oblique predicative constructions function as adjuncts:

(57) *For a politician*, Herzog appears to know quite a bit about Bitcoin, even casually dropping a reference to the cryptocurrency's recent, once-in-four-years halving event in an interview this week. (2020, NOW)

(58) *As a politician*, Smalls authored state legislation that gave South Carolina the first free and compulsory public school system in the United States. (2021, iWeb)

There is a clear distinction in meaning in cases like these. Example (57) means: 'considering that he is a politician, ...', whereas (58) means 'in his role as a politician, ...'. We find a similar contrast in (59) and (60):

(59) *For a girl who always thought of herself as shy*, Talia said the pageant has given her the means to get out of her comfort zone. (2017, iWeb)

(60) *As a girl in Munich*, Marie was the daughter of teachers and showed artistic talent early on. (2016, iWeb)

Example (59) means 'considered as a girl who always thought of herself as shy, ...', whereas (60) means: 'in her identity as a girl in Munich, ...'. These observations also explain the following contrasts in which *for* and *as* again cannot be interchanged:

(61) *For an apartment block* this is a really low building.

(62) ?**As an apartment block* this is a really low building.

(63) *For so young a child* this kid is an excellent mathematician.

(64) **As so young a child* this kid is an excellent mathematician.

(65) **For a plumber*, Mr Lucas wouldn't recommend plastic waste pipes.

(66) *As a plumber*, Mr Lucas wouldn't recommend waste pipes.

(67) The dog is long-legged *for a terrier*. (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 711)

(68) *The dog is long-legged *as a terrier*.

We interpret (61) as 'considered as an apartment block this is a really low building', but with *as* (62) is odd because we are not considering the role of the apartment block.¹² Similarly, we understand (63) as 'thought of as being so young a child...', but (64) is odd when understood as 'in its identity as so young a child...'. And while (65) is possible with a benefactive reading, it is ungrammatical in the predicative reading. We interpret (66) as 'in his capacity as a plumber, Mr Lucas wouldn't recommend plastic waste pipes'. Analogous considerations apply to (67) and (68).

¹² An anonymous reader notes that the following is fine: *As an apartment block this is a really low building, but if we turn it into an office block it would look more well proportioned*. Here the reading 'in its identity/role of an apartment block' is intended.

Notice that the constructions with *as* often allow the preposition to be omitted:

(69) (As) a hardworking teacher, Mrs Hollingdon never went home before 6 p.m.

Constructions with *for* never allow this.

3.3 The construction ‘with (a) X for (a) Y’

In section 3.1 we looked at the lexical preferences that particular verbs have for *as* or *for*. In this section I discuss the preference for *for* in the ‘with (a) X for (a) Y’ construction, exemplified by the following examples:

- (70) So Mary moved like the priest of her own beauty, with her dressing-table for altar and her maid for acolyte. (1923, Kaye Smith *The End of the House of Alard*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 379)
- (71) ... over the radio comes an announcement that a crazed killer with a hook for a hand has escaped from the insane asylum. (1992, COCA: MAG)
- (72) The bedroom had a twin and a double bed, a dresser, a treadle sewing machine, and a closet with a curtain for a door. (2011, COCA: FIC)
- (73) I played cricket regularly on the open grounds beside the cemetery behind Oceanic Hotel – with sticks for stumps, sharing a bat with teammates. (NOW: India)

I found many similar examples – mostly hapaxes, indicating a productive pattern – in the COCA and iWeb corpora. In these constructions the X and Y slots are variable. We can carry over the meaning of ‘for NP’, identified in section 3.1, so that in each case the meaning is: ‘the referent of the predicand is thought of *qua* NP’. Thus in (70) ‘her dressing-table is thought of *qua* (‘as being’) an altar’ and ‘her maid is thought of *qua* (‘as being’) an acolyte’. We also find cases where the predicand is used metaphorically, as in examples like (74)–(76):

- (74) A schmendrick with a noodle for a brain. (1951, A. Hirschfeld, *Show Business is No Business*, 47; quoted in the *OED*, s.v. *for*, A, VI, 18, a, (a))
- (75) The automated roadway is one of many things spawned by 1991 federal legislation with a mouthful for a name: Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, a.k.a. ISTEA, or “ice tea.” (1997, COCA: NEWS)
- (76) A few minutes later, with the door closed behind her children, Kiki turned to her husband with a thesis for a face, of which only Howard could know every line and reference. (2005, Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*)

The preposition *as* is also possible in (70)–(76), but the meaning then shifts to ‘the referent of the predicand is presented *qualitate qua* NP’. Thus in (70) *with her dressing-table as altar* means ‘her dressing-table is thought of in its function as altar’, and *with her maid as acolyte* means ‘her maid is thought of in her role as an acolyte’. The distinction is especially clear in Jespersen’s example *she went to the ball with her aunt as chaperon* (1909–49, IV: 375), i.e. ‘in the role of chaperon’.

In the next section I will discuss a predicative *for* construction involving a *that*-clause.

3.4 The construction ‘*VERB for NP/AdjP that...*’

In the following examples the predicand is a *that*-clause which functions as the extraposed complement of a verb.

- (77) He knew *for a fact* that his father did not see Mr S (1909, Arnold Bennett, *Old Wives' Tale*; quoted in Jespersen 1909–49, IV: 377)
- (78) We know *for certain* that Fleming tracked down Aleister Crowley for advice concerning Hess's interrogation, which prompted Crowley to write to the DNI. (2016, iWeb)
- (79) The director takes *for granted* that this person will be back year after year and do the wonderful job he or she does. (2012, iWeb)

Some speakers insert *it* into these constructions, although this is infrequent, except for the combination of *it* and *for granted*:

- (80) “We almost know *it for a fact* that GM did not want to drop Pontiac. It was from the federal government,” he said. (2010, iWeb)
- (81) Anyway, I take *it for certain* that all use some kind of a cheap plastic lens. (2012, iWeb)
- (82) We can no longer take *it for granted* that the audience will understand classical music much less modern music. (2015, iWeb)

As in the previous section, these examples can be regarded as constructions in which certain slots are relatively fixed – in this case the particular verbs used, namely *KNOW* and *TAKE*, the preposition *for* and the *that*-clauses – but the content of the *that*-clauses is variable. The meaning of ‘*VERB for NP/AdjP that*’ can be characterised as follows:

- (83) The meaning of ‘*VERB for NP/AdjP that...*’ is: ‘the content of the proposition is *VERB-ed/-en qua NP/AdjP*’.

Example (77) means ‘The proposition *that his father did not see Mr S* is known *qua* (‘as being’) a fact’. In other words: ‘He knew this: it *was* a fact that his father did not see Mr S’. By contrast, the meaning of ‘*VERB as NP/AdjP that*’ can be rendered as follows:

- (84) The meaning of ‘*VERB as NP/AdjP that...*’ is: ‘the content of the proposition is *VERB-ed/-en qualitate qua NP/AdjP*’.¹³

If we have *as* in (77) the meaning changes to ‘He knew this: the proposition *that his father did not see Mr S* has the status of a fact’. This is perhaps an unusual meaning to communicate, but in other instances of the pattern ‘*VERB as NP/AdjP that...*’ the verb combines felicitously with the *qualitate qua* meaning of *as*, as in the following examples:

- (85) The Supreme Court upheld the tribunal’s jurisdiction to impose such a remedy once *it* had been established *as a fact* that women had been systematically discriminated against in the types of jobs at issue. (1990, COCA: ACAD)
- (86) The appeal of the argument is that it simply presupposes *as a fact* that direct national election is more democratic than is direct federal election. (2003, COCA: ACAD)

¹³ In (83) and (84) ‘*VERB-ed/-en*’ indicates the past participle form of the verb.

(87) It is often stated *as a fact* that South Africa has more Indian people outside of India. (2011, NOW: South Africa)

In these cases the status of the content of the propositions is under consideration. We can paraphrase (85) as ‘the proposition *that women had been systematically discriminated against in the types of jobs at issue* is established *qualitate qua* a fact’, (86) as ‘the proposition *that direct national election is more democratic than is direct federal election* is presupposed *qualitate qua* a fact’ and (87) as ‘the proposition *that South Africa has more Indian people outside of India* is stated *qualitate qua* a fact’.

3.5 Postmodifier ‘for-NPs’

In this section I will discuss a number of productive constructions that contain a ‘*for*-NP’ phrase which functions as postmodifier. Consider the examples in (88)–(90) below:

- (88) [_{NP} Tears for souvenirs] are all you’ve left me. (Song lyric by Frank Capano, composed by Billy Uhr)
- (89) Sometimes nothing beats [_{NP} a warm serving of bread pudding for dessert] ... that is, unless you top it with a drizzle of rich caramel and creme anglaise. (2015, *LA Times*)¹⁴
- (90) Dismissive of facts, starved of coherent arguments and apparently incredulous as to the nature of reality itself – Iain Duncan Smith really is [_{NP} a pathetic excuse for an MP]. (2018, Twitter)

In (88) the bracketed NP in which the *for*-phrase occurs functions as subject, while in (89) and (90) the bracketed postverbal NPs containing the *for*-phrase are licensed by the verb as a direct object and as a predicative complement, respectively.¹⁵

As for the semantics of (88)–(90), each example signals the *qua*-meaning. This becomes clear when we try to replace *for* with *as*. If we had *as* in (88) this would lead

¹⁴ In (89) I analysed the *for*-phrase as a postmodifier inside the object NP, and not as a separate object-related predicative complement, witness the fact that the verb *beat* can only take one complement. This particular sentence cannot be passivized easily, but we can have (i):

(i) [_{NP} A warm serving of bread pudding for dessert] can’t easily be beaten.

Alternatively, as an anonymous referee points out, we could analyse *for dessert* as an adjunct, given that (ii) is possible:

(ii) *For dessert*, sometimes nothing beats a warm serving of bread pudding.

¹⁵ Predicative *for*-phrases can also occur as postmodifiers inside noun phrases which stand on their own, serving as book titles or newspaper headlines:

(i) *A Stone For a Pillow* (book title and biblical phrase)
 (ii) *Shit For Brains* (New York *Daily News* headline, 12 January 2018)

The string *shit for brains* is also very common as the compound head of a noun phrase or as a compound modifier before nouns, often, but not always, with hyphenation:

(iii) No, don’t be such a *shit-for-brains*! (<https://bit.ly/2TwAmGT>)
 (iv) He and Mom could instruct us better than any of those *shit-for-brains* teachers. (2010, iWeb)

to a different meaning: ‘tears in their capacity as souvenirs’. This meaning does not fit well in the meaning expressed by the overall sentence, which is an existential statement about tears viewed ‘as being’ souvenirs. However, the *qualitate qua* meaning is not excluded if the sentential context allows it, as in (91):

(91) The removal of rocks *as souvenirs* is considered taboo. (2016, NOW: Ireland)

In (89) the *qualitate qua* meaning of *a warm serving of bread pudding as dessert* is possible, but it would conceptualise the bread pudding in a different way, namely by considering its status as a dessert, rather than its mere existence as a dessert. In (90) we are dealing with an idiom in which *for* is fixed. There are virtually no examples resulting from a search in mega corpora for the construction ‘adj. *excuse as a*’. However, I did find an example that occurred as a comment posted on a forum:

(92) [T]his is a pathetic excuse *as a story*. It had practically no character development what so ever, and the art is also awkwardly rigid, considering how much fighting there is supposed to be. (2013, iWeb)

The context in (92) indicates that what the writer had in mind was the *qualitate qua* meaning, since they are considering the nature of the story, not its existence, hence *as*. However, what seems to be happening in this example is that the *qualitate qua* meaning is blended with the *qua* meaning of the idiomatic postmodifier construction ‘adj. *excuse for a*’, discussed above.

4 Conclusion

In this article I discussed the history of prepositions that can take an oblique predicative complement, focusing on *for* and *as*. These have often been regarded as interchangeable, with scholars suggesting that by the early twentieth century *as* became dominant in PDE at the expense of *for*. I have argued that this account is inaccurate, and that instead of regarding these prepositions as being in competition, they each developed a unique semantics from the early twentieth century onwards which I have characterised as Aristotelian *qua* (‘as being’) and *qualitate qua* (‘in its capacity/identity/role’), respectively. Predicative *for* remains fully productive in English, alongside *as*, and survives in patterns and constructions that allow the *qua* meaning.

Author’s address:

Department of English Language and Literature
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
United Kingdom
b.aarts@ucl.ac.uk

References

- Aarts, Bas. 1992. *Small clauses in English: The nonverbal types*. Berlin and New York: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Aarts, Bas. 2011. *Oxford modern English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 2005. *A semantic approach to English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gelderen, Elly van. 2021. Variations on *what for* in the history of English. *The Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 24, 245–67.
- Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum *et al.* 2002. *Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1909–49. *A modern English grammar on historical principles*, 7 parts. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Leu, Thomas. 2008. ‘What for’ internally. *Syntax* 11(1), 100–24.
- Mitchell, Bruce. 1985. *Old English syntax*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mustanoja, Tauno F. 1960. *A Middle English syntax*. Helsinki: Société Néophilologique.
- Poutsma, Hendrik. 1914–29. *A grammar of Late Modern English*, 2 parts in 5 vols. Groningen: P. Noordhoff.
- Quirk, Randolph & C. L. Wrenn. 1957. *An Old English grammar*, 2nd edn. London: Methuen.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech & Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
- Ross, W. D. (ed.). 1924. *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Online at <https://bit.ly/3I27GOu>
- Shields, Christopher (ed.). 2012a. *The Oxford handbook of Aristotle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shields, Christopher. 2012b. Being *qua* being. In Shields (ed.), 343–71.
- Visser, Frederik Th. 1963–73. *An historical syntax of the English language*, 4 vols. Leiden: Brill.

Primary sources

- Davies, Mark. 2008–. *The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*. www.english-corpora.org/coca
- Davies, Mark. 2010. *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*. www.english-corpora.org/coha/
- Davies, Mark. 2016–. *Corpus of News on the Web (NOW)*. www.english-corpora.org/now/
- Davies, Mark. 2018. *The iWeb Corpus*. www.english-corpora.org/iWeb/
- The Middle English Dictionary*. Robert E. Lewis *et al.* (eds.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001. Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*. Frances McSparran *et al.* (eds.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–18. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>
- The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2000–. 3rd edn online. <https://oed.com>