PARTICULAR PARTICLES

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One of the most flavorful and intriguing characteristics of the English language is its penchant for joining locative particles to other parts of speech to form compounds. In the early development of the language, adverbs were prefixed to verbs to form such compounds as ofercuman (overcome), ingangan (in go), and wipstandan (withstand). As a result of this tendency, English contains a considerable number of compounds that are formed by an adverb prefixed to a verb (overdo, uphold), a verbal form (forthcoming, downtrodden), a noun (onlooker, outcry), and even an adjective (uptight, offhand).

What happens to the meaning of the compound when we reverse the adverb and the second element? Basically, such transpositions can be divided into three broad categories:

1) In class one, the largest, the reversal produces a combination with essentially the same meaning as the original: to be downtrodden is to be trodden down; bygone days are gone by; to overthrow is to throw over; and an onlooker is a looker on.

2) In the somewhat smaller class two, the transposition produces a meaning quite different from the adverb-second element composition. Thus, to overdo something is not to do it over; an lookout is not a lookout; to offset is not to set off; and to overtake is not to take over.

3) Finally, we come to class three, the smallest, yet logologically the most engaging of the three groupings. Here the meaning the transposition is antonymic to, and quite the opposite of, that of the adverb-second element compound, at least in one of its primary meanings.

Five words from class three are presented in the quiz below; the reader is invited to fill in the blanks, and to submit any additional class three antonymic examples that come to mind (the dashes denote the number of missing letters). For answers, see Answers and Solutions at the end of the issue.

1. To up---- is the opposite of to --- up.
2. To over---- is the opposite of to ---- over.
3. To up---- is the opposite of to ---- up.
4. To over---- is the opposite of to ---- over.
5. To with------ is the opposite of to ----- with.