

THE POWER OF “a” PREFIX

THOMAS L. BERNARD

South Hadley, Massachusetts

The first letter of the alphabet serves many linguistic purposes and numerous grammatical functions. One that has intrigued this writer is the way in which a humble lower case “a” prefix can semantically transform different types of words. This can be in terms of a manner (loud, aloud), a condition (live, alive), a state (lone, alone), or action (rising, arising). Relevant applications can be with nouns, verbs (particularly with present participles), adverbs or prepositions.

The “a” in its functioning can be applied in all three tenses; to revert to a time-warp and use the language of the Haight-Asbury sixties, there’s an inherent sense of “It’s what’s happening, baby!” In terms of the tenses, and starting with “a live tree” we can have “The tree was alive a year ago”, “the tree is alive and flourishing”, and “The tree will stay alive if it’s taken care of”.

Here is a score of examples of how the humble “a” can transform both form and function:

Why did the chicken CROSS the road? Because he was anxious to get ACROSS
 Shall we WEIGH the anchor, Captain? Anchors AWEIGH, my boys
 Texas is known as the LONE Star State. Before joining the Union, Texas stood ALONE
 The ship’s tied up at the SHORE. All ASHORE who’s going ASHORE
 He has SHAMED our family, and he should be totally ASHAMED
 Are you sure this raft will FLOAT? If you look carefully you’ll see that it is AFLOAT
 I hear that she’s going to make a FRESH start—yes, she’s going to start AFRESH
 Have they gone to SLEEP? They’ve been ASLEEP for hours
 Don’t they look LIKE each other? Yes, they’re so ALIKE
 Her NEW approach didn’t work. I hear that she’s now going to try ANEW
 What’s that BLAZE I see? It looks as if the warehouse is ABLAZE
 I told him to get out of the WAY. Well, he’s gone AWAY
 Can I sit here WHILE I wait? Sure, but you’ll be waiting for quite AWHILE
 Did you WAKE her up? Yes, she’s been AWAKE for some time
 The thief was captured at the SIDE of the bank. He was taken ASIDE and questioned
 Is the farmer working in his FIELD? Actually, today he’s gone far AFIELD
 She shouted “Don’t speak BACK to me”. I was really taken ABACK
 When did the canoe DRIFT away? I believe it went ADRIFT in the night
 The witch has put a CURSE on him. Yes, and now he’s ACCURSED
 Would you like some COMPANY? Good, then I’ll ACCOMPANY you

It is interesting to note that the use of the prefix “a” can be found in dialectal speech in remote parts of the country such as the Ozarks or Appalachia. Here one can still hear speech that includes words such as abed, abide, a-weary, and expressions like gone a-huntin’, gone a-courtin’, his wife’s a-bornin’, etc. This archaic language is preserved in folksongs of yesteryear such as

Mr. Froggie went a-courtin’, and he did ride mm mm
 Six dukes went a-fishing, down by the sea side
 A-roving, a-roving, since roving’s been my ru-i-n, I’ll go no more a-roving with you, fair maid