



## Why Karl du Fresne shouldn't stress too much about prepositions



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**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**A** RECENT inquiry on a linguistics email list wanted to know why news reporters stress prepositions and say things like “Lambing is now taking place *in* the barn” or “The rules, and the interpretation *of* the rules”.

By coincidence, Karl du Fresne has claimed in his Curmudgeon column that Air New Zealand staff, as well as radio and TV journalists, are taking a course training them to place emphasis on words such as “in” in “please remain *in* your seats”.

This is not a recent phenomenon, and has been discussed in linguistics circles since at least the 1960s. The underlying assumption is that prepositions are not normally stressed, which is generally true for English.

That is, “content words” such as nouns, verbs and adjectives typically have sentence stress, but “function words” such as articles and prepositions do not. However, the preposition is stressed at the end of the sentence “Where’s he *from*?”

Contrast this with “Where’s *John* from?” We see that the preposition is stressed only in the first example, when the subject of the verb is not stressed, usually because the conversational partners know who the question is about (hence the use of “he”).

Likewise, if John has already been introduced and we refer to him again, then his name will be “de-stressed” and the preposition again attracts the stress,

as in “A: That’s *John* over there. B: Oh, where’s John *from*?” Prepositions are also stressed when they contrast with other prepositions, as in “Put them *on* the table, not *under* it”.

There are also cases where what looks like a preposition may in fact be a particle in a phrasal verb construction. This usually has a more figurative meaning, such as “look up” – meaning to visit or to search for something in a reference text, rather than when it has the more literal meaning of looking in an upwards direction.

When words like “up” are particles, then they are readily stressed, but not when they are prepositions. So both “looked” and “up” in “Max looked up his friend” are stressed, but the preposition “up” in “Max looked up the stairwell” will probably only be stressed if the speaker wants to emphasise the direction, contrasting it with “down”.

**O** THER properties distinguish particles and prepositions. For example, the object can interrupt the verb and particle in “Max looked his friend up”. This is not allowed with prepositions, and if you try it then you will probably get a phrasal verb interpretation. So “Max looked the stairwell up” does not mean “Max looked up the stairwell”, but something more like Max looked for information about the stairwell in a map or book.

On the other hand, we can put an