

The *For, To* problem: go *To* some place *For* some reason



Correct use of the words *to* and *for* in relation to the direction of an action on the one hand and benefit or purpose of that action on the other can be difficult for Brazilian learners of English. It is difficult for them because in Portuguese, the same preposition is used for the meanings of *for* and *to*. As a result they often use *for* as a **false homonym**¹ for the meaning of *to*.

- For indicating *direction* the preposition *to* should be used.
- For indicating *purpose* or *benefit*, the preposition *for* should be used.

Because in Portuguese the same preposition is used for both meanings, Brazilian learners of English often produce confusing sentences like the following.

I talked about your classes *for* my colleagues.

When they say this to me, I think:

To whom did you talk about my classes and how do your colleagues (the learner's colleagues) benefit from this?

What they probably want to say is:

I talked about your classes *to* my colleagues.

Now, that is nice to hear. Maybe they want to start having class with me too.

At a university, it is not uncommon for a professor to lend some articles to a student. A Brazilian learner of English, talking about such a case, may produce a sentence which means something else than what was intended.

Pedro took the articles back *for* the professor.

What the speaker wants to say is probably quite different from what the listener understands.

The listener probably understands something like this:

Very nice for the professor that Pedro returned the articles, but he returned them where, to the library?

What the Brazilian speaker probably wanted to say is:

Pedro took the articles back *to* the professor.

That is very different. Apparently the articles belonged to the professor. A student, Pedro, had borrowed them and returned them to the professor.

¹See: False Homonyms, Misleading Cognates, Concept Splitting, <https://www.held.com.br/falsehomonymscognates.html>

If Pedro indeed is returning the books to the library so the professor doesn't have to, the following sentence would be clear.

Pedro took the books back **to** the library **for** the professor.

The preposition **to** indicates that the books move in the *direction* of the library.

The preposition **for** indicates that the professor is *benefiting* by not having to go to the library.

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When talking about an action which is *directed* to the same person that *benefits* or the same thing that is the *purpose* of the action, using the correct preposition can be more difficult even. In such cases normally the preposition **to** is used. It seems to work like this. If purpose or benefit is not explicitly communicated with the word **for** then it is implicitly indicated with the word **to**.

It does not work the other way round. Using **for**, to indicate purpose or benefit does in no way indicate direction.

Do you really like that radio so much?

I can give it **to** you, if you want it. I never use it anyway.

The radio goes in your direction but you also benefit because from now on it is yours.

- The preposition for indicating *direction* is **to**.
- The preposition for indicating *purpose* or *benefit*, is **for**.
- If the action is *directed* to the person that *benefits* from or that what is the *purpose* of the action, the preposition **to** is used. In this case it indicates *direction* as well as *purpose* or *benefit*.

Exercise:

Practice the correct use of **for** and **to** with this exercise.

Who does what in the following sentences?

Bob is taking the draft of the report to Jane for Robert.

Who is taking the draft? _____

Who will receive the draft? _____

Who benefits? _____

I'm writing a letter for my boss to the telephone company.

Who is writing the letter? _____

Who is the addressee? _____

Who will sign the letter? _____

Williams is taking the contract to Jennings for MacArthur.

What does Williams do? _____

What does Jennings do? _____

What does MacArthur do? _____

Jorge needs to send an order of five books to Penguin for Mr. Williams.

What does Jorge do? _____

What does Penguin do? _____

What does Mr. Williams do? _____

Enfos

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