



4-letter words and others (5)

by Alistair Reeves

On with only 2 letters precedes 4-letter *onto* and *on to* below, and I look at *into* and *in to* for good measure. *In* on its own is worthy of its own column, so I do not delve further into it here. Even though we make widespread use of *quite* when speaking, it is one of those words that are better not used in scientific texts. I also promised you *onset* in the last issue, so here it is—with a sting in the tail for me.

On

There are some extremely rare uses of *on* as a noun, and less rare uses as an adjective (turn the switch to the *on* position). It is mainly used as an adverb (The patch must be left *on* for at least 8 hours) or as a preposition. Used as the latter, it is sometimes interchangeable with other prepositions and sometimes is reserved for specific meanings.

In a narrative, you might read: *The patient was also on diliazem and an unspecified diuretic when the rash developed.* The implication is clear: the treatment with these substances was ongoing and was probably well established, or intended to be. *On* is not appropriate in this situation for drugs that were given just before the event occurred (for perhaps only one or two days, or even a single dose). Here you have to be more precise: *The patient had received the first 2 doses of cefotaxime just before the rash occurred.*

I have recently seen the following formulation a few times: Patients *on* this study will receive This is not a formulation I write spontaneously. I would always go for: Patients *in* this study ... ; this is certainly what one might call the 'usual' formulation. In the veterinary field, I often see this or similar: *The new vaccine will first be tested on horses and sheep ...* . This sounds perfectly all right for animals, but I find I could not write: The new agent will first be tested *on* patients aged >65 years. *In* is what sounds right with people—and, in addition to *on*, *in* also sounds right with animals.

On also has a specific use in prepositional phrases of time. Everybody knows that in English we say *in the morning*. Construed with the past tense, it means on a particular morning. Construed with the imperative it tells you when to take your medication. Construed with the present or future continuous (*We are going* or *will be going to ... in the morning*), it usually means tomorrow, unless further qualified. Note that I said *on a particular morning* above: as soon as you make the morning you are referring to more specific, the preposition generally switches from *in* to *on*. Don't ask me why—it just does. Hence: *On that morning, the patient developed fever of 40°; The patient died on the*

morning of 8 February 2006 (but: *the patient died in the morning on 8 February 2006!*); *On the morning the patient was admitted, she complained of ...; On Monday morning.* Look out for this. But **beware**: this applies to *afternoon* (although *in* does creep in here now and again) and *evening*, but not to **night**. With *night*, it depends whether you mean the evening or the whole night: *On Monday night* (evening); *The patient died in the night of 8 February 2006* (night); *On the night we arrived* (evening); *In the night the patient was admitted, she suffered an MI at 03:00* (night).

Onto

When do you write *onto* as one word and when is it two words?

When you are speaking, the difference is obvious: when you use *on to*, you put a little more stress on the *on* component and draw it out a little more than when you say *onto*. There is no intonation in writing, so you have to be careful when using both. These two examples illustrate the difference:

- 1) To speed up the proceedings, we moved *on to* the second point on the agenda.
- 2) To minimise shudder, we moved the device *onto* a firm bench screwed to the wall.

In the first example, only *on* modifies the verb *moved* to give the phrasal verb *move on* meaning *to progress*, and this is in turn modified by the prepositional phrase (as an adverbial) *to the second point on the agenda*. It would be very difficult to move **onto** *the second point in the agenda!* In the second example, the preposition *onto* plus its object (*a firm bench*) plus a modifier of this (*screwed to the wall*) form an adverbial phrase, the whole of which modifies the verb *moved*. Phew! Maybe it is just easier to read the sentence out loud if you are not sure!

Into

The situation with *into* and *in to* is very similar to *onto* and *on to*, with a difference: *in to* is used much more rarely than *on to*, which means that I get fewer questions about *into* and *in to* and very much less frequently have to correct it. Even though *in* is collocated in many phrasal verbs, it is rarely followed by a prepositional phrase as an adverbial that starts with *to*. The grammatical principles are the same as for *onto* and *on to*.

- 1) Divide the aliquot *into* two equal parts (*into two parts* modifies *divide*).
- 2) After completion, please hand the questionnaire *in to* the study nurse (*in* is part of the phrasal verb *to hand in* and *to the study nurse* modifies the verb *to hand in*).

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Examples 3 and 4 show why mistakes with *in to* and *into* are made much less frequently and need no further comment:

- 3) We turned him *in to* the police.
- 4) We turned him *into* the police.

A different phenomenon is the use of *in* instead of *into* when describing an action. This is impossible in some languages because different cases are used for states and actions, and people from some language groups therefore have a higher sensitivity to this and are careful about the difference. Especially when speaking, but increasingly in written English, I see the following or similar: *Place/put the bead in the crucible* or *The needle is inserted horizontally in a fold of skin drawn up from the abdomen*. Nobody is going to misunderstand these, but I still like to make that extra bit of effort and use *into* because an action is being described.

And, by the way, this also applies to *on* and *onto*: Place the tubes *on* the rack at an angle of 45°. Again, it is quite obvious what you have to do, but using *onto* makes all the difference, and the prescriptivists amongst us would even tell you that *on* is definitely wrong.

Quite

Not quite a ‘Janus word’¹ [1], the adverb *quite* has contradictory rather than opposite meanings. I used it with its meaning of *entirely* in the previous sentence. The problem is that it is equally frequently used to mean *somewhat* or *to a great extent but not completely*: *The levels remained quite low for the remainder of the observation period* (somewhat). This use is too imprecise for scientific usage, at least when writing, and a better solution should be found. But used in the following way, it means *exactly*: *This was quite the effect we aimed to demonstrate* or *That was quite the wrong thing to do*. It can sound a little formal or even old-fashioned when used this way. This applies to the first example in the previous sentence, but not the second.

When speaking, the word *quite*, when used this way, is also clearly stressed. Both meanings are in widespread use in spoken English, and this is quite (completely) acceptable, because, if there is any uncertainty, listeners can ask for clarification. They cannot do this when reading. *He became quite incoherent after the second dose* or *The answer is quite straightforward*: whilst it is likely that *quite* in both these examples means *somewhat* or *to a large extent*, it might equally well mean *completely*, and is therefore ambiguous. Even though the context will often determine the actual meaning of *quite*, I prefer to avoid it in scientific texts and choose a more precise adverb.

Onset

Most words we use we have not looked up in dictionaries, even though we are writers. The linguists amongst us may have looked up a few more, but then that really is what would be expected when studying other languages. The

word *onset* was in this category for me until last year, when I discovered, at least according to dictionary definitions, that I had misused it all my life. And not only that: I had unwittingly deceived people about its meaning, sometimes quite emphatically.

For me, it definitely included the idea of a protracted and not abrupt start—hence my refusal to accept it coupled with the word *treatment*, whilst being quite happy to see it used together with the word *effect*. It is often modified by the adjective *sudden*, which also seemed sensible if it generally (as I thought) meant a *gradual beginning*, but then again, it is often modified by *slow* as well, so I thought I would finally look it up, because if it really did include the idea of *protracted*, then there would usually be no need to modify it with *slow*.

The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* [1] had the following to say: *1 an attack. 2 a beginning, esp. an energetic or determined one*. When we don’t like what we see, we often seek confirmation elsewhere, so I went to *The Oxford Dictionary* [2], which said: *1. ... an attack, assault. 2. The action ... of beginning some operation; commencement, start—slightly nearer to my lifelong assumption, but not near enough for comfort*. So I took recourse to *Websters* [3] (*1 attack; assault 2 beginning; commencement*) and *Chambers* [4] (*violent attack, assault, storming, beginning, outset*), which also brought no solace, because nowhere was there an idea of *slow* or *gradual*. Indeed, quite the opposite, taking into account the first meaning in each case! In our context, only the second meaning of *start* will usually apply² (and, please, never use *commencement*, or indeed *commence*, which are just ‘big words’ for *start* as a noun and verb).

So it looks now as though I will have to swallow my aversion to *onset of treatment* and *the onset of the adverse event*. My argument against *onset of treatment* was that you pass in one second from being untreated to being treated as soon as you swallow a tablet or receive an injection, and that this is therefore definitely not gradual. And, in the same vein, *the onset of an adverse event* when talking about a convulsion, for example, is also definitely not gradual. But now I know better.

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¹ Edith Schwager [1] uses the term ‘Janus word’ to describe ‘double-headed words that have opposite meanings’ (after the two-faced Roman god, Janus, who gave his name to January), e.g. ‘cleave’ which means to cut apart or to cling to.

² Although I can imagine that onset with the first meaning may well be used as part of the somewhat ‘military’ language (onslaught, invasion, destruction) used when describing the action of antibodies!