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# Touch *down* in Pittsburghese

R. Thomas McCoy<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

In standard American English, *down* may take a DP object only if the DP indicates a path, as in *I walked down the street*. However, for some speakers of Pittsburgh English, it is also grammatical for *down* to take a DP object indicating a location or goal, as in *She works down Baltimore* (meaning ‘She works down in Baltimore’). In this work, I describe the distributional properties of this usage, which I name “touch *down*.” Based on these properties, I propose the syntactic analysis that touch *down* licenses a silent preposition where standard American English has an overt preposition, and that this silent preposition incorporates into *down*.

## Keywords

microvariation, syntax, prepositions, Pittsburgh English

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## 1. Introduction

In standard American English, the preposition *down* requires as its complement either a PP, as in (1a), or a DP indicating a path, as in (1b):

- (1) a. The devil went down to Georgia.
- b. Alice tumbled down the rabbit-hole.

In some varieties of English, including for some speakers of Pittsburghese,<sup>1</sup> *down* may instead be followed by a DP indicating a location, as in (2a) and (2b), or a goal, as in (2c):

- (2) a. My sister lives down Morgantown.  
      ‘My sister lives down in Morgantown.’
- b. Jeff works down Walmart.  
      ‘Jeff works down at Walmart.’
- c. I’m going down my uncle’s house over break.  
      ‘I’m going down to my uncle’s house over break.’

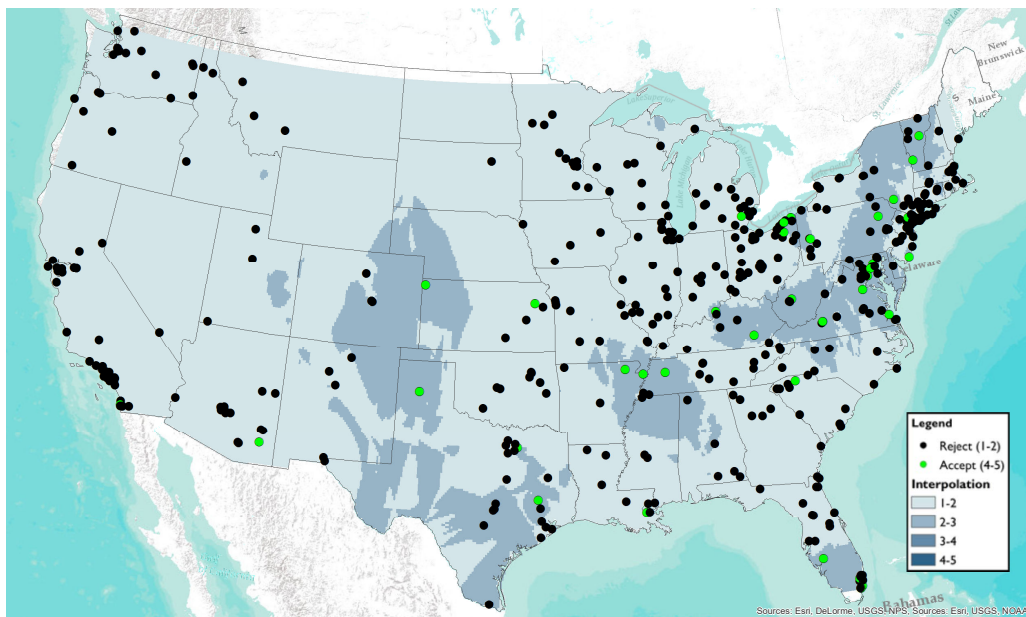
In a similar vein as the name of “contact relatives” (relatives which directly contact their heads), I have termed this construction “touch *down*” because it involves *down* directly touching its object.

<sup>1</sup> See discussion below on the geographic distribution of this construction.

Out of the three most plausible accounts for this phenomenon, I argue that the most likely one is that touch *down* licenses a silent preposition that must appear directly to the right of *down*. The other possibilities are that it results from a purely phonological process of contraction or that it is a new form of *down* that may take a location or goal as its object.

## 2. Geographic Distribution

In this paper, I chose to discuss the manifestation of touch *down* in Pittsburgh because that is where I have personally observed its use, and it is also the place for which it was most convenient for me to seek language consultants from that place. However, I make no claims about the general geographic distribution of this phenomenon. The *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) (Cassidy & Hall 1991) includes an entry for this phenomenon but does not associate it strongly with a specific place. A recent survey administered by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (Survey 9) (see Zanuttini et al. 2018) included one example of the phenomenon, the sentence *She works down Walmart*. The geographic distribution of the judgments of that sentence is shown in the map in Figure 1. This map reveals some geographic variation, although the Hot Spots analysis (see Wood to appear for details) did not find the variation to be statistically significant with either a 200 km or 300 km critical distance. One may note, however, that at least one participant from the Pittsburgh area accepted the sentence, as did several others in Cleveland (which is relatively close). For the remainder of the paper, I set aside the general geographic distribution of the construction, leaving it for future research to determine whether there are consistent geographic patterns, and whether the judgments discussed below hold for all dialects where the construction is found.



### 3. Methodology

All of the judgments presented in this paper come from live phone interviews of speakers who utilize touch *down*. Respondents were asked for grammaticality judgments on a variety of test sentences. When the respondents were unsure of how to rate a sentence, I would work with the respondent to try to find a similarly-structured sentence for which the judgment was clearer. Respondents were found by word of mouth; I asked friends from the Pittsburgh area to recommend acquaintances of theirs who have a strong Pittsburgh accent and who would be interested in participating in a study about Pittsburghese. Seven native Pittsburghers were contacted in this way, and it turned out that only three of them use touch *down*, so the judgments in this paper come from those three speakers.

### 4. Basic properties

#### 4.1 Only with *down*

This construction can only occur with *down*, not with other prepositions such as *up*, *out*, or *over*. Thus, (3b) is acceptable, but (4b), (5b), and (6b) are not:

- (3) a. We're going **down to** Walmart to pick up some milk.  
b. We're going **down** Walmart to pick up some milk.
- (4) a. My best friend lives **up in** Butler County.  
b. \*My best friend lives **up** Butler County.
- (5) a. I had to drive out to Philly to get my passport.  
b. \*I had to drive **out** Philly to get my passport.
- (6) a. I usually walk my dog **over in** West Mifflin.  
b. \*I usually walk my dog **over** West Mifflin.

This property differentiates touch *down* from a similar phenomenon in some varieties of British English, which do allow prepositions other than *down*, as in (7) (Allerton 2008):

- (7) a. Chris went down the pub.  
'Chris went down to the pub.'
- b. She partied up the club.  
'She partied up at the club.'
- c. I spent the day over Anne's.  
'I spent the day over at Anne's.'

#### 4.2 Goal or location

Touch *down* may take either a goal (8) or a location (9) as its object:

- (8) We're driving down McKeesport to pick up groceries.
- (9) a. He lives down West Virginia.  
b. He always waits down the corner.

In this respect, touch *down* resembles two fixed expressions in standard English, namely *downtown* and *down South*. The *town* in *downtown* can be either the goal of motion, as shown in (10a), or a location, as shown in (10b), and the same goes for the *South* in *down South*, as shown in (11).

- (10) a. We're going downtown to shop tomorrow.  
       'We're going down to the town to shop tomorrow.'  
       b. My sister lives downtown.  
       'My sister lives down in the town.'
- (11) a. We're going down South during the break.  
       'We're going down to the South during the break.'  
       b. My sister lives down South.  
       'My sister lives down in the South.'

Johnstone et al. (2016:26) note that there are more such instances of preposition-noun compounds in Pittsburghese than in standard American English:

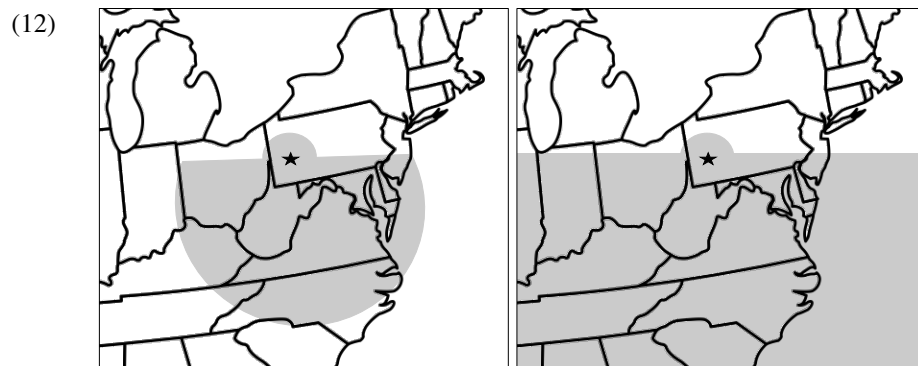
The morphological rule that gave rise to adverbs like *upstairs*, *downstairs*, and *upriver* has produced several additional forms in Pittsburgh speech, where prepositions and nouns can be compounded to form adverbs of direction or location. Examples of this morphological pattern include *upstreet*, *downstreet*, and *downcellar* where in most varieties of American English, speakers use prepositional phrases such as *up the street*, *down the street*, *down in the cellar*.

(Johnstone et al. 2016:26)

It is possible that these Pittsburghese preposition-noun compounds arose from instances of touch *down* (Barbara Johnstone, p.c.).

### 4.3 Semantic restrictions

The set of goals and locations that may be the object of touch *down* is more restricted than for *down to/down in/down at*. For a speaker situated in Pittsburgh (the star), the gray areas show the very rough sets of allowed goals and locations for the two constructions:



The left map indicates allowed goals and locations for touch *down*; the right map indicates allowed goals and locations for *down to/down in/down at*

Very roughly, touch *down* is restricted based on both direction and familiarity. First, any place that is very close to the speaker's home is allowed, regardless of direction. This would include any place that the speaker frequents as well as any places that are visited rarely, if at all, but that are well-known local landmarks that would be known to everyone in the speaker's community. Secondly, for any places farther away from the speaker's home, the location must be more southward than northward to be allowed. However, even if it is directly to the south, the place cannot be too far away, or else it will not be allowed.

The following examples illustrate these restrictions. Bethel Park and Wexford are two communities in the Pittsburgh area, so they are both familiar enough to be acceptable, even though Wexford is slightly north of the speaker. West Virginia is a bit farther away, but it is still acceptable because it is southward. Erie and Canada are not acceptable, however, because they are northward and too far away to be within the familiarity zone. Finally, Brazil is not acceptable because, even though it is clearly to the south, it is too far away to be familiar:

- (13) a. She lives down Bethel Park.
- b. She lives down Wexford.
- c. She lives down West Virginia.
- d. #She lives down Canada.
- e. #She lives down Erie.
- f. #She lives down Brazil.

(13f) highlights the difference between touch *down* and *down to/down in/down at* because (14) is completely acceptable even though (13f) is not:

- (14) She lives down in Brazil.

The vertical notion of down-ness can also be relevant. The following sentence is only acceptable if the bedroom is on a floor above the kitchen but not if it is on the same floor as, or a lower floor than, the kitchen:

- (15) It's too hot in my bedroom tonight, so I'm gonna sleep down the kitchen.

When asked what a prototypically down place was, one of the consultants replied that for her it was the grocery store Kuhn's because this store lies directly down a hill from her, lending further support to the notion that verticality is relevant.

Rather than stating that the object must be both familiar and down, a more accurate portrayal might be that it must be familiar and not up. People generally do not have an extremely strong notion of which places within their immediate neighborhood count as northward, perhaps in part because mobility within one's neighborhood ensures that the same spot might be northward from one part of the neighborhood but southward from another. Therefore, pretty much every spot in the immediate neighborhood is not strongly classified as up and is also familiar, meaning that within a small radius all spots are allowed. However, outside the immediate neighborhood, there is a clearer notion of which places are upward; for example, Canada will be northward from anywhere that a native Pittsburgher frequents. Thus, outside the immediate neighborhood, objects of *down* are restricted to the southern half of a circle of some indeterminate radius of familiarity.

One final note about allowed objects is that goals and locations that are true places (such as rooms, buildings, towns, or geographic regions) are strongly preferred, so the following two sentences are marginal at best:

- (16) #We keep the scissors down the bottom drawer.  
 INTENDED: ‘We keep the scissors down in the bottom drawer.’
- (17) #John jogged down his sister.  
 INTENDED: ‘John jogged down to his sister.’

#### 4.4 All types of DPs allowed

Though there is a preference for definite DPs, the goal or location may be a definite DP (18), an indefinite DP (19), or a pronoun (20) as long as it adheres to the other semantic restrictions mentioned above:

- (18) You could probably buy it down the drug store on Bigelow Boulevard.
- (19) You could probably buy it down some store in the city.
- (20) I’ve never shopped down those stores in Oakland, but I think I will go shop down them tomorrow.

This syntactic and semantic flexibility displayed in this section and the previous one differentiates touch *down* from another related construction, namely the phrase *down the shore* spoken by many people in New Jersey. Semantically, *down the shore* appears very much like a case of touch *down*:

- (21) I’m going down the shore.  
 ‘I’m going down to the shore.’
- (22) My friend has been down the shore all summer.  
 ‘My friend has been down at the shore all summer.’

However, *down the shore* is much more restricted in that the only DP argument it can take is *the shore*. All of the following are disallowed:

- (23) \*I’m going down a shore.
- (24) ??I’m going down the beach.
- (25) \*I’m going down the sunny shore.
- (26) \*I’m going down Cape May.

#### 4.5 May modify verbs or nouns

Touch *down* may modify a verb phrase, as in (27), or a noun phrase, as in (28):

- (27) a. She exercises down the Y.  
 b. She drove down the Point.  
 c. She teaches elementary school down McKeesport.
- (28) a. The grocery store down McKeesport has a great selection of cereals.  
 b. The cashiers down Walmart are usually grumpy.  
 c. Every house down Mount Lebanon is light green.

Thus, touch *down* is subject to ambiguity in the same way that prepositional phrases often are, meaning that (29) has two possible readings, depending on whether *down* is interpreted as modifying the verb phrase (reading A) or the noun phrase (reading B):

- (29) I bought a house down Bethel Park.  
 A: ‘While in Bethel Park, I purchased a house (not necessarily located in Bethel Park).’  
 B: ‘I purchased a house that is in Bethel Park (but I was not necessarily in Bethel Park when I bought it).’

#### 4.6 Modifiers

Touch *down* may be modified by *right* or *straight*:

- (30) A: Do your parents live far away from you?  
 B: No, they live **right** down Bethel Park!
- (31) We’re going **straight** down the store.

These modifiers may only appear directly to the left of *down*. Any other position is unacceptable.

## 5. Syntactic analysis

I posit that there are three likely hypotheses about the structure of this construction:

- (32) **Hypothesis 1:** Touch *down* is the result of purely phonological contraction of prepositions.  
 (33) **Hypothesis 2:** Touch *down* is a new, single preposition that may take a goal or location as its complement rather than just a path.  
 (34) **Hypothesis 3:** Touch *down* is the same as *down to/down in/down at* but with the second preposition silent.

I will consider each of these hypotheses in turn.

### 5.1 Touch *down* as phonological contraction of *down to/down in/down at*

The hypothesis that touch *down* may result from a purely phonological process seems quite unlikely because there are multiple types of cases in which *down to/down in/down at* may occur but touch *down* may not. First, touch *down* may not be used in idioms containing *down to/down in/down at*:

- (35) a. Mary is very down to earth.  
 b. \*Mary is very down earth.

Thus, although (36a) has two readings—the idiomatic one in which John feels unhappy, and the compositional one in which John is currently visiting a landfill—(36b) can only have the non-idiomatic reading because the idiom does not accommodate touch *down*:

- (36) a. John is down in the dumps.  
 b. John is down the dumps.

In addition, touch *down* cannot occur in a sentence where the *down* acts as a particle on the verb, so (37b) is unacceptable:

- (37) a. John sat down in a chair.  
 b. \*John sat down a chair.

Third, touch *down* cannot replace *down to* when *to* has the reading *toward*:



- (38) a. Mary tossed the ball down to her sister.  
 b. \*Mary tossed the ball down her sister.

Finally, the semantic differences (discussed in section 3.3 above) between touch *down* and *down to/down in/down at* suggest that they are underlyingly different.

All of the above reasons provide strong evidence that touch *down* is a grammatical process rather than a phonological one. However, it is possible that phonology played a role in the historical development of this phenomenon, which could account for why *down* is allowed but not *up*. In casual speech, *down to* often gets realized as [danə],<sup>2</sup> with the /t/ of *to* not surfacing. The schwa can also easily escape notice, especially if the next word is vowel-initial, so it would be easy for speakers to hear someone else pronounce *down to* in this way and to hear it as simply *down*. Similarly, it is plausible to see the *in* in *down in* as being easy to miss perceptually because the two instances of /n/ could easily blend together in fast speech. These phonetic misperceptions could then have become grammaticalized to turn into touch *down* as it appears now. However, such a pathway is much less likely for *up*, because *up* does not become easily coarticulated with the following prepositions; for example, *up to* is always pronounced as [əpt<sup>h</sup>ə] and never as [əpə]. Therefore, historical factors combined with phonology could explain why *up* is asymmetric with *down*; though I hasten to add that this is pure speculation and requires historical research to substantiate or disprove it.

## 5.2 Touch *down* as a singleton preposition

Another hypothesis to account for the behavior of touch *down* is that *down* is just a standalone preposition that is unusual for its ability (unlike standard English *down*) to select for a location or goal theta role. However, there are several properties usually possessed by prepositions that touch *down* does not have. First, pseudopassivization is sharply ungrammatical with touch *down* even though it is perfectly acceptable with other prepositions:

- (39) a. A: Has anyone played baseball down that new field yet?  
 B: Yeah, it's been played {in/\*down} a few times.  
 b. A: Has anyone ever lived down that house on the corner?  
 B: No, as far as I can tell it's never been lived {in/\*down}.

Secondly, *wh*-extraction to form questions and relative clauses is sharply ungrammatical as well, even though this typically does work for prepositions:

- (40) a. What town does he live {in/\*down}?  
 b. Which house does he live {in/\*down}?  
 c. What park did you drive {to/\*down} over break?  
 d. If you need help, that's not the place you should go {to/\*down}.

Third, pied piping is also ungrammatical:

- (41) \*Down which town does he live?  
 (42) \*Down which park did you drive over break?

<sup>2</sup>In Pittsburghese, /äü/ is typically monophthongized as [a].

It is also the case that the consultants rejected pied piping with standard prepositions such as *in* or *to*. However, at the suggestion of Matt Tyler (p.c.), I tested some sentences with swiping, and these proved ungrammatical as well even though they were accepted with *in* or *at*:

- (43) A: I just played a football game yesterday!  
B: Where {in/at/\*down}?

Swiping is postulated to occur as pied piping followed by ellipsis of the rest of the sentence and inversion of the *wh*-word and the preposition (e.g. Merchant 2000). My consultants did accept swiping with other prepositions, but not with *down*, so this is further evidence that touch *down* is not a single preposition.

All of these pieces of evidence demonstrate processes that prepositions generally are capable of doing; at least pseudopassivization and *wh*-extraction even work with *down* in its path-object sense:<sup>3</sup>

- (44) This road hasn't been driven down in ages.  
(45) Which riverbank did you walk down?

### 5.3 Touch *down* licensing silent prepositions

The final possibility considered here, and the one I argue for, is that there is a silent preposition (meaning something akin to *to*, *at*, or *in*) following the *down*.

First, this could account for the resistance of touch *down* to extraction. Two-preposition strings may be extracted out of (as the preceding phrase just demonstrated), but whereas single prepositions can almost universally be extracted from, this is not always the case for double prepositions; the following examples generally could be grammatical given enough context, but they do require much more context than a single preposition would:

- (46) ?Which country does your brother live down in?  
(47) ?Which house does she sleep down in?

Touch *down* is much more amenable to focus than it is to other types of movement, and this also agrees with the ease with which a constituent can be focused from within a double preposition:

- (48) Squirrel Hill I've lived down, but I've never lived in Bethel Park.  
(49) Squirrel Hill I've lived down in, but I've never lived in Bethel Park.

However, the silent preposition could not be identical to an overt preposition because it is impossible to interpolate another prepositional phrase between touch *down* and its object (50), which we would expect to be possible if the silent preposition could be separated from *down* (51) (the idea for this test comes from Myler (2011, 2013)):

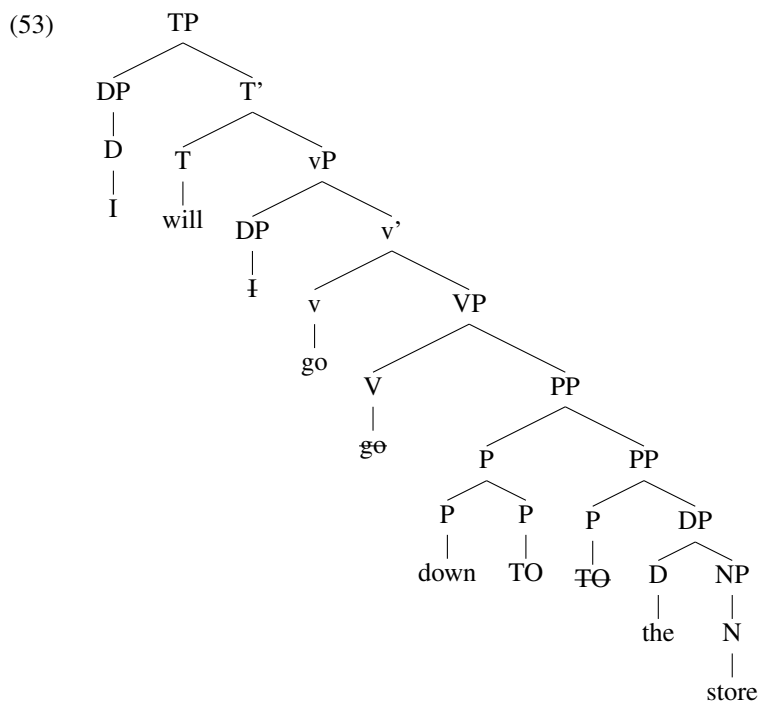
<sup>3</sup>After the rest of this paper had been written, I talked to another speaker of touch *down* who, contrary to all of my other consultants, did allow *wh*-extraction and pseudopassivization. These facts make it likely that, for this speaker, touch *down* is represented as a single preposition that licenses a goal or location as its object. The possibility of this single construction possibly existing with different underlying structures for different speakers would be an interesting question for further research into microsyntactic variation.

- (50) a. I drove down TO Bethel Park with my dad.  
 b. \*I drove down with my dad TO Bethel Park.
- (51) a. I drove down to Bethel Park with my dad.  
 b. I drove down with my dad to Bethel Park.

In addition, consider (52). In (52a), there are two overt prepositions, which have different meanings. However, (52b), which has a silent IN and which we would expect to be a possible structure if the preposition following *down* were truly the same as an overt preposition, cannot be realized; the sentence pronounced *Most of the miners live down by the river and Oakland* can only mean “Most of the miners live down by the river and by Oakland” (the idea to use conjunction as a test for underlying prepositions comes from Fruehwald and Myler (2015)):

- (52) a. Most of the miners live down by the river and in Oakland.  
 b. \*Most of the miners live down by the river and IN Oakland.

Therefore, parallel to Myler’s (2011, 2013) analysis that silent prepositions get incorporated into the verb head in the *come the pub* construction, I posit that in *touch down* the silent preposition has been incorporated into the P head initially occupied by *down*. This would have the basic structure shown in (53):



The fact that there are still two prepositions in this structure accounts for the movement difficulties encountered with *touch down*. In addition, the fact that *down* has been merged with the silent preposition accounts for why these two prepositions cannot be separated, as they could be were they both overt. Note that this account allows the *down* in *touch down* to be the same

as standard English *down*; however, it should be noted that, in order to capture the semantic distinctions discussed above, the silent preposition would have to be a different entity than any overt preposition because it has a different meaning than *to*, *in*, or *at* in that context.

## 6. Conclusion

I have presented novel data about touch *down*, an understudied syntactic phenomenon that appears similar to several other phenomena, such as *down the pub* in British English or *down the shore* in New Jersey English but that has properties that differentiate it from these other constructions. After describing the behavior of this phenomenon, I examined three hypotheses about its underlying structure. The first hypothesis, that touch *down* results from purely phonological deletion of a preposition, was quickly rejected because of the many instances where this hypothesis would predict deletion could occur when in fact it does not. The second hypothesis, that touch *down* is a single preposition that can accept a goal or location as its object, was rejected because touch *down* does not accommodate *wh*-extraction or pseudopassivization, both of which are robustly allowed for by traditional prepositions.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I ultimately argue for the third hypothesis, which is that touch *down* involves a silent preposition after *down* which combines with *down* in the P head of the upper prepositional phrase. This account lends further credence to the account proposed by Myler (2011, 2013) for the *come the pub* construction and sheds light on the circumstances in which prepositions may become silent in English.

## 7. Acknowledgments

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<sup>4</sup>As noted above, however, this may be the correct analysis for some speakers.

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