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Phrasal Verbs: Syntactic Properties and Learning Problems

1. Introduction to phrasal verbs

1.1 Significance

Phrasal verbs undoubtedly cause a great deal headache to students of English who wish to tackle them on nearly all levels. However, needless to say, no student of English can possibly afford to ignore phrasal verbs altogether. Not only would they certainly fail to comprehend even simple, everyday utterances by native speakers, but their performance would come across as awkward and unnatural, if they kept using mostly formal, latinate, one-word verbs in all contexts, regardless of pragmatic rules controlling the choice of words. No field of vocabulary tends to be used so frequently and, at the same time, so unreasonably neglected, disliked and avoided as phrasal verbs. Moreover, this tension is increased by the fact that the frequency of phrasal verbs in both speech and writing has triggered a flow of phrasal verbs into more formal (even official or legal) style, so it is no longer appropriate to label phrasal verbs as 'mostly colloquial' and merely 'informal'. This paper aims to discover the sorts of difficulties students of English may well undergo in tackling phrasal verbs and, by doing so, suggests possible remedies to lessen these difficulties and, hence, achieve a better understanding and more efficient learning process. The importance of phrasal verbs is highlighted by Mortimer:

> Phrasal verbs are used a great deal, especially in spoken English. So it is important for a student to recognise their meaning at least. If he wants to learn to speak English naturally and well, however, he must try to use these verbs himself — once he understands them properly. It is possible to use few of these verbs in one's speech; but then one is likely to sound rather formal, and possibly a bit pompous...[1]

As for morphological change, phrasal verbs create a great deal of new vocabulary that forms an essential part of current English. They may become nominalized by zero derivation (a *breakdown*, a *hold-up* etc.), others follow the pattern *particle+verb* as *upkeep*, *outlay* etc. Plenty of adverbials are likewise produced from phrasal verbs, usually assuming a hyphenated form (a *pick-up* lorry, a *knock-down* argument etc.).

1.2 Syntactic criteria

The traditional definition of phrasal verbs states that a simple phrasal verb comprises a verb and an adverbial particle. The idea that phrasal verbs really exist, in other words, that the verb and the particle constitute one unit can easily be proven by clefting, a test for general constituency:

General formula: It is _____(single constituent slot) that...

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1. Mortimer 1972, iv (intro.).

(1a) Drunks would *put off* the customers.
(1b) * It is *off* the customers that drunks would *put*.
(1c) It is the customers that drunks would *put off*.

The falsehood of (1b) shows that *'off* the customers' (=PP) is not a constituent of the VP *'put off* the customers'. However, (1c) supports the claim that 'the customers' is a constituent (NP) and thus it follows that *put off* is the other subconstituent of the above-mentioned VP since *'put'* and *'off'* cannot fall into different constituents, as they are adjacent and there is no constituent boundary between them.
    As the example suggests, phrasal verbs are normally juxtaposed with prepositional verbs, which look very similar to them but, in fact, they have different underlying structure. The main difference is in the role of the particle; in the first case being an adverbial to the verb (phrasal verbs), whereas with prepositional verbs the particle functions as the head of the PP following the verb in the sentence.

(2) $[_{IP} [_{NP}$ Drunks $] [_{I'} [_I$ would $] [_{VP} [_V$ *put off* $] [_{NP}$ the customers. $]]]]$
(3) $[_{IP} [_{NP}$ Drunks $] [_{I'} [_I$ would $] [_{VP}$ get $[_{PP}$ off the bus. $]]]]$

    1.3 Further differences
    There are a number of other criteria to distinguish between phrasal and prepositional verbs. Let us now contrast the following sentences with prepositional and phrasal verbs as in *A University Grammar of English.*[2]

Prepositional verb: *call on* (visit)

(4a) They called on the man.
(4b) They called on him.
(4c) * They called the man on.
(4d) * They called him on.
(4e) They called early on the man.

Phrasal verb: *call up* (phone)

(5a) They called up the man.
(5b) * They called up him.
(5c) They called the man up.
(5d) They called him up.
(5e) * They called early up the man.

    The examples isolate some major differences. With the prepositional verb no movement of the preposition to the right of the object NP is allowed, whether it is a real NP or a personal pronoun. (4c, 4d) This obviously means that we are faced with a PP in which the head (preposition) must precede its complement (NP). Also, the adverbial ('early') can be placed between the verb ('call') and the preposition ('on') (4e). On the other hand, no adverbial can be put between the verb and the adverbial particle (5e), which seems to confirm the initial premise of considering them as a single verb. However, we can see that with the phrasal verb in the example, particle movement to right of the object NP is possible in both (5c) and (5d). Moreover, particle movement is compulsory in the case of pronouns used as the object NP (see (5b)).
    As for prosodic features, stress patterns also play an important part in telling prepositional verbs from phrasal verbs. According to Mitchell (1958), '...the particle component of the phrasal verb can, and does bear a full stress, and when final and not

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2. Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, 349.

in post-nominal position, is pronounced on a kinetic tone...."[3] On the other hand, '[i]t is true that the preposition, by and large, do not normally carry the accent,' Bolinger argues.[4] The following pair of sentences will show this contrast:

(6a) Jim is not the person I was <u>looking</u> at.
but
(6b) Kim is not the person I was *looking up*.

1.4 Particle movement

Before discussing the main issues linked with particle movement we must establish that a phrasal verb can either be *transitive* or *intransitive* (just like any other lexical verb) and obviously particle movement only applies to transitive combinations because otherwise there is no object for the particle to move around. We shall return to this issue later as one of the numerous learning problems.

However, particle movement rule seems to refute our supposition that a phrasal verb can be taken for a single unit. Now, let us observe the bracketed version of our initial example sentence with the particle moved.[5]

(2a) [IP [NP Drunks] [I' [I would] [VP [V put] [NP the customers] [PP off.]]]]

On what grounds can we posit that 'off' is now a PP? The most decisive argument for this is that it can be modified by PP modifiers:

(2b) Drunks would put the customers right off.
but
(2c) * Drunks would put right off the customers.

Evidence can easily be given that it does function as a PP by completing (2a) so that 'off' becomes an actual head of a PP. This completion, however, is not always possible.

(2d) Drunks would put the customers right off their food.

As we have seen, particle movement seems to ruin the clear-cut definitions of phrasal and prepositional verbs since there is a shift from phrasal to 'prepositional' verbs as particle movement has been adapted. It is, therefore, plausible to propose this position of the particle (demonstrated as optional in (2a) and compulsory in (5d)) as clashjing with the conventional approach and significant in that it eliminates the particle's 'mysterious' status and consequently weakens the theoretical distinction between phrasal and prepositional verbs. Apparently, in such a framework, the movement regarding the particle would be the inverse of what is traditionally called 'particle movement'. However, whether the particle moves or not, we know that we have the same sentence with the same phrasal/'prepositional' verb and, hence, with the same meaning. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the particle counting as a PP is a phrase that comprises a head but no complement (2a). It can take a modifier (2b) and it may take a complement (see completion in (2d)), but the main distinction between phrasal and prepositional verbs is still in effect because the adverbial particle can never take the object NP as its complement with which to form a PP, whether separated or not.

1.5 Looser definitions

Apart from students of English being confused by the rather complicated reasoning of an exact definition, then made somewhat uncertain by particle movement,

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3. In: Sroka 1972, 164-165.
4. Bolinger 1971, 14.
5. Radford 1989, 90-101.

there is a tendency for recent exercise and reference books on phrasal verbs to mingle prepositional and phrasal verbs, also including a number of prepositional verbs in their works. For instance, *Exercises on Phrasal Verbs* by Jennifer Seidl contains the following definition: 'In this book *phrasal verb* is a general term for all combinations of *verb+adverbial particle* and/or *preposition*.'

Another recent example may be *Test Your Phrasal Verbs* by Jake Allsop, which does not go so far as to give a definition at all, but in the very first exercise the sentence 'Where do you come from?' is given, which seems to contain a phrasal verb at first sight since there is nothing following the particle ('from'), so it does not look like a preposition. In fact, we are faced with a prepositional verb in which the complement (NP) in the PP is extracted by wh-movement. Sweet calls these forms 'detached prepositions' and his examples include 'he was thought of', 'who are you speaking of' etc.[6]

This is not to say that mixing these two types is wrong, rather it matches the experience of the average language learner who, being supposedly ignorant of the syntactic background, naturally presumes that these two categories are the same and is puzzled to find that one allows certain transformations the other prohibits and vice versa. The matter is made even more complicated by constructions having the pattern *verb + adverbial particle + preposition* called phrasal-prepositional verbs (e.g. *cut down on, get along with*). But this is just one of the various difficulties students face in learning phrasal verbs.

2. Learning problems with phrasal verbs

2.1 Large number of phrasal verbs

The most fundamental problem is that there are a large number of *verb + adverbial particle* combinations. (The second category being a closed class of morphemes contrary to verbs, which is obviously an open class of items.) The current teaching methods seem to imply that there is no system, so this vocabulary should be memorized piecemeal, which is inevitably intimidating. For most students the particle of a phrasal verb seems random (at least it is suggested to be so), giving way to a large-scale mixing up of phrasal verbs. In fact, there are theories that consider the particle as the more prominent part of a combination (as opposed to the 'main' verb) and they present phrasal verbs listed under one of the various 'meanings' of the particle concerned.[7] These 'meanings' can be isolated by generalisations based on the examination of most (all?) of the possible occurences of a given particle in phrasal verbs (taxonomy).[8]

2.2 Multiple meanings — degrees of idiomacy

Another important factor is that a great many phrasal verbs have several (seemingly unrelated) meanings in most cases including idiomatic ones. For example, on the one hand, *pack sth in* can function literally; 'She opened her suitcase and *packed* all the clothes *in*.' On the other hand, it has an idiomatic meaning ('abandon'): 'Sue decided to *pack* her job *in*.' These meanings must be remembered one by one since, naturally, they cannot possibly be arrived at by simply knowing the 'meanings' of the verb and the adverbial particle.

Nevertheless, idiomacy is gradable depending on the extent to which one might be successful in guessing the meaning. For instance, *put your hand up* is a non-idiomatic combination. A medium degree could be represented by the expression *turn off the light*, which gives us a chance to make an educated guess at its meaning, although it does not necessarily involve 'turning' of any kind. Thirdly, in the case of *put up with the neighbours* we virtually have nothing to hold on to, unless we have met this combination before and <u>know</u> what it means.

No doubt context can help a great deal to work out even highly idiomatic

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6. In: Sroka 1972, 21.

7. Side 1990, 149-150.

8. *Collins Cobuild* 1989, Particles Index, 448.

combinations but in the examples above the contextual scope was almost the same and, nonetheless, we could differentiate between various levels of idiomacy.

We can also make use of the test of insertion of an adverb between the verb and the particle ('expansion') to distinguish the idiomatic from the literal meaning of a certain combination. Namely, if the particle of the phrasal verb is quite literal (e.g. it denotes direction) it will allow expansion whereas in somewhat more idiomatic cases it will not. For instance, let us consider the following sentences with *drop out*:[9]

(7a) I watched the pebbles *drop* gradually *out*.
(7b) * You will see students *drop* gradually *out*.
(7c) You will see students (gradually) *drop out*(gradually).

According to Fraser (1976),[10] phrasal verbs fall into three basic semantic categories: literal (e.g. *go out, get up*), completive (e.g. *cut off, burn down*) and figurative (e.g. *let down, give in*). In the completive case, the particle describes the result of the action whereas figurative phrasal verbs correspond to what we have called idiomatic combinations. In this framework, completive phrasal verbs represent an intermediary category on the scale of idiomacy.

2.3 Transitive or intransitive?

It is also very important to ascertain whether a phrasal verb is *transitive* or *intransitive*. It might sometimes be misleading that the 'same' phrasal verb can be both, although this is the case with many lexical verbs as well. As in the example 'If George doesn't *turn up* within ten minutes I won't ever talk to him. ' *turn up* (make one's appearance) is intransitive whereas in 'Have you *turned* your sleeves *up*?' it is transitive.

2.4 Constraints on particle movement

We have already addressed the problem of particle movement, which is a rule generally applicable to transitive phrasal verbs. However, as we have seen, the particle may not precede personal pronouns, so particle movement is not optional but obligatory in that case.

'The original position (immediately after the verb) tends to be taken by the particle if the object is too long or the intention is that the object should receive end-focus.'[11] 'He *looked up* Jane, not Mary' would be a good example of the last condition being fulfilled.

2.5 Phrasal verbs with preferable separation

In addition, particle movement rule has its own exceptions, or more precisely, there are combinations which do not normally favour the particle to be placed immediately after the verb. One example could be '*think over* things', which is contrasted with '*think* things *over*', the latter being the more widely used version. Other examples of this kind of phrasal verbs include *get* sb *down, lead* sb *on, see* sb *off*, and so on.[12]

2.6 Pseudo-particle movement: idiomatic pairs

To make matters worse, (or I could say more fascinating) one subtype of the kind of phrasal verbs discussed under the previous point seems to have a corresponding 'deep structure', that is, a structure before particle movement, but these apparently relative structures turn out to be intransitive prepositional verbs syntactically completely unrelated to the kind of phrasal verbs mentioned above. This is best demonstrated by the fact that they mean completely different things. (Naturally, a separable phrasal verb must mean the same thing after having undergone particle movement.) The existence of such phrasal verbs also supports the claim (see 1.4) that the separated position of the particle should be deemed as the default (underlying or deep structure).

Nevertheless, there is nothing wrong in learning and presenting them together (as

9. After Bolinger 1971, 12.
10. In: Dagut and Laufer 1985, 74.
11. Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, 348.
12. Seidl 1990, 24.

in *Exercises on Phrasal Verbs* by Jennifer Seidl), in fact, it is a good idea to study them in pairs, since — despite the obvious structural differences — they are associated in our minds. Some examples from the book mentioned are as follows:[13]

Prepositional verbs	Phrasal verbs
see through sb (realize sb's deception)	*see sb through* (take care of sb)
pass on sth (not be able to answer)	*pass sth on* (tell or give sth to sb else)
get round sb (coax sb)	*get sb round* (summon sb to one's house)

2.7 Pragmatic problems

Also, different sort of problems concerning register/appropriacy start to emerge once a student has managed to acquire a combination: Can it be used freely replacing its so-called synonyms?

Naturally, pragmatic rules restrict the use of phrasal verbs and one must be aware that, for this reason, clear equivalents of phrasal verbs do not always exist. In Mortimer's words: '..."enter" for instance, is a rather more momentous verb than "come in", and is not always appropriate to the same occasions.'[14] Also, substituting *give out* for *distribute* in the sentence below, for instance, would result in a sentence of questionable appropriateness and would undoubtedly count as a register error.[15]

(8) The British Government recently distributed leaflets on AIDS to houses throughout the country.

Similarly, in a newspaper report, a VIP is unlikely to *turn up* ('arrive') at the airport when paying an official visit since it has the semantic component of contingency. To support this view further, in 'My radio *picks up* America.' *pick up* has connotations of difficulty quite undelivered by the 'equivalent' *receive*.[16]

2.8 Interference
2.8.1 L1 interference
2.8.1.1 General

Last but not least, L1 interference is a tremendous area affecting the use of phrasal verbs as well, among many other items. The selection of the verbs and the particles/prepositions accompanying them are widely controlled by transfer from one's native language, provided that the equivalent L1 structures are comparable to what is used in L2.

However, it must be noted that interference is often not merely structural but conceptual for the idea of *up* and *down*, *to* and *from* etc. are culturally variable.[17] This will hopefully dissuade us from being unsympathetic to students making certain mistakes, thinking that they regretfully lack common sense or the basic language faculty. So we must at least devote a quick run-through to Hungarian since — according to Dagut and Laufer:

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13. Seidl 1990, 48-50.
14. Mortimer 1972, iv (intro.).
15. After Side 1990.
16. After Side 1990.
17. Side 1990.

...such avoidance can be properly understood only by an interlingual (i.e. · contrastive) approach, and thus provides important, if indirect, corroboration of the dominant role of L1 in the L2 learning process.[18]

2.8.1.2 Hungarian

I shall provide a short overview of the situation in Hungarian as far as phrasal verbs are concerned. The main distinction between phrasal and prepositional verbs does not make sense because there is no prepositional construction in Hungarian (instead we either have suffixes or postpositive determiners).

In simple declarative sentences and yes/no questions phrasal verbs translate into prefixed verbs in Hungarian. These prefixes, however, can detach themselves from the main verb when combined with certain constructions (e.g. *will, must*). To illustrate what has been stated so far the following sentences are to be studied:

(8a) Péter elvitte a levelet./?
(8b) 'Péter away-took the letter./?'
(8c) Péter took away the letter. /Did Péter take away the letter?
(8d) Péter el fogja vinni a levelet.
(8e) 'Péter away will take the letter.'
(8f) Péter will take away the letter.

Moreover, in simple negative, imperative and interrogative (except yes/no questions) sentences the prefix will actually 'jump over' the verb and stand next to it as a distinct morphological unit, in other words, this is the case nearest to what happens in English. So we might expect Hungarians to perform best with these constructions in English but I have no evidence either for or against it since I have conducted no survey yet on this particular point. Here are some examples:

(8g) Péter nem vitte el a levelet.
(8h) 'Péter not took away the letter.'
(8i) Péter did not take away the letter.

(9a) Vidd el a levelet! / ??? Vidd a levelet el!
(9b, c) Take away the letter. /Take the letter away.

It is quite noteworthy that despite the fact that Hungarian is far from being a Germanic language, (it is not even an Indo-European language) its corresponding structure is more or less comparable to that of English phrasal verbs. Particle movement analogy , however, is rather weak since we end up having only marginally acceptable sentences if we try to apply it (see (9a)) and we would get a likewise questionable sentence from (8g).

2.8.2 L2 interference

Surprisingly enough, at a higher level of competence, interference can work the other way around, that is, L2 (target language) may affect one's performance in one's native language. For example, after having spent approximately five months in Britain, a friend of mine used the word by word Hungarian translation of the sentence 'I don't go out with English people so much.', which is unacceptable in Hungarian (*'Nem megyek ki az angolokkal túl gyakran.'). Also interesting is the fact that some proficient Hungarian speakers of English used 'drink up' in Hungarian in the imperative sentence 'Let's drink up and go' saying *'Igyuk fel (a maradékot) és menjünk!', which is incorrect in Hungarian. This may mostly take place if the L2 version is more direct or concise than the L1 equivalent.

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18. Dagut and Laufer 1985, 78.

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