

Week 8 materials

Phrasal Verbs

The Italian translation of this analysis can be found at the following URL:

<http://unrestrictedarea.com/esl/pv/chapter1.htm>

Italian students generally find great differences between the English they learn at school and the English they have to understand and use with native speakers. If only they had been taught a couple hundred essential phrasal verbs, the passage from "school" to "the real world" would have been so much simpler!!

Grammatical classification

Phrasal verbs are a specific kind of verb. The term derives from "phrase" which in traditional linguistic theory refers to the minimum unit of syntax. They differ from normal verbs in that they are constituted by two or three elements instead of just one.

Register

Their register ranges from moderate formality (keep away from, look down on) to informality (hang out, pick on).

Genesis

The number of common verbs, prepositions, and adverbs in English is not very great. Yet the quantity of actions, states, and events to be communicated in verb form tends toward the infinite. Phrasal verbs are products of the recycling and the recombination of finite lessical elements in order to render the language infinitely wealthy and expressive. They often arise from casual uses of the language and eventually work themselves into the mainstream of language use. According to some scholars, phrasal verbs constitute a highly productive system which is difficult to classify completely.

Distinguishing characteristics

Phrasal verbs are morphologically complete verbs: they have an infinitive and conjugations. Morphologically they are composed of a base verb and one or more particles (adverbs or prepositions).

Common mistakes

1. Phrasal verbs are not to be confused with idiomatic expressions, which are expressions, not verbs. Phrasal verbs generally do have a somewhat idiomatic character, although they are idiomatic in varying degrees).

2. Sometimes a phrasal verb can be confused with a single-word verb followed by an adverbial-prepositional phrase. In other words, is the particle (are the particles) following the verb part of the verb itself or not?

Example 1:

- a. He ran up | a huge bill at the restaurant. *phrasal verb*
- b. He ran | up the hill. *single-word verb*

Example 2:

- a. The athlete fell behind | the group. *phrasal verb*
- b. The pen fell | behind the desk. *single-word verb*

In order to decide if a verb+preposition or verb+adverb combination is a phrasal verb or not, the student can try to substitute the base verb with a synonymous single-word verb. If the sentence makes no sense, then the original is a phrasal verb (ex. 1a and 2a). Vice-versa, if the sentence makes sense, the original is a single-word verb (ex. 1b e 2b). See below:

Example 1 with substitution:

- a. He walked up a huge bill at the restaurant.
It makes no sense = phrasal verb
- b. He walked up the hill.
It makes sense = single-word verb

Example 2 with substitution:

- a. The athlete bounced behind the group.
It makes no sense = phrasal verb
- b. The pen bounced behind the desk.
It makes sense = single-word verb

Another way to verify the cohesion of verb and particle is transform the active verb in passive. This time however, if the sentence makes sense, then the original is a phrasal verb (ex. 1c). If the sentence makes no sense, the original is a single-word verb (ex. 1d). See below:

Example 1 with transformation:

- c. A huge bill was run up at the restaurant.
It makes sense = *phrasal verb*
- d. The hill was run up by him.
It doesn't make sense = *single-word verb*

Fortunately, it is usually easy to distinguish between phrasal verbs and single-word verbs followed by an adverbial-prepositional phrase.

Typology and Traditional Classification

Traditionally, phrasal verbs have been divided into three types. It should be immediately noted that the many names used in traditional texts to refer to these types often create confusion rather than clarity. In the following examples, I indicate with an asterisk the correct position(s) available for the direct object.

type 1: Prepositional verbs (ex. to believe in *, to look after *, to talk about *, to wait for *) also called **non-separable** or transitive phrasal verbs. Constituted by basic verb + preposition.

type 2: Adverbial verbs (ex. get up, break (*) down (*), put (*) off (*), turn (*) down (*)) also called phrasal verbs, or **separable** phrasal verbs. Constituted by basic verb + adverb.

type 2a is transitive, takes direct object (write * down *);

type 2b is intransitive, no direct object (work out).

type 3: Adverbial-prepositional verbs (ex. get on with *, put up with *, look forward to *, run out of *) also called phrasal-prepositional verbs, or **three-word** verbs, sometimes grouped with type 1 as **non-separable**. Constituted by basic verb + preposition + adverb.

Additional characteristics of **type 1**:

- a) commonly used prepositions: in, after, about, for
- b) never occur without object (e.g. "to talk about someone/something", etc.)
- c) the direct object always follows the preposition

Additional characteristics of **type 2**:

- a) commonly used adverbs: up, down, off, on
- b) when the object of the verb is present (**type 2a**), it is placed either between the basic verb and the adverb or after the entire phrasal verb (turn the light on, turn on the light)

Additional characteristics of **type 3**:

- a) basic verb + adverb + preposition (out of, up for)
- b) always take a direct object
- c) cannot be separated by the object

Confusion may arise if we note that type 1 is similar to type 2b, type 2b is similar to type 2a, but type 1 is not similar to type 2a. Also, type 1 is similar to type 3, type 1 is similar to 2b, but type 3 is not similar to type 2b! It thus becomes necessary for clarity's sake to list all the criteria concerning phrasal verbs which can function as a basis of comparison and which can lead us to a practical scheme of classification:

- 1) adverb vs. preposition as particle
- 2) necessity of explicit direct object and rules for placement (transitivity)
- 3) ability to be "separated" by the object ("separability")
- 4) typical-atypical behavior of "particle" (semantic normalcy of preposition or adverb)

The traditional three-fold classification scheme given above clearly utilizes the evaluation of the particle, as the exclusive tool for dividing the corpus of phrasal verbs into groups. Nevertheless, on a practical level, the "separability" of a phrasal verb, is undoubtedly its most essential characteristic in order to be used correctly, and the student must memorize not only the phrasal verb's infinitive and its meaning but also its degree of "separability". That is not to say that transitivity is to be overlooked. It therefore appears that a more logical classification structure and nominative strategy would lead us away from an exclusive analysis of the particle, towards a comprehensive consideration of the entire phrasal verb as the basic unit of study. We define in this way our approach which privileges learning techniques rather than a formal analysis of phrasal verbs.

Morphological Classification

Consider the following proposal for the classification of phrasal verbs:

type 0 "intransitive" (traditionally type 2a) no direct object

type 1 "transitive-non-separable" (traditionally type 1) direct object always present, placed after the phrasal verb

type 2 "transitive-separable" (traditionally type 2b) direct object always present, either separating or placed after the verb, a pronoun always separates

type 3 "three-word" (traditionally type 3) direct object always, placed after the verb

Semantic Classification

Phrasal verbs are often listed or grouped according to a basic verb (ex. stand out, stand up, stand by *, stand up to *, stand for *). In fact a large number of phrasal verbs are generated from a relatively small number of basic verbs. Nevertheless, the classification of phrasal verbs according to base verbs does not yield groups having similar qualities of usage or meaning (see for example the aforementioned verbs). There is no way to predict how much the meaning of a simple verb changes when it becomes the base of a phrasal verb.

It seems much more interesting the idea of comparing phrasal verbs with single-word verbs having an equivalent meaning. These do not always exist, given the colloquial and idiomatic origins of many phrasal verbs. However it can often be noted how many phrasal verbs are of Germanic origin, while their single-word equivalents are of Latin origin. More importantly, these pairs at times have no difference in meaning (go back/return, break/break down), although sometimes the phrasal verb adds additional information to the single-word verb (jump at/take, come across/find, hold out/resist).

It has been possible to analyze the individual behavior of the most common adverbial extensions, (cf. Anastasijevic 1954), and we find that the most frequent are : up, down, in, out, on, off. ("Up" is the

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985) classified phrasal verbs according to their varying degree of "idiomatic-ness", which for them is a synonym for predictability of meaning:

A. Phrasal verbs whose meaning with respect to the base verb doesn't change are non-idiomatic (ex. fall down, beat * up *, block * off *, joke around).

B. Those whose meaning changes slightly with respect to the base verb are semi-idiomatic (ex. think * up *, talk out of *, look forward to *, let * down *, hang (*) out (*)).

C. The most idiomatic are those whose meaning is most surprising (ex. brush up on *, act up, take after *, run out of *, put up with *, give (*) up (*)).

It is clear that the meaning of the particle is related to the degree of idiomaticity of phrasal verbs. Thus, in a didactic approach, close attention must be paid to the semi-idiomatic group B and the idiomatic group C. This will facilitate a comparison of the phrasal verb's meaning with that of the particle and the base verb. It has been possible to reach certain conclusions about the typical behavior of some particles. They can give a sense of:

- 1) a prolonged or continued action (eat away at, carry on)
- 2) completion (catch up, use up, give up)
- 3) aimless behavior (hang around, play around)
- 4) resistance (hold out, hang on)

This classification scheme is by no means complete. Many other function categories of particles can certainly be identified.

What distinguishes simple verbs from phrasal verbs appears to be the aspectual difference which the particle controls (see Brinton 1985; 1988). Indeed these particles often indicate a *telic* aspect, that is the transformation of an action into an accomplishment, as compared with the *atelic* aspect of the basic verb (imperfective action or event or state): tear up/tear; throw away/throw; carry out/carry; hold off/hold.

Conclusions

The differences between the four (traditionally three) types of phrasal verbs are very subtle for the English language student, and relatively difficult for the instructor of English to teach from a linguistic-didactic standpoint. The use of phrasal verbs by native English speakers is governed by "ear" and not by "rule". At beginning and intermediate levels, great value should be placed on the acquisition and spontaneous use of essential phrasal verbs.

Given that semi-idiomatic phrasal verbs are not only common but also behave in very peculiar ways, it is highly necessary for beginning and intermediate students of English to dedicate a part of their study to them. A well-organized course on phrasal verbs should result in the student having :

- 1) an essential verbal vocabulary from the standpoint of "written" English
- 2) an essential vocabulary from the standpoint of "spoken" English: generally more informal than formal, more vernacular than erudite, more "from people" than "from a book"
- 3) a good feel for the common semi-idiomatic qualities of the most common particles
- 4) the ability to acquire, study, and understand new phrasal verbs more easily and more intuitively by elaborating on strong fundamental concepts.