

Don't Give up, Look it up! Defining Phrasal Verbs for the Learner of English.

Abstract

Phrasal verbs have long been recognised as one of the most challenging areas of the English language for the learner of English. Even the most fluent speaker can be identified as a non-native speaker through their use of phrasal verbs. With reference to the Cambridge International Corpus of English and the Cambridge Corpus of Learner English this paper will illustrate the importance and difficulties, both real and perceived, of phrasal verbs for the learner of English. It will then examine ways in which, in the light of this information, the lexicographer can create effective frameworks upon which to build appropriate and supportive entries for phrasal verbs.

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that phrasal verbs are considered to be an important feature of the English language and one which presents the learner with considerable difficulty. Phrasal verbs have had dictionaries dedicated to them and they are often singled out for special treatment in English language teaching materials. Much has also been written about them by linguists and grammarians and a great deal of effort has gone into the task of pinning down the true nature of the phrasal verb. This in itself has been the source of considerable controversy. Although the aim of this paper is not to debate the identity of the phrasal verb, it would seem appropriate to consider briefly what a learner of English may be faced with when attempting to find out what a phrasal verb is. In dictionaries and other learner materials phrasal verbs are described in many different ways. They are sometimes described broadly as “combinations of verbs with adverbial or prepositional particles” (Moon and Sinclair 1989: IV), or, with reference to a more restricted group, they are described as “Verbs taking adverb particles” (Crystal 1988:66).

The result of these differences in definition is that different dictionaries use different criteria for deciding what constitutes a phrasal verb. For example, consider the verb *lavish*. Two of the four major learner dictionaries¹ refer to this as the phrasal verb *lavish on/upon*, whereas the other two do not consider it to be a phrasal verb at all. The Oxford Dictionary

of Phrasal Verbs uses the code 'vp' (verb + particle) to describe the verb *come along* (in the sense of 'Come along, Keith, it's time to go!'), whereas the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs is more specific about what they believe this particle to be and uses the code 'v+adv' (verb + adverb). For the learner, these inconsistencies are potentially confusing.

There is also the grey area of when a phrasal verb becomes an 'idiom' because of the fixedness of its collocates. Learners of English would certainly want to know why it is that, in the same dictionary, *lay down your arms/weapons* is considered to be a phrasal verb but *lay down your life* is not. Both of these are included in the Longman, Oxford and Collins Cobuild dictionaries of phrasal verbs but are not consistently referred to as phrasal verbs in those publishers' general dictionaries.

2. Phrasal verbs and the Cambridge corpus of learner English

It comes as no surprise that learners of English perceive phrasal verbs as a difficult feature of the English language. During recent piloting carried out by Cambridge University Press in a number of different countries it became clear that learners have difficulty identifying phrasal verbs, or distinguishing phrasal verbs from other more literal verb + particle combinations. When asked about their difficulties, students also identified areas such as 'remembering meaning', 'grammar' and 'word order' as being amongst the causes.

Learners are not mistaken in their belief that phrasal verbs are problematic for them. Research carried out using the Cambridge Corpus of Learner English reveals that they do often make mistakes in the use of phrasal verbs. Of equal interest and significance is the information the corpus provides on the nature of mistakes which are made. The following is a list of the most commonly occurring errors which learners of English appear to make in the use of phrasal verbs.

- choosing the wrong verb (e.g. being hung up by the traffic instead of held up by the traffic)
- choosing the wrong particle (e.g. hand out instead of hand over)
- using a phrasal verb when it is not necessary or correct (e.g. join in a club instead of join a club)
- the use of incorrect subject or object restriction (e.g. using carry on in a transitive sense about a general activity, such as carry on a trip when this should be restricted to activities which involve talking, such as carry on a conversation or carry on negotiations)

- the use of incorrect grammar (e.g. the electricity cut off, instead of the electricity was cut off)
- the overuse of less frequent forms (e.g. hang up the phone is used more by learners than hang up, even though the opposite would appear to be true for native speakers)
- incorrect collocating grammar (e.g. give up with smoking instead of give up smoking, or give up the idea to have children instead of give up the idea of having children)
- restricted use, showing a general lack of confidence in the use of phrasal verbs (e.g. a reluctance to split the verb from its particle – *hang up your coat* is preferred to *hang your coat up*, even though the latter is perfectly acceptable and appears to be more usual).

Given the fact that phrasal verbs are so problematic, one might expect learners to avoid using them. In fact, corpus evidence shows that learners do not do this. On the contrary, they appear to be keen to use them, even at lower levels of competence. The evidence shows that, in addition to the fact that learners perceive phrasal verbs as being difficult, they also perceive them as being important.

3. Why phrasal verbs are important to the learner

Phrasal verbs are a common feature of the English language and learners encounter them at a very early stage. *Get up, take off, get on with* etc would certainly appear in the vocabulary list of any beginners course book. Their significance to learners even at lower levels is reflected in the UCLES vocabulary list for the Preliminary English Test which includes 81 phrasal verbs “all of which are intended for productive use” (UCLES PET Vocabulary List).

It is often said that phrasal verbs are largely informal or spoken in register (Cornell 1985:269) and that any learner who wishes to be familiar with the range of registers in English therefore needs to know them. Although many phrasal verbs are informal or spoken, (especially those which have entered the language more recently), it is misleading to emphasise this as one of their most distinctive features. If this were the case, it could be argued that their acquisition could come much lower down the list of priorities for the average learner of English. In fact, a phrasal verb is very often the normal or neutral way of expressing something. For example, the phrasal verbs *break in* (as in, *someone broke into the house*), *put away* (as in, *put all your toys away*), or *fill up* (as in, *fill the bucket up with water*) are in no way marked in terms of

formality. It may be the case that there are more formal alternatives for some phrasal verbs. The verb *rise* could be employed in place of the phrasal verb *get up*, or *extract* in place of *pull out*, but this does not mean that those phrasal verbs are informal. They are a normal part of the English language and therefore of great importance to the learner.

It is also often stated that phrasal verbs can be replaced by a one-word equivalent (Cowie 1993:38). Frequently, this is not the case at all. For example, there is no one-word equivalent for the phrasal verbs *knock out* (make unconscious) or *wear out* (make unusable). An attempt to convey a sentence such as *With a screech of the brakes, he drew up outside in a red sports car* without the use of a phrasal verb results in unnatural sounding English along the lines of *With a screech of the brakes, he arrived and stopped outside in a red sports car*. It is simply not possible to successfully and authentically convey this idea other than by using the phrasal verb *draw up*.

Some phrasal verbs do have one-word equivalents but these are of a different register, for example, *hand over* and the more formal *surrender*. This shift in register means that they are not interchangeable and therefore cannot be considered as true synonyms.

Phrasal verbs, as corpus evidence demonstrates, are also inextricably linked to and restricted by their collocational environment or syntactic behaviour. This is another reason why many one-word equivalents are not true synonyms. The verb *circulate* could be thought of as the one-word equivalent of the phrasal verb *put about*. However, in several respects they behave quite differently. *Circulate* can be used intransitively and the main subjects of the verb in this case are rumours, facts, or information. *Put about* is a transitive verb and although rumours may also collocate with it, they are now the object of the verb. One of the most frequent objects however is *it*, as in *Someone's been putting it about that Dan's planning to leave*. Consequently, the one-word replacement theory is once again shown to be ineffective and the learner's belief that phrasal verbs are an important feature of the English language is shown to be a well-founded one.

4. Learning phrasal verbs

Learners, having recognised the importance of phrasal verbs, are justified then in their desire to master them. For the reasons mentioned above, however, this is no easy task and one for which they will require considerable support. It is interesting to note that, on the whole, English language course books tend to integrate phrasal verbs into the learning

process. Grammar and vocabulary practice books, on the other hand, treat them separately and more often than not they are presented and practised in groups according to their base verb. For example, the learner will grapple with all the phrasal verbs which can be formed with the core delexical verbs such as make and do, see and look, put and take etc. This is, no doubt, a daunting task for the learner and an approach which also results in restricted coverage of phrasal verbs. Learners are restricted to phrasal verbs which happen to be formed with those base verbs and may not receive sufficient exposure to other very commonly used phrasal verbs which are formed with other base verbs. Any learner wishing to increase their knowledge of phrasal verbs would not know which, apart from these, they should attempt to learn.

5. Implications for a phrasal verbs dictionary

First and foremost (and this applies not only to lexicographers but to the English teaching community as a whole), it is essential that learners are not given misleading information about the status of phrasal verbs in the English language. Learners who are wary of learning or using phrasal verbs may be tempted, on the basis of erroneous information about the register and replaceability of phrasal verbs, to seek out the neutral or one-word equivalent when it does not exist.

5.1 Identification

Given that learners have difficulty distinguishing between phrasal verbs and other more literal verb+ particle combinations it would be useful to indicate to the learner when a phrasal verb also has a literal counterpart. This would both help to distinguish the idiomatic meaning from the literal meaning and would save the learner from having to make the distinction themselves. A literal sense could be entered and labelled as literal and an example sentence could be given in order to demonstrate this usage. A definition would not be necessary and an entry may look something like:

fall out

1 to argue with someone and stop being friendly with ...

2 if your hair or a tooth falls out, it ...

3 if soldiers fall out ...

4 to happen ...

literal meaning: *As he lifted the suitcase off the bed all his clothes fell out.*

5.2 Syntax

Syntax patterns should be shown clearly, avoiding coding systems which are often very complicated and require an undesirable and unrealistic amount of effort on the part of the learner. Without this a learner's ability to understand phrasal verbs and to manipulate them correctly will be severely hampered. Syntax could be presented as part of the entry for a phrasal verb itself and in this way any shift in meaning which is associated with a change in syntax would also be clearly conveyed. For example, an entry for the phrasal verb *cut out* could be presented as:

cut out sth or cut sth out

1 (to remove with scissors)

2 (to remove from text or film)

3 (to stop doing – often imperative)

cut sb out

to exclude someone

cut out

engine – to stop working

With this information the learner can trace the sense shifts which are governed by changes in the phrasal verb's syntactic pattern. It is clearly conveyed that an intransitive use of *cut out* has an entirely different meaning from a transitive use and that a transitive use involving a human object is quite different from a transitive use involving a non-human object. At the same time it is also clearly demonstrated that when the object of the transitive use of *cut out* is human its position is fixed between the verb and the particle, but that when the object is non-human it may be moved.

5.3 Object/subject restriction

Object and subject restrictions can be shown through the definition in a way which reflects their relative fixedness and frequency. An entry for the transitive uses of the phrasal verb *draw up* might then appear as follows:

draw up sth or draw sth up

1 to prepare something [e.g. list, plan, document]

2 to move something [esp. chair] near to someone or something

3 to move your legs or knees closer to your body

This indicates to the learner that in sense 1 there are many possible objects but that they are all of the type shown, that in sense 2 there is one object which is more likely to occur than any other but that there are still other possibilities, and that in sense 3 the only possible objects are the two shown in the definition. The same precision can be achieved in demonstrating subject restriction in the following way:

take off

if an aircraft takes off, it

leak out

if something [e.g. secret information, news] leaks out, it

5.4 Collocation

Explicit and easily accessible information can be provided on the collocational environment of phrasal verbs. An entry can clearly demonstrate which prepositions or which grammatical constructions commonly collocate with a phrasal verb and can also convey an idea of the relative frequency of these collocates. For example:

join up

to join with another person or organisation in order to do something (usually + **with**) *Cranwell Design is planning to join up with a shoe manufacturer and create a new range of footwear.*

join with sb/sth

to do something or say something with someone or something else (often + **in** + doing sth) *Britain would join with other European countries in providing money for the project.*

join together

to do something with someone or something else (often + to do sth) *Communist trade unions had joined together to call a general strike.*

5.5 Other aids to learning phrasal verbs

Learner dictionaries are increasingly considered as active tools for learning. It would seem logical that this should also be the case for a phrasal verbs dictionary. In addition to the information provided by the

entries themselves, other features can be incorporated to aid the learning process.

To address the learner's difficulty in knowing which phrasal verbs to learn, the 200 most important or most frequent phrasal verbs could be highlighted. The simple and practical message this would convey to the learner would be that if they would like to learn some phrasal verbs, these are the ones they should attempt to learn first.

Some phrasal verbs could also be presented in groups according to their meaning. For example, a panel entitled 'relationships' could include phrasal verbs such as *go out with*, *get along*, *split up*, *settle down* etc. This would provide the learner with a logical and practical strategy for learning which does not restrict them to those phrasal verbs which are formed with a limited group of base verbs.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the ways in which a detailed examination of corpus evidence and careful consideration of learner needs should form the essential basis for an effective description of phrasal verbs in a learner's dictionary.

1 The Cambridge International Dictionary of English, The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.

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