Getting through to phrasal verbs: A cognitive organization of phrasal verb entries in monolingual pedagogical dictionaries of English

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The abundance of English phrasal verbs along with their syntactic and semantic complexity has always been a stumbling block for learners of English. Some think of phrasal verbs as hallmarks of a native-like command of English but there is no universal method to learn their natural contexts or applications and no ready-made recipe to deduce their meaning is available. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the accurate lexicographic description of phrasal verbs in learners' dictionaries, which are often the first source of reference for students. Moreover, dictionary compilers should aim at such presentation of these structures as to guide the users towards working out the multiple meanings of phrasal verbs on their own by creating cognitive links in the entries or even offering spatial cognitive networks.

The paper looks at the organization of a phrasal verb entry in the most recent pedagogical dictionaries of English from the cognitive perspective. The layout of the entries is examined with focus on the methods used to differentiate the many meanings of phrasal verbs, especially figurative ones and an attempt is made to find any cognitive links that are used to generate helpful associations and predictions about the meaning. In his recent paper on phrasal verbs, Brodzinski (2009) calls for such an associative approach to presenting phrasal verbs to learners, be it in class or in a dictionary. His claim is that for pedagogical purposes it is better to replace the multiple meanings of a given phrasal verb with one core meaning along with applications.

An alternative to the linear organization of a phrasal entry could be a network of meanings underlying any possible cognitive links between different senses. Such an approach might prove to be more stimulating for non-native users. Three examples of such networks, each with different semantic focus, are presented in the paper.

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs have vexed both learners and lexicographers for centuries. Even Samuel Johnson acknowledged the possible problems that non-natives could meet when faced with these constructions. In the *Preface* to the *Dictionary* (1755) he acknowledges that 'there is another kind of composition more frequent in our language than perhaps any other, from which arises to foreigners the greatest difficulty'. Many of these constructions, as he continues, 'appear wildly irregular, being so far distant from the sense of the simple words, that no sagacity will be able to trace the steps by which they arrived at the present use.'

Osselton (1986: 10) notices that through his remarks on phrasal verbs Johnson 'identifies unerringly some of the crucial points lexicographers are (...) concerned with. First, the fact that their idiomatic nature makes them perplexing to a foreign learner. Secondly, that many of them are semantically unpredictable.' Johnson did not come up with a technical name for such a complex phenomenon but McArthur (1989: 38) thinks that Johnson would most likely use 'compound' as a description of a phrasal verb.[1] Even though no 'academic name' had been assigned to the construction for centuries, it has been, in fact, 'a vigorous part of English' (McArthur 1898: 38).

Perhaps due to 'the extreme heterogeneousness of the formations in questions [and] their absolute unpredictability' (Frank 1989: 137), phrasal verbs have been long neglected by scholars and only in the 20th century did they receive a comprehensive description – both in terms of their syntactic behavior (e.g. Kennedy 1920; Live 1960; Sroka 1972; Fraser 1976; Dehé 2002), semantic features (Bolinger 1971; Lipka 1972; Pelli 1976; Lindner 1983;

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[1] Throughout the paper the term *phrasal verb* (PV) will be used following the suggestion by Televnaja (2004: 8) that 'it refers to the semantic domain' while *verb-particle construction* (VPC) suggests a syntactic approach.

Campoy Cubillo 1997) and pragmatic functions (O'Dowd 1998). Their multi-faceted idiosyncrasy has made them special enough to warrant production of specialized dictionaries of phrasal verbs, the first of which was (to my knowledge) compiled by George Mayer and published in 1975.

The present paper deals with the presentation of phrasal verbs in the most recent learners' dictionaries of English.[2] More specifically, an attempt is made to investigate the organization of phrasal verb entries from the cognitive perspective.

While phrasal verbs are composite structures, consisting of a verb and a particle,[3] it is not the purpose of this study to conduct separate analyses of these elements.[4] Instead, an inherent semantic unity[5] of phrasal verbs is assumed since 'these verbal forms are lexicalized practically at the same moment in which they are coined' (Frank 1989: 137) and 'in fact, there is hard evidence for the reality of the phrasal verbs as a mental category' (Lindstromberg 1998: 252).[6] With the meaning residing in the whole structure it is only natural that PVs should be granted the status of lexical items in dictionaries, although usually not as lemmas but rather as sub-lemmas. The following section looks briefly at the research done in the area of PV representation in monolingual dictionaries of English.

2. Phrasal verbs and lexicographic description

Stein (2002: 77) names phrasal verbs as one of the 'three types of lexical units EFL lexicographers, like lexicographers for general-purpose dictionaries seem to have difficulties as to where to place them within their dictionaries'.[7] She mentions OALDCE3, where 'idiomatic phrasal verbs are printed and listed in the same way as other idioms' while those containing 'very common verbs like *go, make, put, take* are all gathered together in alphabetical order at the end of the verb's entry' (1983, xvi), which means that 'the foreign learners are expected to know whether or not a verb is very common in order to find its particle combination.' Such a solution is most certainly confusing and not supported by any lexicographic theory (Stein 2002: 77). A better approach seems to be offered by the first edition of LDOCE (1978) with all PVs as main entries, which entails separation on the macrostructural level. In LDOCE2 (1987) users will find phrasal verbs as subentries after the main verb, an arrangement regarded by Stein (2002: 78) as 'so basic that it has also been

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[2] Major dictionary publishers (except for Merriam-Webster) have released separate specialized dictionaries of phrasal verbs but their content is, in most cases, the same as that found in the corresponding general-purpose learners' dictionaries.

[3] There is an ongoing discussion of whether the second element is a preposition or an adverb or both. Since this study looks at phrasal verbs as lexical units, the term *particle* will be used to avoid unnecessary confusion.

[4] Many scholars have underlined the importance of the particle as a major semantic contributor in PVs. For a semantic analysis of the particles in phrasal verbs see e.g. Lindner 1983 - 'out' and 'up'; Silvestre Lopez 2009 – 'in' and 'on'. Hampe (2002) deals with the interesting issue of the particles' semantic redundancy in PVs.

[5] As a non-native user of English, it seems much easier for me to think about PVs as conceptually fused elements rather than componential structures. However, I do realize that the meaning of a PV ultimately can often be derived from the two components as shown by Lindner 1983 and Morgan 1997, the latter of whom is particularly convincing in showing the path from the concrete to the abstract in PVs.

[6] See also Armstrong 2004.

[7] The other two are idioms and affixes.

adopted for phrasal verbs where there is no simple verb form'.[8] By grouping PVs under the main verb, 'EFL lexicographers seem to put the foreign users' language needs first [since] they do not know whether or not a verb+particle combination is lexicalised' (Stein 2002: 78). This policy is realized in all the dictionaries analyzed in the present paper, the main reason being that 'the part that usually sticks in the students' memory and to which they cling is the basic verb [therefore] they will first look up the simple verb when they are trying to recall a particular verb+particle combination' (Stein 2002: 78).

In the only paper so far devoted entirely to the lexicographic presentation of phrasal verbs in learners' dictionaries, Busse (1998) looks at the 4th and 5th editions of OALD, the 2nd and 3rd editions of LDOCE (1987 and 1995 respectively) and also CIDE (1995). His analysis focuses on four main aspects, namely '(1) the clearness, i.e. explicitness and appropriateness, of the instructions or user's notes; (2) the macrostructural arrangement of phrasal verbs i.e. their lemmatisation; (3) coverage of VPCs and (4) semantic-syntactic aspects such as connotations, collocational range, and syntactic restrictions' (Busse 1998: 113). His study does not go deep into the organizational structure of the PV entries. In his conclusion he admits that 'it would clearly be unjustified to draw a general conclusion on the reliability of the dictionaries by simply relying on this non-representative random sample' (Busse 1998: 131). He does notice the use of signposts in LDOCE3 and CIDE but does not elaborate on the possible microstructural consequences of applying this functional device. In Busse's opinion, the superiority of LDOCE3 over the rest of the dictionaries is manifested in 'a map-like view for longer articles' and the policy 'to keep all the phrasal verbs together rather than scatter the semi-idiomatic ones over the different meanings' (Busse 1998: 132). With new features like 'the information maps for complex articles [and] information on frequency' LDOCE3 emerges as the winner amongst the analyzed learners' references with CIDE being acknowledged as a 'remarkably good dictionary [and] a serious competitor to the others' (Busse 1998: 132).

Other lexicographic studies on phrasal verbs in monolingual dictionaries include Hampe (2002), who conducts a synchronic comparison of the definitions of randomly selected 16 simple verbs and their redundant phrasal verbs (e.g. *finish* vs. *finish off*, *cover* vs. *cover up*) in the major monolingual dictionaries of 20th century British English. Her conclusion is that 'the recognition of semantically redundant phrasal verbs and their description is a rather recent phenomenon in British lexicography' (Hampe 2002: 46-51).

Perdek (2008) analyzed definitions of phrasal verbs in the context of juxtaposing British (BrE) and American English (AmE) general-purpose dictionaries for native speakers of English. With eight dictionaries under analysis and 100 examples of PVs, the study revealed that dictionaries of AmE make more frequent use of difficult words in the PV definitions thus making their comprehension more difficult. Additionally, all dictionaries were inconsistent in terms of providing grammatical objects in the definitions of PVs.

3. Cognitive perspective on phrasal verbs and lexicographic applications

As for the application of cognitive principles to lexicographic presentation of phrasal verbs, Ishii (2006: 281) proposed sample entries for *fill in*, *tighten up* and *get at* accompanied by corpus examples of usage:

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[8] She gives an example of the entry for *knuckle,* which is listed as a headword without any definition and then followed by the subentries *knuckle down* and *knuckle under* with definitions and examples.

fill in *sth*/ fill *sth* in: to write requested information on *a form/document* <SPACE ON PAPER IS A CONTAINER/WRITTEN CHARACTERS ARE ENTITIES> ...*fill in* the coupon on page 216 and...

tighten up *sth*/ tighten *sth* up: to make *control/rules/etc.* stricter <FIRM IS UP>... see if the rules relating to unfair play can be *tightened up*.

get at sth: to successfully obtain sth, often after getting over[9] a difficult situation <ARRIVING AT A PLACE IS OBTAINING THINGS THERE> ...the only animals capable of using tools to *get at* their food.

Apart from the obvious spatial restrictions that would play a role in the case of printed dictionaries if this kind of presentation was to be used, Ishii (2006: 282) sees an advantage of such a method in that 'brief illustration of conceptual metaphors could give richer image on how the lexical unit in question is perceived in English than just giving many examples alone'.

Brodzinski (2009) in his recent commentary on phrasal verbs calls for an associative approach to presenting phrasal verbs to learners, be it in class or in a dictionary. His claim is that for pedagogical purposes it is better to replace the multiple meanings of a given phrasal verb with one core meaning along with applications (examples). While the idea of core meaning[10] is nothing new to lexicography, its application in presenting PVs in pedagogical dictionaries might prove very tricky, if not impossible at all. Since the 'core meaning' usually refers to the 'literal' (or basic) meaning, the difficulty arises already at the level of the main verb (or simple verb) constituting a PV because it can have several core meanings itself and with the addition of a particle the phrasal construction thus created may have its own multiple core meanings, which is the case with most phrasal verbs. Such intricate cognitive links between the core meanings and subsenses might prove to be too much of a challenge for a learner, a point made by Shepherd (2009: 14) in the reply to Brodzinski's suggestion. Shepherd's main worry is that 'all teachers[11] come at anything to be learnt from the 'knowledge' end of the spectrum, whereas students come at it from the 'ignorance' end'. Therefore, while teachers and native speakers can easily see the links generated from the core meaning, students might miss or misinterpret them. His take on Brodzinski's idea boils down to the before-and-after effect in that 'the core meaning and metaphorical application is a great help to remembering and understanding, but it won't help you to work out what the phrase means in the first place. (…) But where it is a big help is after the student has learnt the phrase, where suddenly the reason, the extension of meaning, the metaphor, becomes a very useful aid to memory' (2009: 15).

When it comes to the organization of phrasal verb entries in the examined dictionaries, the presentation is slightly different in each case. For example, LDOCE5 uses signposts to show different meanings.[12] In the subentry for *get through* there are 8 of them: DO WORK; USE

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[9] Using another phrasal verb in the definition is perhaps not the best idea from the pedagogical viewpoint.

[10] The definition of *core meaning* as provided by Patrick Hanks in the Introduction to the NODE (1998) reads: '[meaning] accepted by native speakers as the most literal and central in ordinary modern usage.' One word can have several core senses each of which 'acts as a gateway to other related subsenses'. For Svensén (2009: 212) the *core sense* together with any *shades of meaning* attached to it constitute one of the three polysemy structure models. The relation of the shades of meaning to the core sense is specified in terms of *meaning extension*, *meaning specialization* and *metaphorical* (or *figurative*) *use*.

[11] And native-speakers for that matter (cf. Armstrong 2004: 214-215).

[12] Additionally, the order of meanings in LDOCE5 is frequency-based, which often precludes cognitive continuity.

STH; SPEND MONEY; DIFFICULT TIME; TEST/COMPETITION; REACH A PERSON/PLACE; BY TELEPHONE; NEW LAW. In MEDAL2 we find menu boxes with mini-definitions for each sense e.g. for *make out* the menu reads: 1. see/hear/understand; 2. write information on; 3. create false opinion; 4. pretend; 5. succeed/continue; 6. about sexual behaviour. MWALD does not use any differentiating devices, nor is it stated how the senses are ordered. OALD5 makes use of guide phrases but very inconsistently and they usually contain possible collocates.[13]

LDOCE5 signposts are basically key words whose main function is to guide the user to the right meaning as fast as possible. They belong to different word classes while ideally they should all be verbal expressions in order to maintain the continuity with the headword, something which is done more consistently in MEDAL2 with the mini-definitions incorporating verbs with only few exceptions.

An alternative to the linear organization of a phrasal verb entry could be a net of meanings (Figure 1), which might be included in the dictionary as an extra feature in the case of more semantically complex PVs.
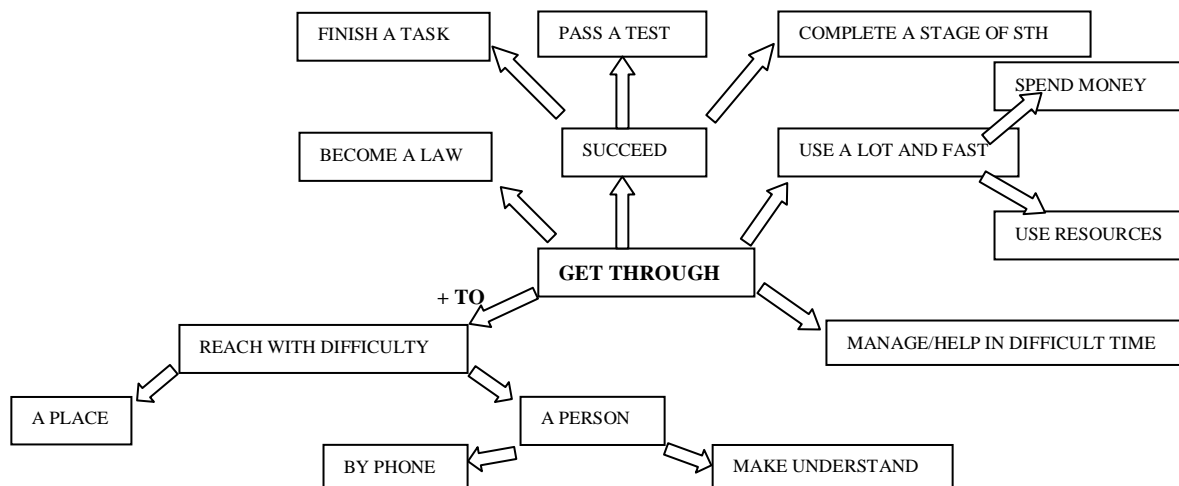

Figure 1. Semantic network for *get through*.

While Fig. 1 is basically a spatial version of the meanings provided in the dictionaries[14], there might be yet another way to help systematize the presentation of PVs. One of the criteria for a verb-particle construction to be included within the idiomatic group of PVs is the replaceability with a Latinate near-synonym.[15] Not all senses of a PV can be substituted with the same single verb counterpart, however, in some cases, like *get through* above, one pervading meaning can be discerned, namely 'to manage/succeed' (except for the sense of 'become a law' and 'use a lot and fast'). Could 'manage/succeed' be the 'core sense'

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[13] The first look at the OALD phrasal verb entry suggests that its structure is syntax-based with each syntactic variant highlighted.

[14] Such spatial presentation might work very well in an interactive electronic dictionary.

[15] This test was criticized as not accurate enough since many PVs and their one-word paraphrases might differ in meaning, sometimes quite significantly (cf. Cornell 1985: 274-275).

Brodzinski had in mind? Much would depend on how the applications he mentioned, but never elaborated on, would be displayed.

This idea might be extended in that all PVs pertaining to one common meaning are grouped and a radial network is built with the prevalent meaning as the center. For example, for the PVs semantically related to the concept of 'support' the network might have the following basic structure:
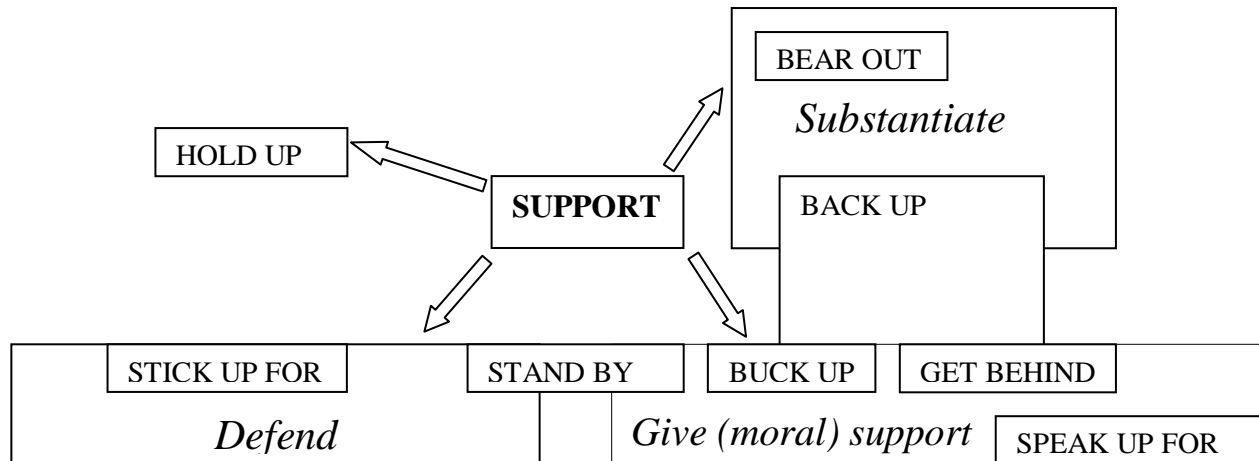
Figure 2. Semantic network based on the common meaning of 'support'.

The network is by no means ideal and could be further supplied with possible objects and subjects or alternatively example sentences showing typical arguments. MPV dictionary (2005) which features an index of single-word equivalents of phrasal verbs might serve as a resource of common meanings of various phrasal verbs for the purpose of creating such meaning-based networks. Such a visual presentation would probably work best in the electronic dictionaries of phrasal verbs but the ultimate effectiveness of the semantic networks should be tested among dictionary users.

The cognitive perspective has also been successfully used in the analysis of particles as separate structures and in combination with the verbal element (e.g. Lindner 1983; Lindstromberg 1998; Hampe 2000; Tyler and Evans 2003). Morgan (1997: 354-355) showed how the metaphoric element is 'mixed within one verb-particle construction'.[16] Additionally, a pedagogical application of the cognitive approach to phrasal verbs was developed by Rudzka-Ostyn (2003). Dirven (2001)[17] used Rudzka-Ostyn's approach in creating semantic networks to be used as learning instruments. Figure 3 below represents Dirven's proposal for *walk/get/put/come across* using examples from Rudzka-Ostyn (2003).

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[16] For PVs like *make out, figure out, come out* etc., Morgan sees four possibilities of metaphoric extension, with *out* assuming the prior existence of a container. They include: literal container, literal verb – *I took the mug out of the box*; literal container, extended verb: *We fished out the ring (from the bowl of potato chips)*; metaphorical container, literal verb: *We handed out the brochures*; metaphorical container, extended verb e.g. *We picked out a name for the baby*.

[17] Dirven used the manuscript of Rudzka-Ostyn's book.

1a. 'transfer' *The teachers always see their pupils across the busy street*		2a. 'make sb. identify sth.' *Marketing is about putting across to the customers the qualities of a product.*

1. 'at the other side' *She was sitting across the table from me.*		2. 'make sb. accept and understand' *He does not know how to get his ideas across to his pupils.*

basic sense (from A to B)
The children ran across the road without looking.
He's the first man to have walked across the mountains.
There will soon be a bridge across the river.

3. 'form impressions about oncoming phenomena'
She came across as a very intelligent person.

3a. 'find or meet by chance'
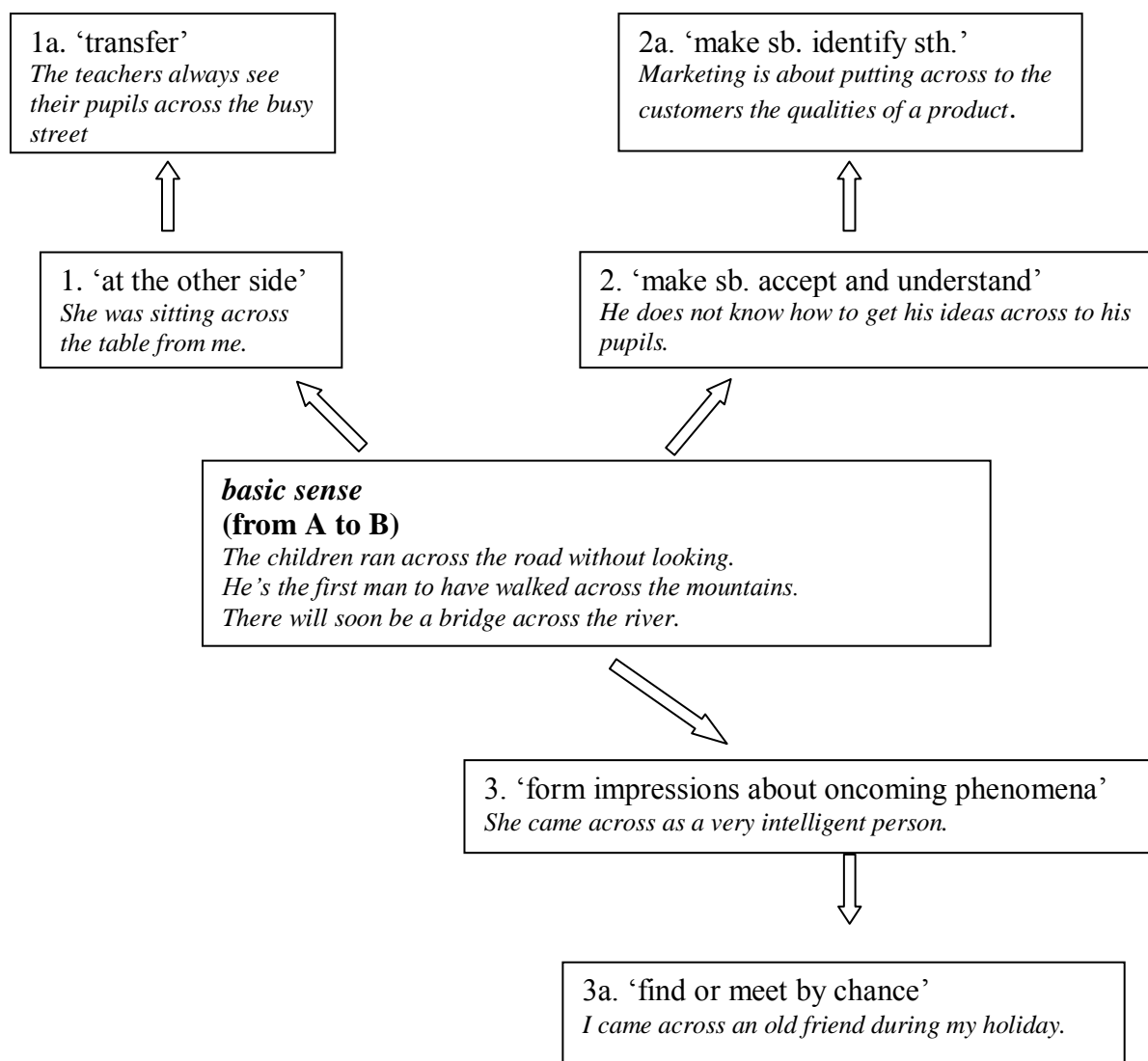*I came across an old friend during my holiday.*

Figure 3. Semantic network of *(walk/get/put/come) across* (after Dirven 2001: 20).

Particle-centered networks (for 12 particles) are introduced in MPV (2005). It is a dictionary which shows cognitive links between the senses of a given particle and provides example of usage on an adjacent page so that it is easy to refer back to the semantic network. The complex semantic structure of PVs poses a lexicographic problem since presentation using cognitive links might take on many shapes depending on which aspect of the PV idiosyncrasy we want to put at the core of the description.

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