

A Comparative Analysis of Definitions of Phrasal Verbs in Monolingual General-purpose Dictionaries for Native Speakers of American and British English

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This paper is an attempt to analyze the definitions of phrasal verbs in monolingual general-purpose dictionaries for native speakers of English. Four dictionaries from Great Britain and four from the USA published in the last decade provide material for the study which includes a total of 100 phrasal verbs. Bearing in mind the specific semantic load of phrasal verbs, their limitation as to the choice of objects as well as the fact that they are commonly used, this study aims at finding whether there exist significant differences in describing phrasal verbs on both sides of the Atlantic. Three aspects are analyzed in particular: word choice with emphasis on the occurrence of difficult, very formal and rarely used words; precision in rendering the meaning, and inclusion of objects typical of a given sense of a phrasal verb. The analysis reveals that there are certain areas of correlation but also points of differences, not only between the two lexicographic traditions but within each of them separately.

1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs,¹ as idiomatic expressions, have long been the interest of pedagogical lexicography with efforts on the part of dictionary compilers to provide clear definitions and rich usage exemplification for the benefits of English language learners. However, a look at definitions of phrasal verbs in dictionaries for native speakers of English might provide some useful insight into the meaning presentation of those semantically complex, yet widely used combinations. The paper deals with the definitions of phrasal verbs as presented in monolingual general-purpose dictionaries for native speakers of English, published in the United States and Great Britain in the last decade.² Eight dictionaries were chosen for the purpose of the study, four of American English and four of British English. The dictionaries published in the USA include *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 11th ed. (2003) (henceforth abbreviated as MW), *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* 2nd ed. (2001) (RHU), *Webster's New World College Dictionary* 4th ed. (2005) (WNW) and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 4th ed. (2006) (AH). The dictionaries published in Great Britain include: *Oxford Dictionary of English* 2nd revised ed. (2005) (ODE), *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* (1999) (CHAMB 21), *The Chambers Dictionary* 10th ed. (2006) (CHAMB) and *Collins English Dictionary* 9th ed. (2007) (CED). The dictionaries chosen are comparable in coverage. A total of 100 verbs were selected for the study.

The understanding of phrasal verbs might sometimes be difficult as they are unique combinations both semantically and syntactically. Their meaning tends to be figurative and they appear in contexts that very often require particular word(s) or phrase(s) as grammatical object(s). Such specificity calls for providing a clear and precise definition, especially that phrasal verbs are commonly used—primarily for their semantic idiosyncrasy. The present analysis of phrasal verbs in dictionaries released in the USA and Great Britain aims to find differences in terms of word

¹ Whenever the term “phrasal verbs” is used in this article, it encompasses both phrasal verbs (verb + adverb particle) and phrasal prepositional verbs (verb + adverb particle + preposition).

² Example sentences are not taken into consideration when analyzing the meanings of phrasal verbs. This is to help to establish how clear and exhaustive the definitions actually are. Moreover, not all dictionaries provide example sentences for each sense.

choices for *definiens*, the precision in pinning down the meaning and specifying grammatical objects for particular senses of phrasal verbs.

2. Difficult, very formal and rarely used words in the definitions of phrasal verbs

As it is the meaning of a phrasal verb that most often constitutes a stumbling block for the dictionary user, it is all the more important to define these verbs in a way that leaves no place for ambiguity or guessing. Therefore, including very formal, sophisticated or rarely used words or phrases in definitions should be discouraged. Two American dictionaries, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate* and *Random House Webster's Unabridged* seem to use such words more often than other dictionaries:

■MW³ **act up** 1. to behave in an unruly, *recalcitrant*⁴, or capricious manner 2. to become active or acute after being *quiescent* vs. ■WNW to misbehave or ●ODE ●CHAMB to behave badly;

■MW **bring forth** *ADDUCE*⁵ – only MW records this particular sense;

■MW **cast about** *CONTRIVE* vs. ■RHU to scheme, plan or ■AH to devise means;⁶

■MW **close in** to *enshroud* to such an extent as to *preclude* entrance or exit vs. ●ODE gradually surround, especially with the effect of hindering movement or vision; ■AH to surround so as to make unusable;

■MW **come around** to *acCEDe* to a particular opinion or course of action vs. ■RHU to change one's opinion, decision, etc., esp. to agree with another's; ●CHAMB 21 to change one's opinion;

■MW **get off** to secure the release of or *procure* a modified penalty for vs. ■RHU a. to escape the consequences of or punishment for one's actions. b. to help (someone) escape punishment ●CED 1. to escape the consequences of an action 2. to be or cause to be acquitted;

■MW **make up** to act *ingratiatingly* and flatteringly vs. ●ODE attempt to win the favour of (someone) by being pleasant;

■MW **put down** *DEPOSE* vs. ■WNW to deprive of authority, power, or position.

■RHU **come across** to make a particular impression; *comport oneself* vs. ■AH to give an impression;

■RHU **get around** to *ingratiate* oneself with (someone) through flattery or *cajolery* vs. ●ODE coax or persuade (someone) to do or allow something that they initially do not want to;

■RHU **get at** to influence by *surreptitious* or illegal means; bribe vs. ■MW to influence corruptly ●CHAMB 21 to influence [them] by dishonest means, e.g. bribery;

■RHU **get away with** to *perpetrate* or accomplish without detection or punishment vs. ■AH to escape the consequences of (a blameworthy act, for example);

■RHU **make out** to imply, suggest, or *impute* –

This sense of **make out** as meaning “to attribute or ascribe (something discreditable), as to a person” is not explicitly visible in the definitions in the other dictionaries. Only by referring to the example sentence can this particular sense be located in other dictionaries;⁷

³ Squares indicate AmE dictionaries while circles indicate BrE dictionaries.

⁴ Italics in definitions presented in the paper are used to emphasize the problem under discussion.

⁵ *MW* makes an extensive use of synonyms as one-word definitions (they are printed in capital letters thus referring the user to the synonym's entry). The verb *to adduce* means “to offer as example, reason, or proof in discussion or analysis”.

⁶ Interestingly, this particular sense of **cast about** is completely omitted in the British dictionaries—a discrepancy that recurs throughout the dictionaries with American dictionaries also lacking certain senses that are thoroughly described in the British dictionaries.

⁷ Based on the example sentence that follows the RHU definition, namely *He made me out to be a liar* one might assume that **make out** in this sense is used with negative connotation but this would have to be checked in a corpus. Interestingly, the same sentence appears as an example of usage in AH but the definition of this sense of **make out** in AH is “to represent as being” which, in itself, does not suggest negative implication. CHAMB 21 on the other hand gives the following definition of **make sb out to be**

■RHU **put down** to criticize, esp. in a contemptuous manner; *disparage*; belittle – in this case “disparage” means exactly what comes before it in the definition;

■RHU **set up** *to propound*; plan; advance vs. ■MW to put forward (as a plan) for acceptance or

■WNW to advance or propose (a theory, etc.)

On the British side, difficult or rare words/phrases are also found but not as frequently and it is *The Chambers Dictionary* that features most of them. This dictionary, more often than not, is very terse in describing the meaning of *definiendum*, which in many cases works to the disadvantage of the whole definition.

●CHAMB **get down** to *disport oneself with abandon* vs. ■MW to have a good time partying;

●CHAMB **get out** to *extricate* oneself vs. ■WNW to escape from or avoid;

●CHAMB **make out** *to descry*, to see vs. ●ODE manage with some difficulty to see or hear something;

●CHAMB **put forth** to produce or *extrude* vs. ■WNW to grow (leaves, shoots, etc); ●CHAMB **set forth** to state, *expound*, declare. vs. ■WNW to express in words; state.

The rest of the dictionaries used difficult words very sporadically. In *Collins English Dictionary* under **come up** we find “to be *regurgitated* or vomited” and this particular sense is recorded only in this dictionary. *The American Heritage Dictionary* gives the following definition of one of the senses of **come on**: “to progress or advance in *increments*”, while *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* explains **come down** as “said of an *heirloom*⁸, etc: to be inherited”. The last definition is also imprecise in that it does not mention the fact of passing something (such a story, custom) by tradition as is done for example in ●CED to be handed down or acquired by tradition or inheritance.

Difficult, rare and very formal words not only blur the meaning but also frustrate the users by forcing them to refer to other entries. While some of the formal words describe phrasal verbs very accurately, for example the verb *to expound* meaning “state in detail” as an explanation for **set forth** (CHAMB), still their relatively low frequency in everyday language preclude the average user from clear understanding of the verb.

3. Precise vs. unclear definitions of phrasal verbs

Vagueness in definitions might be caused not only by difficult words but also by unnecessary nominalizations, awkward wording or syntax. Sometimes the proximity of difficult words makes the definition dense and unclear, like in the already mentioned ■MW **close in**: “*enshroud* to such an extent as to *preclude* entrance or exit” which is a rather sophisticated way to express “to surround so as to make unusable” (AH). The same happens in ■AH **make up** “to make *ingratiating* or *fawning overtures*. Used with *to*”, which is defined in a far better by ●ODE **make up to** attempt to win the favour of (someone) by being pleasant.

However, even seemingly simple and common words can cause confusion, especially if not used in their primary sense as is the case of the word *abandon*, both as a noun and as a verb used in the following definitions:

■MW **break up** to lose morale, composure, or resolution; especially: to *become abandoned* to laughter vs. ●ODE start laughing uncontrollably; or the already mentioned;

●CHAMB **get down** to *disport oneself with abandon* vs. ■AH to lose one’s inhibitions; enjoy oneself wholeheartedly;

■AH **give over** to surrender (oneself) completely; *abandon* vs. ■RHU to indulge in without restraint.

Lexically dense definitions are not uncommon when it comes to phrasal verbs and are often the result of overusing nominalizations:

sth: to portray them, or cause them to seem to be, what they are not *They made us out to be liars*, which again leaves out the negative aspect.

⁸ The word *heirloom* as defined in CHAMB 21 is “a personal article or piece of property which descends to the legal heir by means of a will or special custom”.

●CED **break away** to make a breakaway (this is basically *idem per idem* error) vs. ■MW to detach oneself especially from a group ●CHAMB 21 to put an end to one's connection with a group or custom, especially suddenly;

■RHU **break in** to overcome the stiffness and newness of vs. ●CHAMB to make (shoes) less stiff by use – nominalizations vs. object-specific definition;

■MW **break out** to develop or emerge with suddenness or force vs. ●CHAMB 21 to begin suddenly and usually violently

●CHAMB **put off** to cause aversion or disinclination vs. ■AH to repel or repulse, as from bad manners – nominalizations vs. verb structures with example.

■AH **go for** to expend all one's strength and resources towards achievement of an end or purpose vs. ●CED to seek to obtain

It often happens that a definition is vague because of the presence of an idiomatic expression, awkward wording or addition of some unnecessary information e.g.

●CHAMB **break away** to be scattered, *as clouds after a storm*. One might wonder why the lexicographer chose a comparison to clouds after a storm and what context for this sense might be. *The Chambers Dictionary* features a few more, rather unclear definitions for the following phrasal verbs:

●CHAMB **put across** to perform so as to carry the audience with one. At first reading some doubt might arise as to whether “one” in the definition is a substitute for a personal pronoun or perhaps “carry with one” is a fixed phrase having figurative meaning.

●CHAMB **put in** to perform towards completing a total. This awkwardly worded meaning is rendered very clearly by ●ODE devote time or effort to (something)

●CHAMB **put out** to remove bodily or blind (an eye). This sense is not recorded by other dictionaries. The phrase “to remove bodily” might cause some users to scratch their heads thinking of possible exemplification of such an action and it seems that the object of *to blind* should be a person rather than an eye.

Not to make *The Chambers Dictionary* a black sheep in the dictionary family, here is an example of a little confusing definition from a different dictionary.

■RHU **come out** to make *more or less* public acknowledgment of being homosexual.

What would “more or less public acknowledgment” entail, regardless of the type of information revealed?

A very common defining shortcut, or rather a defining vicious circle, is created when a phrasal verb is defined by a synonymous phrasal verb. Such an approach surely does not make for clarity. Just to give a couple of examples:

■RHU **get up** to draw upon; marshal; rouse / **give off** to put forth

■MW **put across** PUT OVER 3 / **give out** BREAK DOWN, FAIL

●CHAMB **make out** to draw up / **put over** to impose, pass off / **set off** lay off / **go for** set out to secure

●CED **make for** to help to bring about

■AH **get over** to get across

■WNW **bring forward** to carry over

A more serious cause for vagueness in definitions is their imprecision in providing information essential to the complete meaning of a phrasal verb. For example, with the verb **get out** in the sense “to become known” it is important to specify that the information that becomes known has previously been kept back from the public. Only two out of the eight dictionaries examined provide this little detail:

get out

●ODE (*of something previously secret*) become known

■WNW to become *no longer a secret*

■MW to bring before the public

■RHU to become publicly known

- AH to become known
- CHAMB 21 said of information: to become known
- CED to make or become known.

Another imprecision noticed in the abovementioned definitions is that “to make or become known” (CED, AH) when left without an exemplary object might imply that e.g. a person might become known, which is clearly not the case for this sense of **get out**. Only CHAMB 21 definition explicitly gives “information” as the object but still lacks mentioning the previous state of secrecy. MW and RHU definitions come a bit closer to the intended meaning with “public” and “publicly”, both of which suggest previous oblivion on part of the public about “something” that has now become “known”.

For **come up with**, two dictionaries, one British and one American, provide a specific context:

- ODE produce (something), especially *when pressured or challenged*
- MW to produce *especially in dealing with a problem or challenge*
- RHU to produce; supply
- WNW to propose, produce, find, suggest, etc.
- AH to bring forth, discover, or produce
- CHAMB 21 to offer it; to put it forward
- CHAMB to suggest
- CED to produce or find

In the case of **get in with** only ODE clarifies the context:

- ODE become friendly with (someone), especially *in order to gain an advantage*
- MW to become friendly
- RHU to become associated with
- WNW to become familiar or closely associated (*with*)
- CED to be or cause to be on friendly terms with (a person).

However, none of the definitions mentions a negative connotation for this sense of **get in with**, and we can learn it only from the example sentences: *He got in with a bad crowd* (RHU), *She got in with the wrong crowd* (AH), *I hope he doesn't get in with the wrong crowd* (ODE).

For a rather uncommon use of **get up**, only two British dictionaries give some more contextual information but it is slightly different in each one of them:

get up

- CHAMB 21 to learn it *by deliberate effort*
- CHAMB *to learn up for an occasion*; to commit to memory
- ODE enhance or refine one's knowledge of a subject
- CED to study or improve one's knowledge of
- MW to acquire a knowledge of
- RHU to acquire a knowledge of
- WNW to advance; make progress

Perhaps it would be better to provide more information on the type of “occasion” that one is supposed to learn something “by deliberate effort”.

For **get down** the difficulty with which something is swallowed constitutes a distinctive feature of its meaning and it should be reflected in the definition:

get down

- MW *to manage* to swallow
- ODE swallow food or drink, *especially with difficulty*
- CHAMB 21 *to manage* to swallow [it]
- RHU to swallow
- AH to swallow
- CED to swallow

The definition of **make over** in the sense “to transfer the title of (property) does not necessarily need to include the additional information provided by WNW and AH:

- WNW to transfer the ownership of *by or as by signing a legal document*
- AH to change or transfer the ownership of, *usually by means of a legal document*

The two definitions seem to be a bit overspecified since it is commonly understood that something like the title to property or other ownership right is not given or “transferred” to people orally or on a scrap of paper but in a formal written form.

The Chambers Dictionary, usually very laconic in its defining style, gives a rather lengthy definition of **put off**:

- CHAMB to turn (someone) aside from what he or she wants or intends with evasions, excuses or unsatisfying substitutes.

Such overspecification does not seem to be justified, especially if immediately followed by “to divert, turn aside from a purpose”, which is basically a concise version of the elaborate definition. This sense of **put off** is rendered better by another British dictionary:

- CED to evade (a person) by postponement or delay—although shorter, this definition seems to convey the intended meaning without unnecessary elaboration.

Very often the definitions of the same sense are so different that if it wasn’t for the example sentences one would not immediately put them under the same phrasal verb. For example the following definitions describe one of the senses of **come in**:

- MW to assume a role or function
- ODE join or become involved in an enterprise
- CED to play a role; advance one’s interests

Similarly, the definitions for one of the senses of **get up** do not quite correlate:

- MW to create in oneself
- WNW to find within oneself
- RHU to draw upon; marshal; rouse

What could be done to clarify those definitions would be for example, including an object which for this sense is usually “courage” or “nerve”⁹

Regardless of whether the dictionary provides an example sentence, the definition of a phrasal verb should be exhaustive in that it should include all information pertaining to the meaning of a phrasal verb and at the same time dispose of information that might blur the meaning or cause confusion.

4. Specifying objects in definitions of phrasal verbs

When it comes to providing a precise definition of a phrasal verb very often it is the object, particular for a given sense, that makes all the difference in rendering the meaning. In all the dictionaries one can find definitions which are unclear, imprecise or vague due to lack of a specific object or objects. For **put about** all the British dictionaries include the meaning of “to spread” with two of them giving a precise object, i.e. rumor(s), while on the American side RHU is the only dictionary to include a specific object, and the sense itself for that matter:

put about

- ODE spread information or *rumours*
- CHAMB 21 to spread (a report or *rumour*)
- CHAMB to publish or circulate
- CED to make widely known
- RHU to start (*a rumor*); circulate.

⁹ Only by referring to the example sentences/phrases can it be verified that all three definitions are, in fact, for the same sense of **get up**: *cannot get up the courage to tell them* (MW); *to get up one’s courage* (RHU); *got up the nerve to quit* (AH). Interestingly, none of the British dictionaries records this sense of **get up**.

It is clear that “to make widely known” is far too general to even come close to the accurate meaning, “to circulate” is somewhat better in rendering the action of spreading, but still not explicit enough to imply that it is a rumor that passes from person to person.

Similarly with **break in**, it is important to specify that it is usually shoes, boots and any other footwear that we break in. This is exactly what the British dictionaries provide:

break in

- ODE wear something, typically *a pair of new shoes*, until it becomes supple and comfortable
- CHAMB 21 to use or wear (*new shoes or boots*, etc) so that they lose their stiffness, etc.
- CHAMB to make (shoes etc) less stiff by use
- CED to use or wear (*shoes, new equipment*, etc) until comfortable or running smoothly

In the case of the American dictionaries none of them gives shoes or boots as a typical object for this sense:

- MW to overcome the stiffness or newness of
- RHU to begin to wear or use in order to make comfortable
- WNW to prepare (*something new*) by use or wear
- AH to loosen or soften with use.

“Something new” is far too general an object for this sense.

The same situation happens with one of the senses of **put on**—the British dictionaries specify the object with CHAMB and CED going even further and including the insincerity involved in the action, while the American ones do not give the objects appropriate for this sense:

put on

- ODE to assume a particular *expression, accent*, etc.
- CHAMB 21 to assume (*an accent or manner*, etc.)
- CHAMB to assume (a *character or quality*) esp. deceptively
- CED (usually passive) to adopt (*an attitude or feeling*) insincerely;
- MW to feign
- RHU to assume insincerely or falsely; pretend
- WNW to assume or pretend
- AH to assume affectedly

Including an object in the definition of certain phrasal verbs seems crucial as the particular sense might apply only to a limited number of objects. Providing objects only in example sentences might indicate a broader scope of objects and thus be a cause for a potentially incorrect use of a given phrasal verb.

5. Concluding remarks

The approach adopted in this paper focused on the lexical content of the definitions. Although limited in its scope the current analysis sheds some light on certain problematic areas in defining phrasal verbs for the native users of English. Altogether, out of 100 phrasal verbs examined, more than 70 proved to be problematic in at least one of their many senses, 56 of them being included in the present article. This allows to make only very tentative generalizations. American dictionaries seem to make more frequent use of difficult words than the British ones, but for other features analyzed in this paper the place of publication was irrelevant. The British dictionaries feature slightly more clear and accessible definitions, the exception being *The Chambers Dictionary*, but in order to state that definitely more phrasal verbs should be examined. Some problems, however, are common to both lexicographic traditions, for instance the need to supply the definition with an object or at least a general hint at what it might be or providing all the necessary details distinguishing a given sense. Because most phrasal verbs have a very limited range of objects, it is important to include examples of those objects in the definition rather than merely in the exemplary sentence/phrase. Some dictionaries, like RHU, WNW or CHAMB, do without usage exemplification for most senses of

phrasal verbs, which makes the efforts to improve the clarity of definitions all the more worthwhile.

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