

## CORRECT USE OF PHRASAL VERBS IN ENGLISH

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**Abstract.** This article deals with semantic features of phrasal verbs. The collection of examples multi-words verbs is taken as a source of the article, where literal and idiomatic usage are studied.

**Key words:** phrasal verb, idiomatic usage, verb combination, syntactical properties, semantic properties, morphological properties.

Like all multi-word verbs, phrasal verbs have semantic unity; although they are made up of two words, they have a single meaning just as single-word item typically do. In other words, each of the words in a phrasal verb has its own meaning when used independently, but when it is part of the phrasal verb, it loses that meaning and cooperates with another word to create a new meaning.

Some grammarians, such as Kollen, take the view that English phrasal verbs define only those combinations that form an idiom, a phrase whose meaning cannot be predicated from the meaning of its parts. This is a semantic point of view which focuses mainly on the meaning of the verb combination. To clarify this point of view, consider the following example:

–*The balloon **went up** into the sky.*

She (ibid) would say that ‘go up’ in the mentioned above sentence, is not example of phrasal verb because the sentence can be rephrased as:

–*\***Up** the balloon **went** into the sky.*

Kollen (ibid) would designate ‘up’ as an adverb modifying ‘went’. She also applies the test of meaning to phrasal verbs as in: ‘give in’ by ‘surrender’, ‘come by’ by ‘acquire’, and ‘break up’ by ‘end’. Each phrasal verb could be replaced by a single verb with the same general meaning.

On the semantic basis, Fraser points out that phrasalized verbs can be grouped into different classes according to the semantic features. Thus, verbs like ‘cement in/on’, ‘paste up’, ‘nail up’, and ‘clamp down/up’ are of similar sense because all the objects specified by each one of these verbs are used to join materials.

Bollinger defines phrasal verbs as a semantic unit consisting of a verb plus a particle. He states that this semantic unit has a special degree of what he calls

cohesion. In addition, Murphy (2002) explains that the kind of particles that are used with the phrasal verbs can be restricted to the semantic reference of these verbs.

For instance, the particle ‘out’, ‘off’, and ‘up’ are used with verbs of movement such as ‘drive’, ‘get’ and ‘come’.

Semantically, Meyer argues that the particle adds different meanings to the verb such as:

*Primitive meaning as in “mount up”.*

*Literal meaning as in “through”.*

*Extension meaning as in “shut up”.*

He (ibid) goes on to say that he can not make any specification about the second element of the phrasal verbs, yet, he comes again to state that these elements have a positive value because through the use of these elements a great variety of verbal concepts can be produced such as: ‘shoot off’, ‘shoot by’, and ‘shoot out’

It is concluded that in order to guess the meaning of a certain word, one has to use the contextual clues which are often there in any text or context. These clues are of different kinds namely contextual references, conjunctions references, parts of speech, prepositions, compounds, the words and its surroundings .... Training ourselves to infer meaning from the context gives us a powerful aid to comprehension and will ultimately greatly speed up our reading.

To support what has already been stated, concerning the meaning of phrasal verbs, Clark and Nation state that “the ability to guess the meaning of a word without referring to a dictionary saves time and allows the reader to continue reading without interruption”. Of course, what applies to words applies to phrasal verbs as there is always possibility of guessing their meanings, using the clues referred to earlier.

When one takes a look at the different phrasal verbs used in English, one finds that the meanings of some of them are quite clear and that the adverbs added to the verbs produce new constrictions that are semantically clear. On the other hand, some phrasal verbs constructions result in a separated unit of meaning, i.e. the total meaning of a certain phrasal verb bears little or nothing to the meaning of the individual element which that unit is composed.

Most phrasal verbs carry different meanings and some have more than ten meanings. Side and McMardie hint at this when they write that “any one combination may have several idiomatic meanings, depending on the words which precede and follow it, i.e. its ‘collocations’”. If, for example, we take the phrasal verbs ‘take off’, we find that it carries so many meanings. This of course, depends on the context it is used in. Here are a few examples of the different meanings of this phrasal verb:

–*Take* you coat **off** and sit down (remove).

–*Some local trains have been taken off*, as there was no demand for them (removed from service). – *I took off* three kilos last week (lost weight).

–*He is very funny when he takes off* Charli Chaplin (imitate).

–*Why don’t you take off* that silly moustache? (shave).

Phrasal verbs vary in the strength of their idiomaticity; in other words, idiomaticity is on a gradient. For example, the phrasal verb “take off,” meaning “humorously imitate” is strongly idiomatic: it would be impossible to guess its meaning from a knowledge of the meaning of its components. By contrast, “put off” meaning “delay” is moderately idiomatic; and “speed up,” meaning “suddenly accelerate” only slightly so (Its meaning could be quite easily guessed from a knowledge of the meaning of its components, but it still has a unique meaning).

Whoever, McArthur in his treatment of phrasal verbs states that phrasal verbs cover both the literal and idiomatic uses. Grammarians who take this position classify phrasal verbs based on their use in sentence patterns (syntactical properties) and as a new word formation (morphological properties), as well as, by the overall meaning of these verb combinations (semantic properties). The example below illustrates the same phrasal verb having both a literal and idiomatic meaning:

–She **put down** the book (*literal*).

–The army **put down** the rebellions (*idiomatic*).

It is, however, the idiomatic application in everyday speech which makes phrasal verbs so important. In addition, some phrasal verbs carry very vague meanings. Even if such phrasal verbs are used in context, one may not be able to know their meaning unless he/she looks their meanings up in the dictionary or in any book on idioms. Seidl and McMardie mention that “sometimes, the combination of the verb +preposition or particle results in a separate unit of meaning, which may be highly idiomatic”. If we take a look at the following two sentences, we find that the meaning of the phrasal verb ‘pack in’ in sentence (1) is quite clear, whereas in sentence (2) the meaning of it is not very obvious which, in fact, means “abandon”.

1. She opened her suitcase and **packed** all her cloths **in**.

2. He decided to **pack** his job **in**.

Sometimes a difference in syntax or word order of an idiom will result in different meanings. The meaning of the idiom “turn on,” for example, depends a lot on how it is combined with other words.

–He **turned on** me (*He betrayed me; he attacked me*).

–He **turned me on** (*He excited me*).

It is concluded that what distinguishes the writing and the speech of a nonnative speaker of English from that of native speakers is that what native speaker of English write or say is full of phrasal verbs expression of various degree of idiomaticity whereas non-native speaker’s performance is greatly lacking in this respect.

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