THE BOUNDARIES OF ICONICITY IN ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS FORMED WITH *UP* AND *DOWN*

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Abstract

The paper is trying to demonstrate that iconicity is to be found in the first surface layer of phrasal verbs, when their meaning is transparent and the signifier is analogue with the significant; when we enter the deep structure, it is more difficult to find correspondences which might help us understand the phrasal verb constructions. Examples with phrasal verbs formed with *up* and *down* will be supplied.

Introduction

Many British and American linguists wonder about their mother tongue and the way meaning is expressed in different phrases. Phrasal verbs are usually referred to in such cases, as in the examples given by Lederer:

> "If *uplift* is the same as *lift up*, why are *upset* and *set up* opposite in meaning? Why is that when I *wind up* my watch, I start it, but when I *wind up* this essay, I shall end it? How can expressions like "I'm mad about my flat", "No football coaches allowed" and "I'll come by in the morning and *knock* you *up*" convey such different messages in two countries that purport to speak English?
>
> "I lucked out." To *luck out* sounds as if you're out of luck. Don't you mean I *lucked in*?" (1989: 22)

They say that English is easy to learn because its grammar and vocabulary are not so complicated. However, the reverse of this is also true because the use of auxiliaries or combinations of words constitutes the most perplexing branch of grammar, "it being much easier to learn to change the termination of the verb, than to combine two, three or four words for the same purpose." (Webster 1951: 223)

Lexical and semantic units

Phrasal verbs are semantic units. What they have in common is a sort of unity between the verb and the particle and which is the essential feature of this category. They differ in the choice of factors determining that unity. "In one case, the main factor determining the unity between the verb and the particle is semantic, mainly lexical, in the other, formal syntactic." (Sroka, 1972: 180) The term 'particle' is preferred by some linguists as it is difficult sometimes to distinguish between adverb or preposition following the verb or just to ease the theoretical acquisition of the English grammar rules.

Prepositions and particles cause more difficulty to many foreign students than any other aspect of the English language. Particles are portmanteau words, fusions of elements that are syntactically distinct, but semantically identical. Syntactically they remember prepositions, in which both the syntactic and the semantic features are kept relatively more distinct.

Their choice after a certain verb, noun, adjective or adverb can be determined only after constant practice, there being no rule or grammar concept, as far as I know, to give you a clue. Nor can we identify the meaning of a complex verb just knowing the meaning of the verb. From this point of view we can apply the term of 'fuzzy concept' to this special category of English verbs. Moreover, its members can also be graded, from verbs with prepositions, *look at*, verbs with adverbs or prepositions, whose meaning can be easily perceived, *look for,* to verbs fully idiomatic whose meaning is unveiled only when looking up in the dictionary, *look forward to.* Certain verbs are followed by adverbs and prepositions that idiomatically lose their adverbial or prepositional nature and become embedded in the meaning of the verbs, such as *to turn on*, *to stand by*, *to do without*, *to give up*, *to hold out*, *to lay up*, *to try out*.

Some adverbs are predicative adjuncts and cannot stay next to the verb and thus the combination cannot be a phrasal verb; this deficiency can be put on a kind of conflict of homonyms, where the metaphor plays a major role. As an example we can take *to put up* with three literal meanings 'to raise (something) to a higher position, as in the air', 'to build' and 'to show (something such as a notice) in a public place' and sixteen metaphorical meanings 'to increase, raise a cost', to pack (goods such as food or a parcel)', to provide (money needed for something) usually in advance, 'to offer (opposition)', 'to state (a position in an argument)', 'to offer (something) for sale', 'to find food and lodging for (someone)', 'to provide shelter for (something)', 'to offer (oneself) for election; ask to be elected', to suggest (someone) for a job or position', 'to preserve (food such as fruit) in a special bottle or tin', 'to call (a prisoner) to be examined in court', 'to make (an animal, or bird) leave its hiding place', informally 'to arrange (something) as a secret plan', old use 'to put (something) away in a safe place', to take (something) out of use, especially for a time'. It has also idiomatic meanings in the following phrases: put someone's back/hackles up, put up the banns, put one's feet up, put up one's fists/guard, put your hands up!, put someone's monkey up, put up a (good) show, put up the shutters. (Courtney 1994: 477-8)

Freedom to combine phonemes into words is thus limited to certain situations of word coinage. In forming sentences with words, the speaker is less constrained. In the combination of sentences into utterances, the action of compulsory syntactic rules ceases, and the freedom of any individual speaker to create new contexts greatly increases. If we can make rules to combine words into sentences, and then norms to combine sentences in good paragraphs, we can be in a way sure of having rules to make words out of phonemes, or rules to combine two or three words together to form other words with quite different meanings. Anyway, attempts have been made. For example, compound verbs are formed by particle modifier (y) + verb head (z). The meaning is always 'to zy' (where y is an adverbial particle), e.g., *downgrade, overstep, outstretch, underprop, uphold*. (Allerton 1975: 79-135)

Nora Tomoşoiu (1976) classifies these combinations according to semantic criteria:

x = meaning of verb

y = meaning of particle

xy = meaning of the combination

1) xy = x + y; free combination (*eat up* = a. preposition.; > normal; adverb > phrasal verb)

2) xy ≠ x + y, idiom (≠ x; ≠ y)

3) xy = x, semantically insignificant particle (*check up* – dialectal or stylistic differences)

The difference between the concrete and the figurative meanings is given by the fact that verb-particle combinations are concrete while compounds have a figurative meaning. Two elements are responsible for the formation of the verb-particle combinations:

1. the change of stress;
2. the semantic modifications.

But we cannot write *xy* after an equal sign as the new meaning is completely different from both *x* and *y*; and then we should change her formula and write *z*.

[1] *I **get** a letter each day.* (get = x)

[2] *My house is **by** the church.* (by = y)

[3] *All you need is a little food and water to **get by** in the next few days.* (get by = z)

Meaning, surface structure, deep structure and phrasal verbs

The investigation of referential opacity has turned up a great number of examples illustrating how replacement of one expression by another changes meaning, even when the semantic connection between the two is very close. Linguistic competence is achieved when a speaker has mastered the set of rules by which language is generated. To learn a language is not to memorise vocabulary but to acquire a set of rules. We can do this when we have the rules. So far no rules have been written about the formation of words, for example, for nouns. Nobody can tell us why we have *childhood*, *boldness*, and *cowardice*; why we *light up a cigarette* and not *light it on*, and why we *put it out* and not *put it off*. To the transformational grammarian, a complete grammar of a certain language is the full corpus of operational procedures needed for producing all the acceptable sentences of that language. This grammar would be a copy, or rather a model, of the "grammar mechanism" already built into the human organism. (Burgess 1992: 44)

By means of transformations, the phrase-structure grammar can be expanded to cover all combinations, rearrangements, additions, and deletions of the basic sentence. Followers of Chomsky say that it is not a matter of the word but of the meaning, or, to be exact, of generative semantics. The deep structure is related to the surface structure by certain mental operations – in modern terminology, by grammatical transformations. The grammar of a language must contain a system of rules that characterises

deep and surface structures and the transformational relation between them, and thus there is an infinite domain of paired deep and surface structures, the speaker making infinite use of finite means.

One major problem is posed by the fact that the surface structure generally gives very little indication in itself of the meaning of the sentence. There are, for example, numerous sentences that are ambiguous in some way that is not indicated by the surface structure. The grammar of English, and not only, generates for each sentence a deep structure, and contains rules showing how this deep structure is related to a surface structure. Deep structures, which are often quite abstract, exist and play a very important role in the grammatical processes and are used in producing and interpreting sentences. Such facts, then, support the hypothesis that deep structures of the sort postulated in transformational-generative grammar are real mental structures. These deep structures, along with transformational rules that relate them to surface structures and the rules relating deep and surface structures to representations of sound and meaning, are the rules that have been mastered by the person who has learned a language. They constitute his knowledge of the language; they are put to use when he speaks and understands, but sometimes the deep structure may be remote from the surface form and only the knowledge of the language is not enough.

All grammatical symbols have one thing in common: they do not represent directly the ideas they stand for. On the contrary, they seem to operate like a system of signs, or like a code, for which the study of grammar provides a cipher or key and makes it possible to condense complex ideas into words using this code of grammatical "signs". Let us take for example, a phrasal verb formed with *down*:

[4] *I can't come down till I've finished my last examinations*. (Courtney 1994: 91-2)

Taken literally, this could mean to or understood by a foreigner as getting down on the ground floor as the surface meaning of *come down* is 'to move to a lower level'. Analysing its deep structure we get another meaning, 'to travel south or away from an important place such as a capital city or (British English) university. The same interpretations can be applied to the following examples:

[5] *Have you some tea to wash this dry cake down?*

[6] *Peter broke down and was unable to work for a year*. (Courtney 1994: 47)

Langaker (1971) says that verbal labels are particularly important in the realm of abstract ideas. Our thinking is thus conditioned by the linguistic categorisation of experience in that it is easier to operate with concepts coded by single words than with concepts for which no single item is available. Nevertheless, the native English speakers use phrasal verbs more often instead of their one-word synonyms.

Idioms, euphemisms and phrasal verbs

Idioms involve collocation of a special kind. Although an idiom is semantically like a single word, it does not function like one – it functions to some degree as a normal sequence of grammatical words (e.g., *kick the bucket*).

A very common type of idiom in English is the phrasal verb. Not all combinations are idiomatic. There are even degrees of idiomaticity:

a) one can *make up* a story;

b) *make up* a fire;

c) *make up* one's face, (verbs + prepositions; verbs + adverbs + prepositions).

Jackendoff says that "Irregular inflectional morphology involves a single lexical form expressing multiple lemmas; an idiom involves a single lemma expressed by multiple lexical forms." Idioms fall in the third class of compounds (out of three that he classifies) where "some part may be a phonological word of the right syntactic category but the wrong meaning. An example is 'strawberry' -particular kind of *berry*- which has nothing to do with 'straw'". (1997: 163-5)

The fact that many idioms are rigid in syntactic structure, and that some of them have rigid changed structures, comes from the fact that lexical patterning takes place at S-Structure rather than D-Structure. A constructional idiomatic phrasal verb is sometimes a syntactic and conceptual structure that is not determined by the head verb. Although the verb is the syntactic head of the verbal phrase, it is not the semantic head; rather its meaning is embedded in a manner constituent. As a result, the argument structure of the verbal phrase is determined by the meaning of the constructional idiom, essentially a causative inchoative of the sort expressed overtly by verbs such as *put* and *make.*

Euphemism is the habit of avoiding an unpleasant or taboo reference by substituting some indirect word or expression for the blunt direct one, as when we say that somebody 'passed away' when we meant that he died. When such a euphemism has been used for some time, it ceases to work as a euphemism any longer, because it is now simply one of the possible expressions for the thing in question. Thus, a change of meaning has taken place. Some phrasal verbs have succeeded in smoothing the rough meanings of one-word verb, e.g., *put down* for killing an animal.

As we have seen so far there are some structures whose meanings are fully predictable, some eventually grasped and some where both verbs and particles lose their full meanings. Thus, their ultimate meanings become opaque. That is why the denomination of these compound verbs has been widely accepted as 'phrasal' and I would call only the last category 'phrasal verbs'. Their idiomaticity involves a collocation of a special kind. Although an idiom is semantically like a single word, it does not function like one. It functions, to some degree, as a normal sequence of grammatical words.

Conclusion

These combinations (verb + particle) are a distinctive feature of English: they form an active part of the language, as the stock is constantly being increased. They are highly used in colloquial English, and

therefore should be included in any language course, from the very beginning. Unfortunately, they are extremely difficult for the foreign student, for at least two reasons: firstly, they should be learned as vocabulary items, memorized and then used in context. Secondly, the word order they require is not always flexible. On the contrary, if you change the order, they can have quite different meanings. This difficulty arises from the fact that the particle may be either a preposition or an adverb, and on this depend intonation, pronoun position, and whether the verb and particle may be separated by a noun object. Another difficulty is given by the meanings of the constituents which are thought of first literally or lexically, for example *up* and *down* as deictic entities and not empty of meaning.

In transparent style the meaning of the word is elucidated by its context. In the case of phrasal verbs the rules for participants, circumstances and collocations are normally applied, the modificant is reinforced by adverbs, and in the broader context neighbouring verbs and connectives are used in a logical relation to each other, implying all devices of the language of traditional writing.

The basic characteristics of transparent style are therefore mutual semantic reinforcement and co-ordination, and a foreign reader could deduce the sense of isolated unfamiliar lexemes from the context in which they are used.

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