Phrasal Verbs

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1- Introduction

Phrasal verbs are a vital, expressive part of the English language, particularly of the colloquial, everyday sort. They are extremely common in spoken English and are used more informally than their Latinate synonyms; for example, ‘use up’ for ‘consume’, ‘put up’ for ‘extinguish’, etc.

English grammarians note that phrasal verbs have been present in English for many centuries. McArthur states that phrasal verbs were found in Middle English, common in Shakespeare, and often used to define verbs in Latin origin. He also states that “the famous lexicographer of the eighteenth century, Samuel Jonson, was one of the first to consider these formation carefully. (Internet Ref.)

English grammarians also note that phrasal verbs have increased significantly since the mid-nineteenth century and especially so in mid-twentieth century American English.

Thus, phrasal verbs are an interesting linguistic a long way towards being a good knowledge of English itself” (Gethin, 1983: 169).

The aim of this study is to discuss the syntactic, phonological, and semantic criteria of phrasal verbs, and try to present useful ways that may help learners of English overcome some of the difficulties they face in using phrasal verbs.

2-Definition

The term ‘phrasal verbs’ is defined as “a type of verb consisting of a sequence of a lexical element plus one or more particles.” (Crystal, 1980: 170). Phrasal verbs are considered as “units which complement the verb and which are, in general, obligatory in clause structure”. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 347).
3-Syntactic & Phonological Criteria for phrasal verbs

The syntactic criterion for phrasal verbs can be discussed as follows:

1. They consist of two elements: a verb and an adverb particle, as in
   
   1. The boy brings round our newspapers.

2. They can be transitive, i.e. followed by a direct object, as in
   
   2. He will set up a new unit.

   Or, they can be intransitive, i.e. not followed by a direct object, as in

   3. The tank blew up.

   With most transitive phrasal verbs, the particle can either precede or follow the direct object, i.e. “when a phrasal verb has a direct object, the two parts of the verb can usually be separated” (Swan, 1980: 491). Roberts (1997: 108) agrees that it is a characteristic of particles of phrasal verbs that they “can appear in a position after the direct object” without affecting the structure or meaning of the sentence, as in

   4. They turned on the light.

   5. They turned the light, on.

   But, indeed, if the direct object is a pronoun, the particle must appear after that pronoun, as in

   6. They turned it on (Not *They turned on it)

   However, it is argued that the particle “tends to precede the object if the object is long” (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973: 348), as in

   7. She has cleaned up the mass on the kitchen floor. (rather than… clean the mass… up)

   Finally, many transitive phrasal verbs have prepositional adverbs. That is, the particle is behaving as “a preposition with some generalized
ellipsis of its complement.” (ibid: 347). In others words phrasal verbs can combine with prepositional adverbs which function like prepositional phrases, as in

8-The moved the furniture out (of the house)

As far as intransitive phrasal verbs are concerned, palmer (1974:223-224) states that, syntactically, intransitive phrasal verbs can be related to their transitive counterparts in three ways:
a)Some of them can be regarded as identical with the object ‘deleted’ or ‘understood’, as in

9-They carried on the business. (transitive)
10-They carried on. (Intransitive)

b)some of them are related to transitive verbs in terms of the transitivity relation of the familiar type exemplified by such verbs as ‘break’ in ‘It broke’ and ‘He broke it’, one being semantically active, the other passive, as in

11-They blew up the house. (transitive)
12-The house blew up. (Intransitive)

C)Palmer states that an extension of the relationship considered in (2) above, involves the use of different lexemes, but with, otherwise, the same syntactic and semantic relationships, as in

13-He brought about his own down fall. (transitive)
14-His downfall came about. (Intransitive)
15-He brought in his friend. (transitive)
16-His friend came in. (Intransitive)

Like transitive phrasal verbs, a subtype of intransitive verb has a prepositional adverb as its particle, the particle behaving as preposition with some generalized ellipsis of its complement, as in

17-He walked past (the place).
Finally, some phrasal verbs can be either transitive or intransitive with or without changing in meaning. For example, a phrasal verb such as ‘drink up’ can be used transitively or intransitively without changing the meaning of the sentence, as in

18-Drink up your tea quickly. (transitive)
19-Drink up quickly. (Intransitive)

But, with a phrasal verb, such as ‘give in’, change in meaning would occur, as in

20-They gave in their resignation. (transitive/ handed in)
21-When will they give in? (Intransitive/ surrender)

3-Phrasal verbs accept passivization, as in

22-The man was called up.

4-Phrasal verbs will not allow:

a) an adverb to be placed between the verb and the particle, as in

23- *He put carefully on his trousers

b) the particle to be placed before a relative pronoun, as in

24- *The trousers on which he put.

5-Phrasal verbs can form pronominal question personal objects, as in

25-Who (m) did he call up?
26-What did he look for?

As for the phonological criterion, the particle of a phrasal verb is normally stressed, i.e the accent is on the particle, not on the verb, as in

27-He put ‘on his trousers.

And, in final position, the particle bears the nuclear tone, as in

28-The man was called’ up.
4-Semantic criterion for phrasal verbs

In general, grammarians have agreed that the semantic unity in phrasal verbs can often be manifested by substitution with Latinate single-word verbs with the same general meaning. Mcactthur indicates that “there are many good Latinate synonyms that can be used in place of phrasal verbs.” (Internet Ref.); for example “Summon’ for ‘call up’, ‘omit’ for ‘leave out’, etc.

However, Bolinger notes that phrasal verbs are “more expressive than the synonyms they replace”. (Internet Ref.) He contrasts ‘insult’ with ‘to jump on’, ‘exult’ with ‘to jump up and down with joy’, and assault’ with ‘to jump at’.

On the other hand, Fowler notes that “one of the main objections raised to phrasal verbs is that they are used when the simple verb alone would suffice”. (Internet Ref). He believes that there will be redundancy of some phrasal verbs such as ‘visit with = visit’, ‘rest up = rest’, ‘select out = select’, etc.

Grammarians such as swan (1980 $ 491), leech (1994: 337), Palmer (1974: 224), and many others argue that in some cases the meaning of phrasal verbs is simply a combination of the meanings of the two words, i.e phrasal verbs retain the individual meanings of the two words, In other words phrasal verbs retain the individual meaning of the verb and the adverb, as in

29- She put down the book.
Or, the first word keeps its meaning, but the second has a special ‘intensifying,’ sense, i.e it means something like ‘completely’ or ‘thoroughly’, as in

30- They swept up the crumbs.
Phrasal verbs in such cases are characterized to have ‘literal’ meanings.

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In other cases, phrasal verbs have quite a different meaning from the two separate parts, i.e. the meaning of the combination can not be built up from the meaning of the individual verb and adverb, as in

31-The army put down the rebellion,

This type of phrasal verbs is characterized to have ‘figurative/idiomatic’ meaning.

Palmer (1974: 226) states that with phrasal verbs, there seemed to be three ways in which the term ‘idiomatic’ may be used:

1-Palmer states that there is some collocational restriction upon the combinations, and that it is possible to think up explanations for some of the these restrictions, but not possible to give any general rule concerning them. For illustration he gives the following possible and impossible pair:

32-I helped him out.
33-*I aided him out.

2-According to palmer, the term ‘idiomatic’ refers to all the combinations that are not literal in the sense of being locational. He argues that these non-literal combinations are still very largely (though in varying degree) transparent, i.e. their meaning can be inferred from the meaning of its parts. He also argues that native speakers of English would have no difficulty in understanding or forming new combinations using the adverb in one of it’s aspectual senses even with a new verb. He claims that if there were a verb such as ‘Acidiza’ meaning ‘to burn’ with acid, native speakers would have no problem in constructing sentences such as

34-He acidized up the body.

3-Finally, Palmer states that the use of the term ‘idiomatic’ would be simply for those combinations that are totally opaque (non-transparent), i.e. whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of the individual parts, as in

35-let us carry out our original plan. (fulfill)
According to Plamer phrasal verbs vary in their degrees of idiomaticity. He claims that one can make up a bed/ fire/ face/story, but only with the last of these does make up’ with the meaning of ‘invent’ seem to be a complete idiom.

In addition to a single literal and/ or figurative/ idiomatic meaning, some phrasal verb ‘pickup’ may have different meanings in different contexts. Below are some of these meanings:

36-Pick up that book. (to take up by hand)
37-Please, pick up your room (to tidy up)
38-The lawyer noon recess.
(to continue after a break)
39-The home team picked up eight yards on the play (to gain)
40-Her boss picked up the tap for lunch. (to pay a bill)

5-Phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs

The term prepositional verbs refers to ‘a large number of combination of verb + preposition”. (swan, 1980 § 491).

It is believed that, unless learners of English learn how to differentiate between prepositional and phrasal verbs, syntactically and phonologically, most of them would fail to decide whether the combination of verb + particle is a phrasal verb or a prepositional verb.

In comparison with the syntactic and phonological criteria for phrasal verbs discussed previously (See § 3), these criteria for prepositional verbs can be discussed as follows:
1-Prepositional verbs consist of the combination of verb + preposition, as in
41-My car started rolling down the hill.
2-Prepositional verbs normally have objects preceded by the prepositions, as in
42-They called on the man.
3-In interrogatives, the preposition can come at the of the clause, as in
3-Prepositional verbs allow the insertion of
a)an adverb after the verb, as in
   44-They called early on the students.
b)a relative pronoun after the preposition, as in
   45-The man on whom they called.

On the other hand, there are some syntactic similarities between phrasal and prepositional verbs, such as:
1-their acceptance of passivization. The object of a prepositional verb can become the subject of a passive sentence, as in

46-The manager was looked upon almost as saint (by some employees).

However, there are other prepositional verbs that do not occur in the passive freely, but will do so under certain conditions, such as the presence of a particular model, as in

47-Visitors can’t walk over the lawn
The lawn can’t be walked over
2-forming pronominal question form using who (m) for personal and what for non-personal objects, as in.
   48-Whom did they call on?
   49-What started rolling down the hill?

As far as the phonological criterion is concerned, the preposition of a prepositional verb is unstressed, i.e the accent is on the verb, not on the preposition, as in.

50-I’ll ‘look after the children.
And has the ‘tail’ of the nuclear tone on the lexical verb, as in

51-The man was ‘called on.
6- **Summary**

Form what has been discussed previously, we learn that phrasal verbs are used a great deal, especially in spoken English. Therefore, it is important for learners of English, who wants to speak the language naturally and well, to recognize the meanings of phrasal verbs and try to use them frequently.

The meaning of some phrasal verbs are easy to be understood when the meaning of the whole part verb is equal to the meaning of the sum of its two parts. A learner can understand, for example, what ‘bring up’ means in a sentence such as,

52-You may bring up the table.

Provided that he knows the meaning of ‘bring’ and the meaning of ‘up’. This type of phrasal verbs is characterized to have ‘literal’ meaning.

However, difficulties arise when, for example, the same phrasal verb is used in different contexts to give different meanings. In such cases knowing the meaning of the parts does not help learners to know the meaning of the whole. Thus, to add the meaning of ‘bring’ to the meaning of ‘up’ will not help learners to understand the meaning of ‘bring up’ in a sentence such as,

53-He brought up a good point
54-She brought up a family.

This type of phrasal verbs is characterized to have figurative/idiomatic meaning.

Thus, learners, in addition to dictionary definitions, need to be well acquainted with all types of phrasal verbs (literal and figurative/idiomatic), and try to remember how to use them in different contexts. Further more, learners need to learn the groups of words that regularly accompany them. So, ‘bring up’ in ‘bring up a point’ is often
accompanied by question or issue, whereas in ‘bring up a family’ is accompanied by ‘child’, ‘son’, etc.

In other words, in order to memorize the meaning of the same phrasal verb in different contexts, it is useful to think of each separate meaning as a separate verb.
Reference

4-He wings, Martin (2003), Advanced Grammar in Use. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.