

## The meaning and use of phrasal verbs at C1 level

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### **Abstract:**

Despite the fact that phrasal verbs are used in everyday English, foreign learners avoid learning and using them for their complexity and impossibility to understand the meaning of a phrasal verb from its separate parts (a verb itself and a particle separately). As a result of that many learners at C1 level, although being fluent speakers, experience various difficulties using them. The focus of the paper is placed on the meaning and the use of phrasal verbs and the difficulties which students find at C1 level of the English language. The analysis in this paper is based on the phrasal verbs used in the book “**Objective CAE**” (O`Dell & Broadhead, 2008, Cambridge University Press).

In this paper we are also interested in finding out why it is so difficult to understand and use phrasal verbs, the interaction between their meaning and understanding considering their polysemous features. The results of this analysis may be useful for all ESL teachers to help them understand the difficulties their students face when dealing with phrasal verbs, especially at C1 level. Furthermore, it can be a valuable source for teachers how to introduce the phrasal verbs to their students and thus help them master phrasal verbs in both spoken and written discourse.

**Keywords:** phrasal verb, meaning, use, difficulty, English.

### **1. Introduction - What are phrasal verbs and why are they important?**

Phrasal verbs are verbs that, unlike ordinary verbs in English, are accompanied by particular particles, and as such, they function as a whole. The original and primary meaning of the verb in such use varies, depending on the particle and the number of particles after the verb. Phrasal verbs are common in informal spoken or written registers (e.g. **find out** – discover) (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1996).

Many phrasal verbs can be replaced with another word with the little or no change in meaning. Mostly, the use of a phrasal verb is less formal, more colloquial and more emotionally coloured than a word that replaces it. Phrasal verbs are combined with a particle or two (e.g. come up; come up with) which can be a preposition or an adverb (Thornbury, 2006; Cowan, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2010).

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1996:434) suggest that native speakers prefer phrasal verbs over single-verb Latinate counterparts, perhaps because they are simpler and more “natural” in informal registers. However, each phrasal verb might have a one-word equivalent

that can possibly help learners, especially those whose languages (e.g. Romance languages) do not use phrasal verbs.

## 2. Grammar of Phrasal Verbs

A phrasal verb is composed of two elements: a verbal element and a particle. A phrasal verb is the combination of a standard verb such as *make* or *put* with one or two particles. The two main categories of multi-verb verbs consist of a lexical verb plus a particle, a neutral designation for the overlapping categories of adverb and preposition that are used in such combinations (R. Quirk: 336). In phrasal verbs a particle is an adverb (eg: put out, set up), whereas in prepositional verbs a particle is a preposition (eg: depend on, deal with) (R. Quirk: 336). However, there are phrasal-prepositional verbs; verbs with two particles, an adverb followed by a preposition (eg: put up with, take up on).

### 2.1. Transitivity and Intransitivity of Phrasal Verbs

Some phrasal verbs require an object (transitive verbs); others do not take an object (intransitive).

*I was on a crowded bus and by accident **bumped into** my ex-boyfriend.*

Some verbs can be used both with and without an object, but we must be careful about the meaning, it may change.

*The plane had **taken off** before we came to the airport.*

*In our culture you should **take off** your shoes before you enter a house.*

Furthermore, some verbs must have two objects. In this case one object comes after the verb and one after the particle.

*I usually **associate** that concert **with** my childhood.*

Intransitive phrasal verb consists of a verb and an adverb particle and it does not have an object (O`Dell & Broadhead, 2008:204):

She was **brought up** in a nice family.

He has just **walked out**.

Do bad children always **get by**?

### 2.2. Position of the Object

The most important thing to learn about grammar of phrasal verbs is where to place the object. Should it go before or after the particle? What happens when there are two particles?

And what happens if the object is a pronoun? The particle can generally either precede or follow the direct object as below:

*She **switched off** the light.*

*She **switched** the light **off**.*

In these two examples above the object is a noun phrase.

If the object is very long, then it usually comes after the particle.

She **put away** *all the unnecessary thing including equipment for sport.*

However, if the object is a personal pronoun it must come between the verb and its particle (R. Quirk: 337).

*I'll **plug it **in**** as soon as I enter the room. (Not: I'll **plug **in** it** as soon as I enter the room.)*

### 3. The Difficulty of Phrasal Verbs – Analysis of the Phrasal Verbs at C1 Level

Phrasal verbs are one of the most difficult aspects for learners of the English Language. There are four main reasons for this:

1. In many cases the meaning of the phrasal verb cannot be recognized from its elements, i.e., it is being used idiomatically.
2. Many phrasal verbs are polysemous; i.e., they have more than one meaning. Many multi-word verbs carry more than one meaning (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2007:18).
3. There are difficulties with the grammar of phrasal verbs, particularly with the position of the particles.
4. Three components verbs are often difficult to understand. Such phrasal verb consists of a verb and two particles. In this situation the object comes last (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2007:8).

Table 1

	Phrasal Verb	Example	Definition of the Phrasal Verb
1	run over	I <b>ran over</b> a dog on my way home.	Hit sth/sb with a moving vehicle and injure or kill them
		The lecture <b>ran over</b> so I missed 5.45 train.	Go on after its expected time
		I suggest that we <b>run over</b> the schedule again to make sure it's not going to fail.	Read quickly to make sure something is correct
2	brush sth/sb off	She <b>brushed off</b> the mud from her bag.	Use a brush to remove something

		The teacher <b>brushed him off</b> and told him to get back to the test.	Refuse to listen to what someone says
3	warm up	She usually <b>warms up</b> the meal when she gets home.	To heat food that has already been cooked
		The tennis player <b>warmed up</b> the spectators before the match started.	To make a group of people who are going to see a performance start to enjoy themselves by entertaining them for a short time before the performance
4	fall in	The girl <b>fell into</b> the hole while she was riding her bike.	To accidentally arrive in a hole
		She <b>fell into</b> a conversation with a man at the bar.	To start doing something, often without intending to
5	put on	I decided to <b>put on</b> my best clothes.	To get dressed
		My mother <b>put on</b> a lot of weight over Christmas.	To increase in weight
6	put off	I wanted to go out for a walk but the weather <b>put me off</b> .	To discourage
		John <b>put off</b> going on holiday for another month.	To postpone
7	let off	Unfortunately she leaned against the horn and it <b>let off</b> such a noise that her parents were alerted.	To drop, release
		They were so relieved to stop the elopement that they <b>let them off</b> with a stern warning.	To make not subject to punishment or action
8	let down	Maria escaped secretly from her bedroom by <b>letting down</b> a long ladder from the window.	To lower
		Tom was waiting at their appointed meeting and she did not want to <b>let him down</b> .	To disappoint
9	come out with	She's always <b>coming out with</b> the most outrageous things.	say
10	go in for	I don't <b>go in for</b> team sports	like
11	get up to	What have you been <b>getting up to</b> lately?	To do
12	put up with	I can't <b>put up with</b> his rudeness any moreЖ	To tolerate
13	put down	She <b>put the baby down</b> .	To stop holding sth

	put down	The police <b>put down</b> the riots with unnecessary brutality.	To stop sth by force
	put down	The student <b>put</b> her bad grade <b>down</b> to tiredness. ✓	To think that a problem or situation is caused by a particular thing
	put down	The student <b>put down</b> her bad grade to tiredness. ✗	
14	go/come down with	Sorry, I won't be at work today. I think I've <b>come down with</b> the flu.	To fall sick
15	turn down	Jack <b>turned down</b> the radio.	To reduce the noise, heat, etc. produced by a piece of equipment by moving its controls
		He <b>turned her down</b> .	reject
16	tick	The teacher <b>ticked</b> the names of the students who had completed the task.	To make a checkmark
	tick off	The teacher <b>ticked off</b> the student for being late with the project.	To express disapproval
17	cope with	How do you <b>cope with</b> stress? ✓	To manage
		How do you <b>cope with it</b> ? ✗	
18	get	I need to <b>get</b> a battery for my camera.	To obtain, receive
	get together	Why don't we all <b>get together</b> for dinner?	To meet
19	drop off	The taxi driver <b>dropped us off</b> at the airport.	To be driven somewhere and left there
		Lying on the ground, the little girl <b>dropped off</b> .	To fall asleep
20	get on with	I <b>get on with</b> all the children in my class.	To have a good relationship
21	put out	He <b>put</b> the light <b>out</b> .	To extinguish, turn off
		Don't <b>put yourself out</b> ! ✓	Doing something
		Don't <b>put out</b> yourself. ✗	inconvenient in order to help someone else

The table above shows examples of phrasal verbs from the book "Objective CAE" (O'Dell F. 2008, Cambridge University Press). Next to each phrasal verb there is a sentence as an example and definition. Phrasal Verbs under 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 15 and 19 are mostly transitive (19 is intransitive) and they have multiple meanings, which is likely to confuse or

frustrate learners, particularly high-level students. 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14 examples of phrasal verbs refer to the fourth reason for their difficulty – three component verbs. The learner hears a string of words, each of which they know very well, but which in combination do not make any sense. The Phrasal Verbs next to numbers 13 and 21 are special in terms of two difficult reasons for understanding - polysemous feature and position of the object. Learners can be confused about the position of the object. 16 and 18 examples refer to the first reason for the difficulty – their idiomatic meaning. A learner who knows the meaning of these two ordinary verbs (16 and 18) may have difficulty in understanding the sentences with phrasal verbs with their idiomatic meaning. Learners should always be focused on the context to decide if the verb has a different meaning from the one they are familiar with. Phrasal Verb 17 is the only example which reflects just the problem of the position of the object, considering the fact that personal pronoun must come before the particle. In the English language there are some verbs (sometimes called prepositional verbs) that must have the object after the particle, even if it is a pronoun. It is an exception.

#### **4. Pedagogical Implications of the Analysis**

The analysis of the verbs has proved that there can be some logic employed in order to demystify the concept of phrasal verbs in both teaching and learning. On the basis of my knowledge gained from this analysis, I introduced certain changes in the teaching practice of the phrasal verbs at C1 in my classroom. I realize that if the students are introduced with the four difficulties framework and taught how certain grammatical and lexical features of phrasal verbs influence their understanding, the process of their acquisition can be easier. I have made certain changes in the way how I teach them and how I organize the tasks.

Concerning teaching aspect, I stopped viewing phrasal verbs as a separate unit in the text in the textbook. I have made a worksheet that exemplifies these four difficulties and also a list of all of them in the book. The list is given to the students at the beginning of the course, to be glued at the back of the notebook. So, I use the provided list as a supplementary material for students and I refer to it every time when we come across a new phrasal verb during the progress of the course.

The list can be used as the means to organize tasks that urge the students to use phrasal verbs in the context and engage them in the process of learning:

Task 1: All the students can be asked to provide the examples with all the meanings offered for each phrasal verb from their life and write them down in the table or on a separate sheet of paper.

Task 2: They can be used for speaking or writing tasks (to make a story or to tell a story). This particular task can be raised to a higher level in groups or pairs to make or write the story with chosen phrasal verbs but to give to each group/pair a different meaning of the chosen phrasal verbs. By doing that they can see how different meaning of phrasal verbs influence the course

of the story and they analyze and comment on that. This activity involves higher levels of thinking skills that would eventually contribute to the higher level of retention of these phrasal verbs, especially because the students provide the context for them by themselves.

Task 3: One of common demands at C1 level is to transfer formal texts into informal. Informal texts frequently contain a number of phrasal verbs. An additional list can be made for all of these phrasal verbs with their formal/academic counterparts. On the basis of this list tasks can be designed to engage students in producing sentences or texts where they could practice these phrasal verbs in formal and informal context. For example, the story they created in the Task 2 can be turned into a newspaper article or some other more formal form.

There are other methods proposed by some other authors that dealt with the difficulties concerning the teaching and learning of phrasal verbs. At lower levels teachers can mime phrasal verbs so that students guess or understand their meanings more easily. For students at higher levels, brainstorming synonyms might be a good extension to the activity on acquiring of phrasal verbs. Students with prominent visual intelligence may have an advantage of learning to associate actions with specified phrasal verbs. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1996:437), each time a new phrasal verb is introduced or discovered, it should be written up on a large sheet of paper posted to a wall in the classroom. The learners label a new phrasal verb appropriately for its separability and transitivity. If possible, the picture representing the meaning can be pasted. A one-word synonym can also be written next to the phrasal verb, and where appropriate learners can label the register used. Finally, the learners should write at least one or two example sentences using the new phrasal verb

## **5. Conclusion**

English is known for its use of many phrasal verbs which is why it is important to learn them thoroughly. Phrasal verbs are very common in English. Students who are learning English as a second language with the aim of gaining their Certificate in Advanced English need to give a great deal of attention to phrasal verbs. It is no easy task. But using a phrasal verb correctly is not only a matter of knowing its meaning; the learner also has to learn its grammar. Although phrasal verbs can undoubtedly cause problems for learners, in each context the form is similar, but the meaning changes. The particular meaning of the phrasal verb often determines the order of its component parts in a sentence. There are no rules that might explain how phrasal verbs are formed correctly - all you can do is look them up in a good dictionary and study their meanings.

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