

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHRASAL VERBS IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Phrasal verbs are extremely popular in modern English and can be found in a wide variety of contexts. They pose many problems for non-native speakers, because their meanings have to be learned separately from the meanings of their verbal bases. The article presents some reflections of researchers on English phrasal verbs and explores four dimensions of the form of phrasal verbs across time: the density in the texts, the character and stability of its combining elements, the syntactic contexts and the semantic type. Findings indicate that phrasal verbs are almost five times as dense in the contemporary texts as in the 15th century ones. If there are differences between British and American English in any of these dimensions, they appear to be more qualitative than quantitative.

**Keywords:** *language, particles, phrasal verb, diachronic, synchronic, preposition, syntax, synthetic inflections, semantics, combining elements.*

## DEZVOLTAREA VERBELOR FRAZALE ÎN ENGLEZA BRITANICĂ ȘI AMERICANĂ

Verbele frazale sunt extrem de populare în limba engleză modernă și pot fi găsite într-o mare varietate de contexte. Acestea creează unele probleme pentru vorbitorii non-nativi, deoarece semnificațiile lor trebuie învățate separat de semnificațiile bazelor lor verbale. Articolul prezintă câteva reflecții ale cercetătorilor asupra verbelor frazale în limba engleză și explorează patru dimensiuni ale formei verbelor frazale de-a lungul timpului: frecvența acestora în texte, caracterul și stabilitatea elementelor combinative, contextele sintactice și semantice. Rezultatele indică faptul că verbele frazale sunt aproape de cinci ori mai frecvente în textele contemporane comparativ cu cele din secolul al XV-lea. Dacă există diferențe între versiunea britanică și cea americană a limbii engleze, aceste diferențe sunt mai mult de ordin calitativ decât cantitativ.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *limbaj, particule, verb frazal, diacronic, sincron, prepoziție, sintaxă, inflecții sintetice, semantică, elemente combinative.*

American and British English had become recognizably different, in the vocabulary and pronunciation, by the beginning of the 18th century. One of the characteristics rendering American English recognizably different from British English is its preponderance of phrasal verb.

### Overview of Historical Development of Phrasal Verb

As Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, has said, “Time changes all things, there is no reason why language should escape this universal law” [1, p.77]. Time has subjected the verb in modern English to the universal law of change in fascinating ways. The phrasal verb is as old as Old English and offers a particularly dramatic illustration of language change. Its development has been curious.

English phrasal verbs have not always had the structure with which we associate them in the contemporary language. In earlier stages, they are attested in a wider variety of syntactic arrangements. Thus, in Old English particles could appear in pre-verbal or post-verbal position and with or without intervening material between them and the verbal element. Although the pre-verbal pattern was predominant during most of the Old English period both in main and subordinate clauses, the use of the post-verbal pattern became established in all types of clauses already during Early Middle English [2, p. 42]. Thus, the verb *settan*, set, could in Old English be prefixed into *asettan*, place or put; *besettan*, appoint; *forsettan*, obstruct; *foresettan*, place before; *ofsettan*, afflict

and so on. Even in Old English, the tendency had already begun for these inseparable prefixes to break off from the verb and do duty as prepositions. These prepositions could also combine with verbs, as the older prefixes had altering them in similar ways. This verb plus preposition form would eventually develop into the verb plus particle form of the modern phrasal verb. Behind the fragmenting of the prefixed verb form was the major syntactical shift that was altering the language, transforming it from synthetic to analytic. There is a natural tendency in English to shift stress to the first syllable, which, in prototype Germanic languages, was generally the root. Since the inflections of Old English were at the ends of words, they tended to lose stress, and, over time, to drop off.

Phrasal verb growth was somewhat retarded after the Norman invasion. As French became the official language in scholarly and legal circles, Romance derivatives, often paired for meaning with native English phrasal verbs (enter: *come in*, continue: *go on*). The French presence, have ironically played a role in strengthening the Germanic backbone of the English language, with its monosyllabic forms like the phrasal verb. English language historian Nist asserts: “*The most profound impact of French on the English language was exerted by failure rather than by success.... The challenge of French patterns of stress, intonation, and juncture strengthened the resolve of the English peasants to enforce their own patterns upon every new word introduced into language* [3, p. 12]. Moreover, the syntax of Old and Middle English phrasal verbs was more flexible than that of their present-day equivalents in allowing various elements to appear between the verb and the particle.

The literature on the development of phrasal verbs during the Late Modern English period and the 20th century is scarce. In general, those studies discussing this rather long period of the history of English point to a continuation of the tendencies found in earlier stages and to the fact that phrasal verbs seem to have grown in frequency both in British and in American English.

### Synchronic Studies of Phrasal Verbs

Since phrasal verbs were not largely investigated until the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, although they have been part of the English language for centuries, their history is still a controversial subject. A number of synchronic studies have been done, particularly in the last years, most of which have contributed something to a general understanding of the phrasal verb, but less to an appreciation of its development diachronically.

The most important works in this category are those of Fraser, Bolinger, Lipka etc. Fraser is interested in how idioms in general and idiomatic phrasal verbs in particular fit into a transformational framework. He tries to identify syntactically what he calls idiomatic combinations, distinguishing between two semantic types of such combinations: **systematic**, those combinations whose particle has a systematic, generally aspectual relationship to the verb (e.g. *eat up*, *use up*, where up indicates completion) and **figurative**, those whose verb/ particle relationship cannot be analyzed systematically (e.g. *turn up*: appear). Special attention is devoted to differentiating the verb-particle combination from other idiomatic phrases. Fraser does not provide new diachronic insight into the phrasal verb.

Bolinger is primarily interested in syntactic questions: “component categories, possibilities of arrangement, the effects of context, and the tension between stereotyping and dynamics” [4, p. 55]. Unlike Fraser, Bolinger does not exclude literal verb-particle combinations from his definition of the phrasal verb. His most interesting contribution to the field is probably a discussion of how the phrasal verb enables us to manipulate prosody and sentence focus. His review of the phrasal verb’s historical development is, like Fraser’s, not original.

Vlad Eduard describes phrasal verbs as “combinations of a lexical verb and adverbial particle”. Verbs as *give up*, *fall out*, *take in*, are considered by him to be multi-words verbs that are equivalent to one lexical item [5, p.27]. Heaton considers that “phrasal verbs are compound verbs that result from combining a verb with an adverb or a preposition, the resulting compound verb being idiomatic” [6, p. 58]. Rolando Bachelor says it is “impossible to write an exhaustive and definitive history of phrasal verbs”. The term itself, “phrasal verb” was first seen in print in 1925, when Logan Pearsall Smith used it in *Words and Idioms*. Editor Henry Bradley (*Oxford Companion* 772) supposedly suggested it to him.

Phrasal verbs themselves, however, have been around much longer, as can be seen by looking at some Shakespearean and Middle English works. Phrasal verbs have been found in Middle English language in 1300 and 1388, respectively, and phrasal verbs are common in Shakespeare's works. Even though they were present in literature in the fourteenth century, they were not considered serious formations until the eighteenth century, when lexicographer Samuel Johnson noted them “with great care” in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).

Olga Fischer believes the emergence of phrasal verbs to be “the most notable new development in Middle English [the form of the English language spoken and written from about the 12th to the beginning of the 16th centuries] involving prepositions” [7, p. 36]. Akimoto suggests that Old English prefixes often remained before the verb because Old English had strong object-before-verb (OV) tendencies, whereas Present-Day English is largely a VO language, which has made it possible for particles to travel to post-verbal positions. Some Old English verbs did function as modern phrasal verbs do [8, p. 58].

Although all the works cited in this group do take the phrasal verb as their focus, they are synchronic explorations, primarily synthetic. They are qualitative, and do not address questions of frequency of use, either today or yesterday. The history of phrasal verbs is still under debate today.

### **Diachronic Studies of Phrasal Verbs**

The few diachronic studies that have been done on phrasal verbs are the most relevant to the present study. Among them are the investigations of Kennedy, Spasov, Pelli, Pamela Martin and Makkai.

Kennedy's work is wide-ranging and is focused in seeking to understand what syntactical and semasiologically effects particles have on verbs. He came up with broad and germane insights from a diachronic perspective. His major contributions fall into three areas. First, he was one of the earliest to attempt to characterize the nature of individual combining elements. Second, he made significant observations about the phrasal verb's semantic development. And, third, he was able to relate the evolving phrasal verb to the greater context of the evolving English language.

In the first major area of contribution mentioned above, Kennedy tries to characterize both combining elements, verbs and particles. Combining verbs, he recognizes, are largely monosyllabic and of Teutonic (including Scandinavian) origin. He correctly infers that rhythm and a colloquial character are somehow critical to their combinability. As for particles, he explores rather than defines values for only sixteen selected particles (e.g. **up** can mean “upward motion” or “bringing into prominence or consideration” or be perfective “bringing to or out of a certain condition” among other possibilities) [9, p. 48].

Kennedy's second major contribution is that he was one of the first to discuss the importance of semantic shifts in phrasal verb history. This transference of meaning, which is critical to idiomaticity in general, is critical to the growth of phrasal verbs today even more so than it was at

earlier stages. Transference of meaning has led not just to figurative uses, but to an amazing multiplicity of meanings for many combinations, which then require context to provide clues for their appropriate interpretation. **Make up** (or its orthographic variants make-up and makeup), for example, might refer to cosmetics, an exam or a quarrel, among other things, and may be verb, noun or adjective - all depending upon context.

Kennedy's most profound contribution is his insightful and eloquent statement of the phrasal verb's relation to the broad sweep of history, linguistic and social. He places the rise of the phrasal verb into the context of a language in flux, from synthetic to analytic. Kennedy places colloquial, oral language, which is the natural milieu of phrasal verbs, into a broad social context. He calls the growth of phrasal verbs "a sort of "back to the land", movement in language which aims to cultivate and utilize that which is familiar and common ground" [10, p. 144]. Kennedy's methods of investigations were largely intuitive. His insights were so accurate and so comprehensive that researchers today still find them rich for exploration.

After Kennedy, the studies of Spasov and Pelli are of great interests. Spasov provides a pleasant survey of the subject designed to aid the language learner. His investigation is based on British plays dating from the time of the miracle plays to 1958. He took 300 verbs (not just phrasal verbs) from each play, excluding stage directions, and quantified for each play the percentage of phrasal verbs among the 300 and for each period the percentage of phrasal verbs among the collected verbs for that time. He found a steady increase in phrasal verb usage over the centuries, with the significant exception of the late 18th century, which showed decline. By way of explanation, he comments: "On the whole, authors whose language is based on popular speech are apt to use a larger number of phrasal verbs than those who introduce refined or sophisticated speech into their works. Shakespeare and his contemporaries make a wide use this device of linguistic expression, while the younger generation of literary men after him do not show the same taste" [4, p.22].

Spasov's findings are most provocative. He recognized that phrasal verbs are born of the oral, the colloquial, and sought to find them in the language of dramas. His findings pique the curiosity, but questions and reservations abound, about both his methodology and his results. Dramas, for one, do not accurately represent the spoken language. They present our perceptions of it, often different from the reality, but often they are in deliberately stylized language, such as verse, which does not even pretend to approximate natural speech. Furthermore, one wonders how Spasov went about selecting some dramas and excluding others; he mentions four he did not include in his calculations because they were not "representative enough of the corresponding periods". He mentions but does not, substantiate the by now conventional claim that phrasal verbs are more common in American than British English [6, p. 16].

Even his definition of a phrasal verb is open to question, as he does not clearly delineate it in his study, although from examples he cites it is obvious he includes some constructions others have excluded (e.g. BE plus particle constructions).

A more comprehensive presentation of a similar approach is given by Pelli, who considered American rather than British dramas. Pelli, who, like Spasov, is a non-native speaker of English, took all phrasal verbs from the dialogue and stage directions of 68 randomly selected American plays encompassing a period from 1765 to 1972. His purpose was threefold:

1. to distinguish the phrasal verbs from the prepositional verbs syntactically;
2. to classify the phrasal verbs into as few semantically integrated groups as possible and

3. to give statistical evidence of the fluctuations of phrasal verbs in the periods under consideration, both collectively and with respect to the various semantic groups found.

For the syntactic distinction between phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs unstressed prepositions contrast with stressed adverbs (i.e. particles of phrasal verbs). He also excludes BE + particle constructions and verbs followed by “out of”. For the classification of phrasal verbs into semantic groups, Pelli uses four categories:

In Group 1, the particle maintains a pure directional-motional or locational sense and always adds to the verb a new semantic component (e.g. come in from the cold).

In Group 2, the particle retains a directional-motional or locational sense, but does not add new semantic information to the verb, which in group 2, as in group 1, always denotes motion.

In Group 3, the particle carries no directional or motional meaning, but can serve a number of functions, such as “repetition” in speak on or “completion” in shrivel up. Pelli comments, “from the point of view of diversity, productivity and elasticity of the language, this group is the most interesting one. Historically, the particles are interesting because they developed their non-concrete meanings from originally concrete ones [11, p.133].

Finally, group 4 consists of non-analyzable idioms, such as make up in the sense of “reconcile” where the whole cannot be understood as the sum of its parts. Pelli divides his corpus into six periods (1765-1775, 1805-1815, 1845-1855, 1885-1895, 1925-1935, 1965-1972) with interesting results. Pelli’s American study, although presented more explicitly and comprehensively than Spasov’s similar British investigation, is also not without problems. Pelli’s major problem relates to the use of dramas. He presents more detailed data than Spasov, but offers almost no social framework for it, even speculatively.

Another useful study comes from Makkai. Unlike the works of Kennedy, Spasov and Pelli, his study is actually synchronic, but its implications are diachronic. He found almost twice as many literal as idiomatic combinations. More interestingly, though, he was able to show that the more often a given verb and particle enters into literal constructions, the more often it enters into idiomatic constructions as well. Makkai notes that, historically, such a finding is of great significance, it suggests that the idiomatic lexicalization of a given combination is dependent upon such combinations being available as frequent literal constituents, and it supports Kronasser's Law that lexeme formation in natural languages moves from the concrete to the abstract [12, p. 202].

Makkai’s study is limited to the semantic development of phrasal verbs and even here does not give a complete picture as the range and frequency of literal and idiomatic occurrences in natural texts, contemporary or otherwise, written or oral, are not explored. Yet it provides valuable evidence for the intuitively appealing assumption that abstract and idiomatic language develops from the literal.

### **Density of Phrasal Verbs in Texts Over Time**

Phrasal verbs have increased in the English language, approximately five times as dense in over five centuries. The increase was at first gradual, leveling off between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then rising rather with no abatement through the present. The rise of the native Anglo-Saxon phrasal verb form has everything to do with the rise of democratic values, mass education, mass media, telecommunications, transportation, advertising, and all the features that make the earth a global village. But it also has to do with the ongoing evolution of the English language from synthetic to analytic. The process had begun long before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and continues through the present. It could not be checked by prescription.

P. Martin suggests, “there is no quantitative difference in phrasal verb presence in British and American varieties of English. Both reflect approximately 11 phrasal verbs for every 1000 words” [4, p. 115]. As for the widely perceived difference that Americans use more phrasal verbs than the British do, she proposed three explanations. First, it may be because of a qualitative difference in usage. Her study suggests that Americans have a slighter greater tendency than the British to use phrasal verbs of the type **meet up**, where up is used to mark aspect. Second, the perceived difference may be because of a difference in phrasal verb distribution among registers in British and American English. Whereas informal letters of both varieties feature the same number of phrasal verbs, this may or may not be true in the media of both varieties, for example, or in academic writing. It is possible that Americans distribute them more liberally in a wider range of registers. Third, the perceived difference may come from the stereotype of Americans as less refined, less cultured, than Europeans.

### **Combining Elements of Phrasal Verbs over Time**

A relatively small number of particles are used for the formation of phrasal verbs, representing a very stable group. The most frequently occurring particles tend to be monosyllabic and lend themselves easily to metaphorical extension. There are slight British/American differences in particle preference. Combining verbs, in contrast to particles, are an open set and much more variable. There is a substantially greater number of combining verbs, and therefore combination types, in the 20th century British corpus than in the American.

P. Martin’s investigation into combining elements over time, considered with other findings from this study, suggests three areas of particular significance. First, she mentions that the phrasal verb as a linguistic entity is a real lexical-grammatical hybrid because its interacting elements are drawn from an open set of combining verbs and a closed set of particles, a subset of which carry specific grammatical functions (i.e., mark aspect, emphasis). The picture is complicated by the fact that a synchronically closed set or subset may be diachronically open. Round/around, for example, only appeared in this study as a phrasal verb formant in the 19th century, when it only entered into free combinations, that is, those with literal interpretations. By the 20th century, however, it appears to have been admitted into the subset of semi-idiomatic particle formants, or those that carry aspect. So the phrasal verb intriguingly resists complete accountability as a simple lexical item and must also be considered, at least occasionally, morphologically.

A second area of particular significance is the actual quality of the formants: they are usually monosyllabic and general terms, characteristics that contribute greatly to their versatility. The resistance of the formants to the burden of too many syllables supports the notion that they play an important role in sentence rhythm and sentence focus. Moreover, their general, superordinate quality readily facilitates metaphorical extension.

The third area of significance is that of variety differences. The British appear to use more combining verbs and more combination types than the Americans do in the 20th century, although in the 19th the Americans surpassed the British. Differences exist, and the numbers are disparate enough to suggest significance [12, p. 169].

### **Syntactic variability of Phrasal Verbs over Time**

Syntactic possibilities in the English language have narrowed over the centuries. The number of syntactic pattern types in the texts considered peaked in the 16th century, and there has been a noticeable decline since, with the temporary exception of the 19th century. The process, however,

has not been one of simple subtraction although many patterns have disappeared; a few new ones have emerged as well. A notable newcomer is the phrasal verb conversion to other parts of speech (i.e. noun or adjective). As for variety differences, some American patterns appear less diachronically, stable than their British counterparts.

Both the consolidation of pattern types over time and the emergence of increasingly frequent phrasal verb conversions are symptomatic of the ongoing evolution of the language from synthetic to analytic. The process is characterized by the loss of inflections and a compensating dependence upon word order and function words to signal grammatical relationships. Within the increasingly rigid framework of word order, individual elements in the sentence are freed to change grammatical role by simply changing position: conversions.

A significant consequence of the conversion process is that it tends to render individual elements of a sentence more context-bound. A word must be placed in position in a sentence before it can even be known whether it is noun or verb. Also significant, or just remarkable, is the fact that through conversions, because they are so easily generated by modern forces such as technology, politics, advertising, and so quickly dispersed around the world through media, the modern student of the English language can actually observe the seemingly unobservable: language change at the syntactic level [8, p. 54].

With regard to the consolidation of syntactic pattern types, it is appropriate that the greatest number of patterns should be found in the 16th century. Many have characterized the English language of that century as exuberant and experimental; Shakespeare, of course, is its grand example.

The slight differences in British and American patterns suggest no clear trends, except for the generally greater instability of the American patterns. The American fluctuations probably reflect a more diverse society, more in flux. The greater number of conversions in the 20th century American texts may indicate that the American variety has moved a fraction closer to the analytic than the British, but the sample is really too small to make any such statement with confidence.

### **Semantic Functions of Phrasal Verbs Over Time**

Semantically, more and more phrasal verbs over the centuries are accruing abstract meanings in addition to their literal ones. Abstract phrasal verbs include two distinct types: those that are direct metaphorical extensions, as in the case of idiomatic constructions, and those whose particle has a grammatical function (e.g. marking aspect) as with semi-idiomatic constructions. Both types have increased in both American and British varieties, but not in equal proportions. Americans seem to favor the semi-idiomatic usages slightly more than the British [12, p. 144].

Investigation into some of the semantic aspects of phrasal verbs has uncovered some areas of special significance. Most importantly, the intuition explored by a number of linguists that language evolves from the literal to the abstract. It appears that elements first enter into phrasal verb combinations as literal formants. Over time, a number of interesting things can happen.

The American preference for semi-idiomatic, or aspectual, phrasal verb usages is potentially the most significant. The sample may simply be too limited to draw conclusions or the corpora may be poorly matched. But if a true difference exists, it may signal one of two things. It may mean that the American variety has progressed to date a little further on the path both varieties are travelling.

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