

THE SEMANTICS OF ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS

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Abstract: This article explores the semantics of English phraseological verbs, commonly known as phrasal verbs, with reference to recent theoretical and empirical studies. Phraseological verbs pose challenges for both learners and linguists due to their idiomaticity, syntactic flexibility, and semantic opacity. The article investigates how these verbs convey meanings that go beyond the sum of their parts, analyzing patterns of compositionality, polysemy, and contextual inference. Through real-life examples and up-to-date linguistic theory, this paper aims to clarify the semantic behavior of phraseological verbs for applied linguists and educators.

Key words: phraseological verbs, phrasal verbs, idiomaticity, semantics, compositionality, English grammar

Phraseological verbs—multi-word combinations typically consisting of a verb plus a particle (e.g., “look up,” “give in,” “run out”)—form an essential part of English lexicon and grammar. Unlike simple verbs, these combinations often have meanings that are not directly inferable from the components themselves. Their semantics depend heavily on context, making them both linguistically rich and pedagogically challenging.

For example, the verb phrase “look up” can have a literal meaning—“to direct one’s gaze upward”—as in “The children looked up at the sky.” It can also carry a figurative meaning—“to search for information”—as in “I looked up the word in the dictionary.” Additionally, it can function idiomatically in “Business is looking up,” meaning “conditions are improving.” This polysemy illustrates the fluidity and context-dependency of phraseological verb semantics (Gardner and Davies, 2007).

One major semantic feature of phraseological verbs is non-compositionality, where the overall meaning cannot be derived from the literal interpretation of the components (Jackendoff, 2010). For instance, “give in” does not simply mean “to give something while being inside” but rather “to surrender.” This idiomatic use contrasts with compositional phrases, such as “give out,” which can mean “to distribute” or “to emit,” again depending on context.

Compositionality is not binary but exists on a continuum. Some phrasal verbs, such as “stand up” or “sit down,” retain clear physical meanings and are semantically transparent. Others, like “bring up” (as in “raise a topic” or “raise a child”), are more opaque. The cognitive linguistics framework, particularly Construction Grammar, views these phrases as learned

pairings of form and function that accumulate semantic associations through use (Goldberg, 2006; Tyler and Evans, 2003).

The productivity and frequency of phraseological verbs are also notable. Corpus studies have shown that phrasal verbs account for a large proportion of verb usage in spoken English and informal registers (Biber et al., 1999). Yet their idiomatic nature often makes them difficult for second language learners to master, as literal translations rarely apply. Learners may struggle with interpreting expressions like “cut off,” which could mean “to interrupt,” “to remove by cutting,” or “to disinherit,” depending on context (Lindstromberg et al., 2018).

Contextuality plays a critical role in meaning-making. Take the verb “run out”: in “He ran out of time,” it implies depletion; in “He ran out the door,” it indicates motion. Understanding these differences requires sensitivity to collocational patterns and broader discourse. Current research emphasizes the importance of exposure to authentic language use in learning such distinctions (Martínez and Schmitt, 2012).

Phraseological verbs also illustrate metaphorical extensions of meaning. For example, “fall apart” literally describes disintegration, but metaphorically refers to emotional breakdowns (“She fell apart after the news”). This supports Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) argument that abstract meanings often derive from embodied, physical experience through conceptual metaphors.

From a syntactic perspective, many phrasal verbs are separable: “She turned the radio off” vs. “She turned off the radio.” This flexibility affects stress patterns, focus, and information structure. However, some idiomatic verbs, such as “look after,” are inseparable, making them even harder to parse and learn. The syntax-semantics interface thus plays a pivotal role in how these verbs function in discourse (Fraser, 1976; Wulff, 2008).

In terms of acquisition, studies show that phraseological verbs are among the last lexical items to be fully acquired by advanced learners (Laufer and Waldman, 2011). Teaching strategies that emphasize usage-based learning, corpus exposure, and meaning-driven instruction have been shown to be effective. For example, presenting “put off” in varied contexts—“He put off the meeting” vs. “She was put off by his attitude”—can highlight its different meanings (“postpone” vs. “discourage”) and help learners internalize usage patterns.

In conclusion, the semantics of English phraseological verbs lie at the intersection of idiomaticity, context, and cognitive processing. These expressions are semantically rich and syntactically complex, requiring learners and linguists alike to consider both usage and form. Ongoing research continues to uncover how these verbs are structured, processed, and taught, underscoring their relevance to linguistic theory and language education.

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