

# LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR OF COMPOUND AND PHRASAL VERBS: DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS

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## Abstract

A two-word verb (compound or phrasal) is extremely common in both spoken and written English. It plays an important role in the syntactic and semantic structure of the sentence. Syntactically, a verb phrase (including compound and phrasal) is the core of a sentence by which the subject or any other complement is determined. Semantically, the meaning of a sentence is mainly brought about by the verb which controls the meanings of other components. Hence, linguistic analysis of these two-word constructions seem to be necessary to discern their dominant features.

## 1.1 Introduction

Compound and phrasal verbs constitute troublesome and thorny groups of verbs in English that a foreign learner needs to exert considerable efforts to overcome difficulties related to such construct. Probably, the most difficulties, in this respect, lie in their semantic rather syntactic or morphological behaviour. In other words, the learner finds it difficult to interpret the meaning of compound or phrasal verbs (particularly when exploited to predict figurative rather than literal meaning).

However, the term 'compound verbs' indicates a combination of a particle or any other parts of speech (as its first element) plus a verb; whereas the term 'phrasal verbs' is used to refer to a verbal combination of a verb plus a particle (as its second element)\*

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\* A particle is a word which precedes or follows the lexical verb and is closely associated with it. It is either a 'preposition' or an 'adverb'. Compare :

i- Tom called on his brother. (prep)

ii-Tom called up his brother. (adv) (Quirk et al, 1985:1150)

The term 'adverbial particle' is used to the particle in (ii) above, which is defined as a word placed especially after a verb to show position, direction or movement, etc. In come back, break down and fall off; back, down and off are all considered adverbial particles (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2000: 20).

Thus, this paper tends to give a brief account of these two groups of verbal combination, presenting their morphological, syntactic status, focusing on their semantic behaviour. The aim of introducing their grammatical and phonological peculiarities is to arrive at a satisfactory way with which these two types of construction can be identified, recognized and distinguished from each other in particular, and from other types of verbs in general.

## 1.2 Compound Verbs

Compounding is the process of word formation whereby a new word is formed from joining two or more units into a single word (often two bases are combined to

each other to constitute a new form) . For example 'suit' is joined to 'case' to yield the new item 'suitcase'. A word is often referred to as a compound when it can form a formal or a semantic point of view or both " (Kruisinga , 1932:4) . Compound verbs, as a type of compounding, consists of X + Verb, where X refers to a particle or any part of speech such as noun, verb, adverb ...etc, as in overcome, globe – trot, makedo, undervalue ...etc.

[ For the definition of compounding, see also Stageberg , 1981:121]

In some cases of two-word verbs, Eckersley & Eckersley (1960: 281) expound that the adverbial particle has been completely fused with the verb to form an inseparable particle. In such cases it precedes the verb as in; **outnumber**, **overlook**, **upset**, **withstand**, etc.

Graphically, compounds can be written in three different ways, and there is no fixed rule to select any one of them. Some compounds are hyphenated as in hen-peck and globe-trot , some are not hyphenated, and combined in one unit as in undo and overfeed. Yet others are separated from each other, seen as two separate words as in high school and hang glider . Perhaps the same compound word can be written in the three mentioned ways, for example, flower – pot, flower pot, and flowerpot.

It is strikingly important to mention here that in American English, hyphenation is less common than in British English. Consider the following:

Language retarded ( Am E )      Language – retarded ( Br E )

Psychosomatic ( Am E )      Psycho – somatic ( Br E )

In spite of this, we can find in Am E a hyphen in examples like Sino – Russia, Anglo – American . In Both Am E and Br E, hyphens are useful for premodifying compounds, as in much – needed rest, his higher – than – average wages, nineteenth – century novels (where the sequence concerned are not of course compounds outside this premodifying position; 'his wages are higher than average', 'novels of the nineteenth century') (Quirk et al., 1985:1569 ).

### 1.2.1 Classification of Compound Verbs

Compounding generally associates bases taken from the dictionary which are in a wider range of semantic relations. Although both bases are in principle equally open, they are normally in a relation whereby the first is modifying the second. The relations between the combined items brought together in compounding must be such that it is reasonable and useful to classify the second in terms of the first . That is , in terms of theme and focus, we expect the second constituent in a compound is thematic.

However, Quirk et al (1972), Adams (1973) and Zandvoort (1975) offer the following sources of compound verbs:

1- Particle + Verb

**overtake**, **outbalance**, **upset**, **backbite**, **overtop**

The particles in the above compound verbs are mainly spatial adverbs. The most important point here is that these particles are not necessarily of spatial meanings. Those particles which precede the verbs are closely associated with the verbs that the whole construction indicates a type of meaning different from its constituents.

2- Noun + Verb

**caretake, globe – trot, hen – peck**

The nouns (care, globe and hen) which precede the lexical verbs (take, trot and peck) function as modifiers for these verbs and can be paraphrased as V + N as in 'take care', 'trot a globe' and 'peck a hen'.

## 3- Adjective + Verb

**white – wash, safe – guard, rough – hew**

In these examples, the adjectives used here have the function of modifying the verb. For example, in white - wash, the verb 'wash' is modified by the attribute of whiteness but not something else.

## 4- Verb + Verb

**daresay, makedo, makebelieve**

The lexical verbs (dare and make) which precede the verbs (say, do and believe) are intended to modify the second verbs; normally they ascertain the action associated with the verbs 'say', 'do' and 'believe'.

## 5- Adverb + Verb

**undersell, underestimate, oversleep, overeate, daydream, sightsee**

The first four compound verbs contain spatial adverbs (under and over) which are here used in relation to the verbs after them, and thus they are no longer seen of a spatial meaning. They can be, in this respect, paraphrased into:

**undersell = sell at lower price**

**underestimate = estimate at lower cost**

**oversleep = sleep too much**

**overeate = eat too much**

But the last two compounds can be sententially paraphrased :

**daydream = someone dreams during the day**

**sightsee = someone sees sight (Quirk et al, 1985 : 1570)**

**1.2.2 Characteristics of Compound Verbs**

Compound verbs, in order to be recognized as a distinct group of multi – word verbs, must satisfy certain defining characteristics show below:

1- It is often the second element, in compound verb, can take inflection. Thus, **hen-peck** is inflected as **hen-pecks** and **hen-pecked**; similarly **backbite** as **backbites** and **backbit**. In other words, if such constructions are seen as one single unit, the whole construction then can be said to be inflected by(-s) and (-ed). Here, the relation between the two constituents can be recognized as Modifier + Head. In the above examples, **hen** and **back** function as modifiers to the head **peck** and **bite**(Long & Long, 1971: 466).

2- Morphologically compound verbs mostly consist of two bases; the first ( may be of different parts of speech: adverb, noun, verb or adjective) plus a lexical verb, as in **overset, caretake, makebelieve, and safe-guard.**

3- As compound verbs are often considered as a single unite word lexically and syntactically (semantically and syntactically function as inseparable verb). In other words, the meaning of the whole construction of a compound verb seems to be idiomatic that it cannot be predicted from its constituents. For this reason, compound

verbs can be paraphrased by single verbs of the same meaning. Consider the following:

1. United nations observers **oversaw** the elections. ( **supervised** )
2. I **undid** the package and took out the book. ( **opened** )
- 4- Nearly, all compound verbs allow 'passive' transformation as they all seem to be transitive verbs though they include more than one unit:
3. Your opponent must not be **underestimated**.
4. These conclusions are **overgeneralized** by the researchers.
5. Phonologically, a compound verb is usually recognized as having the main (primary) stress on the second element. In the word **overLOOK**, the stress placement is on the second part **LOOK** ( Quirk et al , 1985: 1151).

### 1.3 Phrasal Verbs

There are certain verbs in English followed by either a preposition or an adverb to obtain a variety of meanings known as " phrasal verbs". Semantically such combinations constitute a single unit that is often considered an idiomatic unit that its meaning cannot be easily derived from the meanings of the verb and its particle when separated.

Conversely, Eckersley & Eckersley(1960:281) affirm that some of the meanings of phrasal verbs are literal and may be gathered from the individual words that compose them.

5. **Put** the book **up** there.
  6. The ice was **broken up** by the ice – plough.
- But very frequently the meanings are figurative and cannot be easily known from the constituents composing the phrasal verbs unless they are considered as a single units:

7. Can you **put me up** for the night ? ( **accommodate** )
8. We have **broken up** for two weeks.( classes have finished for a two week's holiday)

Morphologically, the inflection of phrasal verbs, unlike compound verbs, goes with the lexical verbs ( as heads ) as in:

#### **put down, puts down, put down, putting down**

Most grammarians (among them, Sroka, 1972 ; Palmer, 1974: 213 & 1981:80 and Quirk et al 1985: 1150 ff) agree that the verb and its particle can form a semantic unit. Verb-particle combinations can add an idiomatic power to the language. Idiomaticity indicates a semantic unit that has more to do with grammar, although some syntactic characteristics are closely associated to the idiomatic combinations. Yet, some combinations may represent non-idiomatic meanings. Consider :

9. The ruler **put** the rebellion **down** . ( idiomatic )
10. The student **put** the pencil **down** . ( non-idiomatic )

#### 1.3.1 Characteristics of Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs as a distinct group of verbs exhibit specific characteristics that distinguish them from other classes of verbs:

1. The number of particles used to form phrasal verbs are limited ; they are mostly:  
**on, in, down, over, out, up, off**
2. Phrasal verbs are not easily or freely composed. In fact, there are certain restrictions on their composition. In the phrasal verb **look for**, for example, we cannot replace **for** by **after**, simply because this will break the meaning with **for**. The meaning of **look for** is **search** whereas the meaning of **look after** is **tend**.
3. Because phrasal verbs often constitute one unit, they can, thus, be replaced by single verbs of the same sense:
  11. They tried hard to **put out** the fire but they couldn't. ( **extinguish** )
  12. I was about to **get on** the fence when my father called me.( **climb** )
4. Most phrasal verbs allow passive construction except those which are considered 'intransitive' which cannot be followed by a noun phrase as their objects, i.e., particularly those that have idiomatic meanings rather than those that carry literal meanings :
  13. The conclusion has been **arrived at**.
  14. The students are **looked down** by their teacher.
 Nevertheless, Trask (1993: 53) mistakenly considers such constructions that undergo passive transformation as compound rather phrasal verbs as clarified in:
  15. a. We **spoke of** her in admiring terms.
  - b. She was **spoken of** in admiring terms.
5. Phonologically, in contrast with compound verbs, the primary stress is often placed on the particle rather on the lexical verb. For instance, in the verb **give in** the particle **in** is rather accented than the lexical verb **give**, unless the first element is a noun as in **CAREtake**.

### 1.3.2 Function of Particle

Though the topic of phrasal verbs has been discussed by many grammarians, very few are concerned with the distinction of the function of the particle whether an adverb or a preposition. Certain points of view will be considered in this section to arrive at a satisfactory solution.

Smith(cited in Sroka, 1972: 118) defines phrasal verbs as 'idiomatic collocations of verbs followed by prepositions or prepositions used as adverbs'. He cites the following illustrative examples: set up, put through, keep down, etc. It is apparently obvious from the definition given by Smith that he neglects the distinction between particles used as adverbs and those used as prepositions. Moreover, he( *ibid.*) adds that there are some phrasal verbs that have two prepositions like **put up with**, **do up with**, **take up with**, etc.

On the other hand, Sroka ( 1972: 113) treats any particle occurring in final position as an adverb. He further distinguishes the particle whether it is a preposition or an adverb on the basis that only the first can take an object, such as:

16. He looks **at** the picture.
- while the second cannot:
17. These are the girls they looked **at** .

Sroka ( *ibid.*:144-8 ) proceeds that the particle used as an adverb is different from a preposition in that it is complete in itself. That is, it retains its meaning even

when it comes without an object, yet if the particle comes as a preposition, it should be followed by a complement:

18. Turn the gas **on**. ( adverb )
19. Turn **on** the gas. ( preposition )

In this connection, he mentions three criteria for assigning the particle as an adverb:

I. When it follows the object:

20. He put it **on** .

II. When it precedes the object provided that there is an alternative structure with particle following the object:

21. I will put **on** the light .
22. I will put it **out** .

III. When the particle is separated from the object by other words:

23. He runs **over** , with a laughing eye, the child's leg .

Another opinion comes from Dietrich in Sroka ( ibid. : 166-7 ) who remarks that the preposition is connected with the verb . He lays more emphasis on 'word order' in which the particle could be a preposition or an adverb . It is when it accepts the following conditions:

I. If it comes before a relative or interrogative pronoun:

24. The chair **over** which he tripped .

II. If it comes before a personal pronoun object :

25. Don't trip **over** .

III. If it comes after adverbs of manner which lie between the verb and the particle:

26. We should move gently and quietly **over** a smooth surface.

Conversely, a particle is an adverb if it accepts the following conditions:

I. When the verb is intransitive :

27. Tyra passed by **on** the beach.

II. When the particle follows a nominal or a pronominal object:

28. He flung it **down** .

### 1.3.3 Types of Particled Verbs

To avoid overlapping among the different types of particles following the verb, three main kinds ( according to Quirk et al, 1985: 1150 f ) of verb –particle combinations are distinguished :

- i- Phrasal verbs
- ii- Prepositional verbs , and
- iii- Phrasal – prepositional verbs

Consider the following examples respectively:

29. The conjuror **took** the audience **in** . ( Phrasal )
30. They should **go into** the problem . ( Prepositional )
31. Don thinks that he can **get away with** everything . ( Phrasal – prepositional )

Prepositional verbs are those verbs that are followed by a preposition and a noun phrase representing the complement of the preposition but not the direct object of the verb:

32. He **approves of** their action .

33. Jim **looked at** the picture .

whereas phrasal - prepositional verbs are those verbs that consist of lexical verbs followed by an adverb and a preposition functioning as a particle:

34. I am looking forward to your success.

35. She had to **put up with** a lot of tolerance at school.

### 1.3.4 Types of Phrasal Verbs

Two types of phrasal verbs are often recognized : 'intransitive' and 'transitive' . They are both idiomatic constructions.

#### 1.3.4.1 Intransitive Phrasal verbs

This type of phrasal verbs can be represented by the formula : Verb + Adverb ( particle):

36. Luna **broke down** when she heard the sad news.

37. The meeting **broke up** in disorder.

It is worth-mentioning that these verbs can be also used in transitive contexts:

38. **Get** your hat **on** . (transitive )

39. **Get up** ! ( intransitive )

40. John **started up** the motor. (transitive )

41. The motor **started up** . ( intransitive )

The verb **started up** in the last two sentences may be known as ergative phrasal verb since the object in (40) can be used as the subject of in (41).

Moreover , many of these constructions are especially common in informal speech rather than writing contexts. Compare:

42. What time are you planning to **turn up** ? ( informal )

43. Please let us know when you plan to **arrive** . ( more formal )

44. Just **keep on** till you get to the crossroads. ( informal )

45. **Continue** as far as the crossroads. ( formal ) ( Swan, 2000: 234 )

#### 1.3.4.2 Transitive Phrasal verbs

Transitive phrasal verbs, in contrast with intransitive ones , take a direct object after them , and can occur in two constructional patterns either Verb + Adverb + Object as in:

46. He **put away** a whole chicken.

Or in pattern Verb + Object + Adverb as in

47. They **set** a new project **up** .

It is clear that the two employed formulas above have shown that the particle in these verbs can either precedes or follow the direct object. Further, the only formula which is allowed when the object is a personal pronoun is Verb + Object + Adverb . Consider :

48. She **turned on** TV . = She **turned** TV **on** .

49. She **turned on** it . = She **turned** it **on** .

50. Dorothy **called** him **up** . = \*Dorothy **called** **up** him.  
(Quirk et al.:1985:1166)

## 1.4 Compound Verbs Derived From Phrasal Verbs

Some compound verbs may be derived from phrasal verbs . If we change the word order of the phrasal verbs , the result will be compound verbs:

set up (phrasal)	upset (compound)
take over (phrasal)	overtake (compound)

The main distinction between a compound verb and a phrasal verb is that if the verb is compound , the primary stress will lay on the second element ; and if it is a phrasal , it will lay on the particle :

upSET ( compound )	setUP ( phrasal )
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But if the compound is a noun plus a lexical verb , the stress will lay on the first element , as in CAREtake.

Thus, we bring about the fact that compound and phrasal verbs can be distinguished from each other in terms of the word order and stress placement.

## 1.5 Conclusion

English language is very rich in the use of idiomatic expressions (including compound and phrasal verbs), and a speaker of English language cannot avoid them while speaking or writing. Thus , one of the major goals of his mastery of language is learning these expressions, particularly as they exhibit peculiar linguistic traits , and using them carefully and properly in everyday contexts.

It is essentially important to note here that speakers of English as a foreign language face great difficulty to master the use of such expressions , and this difficulty may be due to the fact that the meaning of an idiomatic expression (compound or phrasal verb )as a whole cannot be often produced from the meanings of the individual words forming it . This would require that a learner should be so keen and careful since the use of these constructions , to greater extent , based on their semantic and sometimes syntactic behaviour , a point which most students of English may ignore or be unaware of.

Although both compound and phrasal verbs are of the category of a two – word verb , they exhibit different features between them. Morphologically, a compound verb consists of a particle plus a lexical verb , but it may also be the result of a combination of a noun , adjective , verb or adverb plus a lexical verb. Conversely, a phrasal verb is often composed of a verb plus a particle , being its second element . The most striking point here is that both compound and phrasal verbs can be syntactically and lexically in most cases, considered as single unit. Another striking point related to their phonological characteristics is that while the primary stress is placed on the lexical verb in compound verbs, it is placed on the particle in a phrasal verbs . Moreover, they both can be used in spoken and written varieties , formal and informal situations , in spite of the fact that they occur more in colloquial than in formal contexts.

In relation to the discussion has so far made , it has been noticed that the term 'phrasal verbs' is a wider term than 'compound verbs' as it has been exploited differently by grammarians . Some use the term to refer to all groups of verbs of



particle constructions which cover (i) phrasal verbs , (ii) prepositional verbs , and (iii) phrasal - prepositional verbs . Others ( like Palmer,1974 and Quirk et al. : 1985 ) employ this term to include verbs having an adverb particle. Yet others exploit the term prepositional verbs to imply the combination of a verb plus particle , i.e. , compound verbs and phrasal verbs would be included within this same group.

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