Word Power: Phrasal Verbs and Compounds

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Word Power:
Phrasal Verbs and Compounds

A Cognitive Approach

by

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Preface

Word Power: Phrasal Verbs and Compounds, a Cognitive Approach is a textbook for guided self-learning intended for post-intermediate and advanced students of English.

The textbook contains some 1,100 phrasal verbs and compounds used with 17 particles and/or prepositions which combine with some 500 different verbs, nouns or adjectives. The book deals in the first place with the major problems encountered by even advanced students, viz. understanding and mastering the metaphorical meanings of the particles and the phrasal verbs as a whole. Secondly, depending on the students' level of competence, the book confronts them with another 2,500 to 3,000 less frequently used words in the sentences, explanations, collocations and glosses in connection with the phrasal verbs and compounds. These words constitute an equally essential part of the book and need to be mastered to the same extent as the phrasal material itself.

Expanding students' word power efficiently

In order to help more advanced grown-up learners to rapidly and significantly expand their lexicon, the basis of accurate and fluent communication, we have implemented some of the major findings from both cognitive and applied linguistics.

First, the phrasal verbs and compounds are grouped around each particle. This particle-based arrangement reveals the networks of related meanings of the particles. As experiments have shown, this fascinating insight-oriented approach – visually enhanced by intentionally abstract drawings – enables and encourages the students to create their own contextual schemata, which all contribute to learning the metaphorical extensions faster, better, and above all, in a much more gratifying way.

Second, this textbook implements a battery of techniques used in applied linguistics to develop intensively the students' vocabulary in artificial school settings. It has been shown experimentally that learners fix new words or new meanings in a foreign language best:

– if they are systematically and explicitly focused upon;
– if they are embedded in contexts;
– if they are hooked up with other words they often co-occur with (collocations);
– if learners write them out;

– if there are opportunities to guess their meanings (cf. infra);
– if contexts, glosses, explanations make target words or meanings readily accessible reducing to a minimum wild guessing and/or time-consuming dictionary searches – however useful the latter may sometimes be;
– if their presentation in exetests (EXErcises + TESTS) allows for reviewing them as often as needed;
– if they are activated orally (through learner-centred or horizontal class activities in pairs).

In this guided self-learning approach, teachers play more than ever a crucial role. As true managers they divide the material into weekly portions, organize and supervize the horizontal classroom work, help the students gain (cognitive) insights into the related meanings of the particles or into knowledge they can not easily acquire by themselves. Finally they provide students with feedback through tests.

How this textbook could be used

Methodological suggestions are always welcome but should never be taken as a must. Teachers or students should therefore consider the suggestions below only as a source of inspiration to add to their own experience.

The introductory chapter

The introductory chapter provides only the essential syntactic and semantic information necessary to understand what phrasal verbs and compounds are about. Even in this basic chapter there might be little classical *teaching* since this book is essentially written for guided self-learning. The questions at the end of the introductory chapter could therefore also be handled horizontally (in pairs or small groups).

1 Preliminary individual work (preferably outside the classroom)

As classroom time is generally very limited and since the book is written for post-intermediate or advanced learners, students might be asked to do all low-level work (cf. infra) individually before coming to class.

They can access the missing phrasal elements and their meanings in three ways: (1) the first letter(s) of each verb/noun/adjective is indicated to the right of each sentence, (2) the verbs/nouns to be filled in are also alphabetically arranged on top of each exetest (EXErcise + TEST), and (3) in the key at the end of a section. Glosses at the bottom of each exetest explain less frequently used words in the sentential contexts.

Learners might proceed along the following lines:

1 they guess the verbs/nouns to be filled in, check to see if their guesses are correct and complete the initial letters or clusters in the spaces to the right of the sentences;
2 they consult the glosses for words they do not know or are not sure of;
3 they read (preferably aloud) the sentences while looking also at the verbs/compounds;
4 they cover up the verbs/compounds and read the sentences (while completing the dotted spaces); they may want to do this reading several times until they attain natural fluency;

5 they change the order in which they read the sentences: first from top to bottom, then the other way round or at random;
6 they tick off the sentences where their reading and completing is least fluent;
7 they cover up the sentences and this time use the verbs as starters for identical/similar/totally different sentences or contexts in which the verbs fit.

N.B. Time being money, they focus on the sentences over which they hesitate.

2 Classroom work

Classroom activities could consist of two types of interaction: one horizontal, i.e. in pairs, and one vertical, i.e. teacher-students.

2.1 Simultaneous 'student – student' work (in pairs or in small groups)

Oral horizontal class activities could consist of working in pairs/small groups of students in which the learners take turns, and choose from the following activities:

1 they define, paraphrase, explain (in their own words or through examples/synonyms) any words (and not only verbs) any one of the (two or more) members finds difficult;
They can also start from some of the glosses to find the words related to them.
2 they cover up the verbs (filled in previously to the right) and read (some of) the sentences aloud; take turns to tell the other person which sentence (s)he has to read and complete;
3 they cover up the sentences and start from the verbs to the right creating similar or different sentences in which the verbs fit;
4 they explain how the verbs specify different ways of moving: *fly, jump, send, spring, walk,* etc.;
5 they identify in some of the sentences the different trajectors/entities (that exemplify a certain movement) or the landmarks/containers;
6 they show which particles have spatial meanings and which ones have metaphorical meanings;
7 they indicate in which sentences the particle follows the direct object;
8 they pick out the sentences in which the landmarks (points/containers/surfaces) are not specified;
9 they drop the landmark (point/container/surface) where it is mentioned and add one where it is not specified.

P.S. Activities 5 to 9 might rather be done under the teacher's supervision. One should not overkill by doing too many analyses, however. The quantity of material covered is as important as the quality of the knowledge acquired. As an expert-manager, the teacher is best placed to decide which tasks should be done only occasionally or not at all.

2.2 Teacher – students interaction (either in pairs or in small groups)

As suggested above, the more difficult some of the above activities are, the more the teacher-manager might turn to vertical interaction. One activity in which (s)he should play a leading role is in helping the students discover which semantic features are conveyed by the particle or by the phrasal verb as a whole.

3 Conclusion

Again, it may be stressed that the purpose of this book is to expand massively and qualitatively the students' vocabulary in general and that of phrasal verbs/ compounds in particular. This is therefore not a textbook on (some aspects of) cognitive linguistics though it also uses its insights as a means to achieve this lexical goal.

Acknowledgements

This pedagogical textbook with a filtered and simplified cognitive analysis of phrasal verbs and compounds is Brygida Rudzka's work. As a result of her untimely death she was unable to finish it.

Since at least two decades have evolved since the analyses of the most salient features of phrasal verbs/compounds were published in doctoral dissertations, I am very much indebted to René Dirven, who went through different versions of this textbook meticulously, updating and refining the linguistic analyses while adding numerous valuable methodological comments and suggestions which have greatly improved this textbook.

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Introduction: Words and the World

Over the past decades there has been a growing awareness of the need to equip students of English with a dynamic vocabulary accompanied by a renewed interest in familiarizing them with more idiomatic aspects of the language such as, for instance, phrasal verbs, a notoriously difficult part of the lexicon.

Phrasal verbs do not enjoy a good reputation in foreign language learning. Still, they are common in spoken and written English and new ones are constantly being created. This may be due to the fact that they so clearly go from the concrete to the abstract. Because foreign learners do not see this path, many phrasal verbs are difficult to understand and to use even if they know both the verb and the spatial meaning of the particle. It is not surprising therefore that even advanced learners of English understand many of them poorly and, as research has shown, use them sparingly, if at all.

The difficulties are situated at the levels of both form and meaning.

1 The syntactic frames of phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs, also called (idiomatic) multi-word verbs, consist of a verb, an adverb (adverbial particle) and/or a preposition. Some verbs are called *prepositional verbs* since they consist of a verb and a preposition. The possible types and combinations are:

- verb + particle: *slow down, bring up, put off, give away, look into (a murder), think over*
- verb + particle + preposition: *face up to, get down to, come up with, be in for*
- verb + preposition: *refer to, look into (a room), look at, depend on, abstain from, think of*

The syntactic picture is rather complex since there are restrictions, for instance:

- on the place of the particle: the more figurative a phrasal verb is, the more it forms a tight unit, and the less verb and particle can be split. Hence, the following are not possible: **make your mind up, *make the bill up,* whereas *make up your mind, make up the bill* are correct;
- on passivizing phrasal verbs: *he blew up* is fine, but not **he was blown up by what I said*. Only when there is a flow of energy from an agent to an object can they be used in the passive: *The bill was made up in a minute* is fine, but not **His mind was made up in a minute*.

Thus, knowledge of these frames is important if one wants to use phrasal verbs correctly.

The most important problem with phrasal verbs, however, is that those restrictions are motivated by the meanings of the verb and the particle and the composite meaning of the whole.

Many particles can also function as prefixes/suffixes with nouns or adjectives; in this case they have similar meanings as with verbs: *outlook, output, cutback, upbringing, offprint; be backward, be overwhelmed, be standoffish, a downright lie, an uptight person,* etc.

2 The meaning of phrasal verbs

2.1 The meaning of the verb

Apart from a few static verbs such as *be, sit, hold,* etc. almost all verbs used with particles are verbs of motion. The motion can be physical and can be performed, for example, with one's hands and legs *(wipe, drag, break, throw; walk, run, jump, climb)* or abstract *(think, sell, buy, refer)*. Furthermore, since it is easier to talk about abstract actions by seeing them as concrete movements (cf. infra), most of these verbs of motion can and will also be used to designate abstract, non-visible changes:

(A) physical, spatial motion →	**(B) abstract motion**
1a to *drag* a person *out of* the house	1b the meeting *dragged on*/*dragged out*
2a to *run up* the hill	2b to *run up* expenses; – against opposition
3a to *throw out* old clothes, shoes	3b to *throw* a person *out of* a club
4a to *get out of* the house	4b to *get out of* the mess/the problems
5a to *run out* of a building on fire	5b to *run out of* money; my pen has *run out*
6a to *run off* the edge of a crevasse	6b to *run off* 100 copies of an ad(vertisement)
7a to *skim off* the cream (from the milk)	7b to *skim through* (a book, a document)

***Glosses: 1a** to pull sb along with great effort, difficulty – **1b** lasted a long time – **2b** to accumulate, increase; to encounter, face opposition – **4b** a difficult, unpleasant state, situation – **5b** to have no more money; have no ink in the pen any more – **6a** to run away from the outside limit of a deep open crack – **6b** to make copies, to photocopy – **7a** to take away the cream from the surface of the milk – **7b** to read a book very quickly paying attention only to the most important things*

As can be seen from the above examples, it is clear that in order to understand a phrasal verb one has to understand the meaning of the verbs *drag, run, throw, get, run, wipe, skim,* etc. But this is, however, not always sufficient.

2.2 The meaning of the particles

In many cases, the second and in fact major problem with phrasal verbs and compounds is gaining insight into the meaning(s) of their particles and understanding why one particle is used and not another one. The moot question is whether particles are purely 'idiomatic' or whether they rather consist of clusters of related and transparent meanings. As yet, such questions have mostly remained unanswered in learning English as a foreign language, and as a result many phrasal verbs are called 'idiomatic', i.e. they are said to be impossible to understand on the basis of their constituting elements, verb and particle. All these so-called 'idiomatic' phrasal verbs would therefore have to be learned one by one, an arduous, time-consuming and not very rational task. It is no wonder then that even advanced students often show a poor command of phrasal verbs and use them rarely.

2.2.1 Spatial, prototypical or basic meanings of prepositions and particles

If the meaning of the verb is known and if the meaning of the particle is *spatial,* the phrasal verb is generally easy to understand:

1	Do you know there is petrol *leaking out of* your tank?	*coming, flowing out*
2	The children *ran up* the hill to attack the enemy.	
3	*Wipe* the dirt *off* your face.	*remove, take away*

Prepositions can also be used as particles:

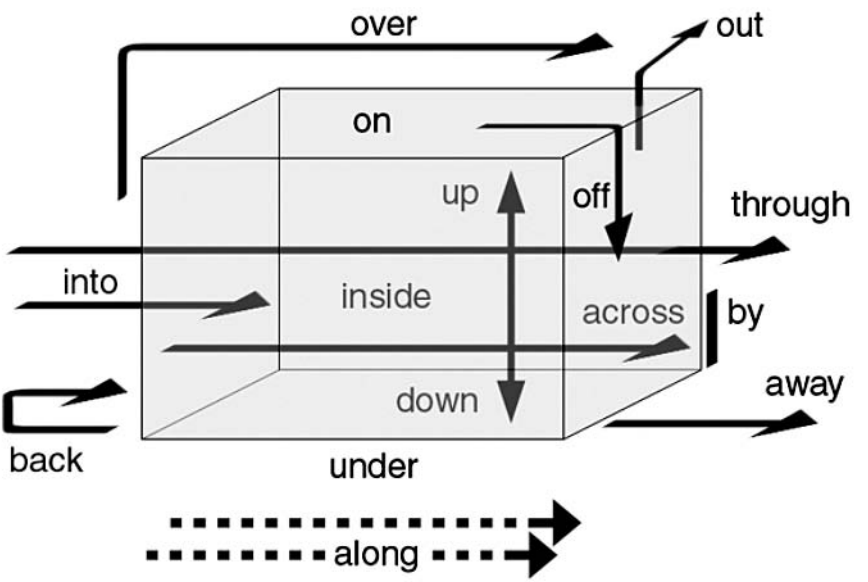
1	The secret has *leaked out*.	
2	He *ran up* a heavy bill.	*accumulated*
3	He *wiped* the event *off* his memory.	*removed completely*

It may still be mentioned here that *away, back* and *out* cannot be used as prepositions.

The spatial, prototypical meaning of the most frequent prepositions/particles can be illustrated as follows (see figure next page):

1	My friend lives ... the street.	*across*
2	The walk ... the river was very pleasant.	*along*
3	The restaurant is only two minutes ... from here.	*away*
4	Could you give me ... the book I lent you months ago?	*back*
5	Their house is ... the church.	*by*

6	The ball rolled ... the hill.	*down*
7	I think that John is ... his room.	*in*
8	Due to a hoax call visitors were not allowed to stay ... the museum.	*inside*
9	We could not go ... the castle.	*into*
10	Two plates fell ... the table.	*off*
11	Could we not hang the picture ... the wall opposite the entrance?	*on*
12	'Ladies and gentlemen, we are now flying ... the North Pole'.	*over*
13	The train was going ... the mountain.	*through*
14	The dog was lying ... the chair.	*under*
15	Take the stairs, the lift doesn't go ... anymore.	*up*



2.2.2 Metaphorical or extended meanings of the particles

The most frequently encountered problem occurs, however, when particles are used *metaphorically,* i.e. when their literal meanings are extended to *abstract,* non-visible domains such as *thoughts, intentions, feelings, attitudes, relations, social and economic interaction,* etc. The non-spatial meaning of verbs such as *wipe out, wear off* are therefore far from obvious for second-language learners of English, even if they know the basic or literal meaning(s) of the verbs:

1 In the Middle Ages epidemics *wiped out* whole cities.	*destroyed completely*
2 As predicted John's initial enthusiasm *wore off* fast.	*(< wear off) diminished*
3 As students we *looked up to* our biology teacher.	*we admired, were full of respect for*
4 Tell me, who are you *to look down on* us?	*to despise, look with contempt at us*
5 We *ran out of* milk when the guests arrived.	*we were without milk*

2.3 The metaphorical meaning of the whole expression *'verb + particle'*

In some cases, it is not enough to know the separate meanings of a verb and a particle to understand the meaning of the phrasal verb resulting from combining both. In the following sentences, the verbs *turn, pick* and *put* have a different meaning from the one they have when used with a concrete meaning as in *turn the inside out, pick up an object from the floor* or *put sth on the stove:*

1 It *turned out* that what he said was not true.	*it was discovered, it became clear*
2 Business is *picking up*.	*is improving, becoming better*
3 For several reasons the meeting was *put off*.	*was cancelled, postponed*

But even with such abstract meanings, there is a far link with the original spatial meaning: *turn out* 'become clear, known' relates to what was formerly *hidden* in the container, *pick up* 'improve' to what was formerly *down,* and *put off* 'postpone' what was formerly *'on the agenda'*.

2.4 A phrasal verb with one particle often has several meanings

Finally, it should be pointed out that with many common phrasal verbs one single particle has several 'different' meanings. On the surface these may look like totally unrelated meanings. Once, however, you gain an insight into the literal and extended or metaphorical meanings of a particle, these 'different meanings' turn out to be closely related. Let's look more closely at **up** in **pick up:**

1 Could you *pick up* the spoon the baby has dropped.	*to lift from the floor (spatial)*
2 The beggar was *picked up* from the street.	*he was taken by the police*
3 Can you *pick* me *up* at 6:30 at the station?	*fetch, collect me by car*
4 I don't know where I *picked up* this cold/flu.	*caught < catch, got*
5 She *picks up* foreign languages in no time.	*she learns, very fast*
6 Trade has *picked up* over the last few months.	*has increased, is higher (figurative)*

The verb **pick** has as its basic meaning 'choose, fetch, take, move' which, joined to *up,* leads to blending the basic meaning into the network of related meanings: moving higher up, make more visible, getting closer to a goal, etc. Cf. the **up**-section.

But before turning to the analysis of the networks of meaning(s) constituted by the particles and the verbs they combine with, it may be useful to look briefly at what language is used for and how it goes about achieving these aims.

3 What do we use language for?

Language allows us to impose order on the world by categorizing or grouping its phenomena into categories or concepts. Thus, certain languages distinguish between animate and inanimate entities, others between human and what is not human, still others between masculine and feminine entities, between small and tall things, between past, present or future events, between events one has witnessed oneself or only heard about, etc.

Conceptual metaphors

The basic question is: how are we able to talk about abstractions or non-observable things like *time, emotions, social relations, interactions, thoughts,* etc., things we cannot see except when they have external consequences? There is usually only one way, namely to see them the way we see concrete objects. Such viewing processes are **metaphors.** Language is essentially metaphorical

since it uses thousands of expressions based on concrete, physical entities in order to express high-level abstractions.

Thanks to the awareness that languages use metaphors, we may readily understand expressions such as:

1 She *covered* herself with glory.	*the way one covers oneself with a coat*
2 The country was in the dictator's *grip*.	*as if he held the country in his fist*
3 How did the news *leak out*?	*the way a liquid comes out of a hole in a container*
4 He is *full of* himself.	*he is thinking only of himself*
5 We were given *an icy* >< a *warm* welcome.	*very unfriendly* >< *friendly*
6 I have *hot* news on *this burning issue*.	*very recent news on an exciting point*
7 His rude behaviour made my blood *boil*.	*caused extreme anger, agitation in me*

In each of the above sentences, we conceive and characterize an abstract reality in terms of a concrete one. And when we talk about our feelings, convictions, fears, hopes, suspicions, relations, we tend to use similar concrete images.

Thus, English phrasal verbs, especially by the metaphorical use of the particle, enable us to conceive of several *abstract* domains in terms of *concrete* domains. We can use this typical transfer from concrete to abstract motion in order to do a number of things:

1 to express the constant changes in and around us:

1 Miniskirts seem to *be in* again this year.	*seem to be popular*
2 Small shops have been *priced out* by supermarkets.	*have been unable to compete*
3 We first have *to test out* the method.	*examine, check*

2 to view people and their bodies (mouths, minds) as containers:

1 He *is full of* himself.	*he is only thinking about himself*
2 He must *be out of his mind* to say that.	*he must be crazy*
3 He *blew up* when I told him that he was wrong.	*he got very angry/exploded*