

PHRASAL VERBS THROUGH THE LENS OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

ANDREEA ROSCA

5 monographs



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PHRASAL VERBS THROUGH THE LENS OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

**A STUDY OF ADVERBIAL PARTICLES IN
BRITISH AND AMERICAN VARIETIES
THROUGH TV CRIME SERIES**

Andreea Rosca

UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA
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APLICADES
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Maquetación: la autora

Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7203/PUV-OA-413-2>

ISSN: 2605-4469

ISBN: 978-84-9133-412-5 (paper)

ISBN: 978-84-9133-413-2 (PDF)

Depósito legal: V-3438-2021

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PREFACE

Linguists, philosophers, and psychologists have been concerned for a long time with the notion of *space* as well as the relationship between spatial experience, language and thought (cf. Tyler & Evans, 2003: ix; Paradis, Hudson, & Magnusson, 2013). This book explores the nature of *embodiment* and how human understanding of spatial relations is linguistically coded in English. To achieve this goal, we look at English spatial particles by drawing from the expertise of Cognitive Linguistics, which combines knowledge from psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy (Evans, Bergen & Zinken, 2007: 5). Together with the lexical verb, the English particle is one of the components included in the semantic makeup of phrasal verbs. The multiple meanings of phrasal verbs represent a well-known challenge in English as linguists have usually considered them as arbitrary and unpredictable (Lipka, 1972; Fraser, 1976). However, Cognitive Linguistics outshines more traditional perspectives by offering a systematic approach to phrasal verbs, which enables language users not only to decipher their meanings but also to find patterns of use and memorize them faster (Boers, 2000; Kurtyka, 2001; Condon, 2008). In our book we provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis of the most productive English particles while explaining how spatial meanings might be extended to create a variety of non-spatial, figurative meanings (Lindner, 1981; Lakoff, 1987; Rudzka-Ostyn, 2003; Tyler & Evans, 2003). Although we base our interpretation of phrasal verbs primarily on Rudzka's (2003) meaning extensions, we also acknowledge the existence of Tyler and Evans' (2003) concept of 'spatial scenes' which lay the foundation for the extension of meaning from the literal/spatial to the figurative.

For all the reasons enumerated above, this book might be regarded as a powerful explanatory tool for English lecturers who wish to make phrasal verbs accessible for their students. It could also be considered as a starting point for MA or PhD students who wish to delve deeper into the study of phrasal verbs. In a nutshell, it is a written record for researchers interested in the analysis of phrasal verbs from the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics.

Another aspect that turns this book into a valuable resource is the fact that it offers a comparative investigation of the most productive phrasal verbs between American and British English by examining a popular subgenre, namely television crime drama. Despite the existence of previous corpus-based studies focusing on the frequency of phrasal verbs (e.g. Biber *et al.*, 1999; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Trebits, 2009; Liu, 2011; Breeze, 2012; Lee, 2015), none of them is as encompassing and specialized as the one carried out in the present book. Our study goes a step beyond as it does not limit itself to merely determining the usefulness of phrasal verbs in terms of their frequency of use, but it expands the scope by providing a solid theoretical framework of analysis for these verbs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Francisca Antonia Suau Jiménez (University of Valencia) for her helpful remarks on the outline and initial proposal of this book. Any remaining weakness is my own responsibility.

I would also like to thank my husband, Emilio, my mother, Elena, and my brother, George, for their constant support and encouragement throughout the whole process.

The research was financed by FEDER/Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, State Research Agency, project no. FFI2017-82730-P.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Phrasal verbs pose a real challenge to English language learners and teachers alike. Many authors have been concerned with the various factors that affect the avoidance or the difficulty of acquiring phrasal verbs: (1) the overwhelming amount of phrasal verbs; (2) their polysemous nature; (3) their complex and unpredictable syntactic rules (e.g. the transitive/intransitive dichotomy, tense and aspect requirements); (4) cross-linguistic differences (e.g. absence of phrasal verbs in L1 – Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Liao & Fukuya, 2004); and (5) substandard textbook presentation (for a more detailed overview see Sinclair, 1989: iv; Trebits: 2009; Alejo, 2010a; Alejo *et al.*, 2010). When discussing the pervasiveness of phrasal verbs, Gardner and Davies (2007: 347) highlight that “learners will encounter, on average, one [phrasal verb] in every 150 words of English they are exposed to”. Aside from the ubiquity of these constructions, Gardner and Davies (2007: 353) corroborate their polysemy by attributing an average of 5.6 different meanings to each of the 100 most frequent phrasal verbs. On top of that, English speakers create new phrasal verbs with ease (Bolinger, 1971). One such example is the phrasal verb *google out* which is a more specific variant of the verb *find out* ‘discover information by using the Google search engine’ (e.g. *I had Googled out a relevant website*)¹.

Given the sheer number of phrasal verbs, L2 learners may find it confusing to decide which ones are more important to learn. Thus, it is

¹ This example was retrieved from the monthly webzine of the Macmillan English Dictionaries: <https://bit.ly/3Cdd01e>.

the linguists' responsibility to prioritise certain phrasal verbs or meanings based on learning objectives, contexts of use, students' level, and frequency of occurrence. As Liu (2011) pointed out, the frequency of phrasal verbs is genre and register specific and as such, L2 learners should be exposed to the most productive phrasal verbs in their own field of study. Regarding the L1 transfer as an inhibiting factor in the acquisition of phrasal verbs, Alejo (2010b) used the MICASE learner corpus to compare the usage patterns of learners with a satellite-framed L1 background (e.g. English, Dutch, German) with those of learners with a verb-framed L1 background (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Portuguese). His findings indicate that learners who speak verb-framed languages show significant evidence of avoidance of phrasal verbs. In addition, even more advanced learners of English display rather impoverished knowledge of the different senses of phrasal verbs as they tend to use the prototypical (locational) meanings instead of the metaphorical ones. This suggests that teachers should provide explicit instruction to raise learners' awareness of the fact that phrasal verbs operate within radial categories and help them explore the more peripheral or figurative meanings. Moreover, it has been claimed that, as a result of the disconnect between the findings of corpus studies and the commercial grammar textbooks, the contents of a syllabus remain largely "based on isolated examples and the intuition of the author as to correctness" (Hughes, 2010: 402). Thus, L2 learners are presented with innumerable lists of phrasal verbs accompanied by their corresponding definitions and explained by means of decontextualized examples, matching or gap-fill exercises (Darwin & Gray, 1999; Gardner & Davies, 2007).

The purpose of this book is threefold. First, it aims to determine the usefulness of phrasal verbs for L2 learners based on their frequency

of occurrence. To this end, we decided to focus on phrasal verbs formed by nine of the most productive particles in the English language: *down*, *in*, *into*, *off*, *on*, *out*, *over*, *through*, and *up* (cf. Sinclair, 1989; Biber *et al.*, 1999). The second goal of this book is to offer a comparative exploration of the most common phrasal verbs in spoken American and British English across the subgenre of television crime dramas. This study emerged from the need to fill the gaps related to phrasal verbs about police investigative work. McCarthy and O'Dell's (2004) textbook includes only phrasal verbs denoting purely criminal activities, such as *break out of sth*, *beat sb up*, *tip sb off*, among others. On the basis of corpus analysis, we propose an alternative list of phrasal verbs that also describe the steps taken by the police in the investigation of a crime. Thus, detectives verify the information received from witnesses or criminals (*check sth out*), take suspects to the police station to be interrogated or arrested (*pick sb up*), broadcast alert notifications to their personnel or other police agencies about a wanted person (*put out an APB*) or can stop people from entering a dangerous area (*close sth off*). For our study, we compiled two corpora composed of spoken dialogues extracted from the transcripts of two TV series: *New Tricks* for British English, and *Castle* for American English. The third goal of this book is to show the crucial role that adverbial particles play in decoding the meaning of phrasal verbs. Regarding the analysis of phrasal verbs, we relied mainly on Rudzka's (2003) cognitive motivations for the different particles as her approach combines both verbal explanations and visual imagery for meaning extensions. For each particle we will explain its central meaning, which is grounded in our spatio-physical interaction with the world. After that, we will present the other figurative meanings extended from the basic one. In

some cases, descriptions were complemented through the addition of cognitive notions proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Langacker (1987, 2008). Our preference for a cognitive perspective is motivated by previous empirical studies according to which a Cognitive Linguistics (CL) proposal to phrasal verbs can enhance their comprehension, retention as well as knowledge transference from learnt to novel phrasal verbs (Kövecses & Szabó, 1996; Boers, 2000; Kurtyka, 2001; Condon, 2008).

This book is structured as follows. Chapter 2 explains the theoretical framework adopted for the interpretation and analysis of phrasal verbs, viz. Cognitive Linguistics. Chapter 3 details the methodological steps followed to carry out this study. Chapter 4 provides information about the frequency results of phrasal verbs combined with each of the abovementioned particles. We will as well pay close attention to the basic meanings and semantic extensions for each particle. In this chapter we also offer an overview of previous corpus-based studies that examined the frequency of phrasal verbs in English. The main objective is to establish connections between these different studies and explain how ours stands out from the rest. Chapter 5 summarizes the main results, discusses the main limitations of this study, and puts forward some pedagogical applications for second language learning and teaching.

CHAPTER 2. CONSTRUALS IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

1. CONSTRUALS

Construals are cognitive operations which determine the way language is used. In the words of Langacker (2008: 43), the term ‘construal’ represents “our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways”. We will now focus on five dimensions of construal that are relevant for the understanding of phrasal verbs. The first two relate to viewing operations (e.g. *viewpoint*, and *mental scanning*), whereas the latter three relate to prominence (e.g. *windowing of attention*, *figure* and *ground* or *trajector* and *landmark*, and *profiling*).

In visual perception, the default viewpoint or *vantage point* is the actual location of the speaker observing a scene. In cognition, we may mentally switch and adopt another person’s perspective. Let us compare the use of the motion verbs *go* and *come* in the sentences *I’m going to your party* and *I’m coming to your party*. In the first one, the verb *go* helps the speaker keep his/her viewpoint. In using *come* in the second example, the speaker takes the hearer’s point of view. The second option is preferred when we wish to sound sympathetic and polite (cf. Radden and Dirven, 2007: 24).

Mental scanning enables us to visualize a situation with respect to its phasing in time. When we hear a sentence like *Our neighbours have just got divorced*, we mentally scan the whole process of divorce as it occurs in time. *Fictive motion*, a subtype of mental scanning, refers

to the construal of a static scene in terms of spatial motion. The sentence *The road rises steeply from the village* illustrates an instance of fictive motion. To process the sentence, we trace a mental path along the road in an upward direction.

Windowing of attention is a cognitive operation whereby our brain performs a subconscious selection of the most salient stimuli for our attention. At a linguistic level, the explicit mention of certain words is intended to direct our attention to selected elements of a scene. For instance, we may decide to ‘window’ the whole route of a bus journey or just its final stretch to the endpoint (e.g. *This bus goes from Birmingham to London* vs. *This bus goes to London*).

The dichotomy figure-ground is intimately linked to attention, in that we automatically categorize the elements of a visual scene into a prominent figure (also called trajector) and a non-prominent background or ground (also landmark). For example, a sudden noise would stand out as a figure against a background of silence. The principle of figure-ground/trajector-landmark alignment also applies to how we think of or conceptualize a situation. Let us take the following sentences *The hunter shot the deer* and *The deer was shot by the hunter*. Although both describe the same scene, they differ with respect to the degree of prominence conferred on the relational participants. In the first example, the hunter appears as the most salient participant (figure/trajector) whereas in the second example, the deer acquires the status of figure/trajector.

A special type of figure-ground relation is the relation holding between an expression and its conceptual *base*. The base is identified as the immediate larger scope that characterizes an expression and

profiling designates a conceptualization by means of a linguistic expression. The word *Monday*, for instance, evokes the conception of a week as its base, within which it profiles the first day.

One last type of construal is *metaphor*, which reflects humans' ability to construe one thing in terms of another. Metaphor is based on *conceptual mapping* or a set of correspondences between two separate domains: a *source domain* which enables us to think, talk and reason about a *target domain* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For the sake of illustration, consider the sentence *We started out from these assumptions* (cf. Taylor, 2002: 12). This makes use of the metaphors STATES ARE LOCATIONS and CHANGES OF STATES ARE CHANGES OF LOCATIONS. The combination of these metaphors enables us to see an initial assumption as a starting point or source location, and mental activity as a journey along a path from a source to a destination. The example also windows our attention only on the starting point of the journey.

2. IMAGE-SCHEMAS

Apart from construals, we consider that the notion of *image-schema* is also crucial for interpreting the central meaning of particles as well as their extended senses. As Johnson (1987) suggested, image-schemas represent pre-conceptual configurations arising from everyday bodily experiences, perceptual interactions, and ways of manipulating objects. For example, the image-schema CONTAINER derives from our recurrent experiences with containers, as pointed out by Johnson (1987) when describing the start of an ordinary day:

You wake **out of** a deep sleep and peer **out from** beneath the covers **into** your room. You gradually emerge **out of** your stupor, pull yourself **out from** under the covers, climb **into** your robe, stretch **out** your limbs, and walk **in** a daze **out of** the bedroom and **into** the bathroom. [...] You reach **into** the medicine cabinet, take **out** the toothpaste, squeeze **out** some toothpaste, put the toothbrush **into** your mouth, brush your teeth **in** a hurry, and rinse **out** your mouth. (Johnson, 1987: 331, our emphasis)

As highlighted by the spatial prepositions *in*, *into*, *out*, *out of* and *out from*, many objects and experiences can be classified as specific instances of the schematic concept CONTAINER. Some of the examples included in this extract may be considered prototypical containers (e.g. bathroom cabinets, toothpaste tubes) whereas others qualify as less canonical containers (e.g. bed-covers, clothing, rooms, or states like daze, sleep, stupor, and hurry).

A basic image-schema can give rise to more specific concepts (cf. Evans and Green, 2006: 180). Consider the visual representation of the CONTAINER schema in Figure 1. This image-schema is composed of structural elements such as an interior, a boundary, and an exterior (Lakoff, 1987).

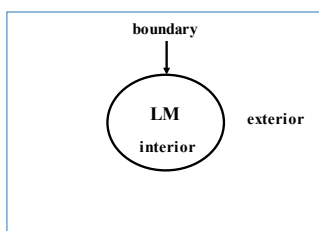


Figure 1. Basic CONTAINER image-schema

The landmark (LM), which is represented by the circle, contains two structural elements: the interior – the area within the boundary –

and the boundary. The exterior is the area outside the circle, contained within the square. From this fundamental schema, other more specific and detailed image-schemas may emerge. A sentence like *Mary went out of the house* may instantiate a different variant of the CONTAINER schema. The related image-schema is diagrammed in Figure 2.

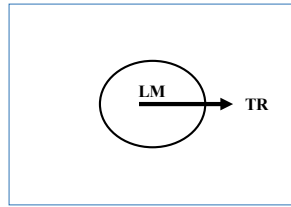


Figure 2. Specific CONTAINER image-schema

The trajector (TR) Mary, which is the entity that undergoes motion, moves from the interior of the LM to a location outside the LM. It should be noted that the second image-schema is more detailed than the first one in that it involves both motion and containment.

Image-schemas can also be internally complex (Evans and Green, 2006: 185). Take for instance the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL (also called PATH schema) illustrated in Figure 3. This schema, which is based on our bodily experience of moving from one location to another, consists of several structural elements: a SOURCE or starting point, a destination or GOAL, a PATH (a series of contiguous locations connecting the source and the destination), and a DIRECTION (orientation toward the destination).

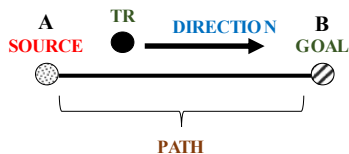


Figure 3. The PATH image schema

Due to its internal complexity, we can profile different components of the PATH schema, as shown in the discussion of windowing of attention (e.g. SOURCE: *Susan left Spain*; GOAL: *Susan travelled to Germany*).

Other image-schemas relevant to the interpretation of the adverbial particles found in our work are the VERTICALITY, the CONTACT, and the SUPPORT schemas. The first one underlies the particles *up* and *down* whereas the second and the third one help us explain the linguistic unit *on*. The VERTICALITY schema is based on the UP-DOWN organization of the human body and the fact that we use this orientation to discern meaningful structures of our experience. As Johnson (1987) states, the structure of verticality arises from daily perceptions and activities such as perceiving a tree, our sense of standing upright, the activity of climbing stairs or watching water rise in the bathtub. For Navarro i Ferrando (1999), the conceptual schema of *on* combines three types of image-schema belonging to three dynamic configurations: a topological configuration, a functional configuration, and a force-dynamic configuration. The interaction of these image-schemas is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

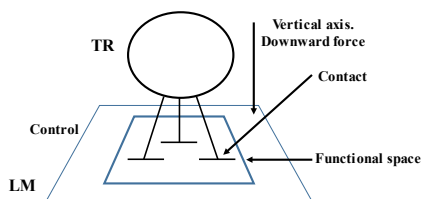


Figure 4. Basic CONTACT and SUPPORT schemas

Thus, *on* describes a topological relation of two entities in contact: a TR and a LM (CONTACT image-schema), where the TR performs a function of control over the LM through contact of its resting side with the external part of the LM (SUPPORT schema). Finally, the force exerted by the TR is directed downwards along a vertical axis (UP-DOWN schema).

3. PHRASAL VERBS IN COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

In the late 20th century, Bolinger (1971: 6) dwelt upon the lack of consensus about what qualifies as a phrasal verb by asserting that “being or not being a phrasal verb is a matter of degree”. Similarly, Gardner and Davies (2007: 341) pointed out that “linguists and grammarians struggle with nuances of phrasal verb definitions” even though such distinctions matter very little for the average L2 learner. Most English grammars agree that a phrasal verb is a combination between a lexical verb and one or more prepositions or adverbial particles whose meaning cannot be strictly predicted from its component parts (Quirk *et al.*, 1985).

This book has three main aims: (i) to determine the usefulness of English phrasal verbs for L2 learners based on their frequency of occurrence; (ii) to offer a comparative exploration of the most common phrasal verbs in spoken American and British English across the subgenre of television crime dramas, and (iii) to show the crucial role that adverbial particles play in decoding the meaning of phrasal verbs.

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