

UNIT 22

MULTI-WORD VERBS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Verbal expressions pose a significant challenge for our students when studying English as a foreign language. As these expressions play a crucial role in the curriculum, it is our responsibility as teachers to help them understand and use them accurately, enabling them to communicate effectively in the foreign language. This unit focuses on the complex group of verbs known as "multi-word verbs," which are formed by combining one or two particles with the main verb. We will analyze the nature of these particles to identify the verb's components and where the rest of the predicate begins. Through syntactic analysis, we can classify multi-word verbs into various categories. Additionally, we will examine semantic aspects since these combinations are often idiomatic, such as "call off," "pull through," and "run out of." We will also consider pragmatic aspects, such as choosing between a multi-word verb and a lexical item of Latin origin, like "put out" versus "extinguish." Therefore, this unit is significant for SLT as it covers concepts related to verbs, particularly the problematic multi-word verbs.

2. PHRASAL VERBS

The usage of phrasal verbs is widespread in modern English. The selection of using a phrasal verb or a one-word synonym can indicate a shift in register. A single-word equivalent is often more informal and commonly used in spoken language, while phrasal verbs are frequently employed in written discourse. Our students must understand this distinction and try to use both options, taking register into account.

Phrasal verbs consist of a combination of a lexical verb and an adverbial particle, forming a new unit that is both syntactically and semantically distinct. For instance, "The prisoner managed to get away," "The days are drawing in as autumn approaches," and "It is not always easy to think up original ideas." From a syntactic perspective, the verb and the particle constitute the verb phrase, and as the Head of the Predicate, a phrasal verb can accept various complements, such as V [trans] + DO (e.g., to think up original ideas) or V [intrans] + AdvC (e.g., are drawing in as autumn approaches).

As demonstrated above, phrasal verbs can receive various complements and are primarily categorized as transitive or intransitive.

2.1. INTRANSITIVE PHRASAL VERBS

Intransitive phrasal verbs generally appear in isolation in the predicate, such as in "music died away." Alternatively, they may be followed by adverbial complements indicating manner, place, time, and so on, as in "a car pulled up suddenly at the traffic lights."

Frequently, the particle of an intransitive phrasal verb is a "prepositional adverb" that is a preposition with a generalized ellipsis of its complement. Consequently, they can be regarded as transitive forms but with the object deleted or understood, such as in "They drove past" (meaning past the house, etc.).

2.2. TRANSITIVE PHRASAL VERBS

However, transitive phrasal verbs are those which typically take a direct object. E.g. They called off the meeting. This group of verbs allow different positions of the object

1. [V + DO + AdvPrt] or [V + AdvPrt + DO]

With transitive phrasal verbs, the particle in most cases may either precede or follow the object, if this is realised by a Nominal Group with a Noun as Head; so following the example we could also say: “They called off the meeting or They called the meeting off”. The choice of a discontinuous structure allows the speaker to emphasise either the object or the verbal process. This choice could not be possible with a one-word equivalent, such as “cancel”

2. [V + DO + AdvPrt]

There are, however, certain pragmatic restrictions concerning specific combinations. Consider, for instance, the preference for the pattern [V + DO + AdvPrt] with the following phrasal verbs: They managed to bring the girl round (not *to bring round the girl) They told the child off (not *told off the child)

3. [V + AdvPrt + DO]

By contrast, the pattern [V+ AdvPrt+ DO] is preferred with other Combinations, such as “She gave up smoking. (not *gave smoking up)”

But there are also some exceptional cases.

- Moreover, when the DO is realised by a **pronoun**, the pattern [V+DO +AdvPrt] is the norm. Thus, we say: “they called it off/ she gave it up/ they managed to bring her round”
- Exceptionally, though, an object pronoun can receive "end-focus" for contrastive purposes “they ruled out me but not Peter”
- Finally, when the Do is long. It is normally placed at the end, thus avoiding the gap between verb and particle, as in: “He rang up all the friends he had made on the Mediterranean cruise”. (not: rang ...up.)”.

2.3. ERGATIVE PHRASAL VERBS

A third group of phrasal verbs consists of a few verbs that can be used transitively or intransitively and are commonly known as "ergative" phrasal verbs in grammar. With these verbs, the Object of the transitive clause can become the Subject of the intransitive clause. Ergative phrasal verbs enable us to describe an action from the perspective of the performers of the action or from the viewpoint of something that is affected by the action. This is demonstrated in the following examples: "Terrorists have blown up the power station" or "The power station has blown up."

In addition to these groups, a significant number of phrasal verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively, but with different meanings. For example, in "They broke down the door to rescue the child" and "Her health broke down under the strain," the verb "break down" is used transitively and intransitively, but with different meanings.

3. PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

Before we begin, it is important to distinguish prepositional verbs from simple sequences of a verb and a preposition, such as "sit under a tree." Prepositional verbs form much closer combinations, such as "they went down the street." While the meaning of a prepositional verb is usually the sum of the verb and the preposition, this is not always the case. Therefore, a prepositional verb is a combination of a lexical verb and a preposition that are semantically associated, as shown in these examples: "The police are looking into the matter," "The man came at me with a gun in his hand," and "I'm your friend, I'll stand by you." Prepositional verbs can also be classified as transitive or intransitive.

3.1. INTRANSITIVE PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

It is important to note that intransitive prepositional verbs are often idiomatic, but syntactically, the verb and the preposition do not form a unit. Instead, there is a Verb Phrase followed by a Prepositional Phrase, with the Prepositional Phrase functioning as a Prepositional Object, which is a specific type of Complement for

prepositional verbs. Prepositional Objects are obligatory, and the preposition cannot be changed or omitted.

However, like Adverbial Complements, Prepositional Objects can often accommodate adverbs between the verb and the preposition, as in "The police are looking carefully into the matter." The boundary between the verb and the preposition is suggested by the fact that prepositions like "rely on" collocate with specific prepositions and cannot occur without them.

In addition, Prepositional Objects resemble Direct Objects, as when a prepositional verb appears in the passive voice, the Prepositional Object becomes the Subject, and the preposition is stranded, as in "The matter is being looked into."

3.2. TRANSITIVE PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

Certain prepositional verbs take two NPs as their complements, where the first NP functions as the Object of the verb and the second NP as the Object of the preposition, as in "He talked me into it / Susan congratulated Tom on his birthday".

Many of these combinations form an idiomatic unit with the verb and the preposition from a semantic point of view. For example, "catch sight of" and "lose touch with" in the sentences "We suddenly caught sight of her among the crowd / I have lost touch with most of my school friends".

4. PHRASAL OR PREPOSITIONAL

So far we have defined and classified the so-called "multi-word" verbs according to their syntactic patterns. The adoption of syntactic criteria is useful because the syntactic analysis enables us to distinguish a phrasal verb from a prepositional verb in all cases. And we need such a distinction because sometimes phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs are very much alike. Compare, for example: they called up all young men (phrasal)/ they called on their friends (prepositional)". There are other cases in

which a word can be both adverb or preposition: as in the following examples: “He run up the hill” (prepositional) and “he run up the bill” (adverb).

“Call up” is a phrasal verb and “call on” a prepositional verb. Both combinations have an idiomatic meaning, but differ at least in four respects, that are the following according to **Quirk and Greenbaum**:

- (a) The adverbial particle *up* is **stressed** whereas the preposition *on* is unstressed.
- (b) The **preposition** always precedes its complement, even when it is a pronoun: “they called on them” but “they called them up”
- (c) An **adverb** can potentially be placed between a verb and a following preposition, whereas phrasal verbs do not admit an adverb between the verb and the particle: “they called early on their friends” is a correct sentence, however * “They called immediately up all young men” is ungrammatical.
- (d) A **relative** pronoun can often be preceded by a preposition but not by a particle, Thus, we can say: “the friends on whom they called were not at home”, But not: * “the young men up whom they called”. The same happens in questions as the **interrogative** particle can be precede by preposition but not by an adverb, so we could say: “on whom did they call?”

So, by applying so me simple tests as these we will be able to determine the nature of the particle which follows the verb, i.e. an adverbial particle or a preposition.

One characteristic both of phrasal and prepositional verbs is that when there is a verb following them, it is normally in the –ing form (he carried on working). However, in some cases, to express purpose, it may be in the to-infinitive (he set out to do his homework).

5. PHRASAL-PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

A further type of "multi-word" verb is a three-part combination consisting of a verb, an adverbial particle and an obligatory preposition. Most of these verbs are INTRANSITIVE, the preposition at the end is followed by its own object. As e.g. in: You must stand up for your principles / The missile zeros in on the target / I can't put up with his behaviour.

However, some combinations of this kind are TRANSITIVE and they take two objects. In this case the DO of the verb comes immediately after the verb and a second object accompanies the preposition. “ Some people put success down to sheer luck/ the other boys have it in for him / the shopkeeper did me out of 50 pence”.

And certain phrasal-prepositional verbs can occur in the passive: “All the old regulations were done away with.”

6. DEGREES OF IDIOMATICITY

Multi-word verbs and, in particular, phrasal verbs may present several degrees of idiomaticity. For practical purposes, we shall distinguish between non-idiomatic, semi-idiomatic and fully idiomatic combinations.

6.1. NON-IDIOMATIC COMBINATIONS

We talk about non-idiomatic combinations when the meaning is transparent, so it can be deduced from the parts. The verb and the particle each keeps its own meaning, the sum of the meanings being one of movement plus direction. The particle indicates the direction of the movement, while the lexical verb indicates the manner: as in the following examples: “Water gets in through the cracks in the roof / Temperatures went down last night” .

Sometimes we can replace the basic lexical verb by a more specific verb of movement, while retaining the same particle: “The man went (ran, rushed, sidled, crept) out when we saw the policeman”. In this way, a situation or event can be expressed in a

basic analytical way or by means of lexical verbs with physical, emotive, or other connotations.

Other non idiomatic combinations are verbs followed by prepositions where the verb has a real meaning but it needs to be followed by a preposition when accompanied by a complement, this happens in the case of “believe in” and “listen to”. When there is no complement the preposition is not needed (please, listen!).

6.2. SEMI-IDIOMATIC COMBINATIONS

The lexical verb, generally speaking, keeps its meaning while the particle is used as an intensifier or an aspectual marker of perfectivity in the sense of completion. The notion of completion is most clear in those cases in which there is a contrast with a single verb. Compare, for instance:

“I’ve used this detergent (= some of this detergent) I’ve used up this detergent (=there is none left)” .

In other cases, perfectivity is interpreted in various ways, according to the situation represented by the clause. Some of the many shades of meaning are illustrated in the following examples:

My patience is beginning to give out (=come to an end)

Remember to put out the lights before you go out. (=extinguish)

It looks as if this war will go on forever. (=continue)

Just hold on a second while I put my shoes on. (=wait)

6.3. FULLY-IDIOMATIC COMBINATIONS

Fully-idiomatic combinations are those in which the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from the parts, so the meaning is opaque. However, it is by no means easy to establish boundaries between what is idiomatic and what is not. Many verbs have a number of related meanings according to their collocation with different nouns and to the contexts in which they are used. For instance, the phrasal verb “put up” yields the following examples:

The boys have put up the tent (armar)

They put the bus fares up (aumentar)

I can put you up for a couple of nights (alojar)

The project has been approved, but someone will have to put up the necessary fund (aportar)

As can be seen from these examples, the degree of semantic cohesion between the verb and the particle varies considerably from one use to another, so it is difficult to measure the idiomaticity accurately.

7. NOUNS AND ADJECTIVES DERIVED FROM PHRASAL VERBS

Phrasal verbs are so commonly used in English that many of them have become nouns: We had a breakdown on the motorway / We have a crew on standby;

Some “phrasal noun” can have different meanings: I nearly missed my flight due to a traffic hold-up (atasco) / Two people were wounded in a bank hold-up. (atracó).

Finally, we should point out a few adjectives which are formed in a similar way to phrasal nouns, e.g. “take-away” food is food that is sold to be eaten somewhere else. And a “stand-in” person is someone who does someone else's job for a short time, for example if the other person is ill or away: “I'm trying to arrange a stand-in lecturer”

8. CONCLUSION

I want to add as a conclusion that foreign students of English, as Spanish are, find lots of difficulties when dealing with the translation of these multiword verbs. They could almost guess the meaning of the verb combination with literal meaning. But with the idiomatic verbs is different since they have to study the meaning of each combination of verb + adverb. So we get to the common idea that the use of these verbs can only be properly learnt with practice, because this is not a grammar problem but a question of lexical comprehension.

To sum up, since our curriculum puts special emphasis on the fact that students have to become competent users of the foreign language, they should be able to use and understand multiword verbs. Since a misunderstanding of a single word can lead to a misinterpretation of the whole message

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9.2. LEGISLATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- **Royal Decree 217/2022**, of March 29.
- **Royal Decree 243/2022**, of April 5.
- **Royal Decree 205/2023**, of March 28.
- **Decree** (aquí puedes añadir el Decreto específico de tu Comunidad Autónoma).

9.3. WEB RESOURCES

- <https://schools.duolingo.com/>
- <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/>
- <https://kahoot.com/>