

PHRASAL VERBS IN POLITICS

Introduction

Although there are linguists who have suggested and used other terms instead of 'phrasal verbs', this paper will use the term as such, as it is widely accepted in English grammar. Phrasal verbs have always been a challenge both for students and teachers, causing anxiety not only due to their syntactic and semantic complexity, but also to their unpredictability. The next problem is whether it is appropriate to use them in formal English or not. Regarded as an intriguing linguistic phenomenon, phrasal verbs have been highly polysemous, characterized by different levels of idiomacity, thus causing difficulties especially to language learners.

Literature Review

The presence of phrasal verbs in the English language is undeniable. Being "the most productive pattern of the English language" (Cubillo, 2002:95), they have been "frequently criticized and occasionally praised" (Wild, 2010:2), analyzed, defined, classified and described even from the beginning of late nineteenth century.

As McArthur (1989) put it, they have always been a vigorous part of English. Phrasal verbs are highly productive and their exact number cannot be determined. Some of them are common, some of them are rare, some of them are formal.

Over the years numerous attempts have been made to compile them into various specialized dictionaries of phrasal verbs (*Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus* (2011), *Really Learn 100 Phrasal Verbs for Business*, (2008), *Cambridge Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2006), *The Ultimate Phrasal Verb Book* (2009), *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1994), etc.) or online resources listing phrasal verbs (and their meanings) according to their frequency of occurrence (see annex 1).

Some linguists argue that, in formal registers, the use of phrasal verbs should be avoided and should be replaced by their single-word equivalent. Others disagree (Sinclair, Hanks & Moon, 1994), as the language may sound pompous or over-formal. There are even linguists (McCarthy & O'Dell, 2008:20) who uphold the use of phrasal verbs in formal contexts, arguing that they "seem to be a lot more vivid and emphatic than their single verb counterpart" (Hampe, 2002:110). In addition, their avoidance may lead to lengthy circumlocutions (Darwin & Gray,

1999:65) or to the situation when students get lower marks if the words they use are too formal (Walter, 2005).

Despite criticism, phrasal verbs have been frequently used in all registers (from general to technical or business English), informal, colloquial and formal language (Wild, 2010:2), written or spoken English.

Phrasal Verbs: Syntactic and Semantic Features

Defined as combinations of two or three elements (a verb and a particle and/or a preposition) that function as single units, many linguists and researchers have recognized their importance and have suggested various approaches to make their acquisition more effective.

Linguists have suggested various classifications of phrasal verbs. Thus they can be classified into the following categories:

- **intransitive** (they don't take an object)

e.g. *keep up* = *maintain, continue*, e.g. *Can politics keep up with the rise of high-tech cities?*;

- **transitive inseparable** (they can take an object but the verb cannot be separated from its particle)

e.g. *bring up* = *raise or tackle a topic*; e.g. *President John F. Kennedy brought up the issue of tax reduction in his 1963 State of the Union address*;

- **transitive separable** (they can be separated by the object which can be placed between the verb and the particle or after the verb)

e.g. *bring forward* = *propose for discussion*; e.g. *Greek government brings forward key presidential vote to this month*;

- **three-part transitive inseparable**

e.g. *put up with* = *endure, tolerate* e.g. *Some will cause you to put up with inconveniences and to make sacrifices.* (President Carter's speech April 18th, 1977)

The syntactic patterns of the transitive phrasal verbs may include verb + adverb + noun; verb + noun + adverb; verb + pronoun + adverb.

Ditransitive phrasal verbs have two objects, a direct object and an indirect object, for example *hand in* = *submit a document, letter of application, resignation, etc. to a person in authority*.

e.g. *Italian President Giorgio Napolitano handed in his resignation as head of state today (14 January), leaving Prime Minister Matteo Renzi with the politically delicate task of finding a successor.* (Euractiv.com)

Intransitive verbs do not have an object and their pattern includes a verb and an adverb, for instance *level off* = *stop changing or developing, stabilize*. Ergative verbs can be either transitive or intransitive. When intransitive, their pattern includes a verb + an adverb, for instance *give in* – when it is intransitive, it has the following pattern: verb + adverb; its basic meaning is *surrender*, for instance: *Never*

give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy. (Winston Churchill' famous quotes, <http://www.goodreads.com>) When it is transitive, its basic meaning is *hand in* and its pattern may involve verb + adverb + noun or verb + noun + adverb or verb + pronoun + adverb.

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999:432-433) distinguish between literal, aspectual (semi-idiomatic) and idiomatic phrasal verbs (the most challenging ones, causing difficulties to language learners as their meaning cannot be deduced from their elements), e.g. (*put off – postpone, tell off – criticize, touch off – cause something to happen*, e.g. *The attack touched off the world struggle that Churchill would later call "The Unnecessary War" because he felt a firm policy toward aggressor nations after World War I would have prevented the conflict.* (The Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill)

Downing & Locke (2006) classify phrasal verbs into three categories: non-idiomatic (are commonly used in every-day speech and are semantically transparent), semi-idiomatic (their meaning can be predicted) and fully idiomatic (the meaning of these phrasal verbs cannot be deduced easily, but the context can be helpful).

Phrasal Verbs in Politics

The political discourse is characterized by an amalgamation of registers and genres, strategies for persuading audience, abundance of figurative language, semantic and lexical choices, etc. It mainly includes the text and the talks of state institutions, professional politicians and political parties.

Political speeches are usually prepared in advance and are tailored to the audience, topic or situation in which they will be delivered. They use the words and phrases that will convey the message most effectively to the audience. In this respect, the use of a plain language is highly recommended so that the messages can be easily understood by the intended audience. As phrasal verbs are very popular among the native speakers, their presence in political speeches, government press releases, political debates, etc. is justified by the vibrancy they provide to the discourse, making it more appealing to the audience.

Although linguists argue that the use of phrasal verbs should be avoided in written discourse, as they are characteristic of informal or colloquial English and the use of a Latinate verb with the same illocutionary force is recommended, there are many situations when the use of a phrasal verb is more appropriate than a single-word equivalent, especially in political speeches, as they sound natural and have a greater impact upon the audience.

However, there are cases when this is not possible, an example in point being *shore up* which cannot always be replaced with 'uphold' (*prop up* means

almost the same as *shore up*, as in *Portugal uses EU bailout cash to shore up troubled Banco Espírito Santo* (The Guardian); *White House works to shore up support for fast-track Bill before Friday vote* (The Wall Street Journal))

Due to their presence the message conveyed sounds more natural and establishes mutual understanding between politicians and their audience. For instance, let's consider the following excerpt from David Cameron's speech:

(a) *Our first priority is to **kill off** the spectre of massive sovereign debts. Those who argue that they are **dealing with** our deficit and promoting growth are somehow (...) wrong. You cannot **put off** the first in order to promote the second.* (weforum)

	Meaning	Synonym(s) – Latinate verb
<i>kill off</i>	to put an end to, to wipe out	to destroy, to eradicate (formal)
<i>deal with</i>	to take action in order to solve a problem	to handle, to tackle
<i>put off</i>	to hold back to a later time	to postpone, to delay

In variant (b), we replaced the phrasal verbs with their single-word equivalent:

(b) *Our first priority is to **eradicate** the spectre of massive sovereign debts. Those who argue that are **handling** our deficit and promoting growth are somehow (...) wrong. You cannot **postpone** the first in order to promote the second.*

The sentences in the first variant are more concise, the message is conveyed more efficiently, the language sounds more natural and thus effective communication is enhanced. Even if *put off* is more idiomatic, its meaning can be deduced from the context. The second variant sounds more formal, less forceful and therefore it may not be appealing to the target audience.

The appropriacy and formality of a phrasal verb depends highly on the context. Numerous phrasal verbs are informal, some are neutral but there are several phrasal verbs generally accepted as formal (Marks, 2005) such as *infringe on/upon, adhere to, complain of, point out* (frequently used in academic writing), etc.

If we consider a government press release from May 7th, 2015, focusing on the presence of phrasal verbs, it reveals interesting findings. As shown in the table below, the number of phrasal verbs used in a government press release is significant. Mention must be made here of the nouns and adjectives derived from phrasal verbs and which are, according to Bolinger (1971), "the most prolific source of new nouns in English".

Phrasal Verb	Meaning
to mount up	- to increase, to go up, to build up
to go down (twice)	- to decrease, to fall down
to turn down (twice)	- to reduce, to reject
to pick up	- to increase slightly
to speed up	- to increase, to accelerate
to drop off	- to diminish, to fall off
to fall in	- to collapse, to cave in
to take up	- to resume, to adopt

In point of idiomaticity, *go down*, *speed up*, and *drop off* are non-idiomatic, *turn down*, *fall in* are semi-idiomatic and *mount up*, *pick up* and *take up* may be included in the category of full idiomatic verbs that could generate difficulties to language learners.

Set, *put*, *take*, *go* are included in the category of 'light' verbs, with little semantic content but that are very productive (Wild, 2010:15). *Set up* is an example of a very productive phrasal verb as it has six different meanings, all of them being used in the political discourse but the highest frequency of occurrence is recorded when it means *to establish (according to law or provision)*,

e.g.: *EU Parliament could still set up a committee of inquiry* (euranetplus) *Put forth*, although more idiomatic, is also used in politics as it means *to present something for consideration or judgment* as in *A motion put forth by Prime Minister Harper said Canada planned to extend its mission until March 2016 and begin launching air strikes in Syria.*(news-en.fb) *Put forward* is another example in case, it is also more idiomatic and is used with the meaning *to propose for discussion*,

e.g. *Eurozone finance ministers have put forward a four page draft proposal which Greek officials have described as "very bad" and designed to humiliate Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his left-wing Syriza government.*(ibtimes.co.uk)

In order to check the meaning and usage of a more idiomatic phrasal verb, the use of specialized dictionaries as well as concordances is recommended, as they display the occurrences of a word or combination of words.

Conclusions

Phrasal verbs play a very important part in English today and are still currently very productive. The objections against using phrasal verbs in formal contexts, in general, have subsided in recent years, indicating a growing awareness among linguists and researchers.

Phrasal verbs are regarded as idiomatic phenomena and are present in all types of texts. Being part of every-day speech, phrasal verbs are used in political

discourse as they convey information more efficiently, since single-word verbs are sometimes less common.

Due to their idiomatic nature and to the fact that they cannot be translated literally, non-native students of English prefer in most cases to use a single-word verb, whereas English native speakers choose a phrasal verb instead.

Acquiring the various meanings of the phrasal verbs in specialized contexts (at least the most commonly used ones) is a complex task and requires a tedious process of learning and hard practice. Language learners must be provided with phrasal verbs in various contexts and should be encouraged to use them in order to ensure fluency and to develop natural-sounding English.

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Annex 1

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LES COLLOCATIONS VERBALES DANS LE DOMAINE POLITIQUE

Résumé: *À l'avis de certains linguistes, les collocations verbales figées en anglais sont imprévisibles et familières. Certains autres linguistes soutiennent que, grâce à leur distribution dans l'anglais contemporain, elles ne sont plus familières et colloquiales, et leur maîtrise assure la fluence de l'expression dans la langue étrangère. À cause des changements courants dans notre société, de nouveaux verbes sont inventés, étant promus dans le discours courant. Comme la source la plus active et productive est la vie politique, transmise via les médias, l'article analyse l'utilisation des combinaisons figées en politique.*

Mots-clés: *collocations verbales, discours, politique.*