

Teaching English Verb-Particle Combinations to Arab ESL Students

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Verb-Particle Combinations (V-PCs)

English has a continual need to make up new verbs. One of the most common ways of making up new verbs in the Indo-European languages has been to fuse a verb stem and particle to make a new verb. In Latin, the particle was attached to the beginning of the verb. Here are some examples of verbs made in this way that have come into English:

compel Lat *com* "with, together" + *pello* "drive, force"

devour Lat *de* "down, from" + *voro* "swallow"

exceed Lat *ex* "out" + *cedo* "go away, withdraw"

Many English verbs are made up with particles prefixed in the Latin manner, for example:

by pass, overestimate, downplay, overlook, forget, understand, upset, offset, withdraw, withstand, overcome.

However, most English V-PCs are made with the particle used as a suffix rather than as a prefix, e.g.

go for, bring round, fall for, run down, walk into (food), bear out, get over, give up, keep up with, look up, look up to, make for, make up for, make up to, put off, put up with, stand down, stand for, stand up for, stand up to, turn in, turn on, turn out.

V-PCs are mainly colloquial; that is they appear first as slang or part of a specialized technical jargon. If the combinations withstand the passage of time, they become an unobjectionable part of the English vocabulary.

Semantic Spreading Out

Bolinger (1971, p. 33) argues that we have to use what he calls "a kind of semantic

spreading out." That is, V-PCs are frequently used in preference to verbs of classical origin which have similar meanings but unsuitable overtones of formality, pomposity or difficulty. Instead of placing a fat bundle of semantic features into one word, matters can be more flexible by packing thinner bundles into two or three or more words. In other words, he would prefer *spreading* rather than *overloading*, for example:

He *discarded* the trash. (overloading)

He *threw out* the trash. (spreading)

He *estimated* the situation and *provided* figures. (overloading)

He *sized up* the situation and *gave in* figures. (spreading)

Problems of Teaching V-PCs to Arab ESL Students

Arab ESL students are introduced to V-PCs at a later stage of learning English. During the early stages, they are taught that certain recurring segments possess

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unique and constant meanings. They are taught, for instance, that certain monosyllabic verbs such as *go*, *bring*, *come*, *fall*, *run*, *turn*, *walk* are verbs of movement, and that certain other verbs have core meanings attached to them, e.g.

to squeeze = to press on; get (water, juice) out of sth,

to salt = to add salt to food,

to shut = to close,

to act = to do something,

to build = to erect.

Particles such as: *for, up, away, down, across, to, out, over, with, on*, etc. are also taught as separate words with core meanings attached to them.

This tendency of learning 'separate' words is reinforced by the fact that ESL activities in many parts of the Arab world are basically text-book centered. Students are, therefore, introduced first to written modes of English characterized by what Bolinger describes as 'overloading.' Arab students learn verbs such as:

to extinguish, to encounter, to corroborate, to compensate, etc.,

before they are introduced to simpler synonyms such as:

put out, run up against, bear out, and make up for.

When the Arab learner is introduced to a V-PC such as *go for*, he tries to deduce the meaning of the whole from the sum of the meanings of the component parts which he has learnt as separate segments. In an utterance like:

He went for a walk.

the Arab learner will find no trouble as the component parts *go* and *for* keep what he has learnt as their 'basic' meanings. But trouble begins when he reads *go for* in the following various linguistic contexts:

-In investing money some people *go for* (=aim at; have an objective) a more or less assured dividend, others for capital increase.

-I let him have his say, and then I *went for him* (=attacked) and told him just what I thought.

-What I've said about this person *goes for* (=applies to) anyone else whom I find trespassing on my land.

The Arab learner will be overwhelmed by the multiplicity of meanings of V-PC *go for*, none of which relates to the meanings of the individual parts. Similar multiple meanings for the 'same' V-PC are suggested by *put up*:

-I'll *put you up* (=accommodate) for the weekend.

-They *put me up* to the situation. (gave me an idea)

-I can't *put up* with (tolerate) his misbehaviour.

-I'll *put up* your name for the football team.

Classification of V-PCs

The 'neutral' term 'particle' has been adopted to designate both adverbs and prepositions. This approach derives from Mitchell's (1958, p. 103) classification of particle verbs:

Mitchell distinguishes two main categories: 'phrasal' and 'prepositional' to which we may add a third: the 'copula + particle.'

1. Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs have the following features:

a) The particle can be either pre- or post-nominal, e.g.

He put (on) his coat (on).

He called (up) her parents (up).

He made (up) the story (up).

The company turned (down) the offer (down).

It puts (out) a lot of news (out).

The separability of the particle from the verb itself is a purely formal matter, with no effect on meaning. If the object is long, however, it can come only after the particle:

It puts out a lot of news that you don't see anywhere else.

Phrasal verbs with two or more particles must occur in pre-nominal position:

The children *talked back to* their mother.

John *came up with* an idea.

Everyone *looked down on* them.

They *walked out on* us.

b) Pronouns usually precede the particle:

They made *it* up.

The company turned *it* down.

The habitual placing of the pronoun before the particle is explained by Erades (1961) as being generally due to their (i.e. 'the pronouns') weak stress.

c) Adverbs cannot intervene between the verb and particle. We can say:

He *turned up* at seven o'clock, and

We *took off* for Memphis, but not

*He turned *suddenly* up at seven o'clock, or

*We took *immediately* off for Memphis.

d) The particle component can be, and generally is, fully stressed:

The pilot flew *in* the plane.

The pilot flew the plane *in*.

She tried *on* the dress.

She tried the dress *on*.

e) When final and not in post-nominal position, the particle is pronounced in a kinetic tone. Strang (1962, p. 159) suggests that one should think in terms of "a complex of related differences (a superfix) part stress, part rhythm, part intonation."

2. Prepositional Verbs

Prepositional verbs have the following features:

a) Non-interpolability of (pro) nouns between verb and particle:

He *turned down* the driveway.
(V + P)

He *turned down* the offer. (Phrasal Verb)

He *turned* the offer *down*. (Phrasal Verb)

This change is impossible with the preposition:

*He *turned* the driveway *down*.

b) *Expansion*: A verb-preposition combination can be divided by an adverb, but a verb-adverb combination cannot, for example:

He *turned up* (=discovered) a new manuscript. (Phrasal Verb)

He *turned* (sharply) *up* the country road. (V + P)

c) A single verb is often commutable with a prepositional verb. This criterion covers such a wide range of possibilities (*go down* = 'descend', *ask for* = 'request') that it can provide no reliable indication of the degree of V-P linkage.

There are a few criteria not referred to by Mitchell which have been made

use of by other grammarians to distinguish phrasal and non-phrasal verbs. Grammarians note that phrasal verbs, as opposed to prepositional verbs, cannot undergo a relative transformation with the particle detached from the verb and preceding the relative pronoun:

They *came across* the bridge
(V + P)

The bridge *across* which they *came*.

They *came across* the man. (Phrasal Verb)

but not *The man *across* whom they *came*.

But compare:

*Up he turned. *Off he took.

It appears that some prepositional verbs, and notably those with close V-P linkage, share the restrictions of phrasal verbs in their behaviour under relative transformation.

Another criterion, not mentioned by Mitchell, is that of 'substitution.' A word is an adverbial extension when it forms such a unit with the verb that this unit can be replaced by one single verb without any change occurring in the structural arrangement of the utterance, for example:

bring round = persuade

fall for = love

run down = defame

walk into (food) = eat (heartily)

keep up with = keep level with

look up = verify (by reference to books or documents)

look up to (someone) = admire

make for = be conducive to

make off with = steal

make up for = compensate

make up to = attempt to curry favour with

stand down = withdraw (from a contest)

stand for = represent

stand up for = support (morally or verbally)

However, many other combinations may be replaced by a single verb:

look at = examine

go before = precede

The restriction that 'the structural ar-

rangement of the utterance' should not be changed is semantic—the meaning of the whole utterance will still remain unchanged. The substitution criterion is also used to demonstrate that prepositional verbs are in some cases to be treated as units.

Where the same particle is used both as an adverb and as a preposition, it is often difficult to distinguish between them. Three guidelines are:

a) The adverb can stand alone whereas the preposition cannot, e.g.

Come in! Go out!, etc.

b) Prepositions with an accompanying noun form a phrase which in itself makes sense, e.g. up the road, under the table, through the door, etc. When the particle is used as an adverb the phrase can't make sense by itself, e.g. (put) down his hat, (turn) off the tap, etc.

c) The adverb and the noun accompanying it can change positions, e.g.

He put (on) his coat (on).

3. Copula Verbs + Particles

The distinction between lexical verbs and copula verbs has led to a great deal of the discussion about the function of *be* when followed by particles or prepositional phrases. Jespersen writes (1949, III, 17) that "some verbs when connected with predicatives tend to lose their full meaning and approach the function of an empty link." Among his examples of predicatives he includes:

he is in good health,
the rain is over.

On the other hand, particles and prepositional phrases are adverbial after *be* "when the verb has a full meaning" (III, 18), for example:

—I mean they're *after* the news. (be + P + N)

—The red one *was for* scrambling.

—The joke's *over* now. (be + preposition)

—...we'd thrown our hands in without telling one another we knew the game *was up*.

—...and a man said, "What's *up*?"

—The dividend *is up* by 3 percent to 18 percent.

—Next morning, John *was up* early.

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—They *are in for* pretty poor service. (be + preposition + preposition + noun)

—He *was off to* sea again.

—We *are out to better* ourselves. (be + P + to-infinitive)

Jespersen often compares predicative P and P-N with adjectives, and regards them as subject modifiers rather than verb modifiers.

Compare:

But all the articles are *of great value*,

But all the articles are *beautiful and of great value*.

Also, the copula *seem* can replace *be*:

But all the articles *seem of great value*.

Be + P + N can be premodified by *very*, *more* or *most*:

—Conservative supporters *were more in favour* of the retention of public schools than Labour supporters.

Be + P: Examples belonging to this group are of the same structure as phrasal verbs; that is they are made up of a verb followed by a particle:

—*There were few people about* in the wet windy night and little traffic.

—*There were few people about the town*.

Compare with:

—*So after all was over*, I . . . , in which the particle cannot be expanded.

Grammatical vs. Lexical Restrictions on the Particle Component:

The verbal component cannot function without the particle:

—Mme. Nhu came to the US . . . complaining that US aid had *petered out*.

—... if your own conscience is clear, then the village or city can *gossip its head off*.

The particles *out* and *off* in the immediately preceding examples cannot under any consideration be left out. If they are omitted, the resulting sentences will be grammatically deviant. The restrictions on *peter out* and *gossip its head off* are, therefore, 'grammatical restrictions,' op-

posed to 'lexical restrictions' on *shot (down)* in:

They *shot (down)* the prisoner.

Meaning of the Particle Component:

It is sometimes possible to assign some kind of meaning to the particle in a phrasal verb. In the utterances:

—I'm *typing it up* now, *typing up* the final copy,

—The theatre is *booked up*.

the particle *up* has the function of 'specifying,' 'finalizing' or suggesting 'completeness.'

Similarly, the particles *out* and *off* have a meaning of their own when they occur with certain kinds of verbs. *Out* is used with verbs dealing with the interior of something; *off* is related to the exterior:

The car needs to be cleaned

out (Use a vacuum)

off (Use a hose)

Figurative vs. Literal V-PCs

One way of differentiating:

—the light *went out* from

—John *went out*

is by comparing the contrasting subject exponents; in the first case the subject is inanimate, in the second it is animate.

It is usually easy to isolate the point of contrast between the two V-PCs made up of the same words, one of which is regarded as 'figurative,' the other as 'literal.' Compare, for example:

The light *went out*.

John *went out*.

*The light *went*.

John *went*.

It seems that in this case one can equate 'figurative' with no potentiality for expansion, contraction, or commutation—that is, with grammatical fixity. In general terms, this is true of most of the figurative phrasal verbs (Yassin, 1978).

While it has been possible to demonstrate the formal differences between the examples above, there are cases in which an intuitive figurative labeling is not supported by formal features:

—Outside the dusk was creeping up on us.

—Outside John was creeping up on us.

But, generally, when 'the same verb' is used literally and figuratively, one must distinguish two lexical items. This distinction can be formally demonstrated, either by grammatical differences or by differences of exponence.

Concluding Remarks

This minute analysis reflects a complexity which would be overwhelming to an Arab ESL student. But it is a needed stock-in-trade for the language teacher. The important thing here is that V-PCs are patterns of lexis and must be taught as individual items, not via their class properties but via their own uniqueness. Rather than teaching separate words with dictionary core meanings attached to them, we are here interested in relating the internal patterning of V-PCs to a wider patterning, both linguistic and situational. As frequent and systematic applications are practiced, the Arab ESL learner becomes progressively aware of the distribution of V-PCs, phrasal, prepositional, and copula, as particular unique lexical items different from all other lexical items.

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