

# Discourse–Syntax Interface: A Look at Transitive Phrasal Verb Constructions in English

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the interface between discourse and syntax in English transitive phrasal verb constructions<sup>1</sup>. Focusing on the positioning of the particle, it argues that the word order alternation often has subtle semantic consequences. The basis of the work is the hypothesis that one significant factor, action vs. resultant orientation, influences the word order choice in many, if not most, of the cases.

Let us compare the following two constructions:

- (1) a. He *ran up* the bill.  
b. He *ran* the bill *up*.

The particle *up* and the verb *ran* depend on each other for the unique meaning of the phrasal verb *run up*. The word order alternation here is taken to be one instance of grammatical variation. Of the two, (1a) type is generally considered to be the underlying or unmarked word order. (1b), on the other hand, illustrates a type of discontinuous dependency: the verb is separated from its particle by the intervening direct object NP.

## 2. Overview of Literature

In general, there are three prototypical views on this alternation. First is the view that the two sentences in (1) are basically free variations, i.e. both constructions are acceptable unless the direct object is an unstressed pronoun, in which case the version with discontinuous dependency is mandatory. Compare:

- (2) a. \*Give up it.  
b. Give it up.

This view appears to be common in the transformational generative paradigm. The second is the conscious prescriptive view that the version with discontinuous dependency is nonstandard unless the direct object is an unstressed pronoun. A sociolinguistic research by Kroch and Small (1978) has revealed there are many educated people who consciously avoid using the (1b) type construction<sup>2</sup>. A look at any naturally occurring data will witness an abundance of the discontinuous version with full NP objects, especially but not exclusively in narratives. The third is the view that this alternation is governed by a variety of factors. This is the view shared by both traditional grammarians and more recent functionalists. The latter group has shown that an analysis of particle positioning benefits from considering pragmatic factors and processing requirements.

A closer look at natural discourses tells us that particle positioning preference is an extremely complex issue. To name just one complicating factor, rules of thumb may be overturned by contexts which may strongly tend to determine prosody and, thereby, word order. One of such rules of thumb stated by Bolinger (1971) is the following:

- (3) News value is the primary determinant of word order for transitive phrasal verbs.  
i. The unaccented mid-position of objects correlates with presupposed items.  
ii. The accented end-position of the object indicates the newness of the object.

More recently, Gries (1999) has presented accounts for the word order alternation in terms of the object NP's accessibility and the processing requirement. He formulated a consciousness hypothesis, under which, he claims, all of the factors so far investigated can be subsumed. Gries summarized a variety of factors governing the alternation of particle positioning which have been proposed so far:

- (4) i. word classes of the direct object (a full NP or a pronoun)

- ii. stress of the direct object
- iii. length/complexity of the direct object
- iv. presence of a directional adverbial after the construction
- v. modification of the noun or of the verb
- vi. idiomaticity of the construction
- vii. news value of the direct object
- viii. times of subsequent mention
- ix. distance to next mention

After pointing out weaknesses for all of these findings, Gries argued that the vast majority of these factors can be derived from the speaker's assessment of the amount of consciousness required for the processing of the direct object by the hearer.

Working in the same vein, I will go one step further and draw attention to the discourse function of the particle position and the parallelism between the discontinuous phrasal verb construction and the resultative/causative construction. I will not concern myself much with the separability of verb and particle but will approach the phenomenon from a hitherto unexplored angle, i. e. a possible interrelationship between the discourse function and syntax of the phrasal verb construction. In order to examine the discourse-syntax interface, principal examples in the upcoming sections are taken from popular narratives with extended contexts. In the course of discussion, I will also point out that the status as a phrasal verb is, naturally, not just a question of phrasal verb vs. non-phrasal verb — rather, the status is a matter of degree (as is probably the case with many, if not most, cognitive and linguistic phenomena.)

### 3. Action vs. Resultant Orientation

Particles of phrasal verbs strongly tend to indicate a state resulting from the action/process named by the verb phrase. Thus, both an action/process and a resultant state are coded in the following examples. (Below, a [P] after an example means that it (and those following it) has been cited from the Harry Potter series and a [C] from the Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction, and a [B] borrowed from Bolinger.)

- (5) a. This proposal had the effect of *cheering Harry up* a great deal. [P]  
 Action/process: 'the proposal cheered up Harry'  
 Resultant state: 'Harry became cheerful'
- b. ...he *had pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out* from between Harry's robes.  
 Action/process: 'he pulled *Pocket Sneakoscope* out'  
 Resultant state: '*Pocket Sneakoscope* was out'

Previous works on phrasal verbs seldom addressed semantics of the construction, much less the semantic aspects of the word order alternation. It was Bolinger (1971: 82-90) who first noted that when a particle changes its position, the sentence meaning is often altered. He maintained that though the phrasal verb embodies both the action and the result, the position of the particle tends to make one or the other paramount. Let us look at the following pair:

- (6) a. He knocked out Joe Frazier. (defeated) [B]  
 b. He knocked Joe Frazier out. (unconscious)

Bolinger did not attempt to theorize, probably because much of the time there is no practical difference. I will claim that here is a type of iconic relationship between the form and the meaning of a linguistic representation. Syntactically, (6a) is analyzed as an SVO construction, but (6b), with the particle in the predicative adjunct position, is more complex. *Joe Frazier* is the object of the verb and the subject of the secondary predicate *out* at one and the same time: what *knock* and *out* jointly code in (6a) is simply the action of 'defeating', while in (6b) they code the 'action of hitting someone hard' and its end state of 'the patient's becoming unconscious.' Although both an 'action/process' meaning and a 'resultant state' meaning are present in the two versions, what we find in (6a) is an action/process orientation, whereas (6b) is a resultant state orientation. (Hereafter I adopt the terms 'action orientation' vs. 'resultant orientation' purely for convenience, and use the more precise 'action/process orientation' vs. 'resultant state orientation' only when needed.)

I formulate a hypothesis that, among the factors which influence the word order alternation, there is a discourse-functional opposition of action vs. resultant orientation.

(7) Orientation hypothesis:

The phrasal verb construction with the particle standing next to the verb is used to code an action-oriented conceptualization, whereas the version with the postposed particle is used to code a resultant-oriented conceptualization.

The orientation hypothesis is not to deny the fact that the phrasal verb embodies both the action and the result regardless of the position of the particle. The speaker/writer chooses one word order within the contextual requirements. Much of the times, the semantic difference may be subtle, but there is a distinct correlation between the speaker/writer's conceptualization of the event and the positioning of the particle. Thus, the two sentences in (5) appear to focus on the resultant state rather than the action/process. Other examples follow:

- (8) a. Don't *let that thing out!* [P]  
 b. Yvonne even *got her gun back.* [C]  
 c. 'Get out of the way,' said the manager impatiently, *brushing Harry aside.* [P]

In all these speech situations, the focus is on the end state/result. Let us examine next some action-oriented examples:

- (9) a. Ron spooned stew onto his plate and *picked up his fork* but didn't start. [P]  
 b. After breakfast Harry would go out into the back yard, *take out his wand...*  
 c. She opened the front door to *put out the milk bottles.*  
 d. It *had nearly bitten off his leg.*  
 e. Then he ran, before Dudley could *work out what he'd said.*

From the perspective of the syntactic and pragmatic context, we note that the phrasal verb in each of these examples primarily describes an action/series of actions. Reference to end state is irrelevant in these cases.

The orientation factor necessarily intertwines with other factors and often gets neutralized, particularly when the object is an unstressed pronoun or a general noun. The upcoming sections will provide a variety of evidence to the orientation hypothesis.

#### 4. Analogous Constructions

It is customary in discussions of phrasal verbs to use the term particle to include both prepositions (e. g. *in, on, over*) and directional adverbs (e. g. *up, out, away*). There are other lexical categories which allow the same word order alternation. Additional examples follow:

- (10) a. Adverbial particles/adjectives:  
     She pushed the basin *across*.  
     They set him *free*.  
     Wipe those tools *clean*.  
     He pushed *open* the gate.  
 b. Infinitives:  
     He let *go* the lines.  
 c. Others:  
     It brings *to light* the facts.  
     Keep *in mind* the alternatives.  
     They took *on board* the cargo.

In this paper, I will not go into detailed discussions of the class membership of a particular verb-particle/adverbial expression. But it is possible to discern the same correlation between the word order and the orientation alternation here. The object postposed examples in (10), assume action-orientated sense, while particle postposed ones are all resultant-oriented.

According to classical theories of categorization, category membership is a yes-or-no matter. Modern linguistic studies showed that there appears to be an in-between area where both category names are appropriate. Categories have fuzzy rather than sharp boundaries. More recently linguists seem to agree that

different verb plus particle/adverbial constructions fall along a continuum in terms of being phrasal verbs or not, or phrasal verbs of one kind or another.

## 5. Secondary Predication

The facts noted in the previous two sections show the resemblance of phrasal verb constructions to resultative and causative constructions. Thus, the particle in the position of a predicative adjunct may be said to assume resultative sense just like an adverb or an adjective in the same position. Compare:

- (11) a. He knocked the man *out*.  
 b. He knocked the man *cold*.  
 c. He knocked them *apart*.  
 d. He knocked them *loose*.

Each particle/adverb/adjective in (11) indicates the particular change of state, which is not entailed by the verb. Its function is not to further specify a change already entailed by the verb, since the verb *knock* merely codes an action and does not entail the resultant state of its object. The function of the particle/adverb/adjective here is no doubt that of a secondary predicate.

One evidence for the predicative nature of the particles is found in the fact that many of the particles which are usable in phrasal verbs are precisely the ones that appear as quasi-verbs in the imperative or form part of a construction involving an embedding<sup>3</sup>.

- (12) a. Out! [B]  
 b. Back!  
 c. Away with you!  
 d. He wants *off* (*in, out, up*).

What is noteworthy in this connection is the highly productive nature of the resultative use of certain particles. The pairing of the verb and the particle/adverbial in the following examples is regarded not as phrasal verbs but free combinations, which participate in productive secondary predication.

- (13) a. I *had* my shoes *on*.  
 b. I *brought* the references *in*.  
 c. They *heaved* him *back* onto his seat.  
 d. He *ladled* some soup *up* from the pan.

The adjectives and other phrases designating resultant state in (11) also fit the description. The following are some additional examples:

- (14) a. She *slid* the compartment door *closed*. [P]  
 b. 'Stop it! Stop it!' cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and *knocking the books apart*.  
 c. They had *clamped them together* with bullclips.

Despite the similarities in form and function, there are two notable differences between phrasal verb constructions and resultative or causal constructions. First, the postposed particle in a phrasal verb, but not the other secondary predicates, serves dual functions: it belongs both to the verb as a part of the larger unit 'phrasal verb' and to the object NP as a predicate:

- (15) a. He knocked Joe Frazier *out*.  
 b. He kicked Joe Frazier *black and blue*.

Secondly, while the canonical word order of the phrasal verb construction has the particle following the verb (the action-oriented version), that of the resultant construction has the resultative phrase following the object NP. The evidence for this comes from facts like the following, where the other word order is branded ungrammatical.

- (15) c. \*He knocked out him.

- d. \*He kicked black and blue Joe Frazier.

## 6. Information Content of Object NP and Neutralization

The opposition of action vs. resultant orientation seems to be neutralized when the object NP has a lot of information content, or conversely very little.

### 6.1. New/Lengthy Object

The word order alternation found in phrasal verbs has much to do with information processing strategies. Linguists seem to agree that the clause final position is normally reserved for new, highlighted information. The following are examples where the object NPs are placed after the particles, thereby facilitating information processing by the hearer/reader.

- (16) a. Mr Dursley hummed as he *picked out* his most boring tie for work. [P]  
 b. 'S-s-sorry,' sobbed Hagrid, *taking out* a large spotted handkerchief..  
 c. Fudge cleared his throat loudly and *picked up* his pinstriped cloak.

The underlined object NPs in (16) are all loaded with new information, which, in a somewhat nonchalant manner, serves to provide information about the character/personality of the referent of the subject NP. As far as these cases are concerned, the underlined NPs do not occur anywhere in the following discourse. Hence, among the various factors listed in (4) above, only the ones of length/complexity and news value appear to be relevant here. Let us look at some more examples:

- (17) a. He drew on a pair of very thick groves, *picked up* a large, knobby walking stick... [P]  
 b. Harry *pulled out* a handful of strange-looking coins.  
 c. He was about to *pull off* another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task.  
 d. His new company would *put out* a complete and definite set of recordings. [C]  
 e. A persuasive publisher was about to *bring out* a book of which he had high hopes.

In all these cases, a new discourse entity in the form of complex NP, naturally commands a lot of processing effort. Thus, cognitive processing requirement seems to take precedence over all the other factors, including the action vs. resultant orientation distinction.

### 6.2. Unstressed Pronoun Object

As is universally acknowledged, an unstressed personal pronoun must precede the particle in phrasal verb constructions, neutralizing the opposition of action vs. resultant orientation<sup>4</sup>.

- (18) a. You're putting him on! [B]  
 b. \*You're putting on him!

The following are some naturally occurring examples:

- (19) a. ...I am, however, astounded that you didn't *hand it in*...And I can't let you *have it back*, Harry. [P]  
 b. A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the *Monster Books* had seized a third and were *pulling it apart*.  
 c. He's been a bit off-colour ever since I *brought him back* from Egypt.  
 d. The thought didn't *cheer him up* at all.

The postposed particles in these sentences do not make the end state meaning prominent.

### 6.3. Highly General NP Object

The action vs. resultant orientation opposition also seems to be neutralized when the object is a highly general NP. The following are some examples I have collected from the narratives at hand.

- (20) a. Trust Malfoy to *mess things up* for him. [P]  
 b. Don't you think it was highly appropriate to—*hush the whole business up*?  
 c. He *thought the matter over* for a few days.

Notice that information content of these nouns is of little or no semantic significance.

#### 6.4. Passive Construction

In the case of passives, the direct object of the phrasal verb is promoted to the subject position, canceling the word order alternation itself.

- (21) a. Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might *be thrown out*... [P]  
 b. ...notes *were handed out* to all students...  
 c. It's *one of these things that can't be written up* as a proper scientific paper. [C]

The discourse function of these passive sentences is an intriguing research topic, but let us suffice here just to note the lack of orientation option.

#### 7. Some Other Direct Object Types

Gries (1999: 122-124) suggests that the Silverstein hierarchy can plausibly be regarded as an entrenchment hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy are highly context-dependent forms: first, second, and third personal pronouns, and at the bottom of the hierarchy lie those NPs which denote abstract entities. We have seen above the highly grammaticalized nature of pronoun object position in transitive phrasal verb construction. The following are some examples with abstract/metaphorical NPs.

- (22) a. They *brought back peace*. [P]  
 b. He *waived aside our indignant protests*.  
 c. Perhaps he was *seizing up the enemy*, waiting for the Professor to make the first mistake...  
 d. It *opened up new worlds* to him. [C]

It is premature to conclude from such a small amount of evidence, but these types seem to go with object-final action-oriented version, which seems to be in consistency with Gries' entrenchment hypothesis.

Let us next consider indefinite NPs, which fall outside the concerns of the Silverstein Hierarchy. Look at the following examples:

- (23) a. Don't *pull any of his feathers out*. [P]  
 b. Trust Malfoy to *mess things up* for him.  
 c. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned— 'Orange, Longbottom,' said Snape, *ladling some up* and...

Admittedly, it is premature to say anything conclusive, but indefinite object NPs appear to favor the resultant state orientation.

The following are examples which show that the direct objects of phrasal verbs are not confined to NPs:

- (24) a. Some of the teachers *gave up trying to teach them much*. [P]  
 b. Some job for the ministry, trying to *sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will*.  
 c. Hermione squashed this plan by *pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an aqualung with the set limit of an hour, he was sure to...*  
 d. The Dursleys...didn't think they could bear it if anyone *found out about the Potters*.

The direct object of the phrasal verb in (24a) is a gerund, in (24b) it is a *wh*-phrase, in (24c) it is a *that* clause and in (24d) it is a PP. All of them have heavy information contents. These types evidently go with action/process orientation.

#### 8. Mode of Conceptualization

Some phrasal verbs are thought to be idiomatic because of their multi-word form, metaphoric nature and semantic opacity<sup>5</sup>. The following are some such examples:

- (25) a. Harry tried to *make out what it was*... [P]  
 b. I'll *get her back* for this if it's the last thing I do!  
 c. Didn't we swear when we *took him in* we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?  
 d. Malfoy gave Professor Lupin an insolent stare, which *took in the patches on his robes and the dilapidated suitcase*.

(25c) and (25d) are, incidentally, examples of one phrasal verb having more than one meanings.

A phrasal verb, when used in a particular sense, may be immutably fused with a particular NP, as in the following examples:

- (26) a. turn over a new leaf  
 b. let off a steam  
 c. lay down the law  
 d. bring up the rear

Or it may collocate with a very narrow range of NP as in *strike up a conversation/the band*<sup>6</sup>. This type probably contributes much to the view of phrasal verbs as idiomatic expressions. I would argue, however, that majority of phrasal verbs in everyday use are not such amalgamated ones, but productive pairings of a verb and a particle/particles. It is one of the most fertile sources of lively linguistic expressions. It is just we are hardly conscious of their existence.

According to Lakoff (1993: 210), metaphor is not a ‘figure of speech’, but a ‘mode of thought.’ Choice of one linguistic form reflects the speaker/writer’s ‘mode of conceptualization.’ When a phrasal verb is used in place of a simple verb with equivalent meaning, the event is conceptualized not as an opaque whole, but as conglomeration of multiple factors. Thus, the speaker/writer resolves the event in question into factors of action/process and resultant state, thereby increasing the vividness and picturesque effect of communication. She can also highlight one aspect of the event, backgrounding the others. Let us examine some more examples:

- (27) a. Percy, however, *held out his hand* solemnly... (cf. *offer*) [P]  
 b. He *ripped open the letter* and shouted, ‘It’s from Sirius!’ (cf. *open*)  
 c. Harry and Ron *packed away their unused ingredients*... (cf. *store*)  
 d. Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to—er—*let our hair down*. (cf. *relax*)

When we compare the phrasal verbs with the equivalent one-word verbs, it is evident that the former presents more concrete and effective descriptions of the events. Some phrasal verbs, as we have seen, are highly idiomatic, but many are free combinations of a verb and a particle. For example, pairings of so-called ‘primary’ (basic, general) verbs such as *make, get, take, put, hold* with particles denoting ‘perfectivity’ or ‘exhaustiveness’ (*on, up, out, off, etc.*) are quite productive in this regard. The following examples all succeed in presenting dynamic description/vivid picturing of the event.

- (28) a. I *took it off* for polishing—(cf. *remove*) [P]  
 b. —house was almost destroyed but I *got him out* all right... (cf. *rescue*)  
 c. ...they were boarding the Hogwarts Express;... *pulling off their wizard robes* and *putting on Jackets and coats*... (cf. *undress, dress*)  
 d. He held them up. (cf. *raise*)

Finally, compare the following two sentences:

- (29) a. They are *opening up* a branch in Nevada. [C]  
 b. They are *opening* a branch in Nevada.

The two sentences basically mean the same, but addition of the particle *up* in (29a) has subtle but distinctive semantic consequences. The sentence seems to assume perfective meaning as well as a picture-like image. Many simple verbs thus can be accompanied by a particle, thereby obtaining a dynamic picturing of events. This is another area of high productivity of the phrasal verb construction in the language.

As is often pointed out a linguistic entity such as the phrasal verb cannot be confined within clear bounds. It may be said that besides the core groups of phrasal verbs, there are some highly productive verbs and particles as well as the combination thereof. It is not the case that the class of phrasal verbs comprises only idiomatic and fixed expressions but it is an open class with high productivity. At the same time, there are analogous extensions in all directions, involving other lexical categories. Being or not being a phrasal verb is a matter of degree.

## 9. Conclusion

What I have presented in this paper is a discourse-functional account of the transitive phrasal verb

constructions and their characteristic 'mode of conceptualization.' Much remains to be investigated regarding, for example, the prosodic effects on the meaning, the different types of verbs and particles/adverbs participating in the construction, categorization in terms of discourse functions, the morpho-syntactic analysis of the phrasal verbs and the relationship with other parts of the grammar. Last but not least, more extended analyses of discourse data will most certainly shed more light on this issue.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>I use the term phrasal verb because it seems the best known among a number of others.

<sup>2</sup>The source of prescriptive thinking that favors object-final version may be related with the dislike for discontinuous constructions. People tend to favor one to one correspondence of form and meaning.

<sup>3</sup>More evidence is found in Bolinger (1971: 87-8).

<sup>4</sup>An apparent counter example below has a completely different structure and is considered a frozen idiom.

*Come off it.*

<sup>5</sup>Based on Bolinger (1971), Lindstromberg (1997) points out that wherever a preposition of path is used, there is focus on endpoint or, in metaphors, on end state/result. This tendency is even stronger when the particle follows the object noun.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Lindstromberg (1997: 246-247).

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