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Neutral Phrasal Verbs in English

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Abstract

This article examines the feature of neutrality in English phrasal verbs. In a formal classification of over 1,300 transitive phrasal verbs, a large part (350 entries or 27%) also exhibits the feature of neutrality. While some semantic classes favor neutrality in English, they do not automatically assure it, thus giving further evidence of the need for building lexicon-grammars. Since more than one meaning can sometimes be associated with a particular verb-particle combination, phrasal verbs enter into one of seven verbal syntactic classes as first defined by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976), a complexity further justifying formal lexicons.

Keywords : phrasal verbs, neutral verbs, ergative verbs, lexicon-grammar

Les verbes à particules neutres de l'anglais

Cet article examine la relation de neutralité dans les verbes à particules de l'anglais. Dans une classification formelle de plus de 1.300 verbes à particules transitifs, une grande partie (350 entrées ou 27%) entrent aussi dans la relation de neutralité. Bien que certaines classes sémantiques favorisent la neutralité en anglais, elles ne la garantissent pas, ainsi témoignant de l'importance des lexique-grammaires. De plus, les sept classes syntaxiques verbales, initialement définies par Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976), montrent la complexité des verbes à particules dans la construction d'un lexique formel.

Mots-clés : verbes à particules, verbes neutres, relation de neutralité, lexique-grammaire

1. Introduction

In the 1970's many linguists in the United States were investigating the behavior of phrasal verbs. Although such works as Bolinger (1971), Fraser (1976), and Makkai (1972) were not systematic in their approach, they did offer a representative listing of the types of phrasal verbs found, and examined factors such as restrictions on particle movement, ambiguity, nominalizations, and aspectual features of these verbs. At the same time, researchers at the *Laboratoire d'Automatique Documentaire et Linguistique* (LADL) at the Université de Paris 7 were building a formal large-scale classification of the French language or lexicon-grammar. This exhaustive process revealed numerous classes of French verbs at the time and among the many fascinating discoveries was the phenomenon of *verbes neutres* or neutral verbs. In their chapter on the "Relation de neutralité," Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976, 66-120) showed not

only how complex this syntactic relationship was, but also how omnipresent these verbs were in French with over 400 entries in the lexicon-grammar.¹

Since the 1970's, the status of both phrasal verbs and neutral verbs – referred to as ergative verbs, unaccusatives, and the causative alternation in other frameworks – have been discussed from many diverse points of view. Studies on phrasal verbs now focus on intonation (Dehé 2002), compositionality (Jackendoff 2002, McCarthy, Keller & Carroll 2003), and productivity (McIntyre 2002, Villavicencio 2005) as well. This article examines yet another aspect, the correlation of neutrality in English phrasal verbs. Although some websites and textbooks might point out a few “ergative phrasal verbs,” the present analysis is based on a formal classification of a significant portion of the lexicon of transitive phrasal verbs (over 1,300 entries), of which a large segment (350 entries or 27%) also exhibits the feature of neutrality.

2. Neutral Phrasal Verbs

Particles or satellites (Talmy 1985) are often associated with prepositions or adverbs, and combine with simple verbs to form verbal expressions known in English as phrasal verbs, two-word verbs, multi-word verbs, or verb-particle combinations. For example:

(1) a. *The TV station **blacked out** the football game* [block broadcast]²

b. *The TV station **blacked** the football game **out***

In the English transitive phrasal verb, this movement is optional and does not change meaning. The following equation is therefore true:

(2) $N_0 V Part N_1 \Leftrightarrow N_0 V N_1 Part$

If the object is a pronoun, however, it generally must appear after the particle:

(3) a. *The TV station **blacked** it **out***

b. **The TV station **blacked out** it*

Neutrality is present when the following equation holds, where the arrow means relative synonymy:

(4) $N_0 V Part N_1 \Leftrightarrow N_1 V Part$

For example, the direct object of (5a) and (5b) has the possibility of being the subject of (5c):

(5) a. *The maid **aired out** the room* [ventilate]

¹ For a systematic analysis of 500 non-phrasal neutral verbs of English, see Machonis (1997).

² Throughout this article, we give an equivalent translation in brackets of all phrasal verbs and phrasal verb idioms to clarify ambiguities and to facilitate understanding by non-native speakers of English.

b. *The maid **aired** the room out*

c. *The room **aired** out*

Note that example (5) is different from example (1) in that the expression *black out* does not exhibit the feature of neutrality as can be seen in the following:

(6) **The football game **black**ed out*

3. The Lexicon-Grammar of Phrasal Verbs

Our database of over 1,300 transitive phrasal verbs was composed using Fraser (1976), Spears (1996), *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2000), *The Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2000) and *The Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1997). The lexicon-grammar includes both compositional phrasal verbs (e.g., *drink up the milk*, *wipe down the countertop*) and non-compositional or idiomatic phrasal verbs (e.g., *break up the audience* “cause to laugh,” *burn out the teacher* “exhaust”).

Although some dictionaries include prepositional verbs under the rubric of phrasal verbs, we did not incorporate them into our database. True phrasal verbs can be separated from prepositional verbs by a test for particle movement; that is, they have both a continuous and discontinuous structure, while prepositional verbs require the continuous form. Thus *call out* would be categorized under transitive phrasal verbs, but not *call on* as in the following examples:

(7) a. *The announcer **called out** the numbers* [announce loudly]

b. *The announcer **called** the numbers out*

(8) a. *Anne **called on** her neighbor* [visit for short period]

b. **Anne **called** her neighbor on*

We also did not incorporate what appear to be obligatorily discontinuous phrasal verbs, some of which may be neutral:

(9) a. *The workers **slapped** the roof together* [make quickly]

b. **The workers **slapped together** the roof*

c. *The roof **slapped** together*

(10) a. *The researcher **saw** the project through* [work until completion]

b. **The researcher **saw through** the project*

c. **The project **saw** through*

This last example in fact contrasts with the following prepositional verb:

(11) a. *The people **saw through** the leader's charisma* [see deception in]

b. **The people **saw** the leader's charisma through*

We also did not take into account transitive phrasal verbs that entail a frozen noun phrase afterwards:

- (12) a. *The Jones **keep up** appearances* [pretend that everything is alright]
 b. *The Jones **keep appearances up***
- (13) a. ***Keep** your chin up* [be courageous in spite of difficulties]
 b. ****Keep up** your chin*
- (14) a. *Chris is **dancing up** a storm* [dance energetically / vigorously]
 b. **Chris is **dancing a storm up***

These transitive verb-particle combinations, table C1PT of English frozen expressions previously studied by Freckleton (1984) and Machonis (1985), have a very restricted complement after the phrasal verb. As can be seen in examples (13) and (14), some of them are also limited to either the continuous or discontinuous form, although these linguistic judgments do not always remain consistent across dialects. Nevertheless, when the following two related expressions are compared, we see the importance of entering each and every frozen expression into the lexicon-grammar:

- (15) a. *Let's **get a move on*** [get something started / underway]
 b. **Let's **get on a move***
- (16) a. *Let's **get on the move*** [get something started / underway]
 b. **Let's **get the move on***

As can be seen in the sample Table 1, the lexicon-grammar of phrasal verbs is in matrix form, where each verb-particle combination represents a row in the matrix. To the far left, we indicate if the subject, N_0 , can be human or non-human by plus or minus signs. After the verb and particle, we indicate the distributional properties of the object N_I (i.e., human and non-human), along with a potential N_I or noun phrase. This is followed by three possible transformations: particle deletion with a similar meaning (indicated by a plus in column $N_0 V N_I$), intransitive neutral use with particle (plus under $N_I V Part$), and intransitive neutral use without particle (plus under $N_I V$). Finally a paraphrase or synonym is provided for each phrasal verb.

4. Semantic Nature of Neutral Phrasal Verbs

Among the 1,300 entries of transitive phrasal verbs, we found 350 that exhibited neutrality. Although certain semantic classes (e.g., change of state, motion, sound emission, cooking, gathering) seem to favor neutrality in English (Machonis 1997), as they do in French (Boons, Guillet, & Leclère 1976), they do not automatically assure it, thus illustrating the value in building formal lexicons or lexicon-grammars as defined by Maurice Gross (1996).

$N_0 :: N_{hum}$	$N_0 :: N-hum$	Verb	Particle	Example of N_1	$N_1 :: N_{hum}$	$N_1 :: N-hum$	$N_0 V N_1$	$N_1 V Part$	$N_1 V$	Synonym
-	+	blow	away	the leaves	+	+	+	+	-	blow
+	-	blow	away	the other team	+	-	-	-	-	defeat decisively
+	-	blow	away	the gangster	+	+	-	-	-	kill with gun
+	+	blow	away	the spectators	+	-	-	-	-	overwhelm/impress
-	+	blow	down	the tree	+	+	-	+	-	cause to fall
+	-	blow	off	class	+	+	-	-	-	not attend/be absent from
+	+	blow	out	the windows	-	+	-	+	-	break
+	+	blow	out	the front tire	-	+	+	+	+	deflate suddenly
+	-	blow	out	the other team	+	-	-	-	-	easily defeat
+	+	blow	out	the candle	-	+	-	+	-	extinguish
-	+	blow	over	the tree	+	+	-	+	-	cause to fall
+	+	blow	up	the photo	-	+	-	-	-	enlarge
+	+	blow	up	the scandal	-	+	-	+	-	exaggerate
+	+	blow	up	the building	+	+	-	+	+	explode/demolish
+	+	blow	up	the balloons	-	+	-	-	-	inflate
+	-	bluff	out	the secret service	+	-	+	-	-	deceive
+	-	blurt	out	the information	-	+	-	+	-	speak without thinking
+	+	bog	down	the peace talks	-	+	-	+	-	delay progress of
+	+	boil	away	the water	-	+	+	+	+	boil
+	-	boil	down	the liquid	-	+	+	+	+	boil
+	-	boil	up	the water	-	+	+	-	+	boil
+	+	bolster	up	Max	+	-	+	-	-	give hope to
+	+	bolster	up	the theory	-	+	-	-	-	support
+	+	boom	out	the music	-	+	-	+	+	play loudly
+	+	boot	up	the computer	-	+	+	+	+	start
+	-	boss	around	Max	+	-	-	-	-	give orders to
+	+	botch	up	the situation	-	+	+	-	-	bungle
+	+	bottle	up	the legislation	-	+	-	+	-	make progress difficult
+	+	bottle	up	the soda	-	+	+	-	-	put in bottle
+	-	bottle	up	POSS-0 emotions	-	+	-	+	-	suppress/restrain
+	+	box	in	Max	+	+	-	-	-	limit/confine
+	+	box	up	the dishes	-	+	+	-	-	pack into boxes

Table 1: Sample from *Lexicon-Grammar of Transitive Phrasal Verbs*

Neutrality seems to imply an independent activity which can occur without an external agent, yet at the same time has a presumed external control. Inchoative verbs, for example, often allow neutrality, although non-compositional phrasal verbs may not allow it with the simple verb, as in *turn up*, *fire up* and *power up*:

- (17) a. *Max (booted up + turned on) the computer* [start]
b. *The computer (booted up + turned on)*

c. *The computer (booted + *turned)*³

(18) a. *The driver (started + fired + powered) up the engine* [start]

b. *The engine (started + fired + powered) up*

c. *The engine (started + *fired + *powered)*

Yet even in semantically similar fields, such as for “block,” “delay,” and “extend” verbs, we find that some phrasal verbs exhibit neutrality while others do not:

(19) a. *The crowd jammed up the exits* [block]

b. *The exits jammed up*

(20) a. *The accident tied up the interchange* [block]

b. **The interchange tied up*

(21) a. *The controversial debate bogged down the peace talks* [delay]

b. *The peace talks bogged down*

(22) a. *The mail strike held up the delivery* [delay]

b. **The delivery held up*

(23) a. *The comedian dragged out the story* [extend]

b. *The story dragged out*

(24) a. *The discussion drew out the meeting* [extend]

b. **The meeting drew out*

Levin (1993, 26-7) implies that verbs having both a transitive and intransitive use but where the transitive verb, *V*, can be paraphrased as “*cause to V-intransitive*,” are often neutral. Causative expressions from our lexicon-grammar tables, however, show that neutrality is highly variable, and can even vary if the particle is deleted:

(25) a. *The storm blew (down + over) the palm tree* [cause to fall]

b. *The palm tree blew (*E + down + over)*

(26) a. *The child (toppled + tipped) over the table* [cause to fall]

b. *The table (toppled + tipped) (E + over)*

(27) a. *The garlic smelled up the kitchen* [cause to smell]

³ Examples containing parentheses mean that any given element is possible or, if starred, not possible, with *E* standing for an *empty string*. Thus the (a) sentences below should be understood as meaning both (b) and (c):

(i) a. *The computer (booted + *turned)* [start] (ii) a. *The palm tree blew (*E + down)* [fall]

b. *The computer booted* [start] b. **The palm tree blew* [fall]

c. **The computer turned* [start] c. *The palm tree blew down* [fall]

b. *The kitchen **smelled** (E + *up)*

We find a similar unpredictability with respect to neutrality for “gather” verbs. While the idiomatic *rake in* only allows neutrality with an overt particle, the compositional *herd in* allows it only without, yet the phrasal verb *gather up*, also compositional, does not allow neutrality at all:

(28) a. *The casino **raked in** the bets* [gather]

b. *The bets **raked** (*E + in)*

(29) a. *The cowboy **herded up** the cattle* [gather]

b. *The cattle **herded** (E + *up)*

(30) a. *The child **gathered up** the toys* [gather]

b. *The toys **gathered** *(E + up)*

5. Syntactic Classes of Phrasal Verbs

Since more than one meaning can be associated with a particular verb-particle combination, either idiomatic or compositional, phrasal verbs can enter into one of seven verbal syntactic classes as established by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976, 100). For example, some phrasal verbs are intrinsically intransitive (the class C_i) with respect to neutrality:

(31) *The stock **bottomed out** ⇔ *The market bottomed out the stock*
[fall to lowest point]

Others are never intransitive and are intrinsically transitive (the class C_t):

(32) *The student **jotted down** (*E + the answer)* [make note of]

A third category, C_{ti} , involves phrasal verbs that, although never in a relationship of neutrality, have both an independent transitive and intransitive use:⁴

(33) a. *Chris **broke out** the champagne ⇔ *The champagne broke out* [open]

b. *War **broke out** ⇔ *The political tension broke out the war* [start]

The class C_m represents neutral verbs that have at least one independent transitive use:

(34) a. *The Senate **wrapped up** the session ⇔ The session wrapped up* [finish]

b. *The clerk **wrapped up** the gift ⇔ *The gift wrapped up* [wrap]

⁴ Although some members in this class may first appear to exhibit neutrality, the direct object does not encompass the same semantic relationship in the intransitive sentence:

(iii) a. *Mary **helped out** (E + Max) ⇔ *Max helped out* [help someone explicitly stated]

b. *The workers **helped out** ⇔ *Max helped out the workers* [help in general]

The class C_{ni} , on the other hand, entails verbs that have at least one autonomous intransitive use, aside from the neutral:

- (35) a. *The sun **melted down** the ice* ⇔ *The ice melted down* [melt]
 b. *The nuclear reactor **melted down*** ⇔ **The accident melted down*
the nuclear reactor [melt core and release radiation]

Similarly, the category C_{mi} involves phrasal verbs that can have three interpretations: autonomously transitive, intransitive, as well as neutral:

- (36) a. *The artist **blew up** the photo* ⇔ **The photo blew up* [enlarge]
 b. *The professor **blew up** (E + in class)* [lose temper]
 c. *The army **blew up** the bridge* ⇔ *The bridge **blew up*** [destroy]

Sometimes a single phrasal verb can have more than one connotation exhibiting neutrality, along with an autonomous transitive and intransitive meaning, which all require separate entries in the lexicon-grammar:

- (37) a. *The clown **broke up** the spectators* ⇔ *The spectators **broke up*** [make laugh]
 b. *The police **broke up** the crowd* ⇔ *The crowd **broke up*** [disperse]
 c. *The gardener **broke up** the sticks* ⇔ *The sticks **broke up*** [break]
 d. *The bystander **broke up** the argument* ⇔ *The argument **broke up*** [end / disrupt]
 e. *The short rest stop **broke up** the long trip* [interrupt monotony of]
 f. *I can't hear you; you're **breaking up*** [have a bad phone connection]

Finally, the class C_n represents verbs that are intrinsically neutral, having no independent transitive or intransitive usage:

- (38) *The loud noise **woke up** Mary* ⇔ *Mary **woke up*** [wake]

While not part of the lexicon-grammar of transitive phrasal verbs, example (31) is included in a new table under construction of purely intransitive phrasal verbs. All of the other examples (32) – (38) can be found in the current lexicon-grammar, which includes both transitive and neutral. The relationship of neutrality observed in phrasal verbs is thus as intricate as that previously witnessed with simple verbs.

Conclusions

As first noticed by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976), neutrality is not a peripheral occurrence in verbal behavior, but present in a large portion of the lexicon, as observed in our corpus of English phrasal verbs, where 27% of them exhibit the feature of neutrality. As the examples here show, a systematic study of neutrality is incredibly complex, both semantically and syntactically. Research in lexicon-

grammar continues to confirm that “tests for characterizing essential complements are highly lexical and tend to apply more to individual verbs or small groups than to broad semantic classes” (Gross 1996, 245). Further defining the parameters of the complements N_0 and N_1 in detailed lexicon-grammar tables will consequently shed more light on the phenomenon of neutrality with respect to English phrasal verbs.

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