

Multi-word verbs in the Late Modern English period: Semantic reanalysis and increasing idiomatization

The present study aims to examine the semantic changes affecting multi-word verbs (hereafter MWVs), namely phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs during the Late Modern English (LModE) period. Specifically, the objective is to describe the role performed by processes of semantic reanalysis and idiomatization in the linguistic evolution of MWVs during the years 1750-1850.

Existing studies on MWVs have highlighted that interacting factors created the conditions for the grammaticalization and lexicalization of independent units and their transformation into verbs characterized by a complex internal constituency. The already formed verbs were endorsed in processes of innovation that favored semantic reanalysis and, on many occasions, idiomatization (Denison 1981; Elenbaas 2007; Rodríguez-Puente 2019) since early periods in the history of English (Denison 1981; Elenbaas 2007; Rodríguez-Puente 2019). However, despite extensive knowledge of the development of MWVs, there are some areas open to inquiry.

There are two major limitations: (i) works undertaken to date have examined earlier periods in the history of English including the Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), and Early Modern English (EME) periods (Denison 1981; Hiltunen 1983; Claridge 2000; Elenbaas 2007), whereas the LModE time has often been disregarded; (ii) studies undertaken with a focus on the LModE time have especially investigated phrasal verbs (Brinton 1988; Akimoto 1999; Thim 2012; Leone 2019; Rodríguez-Puente 2019), which means that the representation of semantic innovation of the MWV system and processes on reciprocal influence among the various groups have not been investigated to date.

The present study aims to fill this gap in the literature and to describe the role performed by semantic reanalysis and increasing idiomatization in the renewal of MWVs during the LModE time. This entails the need for examination of factors that prompted the semantic reinterpretation of already established meanings including phenomena of context-induced reinterpretation as the immediate context may favor both the creation of new connotative features and the recontextualization of extant meanings. This study is a corpus-based investigation undertaken on the Late Modern English-Old Bailey Corpus (LModE-OBC), a corpus that has been compiled by selecting texts from the Proceedings of the Old Bailey (<https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>), London's Central Criminal court. The corpus includes trials and witness depositions dating back to the years 1750-1850 and overall amounts to 1,008,234 words. The data has been examined with the concordance WordSmith Tools 6.0 and specifically with the tool 'Concord' that allows the visualization of MWVs and their immediate context.

The analysis reveals that, similarly to the previous periods, context-induced factors favored processes of semantic reanalysis and increasing idiomatization. Specifically, the most important aspects are: (i) phrasal verbs were affected by semantic reanalysis promoted by the innovation of the lexical profile which often favored increasing idiomatization and the transformation of the literal particles into particles marking a telic or atelic connotation; (ii) both prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs were involved in processes of idiomatization leading to the gradual internal demotivation of affected verbs via metaphor and metonymy, which both derive from phenomena of reinterpretation driven by contextual factors.

References

- Akimoto, Minoji. 1999. Collocations and idioms in Late Modern English. In L. J. Brinton and M. Akimoto (eds.), *Collocational and idiomatic aspects of composite predicates in the history of English*, 207-238. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Brinton, Laurel J. 1988. *The development of English aspectual systems. Aspectualizers and post-verbal particles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Claridge, Claudia. 2000. *Multi-word verbs in Early Modern English. A Corpus-based study*. Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Denison, David. 1981. *Aspects of the history of English group-verbs, with particular attention to the syntax of the ORMULUM*. Oxford: University of Oxford Ph.D. Dissertation. <http://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/uk-ac-man-scw:74782>
- Elenbaas, Marion. 2007. *The synchronic and diachronic syntax of the English verb-particle combination*. Utrecht: LOT. https://www.lotpublications.nl/Documents/149_fulltext.pdf
- Hiltunen, Risto. 1983. *The decline of the prefixes and the beginnings of the English phrasal verb: The evidence from some Old and Early Middle English texts*. Turku: Turun Yliopisto.
- Leone, Ljubica. 2019. Context-Induced reinterpretation of phraseological verbs. Phrasal verbs in Late Modern English. In G.C. Pastor and R. Mitkov (eds.), *EUROPHRAS 2019, LNAI 1175*, 253-267. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Rodríguez-Puente, Paula. 2019. *The English phrasal verb, 1650-present. History, stylistic drifts, and lexicalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Proceedings of the Old Bailey. <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>
- Thim, Stefan. 2012. *Phrasal verbs. The English verb-particle construction and its history*. Berlin & Boston: Walter de Gruyter Mouton.
- WordSmith Tools Manual. Version 6.0. Lexical Analysis Software Ltd. <https://lexically.net/downloads/version6/wordsmith6.pdf>