# English phrasal verbs

In the traditional grammar of Modern English, a **phrasal verb** typically constitutes a single semantic unit consisting of a verb followed by a particle (examples: *turn down*, *run into* or *sit up*), sometimes collocated with a preposition (examples: *get together with*, *run out of* or *feed off of*).

Phrasal verbs ordinarily cannot be understood based upon the meanings of the individual parts alone but must be considered as a whole: the meaning is non-compositional and thus unpredictable.[a] Phrasal verbs are differentiated from other classifications of multi-word verbs and free combinations by criteria based on idiomaticity, replacement by a single-word verb, w-question formation and particle movement.[1][2]

## Terminology

The term *phrasal verb* was popularized by Logan Pearsall Smith, in *Words and Idioms* (1925), in which he states that the OED Editor Henry Bradley suggested it to him.[3] This terminology is mainly used in English as a second language teaching.

Some textbooks apply the term "phrasal verb" primarily to verbs with particles in order to distinguish phrasal verbs from verb phrases composed of a verb and a collocated preposition.[4][b] Others include verbs with prepositions under the same category and distinguish particle verbs and prepositional verbs as two types of phrasal verbs.[5][c] Since a prepositional phrase can complement a particle verb, some explanations distinguish three types of phrasal verb constructions depending on whether the verb combines with a particle, a preposition phrase, or both,[6] though the third type is not a distinct linguistic phenomenon. Some linguists reject the term.[d]

## Types

### Verb + particle (particle verbs)

Particle verbs (phrasal verbs in the strict sense) are two-word verbs composed of a simple verb and a particle extension that modifies its meaning. The particle is thus integrally collocated with the verb. In older grammars, the particle was usually analyzed as an adverb.[7][8]

a. *Kids **grow up** so fast these days*
b. *You shouldn't **give in** so easily.*

In these examples, the common verbs *grow* and *give* are expanded by the particles *up* and *in*. The resulting two-word verbs are single semantic units, so *grow up* and *give in* are listed as

discrete entries in modern dictionaries.

These verbs can be transitive or intransitive. If they are transitive, i.e. if they have an object, the particle may come either before or after the object of the verb.

c. *She **handed in** her homework.*
d. *She **handed** her homework **in**.*
e. *She **handed** it **in**.*

When the object is a pronoun, the particle is usually placed afterwards. With nouns, it is a matter of familiar collocation or of emphasis.[9]

Particles commonly used in this construction include *to, in, into, out, up, down, at, on, off, under, against*.[e] All these words can also be used as prepositions, but the prepositional use is distinct, and modern dictionaries may list, for example, *to (particle)* and *to (preposition)* as separate lexemes.[f] In the particle verb construction, they cannot be construed as prepositions because they are not being used as part of a prepositional phrase.

f. You should **think** it **over**. – *over* cannot be a preposition, as it is not followed by a noun phrase.
g. Who **thought up** this scheme? – although *up* is followed by a noun phrase, it is linked to the verb (*to think up*) not to the noun (**up this scheme*), so not a preposition.

## Verb + preposition (prepositional verbs)

Many verbs can be complemented by a prepositional phrase that functions adverbially:

a. Don't stand **on the table**.

This construction is sometimes also taught as a phrasal verb, but only when the combination of verb and preposition is not intuitive to the learner:

b. Don't stand **on ceremony**.

Further examples:

c. I **ran into** an old friend. – *into* is a preposition that introduces the prepositional phrase *into an old friend*.
d. She **takes after** her mother. – *after* is a preposition that introduces the prepositional phrase *after her mother*.
e. Sam **passes for** a linguist. – *for* is a preposition that introduces the prepositional phrase *for a linguist*.
f. You should **stand by** your friend. – *by* is a preposition that introduces the prepositional phrase *by your friend*

## Verb + particle + preposition (particle-prepositional verbs)

Sometimes both phenomena can occur in the same context.

a. Who can **put up with** that? – *up* is a particle and *with* is a preposition.[10]
b. She **looks forward to** a rest. – *forward* is a particle and *to* is a preposition.
c. The other tanks **bore down on** my Panther. – *down* is a particle and *on* is a preposition.
d. They really **teed off on** me. – *off* is a particle and *on* is a preposition.
e. We **loaded up on** snacks. – *up* is a particle and *on* is a preposition
f. Susan had to **sit in for** me. – *in* is a particle and *for* is a preposition.

In general, the discrete meanings associated with *phrasal verbs* cannot be readily understood solely by construing the sum of their respective parts: the meaning of *pick up* is distinct from the various meanings of *pick* and *up*, and may acquire disparate meanings depending on its contextual usage. Similarly, the meaning of *hang out* is not conspicuously related to a particular definition of *hang* or *out*.

## Distinguishing phrasal verb types

When a particle verb is transitive, it may be difficult to distinguish it from a prepositional verb.[11][g] A simple diagnostic which works in many cases is to consider whether it is possible to shift the preposition/particle to after the noun. An English preposition can never follow its noun, so if we can change *verb - P - noun* to *verb - noun - P*, then P cannot be a preposition and must be particle.[h] But even with a particle verb, shifting the particle is not always possible, for example if it is followed by a pronoun instead of a noun, or if there is a fixed collocation. A second diagnostic is to think about where the instinctive division would be if we had to take a breath in the middle of the phrase. A particle would naturally be grouped with the preceding verb, a preposition with the following noun phrase.[i] In the following examples, which show both of these approaches, an asterisk indicates an impossible form.

a. You can **bank on** Susan. – *on* is a preposition. The natural division is "bank | on Susan".
b. *You can **bank** Susan **on**. – The preposition cannot follow its noun.

a. You can **take on** Susan. – *on* is a particle. The natural division is "take on | Susan".
b. You can **take** Susan **on**. – The particle can follow the object of the particle verb.

a. He **got over** the situation. – *over* is a preposition. The natural division is "get | over the situation".
b. *He **got** the situation **over**. – The preposition cannot follow its noun.

a. He **thought over** the situation. – *over* is a particle. The natural division is "think over | the situation".
b. He **thought** the situation **over**. – The particle can follow the object of the particle verb.

A third test, which probes further into the question of the natural division, would be to insert an adverb or adverbial between the verb and the particle/preposition. This is possible with a following prepositonal phrase, but not if the adverbial is intruding between the two parts of a particle verb.[12]

a. You can **bank** without reservation **on** Susan. – The adverbial can fall in the natural division: "bank | on Susan".

b. *You can **take** without reservation **on** Susan. – The collocation "take on" cannot naturally be divided by an adverbial.

A fourth test would be to place the verb in a w-question (*which? who?*) or a relative clause and consider whether the particle/preposition can be placed before the question word or relative pronoun. While this may sound antiquated, it is always possible with a preposition, never with a particle. (For more on an obsolete prescriptive rule about this, see preposition stranding.)

a. Who can you **bank on**? Susan is someone (who) you can **bank on**. – *on* is a preposition in terminal position.

b. **On** whom can you **bank**? Susan is a person **on** whom you can **bank**. – The preposition can go before the w-words.

a. Who can I **take on**? Susan is someone (who) any employer could **take on**. – *on* is a particle in terminal position.

b. ***On** whom can I **take**? *Susan is a person **on** whom any employer could **take**. – The particle cannot be moved.

While this distinction is of interest to linguists, it is not necessarily important for language learners, and some textbooks recommend learning phrasal verbs as whole collocations without considering types.[8]

## Shifting

A complex aspect of phrasal verbs concerns the syntax of particle verbs that are transitive (as discussed and illustrated above). These allow some variability, depending on the relative weight of the constituents involved. Shifting often occurs when the object is very light, e.g.

a. Fred chatted up **the girl with red hair**. – Canonical word order

b. Fred chatted **her** up. – Shifting occurs because the definite pronoun *her* is very light.

c. Fred chatted **the girl** up. - *The girl* is also very light.

d. ?Fred chatted **the redhead** up. - A three-syllable object can appear in either position for many speakers.

e. ??Fred chatted **the girl with red hair** up. – Shifting is unlikely unless it is sufficiently motivated by the weight of the constituents involved.

a. They dropped off **the kids from that war zone**. – Canonical word order

b. They dropped **them** off. – Shifting occurs because the definite pronoun *them* is very light.

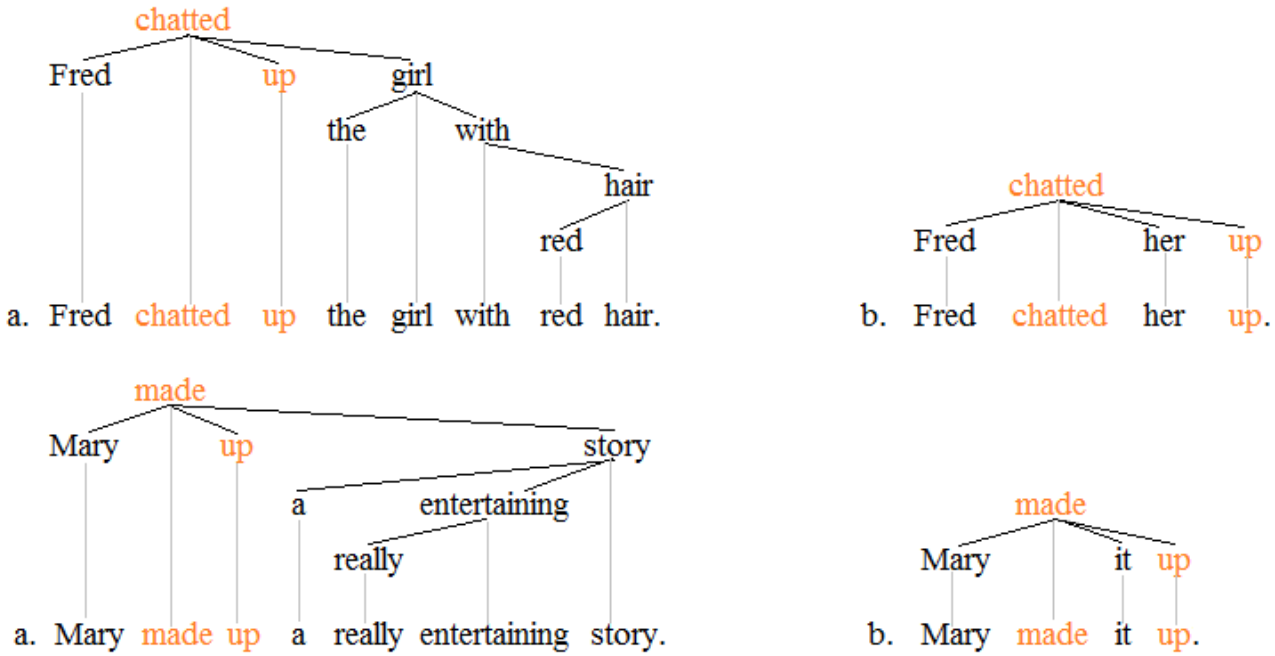
c. ??They dropped **the kids from that war zone** off. – Shifting is unlikely unless it is sufficiently motivated by the weight of the constituents involved.

a. Mary made up **a really entertaining story**. – Canonical word order

b. Mary made **it** up. – Shifting occurs because the definite pronoun *it* is very light.

c. ??Mary made **a really entertaining story** up. – Shifting is unlikely unless it is sufficiently motivated by the weight of the constituents involved.

Shifting occurs between two (or more) sister constituents that appear on the same side of their head. The lighter constituent shifts leftward and the heavier constituent shifts rightward, and this happens to accommodate the relative weight of the two. Dependency grammar trees are again used to illustrate the point:




The trees illustrate when shifting can occur. English sentence structures that grow down and to the right are easier to process. There is a consistent tendency to place heavier constituents to the right, as is evident in the a-trees. Shifting is possible when the resulting structure does not contradict this tendency, as is evident in the b-trees. Note again that the particle verb constructions (in orange) qualify as catenae in both the a- and b-trees. Shifting does not alter this fact.

## Compounding

An extension of the concept of *phrasal verb* occurs via compounding when a verb+particle complex is nominalized. The particles may come before or after the verb. If it comes after, there may be a hyphen between the two parts of the compound noun.

*to set out → outset:*

We **set out** on a quest for the holy grail.

Our quest was doomed from the **outset**

*to put in → input:*

Don't be scared to **put** your own ideas **in**.

Try to come to the meeting – we'd value your **input**.

*to stand by → standby:*

The fire brigade is **standing by** in case of emergency.

We are keeping the old equipment on **standby** in case of emergency.

*to back up → back-up:*

Neil will **back you up** if you need it

Neil will give you any **backup** you need.

Compounds which place the particle before the verb are of ancient development, and are common to all Germanic languages, as well as to Indo-European languages in general. This is related to the history of particle verbs, which developed out of Old English prefixed verbs. By contrast, compounds which put the particle second are a more modern development in English, and focus more on the action expressed by the compound.

## Origins and similar constructions in other languages

Prepositional verbs are very common in many languages, though they would not necessarily be analyzed as a distinct verb type: they are simply verbs followed by prepositional phrases.

By contrast, particle verbs are much rarer in cross-language comparison, and their origins need some explanation. Middle English particle verbs developed from Old English prefixed verbs: OE *inngan* > English *go in*.[13][4]

English phrasal verbs are related to the separable verbs in other West Germanic languages, which can be seen historically as a parallel, though independent development. For example, in Dutch or German

a. *Ik moet de lamp aansteken* / *Ich muss die Lampe anmachen* - 'I have to put on the lamp': *aan-* / *an-* is prefixed to the infinitive.

b. *Ik steek de lamp aan* / *Ich mache die Lampe an* - 'I am putting on the lamp': *aan* / *an* stands separately at the end of the principal clause.

A number of particle verbs exist in some Romance languages such as Lombard, spoken in Northern Italy: *Fa foeura* (to do in: to eat up; to squander); *Dà denter* (to trade in; to bump into); *Borlà giò* (to fall down); *Lavà sü* (to wash up, as in English); *Trà sü* (to throw up, as in English); *Trà vìa* (to throw away, as in English); *Serà sü* (to lock up, as in English); *Dà vià* (to give away, as in English), and more. Some of these made their way into Italian, for instance *far fuori* (to get rid of); *mangiare fuori* (to eat out); *andare d'accordo con* (to get on/along with); *buttare via* (throw away).

In Portuguese, there are some phrasal verbs that aren't common. There are 3 phrasal verbs in Portuguese that are commonly used; Ir embora, Jogar fora and Fazer de conta. Some other phrasal verbs are: Estar perante, Ficar de, Usar-me como and Ter Medo.

## See also

- Adverbial phrase
- Collocation
- Ergative verb
- Idiom
- Lexical unit
- Verb phrase

## References

**Notes**

a. That unpredictability of meaning is the defining trait of phrasal verb constructions is widely assumed. See for instance Huddleston & Pullum 2002, p. 273 and Allerton 2006, p. 166.

b. For examples of accounts that use the term *phrasal verb* to denote particle verbs only (not prepositional verbs), see for instance Tallerman (1998:130), Adger (2003:99f.) and Haiden (2006).

c. For example, the series 'English File' uses phrasal verbs in this way. This exercise on the English File website features both types of verbs under the term "phrasal verbs". elt.oup.com (https://elt.oup.com/student/solutions/advanced/grammar/grammar_01_022e?cc=global&selLanguage=en)

d. Huddleston & Pullum 2002, p. 274 reject the term *phrasal* verb because the relevant word combinations often do not form phrases.

e. For a list of the particles that occur with phrasal verbs, see Jurafsky & Martin 2000, p. 319.

f. e.g. Miriam Webster

g. For more on how this confusion played into the old controversy about prepositions at the end of sentences, see Preposition stranding#Controversy

h. For more on the shifting diagnostic used to distinguish particle verbs from prepositional verbs, see Tallerman (1998:129).

i. For more on the difference between particles and prepositions with phrasal verbs, see Jurafsky & Martin 2000, p. 318.

**Citations**


1. Quirk 1985.
2. Biber 2012.
3. Smith 1925, p. 172.
4. Lamont 2005.
5. Sinclair 1995, p. 162.
6. Declerck 1991, p. 45.
7. Fowler 1926.
8. Thomson & Martinet 1993, §362A.
9. Thomson & Martinet 1993, §362B.
10. Jeanette S. DeCarrico The structure of English: studies in form and function – Volume 1 – Page 80 – 2000 "4.6.3 Prepositional Phrasal Verbs – It is also possible to find phrasal verbs that are themselves followed by a preposition. These structures are called prepositional phrasal verbs or multiword verbs. Examples are put up with (e.g., I can't put up with) "
11. Farrell, Patrick (2005). "English Verb-Preposition Constructions: Constituency and Order" (https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6nq8q46n) . *Language*. **81** (1): 96–137. doi:10.1353/lan.2005.0017 (https://doi.org/10.1353%2Flan.2005.0017) . ISSN 1535-0665 (https://www.worldcat.org/issn/1535-0665) . S2CID 119715102 (https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:119715102) .

12. Ron Cowan – The Teacher's Grammar of English: A Course Book and Reference 2008 Page 176

    "**The Adverb Insertion Test** – Earlier, we saw that intransitive phrasal verbs usually do not permit the insertion of an adverb between the verb and the particle, and the same is true of transitive phrasal verbs, as (25a) and (25b) show. In contrast, prepositional verbs do permit adverb insertion, as (25c) demonstrates.

    (25) a. He turned quickly out the light. = separable phrasal verb.

    b. He ran unexpectedly into his cousin = inseparable phrasal verb.

    c. He stared intently at the target = prepositional verb.

    **The Relative Clause Test** Relative clauses in which the relative pronoun is the object of a preposition permit the two patterns shown in (26).

    (26) a. The man [that they were waiting for] was late b. The man [ for whom they were waiting] was late. In (26a), the preposition for is at the end of the relative clause enclosed by square brackets, but (26b) shows that this preposition can also occur at the beginning of the clause before the relative pronoun whom."

13. Ogura 1995.

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## External links

- Ordered list of phrasal verbs (http://www.uazone.org/friends/esl4rus/pvlist.html)
- Write Back Soon (https://web.archive.org/web/20170822185524/http://radiolingua.com/shows/english-efl/write-back-soon/) A course by Radio Lingua, which aims to help English learners understand and practise their phrasal verbs.
- Phrasal Verb Demon (http://www.phrasalverbdemon.com) . Making sense of phrasal verbs.