Avoidance of Phrasal Verbs: The Case of Chinese Learners of English

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This study investigates the avoidance of English phrasal verbs by Chinese learners. Six groups of Chinese learners (intermediate and advanced; a total of 70) took one of 3 tests (multiple-choice, translation, or recall), which included literal and figurative phrasal verbs, while 15 native speakers took the multiple-choice test. The results show that 3 factors (proficiency level, phrasal-verb type, and test type) affect learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs. The authors speculate that the differences between first and second languages and the semantic difficulty of phrasal verbs may be reasons for the learners' avoidance. Incorporating the findings of 3 previous studies, this study claims that learners' phrasal-verb avoidance behavior is a manifestation of interlanguage development.

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Avoidance

The phenomenon of avoidance behaviors in second language (L2) acquisition was first brought to light by Schachter (1974), who pointed out the importance of examining not only the L2 forms that were actually produced by the learners of a foreign language, but also the L2 forms they seemed to avoid using consistently. Since then, avoidance has drawn the attention of many researchers (e.g., Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Kamimoto, Shimura, & Kellerman, 1992; Kleinmann, 1977, 1978).

When comparing the errors in relative clauses made by native speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Arabian learners in their English compositions, Schachter (1974) found that the difficulty of relative clauses for Chinese and Japanese students, which was predicted by contrastive analysis, manifested itself not in the number of errors made by these two groups of learners, but in the number of relative clauses produced, which was much smaller than that produced by the Persian and Arabian speakers. She concluded that "if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it" (p. 213). She further pointed out that error analysis, which had been prevalent in previous transfer studies, was insufficient in L2 acquisition because it was incapable of explaining the phenomenon of avoidance.

Despite Schachter's (1974) important revelation regarding avoidance, her study was limited. It did not control for proficiency level or the frequency of relative clauses in the texts. Furthermore, as Kleinmann (1977, 1978) argued, "to be able to avoid some linguistic feature presupposes being able to choose not to avoid it, i.e., to use it" (1977, p. 96). However, in Schachter's (1974) study, there was no proof that the learners had the ability to use relative clauses. Therefore, the Chinese and Japanese learners' so-called avoidance of producing English relative clauses may have resulted simply from their ignorance of the structure rather than conscious avoidance. Avoidance, as interpreted by Kleinmann (1977, 1978), is a strategy that L2 learners might resort to when, with the

knowledge of a target language word or structure, they perceived that it was difficult to produce.

To pinpoint avoidance behavior more accurately, Kleinmann (1977, 1978) examined four English grammatical structures (passive, present progressive, infinitive complement, and directobject pronoun) produced by two groups of intermediate-level learners of English as an L2: native speakers of Arabic and native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. Before looking at any potential avoidance, Kleinmann administered comprehension tests to establish the presence of the learners' knowledge of the four structures in question. His results showed an avoidance pattern in accordance with difficulty predictions made by contrastive analysis. The frequency of use of the target structures also correlated with various affective measures (e.g., confidence, facilitating anxiety).¹ These findings, together with the avoidance pattern, led to the suggestion that "while CA [contrastive analysis] is a fairly good predictor of avoidance there is an interaction of linguistic and psychological variables in determining learner behavior in a second language in that structures which otherwise would be avoided are likely to be produced depending on the affective state of the learner" (Kleinmann, 1977, p. 93). Therefore, the study supported Schachter's point that avoidance can be predicted by the structural differences between the first language (L1) and L2. although other factors operate simultaneously to determine the actual occurrence of the avoidance.

On the other hand, some researchers have argued that the underproduction of certain linguistic features does not necessarily suggest avoidance and that the structural difference between the L1 and L2 alone may not be the only reason for underproduction. Kamimoto et al. (1992) pointed out that in order to be able to establish whether avoidance is a feasible explanation for a group of learners' relative underproduction, it is necessary to look at the L1 form, distribution, and function of the entity supposedly being avoided in the L2, as well as the means being used to establish whether and to what extent the entity is already part of the L2 knowledge of that group. In a detailed

study of Chinese and English relative clauses, Li (1996) found that intermediate and advanced learners did not necessarily avoid structures that were apparently different in form from those in their L1. Hence, he concluded that it was not the apparent structural difference that caused Chinese learners to avoid English relative clauses consciously, but the more subtle pragmatic differences that made them subconsciously underproduce this structure.

The above-mentioned studies have illustrated the existence and some potential causes of avoidance in L2 learners. The following sections discuss the definitions of phrasal verbs, as well as three studies on the avoidance of English phrasal verbs.

Definitions of Phrasal Verbs in English

A phrasal verb is usually defined as a structure that consists of a verb proper and a morphologically invariable particle that function as a single unit both lexically and syntactically (Darwin & Gray, 1999; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). Various attempts have been made to classify phrasal verbs. Some researchers have looked at the relationships between the verb proper and the particle (e.g., Fraser, 1976), whereas others have focused on the semantics. Cornell (1985) observed that large numbers of phrasal verbs are nonidiomatic in the sense that their meaning is easy to deduce if the verb element is known. For example, if the meaning of rush or steam is known to the learner, it would not be hard to understand rush away or steam off. In two studies of the avoidance of phrasal verbs, Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) approached the classification with different terms but the same nature. Dagut and Laufer (1985, p. 74) divided the 15 phrasal verbs used in their study into three types:

(a) literal—phrasal verbs whose meaning is a straightforward product of their semantic components: go out, take away, come in;

- (b) figurative—in which a new meaning has resulted from a metaphorical shift of meaning and the semantic fusion of the individual components: *turn up, let down*;
- (c) completive—in which the particle describes the result of the action: $cut\ off,\ burn\ down.$

Similarly, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) worked with three types: semantically transparent (the meaning of the whole verb-particle combination can be derived from the meaning of its parts), semitransparent (those that are transparent when put into context), and figurative or "semantically opaque" (p. 37), which have lexicalized meaning. The figurative, or idiomatic, phrasal verbs were considered semantically more difficult than other types of phrasal verbs.

Avoidance of Phrasal Verbs in English

There are three studies of the avoidance of phrasal verbs in the literature. The first is Dagut and Laufer (1985), which looked at Israeli learners' use of English phrasal verbs, a lexicosyntactic form with no formal equivalent in Hebrew. The study also looked into the frequency of avoidance of three phrasal-verb types (literal, figurative, and completive). Three groups of advanced Hebrew learners took three tests (a multiple-choice test, a verb translation test, and a verb-memorizing test).² The results showed that a majority of the learners avoided using the phrasal verbs, preferring the one-word verbs, and that avoidance was most evident with the figurative phrasal verbs. Dagut and Laufer (1985) concluded that the Hebrew learners' difficulty in producing English phrasal verbs could not be explained by any intralingual factors such as overgeneralization or fossilization. Instead, it could be understood only by means of an interlingual approach, that is, structural differences between the L1 and L2. Thus, Dagut and Laufer (1985) contended that typological difference between Hebrew and English resulted in the avoidance.

Despite their study's being the first contribution to research on avoidance of phrasal verbs, Dagut and Laufer's (1985) study has two weaknesses. First, the method used to establish participants' prior knowledge of the linguistic feature in question was not sound. The choice of the phrasal verbs depended on the researchers' impression from their teaching experiences, as the researchers assumed that the students "had come across all of the 15 phrasal verbs at some point in their education" (p. 75). Because of this impressionistic procedure, the underproduction may have resulted from learners' pure ignorance of the phrasal verbs. Thus, Dagut and Laufer's (1985) conclusion that the learners had "a genuine avoidance phenomenon" (p. 78) was not, as pointed out by Kamimoto et al. (1992), well grounded. Second, although Dagut and Laufer (1985) pointed out that interlingual differences played a role in the avoidance of phrasal verbs for Hebrew speakers, they failed to address the fact that the avoidance was much more frequent in the category of figurative phrasal verbs than in the case of the literal or completive ones. This, indeed, points to an intralingual element in the avoidance behavior in which the literal versus figurative semantic differences of the same target structure in the L2 might cause different language use by the L2 learners.

A follow-up study by Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) addressed the latter of these two issues. From the conclusion drawn by Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) derived a corollary that Dutch learners of English would tend not to avoid phrasal verbs because they had phrasal verbs in their native language. Nonetheless, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) hypothesized that Dutch learners would still avoid phrasal verbs, not for structural reasons as the Hebrew learners did, but for semantic reasons. Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) used the same forms of elicitation tests as Dagut and Laufer (1985) with different phrasal verbs. Three tests (multiple-choice, memorization, translation) were administered to independent groups of intermediate learners and independent groups of advanced learners to examine whether the avoidance, if any, would diminish with increased

proficiency. From their findings, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) claimed that Dutch learners, contrary to the hypothesis, did not avoid phrasal verbs categorically (i.e., as a form class), whether they were at the intermediate or advanced level.

Hulstijn and Marchena's (1989) study offered two interesting findings about avoidance. First, Dutch learners, although not avoiding phrasal verbs categorically, did avoid those idiomatic phrasal verbs that they perceived as too Dutch-like. These were phrasal verbs that had Dutch equivalents with an identical, specific meaning (e.g., go off, which is the literal counterpart of the Dutch word afgaan). This finding implied that avoidance did not result from structural differences between the L1 and L2 alone. Similarities between the L1 and L2 are also possible reasons. Second, the participants exhibited "a tendency to adopt a play-it-safe strategy, preferring one-word verbs with general, multi-purpose meanings over phrasal verbs with specific, sometimes idiomatic, meanings" (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p. 241).

Kellerman (1983) may be able to explain this tendency via his finding that "not everything that looks transferable is transferable" (p. 113). In other words, there are L1-induced constraints on the form of the L2 that may prevent not only facilitation where the L1 and L2 are similar, but also negative transfer where the L1 and L2 are different. One such constraint is the learner's perception of language distance, which Kellerman termed "psychotypology." Another constraint Kellerman identified is "prototypicality," which refers to the learner's perception of some L1 structures as potentially transferable, with others potentially nontransferable. According to Kellerman, "if a[n L1] feature is perceived as infrequent, irregular, semantically or structurally opaque, or in any other way exceptional,...its transferability will be inversely proportional to its degree of markedness" (1983, p. 117). We believe that this psycholinguistic markedness accounted for the finding in Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) that Dutch learners, although familiar with the phrasal-verb structure in their L1, avoided those idiomatic phrasal verbs that were too Dutch-like. In other words, idiomatic phrasal verbs are semantically opaque and therefore may

have been perceived by the Dutch learners as language specific and not transferable to L2. Here, learners' perception of both their L1 and L2 also played a role in avoidance.

The third study on the avoidance of phrasal verbs is Laufer and Eliasson (1993). Based on the previous studies, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) identified three possible causes of syntactic and lexical avoidance: (a) L1-L2 differences (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Kleinmann, 1977, 1978; Levenston, 1971; Schachter, 1974); (b) L1-L2 similarity (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Jordens, 1977; Kellerman, 1977, 1986); and (c) L2 complexity. The participants in Laufer and Eliasson (1993) were advanced Swedish learners of English, whose native language has the phrasal-verb structure. Two types of tests were used in this study: a multiple-choice test and a translation test. The researchers first gave a comprehension test to a control group to establish the passive knowledge of the phrasal verbs, arguing that only from this baseline could avoidance be identified. They compared the results of their study with those of Dagut and Laufer (1985) to yield the following findings: (a) phrasal verbs were avoided by learners whose L1 lacked such a grammatical category (Hebrew) but were not avoided by those who possessed the category in their L1 (Swedish); (b) inherent complexity did not play the major role in L2 avoidance; and (c) contrary to the findings of Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), idiomatic-meaning similarity between the L1 and L2 did not necessarily induce learner avoidance. Laufer and Eliasson (1993) thus concluded that the best predictor of avoidance was L1-L2 difference.

In line with the inquiry of these three studies, the present study investigated the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Chinese learners of English, who do not have the structure of phrasal verbs in their native language. It aimed at providing further evidence for avoidance in the context of structural differences between the L1 and L2, as well as the inherent semantic complexity of the target form. Moreover, it included proficiency level in the design. Both Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) studied only one proficiency level (advanced). Including two proficiency levels (intermediate and advanced) in

their study, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) claimed that their participants did not avoid phrasal verbs categorically. However, the intermediate Dutch learners actually demonstrated a tendency to avoid using the English phrasal verbs on the multiple-choice test (see the third paragraph of the Discussion section). Indeed, more empirical studies are needed to examine whether proficiency level is a determining or an insignificant factor in the avoidance of phrasal verbs. Furthermore, this study included the test effect in its design to investigate whether different elicitation test formats would play a role in the avoidance of phrasal verbs, because the previous studies on phrasal verbs did not look at this effect. However, a number of studies have reported task-induced interlanguage variation (i.e., the test effect) in different language areas: phonology (Sato, 1985), morphology (Larsen-Freeman, 1976), syntax (Schmidt, 1980), and pragmatics (Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). In the area in question, Hulstiin and Marchena (1989) assumed that test instruments (i.e., multiplechoice, translation, and recall tasks) might differentially affect avoidance of phrasal verbs. Based on the previous studies in this area, the present study investigated three research questions:

Research Question 1: Do Chinese learners avoid using phrasal verbs?

Research Question 2: Does their avoidance, if any, reflect differences in the semantic nature of phrasal-verb types (figurative vs. literal)?

Research Question 3: Does their avoidance, if any, reflect the ways their performance is measured?

Method

Participants

Eighty-five people participated in this study, divided into three groups: native speakers of English, advanced Chinese learners of English, and intermediate Chinese learners of English. The native speakers of English were 15 undergraduate students at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. The advanced learners were 30 Chinese graduate students at the same university. Their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores were all above 600. At the time of the data collection (1999) from these 30 students, 5 of them had been in the United States for more than 3 years, 4 for about 2 years, and the remaining 21 for 9 months. These advanced learners were randomly assigned to one of three groups, with each group given one of the three elicitation tests (multiple-choice, translation, and recall).

The remaining participants were 40 intermediate Chinese learners of English, 10 of whom were graduate students at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; the remaining 30 were college students in China. The TOEFL scores of the graduate students ranged from 500 to 590. At the time of the data collection (1999) from these 10 graduate students, 7 of them had been in the United States for about 5 months, and 3 for about 9 months. At the time of the data collection (2000) from the 30 college students in China, all of the students in the group had studied English for a minimum of 8 years (6 years in secondary school and 2 in college) and had passed Band 6 of the College English Test (a national standardized English test for college students in China), which is roughly equivalent to 500-600 on the TOEFL. These 40 intermediate Chinese learners were combined into one group on the grounds that the 10 graduate students at the university had been in the United States for only a short period of time (the majority for only 5 months and some for 9 months). Of the 10 learners from the university, 5 took the multiple-choice test and 5 took the translation test. The 30 learners from China were randomly assigned to one of three groups, with each group given one of the three tests.

Research Design

Fifteen native speakers took the multiple-choice test. Of the 30 advanced learners, 10 took the multiple-choice test, 10 the

translation test, and 10 the recall test. Of the 40 intermediate learners, 15 took the multiple-choice test, 15 the translation test, and 10 the recall test. The study was carried out in two stages. First, 15 native speakers took the multiple-choice test alone, so that 15 cases of native-speaker preference for a phrasal verb over a semantically equivalent one-word verb in a short dialogue could be identified.³ The present study also looked at two types of phrasal verbs: literal and figurative (see Appendix A). The second stage was to find out whether and to what extent Chinese learners of English would avoid using these phrasal verbs. This stage consisted of the administration of three elicitation tests to three independent groups of advanced learners and three independent groups of intermediate learners.⁴

The study was designed along the lines of two of the studies previously discussed: Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Hulstijn and Marchena (1989). However, the present study was different from these two studies in two respects. First, different phrasal verbs were used. In the latter study, the phrasal verbs used were those preferred by native British English speakers and therefore might not have been appropriate for the participants in this study, who were in an American English environment. Second, phrasal verbs are colloquial (Cornell, 1985; Dixon, 1982; Side, 1990) and generally considered to belong to an informal register. These two prior studies used sentences to provide the context for the phrasal verbs in their tests. Although the participants were told to imagine saying the sentences in casual speech, some of the sentences seem too long and too formal to suit the purpose. For example: "After having failed to have a decent conversation with a German couple I had met in the pub, I decided that it was time to brush up my German" (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p. 255). Instead of using long sentences, the present study used shorter and more casual dialogues as the context. For the same phrasal verb brush up (brush up on in American English), the following dialogue was used: Cathy: "I heard the company is sending you to Germany again." Tony: "Yes. It's been a long time since I was there, so I guess it's time to brush up on my

German" (see Appendix B). We hoped that despite the fact that these dialogues were still in written form, they offered a better chance of making the participants feel that they were in spoken English.

Materials

Fifteen pairs of phrasal and one-word verbs were selected based on native-speaker preference in the context of small dialogues. This set of 15 dialogues was used in all three tests.

Multiple-choice test. The multiple-choice test consisted of the 15 short dialogues from the test of native speakers (see Appendix B). In each dialogue, the verb in question was left blank. The participants were asked to fill in the blank with one of the four verbs presented below the dialogue: the phrasal verb, an equivalent one-word verb, and two distractor verbs (one of which was also a phrasal verb). The participants had 10 min to complete the test. Because each item actually contained two correct answers, the participants received special instructions to choose the one that they considered most suitable to complete the dialogue.

Translation test. The translation test used the same 15 dialogues as the multiple-choice test, but with the verbs left out. At the end of each dialogue, the Chinese equivalent of the missing verb in that dialogue was given. The participants were required to translate the missing verbs into English in the 10 min provided.

Recall test. The participants were first given the same 15 dialogues as in the multiple-choice test, written out in full with the phrasal verbs. The test included five distractor dialogues with one-word verbs. The participants were given 10 min to remember the main ideas of the dialogues. After an hour, they were given the same dialogues again, but this time, the verbs were left out. They were asked to fill in the verbs according to what they remembered. In order to prevent L1 influence, no native-language translation of the phrasal verbs was given (Hulstiin & Marchena, 1989).

Data Analyses

An alpha level of .05 was used for both statistical tests performed on the data. For the purpose of the analysis of variance (ANOVA), raw scores were converted into proportions. For example, on the multiple-choice test, if a participant chose 8 phrasal verbs out of the 15 items, the raw score was converted into the proportion 8/15, or .53. Because there were two phrasal verbs among the four choices (one correct, one distractor). only the correct phrasal verbs chosen by the nonnative speakers were counted in the calculation. Among the 15 phrasal-verb items. 11 were figurative and 4 were literal. If out of the 11 figurative phrasal verbs, the participant chose 5 (again, for the nonnative speakers, this would be the correct ones chosen), the raw score for figurative phrasal verbs was converted into the proportion 5/11, or .45. If out of the 4 literal phrasal verbs, the participant chose 2, the raw score for literal phrasal verbs was converted into the proportion 1/2, or .50. (Similar procedures were used to convert the raw scores on the recall and translation tests, which also had 15 items, 11 of which were figurative and 4 literal.)

Results

The raw scores on the tests are presented in Appendix C. Fifteen native speakers took the multiple-choice test. The total number of possible verbs was 225 (15 participants \times 15 items). In 189 cases, the native speakers chose the phrasal verb, and in 36 cases, they chose the one-word verb. Of the 225 possible occurrences of phrasal verbs, 165 were figurative (15 participants \times 11 figurative phrasal-verb items), and 60 were literal (15 participants \times 4 literal phrasal-verb items). Among the 189 phrasal verbs the native speakers chose in the multiple-choice test, 136 were figurative and 53 were literal. The raw scores for the two groups of nonnative speakers on all three tests are presented in the same fashion.

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of phrasal-verb usage for all three groups of participants. A

Table 1

Means and standard deviations of phrasal-verb usage

Test	Group	Phrasal-verb type	M	SD
Multiple choice	Native speakers	Total	0.84	0.10
	of English	Figurative	0.82	0.12
		Literal	0.88	0.13
	Advanced learners	Total	${0.75}$	0.15
	of English	Figurative	0.73	0.19
	_	Literal	0.83	0.17
	Intermediate learners	Total	0.45	0.19
	of English	Figurative	0.43	0.20
	J	Literal	0.50	0.19
Translation	Advanced learners	Total	0.47	0.16
	of English	Figurative	0.35	0.22
		Total Figurative Literal Total Figurative Literal	0.83	0.17
	Intermediate learners	Total	0.38	0.16
	of English	Figurative	0.26	0.19
		Literal	0.70	0.24
Recall	Advanced learners	Total	0.78	0.17
1000011	of English	Figurative	0.76	0.17
	of English Figurative 0.	0.83	0.24	
	Intermediate learners	Total	0.50	0.22
	of English	Figurative	0.48	0.21
	-	Literal	0.55	0.35

two-way (3×2) ANOVA with repeated measures on one independent variable (Analysis I) was conducted to investigate the performance of the three groups (the native speakers, the advanced learners, and the intermediate learners) on the multiple-choice test. The ANOVA results showed that group was significant, F(2, 34) = 31.25, p < .01. Phrasal-verb type was also significant, F(1, 34) = 7.68, p < .01, with the mean score on the literal phrasal verbs significantly higher than that on the figurative phrasal verbs.

However, the first-order interaction between group and phrasalverb type was not significant, F(2, 34) = 0.22, p = .80. Post hoc analysis (Tukey) of the group revealed that the difference between the native speakers and intermediate learners was statistically significant, with the mean score of the former higher than that of the latter. Cohen's (1988) d was calculated for the effect size estimate. The effect size of the intermediate learners relative to the native speakers was d = -2.57, with the upper limit of its 95% confidence interval at d = -2.84 and the lower limit at d = -2.30. The difference between the advanced and intermediate learners was also statistically significant, with the mean score of the advanced learners higher than that of the intermediate learners. However, the difference between the native speakers and the advanced learners was not statistically significant. The effect size of the advanced learners relative to the native speakers was d = -0.41, with the upper limit of its 95% confidenc interval at d = -0.62 and the lower limit at d = -0.20.

A three-way $(2 \times 3 \times 2)$ ANOVA with repeated measures on one independent variable (Analysis II) was conducted to analyze the performance of the two nonnative-speaker groups (advanced and intermediate) on all three tests (Table 2). Proficiency-level difference was statistically significant, F (1, 58) = 28.05, p<.01, which is consistent with the result in Analysis I. The three tests tended to produce different results at p=.06. Phrasal-verb type was also statistically significant, F (1, 58) = 46.79, p<.01, with the mean score on the literal phrasal verbs higher than that on the figurative ones. Finally, the interaction between phrasal-verb type and test type was statistically significant, F (2, 58) = 17.50, p<.01.

Because of these results, post hoc analysis was necessary to examine only the interaction between phrasal-verb type and test type. Figure 1 shows a plot of Phrasal-Verb Type × Test Type for the advanced learners of English, whereas Figure 2 shows a plot of Phrasal-Verb Type × Test Type for the intermediate learners of English. Post hoc analysis (Tukey) of the test type revealed that the difference between the multiple-choice test and the translation test was statistically significant. The difference

Table 2 Three-way $(2 \times 3 \times 2)$ ANOVA results

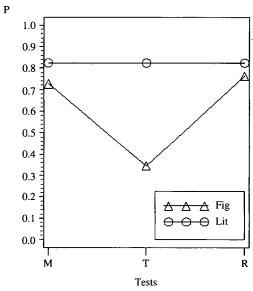
Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between participants					
Proficiency	1	1.71	1.71	28.05*	.01
Test Type	2	0.37	0.18	3.03	.06
Proficiency \times Test Type	2	0.27	0.13	2.19	.12
Error	64	3.90	0.06		
Within participants					
Phrasal-Verb Type	1	1.45	1.45	46.79*	.01
Phrasal-Verb Type	1	0.01	0.01	0.03	.86
× Proficiency					
Phrasal-Verb Type	2	1.09	0.54	17.50*	.01
× Test Type					
Phrasal-Verb Type	2	0.01	0.01	0.08	.92
\times Proficiency \times Test Type					
Error (Phrasal-Verb Type)	64	1.98	0.03		

^{*}p < .05.

between the recall test and the translation test was also statistically significant. However, the difference between the multiple-choice test and the recall test was not statistically significant. A specific interaction was therefore found between phrasal-verb type and the translation test. This means that the difference between the proportions of figurative-verb use and literal-verb use was found to be statistically significant for both the advanced and intermediate learners only on the translation test. In other words, only on the translation test was the learners' (both advanced and intermediate) production of the figurative phrasal verbs significantly less frequent than that of the literal phrasal verbs.

Discussion

Research Question 1 asked whether Chinese learners of English avoid using phrasal verbs. To answer this question,



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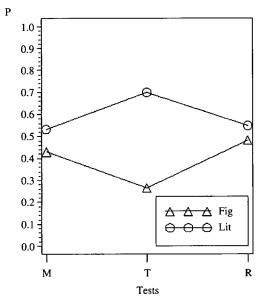
P: Proportion of actual occurrences of a phrasal-verb type in total possible occurrences

Fig: Figurative phrasal verbs Lit: Literal phrasal verbs
M: Multiple-choice test T: Translation test

R: Recall test

Figure 1. Use of figurative and literal phrasal verbs by the advanced learners.

results from all three elicitation tests were analyzed. The present study operationalizes learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs as a usage that is lower than that of the native speakers at a statistically significant level. On the multiple-choice test, the advanced learners used phrasal verbs 75% of the time and one-word verbs 21% of the time, whereas the intermediate learners used them 45% and 43% of the time, respectively. The native speakers, on the other hand, used phrasal verbs 84% of the time and one-word verbs 16% of the time. Analysis I found that the intermediate learners produced phrasal verbs much less frequently than both the advanced learners and the native speakers, which means that the intermediate learners avoided



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 Proportion of actual occurrences of a phrasal-verb type in total possible occurrences

Fig: Figurative phrasal verbs Lit: Literal phrasal verbs
M: Multiple-choice test T: Translation test

R: Recall test

Figure 2. Use of figurative and literal phrasal verbs by the intermediate learners.

using phrasal verbs and preferred the one-word verbs (d=-2.69). Although the advanced learners did not perform very differently from the native speakers, they also showed a slight tendency to use phrasal verbs less than the native speakers (d=-0.41). Analysis II further revealed that on all three elicitation tests, the advanced learners used significantly more phrasal verbs than the intermediate learners did (see Table 1).

The L1-L2 structural differences (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993) between Chinese and English might be a reason for the avoidance of phrasal verbs by the intermediate Chinese learners. The phrasal-verb structure is a peculiarity of the Germanic languages (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Darwin &

Gray, 1999) that has no parallel in Chinese. The structure of a verb followed by a particle does exist in Chinese, as in guolai (come over here), guoqu (go over there), in which the particles lai and qu follow the verb guo to give directional meanings. However, this structure is different from the English phrasalverb structure in two ways. First, unlike in the English phrasalverb structure, the particles in Chinese are generally inseparable from the verbs; it is very rare for nouns to come between the verbs and the particles. As a result, this type of verb + particle structure is more or less treated as a single word. Second, the morphological form particle is very restricted in Chinese. There are very few directional particles, such as lai (over here), au (over there), shang (up), xia (down), jin (in), and chu (out), and the verb + particle combinations rarely take on figurative meanings. as they often do in English (e.g., let down for disappoint). Because of the L1-L2 differences, the semantic function of the particles in English phrasal verbs may be confusing to intermediate Chinese learners of English; this is frequently commented on by both teachers and learners of English. Learners might develop a "natural tendency to avoid using what they do not properly understand and to prefer the more familiar one-word verb" (Dagut & Laufer, 1985, p. 78). Nevertheless, learning seems to have counteracted the effects of the L1-L2 difference for the advanced learners of English. Thus, the findings of the present study partially support the idea that L1-L2 differences are a good predictor of avoidance in L2 acquisition (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993).

Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), who investigated differences in English proficiency levels in the avoidance of phrasal verbs, hypothesized that Dutch learners' avoidance tendency would diminish with increased proficiency. Although their study claimed that Dutch learners did not avoid phrasal verbs at either the advanced or the intermediate level, they found that on the multiple-choice test (given to the native speakers, as well as the advanced and intermediate learners), "the intermediate ESL learners responded significantly differently from the

English native speakers, $\chi^2 = 42.4$, df = 1, p < .01, showing much less preference for phrasal verbs. The advanced ESL learners. however, showed a clear preference for phrasal verbs not significantly different from native preference, $\chi^2 = .49$, df = 1, ns" (p. 246). The former finding in fact points to the intermediate Dutch learners' (i.e., secondary school students') tendency to avoid using English phrasal verbs, as compared with native speakers on the same test. The disparity between Hulstijn and Marchena's (1989) claim and their findings might have come from a failure to analyze the full effect of the two distinct proficiency levels (intermediate and advanced) before collapsing them in a broader analysis of Dutch learners as one group. Put another way, Hulstijn and Marchena did not follow the standard statistical interpretation procedure used when an interaction between two proficiency levels is significant. Thus, the interpretation should focus first on the interaction before any nonsignificance of the main variable, the proficiency level, is claimed.

Incorporating the findings of the previous three studies, the present study claims a developmental manifestation of interlanguage from avoidance to nonavoidance. Figure 3 shows a simplified line for interlanguage development toward a nativelike stage. The horizontal line of arrows divides learners according to their L1. Learners whose L1 lacks phrasal verbs are above the line, and those whose L1 has phrasal verbs are below the line. The vertical line divides avoidance (on the left) and nonavoidance (on the right) of phrasal verbs. The findings of the four studies have been laid out along these two lines. This model seems to suggest that, regardless of whether learners have phrasal verbs in their L1 (Dutch) or not (Chinese), they seem to go through the same developmental process from avoidance to nonavoidance of phrasal verbs. Chinese undergraduate and graduate learners avoided phrasal verbs, whereas more advanced Chinese graduate learners did not; Dutch high school students avoided phrasal verbs, but more advanced Dutch undergraduate learners did not. At this stage, it is not certain whether Hebrew and Swedish learners go

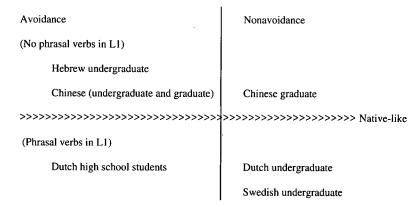


Figure 3. Developmental shift from avoidance to nonavoidance of English phrasal verbs.

through the same process as well because Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) provided data for only one proficiency level of Hebrew and Swedish learners. Hebrew undergraduate learners avoided phrasal verbs. Swedish undergraduates did not. Having said that, we suspect that Hebrew and Swedish learners undergo the same developmental process, and this belief calls for empirical validation. It should be noted that the two notions of interlanguage development and L1-L2 structural difference (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993) are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. Establishing structural difference as a factor in phrasal-verb avoidance does not rule out the possibility that L2 learners' difficulties with phrasal verbs would eventually subside. Moreover, the developmental framework is a learner's internal system, whereas the L1-L2 difference is a linguistic factor that affects some learners' interlanguage.

Within this developmental framework, one significant contributing factor to the learners' language development from avoidance and nonavoidance found in this study might have been the amount of contact with the L2. The advanced learners in this study were all learners of English as an L2 who had been in a native English environment for periods ranging from 9 months to more than 3 years. It can be reasonably assumed

that they had had plenty of interactions in English with native speakers. On the other hand, the majority (30 out of 40) of the intermediate learners were learners of English as a foreign language who had not been exposed to any native-English environment. Phrasal verbs are a structure that occurs more often in spoken than in written English. The different amount of exposure to and interaction with English in the case of the Chinese learners might have been an important reason why the advanced learners in this study incorporated phrasal verbs in their language use significantly more than the intermediate learners.

Research Question 2 investigated whether the avoidance of phrasal verbs by Chinese learners reflects differences in phrasal-verb types (i.e., figurative vs. literal). Analysis I found phrasal-verb type to have been statistically significant on the multiple-choice test, with the mean for literal phrasal verbs higher than that for figurative phrasal verbs. There was no interaction between the phrasal-verb types and the three groups, which means that all three groups favored more literal phrasal-verb production than figurative phrasal-verb production on the multiple-choice test. Analysis II also found that learners favored more literal phrasal-verb production than figurative phrasal-verb production. (More precisely, significant results were obtained only on the translation test.) Analysis II found no interaction between group and phrasal-verb type, which means that learners of both proficiency levels performed in a similar way, using figurative phrasal verbs less often than literal ones. Finally, there was no difference between the advanced and intermediate learners in terms of using figurative phrasal verbs less than literal ones.

Although both the advanced and intermediate learners showed the same pattern of using fewer figurative phrasal verbs than literal phrasal verbs, the advanced learners' performance was not statistically different from that of the native speakers, which means that they did not really avoid either figurative or literal phrasal verbs. It was only the intermediate learners who avoided using both. An interesting

finding here is that the different frequency of figurative and literal phrasal-verb usage found for the nonnative speakers is consistent with the frequency of phrasal-verb production by the native speakers. The native speakers used figurative phrasal verbs 82% of the time and literal ones 88% of the time (see Table 1), findings that are consistent with previous studies. Hebrew speakers were found to avoid using figurative phrasal verbs more often than literal ones (Dagut & Laufer, 1985), and Dutch speakers, despite the L1-L2 similarity, were found to avoid some of the idiomatic (i.e., figurative) phrasal verbs (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989).

The difficulty of figurative phrasal verbs in contrast with literal phrasal verbs may reside in their semantic nature (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). With a figurative phrasal verb, the meaning of the verb departs from the meaning of its individual components. As figurative phrasal verbs often take on idiomatic meanings, learners find it difficult to map their meanings to their forms. On the other hand, it is relatively easy for them to derive the meaning of a literal phrasal verb by combining the meanings of the verb proper and the particle. The reason for the intermediate Chinese learners' stronger avoidance tendency with figurative phrasal verbs, therefore, could be semantic. A complementary explanation could be a distributional bias in the input.⁵ As 11 of the 15 phrasal verbs employed in the study were figurative and only 4 were literal, this differential distribution of the two phrasal-verb types might have affected the outcomes.

The last research question in this study looked into the test effect on the participants' avoidance of phrasal verbs. In their study, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) hypothesized that the evidence for avoidance of phrasal verbs produced via the three elicitation tests would be strongest for the memorization test (the recall test in the present study), less strong for the multiple-choice test, and least strong for the translation test. They reasoned that the recall test had been designed with a bias in favor of phrasal-verb responses, with only phrasal verbs explicitly given in the

test. If learners were to respond to the recall test with one-word verbs, then this would be the strongest evidence for the avoidance of the phrasal verbs. The multiple-choice test, with both phrasal verbs and their one-word counterparts present, had a less strong bias in favor of phrasal-verb responses. The translation test offered the least strong evidence for phrasal-verb responses because it made neither the phrasal verbs nor their one-word equivalents explicitly available. Despite Hulstijn and Marchena's (1989) hypothesis, however, their results showed that on all three tests, the advanced Dutch learners "did not avoid phrasal verbs as a form class and that the intermediate learners, although showing a tendency to avoid phrasal verbs to some extent, did not avoid phrasal verbs categorically either" (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p. 250).

In the present study, Analysis II on the test effect revealed that there was an interaction between test type and phrasalverb type and that this interaction was found only on the translation test. This means that it was only on the translation test that the Chinese learners (both advanced and intermediate) showed the tendency to use figurative phrasal verbs less often than literal ones. Hence, inherent L2 complexity played a role in the intermediate Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs when they took the translation test, which made neither the phrasal verbs nor their one-word equivalents available. This is also a reason that the advanced Chinese learners used literal phrasal verbs more often than figurative ones. As such, why did the Chinese learners tend to use figurative phrasal verbs much less than literal ones on the translation task? We speculate that semantic difficulty of figurative phrasal verbs may have aggravated the avoidance of phrasal verbs by the Chinese learners when they worked their way through the translation test. Of the three tests, the translation was the only one in which phrasal verbs were not available to the learners. The greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs produced by the translation test offers additional evidence for L2 semantic complexity in the Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs.

In order to examine the test effect further, we now compare our results with those obtained in the three studies discussed previously (see Table 3). Dagut and Laufer (1985) found a greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs than literal phrasal verbs on all three tests (multiple-choice, translation, and memorization) in the case of advanced Hebrew learners of English. Their conclusion, however, was based on only descriptive statistics. The second study, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), did not provide any specific statistics for the avoidance of figurative and literal phrasal verbs. In the third study (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). Swedish learners of English showed a greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs than literal ones on the translation test, whereas on the multiple-choice test, the exact opposite was found. (No memorization [recall] test was used in Hulstiin and Marchena's study.) The results of the test effect in the present study and the above comparison on the interactions between test type and phrasal-verb type led to our conclusion that the translation test is the test type that is most likely to yield a greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs than literal

Table 3

Interaction between test type (multiple choice, translation, memorization/recall) and phrasal-verb type (figurative vs. literal)

	Multiple choice	Translation	Memorization/ recall
Dagut & Laufer (1985)	+	+	+
Hulstijn & Marchena (1989)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Laufer & Eliasson (1993)	_a	+ ^a	(Not used)
Present study		+ ^a	

Note. += Greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs than literal ones; -= Greater avoidance of literal phrasal verbs than figurative ones; N/A=No statistics available from the study.

^aFrom inferential statistics.

phrasal verbs, regardless of learners' native language. This, however, does not mean that multiple-choice tests and recall tests will not produce a greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs. Incorporating the results of the three studies (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; the present study), the present study claims a greater avoidance of figurative phrasal verbs only on the translation test.

Future Inquiry

We have contended that there is a developmental manifestation of interlanguage from avoidance to nonavoidance. This claim, however, needs further empirical validation, because the data currently available from the four studies of phrasal-verb avoidance are not sufficient to compare precisely learners' English proficiency levels across the studies. We have speculated that, within the developmental framework, the advanced Chinese learners' exposure to the L2 environment might have been an important factor in their nonavoidance of phrasal verbs in contrast with the intermediate learners' avoidance. Researchers might want to compare learners of English as an L2 with learners of English as a foreign language at both the advanced and intermediate proficiency levels to determine the role that exposure to the L2 environment plays in the avoidance or nonavoidance of phrasal verbs.

We have also provided evidence for three factors that affect Chinese learners' avoidance of phrasal verbs (proficiency levels, phrasal-verb types, and test types). Nonetheless, we remind readers, as a cautionary note, that the present study was based on small numbers of phrasal-verb items and a small population sample, although the effect sizes indicate the effects of proficiency on avoidance. We have inferred that the L1-L2 differences might be a reason for the intermediate Chinese learners' phrasal-verb avoidance, but its role will diminish as learners reach a higher level of English proficiency. In other words, in the avoidance of phrasal verbs, the L1-L2 differences affect learners only up to a

certain level of English proficiency. To provide further evidence for this, we suggest multiple-language designs to compare learners of equivalent proficiency levels whose L1 has the phrasal-verb structure with those whose L1 does not have it. Although our study has attested the role of phrasal-verb types in learners' avoidance, the unequal distribution of figurative and literal phrasal verbs in the input may have created a certain inclination for such avoidance. Finally, this study has demonstrated a test effect (the interaction of the translation test with phrasal-verb types) on the avoidance of phrasal verbs, from which we have speculated that the semantic difficulty of phrasal verbs may be a reason for the learners' avoidance.

With the limitations of the present study in mind, we recommend that future research on the avoidance of phrasal verbs consider (a) the developmental framework, (b) the role of exposure to the L2 environment, (c) larger numbers of phrasal items as well as larger population samples, (d) a multiple-language design, (e) an equal distribution of figurative and literal phrasal verbs in the input, and (f) the test effect.

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Notes

¹Despite these findings, psychological variables are beyond the scope of the present article.

²We initially regarded Dagut and Laufer's (1985) participants as intermediate learners of English. Of the 180, 60 were "first-year university students from various departments (except English Language and Literature), who had had 7–8 years of English in high school" (p. 75). Another 90 students were also EFL (non-English majors), and the remaining 30 were English majors. The researchers did not report the learners' English proficiency through a standardized test. However, as a result of our communication with one of the study's authors, we finally decided to categorize the participants as advanced learners: "I specifically chose subjects of approximately the same level in the two studies [Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993] (on the basis of length of study and learning materials). Both groups are advanced" (B. Laufer, personal communication, November 3, 2003).

³We used native-speaker usage in specific contexts as baseline data because frequency of literal and figurative phrasal verbs is context-specific. For instance, in general contexts, people are likely to choose *wait* over *hold on*. However, in specific conversations over the phone, people are likely to prefer *hold on* to *wait*.

⁴Although all three tests could have been administered to individuals in the advanced and intermediate groups, such a repeated-measures design would have been likely to create a practice effect of the phrasal and/or one-word verbs on their performance.

⁵We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for expressing this complementary viewpoint.

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Appendix A

The 15 Pairs of Phrasal and One-Word Verbs Used in the Study

Phrasal Verbs	One-Word Equivalents	Chinese Translation		
a. Literal				
get up	rise	起床		
go away	leave	走开		
take away	remove	拿走		
come in	enter	进来		
b. Figurative				
show up	appear	出现		
brush up on	review	复习		
let down	disappoint	让失望		
go off	· explode	爆炸		
hold on	wait	等一等		
put out	extinguish	扑灭		
make up	invent	编造		
give in	surrender	屈服		
turn down	refuse	拒绝		
show off	boast	炫耀		
run into	meet	碰到		

Note. See Appendix B for context.

Appendix B

Test Items

After each dialogue presented here, the following information has been added: in order of their appearance, the Chinese translation of the phrasal verbs and the four verbs presented in the multiple-choice test. The percentage of native-speaker preference for the phrasal verb is in the parentheses after its occurrence. All 15 informants were adult native speakers of American English who were studying at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

- 1. "When the weather is nice I love to early."
 - -"Me, too. It's good to enjoy the morning air."(起床)
 - A. rise B. release C. get up (100%) D. look after
- 2. -"I didn't expect to see Emily at the party. I thought she had gone on vacation."
 - -"Me neither. I was also surprised when she —."(出现)
 - A. claimed B. appeared C. showed up (93%) D. looked up
- 3. -"I heard that the company is sending you to Germany again."
 - -"Yes. It's been a long time since I was there, so I guess it's time to my German."(复习)
 - A. abolish B. improve C. brush up on (73%) D. calm down
- 4. –"How do you like John?"
 - -"He is one of those few people who never his friends."(让.....失望)
 - A. solves B. disappoints C. lets down (73%) D. carries on
- 5. -"Did you hear about the bombing of the embassy in Nairobi?"
 - -"That was a disaster. Fortunately, there weren't that many people in the building when the bomb —."(爆炸)
 - A. went off (73%) B. tuned in C. exploded D. replied
- 6. -"Hello, Jan!"
 - -"Hi, Susan! How nice of you to call me!"
 - -"I want to ask for some advice."

- -"No problem. Oh—, can you a second? Someone is knocking at the door." (等一等)
- A. hold on (73%) B. capture C. wait D. fall down
- 7. -"Michelle sometimes forgets to the fire when she finishes cooking!"
 - -"That's dangerous! You should talk to her about this."(扑灭)
 - A. break into B. foresee C. put out (93%) D. extinguish
- 8. —"I was late for my date last night, so I a story about a traffic jam."
 - -"But did your girlfriend believe it at all? Better be frank next time."(编造)
 - A. invented B. made up (93%) C. followed D. lay down
- 9. —"Robert and Paul were fighting on the street this morning."
 - -"So I heard. Was it serious?"
 - -"They didn't stop until Paul twisted his ankle and had to —."(屈服)
 - A. realize B. give in (87%) C. surrender D. look up to
- 10. "How is your business going?"
 - -"Pretty good, though I have to several good offers because I am just short of time."(拒绝)
 - A. offend B. turn down (80%) C. cheer up D. refuse
- 11. "When you think about it, most of your classmates will disappear from your life forever after you graduate."
 - -"Yeah, but every now and then you will one of them on the street."(碰到)
 - A. go over B. run into (80%) C. meet D. applaud
- 12. "Do you notice that Marvin likes to -?"
 - -"Yes, but I don't think that he has anything to be proud of."(炫耀)
 - A. lie B. boast C. show off (93%) D. break out
- 13. -"I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to say those things. I was just angry."
 - -"Just —. I don't want to see you for a while."(走开)
 - A. leave B. sit C. go away (100%) D. move on

- 14. (in a restaurant)
 - -"Miss, could I get some more coffee when you've got a chance?"
 - -"Sure. Would you like me to these plates first?" (拿走)
 - A. remove B. take away (73%) C. mix D. drop in
- 15. -"How do you get in the bar?"
 - -"You have to the back door."(进来)
 - A. enter B. come in (80%) C. adopt D. put up

 $\label{eq:Appendix C} \mbox{Raw Scores on the Three Elicitation Tests}$

Test	Group	$\cdot n$	Type	\boldsymbol{k}	PV	owv	Mistake
M	NS	15	Total	225	189	36	0
			Fig	165	136		
			Lit	60	53		
	A	10	Total	150	113	32	5
			Fig	110	80		
			Lit	40	33		
	I	15	Total	225	101	96	28
			Fig	165	71		
			Lit	60	30		
T	Α	10	Total	150	71	50	29
			Fig	110	38		
			Lit	40	33		
	I	15	Total	225	85	79	61
			Fig	165	43		
			Lit	60	42		
R	A	10	Total	150	117	5	28
			Fig	110	84		
			\mathbf{Lit}	40	33		
	I	10	Total	150	75	15	60
			Fig	110	53		
			Lit	40	22		

Note. n=number of participants; k=total number of verbs; PV=phrasal verbs; OWV=one-word verbs; M=multiple-choice test; T=translation test; R=recall test; NS=native speakers of English; A=advanced learners of English; I=intermediate learners of English; Fig=figurative phrasal verbs; Lit=literal phrasal verbs.



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