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Defining Phrasal Verbs: Considerations for Polish Teachers of English¹

This paper examines phrasal verbs, not linguistically, but as an example of how the means of defining a syntactic category for pedagogical purposes may actually impede learning. Phrasal verbs were chosen as the topic because they are frequently cited as one of the most challenging areas of English lexis to learn, to 'keep straight' from one another and to use appropriately. Beyond the array of associations to be noticed, including irregularities and exceptions to them, and the sheer quantity of material to be memorized, much of the difficulty and confusion surrounding phrasal verbs appears to stem from the lack of a clear, unified notion of how to define them.

1. A consideration of teaching content

The first consideration in defining any category is to determine which items to include and exclude. Even a cursory examination of text and reference books reveals substantial variation in the phrasal verbs they contain; judgements of a sample group of teachers, asked to list the five most important phrasal verbs to teach, would likewise differ.² In compiling such lists or otherwise determining the contents of a lesson plan, teachers rely on their knowledge of their texts, course and school syllabi and, perhaps to a greater extent, their intuition to decide what is important for their students to learn. If the primary instructional purpose is test preparation, texts or syllabi might seem to be adequate.

However, even examinations frequently contain 'real world' readings and/or communicative tasks. Knowledge of phrasal verbs thus involves not only memorization of vocabulary items, but minimally: (1) a familiarity with their use at a variety of registers or levels of formality, and (2) the ability to judge whether a phrasal verb or a single word verb may be used interchangeably or whether one is more appropriate than the other in a given

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² During the conference presentation of the paper, this task was carried out as an informal survey. The resulting lists of the most important phrasal verbs to teach were not identical. A few verbs denoting common physical action (e.g. *turn on/off*) appeared on many, but not all, of the lists produced at that time. A minority of the teacher participants were unable to produce any list at all, writing verbs down and then crossing them out, indicating their apparent indecision.

context. Moreover, as the needs of learners may involve both recognition and production, or may shift back and forth between them (Cornell 1985, Darwin & Gray 1999), depending on intuition and text syllabi for word lists for memorization is not likely to be sufficient. Figure I-A is Darwin and Gray's (2000) list of 20 most frequently used phrasal verbs, based on a computerized frequency count (p. 172); the sources they used are given in I-B (p. 169).

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1. write down | 8. end up | 15. set out |
| 2. point out | 9. set up | 16. cut off |
| 3. carry out | 10. take over | 17. point up |
| 4. make up | 11. take on | 18. pass on |
| 5. break out | 12. break down | 19. sum up |
| 6. grow up | 13. stand out | 20. go on |
| 7. bring on | 14. give up | |

Figure I-A. The top 20 phrasal verbs of Darwin & Gray 2000 (p. 172)

1. Discovering World History on CD-ROM (Craig, Graham, Kagan, Ozment, & Turner, 1997)
2. Discovering Psychology on CD-ROM (Davis & Palladino, 1997)
3. Discovering Sociology on CD-ROM (Macionis, 1997)

Figure I-B. Electronic texts used for the Darwin & Gray research (2000: 169)

As frequency counts like this provide accurate samples of language use, they are undeniably more reliable than intuition if the teaching goal is actual communication, i.e. language production. They are also preferable for "lexical sets" (Crystal 1997: 221) such as phrasal verbs which Bolinger (1971: xiii) has characterized as a "most prolific source" of English vocabulary. Text and school syllabi, many of which are at least partially based on standard reference volumes such as West's (1953) *A General Service List of English Words*, cannot keep abreast of current language variation and use to the extent of more easily-updateable electronic sources. Thus, even for test-oriented classes, consultation of computerized counts, along with syllabi and texts, is advisable (Darwin & Gray 1999, 2000; Sawyer 2000, Sheen 2000, among others). As internet and other computer resources are now becoming generally accessible in schools throughout Poland, both teachers and students are increasingly able to take advantage of computerized texts such as the volumes mentioned above, both for decisions about language content and also for the design of pedagogical tasks, perhaps even involving students in computer searches of their own.

2. A consideration of definition

The second consideration in defining categories involves learning difficulties inadvertently created by reference and textbook definitions. First, many texts (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983, 1999; Frank 1993; Quirk et al. 1985) define phrasal verbs as a combination consisting of a verb plus another constituent, although they vary in the identity given to the second constituent (See Figure 2.). We will return to the issue of terminology shortly. At this point, however, we note first, that the first two definitions, Verb + Preposition and Verb + Adverb, are likely to limit learners'

understanding of phrasal verbs, depending on their knowledge of and comfort level with the second constituent named. Students who have difficulty with the use of prepositions and/or adverbs, or perhaps more importantly believe that they do, are likely to transfer their perceptions of confusion to the learning of phrasal verbs, if definitions used in teaching emphasize these constituent terms. Second, should learners consult more than one text in their studies, the definitions they find are likely to differ, resulting in further confusion.

- **Verb + Preposition**

- e.g. “The term phrasal verb refers to a verb and preposition which together have a special meaning ... also called *two-word verbs* or *three-word verbs*.”

(Azar 1992: A26)

- **Verb + Adverb**

- e.g. “a verb plus adverb combination”

(Eastwood 1994: 401)

- **Verb + Preposition/Particle or Verb + Adverb/Particle**

- e.g. “Phrasal verbs usually consist of a verb plus a second word, the latter often referred to as an adverb. We will refer to the second part of the phrasal verb as a particle, to show its close association with the verb, and to distinguish it from other prepositions and other adverbs ...”

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 426)

- [less commonly] “... **“adprep”** (Bolinger 1971), a **“prepticle”** (Clark 1995) a **“P”** (O’Dowd 1994) ...”

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 441)

Figure 2. Text/reference book renderings of phrasal verbs

Side (1990), and others more recently, have noted another learner difficulty related to the presentation of phrasal verbs in dictionaries and texts, i.e. that they are most often listed under the verbal element of the combination, although some may be found in prepositional or adverbial listings. This means not only that without some training, students will probably have trouble finding what they are looking for, but also that they may try to view phrasal verbs semantically either by adding up the parts, which Sawyer (2000) has noted may not work for examples such as “... *clean up, lock up, wash up, act out, sort out, start out...*” in which the “particles do not seem to add much semantically to the verb.” (p. 156). Alternatively, learners may attempt to understand a phrasal verb in terms of the meanings of its verbal, or prepositional or adverbial element, which is an effective strategy only in some cases. Darwin & Gray (2000: 172) caution that this “can only lead to confusion, as phrasal verbs may share no meaning with their non-phrasal-verb counterparts.” It might be compared to trying to understand Polish verbs by looking at a stem verb such as *brać/wziąć* ‘to take,’ in order to figure out the prefixed variants (*dobierać/dobrać, nabierać/nabrać, obierać/obrać, odbierać/odebrać, pobierać/pobrać, pobierać się/pobrać się, powziąć, przebierać (się)/przebrać (się), przybierać/przybrać, rozbierać (się)/rozebrać (się), ubierać (się)/ubrać (się), wziąć się, wzbierać/wezbrać, wybierać (się)/wybrać (się), zabierać (się)/zabrać (się), zawziąć się, i zbierać (się)/zebrać (się)*), as the prefixes of Polish verbs occur independently as prepositions (See Appendix 1 for a list presentation of the array of meanings in Polish prefixed verbs derived from *brać/wziąć*.) Overall,

searching for possible similarities is more likely to create extra work on a frequently unproductive task, as well as reinforcing the notion that phrasal verbs are difficult, according to current theories of vocabulary learning.

Nation (2000: 6) argues that contrary to teachers' intuition that "it seems a good idea to present words of related meaning together so that learners can see the distinctions between them and gain a reasonably complete coverage of a defined area of meaning," initially lexical items should be treated separately and given in contexts which allow the learner to perceive and remember the meaning of that individual item, rather than the fact that it and one or more others are somehow related. In other words, it is actually the case that "learning related words at the same time makes learning them more difficult. Teachers can decrease the possibility of *interference* by making the contexts, *collocates*, and visual representations of related words as different as possible." (p. 6)

3. Considerations for teaching

In summary, research in the teaching of phrasal verbs currently calls first for individualized contextual teaching of phrasal verbs, rather than presentation of related words in lists, the most common current practice (Darwin & Gray 1999, 2000; Sawyer 2000, Sheen 2000, etc). Teaching in context may also help students learn when it is appropriate to use phrasal verbs as opposed to single-word verbs, an area which list teaching does not easily allow. Lists and presentations of word associations should be delayed until after individual phrasal verbs are thoroughly familiar in their appropriate usage context(s). When lists are introduced, two separate lists are recommended, a shorter one for productive use and a longer one for recognition, which would be revised as learners gain greater familiarity with individual items (e.g. Sheen 2000: 164). We should add that degree of formality (minimally a distinction between formal and informal contexts) be included in this listing to further facilitate appropriate use. This is especially important in EFL teaching environments such as Poland, as the non-classroom environment does not offer exposure to natural language forms or usage.

Finally, to make it easier for learners to cope with some of the terminological and grammatical complexities of phrasal verbs, such as the syntactic identity of the particle or the separability of certain verbs and particles (*look up a word/look a word up*), Sawyer (2000) has suggested minimizing what we teach as phrasal verbs. Her proposals include not teaching Verb + Preposition combinations as phrasal verbs as long as the meaning is unaffected by the combination, and using Verb + Adverb combinations which are semantically transparent (i.e. students know the meanings of both the verb and adverb) mainly to teach grammatical "splitting":

- a. The hurricane knocked the tree *over*. (split)
- b. The hurricane knocked *over* the tree. (nonsplit)

Even those who advocate a less restrictive approach favor limiting terminology and general presentation of syntactic tests for phrasal verbs to more advanced learning stages, if at all. Instead, instructional emphasis should be placed first on teaching single phrasal verbs in context, with the syntactic and pragmatic patterns in which they most frequently occur, and then on actively teaching "particle semantics" (Side 1990), i.e. the meanings of

certain prepositions or adverbials which occur more frequently as particles (e.g. *up* in *eat up*, *chew up*, which has a sense of telicity or completeness). Idiomatic usage would then be less confusing to students, as they would only need view it as the property of single items rather than a characteristic of many or all phrasal verbs.

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Appendix 1

List Presentation of the Prefixed Forms of the Polish Verb *brać/wziąć*

VERBS	ENGLISH MEANING(S)	EXAMPLES
dobierać (się) dobrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> choose, select (words, friends) match st with st (according to size, color, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> dobrać się do czegoś: tamper w/, get one's hands on dobrać się komuś do skóry: give sb his comeuppance dobierać się do kogoś: (colloquial) make a pass at sb
nabierać nabrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take in(to) st, take from st develop, gain, pick up, take on st (in sb/st) take sb in, play tricks on sb, deceive sb 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nabierać zwyczaju, apetytu: develop a habit, appetite nabierać sił, wysokości, kształtu, wprawy: get stronger, become taller, take shape, become adept nabierać odwagi, otuchy: take courage, heart
obierać obrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> remove a skin, shell or surface covering, peel (egg, potato, fruit), bone (fish) choose, select, elect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> obrać cel, swoją drogę życiową: choose a goal, choose one's life course obierać kogoś prezesem: elect sb chairperson
odbierać odebrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reclaim, receive (letter, package); collect, pick up (sb from airport, hospital, school) pick up, answer (telephone) deprive, take away, withdraw 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> odebrać kogoś ze szpitala: pick up sb from hospital
pobierać pobrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take st from sb/st collect (pension) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pobrać od kogoś opłatę: charge sb for st pobrać pieniądze z banku: take money from the bank pobrać komu krew: take sb's blood
pobierać się pobrać się	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> get married, marry sb 	
podbierać podebrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take, remove st snatch, pilfer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> podbierać coś z całości: take some of the whole
powziąć [dk]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> make, take (decision, suspicion, dislike) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> powziąć postanowienie/zamiar: make up one's mind powziąć decyzję: make, take a decision
przebierać (się) przebrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sort, sift; be particular about st disguise sb; się: change (clothes) tap, hop (fingers, feet) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> przebierać palcami: tap one's fingers przebrać się za kogoś: disguise oneself przebrać miarę: to exaggerate st
przybierać przybrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> grow, gain in st; rise (water) assume (name, title) decorate, gamish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> przybrać na wadze, siłę: gain weight, strength przybierać choinkę: decorate a Christmas tree
rozbierać (si) rozebrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take apart, pull down (się:) take off one's clothes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rozebrać budynek: tear down a building rozebrać coś na części: take st apart, to pieces
ubierać (się) ubrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (się:) dress decorate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ubierać choinkę: decorate a Christmas tree ubierać tort: decorate a cake
uwziąć się [dk]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have it in for sb 	
wzbierać wezbrać	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rise, gradually increase (water, feeling) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> złość w kimś wzbiera: sb is getting angry
wybierać (się) wybrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> choose, select, elect się: go somewhere (with sb) dial (telephone number) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wybierać się w podróż: go on a trip wybierać się na spacer/narty: go for a walk/skiing
zabierać (się) zabrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> take (up), bring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> zabierać komuś czas: take up sb's time zabrać autobus: take a bus
zawziąć się	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> have it in for sb; dig in one's heels 	
zbierać (się) zebrać (się)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> collect, gather (up) remove from sb, st -się: brace oneself for st 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> zebrać pieniądze na coś: collect money for st zebrać się na deszcz/burzę: it's going to rain/storm zebrać myśli/siły: gather one's thoughts/strength