

English Phrasal Verbs and Prepositional Verbs: Difficulties and Pitfalls from the Perspective of the Romanian Language Native Speaker

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to investigate the multi-word *verbs*, which are very common in English, but are acknowledged as *difficult* to acquire by *non-native* learners of English. Phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs serve an idiomatic purpose. Therefore, they should not be taken literally; rather, they have a figurative or metaphorical meaning. The existence of a simple notional verb in a synonymic relationship with a verb with an adverbial particle determines the non-native English speakers to avoid the latter. From the perspective of the Romanian language, where such constructions do not exist, it is obvious that the attempt to avoid verbs with an adverbial particle and the preference for simple verbs will be more significant as the semantic transparency of the English verbal construction is reduced.

Keywords: verb, phrase, language, particle, preposition, construction

A peculiarity of the English language, not only in comparison with the Romanian language, but also with other languages, is represented by *the verbs with an adverbial particle* (Phrasal Verbs), most often found in specialized literature under the name of *complex verbs*. Most English grammars written by Romanian authors include in the category of complex verbs both verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional verbs, together with those containing both an adverbial particle and a preposition. (Levițchi, 1970). In the following pages, we will consider these classes of verbs separately for two reasons: firstly, the clear distinction between verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional verbs operated by English grammars (Biber et al., 1999; Palmer, 1968), and secondly, the distinct treatment that we will apply to the two classes from the contrastive perspective, considering the non-existence of structures similar to verbs with an adverbial particle in the Romanian language and the presence, even if not as a distinct class and with notable differences, of verb + preposition constructions in Romanian.

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R. Quirk et al. (1972) define *verbs with an adverbial particle* (phrasal verbs) as structures formed by a verb and a morphologically invariable particle, and which together form a single lexical and syntactic unit.

The confusion between verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional ones is determined by the fact that most adverbial particles have the same form as the corresponding prepositions but function as adverbs, modifying the verb to which they are linked.

The classification of verbs with an adverbial particle is most often based on the semantic criterion. Thus, M. Dagut and B. Laufer (*Avoidance of Phrasal Verbs – A Case for Contrastive Analysis*, in “Studies in Second Language Acquisition”, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1985, p. 73-79, *apud* Liao, Fukuya, 2004: 196) divide them into:

- **literal** – verbs with an adverbial particle whose meaning emerges from the combination of semantic components:

to go out – a ieși; to come in – a intra; to turn round – a se întoarce.

*An old man was staring at her, so she **stuck** her tongue **out** at him.*

*Un om bătrân se holba la ea, așa că **a scos** limba la el.*

- **figurative** – where a new meaning appeared through the metaphorical change of meaning and the semantic fusion of elements:

to let down – a dezamăgi; to give up – a renunța; to put off – a amâna.

*I **made up** the most credible story.*

*Eu **am inventat** cea mai credibilă poveste.*

- **completive** – where the particle describes the result of the action:

to burn down – a arde complet; to cut off – a întrerupe; to break off – a se despărți.

*She swung her body around, and **climbed down** like it was a ladder.*

*Ea și-a răsucit corpul și **a coborât** de parcă ar fi fost o scară.*

Similarly, but even more useful for a contrastive approach, is the classification proposed by B. Laufer and S. Eliasson (*What Causes Avoidance in L2 Learning*, in “Studies in Second Language Acquisition”, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1993, p. 35-48, *apud* Liao, Fukuya, 2004: 197):

- **transparent** from a semantic point of view (the meaning of the construction can be derived from the accumulation of the meanings of the components);

- **semi-transparent** (those that are transparent when they appear in a context);

• **figurative or opaque** (which have a lexicalized meaning and are considered to be semantically more difficult to assimilate than the other verbs with an adverbial particle);

G. Gălățeanu-Fârnoaga and E. Comișel (1998: 186) consider a similar classification distinguishing between verbs with an adverbial particle whose meaning is completely different from that of the individual components taken separately, constructions whose meaning can be deduced from analyzing the elements and constructions in which the use of the adverbial particle emphasizes, without modifying, the meaning of the verb:

- change of meaning: *to come round – a-și reveni*
- meaning deduction: *to come back – a se întoarce*
- emphasizing the meaning: *to drink up – a bea (până la fund)*

The most common adverbial particles are: *about, above, across, after, along, around, away, back, behind, by, down, in, off, on out, over, round, through, under, up*, which cannot be literally translated into Romanian except in very few cases. Knowing their meaning is useful when constructions with an adverbial particle are transparent or semi-transparent, but insufficient for those in which there is a change in meaning. In the latter case, the only approach for their correct assimilation is to learn them independently or, even better, together with the full notional verb with which they form a synonymous pair, since their meaning cannot be recomposed by summing up the meanings of the component elements:

to put off = to postpone (a amâna);

to bring back = to reintroduce (a readuce /reintroduce);

to call off = to cancel (a anula) etc.

*We must **put off** the party till you return.*

*Trebuie **să amânăm** petrecerea până când te vei întoarce.*

We will try to illustrate the multiple uses of some adverbial particles, comparing the constructions in which they play a determining role with examples where the meaning of the verbal construction can be deduced, respectively those in which the adverbial particle completely changes the meaning of the verb it accompanies. In the following, we will observe these changes in the case of the adverbial particle *off*:

transparent

- disappearance, lack

*The damage to the fuse box caused the power to **go off** in the whole cottage.*

*Deteriorarea cutiei de siguranțe a cauzat **întreruperea** curentului în toată cabana.*

- separation, detachment:

*He'll **bite** my head **off** if I disobey his orders.*

O să-mi reteze capul dacă nu ascult ordinele lui.

The patient **took off** all his clothes and lay down.

Pacientul **și-a dat jos** toate hainele și s-a întins.

She **pulled off** her clothes and threw them into a pile in the middle of the dance floor.

Ea **și-a scos** hainele și le-a aruncat într-o grămadă în mijlocul ringului de dans.

semi-transparent

- removal, leaving a place:

They **hurried off** in the opposite direction.

S-au **grăbit să plece** în direcția opusă.

I stepped on it and **drove off**.

Am apăsat accelerația și **am plecat**.

- deactivating:

The light is a bit too harsh. You can **turn it off**.

Lumina este un pic prea tare. O poți **stinge**.

- ending an action:

All this time the Queen had never **left off** staring at the prisoner.

În tot acest timp Regina **nu încetase** să se zgâiască la prizoner.

Stop whining and **help me off** with this bloody thing.

Nu te mai plânge și **ajută-mă** odată cu drăcia asta.

Figure it out. Work a lifetime to **pay off** a house downtown.

Zi și tu. Să lucrezi o viață ca **să plătești/termini de plătit** o casă în

centru.

figurative

She **set off** at once, and ran till she was out of breath.

Ea **plecă** imediat și fugi până când își pierdu suflarea.

The plane **took off** as scheduled.

Avionul **a decolat** conform orarului.

You always buy more instead of **paying off** your debts.

Întotdeauna cumperi mai mult, în loc **să-ți achiți** datoriile.

I'm afraid I'm not feeling well so I'll **take the day off**.

Mă tem că nu mă simt bine, așa că **o să-mi iau liber** astăzi.

They **called off** the meeting and left the building as fast as possible.

Au anulat ședința și au părăsit clădirea cât mai repede posibil.

They tried to **buy the policeman off** but they ended up in jail eventually.

Au încercat **să-l mituiască** pe polițist dar au ajuns până la urmă la închisoare.

He only bought that sports car to **show off** and prove he could afford one.

Și-a cumpărat acea mașină sport doar pentru a **se lăuda** și a dovedi că își permite una.

*Ten thousand people were **laid off** this year.
Zece mii de oameni **au fost concediați** anul acesta.
They cannot **put off** a decision much longer.
Ei nu pot **amâna** o decizie mult mai mult.*

The combinatory possibilities of these adverbial particles are, of course, much more varied. Not only in terms of the verbs that accompany them, but also their topic in the sentence, in close connection with the transitive or intransitive nature of the verb.

A large number of verbs with an adverbial particle are intransitive, in this case the adverbial particle follows immediately after the verb:

*The sun **had just gone down** as the divers raised their heads out of the water.*

*Soarele tocmai **apusese** când scafandrii și-au ridicat capetele deasupra apei.*

*If you don't sit still, you must be **tied down** to the tree.*

*Dacă nu stai liniștit, va trebui **să te legăm** de copac.*

*It's no use **going back** to yesterday, because I had a different mentality then.*

*Nu are rost **să ne întoarcem** la ziua de ieri, pentru că atunci aveam o altă mentalitate.*

Transitive verbs accompanied by an adverbial particle determine a certain topic for the elements that follow them, as follows:

- when the direct object is expressed by a pronoun, it will appear between the verb and the adverbial particle:

*He often **cheers me up** when I'm feeling down.*

*Adesea mă **amuză** când mă simt dezamăgit.*

*I rose to go but the detective caught me by the arm and **pushed me back** into my chair.*

*M-am ridicat să plec, dar detectivul m-a prins de braț și m-a **împins înapoi** pe scaun.*

- when the direct object is expressed by a noun, it can be before or after the adverbial particle:

*'Just **take his head off** outside', the governor ordered the executioner.*

*„Duceți-l afară și **luați-i capul**,” a ordonat guvernatorul călăului.*

*Do you intend to **take over this house**?*

*Intenționezi **să faci pe șeful** în casa asta?*

- when the direct object is expressed by a subordinate clause or a longer construction, the adverbial particle remains immediately after the verb:

*He **took out the gun and the ammo case**.*

*El a **scos pistolul și carcasa de muniție**.*

*The soldier felt a very strange dizziness, which puzzled him a good deal until he **made out what it was**.*

Soldatul avu o amețeală ciudată, care îl încurca destul de tare, până când își dădu seama despre ce era vorba.

As I mentioned before, a large part of the verbs with an adverbial particle corresponds from a semantic point of view to a simple verb, the difference between them being mainly one of register, because verbs with an adverbial particle are used mostly in everyday speech. The existence of a simple notional verb in a synonymic relationship with a verb with an adverbial particle determines the non-native English speakers to avoid the latter. From the perspective of the Romanian language, where such constructions do not exist, it is obvious that the attempt to avoid verbs with an adverbial particle and the preference for simple verbs will be more significant as the semantic transparency of the English verbal construction is reduced:

*They **turned down** / **refused** our offer.*

*Au **refuzat** oferta noastră.*

*The bomb **went off** / **exploded** in a crowded train station.*

*Bomba **a explodat** într-o stație de tren aglomerată.*

*He **was taken in** / **deceived** by her looks.*

*A **fost păcălit** de înfățișarea ei.*

*The meeting **was called off** / **cancelled** without any notice.*

*Ședința **a fost anulată** fără nici un avertisment.*

*She really **takes after** / **resembles** her mother.*

*Ea **seamănă** bine cu mama ei.*

Prepositional verbs also represent a separate category in the English language, unlike the Romanian language, in which this type of verbs obligatorily takes a certain preposition together with which, sometimes, they form an idiomatic unit. This type of construction was also studied in the Romanian language, C. Dimitriu (2002) appreciating that the preposition cannot be part of the syntagmatic unit of the predicate, having only the role of a mark, unlike G. Pană-Dindelegan (1975: 81-82), which highlights the existence in the Romanian language of *verb + preposition* constructions, with the mention that the preposition that follows the verb is a constitutive part of the predicate: *el face pe deșteptul, el se erijează în cunoscător* (Avădanei, 2000: 43). Constanța Avădanei calls these constructions short combinations of words, expressing a single notion and having a single grammatical function, noting at the same time that “unlike the English language, where the verb together with the preposition forms a unit of meaning (and a grammatical unit), the semantic input of the preposition being important in forming the meaning of the group (*to shoot up = a teroriza, to shoot out = a înmuguri etc.*), the Romanian constructions (*a se erija în, a face pe*) cannot constitute a unit of meaning. Their meaning is incomplete, being mandatory completions (*cunoscător, deșteptul*), without which the group has no meaning and no stability” (2000: 43).

However, Constanța Avădanei does not make a clear distinction between verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional verbs, the meanings formulated applying rather to the first category, which also presents a higher degree of idiomaticity. Prepositional verbs rarely present a semantic unit similar to idiomatic expressions, in most cases it is only a matter of constraints in the use of prepositions after the verb. However, the difficulties remain from the perspective of the Romanian language, because in many cases, the equivalent structures in the two languages refer to different prepositions.

Few of the prepositional verbs in English are idiomatic, as shown by F.R. Palmer (1968: 188), who states that the most common are the following:

*to look for: They are a bunch of imposters **looking for** publicity.*

*Ei sunt o adunătură de impostori care **caută** publicitate.*

*to look after: The doctor's email to the landlords ensured that he **was well looked after**.*

*Mailul doctorului către proprietari dădea asigurări că el **era bine îngrijit**.*

*to take to: The two dogs **took to** each other immediately and started to play.*

*Cei doi câini **s-au plăcut** imediat și au început să se joace.*

*to go for: He has never hidden that he **went for** her.*

*El nu a ascuns niciodată faptul că **a umblat după** ea.*

The difference between verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional ones with an idiomatic character is difficult to notice and most dictionaries include the latter in the category of verbs with an adverbial particle. However, we can observe that in the case of verbs with an adverbial particle, the verb is semantically dominated by the particle, while in the case of prepositional verbs, the verb semantically dominates the preposition depending on the context in which they appear.

From the point of view of construction, prepositional verbs can be accompanied by **simple prepositions** (*about, after, at, before, by, during, for, from, in into, of, on, out, over, to, under, with, without etc.*), **compound prepositions** (*according to, along with, out of, because of, next to, together with etc.*), **prepositional phrases** (*in accordance with, in addition to, on condition that, with regard to, in spite of etc.*):

*Can't you see he's **thinking of** a good reason to ask for some more money?*

*Nu vezi că **se gândește la** un motiv bun pentru a mai cere niște bani?*

*All that was coming **out of** his mouth was full of envy and hatred.*

*Tot ce-i **ieșea din** gură era plin de invidie și ură.*

*I don't want to **pass in front of** those men.*

Nu vreau să trec prin fața acelor bărbați.

Even if the similarities between the two languages are obvious regarding this type of construction, however, there are many cases in which the English language uses a different preposition than the Romanian language in collocation with a certain verb, hence the difficulties related to their assimilation:

*Her courage made him **shiver with** fear for her.*

*Curajul ei l-a făcut să **tremure de** teamă pentru ea.*

*She **speaks in** a quiet voice that is not clear.*

*Ea **vorbește cu** o voce liniștită care nu este clară.*

*They seem to **laugh at** me whenever I open my mouth.*

*Par să **râdă de** mine ori de câte ori deschid gura.*

Difficulties can also arise when in one of the languages, either Romanian or English, the verb is followed by a preposition, and in the other language the verb is followed by an object without a preposition:

*Peter went on **saying to** himself the same magic words.*

*Peter continuă **spunându-și** aceleași cuvinte magice.*

*Abia la ora patru noaptea **intră pe** ușa apartamentului și cel de-al doilea agent.*

*Only at four in the morning did the other agent **enter** the flat's door.*

*I'm ready to **answer** all questions at all costs.*

*Sunt gata să **răspund la** orice întrebare cu orice preț.*

***M-am întâlnit cu** ea acum vreo doi ani când era la liceu.*

*I **met** her a couple of years ago whe she was at highschool.*

*Don't say I **lied to** you because I did not.*

*Nu spune că te-**am mințit** pentru că nu am făcut-o.*

***Am rugat-o pe** scriitoare să se uite mai bine la ultimele citate.*

*I **asked** the writer to have a closer look at the last quotes.*

*She wouldn't say anything but she **asked for** a drink.*

*Nu a vrut să spună nimic, dar **a cerut** ceva de băut.*

Along with the verbs with an adverbial particle and prepositional ones, we also point out the existence of a category of *prepositional verbs with an adverbial particle*, i.e. verbs composed of two particles, one of them adverbial and the other prepositional. These constructions are often idiomatic, being treated together with the verbs with an adverbial particle in the dictionary:

*I am too tired to **put up with** any person around me.*

*Sunt prea obosit să **suport** pe orice om în jurul meu.*

*You wouldn't get **fed up with** such a life style.*

*Nu **te-ai sătura de** un astfel de stil de viață.*

*Most American states **did away with** the capital punishment.*

*Multe dintre statele americane **au abolit** pedeapsa capitală.*

I. Vlădoiu (2005: 256) includes in this category both semantically transparent constructions, in which the adverbial and prepositional particles

only partially modify the meaning of the verb, as well as idiomatic constructions, while F.R. Palmer (1968: 189) calls *phrasal prepositional verbs* only those verbs with idiomatic content, distinguishing between them and transparent constructions of the type verb + adverb, verb + preposition or verb + adverb + preposition.

G. Măciucă (2000: 131) also mentions verbs constructed with two prepositions in English:

*His body was **carried by** anonymous hands **to** the edge of the grave.*

*Trupul îi fu **transportat de** mâini necunoscute **până la** marginea mormântului.*

Leon Levițchi (1970: 126) also includes in the class of complex verbs of the English language constructions with verb + adjectiv (*to break loose – a fugi, to fall short – a se împuțina/a lipsi, to fall flat – a nu prinde* etc.). This type of construction is generally treated as an idiomatic expression or phrase (verbal phrase).

Phrasal verbs as well as prepositional verbs are notably essential for English language learners due to their common use in spoken and informal written language; however, non-native learners may find it difficult to master phrasal verbs in English as a foreign language, and they represent a challenge at all levels. Such findings should lead to some pedagogical implications. Firstly, these findings would suggest that students should be aware of the roles of phrasal verbs in both speaking and writing so that they should create their own study plans to master phrasal verbs. Furthermore, they should practice how to include the use of such verbs in their speech gradually. Secondly, teachers should instruct students on how to use phrasal verbs in conversations and motivate them to use them not only in speaking but also in writing. Thirdly, they should design useful lists of phrasal verbs for students so that they can make use of phrasal verbs in the process of learning. Additionally, textbooks with rich materials covering exercises and activities in relation to phrasal verbs should be designed to support students' learning and practice.

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