

English Phrasal Verbs: “The Scourge of the Learner” or a Bit of Confusion

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In my talk, I would like to address the established belief in EFL methodology and linguistic theory that English Phrasal Verbs are “significantly challenging and puzzling for non-English speakers, especially in terms of idiomaticity and polysemy” (Riguel 2014). I would like to discuss the nature of this ‘thorn in the flesh of foreign learners’ as primarily the unintended consequence of the coinage of the term itself in the 1920’s.

The desire to explain the combinations of English verbs with adverbs or prepositions as unique and idiosyncratic in order to make them more accessible to non-native speakers has obfuscated the nature of such phrases. The dictionaries and textbooks abound in lists of phrasal verbs and encourage non-native speakers to learn them as ‘idioms’ or non-compositional units, thus turning the English Phrasal Verb into a menace for a non-native speaker.

I would like to put forward an idea that the root of the problem lies in the assumption that English phrasal verbs constitute a unique feature of the English language to be taken for granted as chunks of language that must be accepted and assimilated by non-native speakers.

I will first discuss the tendency to present such combinations as *look at* as phrasal verbs by dictionaries for foreign learners. I will argue that this approach creates confusion concerning the role of prepositions in English by disconnecting prepositions homonymous to adverbs when they occur after a verb from the rest of their potential contexts. It creates an illusion in the minds of foreign learners that prepositions after verbs ought to be approached as something uniquely English (*the phrasal verb*).

Next, I will consider the treatment of combinations of verbs and adverbs as non-compositional idiomatic units. I will demonstrate how this approach creates problems for a more systematic understanding of the meaning of both components of such phrases and will talk about how a consistent demonstration of the compositional nature of the phrasal verbs containing adverbs can lead to a clearer understanding of what aspects of meaning are contributed by each of the components to the context. Instead of confusing non-native speakers, such an approach can establish a safe distance between English and the speaker’s native tongue.

I will conclude by stating that phrasal verbs do not have to be a scourge for learners. Demystifying the phrasal verb can create more opportunities for non-native speakers to experience and assimilate English as a specific way of encoding human experience. Stepping into the world of meaning in another language is always a step into an alternative reality but it does not have to be filled with opaque and non-compositional hurdles.

Riguel, E. 2014 Phrasal Verbs, “The Scourge of the Learner”.

http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/laelpgconference/papers/v09/02_Emilie_Riguel_article.pdf