SCIENTIFIC CULTURE

www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 5, (2026), pp. 1435-1439
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20818595

THE NATURE AND CLASSIFICATION OF ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS

Firstov Leonid Yurievich[1*]

[1]Senior teacher at CT-School Moscow, Russia, Email: lfirstov@yandex.ru

Received: 12/04/2026
Accepted: 26/05/2026

Corresponding Author: Firstov Leonid Yurievich (lfirstov@yandex.ru)

ABSTRACT

This paper builds upon the earlier work, 'Classification of English Phrasal Verbs Reconsidered', and aims to further refine our understanding of the nature of the English phrasal verb. The focus of this research is on the semantics of English phrasal verbs, with a literature review and semantic analysis serving as the primary methods. The analysis demonstrates that the English phrasal verb is a multi-level phenomenon, in which the unity of the base verb and particle is manifested across three dimensions: semantic, registerial, and prosodic. The paper also clarifies why the term should not be applied to certain word combinations that are often regarded as phrasal verbs. The scientific contribution of this research lies in its classification of phrasal verb meanings, grounded in the logic of their genesis and streamlined for teaching English as a second language. The findings not only deepen non-native English speakers' understanding of phrasal verbs but also offer a theoretical foundation for much-needed updates to study guides on the subject.

KEYWORDS: Phrasal Verb, Particle, Preposition, Postposition, Adverb, Compound Verbs, Idiomatic, Phraseology.

The nature and classification of English phrasal verbs (hereafter, PVs) are not merely topics for abstract academic study. English has long been the leading international language, and the effectiveness of its teaching directly affects the lives and career trajectories of millions. PVs represent one of its most challenging aspects, largely due to the lack of study guides that provide a consistent perspective on their nature and a clear structural framework for organizing them into a system.

This paper aims to build upon the ideas presented in the article 'Classification of English Phrasal Verbs Reconsidered' (Firstov, 2020), to synthesize contemporary findings regarding the nature and classification of PVs, and to offer a perspective that is both consistent and relevant to teaching practice.

Aarts and Close note: "We use the term 'phrasal verb' here as a cover term for both verb + adverb combinations (e.g., *put off*) and verb + preposition combinations (e.g., *look for*)" (2021). Notably, many recent authors—particularly in corpus linguistics and language teaching—use 'phrasal verb' as an umbrella term that encompasses both verb-particle and verb-preposition combinations (or prepositional verbs), at times without distinguishing between the two.

Popular study guides often do not introduce the concept of prepositional verbs at all, citing forms such as *hinge on* (*Everything hinges on the result of next week's referendum*) and *spring on* (*…to spring a new piece of legislation on parents…*) as PVs (O'Dell & McCarthy, 2017). A closer examination reveals that, in each instance, these are simply ordinary single-word verbs followed by prepositions; thus, there is no compelling reason to classify them as PVs. The same holds true for word combinations like *fuss over (smb/smth)*, *dwell on (the past)*, *get over (an illness/someone's death)*, and many others.

Dictionaries list PVs consisting of three components, such as *close in on* and *put up with*. However, upon closer examination, it can be seen that the third component is essentially just a preposition, as PVs—like ordinary single-word verbs—often collocate with prepositions.

It seems appropriate to assume that a PV consists of two components: a verb and a 'particle' (*in*, *up*, *off*, etc.), which is an adverb derived from a preposition. The list of particles used in PVs varies from one author to another; see Rodríguez-Puente (2019). This particle may convey a literal sense of spatial movement or a figurative meaning that developed later in the history of the language. The 'verb + particle' combination forms a single semantic unit and, in its citation form, carries two stresses, with primary stress on the particle. The same stress pattern mostly applies when the construction appears in spoken sentences, even if the verb and particle are separated by an object (Firstov, 2020).

Bolinger (1971) suggests that when the meaning of a PV is compositional, the primary stress tends to fall on the base verb, whereas in cases where the verb-particle combination is non-compositional, the stress more typically shifts to the particle.

This view is challenged by subsequent works, such as Wright (1997) and Siyanova & Schmitt (2007).

Povey (1990, pp. 13–15) presents a series of examples demonstrating that, while the particle is typically stressed more than the base verb, the distribution of stress is significantly influenced by other elements in the sentence. In particular, shorter or less 'weighty' particles may at times lose stress. Furthermore, logical stress can, in fact, fall on any word depending on the context.

This perspective is shared by Michael Ashby (2003), who demonstrates that a partial or complete shift of stress from a particle may result from the influence of stress in adjacent words, citing examples such as:We ˌcame back ˈearly.What time did you ˌcome ˈback?

According to study guides and dictionaries, the PV *run over* allows the object to be placed either before or after the particle: John *ran over the rat / John ran the rat over*. This is correct; however, confusion arises when *run over* is labeled a PV in sentences like *The truck ˌran over the ˈbridge.* Here, *over* functions as an ordinary preposition—unstressed and without any semantic unity with the verb *run*—so *run over* is not a PV in this context.

Let's examine some more cases where ordinary verbs followed by prepositions are easily mistaken for PVs.

The coin dropped out of my pocket does not feature a PV: out of here is a preposition, just as in Mary came out of the house. Compare:

I lost the coin – it dropped out.

I am not a student anymore – I dropped out.

In these cases, *drop out* is a fully-fledged PV—a lexical unit with two distinct meanings: 'to fall out of something' and 'to leave an activity or program without finishing it' respectively.

The stain won't come off the surface does not contain a PV: *off* here is a preposition. *The dress is ruined: the stain won't come off* does feature a PV: *come off* here has a distinct meaning ('be removed') reflected in dictionaries, with *off* acting as a particle of adverbial nature.

They got off the train at Chelsea does not feature a PV: *off* here is a preposition. However, *they got off at*

Chelsea does include a PV: *get off* in this context has a distinct meaning reflected in dictionaries ('to disembark') with *off* serving as a particle.

In such examples, prepositions and adverbs share essentially the same meaning, making it difficult for non-native English speakers to distinguish between them.

It is important to note that PVs are formed almost exclusively with one- or two-syllable base verbs in their infinitive form. Rodríguez-Puente, P. & Obaya-Cueli M. observe in their corpus study (2022): 'The verbal bases are primarily monosyllabic or disyllabic verbs with the accent on the first syllable. However, twenty-four of our examples do not follow this general tendency. Five verbs contain three syllables and nineteen are disyllabic with the accent on the second syllable. Combinations containing these verbs are scarce and, in most cases, attested only once.'

Apparently, contemporary English PVs tend to follow a similar rhythmic pattern in their citation form:

[ˌVERB ˈPARTICLE], where the base verb (monosyllabic or disyllabic) receives secondary stress (ˌ), and the particle (a preposition-derived adverb) bears primary stress (ˈ). Phonologically, the whole construction forms a single prosodic word.

It is nearly impossible to maintain this rhythmic pattern with three- or four-syllable base verbs, except in marginal cases (see *separate* below). For example, *sync up* is a fully-fledged PV, whereas *synchronize up* is never used as a PV, despite *sync* being merely an abbreviated form of *synchronize*.

In addition to not conforming to the rhythmic pattern, there is a clear stylistic mismatch: *synchronize* (like most multi-syllabic English verbs) belongs to the formal speech register, while the particle *up* (like other particles) is inherently colloquial. PVs are marked by 'snappiness' and brevity—qualities that contribute to their informality—which is why they predominantly occur in colloquial speech, seldom in academic contexts, and quite rarely in legal English (statutes, contracts, etc.). There are, however, time-honored exceptions, such as *set out* (as in *'as set out in Section 2'*) or *carry out* (as in *'to carry out the provisions of this Act'*). See also Biber et al. (1999).

Separate out stands out among PVs in terms of syllable count. It sounds distinctly different from most PVs, and, despite its frequent use, some major dictionaries, such as the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), do not even include it as a discrete entry. Evidently, only the *'-rate out'* segment conforms to the aforementioned rhythmic pattern, while the first two syllables function, so to speak, as an appendix—imparting to the lexical unit a somewhat unusual and peculiar sound quality.

Another example of a three-syllable base verb is *average (*as in *average out)*. But while the dictionary pronunciation is [ˈævərɪdʒ], in actual usage it is often realized as a two-syllable form [ˈævrɪdʒ], thus conforming to the rhythmic pattern under consideration.

Although similar structures do exist in other languages, most notably in the present-day Germanic languages (Thim, 2012), the English PV is, by all appearances, a distinctly English, multi-level phenomenon in which the unity of a base verb and a particle is manifested in three dimensions: semantic, registerial, and prosodic. It appears that in this unified form, PVs are perceived by native English speakers in everyday life, albeit unconsciously most of the time.

For tutorial purposes, it is essential to distinguish the mechanisms underlying the formation of PV meanings, with the distinction between compositional and non-compositional types being especially important (Fraser, 1976), (Jackendoff, 2002). Accordingly, a genesis-based classification system is proposed.

1st type of PV meaning is compositional: the particle functions as an active transforming element, while the base verb retains one of its dictionary meanings—either literal or figurative. In such cases, the meaning of the PV is a combination of the base verb's sense and that of the particle, conveying either the notion of spatial movement (literal sense) or a metaphorical extension developed later in the language's evolution. There already exist thorough and comprehensive studies addressing the meanings of the PV particles, such as Tyler & Evans (2003) and Cappelle (2005).

Drink up your beer—we are leaving.

Drink up = the literal 'consuming a liquid' sense of *drink* + *up* in the sense of 'completion'.

I need to build up my stamina.

Build up = the figurative sense of *build* ('to increase or strengthen') + 'to a higher level' sense of *up*.

The cut healed over.

Heal over = the literal sense of *heal* (becoming healthy) + 'covering' sense of *over*.

Mary came out to see me.

Come out = the literal 'move towards' sense of *come* + 'from the inside or center' sense of *out*.

The 2nd type of PV meaning is metaphorical or idiomatic: in these cases, the entire semantic unit is reinterpreted and acquires a meaning that is wholly distinct from the sum of its components. Importantly,

1st type meanings can be reinterpreted in a variety of ways, resulting in the development of multiple 2nd type meanings.

The book came out last week: come out was reinterpreted to mean 'be published or released'.

He came out against the government: *come out* means 'to express one's opinion openly'.

He came out to his Republican parents as a Democrat: come out means 'come out of the closet'.

Sometimes, even a 2nd type meaning may undergo further reinterpretation:

In the sentence *the plane will take off soon*, the PV *take off* means 'leave the ground,'. This meaning is clearly idiomatic, since none of the dictionary definitions of *take* relate to planes or flying. A further extension of this meaning is 'become successful rapidly', as in *Her career took off after the film*. Such cases may be described as 'a second-level extension' (or 'a secondary extension'), helping students recognize that there may have been two successive layers of reinterpretation.

A 2nd type meaning may sometimes emerge seemingly without passing through the 1st type stage. For example, the sense of 'annoy' in *piss off* originated as a 2nd type meaning and rarely, if ever, reflected a semantic combination of the base verb and the particle, although a native speaker could theoretically interpret it as such. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), *piss off* meaning 'to annoy' was first attested in 1946. Those who initially coined this usage selected the verb-particle combination precisely because it was apt for reinterpretation as a snappy, 'catchy' phrase for expressing annoyance. The origin of this meaning follows a common pattern in English (and other languages), in which bodily functions are used to express strong emotion, while the particle *off* is often associated with abruptness and decisiveness. In light of this, it can be argued that this meaning initially arose in a native speaker's mind as a combination of *piss* and *off*, before being extended to signify 'annoy'.

In fact, the combination of a base verb and a particle is virtually never arbitrary; both elements contribute to the overall meaning, even if that meaning is rapidly reinterpreted as a 2nd type meaning and never manifests at a 1st type stage.

Occasionally, native speakers use *piss* to mean 'annoy' *(e.g., Marc was pissed when he found out the results),* which might suggest that 'annoy' is a 1st type PV meaning. However, major authoritative dictionaries do not attest the 'make angry' sense for *piss* as a standalone verb and *pissed* in this sense is almost always considered a shortening of *pissed off*. This phenomenon exemplifies reverse semantic transfer, wherein the common PV *piss off* imparts its figurative meaning to the base verb.

The English PV is inherently a two-component entity; however, there are also two-particle constructions that unquestionably qualify as PVs, such as *sit back down* and *come on over.* These are formed by appending an additional particle to a standard two-component PV: for example, *sit back down* = *sit down* + *back* (to return to one's previous seated position), and *come on over* = *come over* + *on*, which essentially retains the meaning of *come over*, though in the imperative, *on* adds further encouragement. See also Kovács (2007). Such constructions should be distinguished from forms like *put up (with)* or *close in (on),* where the third element is a preposition rather than a particle.

It is also important to identify another category of PVs: the proxy-type. These constructions serve as substitutes without any inherent logic of their own. Proxy-type PVs are formed by replacing the base verb in an existing PV with a different verb, while retaining the original particle. The resulting structure preserves the meaning of the original PV but differs stylistically. For example, *pop on over* is derived from *come on over*: *pop on over* = *come on over*. Etymologically, *pop* is an onomatopoeic word that imitates the sound of a balloon bursting or a bottle being uncorked. *Pop* frequently replaces the original verb in PVs, imparting a more informal tone to the expression.

It should be emphasized that proxy-type PVs rarely substitute for all meanings of the original PV; typically, they replicate only certain 1st or 2nd type meanings. For example, c*ome around next weekend* is equivalent *to pop around next weekend.* However, *come around* also carries meanings such as 'regain consciousness after a faint' and 'begin to accept what one was reluctant to accept at first,' which are not shared by *pop around*. Other substitute base verbs include *hop*, *drop*, *swing*, etc.

Euphemistic PVs that substitute for many obscene or offensive expressions also fall into this category, as they similarly lack inherent semantic logic and serve primarily to soften the vulgarity of the original forms. Examples include *jack up* as in 'make a mistake, ruin', *jack off* as in 'masturbate', and *screw around*, as in 'engage in casual sexual acts'. Other base verbs that substitute for swear word roots include *fiddle*, *mess*, *frig*, etc. See also Kovács (2007).

Both PV particles and swear word roots are limited in number yet highly productive, which can result in cases of semantic overlap, where different meanings of 'the same' PV arise from entirely different principles. *Screw up* exemplifies this

phenomenon: one of its meanings is 'to tighten or secure with screws' which represents a 1st type meaning. However, it can also function as a euphemistic proxy-type PV, replicating the 2nd type meaning of *f— up* – namely, 'to make a mistake, ruin'.

In conclusion, the perspective articulated by S. Y. Bogdanova (2007) is affirmed: 'Even a non-native English speaker can master phrasal verbs, precisely because they are not a chaotic assortment of lexical units, as it may appear, but rather a system with its own intrinsic order and observable, non-arbitrary interrelated patterns.'

The underlying logic of a particular PV meaning may sometimes be obscured or lost, as in the case of *get off* (as in *Where do you get off talking to me like that?*), but such logic was certainly present at the stage of the meaning's genesis.

Grasping this logic not only aids in memorizing PV meanings, but also enables students to use them accurately and to appreciate the wordplay that is not uncommon in both everyday life and the media. Tracing this logic is now greatly facilitated by AI. It is hoped that much-needed appropriate study guides will soon follow—a goal to which the present paper seeks to contribute theoretically.

REFERENCES

Aarts, B., & Close, J. (2021). Phrasal verbs in recent spoken British English: A corpus study. English Language and Linguistics, 25(3), 545–570.

Ashby M., (2003). Revising the phonetics of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary // Proceedings of the 15th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences. Barcelona: ICPhS-15. – P. 2853-2856.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E., (1999). Longman grammar of spoken and written English. London: Longman.

Bogdanova, S. Y. (2007). Conceptualization and reconceptualization of spatial relations. Volgograd, 350 p.

Bolinger, Dwight., (1971). The phrasal verb in English. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Cambridge Dictionary. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/

Cappelle, B. (2005). Particles in English: A study of verbal prepositions (LOT Dissertation Series No. 127). LOT.

Firstov, L. Y., (2020) 'Classification of English Phrasal Verbs Reconsidered'// Litera. № 8, 21-28.

Fraser, B., (1976). The verb-particle combination in English. Academic Press.

Jackendoff, R. (2002). English particle constructions, the lexicon, and the autonomy of syntax. In N. Dehé, R. Jackendoff, A. McIntyre, & S. Urban (Eds.), Verb-particle explorations (pp. 67–94). Mouton de Gruyter.

Kovács, É. (2007). Productivity and creativity in English phrasal verbs. Studia Anglica Resoviensia, 4, 101–112.

O'Dell, F., & McCarthy, M. (2017). English phrasal verbs in use: Advanced (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.). Piss off. In OED Online. Retrieved May 2, 2026, from https://www.oed.com/

Povey J., (1990). Phrasal Verbs and How to Use them. Vysshaya Shkola Publishers, – 176 p.

Rodríguez-Puente, P., Obaya-Cueli M., (2022). Phrasal verbs in Early Modern English spoken language: a colloquialization conspiracy? English Language and Linguistics;26(4):807-831

Rodríguez-Puente, Paula., (2019). The English phrasal verb, 1650–present: History, stylistic drifts, and lexicalisation. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

Siyanova, A. & Schmitt, N. (2007). "Native and Non-native Use of Multi-word vs. One-word Verbs: Evidence from the British National Corpus." International Journal of Corpus Linguistics 12(3): 281–302.

Thim, S., (2012) Phrasal verbs: The English verb–particleconstruction and its history (Topics in English Linguistics78). Berlin and New York:De Gruyter Mouton. Pp. xiv +302. ISBN978-3-11-025702-1.

Tyler, A., & Evans, V. (2003). The semantics of English prepositions: Spatial scenes, embodied meaning, and cognition. Cambridge University Press.

Wright, S. (1997). "Verb-Particle Constructions and Stress Placement in English." English Language and Linguistics 1(2): 291–318.