Syntax of Phrasal Verbs and Idioms

Rafida Mansoor Mahmood
Al-Mustansiriyah University
College of Arts
Department of English

Introduction

Needless to say that phrasal verbs and idioms are, as any other subject in English grammar, very important in affecting the performance of any leaner (EFL), especially their spoken language.

This paper contains Four Sections:

Section One tackles with the problem, the hypothesis, the scope, the purpose, and the limitation of the study.

Section Two deals with the first part of the study which studies the definitions, types, syntax of phrasal verbs.

Section Three deals with the second part of the study which studies the definitions, types, syntax of idioms.

Finally Section Four contains the procedural part of the study, as well as the conclusion.

Section One

1.1 The Problem

The distinction between phrasal verbs and idioms is the most problematic subject for any leaner of English language.

1.2 The Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that Fourth - year students know how to differentiate between phrasal verbs and idioms correctly.

1.3 Scope of the Study

The study is concerned with measuring Fourth year / morning and evening students.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the ability and performance of EFL, especially English grammar, i.e., they can use phrasal verbs and idioms and differentiate them correctly.

1.5 Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to the measuring of students' knowledge of English grammar as EFL. It is limited to the Fourth - year students / Department of English/ morning

and evening studies/ College of Arts AL-Mustansiriyah University, for the academic year 2007-2008.

Section Two
Phrasal Verbs

2.1 Definitions of Phrasal Verbs

Crystal (1990:352) and McArthur (1992:878) agree upon the definition which says that the term phrasal verbs is one kind of verbs formed of two parts or sometimes three parts. The first part is an ordinary verb while the second part is a particle, which is either a preposition or an adverb. For instance **lie down**, **get on**.

2.2 Types of Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are, as any normal verb, either transitive or intransitive. The transitive verbs are those verbs which take an object whereas the intransitive verbs are those which do not need any object.(Quirk et. al., 1985:1152).
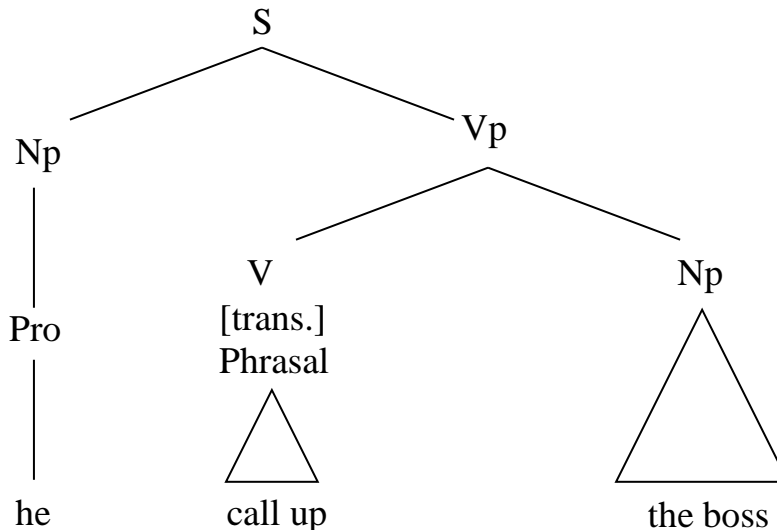
2.2.1 Transitive Phrasal Verbs

Roberts (1989:99) shows that in sentence (1) below:

1- **He called up the boss.**

the verb **call** and the preposition **up**, do not form a prepositional phrase, instead **up** belongs to **call** and they form the phrasal verb **call up**.

In this case the phrasal verb is considered to be either subject – predicative or direct object; so, **call up** is a transitive phrasal verb as the following diagram shows:

Diagram (1) Transitive Phrasal Verb

Other examples of transitive phrasal verbs given by Robert (ibid.) are **call off**, **look up**, **put down**, **hand down**, **hand over**.

2.2.2 Intransitive Phrasal Verbs

Quirk and Greenbaum ,1973:347, point out that intransitive phrasal verbs contain a verb plus a particle which cannot be separated from its verb. For example.

2a- Drink up quickly. cannot be as:

b- *Drink quickly up.

3a- Get up at once. cannot be as:

b-*Get at once up.

In transitive and intransitive phrasal verbs, such as **call off**, **look up**, **put down**, **give in**, **drink up**, the second words, i.e., **off**, **up**, **down**, **in** look like preposition but in this position they are called or categorized as particles. This will give the rule:

The phrasal verb $\xrightarrow{\text{consists}}$ **a verb + a particle**.

2.3 Selection of Particle of Phrasal Verbs

Burton (1986:136) says that English verbs are frequently compounded with words which are so much part of their meaning through which affect the common sense. He also points out that the selection of the verb with its suitable particle to form a phrasal verb plays a very important role in English grammar. The form of these two words i.e., the verb and its particle, should be regarded as grammatical entity. e.g.: **to make up**, **to put down**, **to take in**, **to take off**, **to switch on**. In these group of words the companion words **up**, **down**, **in**, **off**, **on** look like prepositions but they do not make grammatical sense to treat them as such. Thus in analyzing the sentence:

4a- Sally switched off the lamp.doesn't sense as:

4b- Sally / switched / off the lamp.but as:

4c- Sally / switched off / the lamp.

This shows that the verb **switched off** is a transitive verb and **the lamp** is its object.

 Burton ,ibid, stresses that the companion words in a phrasal verb has the function of an adverb, but the two elements the verb and the adverb are fused to form one verb. This verb may be used transitively and intransitively as is mentioned before. For example:

 5- He took off his hat. (transitive)

 6- They slept in that morning. (intransitive)

2.4 Position of Phrasal Verbs

Baker ,1989:156, among other scholars, states that the position of phrasal verbs are distinguished according to the type of the phrasal verbs, i.e., transitive or intransitive.

2.4.1 Transitive Phrasal Verbs

Baker ,ibid., the transitive group can be shifted to a position immediately after the verb, incase that the object is not a pronoun. For instance,

 7a- Ruth **sounded** her brother **out.**can be shifted to form:

 7b- Ruth **sounded out** her brother.

 8a- Sidney called his boss up.can be shifted to form:

 8b- Sidney called up his boss.

Whereas Parninskas ,1975:217, points out that "two-word verbs permit the object between the two parts in certain cases:

1- Pronoun objects always occur between the two parts of a separable two-word verbs, as in:

  9- Professor Baker called her up.

2- Short noun objects which are not modified by a phrase or a clause may occur between the two parts of the verb or after the second part", as in:

  10a- Professor Baker called his secretary up.

   b- Professor Baker called up his secretary.

   The researcher agrees with Baker's point of view because it is more strict than Parninskas' point of view.

2.4.2 Intransitive Phrasal Verbs

   According to Baker ,ibid., intransitive phrasal verbs cannot be treated in the same way, i.e., they cannot be shifted, since there is no object, as shown in the examples below:

  11- Donna sounded off.

  12- Sames flunked out.

Baker ,ibid., shows that transitive and intransitive prasal verbs need environmental specifications.

Sound: [-------------NP out] Transitive.

Call: [------------- NP up] Transitive.

Sound: [------------- off] Intransitive.

Flunk: [------------- out] Intransitive.

Section Three
Idioms

3.1 Definition of Idioms

Clark ,1977:446-7, Crystal ,1989:624, Fernando and Flavell ,1981:23-4, define idioms as a word or group of words that are complex in their representation and form. Some idioms cannot be understood directly from their lexical items, since they may produce different meaning. For example, sentence (13) implies the meaning 'die':

13- Kick the bucket. = die

The word in (14) below implies the meaning of 'showing impatience when criticizing a child':

14- Naughty, naughty. = shows impatience when criticising a child

Sentence (15) implies the meaning of 'acting as a host or hostess by doing something such as producing drinks or food':

15- Do the honors. = to act as host or hostess

by doing something such as producing drinks or food

Finally, sentence (14) implies the meaning of 'wishing good luck':

16- You'll be Lucky! = Good luck; I wish you well, Manser, 1990:77, 113, 101,

3.2 Types of Idioms

According to some grammarians, such as Culicover (1976:167), idioms can be divided into two types simple

and complex. Generally speaking, the meaning of idioms is not completely predictable from the meaning of the parts of idioms: the simple is a single word, since its meaning must be specified in the lexicon and cannot be predicated from other facts, whereas the complex idioms are the idioms which contain a number of lexical items such as: Kick the bucket, make eyes at and so on.

Other grammarians, such as Cowie et. al. ,1983: xii-xiii, believes that English idioms are divided into three kinds: **restricted collocation**, **figurative idioms** and **pure idioms**.

3.2.1 Restricted Collocation

In this kind of idioms one of the words has a figurative sense which is not found outside that limited contex. The other word appears in a familiar, literal sense, e.g:

17- Jog one's memory.

18- A blind alley.

3.2.2 Figurative idioms

This kind of idioms are described as idiomatic, and there isn't any variation, but pronoun substitution is not allowed, except in certain sentences such as:

19- The boot / shoe is on the other foot.

20a- A close / narrow shave.

20b- Bill had a narrow shave and Fred an even narrower one.

3.2.3 Pure idioms

Fernando ,1996: 65, stresses that the expressions in this kind are considered highly idiomatic, in that they have two features: (a) **non – literalness**, which is a basic feature (major feature); and (b) **opacity**, which is considered to be a minor feature.

3.3 Syntax of Idioms

3.3.1 Transformation of Idioms

Longman idioms Dictionary ,1998: ix, explains that there are few idioms which are fixed in form, whereas others can delete some of their parts without affecting the meaning of the whole expression as in:

21- Somebody's been around the block a few times.

However,some idioms may accept other inserted words within them, depending on what the speaker / writer describes. For example:

22- [The -------- of somebody's dreams].

3.3.2 Idioms and Conjunctions

Newmeyer ,1974: 330, sheds light on the movement of conjunction, saying that when the actual and literal meanings allow conjunct movement, idioms will allow it in the sentence as well, and the sentence is still

grammatical; some sentences would be ungrammatical when they are transformed because either the actual or the literal meaning does not allow conjunct movement, as in:

23 a- Tom and I got the picture. = became aware)

  b- *Tom got the picture with me. (the idiomatic meaning is blocking the transformation).

3.3.3 Tough Movement

Tough movement is a rule in which a noun phrase is moved out of the predicate of a complement sentence. The term **tough** is one member of a class of adjectives e.g.: simple, difficult, hard, easy … etc. **Tough** movement can be seen in the following example:

24- The ball was easy for John to catch.

As far as the **tough** movement is concerned the analysis of the above sentence may be traced as follow:

NP[it S [For John to catch the ball] S] NP was easy.

According to this rule, the non – subject noun phrase is taken from the extraposed complement , the ball, and substituted for the initial subject pronouns of the whole sentence, i.e., (it).

Newmeyer ,1974: 333, states that the **tough** movement rule may be applied to a number of idioms, as shown in the sentences below:

25 a- It's easy as a pie to solve this puzzle.

b-This puzzle is easy as a pie to solve.

26 a- It is easy to please John.

b-John is easy to please.

27 a- It is tough to annoy Alex.

b- Alex is tough to annoy.

3.3.4 Insertion of (there)

Newmeyer ,1974:334, explains that, in general, empty **there** may be inserted in the subject position used with intransitive verbs, which indicates existence or occurrence, For example:

28 a- A golden mountain exists.

b-There exists a golden mountain.

For idioms, the rule of **there** insertion can be applied if the actual meaning contains a predicate of existence or occurrence, as in:

29a- A new development came to light.

b-There came to light a new development.

30a- A sad event came to pass.

b-There came to pass a sad event.

Section Four
The Procedural Section

4.1 The Achievement Test

The researcher has designed a one – part test to be carried out by the candidates represented by 50 students, 25 of morning and 25 of evening studies of the fourth – year / students / Department of English / College of Arts / AL-Mustansiriyah University. This test consists of (20) items "Give the meaning of the following words and phrases, mention which list contains phrasal verbs and which contains idioms", (see Appendix). The carrying out of this test aims at measuring the degree of the students' knowledge, as EFL, of comprehending and using English phrasal verbs and idioms.

After scoring the students' papers the researcher finds out that the percentage of correct answers is about 20% which is considered a low degree. This low percentage indicates that there are certain reasons which may affect the students' performance.

4.2 Reasons Behind the Subjects' low Performance

The researcher thinks that the following are the most probable reasons behind the subjects' low performance.

1- Psychological reasons.

Motivation is one of the reasons which affects the students' performance. If the student has a high motivation of learning English language his or her performance would be affected and he or she would get a high score, but if he or she has a low motivation, he or she would get a low score, McClelland, 1975:213.

2- The material which the subjects' have studied through their four years in learning English as a foreign language.

3- Phrasal verbs and idioms are considered to be very difficult subjects for (EFL) especially in their spoken language.

4.3 Conclusion

1- English phrasal verbs and idioms are very difficult subjects according to (EFL).

2- Most of the student face difficulty in comprehending and using phrasal verbs, particularly when the same phrasal verb is used in different contexts to give different meaning.

3- English idioms are either a word or sequence of words which denote a certain idea.

4- Most of the students haven't got enough knowledge of what English idioms are and in which context they are used.

5- Most of the students are not able to differentiate between the group which contains the phrasal verbs and that which contains the idioms, since they do not know how to distinguish between the forms of idioms, i.e., whether the idiom can be a single word or a whole phrase.

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Appendix

Give the meaning of the following words and phrases, mention which list contains the phrasal verbs and which contains the idioms.

1- List A	2- List B
1- call off	1- Don't call us, we'll call you
2- call on	2- For all I (you, etc) care.
3- fill out	3- Wonders will never cease.
4- find out	4- Not by along chalk (or shot).
5- leave out	5- A change is as good as arrest.
6- look over	6- He's (she's, etc.) got a chip on his (her,etc.) shonlder.
7- pass out	7- Be a devil!
8- take up	8- Naughty, naughty!
9- keep on	9- Out of my sight!

10- look into   10- Skip it!