SOME DIFFERENCES IN AMERICAN AND BRITISH PHRASAL VERBS

Tatiana IAȚCU

Abstract

This paper presents a short description of English phrasal verb and the reasons why it is more used in recent years. There is also a parallel between phrasal verbs met both in the British and American dialects, emphasizing some similarities and differences.

The combinations verb + adverb, verb + preposition, verb + adverb + preposition are also known as verb phrases, compound verbs, verb-adverb combinations, verb-particle constructions (VPC), American English two-part words/verbs and three-part words/verbs, depending on the number of particles that follow the verb. The moment these combinations lose their literal meanings, they become phrasal verbs, or idiomatic phrasal verbs. According to Dwight Bolinger, the term 'phrasal verb' appeared first in Smith's *Words and Idioms: Studies in the English Language*, published by London, Constable and Co., Ltd., 1933, p.172, (Bolinger 1971: 3) According to *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language*, Oxford University Press, 1996, the same Logan Pearsall Smith printed the name of 'phrasal verb' for the first time in 1925, who stated that the *Oxford English Dictionary* editor Henry Bradley suggested the term to him.

Although present in the language for many centuries, it hasn't been described until before recently. "Citations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* date from Middle English: for example, *turne about* 1300; *gon doun* 1388. They are common in Shakespeare: 'So long, that ninteene Zodiacks haue gone round' (*Measure for Measure*, 1603). Such verbs have often been used to translate Latin verbs (*to putte downe…calare, deponere: Catholicum Anglicum*, 1483) and to define verbs of Latin origin in English (*abrogate…take away: Cawdrey, Table Alphabeticall*, 1604). The 18th century lexicographer Samuel Johnson was among the first to consider such formations seriously: <There is another kind of composition more frequent in our language than perhaps in any other, from which arises to foreigners the greatest difficulty. We modify the signification of many words by particle subjoined; as to *come off*, to escape by a fetch; to *fall on*, to attack; to *fall off*, to apostatize; to *break off*, to stop abruptly…these I have noted with great care> (Preface, *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755). (McArthur 1996: 629)

Kennedy says in *Modern English Verb-Adverb Combinations* that compounding is linguistic laziness as "it is so much easier to combine a dozen or fifteen well-known prepositional adverbs with the singular and more familiar verbs than it is to keep in mind a special polysyllabic verb for each different concept." (1972: 32)

New compounds are continually made making use of old morphemes. *Output* and *feedback* are two examples, one representing a British way of placing a prefix to a verb, the other an American method of compounding, with a consequent American flavour. The

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

order of morphemes in a word is not supposed to vary. *Upset* and *set up* are entirely different items.

Furthermore, the distinction between 'legitimate' or 'correct' usage and 'unacceptable' usage has become harder to verify, especially with the development of metalanguages, idiolects and major dialects and variants of English, especially American English. The invasion of American fashion-words, idioms and syntax has been perhaps the most important modern influence on English. When talking about Modern English we cannot ignore technical and progress terms, as well as a whole stock of vivid demotic idioms, among which we found phrasal verbs as well (for instance, *cool, neat, smart, mean, with it, dumb, uptight, rip off, wild, weird,* and *out of sight*).

As Tom Fahey noticed in the 1990 edition of *The New Oxford English Dictionary,* in addition to the half million entries carried from the first edition (1927) and the supplements (1933, 1972, 1986), that this one contains 5000 words coined since 1970, mostly from medicine, science and technology, and mostly American. Many new formations can be made with just the word 'down': *down-and-out; down turn, down-load, downscale, down-link, downside, down-size, down quark, down, downer.*

One of the most important trends in contemporary language use is the move towards developing 'plain' English in official speech and writing. It was the effort to simplify the language in legal, government, business, technical, and academic documents. Plain English means writing in a simple and direct way, using as many words as possible from the spoken language, without those pompous and archaic terms, multi-syllabic words and difficult turns of phrases that even educated readers cannot understand. Plain English is clear, direct, and simple. The plain English movement has some history, though. Stuart Chase in *The Power of Words* (1953) complained about the "gobbledygook" that flourished then in the bureaucracy in the law and in university. Even earlier, in 1946, George Orwell stated the six principles of good writing in *Politics and the English Language*.

The main aim of the Plain English campaigns in Britain and the USA is to attack the complicated language used by government departments, businesses, and any other group who are often in linguistic contact with the general public. Application forms, safety instructions, official letters, licences, contracts, insurance policies, hire-purchase documents, guarantees and other documents, the campaigners argue, should be presented clearly, using language that people are likely to understand. One linguistic item that a native of English uses in everyday speech is the phrasal verb. Thus, it is no coincidence that phrasal verbs have been "officially" studied in grammar books since that period, mainly the 1970s. Since 1970, plain English has been obligatory in a few federal laws and regulations governing consumer documents. Since the mid-1970s, several government documents and many insurance and banking documents have been rewritten into plain English. There has been done increasing research on language and design. New fields enrich with new words that are accepted by lawyers and consumers, and so it becomes easier for other writers in the same field to follow the examples. It is also easier to persuade other users of accepting simply written documents. "In the United Kingdom the campaign was launched in 1979 by a ritual shredding of government forms in Parliament Square. By 1985, over 21,000 forms had been revised, and a further 15,000 withdrawn. In the USA, President Carter issued an order in 1978 requiring that regulations be written in plain English; the order was revoked by President Reagan in 1981, but it none the less promoted a great deal of local legislation throughout the

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

country, and an increase in plain English usage among corporation and consumers." (Crystal, 1997: 266)

Several authors disagree as to what counts as 'plain' and what does not. Certain recommendations are widely accepted, such as the preference for short words and paragraphs, the use of concrete rather than abstract words, and the avoidance of the passive voice. The increasing usage of prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses, and verb-adverb (or verb-preposition) combinations (*I ran into an old friend*), and a tendency to use almost any word as more than one part of speech are some of the Modern English developments in plain language.

Words with an emotive component of meaning are subject to more rapid and unpredictable change than those with the denotation and linguistic connotation. Thus, what was in fashion some time ago today may sound obsolete. Even the emotive connotation of a certain term may vary a lot in meaning and intensity from one group of speakers to another, or among the same group in different circumstances. What is commonly used in addressing a college class will sound ridiculous in addressing the same college students on a football pitch; some are permitted in books and on the stage but not in radio and television programmes or in "family" magazines. For example, *stick around* is not accepted in a respectable middle class English family, but is often used by the medium American. Perhaps this various shiftiness becomes most noticeable when you try to acquire a real working knowledge of a foreign language, that is, a mastery of the nuances that make one phrase polite and another, perhaps only slightly different, offensive.

What is tricky about the 'underground' American dialects is that the main vocabulary is apparently familiar to a speaker of Standard English, but meanings are often entirely different. Examples include *square, weird, pad, soul, high, acid, grass, horse, camp, trip, bird, cool, sweet, heat, fruit, bread, cat, sick and gross, jerk off.* These dialects are sometimes false sub-codes, alternative argots which deliberately avoid traditional language, as well as its conventions of public explication. (see Hughes 1988) Mathews sees an English wildness and an American passion for freedom as the two major causes of "[…] barbarisms, solecisms, and improprieties. The chief cause must be found in the character of the English-speaking race. There is in our very blood a certain lawlessness, which makes us into learners of syntactical rules, and restless under pedagogical restraints… In America this scorn of obedience, whether to political authority or philological, is fostered and intensified by the very genius of our institutions. We seem to doubt whether we are entirely free, unless we apply the Declaration of Independence to our language, and carry the Monroe doctrine even into our grammar." (in Baron 1982: 327-28)

The English language is influenced little by little by the verbal centers of American culture: these are embodied in the speech writers of Washington, the advertising copywriters of Madison Avenue, and the script-writers of Hollywood. The principal TV export of America is soap-opera and 'one-liner' comedy. Since the discourse in those forms is exclusively banal dialogue and not (as in a novel) description and psychological analysis, the popular idiom of American speech tends to become a model of conversation. Hence the increasingly popular acceptance of *pants* for *trousers*, *truck* for *lorry*, *call* for *telephone*, *mail* for *post*, *can* for *tin*, *elevator* for *lift*, *rookie* for *beginner*, *vacation* for *holiday*, *executive* for *businessman*, *relocate* for *move*, *medication* for *medicine, automobile* for *car* and *fill out* for *fill in*. There is also increasing acceptance of the American use of unnecessary

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

prepositions: *refer back, forward planning, win out* or *through*, and *listen up*. British usage has started to adopt the verbal use of *into*, as in American '*He's into yoghurt/Buddhism/skiing*'. As J. S. Bernstein (1974) confirms, "In one particular area, we can see the semantics of phrasal verbs very clearly: current American slang. A notable feature of 'counterculture' slang in recent years is its borrowing a technical or technological vocabulary for use in referring to human relations and humanistic concerns (e.g. *to space out*)." (in Stephens & Waterhouse 1990: 113) In a machine age, the technical vocabulary spreads into non-technical areas, creating a curious situation: areas traditionally thought of as remote from modern technological intrusion (e.g., human love) borrow lexical terms from technology (e.g., *screw up*).

In USA journalism, there are two striking features. The first is the 'democratization' of the language, as the ideology of the 'melting pot' goes for its linguistic equivalent too, and rich slang can be found in all categories. The second appears to be the result of competition, that is "the whole verbal texture resembles a conglomerate of registers made up of the recherché, the literary and the common slang terms. Boorstin said that the 'American language became the apotheosis of *slang*.'" (Hughes 1988: 143) On the whole it would appear that spoken, and therefore informal usage, is more likely to become a source of acceptable written usage than an artificially selected, though flexible, vocabulary invented by journalists for their own use, but not heard outside their offices. The contrast in usage is also apparent in the way that compounds made up of slang terms and metaphors, such as *road-hog, litterbug, dropout, rip-off* and *up-tight* have gained normal use, whereas common compounds like *holiday-maker, rescue-worker, pace-setter* and *flat-dweller* have not caught on so quickly and widely. Compounding is a fundamental method of word formation in English, and is a general feature of the Germanic languages. Formations which have evolved over time, like *handbook*, *homesick*, and *sea-horse* have a natural, assimilated quality, which is different from the typically artificial creations of copy-writers, such as *fresh-tasting, hand-crafted, oven-fresh, king-size, see-through, all-round, space-saving, take-away, up-to-the-minute,* and *do-it-yourself*. Everyone senses the difference between a compound, which can have conventional meaning of its own, like any other word, and a phrase, whose meaning is determined by the meanings of its parts and the rules that put them together. Pinker says that "One of the delights of English is its colourful cast of characters denoted by headless compounds, compounds that describe a person by what he does or has than by what he is: *bird-brain, blockhead, boot-black, butterfingers, cut-throat, dead-eye, egghead, fat-head, flatfoot, four-eyes, goof-off, hard-hat, heart-throb, heavyweight, highbrow, hunchback, lazy-bones, loudmouth, low-life, ne'er-do-well, pip-squeak, redneck, scarecrow, killjoy, know-nothing, scofflaw, wetback*. This list shows that virtually everything in the language falls into systematic patterns, even the seemingly exceptions." (1994: 393)

What makes a phrase idiomatic is that not all the syntactic constituents correspond to conceptual constituents, not being linked to the logical conceptual structure. Thus, these constituents have no independent interpretation, although most of them inflect normally. "Irregular inflectional morphology involves a single lexical form expressing multiple lemmas; an idiom involves a single lemma expressed by multiple lexical forms." (Jackendoff 1997:163) Idioms fall into the third class of compounds (out of three that he classifies) where "some part may be a phonological word of the right syntactic category but the wrong meaning. An example is 'strawberry' –particular kind of *berry*- which has nothing to do with 'straw"'. The fact that many idioms are rigid in syntactic structure, and that some of them have rigid changed structures, comes from the fact that lexical

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

processing takes place at Surface Structure rather than Deep Structure. A constructional idiomatic phrasal verb is sometimes a syntactic and conceptual structure that is not determined by the head verb. Although the verb is the syntactic head of the verbal phrase, it is not the semantic head; rather its meaning is embedded in a manner constituent. As a result, the argument structure of the verbal phrase is determined by the meaning of the constructional idiom, essentially a causative inchoative of the sort expressed overtly by verbs such as *put* and *make.*

What an awkward position I'm now (put) into – if I say yes, I'm too demanding; if I say no, I'm too proud – either way I lose!

Aunt Mary is (making) over the new baby again.

The verb loses its literal meaning and the semantic head becomes the particle, such as:

When I drew back the curtains, there outside the window stood a crowd of people looking in. (Here the stress is on the meaning of 'look'.)

I don't intend to look in tonight, there is nothing worth watching. (Here the meaning is given by the two items, 'watch television'.)

I'm glad to see you so much better; I'll look in again tomorrow. (In this example the meaning is focused on the particle *in,* which could be preceded by any verb with the sense of 'visit')

The verb can also combine with a preposition, an adverb and preposition, an adjective, an infinitive, to form an idiom. Sometimes this construction must be considered as a unit, for its meaning can rarely be inferred from knowing the verb and the particle separately.

He ran the flag up. Here the particle is an adverbial adjunct, which is given end position.

Let the prisoners loose. The second component is an adjective, whose change of semantic content is more evident with semantically empty causative verbs. Cf. *He made ready the draft. He readied the draft.* Here the adjective behaves like adverbial particles.

Subtle variations in meaning are frequently expressed by the use of different prepositions with the same word.

You might clear the jump if you take a run at it. ('To aim in the direction of'.)

The director intends to take your suggestion before the rest of the Board at their next meeting. ('To send for approval by'.)

The old lady was taken for all her money. ('To rob or cheat')

It's easy for you to find a job when you know that your uncle will take you into the family firm. ('To admit somebody into a business as a worker'.)

The policeman has been taken off this case. ('To cause someone to leave an activity'.)

Will you take me over my lines? ('To help someone to learn, repeat'.)

The director likes to take visitors round the factory personally. ('To show somebody round a place as on a visit or examination'.) They say that English is easy to learn because its grammar and vocabulary are not so complicated. However, the reverse of this is also true; because the use of auxiliaries or combinations of words, it constitutes the most perplexing branch of grammar; "it being much easier to learn to change the termination of the verb, than to combine two, three or four words for the same purpose." (Webster, 1951: 223)

From a short study of more than 300 phrasal verbs included in two dictionaries, *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (more than 12,000 entries) by Rosemary Courtney

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

published in a sixth impression by Longman Group UK Ltd. 1994, and *NTC's Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs and Other Idiomatic Verbal Phrases* (12,276 entries) by Richard A. Spears published by NTC Publishing Group, Chicago, Illinois in 1993, I could discern some differences in the meaning, structure and use of phrasal verbs, as follows:

1. In the British dictionary there are phrasal verbs with old use such as *abide in, advise with* which are not included in the American one;
2. In the British dictionary there are phrasal verbs whose use is mostly formal such as *allow of/out/through/to, approximate to, arbitrate on, assort with, attain to*, and others that are not to be found in the American one;
3. Some slang phrasal verbs (*arse about*) do not appear in the American dictionary;
4. Some phrasal verbs are said to be especially American but they do not appear in the American dictionary: *ante up* ('to pay') or *jerk off* ('to masturbate');
5. American phrasal verbs are followed by more prepositions meaning the same thing than the British ones: *abut against/up* – BrE *abut against,* AmE *agree with/in* – BrE *agree with,* AmE *aim at/for/to* – BrE *aim at/for*, and so on;
6. There are other prepositions for the same meaning, and their use is considered incorrect by the other dialect, e.g., *fills in, takes out* in BrE and *fill out* and *takes away* in AmE.
7. Although they say that the tendency to use phrasal verbs is American, there are more British phrasal verbs than American. For example, phrasal verbs beginning with 'a' are 231 in BrE and 221 in AmE. From these 17 do not appear in the British dictionary and 21 do not appear in the American dictionary;
8. Sometimes the same preposition gives different meanings, as in *ask about/around* which in AmE means 'inquire about someone or something' while in BrE *ask round* means 'invite someone to one's home'; *ask up* in AmE means 'invite for a visit' while in BrE means 'invite upstairs'.

Studying the verb *be*, I have noticed that in BrE it has more idiomatic meanings than in AmE, at least according to the dictionaries at hand. Thus, for example *be in* is used with only one idiomatic meaning in AmE and in 35 more or less idiomatic expressions while in BrE, when *in* is an adverb, it has 3 literal meanings, 7 idiomatic meanings and is used in two expressions. When *in* is a preposition it has 3 literal meanings and is used in 31 expressions:

AmE 1. *Be in* = 'to be in attendance/available/in one's office': *Is the doctor in?*
2. *Be done in* = 'be exhausted': *I'm really done in!*

BrE 1. *In* as adverb, literal: 'to be in place': *Is the nail in?*
2. Idiomatic: 'to burn': *I hope the fire is still in when we get home.*
3. Expressions: *one's luck be in*: 'to have a period of good luck' – *I think I'll put some money on the next race, while my luck is in.*

1. *In* as a preposition, literal: 'to work or be concerned in (a business)': *Two of his brothers are in printing, the other in law.*

2. Expressions: *be in cahoots/league (with): Don't trust him with the workers' plans, he's in cahoots with the directors.*

From the 70 entries that *be* has in the dictionary of phrasal verbs 3 are not to be found in the BrE dictionary and 17 do not appear in the American one.

From what has been said so far, we could conclude that the British vocabulary of phrasal verbs is more exhaustive and abundant in more subtle meanings.

Spoken language contains many incomplete sentences. This may explain why phrasal verbs are used so much in spoken language. Many phrasal verbs can be considered

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

as incomplete sentences, as the adverb that follows the verb was, in many cases, initially a preposition that linked the verb to the phrasal noun.

She can't get by (normal life) on such a small income.
You get the biggest man down (the earth), and I'll fight the other two.

Spoken language typically uses less clause-subordination and constructions are joined not so much by conjunctions or relative pronouns as by pause. Reference, presupposition, implicature, and inference are often used as key terms in discourse analysis, a part of pragmatics. The context of an utterance is a small subpart of the universe of discourse shared by speaker and hearer, and includes facts about the topic of the conversation in which the utterance occurs, and also facts about the situation in which the conversation itself takes place. The exact context of any utterance can never be specified with complete certainty. (Hurford & Heasley 1983: 210)

The destiny of the English language was foreseen to grow "more august" and undergo "universal expansion" by Russell Green in 1915, and he urged linguists to discover a little of the secret of its triumph because a word cannot always be ideally "the operative" symbol of a relation between two minds. "Indeed the English language is now at an uneasy stage of its development and expansion: the sheer voluminousness and complexity of the network of the language throughout the English-speaking world place almost insuperable obstacles in the path of those whose job it is to set down an accurate record of all of its variety." (in Burchfield 1989 :61)

Abbreviations:
AmE = American English
BrE = British English

References:

Baron, D. E. (1982) *Grammar and Good Taste*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Bolinger, D. (1971) *The Phrasal Verb in English*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Burchfield, R. (1989) *Unlocking the English Language*. United States of America: Hill and Wang

Crystal, D. (1997) *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Fahey, T. (1990) *The Joys of Jargon*. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

Hurford, J. R. & Heasley, B. (1983) *Semantics. A Coursebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hughes, G. (1988) *Words in Time*. New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc.

Jackendoff, R. 1997 *The Architecture of the Language Faculty,* The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., London

Kennedy, A. (1972) *Modern English Verb-Adverb Combinations*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

McArthur, T. (1996) *The English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Pinker, S. (1994) *The Language Instinct*. London: Penguin Books

Stephens, John and Waterhouse, Ruth (1990) *Literature, Language and Change. From Chaucer to the Present*. London and New York: Routledge

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)

Webster, Noah (1951) *Dissertations on the English Language*. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars, Facsimiles and Reprints

LIVING TOGETHER –ETHIC NORMS OF MINORITIES LIVING IN HUNGARY

Ana HOȚOPAN

Abstract

We may say that the peaceful life in a village with a mixt population was preserved due tothe respect towards one's fellow citiyens, first of all, even if these had a language, a culture and a civilisation that differed from their own. Reciprocity in the moral conduct, the ethic rules and those of social behaviour preserved these values.

The great majority of the Romanians in Hungary have lived to a greater or smaller extent together with other ethnic minorities along their history. The fact has resulted in interethnic cultural influences and has imposed a certain behavioral conduct among individuals. Thus an unwritten ethic code of behavior was born which was rigorously observed by all members of the different ethnic entities which lived together. The cohabitation of the people of a different mother tongue has influenced their way of thinking, making them sensitive and curious to another culture, strengthening thus their linguistic, traditional and cultural tolerance. At the same time the critical spirit has become more acid, through comparison to the others' way of living, finding similarities and differences ceaselessly.

Even if the cohabitation of several nationalities has resulted in a change in the specific national costume, losing its most important ethic signs, several small elements have been preserved for a long time. Thus, one could tell on the basis of a person's looks what nationality they belonged to for a long time. For example, the Romanian women wore their hair plaited in two plaits set around their heads, while the Hungarian women would wear only one plait. The Romanian women wore a flat bun, while the Hungarian ones a pointed bun. Up to the 60s and 70s, the Romanian women did not cut their hair and would not walk around bare-headed. The Hungarian men would wear a hat, the Romanians a cap, the Serbs, a rounded cap. The Hungarians and Germans would wear trousers, while the Romanians wore men's white linen culottes (izmene) or wide white linen culottes (gaci). For a long time the Romanian women used to wear "a scarf around their head" (cârpă după cap) instead of a winter coat. These exterior signs of the clothing would oblige people that once in a community place, at the fair, wedding, shop a.s.o. they should behave according to the circumstances. For example, the Romanians of Micherechi, upon going to the fair in the neighboring village of Sercad, during the week, would dress into their Sunday best, would avoid speaking loud and initiate conversations at a distance, so specific to country folk, as well as they strived to communicate with people in their own language. The same respect was paid to the shopkeeper, the mayor,

BDD-A2750 © 2005 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 13:36:11 UTC)