CHANGING MEANINGS DUE TO PARTICLE USE ("IN" AND "AT")

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Abstract

The paper deals with changing in meanings that happen when a verb is followed by an adverb, a preposition or an adverb and a preposition. The focus is on verbs followed by the prepositions *in* and *at*. The meaning of the verbs, when they form a compound with a particle, as many linguists prefer to call prepositions and adverbs, can be transparent, when obvious, semi-transparent, when the context intervenes, and opaque, when a foreigner needs a dictionary to decode it.

Keywords: meaning, verb, adverb, context, decoding

Like all cultural systems, languages change over time and can be adapted to particular needs and circumstances. The differences, which can be seen in any language viewed at different periods in its history, reveal the fact of regular, systematic change.

A linguistic study can give unique insights into cultural 'world view' and values, and cultural anthropologists would be unable to study and describe the life of many community of people without somehow dealing with language.

New compounds are continually made with words belonging to a settled vocabulary. *Output* and *feedback* are two examples, one representing a British way of prefixing a preposition to a verb, the other an American way of compounding, with a "consequent American flavour". The order of morphemes in a word is not supposed to vary: *upset* and *set up* are entirely different items.

Traditional grammar was oriented almost exclusively to the written language. This had special consequences for the writing of grammars: it meant that many constructions regularly heard in the language were simply not described because they were not encountered in the written language. That is why we generally do not find phrasal verbs described in grammars written before 1970.

When people learn a language, they are learning how to put words in order, but not by recording which word follows other word. They do it by recording which word category - noun, verb, and so on – follows which other category. The dependencies are very numerous in languages and people use them all the time, often handling several at once – just what a word-chain device cannot do. The most quoted example is: "Daddy, what did you bring that book that I don't want to be read to out of up for?" By the point at which he utters *read*, the

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child has committed himself to holding four dependencies in mind: *to be read* demands *to*, *that book* requires *out of*, *bring* requires *up*, and *what* requires *for*.

In spoken language the speaker frequently sets the norms. In using verbs the speaker plays an essential part: in judging according to a personally set norm and standard, he expresses his own attitude towards an element of the verbal action, aiming at impressing or even influencing his listener or reader. Where the speaker's attitude can be described as positive or negative, we can talk of the speaker's evaluation, which can minimize or maximize the value of the action. This is well illustrated in the verbs denoting *deceiving* and *lying*, for example.

Apart from indicating a moral attitude, speaker's evaluation can also express an aesthetic norm, usually through a negative reaction, particularly with verbs denoting human behaviour, e.g.

The writer Charles Branham popped off in his flat in New York yesterday afternoon. (*Euronews Channel*, 2002).

There he goes, popping off again! (Speaking in anger, American English)

Through verb usage, a speaker can express sympathy with the agent or, as is more usually the case, detachment and criticism.

Phrasal verbs have been given different names, such as: verb-adverb combinations, verb-adverb groups, two-word verbs, verbal idioms, verbal collocations, separable verbs, phrasal verbs, compound verbs, group verbs, compound forms, merged verbs, verb-phrase, and verbal phrases. Many of the phrasal verbs have been converted into nouns, this phenomenon stretching over a long period of time. For instance, *pop-in* was recorded in 1748, *take-in* was recorded in 1778, *stick-in* was recorded in 1843 and since the second half of the 19th century they began to appear in vocabulary more regularly and frequently.

Frequency rankings can be made for both the verb list and the particle list. Makkai (1967) made a statistics which included particles: *up* has the most occurrences, 177 combinations, of which 103 are idioms; *out* occurs in 155 combinations, of which 69 are idioms; *over* with 108 occurrences including 40 idioms; *again* with 89 occurrences but only one single idiom; *off* with 86 occurrences including 42 idioms. The last in the list is *aback* with one occurrence, which is an idiom *to be taken aback*; *from* and *with* score zero except in combinations where they are the third word, as in *to put up with*.

As far as the verbs are concerned the list is headed by *take* with 37 occurrences, 24 of which are idioms (*take one's life in one's hands*); *come* with 36 occurrences, 19 of which are idioms; *get* also with 36 occurrences of which 17 are idioms, *put* with 35 occurrences, 26 idioms; *run* with 35 occurrences, 19 idioms. Relatively unproductive verbs are *meet, present, need, matter* and *may*.

Makkai does not include *be* in combinations in his statistics, although this is an important verb which has 69 occurrences, out of which 32 have both literal and idiomatic

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meanings, 10 have only literal meaning, and 27 only idiomatic meaning. He goes on saying that the most productive verbs are verbs of motion, but the frequency of *get* and *be* contradicts his statement.

The list with verbs that enter different combinations has been increased with polysyllabic verbs, but their frequency of occurrence with the particles decreases dramatically; monosyllabic verbs, either of motion or of state, are more frequent both in literal and idiomatic combinations.

I have chosen "in" and "at" as both of them have a more static meaning. "At" is found in phrasal verbs only as a preposition, "in" both as a preposition and adverb.

Lindkvist (1950) described the uses of "at" as the following:

1. Location in close proximity to an object (*stay at the door*)

2. Location within an area or space or on a surface apprehended as a point. (*at sea*)

3. Relative position (a specific position in a whole – *at the top*)

4. Location close to or within a body, surface or area thought of as being used to serve a certain purpose (*at the stake, at 10, Downing Street*)

5. Motion and direction with verbs expressing motion in the form of a completed action (*place, put, fall, drop, arrive, land*)

The uses of "in":

1. Enclosure (total or partial) within a body (*in the cupboard; in a corner*)

2. Enclosure within a surface, expanse or area (*in a picture, in the world, in the province*)

3. The qualities or nature of an object (a purely formal function: *He was deaf in one ear.*)

4. Location within or along a line (*in an elliptic orbit*)

5. Relative position (*in the picture's middle; in the S.W.*)

6. Enclosure within a body, surface or area thought of as being used to serve a purpose (*in a mansion; in the Forces; in his chair*)

7. Motion and direction to the interior of a body or surface (neutral transport verbs – *place, put*; compounded with the prefix in-: *include, insert*; movement downwards: *fall, lay*; an act of reaching: *arrive, land, appear*; a vertical movement; verbs of looking and staring)

Although many verbs have more than one meaning, Biber et al. (1999) have found it useful to classify verbs into seven major semantic domains:

1. *Activity verbs* The most common lexical verbs are *make, get, go, give, take, come, use, leave, show, try, buy, work, move, follow, put, pay, bring, meet,* and *play.*

2. *Communication verbs* The most common lexical verbs are: *say, tell, call, ask, write, talk, speak, thank, describe, claim, offer,* and *suggest.*

3. *Mental verbs* The most common: *see, know, think, find, want, mean, need, feel, like, hear, remember, believe, read, consider, suppose, listen, love, wonder, understand*, and *expect.*

4. *Causative verbs* or *of facilitation* The most common: *help, let, allow, require*

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5. *Verbs of simple occurrence* The most common: *become, happen, change, die, grow, develop*, and *occur*.

6. *Verbs of existence* or *relationship* The most common: *seem, look, stand, stay, live, appear, include, involve, contain, exist, indicate*, and *represent*.

7. *Aspectual verbs* The most common: *begin, continue, finish, keep, start*, and *stop*

According to their survey , the most common lexical verbs are: *say, get, go, know, think, see, make, come, take, want, give,* and *mean,* of which six are activity verbs: *get, go, make, come, take,* and *give;* five are mental verbs: *know, think, see, want,* and *mean* and one is a communication verb: *say*.

Get, in conversation, is the single most common lexical verb in any one register, because it is polymorphous, with a wide range of meanings and grammatical patterns:

- obtaining something;
- moving to or away from something (activity);
- causing something to move (causative);
- causing something to happen (causative);
- changing from one state to another (occurrence);
- understanding something (mental);
- equivalent to the primary verb *have* with a stative meaning.

Although it is relatively rare in most written registers because many of its uses have strong casual overtones, which are avoided by more careful writers of informational prose, it is a verb at hand, as Burgess says:

"Indeed, foreign learner and native speaker alike can get through a great part of the day with only one verb – though a "strong" one – *get*. […] I get up in the morning, get a bath and a shave, get dressed, get my breakfast, get into the car, get to the office, get down to work, get some coffee at eleven, get lunch at one, get back, get angry, get tired, get home, get into a fight with my wife, get to bed. For some reason, *get* is regarded as vulgar, perhaps because it can make life so easy. (1992: 60)

Besides the main characteristics of *get* shown above, more can be added with the help of the particles with which it forms phrasal verbs. For example, with "at":

get at (prep)

1. be able to reach (*Don't let the enemy get at our women.*);

2. reach and discover (*It is always difficult to get at the truth.*);

3. be able to work at (*I'd like to get at repainting the house as soon as the weather is suitable.*);

4. *not fml* mean/suggest (*What are you getting at?*);

5. *not fml* attempt to influence sm wrongly, as by paying money or performing favours so as to persuade (*Policemen in this country can't be got at.*);

6. *not fml* scold; repeatedly ask/find fault with (*She's always getting at the children for one thing or the other.*);

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7. do sth wrong to sth (*Someone's been getting at my drink, it tastes strange.*);

Other phrasal verbs with *get in* (adv):

1. arrive (*The plane got in early for a change.*);
2. collect (*The government will have to get in more tax money.*);
3. buy a supply of (*We should get some wine in for the party.*);
4. plant (*We must get next year's potatoes in soon while the soil is ready.*);
5. call sm to one's help (*Get the doctor in, I don't like the sound of the child's breathing.*);
6. be able to deliver sth (*Be sure to get your offer in first.*);
7. introduce; say sth esp. by interrupting (*May I get a word in?*)
8. *not fml* take part in (*Alice is always wanting to get in on the act.*);
9. be admitted to a place of education or a competitive group (*Did your son get in?*);
10. be elected *(He was surprised to get in at his first election.*);
11. be able to include (an activity) (*Can you get in another year's study at the university?*)

Heaton (1974) says that much of the confusion associated with phrasal verbs has been caused by failure to distinguish between verb and particle forms (phrasal verbs) and verb and prepositional forms. The mere fact that a verb and a preposition may form a collocation possessing an entirely new meaning is no indication of the formation of a phrasal verb. Whenever a preposition gives a verb a new meaning or causes the verb to assume a secondary or subsidiary meaning it belongs to the verb. Compared with the adverb, prepositions combine less with verbs to form phrasal verbs. For instance, within 441 combinations with *in/into* only 189 form phrasal verbs as prepositions, with the verb only, and 39 phrasal prepositional verbs. The rest of the constructions are formed with *in/into* with the function of adverbs. This can be explained by the fact that the preposition links the verb to the noun phrase that follows and thus gives a clue regarding the meaning.

The construction with a preposition is not as opaque as a construction with an adverb. For example, with *get* the preposition *in* does not form phrasal verbs, just prepositional verbs: get in = 1. enter a space (*Get in the car and we'll go for a drive.*); 2. receive sth unwanted in (*Looking up, she got a drop of rain in her eye.*)

Conclusion

Grammarians have concentrated mainly on the written language and they have often failed to see that the spoken language is different from the written until recently. Thus, they have tried to squeeze the spoken language within the limits of the written. It has been even harder for semanticists, for the written language is mostly the narration or the presentation of information or arguments.

This has led to the assumption that meaning is largely concerned with information or with propositions. But the main function of language, especially the spoken language, is not to inform but to communicate.

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Abbreviations

Fml - formal
Sm - someone
Sth - something
Esp - especially

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