

Phrasal verbs in spoken and written L2 learner English

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This paper presents research on the use of phrasal verbs (PVs) in Norwegian L2 English, addressing the following questions:

- 1) Are there contrasting syntactic/semantic patterns of PV usage across the spoken and written modes?
- 2) How often do learners produce anomalous PVs?
- 3) Is there a correlation between anomalous PV usage and figurative use?
- 4) Is there a correlation between anomalous PV usage and L1 transfer?

PV usage is generally acknowledged as “one of the most problematic areas for learners of English” (Jenkins 2009: 52). First, PVs are subject to syntactic restrictions that may not be readily apparent to learners. Second, semantics poses a challenge, because PVs are often highly polysemous with both literal and (often several) figurative meanings. Third, negative L1 transfer may also play a role, especially for learners whose L1 has similar verb-particle constructions. In addition, stylistic considerations have an impact as do the ways in which PVs are traditionally taught (see e.g. Cowie 1993: 38-39; Waibel 2007: 21-32).

At the same time, PVs are viewed as highly important to proficiency in English. Much of the previous research focuses on learner avoidance of PVs rather than actual usage (e.g. Hulstijn & Marchena 1989; Laufer & Eliasson 1993; Liao & Fukuya 2004). However, there are exceptions, such as the corpus-based studies by Hägglund (2001), Waibel (2007), and Gilquin (forthcoming). Pye’s (1996) report on PV errors in the Cambridge Corpus of Learner English, asserts that learners often make mistakes in this area. The present paper adds empirical evidence concerning the real magnitude of the challenge that PV use presents, by investigating the PV production in written and spoken language of Norwegian learners, thus comparing PV use across modes and for an added group of English language learners.

The data consists of all PVs uttered by fifty L2 English students in the entire Norwegian subcorpus of LINDSEI (Gilquin et al. 2010) – approximately 13 hours of conversation equaling 83,000 words – along with all PVs in roughly 83,000 words of argumentative texts retrieved from the Norwegian component of the ICLE corpus (Granger et al. 2009). Informants for both corpora were Norwegian college students characterized as higher-intermediate to advanced learners of English. PVs are here viewed as distinct from prepositional verbs and free combinations, but include phrasal-prepositional constructions (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 1152 and 1167).

All PVs in the material were categorized according to structural type: Verb+Particle, Verb+Object+Particle, and Verb+Particle+Object (following Gilquin, forthcoming). The PVs in each pattern were then analyzed along a nominal scale for metaphoricity (yes/no/don’t know) (see Nacey, 2013; Steen et al., 2010). Such classification allows for comparison not just of overall PV usage in the two corpora, but also for preferences for particular syntactic and/or semantic patterns across modes. An additional focus concerns ‘anomalous’ PVs -

identified through lack of codification (either of the entire PV or of the particular contextual meaning) in standard English dictionaries - with a view towards establishing whether learner challenges increase as the contextual meaning shifts away from a core, concrete meaning to a more peripheral, metaphorical meaning. Finally, anomalous PVs were also investigated for possible L1 transfer of the verb, the particle, or the entire construction.

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