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Abstract
This article examines the feature of neutrality in English phrasal verbs. In a formal classification of over 1,300 transitive phrasal verbs, a large part (350 entries or 27%) also exhibits the feature of neutrality. While some semantic classes favor neutrality in English, they do not automatically assure it, thus giving further evidence of the need for building lexicon-grammars. Since more than one meaning can sometimes be associated with a particular verb-particle combination, phrasal verbs enter into one of seven verbal syntactic classes as first defined by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976), a complexity further justifying formal lexicons.

Keywords: phrasal verbs, neutral verbs, ergative verbs, lexicon-grammar

1. Introduction
In the 1970’s many linguists in the United States were investigating the behavior of phrasal verbs. Although such works as Bolinger (1971), Fraser (1976), and Makkai (1972) were not systematic in their approach, they did offer a representative listing of the types of phrasal verbs found, and examined factors such as restrictions on particle movement, ambiguity, nominalizations, and aspectual features of these verbs. At the same time, researchers at the Laboratoire d’Automatique Documentaire et Linguistique (LADL) at the Université de Paris 7 were building a formal large-scale classification of the French language or lexicon-grammar. This exhaustive process revealed numerous classes of French verbs at the time and among the many fascinating discoveries was the phenomenon of verbes neutres or neutral verbs. In their chapter on the “Relation de neutralité,” Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976, 66-120) showed not
only how complex this syntactic relationship was, but also how omnipresent these verbs were in French with over 400 entries in the lexicon-grammar.¹

Since the 1970’s, the status of both phrasal verbs and neutral verbs – referred to as ergative verbs, unaccusatives, and the causative alternation in other frameworks – have been discussed from many diverse points of view. Studies on phrasal verbs now focus on intonation (Dehé 2002), compositionality (Jackendoff 2002, McCarthy, Keller & Carroll 2003), and productivity (McIntyre 2002, Villavicencio 2005) as well. This article examines yet another aspect, the correlation of neutrality in English phrasal verbs. Although some websites and textbooks might point out a few “ergative phrasal verbs,” the present analysis is based on a formal classification of a significant portion of the lexicon of transitive phrasal verbs (over 1,300 entries), of which a large segment (350 entries or 27%) also exhibits the feature of neutrality.

2. Neutral Phrasal Verbs

Particles or satellites (Talmy 1985) are often associated with prepositions or adverbs, and combine with simple verbs to form verbal expressions known in English as phrasal verbs, two-word verbs, multi-word verbs, or verb-particle combinations. For example:

(1) a. The TV station blocked out the football game [block broadcast]²

b. The TV station blacked the football game out

In the English transitive phrasal verb, this movement is optional and does not change meaning. The following equation is therefore true:

(2) \[ N_0 V \text{Part} N_1 \Leftrightarrow N_0 V N_1 \text{Part} \]

If the object is a pronoun, however, it generally must appear after the particle:

(3) a. The TV station blacked it out

b. *The TV station blacked out it

Neutrality is present when the following equation holds, where the arrow means relative synonymy:

(4) \[ N_0 V \text{Part} N_1 \Leftrightarrow N_1 V \text{Part} \]

For example, the direct object of (5a) and (5b) has the possibility of being the subject of (5c):

(5) a. The maid aired out the room [ventilate]
b. The maid *aired* the room *out*
c. The room *aired* *out*

Note that example (5) is different from example (1) in that the expression *black out* does not exhibit the feature of neutrality as can be seen in the following:

(6) * The football game *black* *ed* *out*

3. The Lexicon-Grammar of Phrasal Verbs

Our database of over 1,300 transitive phrasal verbs was composed using Fraser (1976), Spears (1996), *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2000), *The Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2000) and *The Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (1997). The lexicon-grammar includes both compositional phrasal verbs (e.g., *drink up the milk, wipe down the countertop*) and non-compositional or idiomatic phrasal verbs (e.g., *break up the audience* “cause to laugh,” *burn out the teacher* “exhaust”).

Although some dictionaries include prepositional verbs under the rubric of phrasal verbs, we did not incorporate them into our database. True phrasal verbs can be separated from prepositional verbs by a test for particle movement; that is, they have both a continuous and discontinuous structure, while prepositional verbs require the continuous form. Thus *call out* would be categorized under transitive phrasal verbs, but not *call on* as in the following examples:

(7) a. The announcer *called out* the numbers [announce loudly]
   b. The announcer *called* the numbers *out*

(8) a. Anne *called on* her neighbor [visit for short period]
   b. *Anne called* her neighbor *on*

We also did not incorporate what appear to be obligatorily discontinuous phrasal verbs, some of which may be neutral:

(9) a. The workers *slapped* the roof *together* [make quickly]
   b. *The workers slapped* together *the roof*
   c. The roof *slapped* *together*

(10) a. The researcher *saw* the project *through* [work until completion]
     b. *The researcher saw* through *the project*
     c. *The project saw* *through*

This last example in fact contrasts with the following prepositional verb:

(11) a. The people *saw through* the leader’s charisma [see deception in]
     b. *The people saw* the leader’s charisma *through*
We also did not take into account transitive phrasal verbs that entail a frozen noun phrase afterwards:

(12)  a. The Jones keep up appearances [pretend that everything is alright]
    b. The Jones keep appearances up

(13)  a. Keep your chin up [be courageous in spite of difficulties]
    b. *Keep up your chin

(14)  a. Chris is dancing up a storm [dance energetically / vigorously]
    b. *Chris is dancing a storm up

These transitive verb-particle combinations, table C1PT of English frozen expressions previously studied by Freckleton (1984) and Machonis (1985), have a very restricted complement after the phrasal verb. As can be seen in examples (13) and (14), some of them are also limited to either the continuous or discontinuous form, although these linguistic judgments do not always remain consistent across dialects. Nevertheless, when the following two related expressions are compared, we see the importance of entering each and every frozen expression into the lexicon-grammar:

(15)  a. Let’s get a move on [get something started / underway]
    b. *Let’s get on a move

(16)  a. Let’s get on the move [get something started / underway]
    b. *Let’s get the move on

As can be seen in the sample Table 1, the lexicon-grammar of phrasal verbs is in matrix form, where each verb-particle combination represents a row in the matrix. To the far left, we indicate if the subject, \( N_0 \), can be human or non-human by plus or minus signs. After the verb and particle, we indicate the distributional properties of the object \( N_1 \) (i.e., human and non-human), along with a potential \( N_I \) or noun phrase. This is followed by three possible transformations: particle deletion with a similar meaning (indicated by a plus in column \( N_0 V N_I \)), intransitive neutral use with particle (plus under \( N_I V Part \)), and intransitive neutral use without particle (plus under \( N_I V \)). Finally a paraphrase or synonym is provided for each phrasal verb.

4. Semantic Nature of Neutral Phrasal Verbs

Among the 1,300 entries of transitive phrasal verbs, we found 350 that exhibited neutrality. Although certain semantic classes (e.g., change of state, motion, sound emission, cooking, gathering) seem to favor neutrality in English (Machonis 1997), as they do in French (Boons, Guillet, & Leclère 1976), they do not automatically assure it, thus illustrating the value in building formal lexicons or lexicon-grammars as defined by Maurice Gross (1996).
Neutrality seems to imply an independent activity which can occur without an external agent, yet at the same time has a presumed external control. Inchoative verbs, for example, often allow neutrality, although non-compositional phrasal verbs may not allow it with the simple verb, as in *turn up*, *fire up* and *power up*:

(17) a. Max (booted up + turned on) the computer [start]

b. The computer (booted up + turned on)
c. The computer (booted + *turned)  
(18)  a. The driver (started + fired + powered) up the engine  
    b. The engine (started + fired + powered) up  
    c. The engine (started + *fired + *powered)  

Yet even in semantically similar fields, such as for “block,” “delay,” and “extend” 
verbs, we find that some phrasal verbs exhibit neutrality while others do not:

(19)  a. The crowd jammed up the exits  
    b. The exits jammed up  
(20)  a. The accident tied up the interchange  
    b. *The interchange tied up  
(21)  a. The controversial debate bogged down the peace talks  
    b. The peace talks bogged down  
(22)  a. The mail strike held up the delivery  
    b. *The delivery held up  
(23)  a. The comedian dragged out the story  
    b. The story dragged out  
(24)  a. The discussion drew out the meeting  
    b. *The meeting drew out  

Levin (1993, 26-7) implies that verbs having both a transitive and intransitive use but 
where the transitive verb, V, can be paraphrased as “cause to V-intransitive,” are often 
neutral. Causative expressions from our lexicon-grammar tables, however, show that 
neutrality is highly variable, and can even vary if the particle is deleted:

(25)  a. The storm blew (down + over) the palm tree  
    b. The palm tree blew (*E + down + over)  
(26)  a. The child (toppled + tipped) over the table  
    b. The table (toppled + tipped) (E + over)  
(27)  a. The garlic smelled up the kitchen  

---

3 Examples containing parentheses mean that any given element is possible or, if starred, not possible, with E 
standing for an empty string. Thus the (a) sentences below should be understood as meaning both (b) and (c):

(i)  a. The computer (booted + *turned) [start]  (ii)  a. The palm tree blew (*E + down) [fall]  
    b. The computer booted [start]  b. *The palm tree blew [fall]  
    c. *The computer turned [start]  c. The palm tree blew down [fall]
b. The kitchen smelled \((E + \ast up)\)

We find a similar unpredictability with respect to neutrality for “gather” verbs. While the idiomatic rake in only allows neutrality with an overt particle, the compositional herd in allows it only without, yet the phrasal verb gather up, also compositional, does not allow neutrality at all:

(28)  a. The casino raked in the bets
     b. The bets raked \((\ast E + in)\)

(29)  a. The cowboy herded up the cattle
     b. The cattle herded \((E + \ast up)\)

(30)  a. The child gathered up the toys
     b. The toys gathered \((E + up)\)

5. Syntactic Classes of Phrasal Verbs

Since more than one meaning can be associated with a particular verb-particle combination, either idiomatic or compositional, phrasal verbs can enter into one of seven verbal syntactic classes as established by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976, 100). For example, some phrasal verbs are intrinsically intransitive (the class \(C_i\)) with respect to neutrality:

(31)  \(The\ stock\ bottomed\ out \Leftrightarrow \ast The\ market\ bottomed\ out\ the\ stock\)
      \([\text{fall to lowest point}]\)

Others are never intransitive and are intrinsically transitive (the class \(C_t\)):

(32)  \(The\ student\ jotted\ down\ \ast \(E + \text{the\ answer}\) \([\text{make\ note\ of}]\)

A third category, \(C_{ti}\), involves phrasal verbs that, although never in a relationship of neutrality, have both an independent transitive and intransitive use:\(^4\)

(33)  a. Chris broke out the champagne \(\Leftrightarrow \ast The\ champagne\ broke\ out\) \([\text{open}]\)
     b. War broke out \(\Leftrightarrow \ast The\ political\ tension\ broke\ out\ the\ war\) \([\text{start}]\)

The class \(C_{in}\) represents neutral verbs that have at least one independent transitive use:

(34)  a. The Senate wrapped up the session \(\Leftrightarrow\ The\ session\ wrapped\ up\) \([\text{finish}]\)
     b. The clerk wrapped up the gift \(\Leftrightarrow \ast The\ gift\ wrapped\ up\) \([\text{wrap}]\)

\(^4\) Although some members in this class may first appear to exhibit neutrality, the direct object does not encompass the same semantic relationship in the intransitive sentence:

(iii) a. Mary helped out \((E + Max) \Leftrightarrow \ast Max\ helped\ out\) \([\text{help\ someone\ explicitly\ stated}]\)
     b. The workers helped out \(\Leftrightarrow \ast Max\ helped\ out\ the\ workers\) \([\text{help\ in\ general}]\)
The class \(C_{ni}\), on the other hand, entails verbs that have at least one autonomous intransitive use, aside from the neutral:

\[
\begin{align*}
(35) & \quad \text{a. The sun} \text{ melted down the ice } \Leftrightarrow \text{The ice melted down} \quad \text{[melt]} \\
& \quad \text{b. The nuclear reactor} \text{ melted down } \Leftrightarrow \text{*The accident melted down} \\
& \quad \qquad \text{the nuclear reactor} \quad \text{[melt core and release radiation]}
\end{align*}
\]

Similarly, the category \(C_{ni}\) involves phrasal verbs that can have three interpretations: autonomously transitive, intransitive, as well as neutral:

\[
\begin{align*}
(36) & \quad \text{a. The artist} \text{ blew up the photo } \Leftrightarrow \text{*The photo blew up} \quad \text{[enlarge]} \\
& \quad \text{b. The professor} \text{ blew up (E + in class)} \quad \text{[lose temper]} \\
& \quad \text{c. The army} \text{ blew up the bridge } \Leftrightarrow \text{The bridge blew up} \quad \text{[destroy]}
\end{align*}
\]

Sometimes a single phrasal verb can have more than one connotation exhibiting neutrality, along with an autonomous transitive and intransitive meaning, which all require separate entries in the lexicon-grammar:

\[
\begin{align*}
(37) & \quad \text{a. The clown} \text{ broke up the spectators } \Leftrightarrow \text{The spectators broke up} \quad \text{[make laugh]} \\
& \quad \text{b. The police} \text{ broke up the crowd } \Leftrightarrow \text{The crowd broke up} \quad \text{[disperse]} \\
& \quad \text{c. The gardener} \text{ broke up the sticks } \Leftrightarrow \text{The sticks broke up} \quad \text{[break]} \\
& \quad \text{d. The bystander} \text{ broke up the argument } \Leftrightarrow \text{The argument broke up} \quad \text{[end / disrupt]} \\
& \quad \text{e. The short rest stop} \text{ broke up the long trip } \quad \text{[interrupt monotony of]} \\
& \quad \text{f. I can’t hear you; you’re breaking up } \quad \text{[have a bad phone connection]}
\end{align*}
\]

Finally, the class \(C_n\) represents verbs that are intrinsically neutral, having no independent transitive or intransitive usage:

\[
\begin{align*}
(38) & \quad \text{The loud noise} \text{ woke up Mary } \Leftrightarrow \text{Mary woke up} \quad \text{[wake]}
\end{align*}
\]

While not part of the lexicon-grammar of transitive phrasal verbs, example (31) is included in a new table under construction of purely intransitive phrasal verbs. All of the other examples (32) – (38) can be found in the current lexicon-grammar, which includes both transitive and neutral. The relationship of neutrality observed in phrasal verbs is thus as intricate as that previously witnessed with simple verbs.

**Conclusions**

As first noticed by Boons, Guillet & Leclère (1976), neutrality is not a peripheral occurrence in verbal behavior, but present in a large portion of the lexicon, as observed in our corpus of English phrasal verbs, where 27% of them exhibit the feature of neutrality. As the examples here show, a systematic study of neutrality is incredibly complex, both semantically and syntactically. Research in lexicon-
grammar continues to confirm that “tests for characterizing essential complements are highly lexical and tend to apply more to individual verbs or small groups than to broad semantic classes” (Gross 1996, 245). Further defining the parameters of the complements $N_0$ and $N_1$ in detailed lexicon-grammar tables will consequently shed more light on the phenomenon of neutrality with respect to English phrasal verbs.

References


