

Phrasal Verbs are Lexemes with Their Own Polysemy, Connotation, and Collocations

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Phrasal verbs are a subset of formulaic language that is often perceived as something of a blend between grammar and lexis. They are usually primarily defined as combinations of verbs and particles (*set off*) that function together as single grammatical units, but also as single lexical units in the sense that the meaning of the combination cannot be predicted from the meanings of its individual elements (verb + particle). This presentation shows that phrasal verbs should be conceived as single lexemes having their own characteristics of polysemy, connotation, and collocations, just the same as individual words do. Findings from the Contemporary Corpus of American English show that the majority of the most frequent phrasal verbs in English are polysemous, about one-third frequently occur with their own collocations or as part of idioms, and about one-sixth have specific semantic connotations.

For example, the phrasal verb *carry on* has two main meaning senses: 1. continue or make something continue (with collocates such as 'tradition' and 'legacy'; the connotation being something continuing in spite of difficulty or adversity), and 2. engage or take part in something (collocate: 'conversation').

This suggests that using phrasal verbs may be the result of lexical decisions based on more than just formality/informality, in spite of the widespread belief that phrasal verbs are typically informal alternatives to one-word verbs. The concept of phrasal verbs as individual lexemes with their own idiosyncratic characteristics also has obvious implications for acquisition and testing, as it requires a shift away from the traditional 'verb + particle combination' conceptualization.

This presentation will illustrate the characteristics of a number of phrasal verbs, introduce a list of phrasal verbs giving polysemy, connotation, and collocation information about the most frequent 150 phrasal verbs, and suggest how the list can be profitably used in both research and pedagogy.

Summary

Phrasal verbs are often discussed from a grammatical perspective as combinations of a verb plus particle. This presentation shows that they are actually individual lexemes having their own characteristics of polysemy, connotation, and collocation. A list of phrasal verbs showing these characteristics will be presented, and its implications discussed.