DE GRUYTER

Stefan Thim. *Phrasal Verbs: The English Verb-Particle Construction and its History*. Topics in English Linguistics 78. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter Mouton, 2012, xiv + 302 pp., 11 figures, 12 tables, € 99.95.

The term 'phrasal verb' has been used as a category label for English expressions such as *to meet up*, *to give in*, *to blow out (a candle)*, or *to bring on (the*

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night). The book under review argues that, in order to understand what phrasal verbs are, it needs to be understood how these expressions came into being. The study thus takes an approach that is in equal measures historical, cross-linguistic, and sensitive to issues of normativity and prescriptivism. Unlike many titles in the TiEL series, the study does not engage directly with empirical data. Findings from corpora do play a large role, but the book handles these in the way of a meta-analysis, drawing together a large amount of corpus-based work and critically examining the different pieces of evidence in a common context. As it turns out, the combined results are at odds with several commonly-held assumptions: for one thing, the historical data do not support the idea that phrasal verbs only arose during Middle English as a consequence of the loss of Old English verbal prefixes. Then, viewed in the wider Germanic context, it becomes apparent that phrasal verbs are not distinctly English. Lastly, the idea that phrasal verbs are particularly colloquial is also in need of revision. The main conclusions of the study can be summarized in two proposals. First, the study brings English phrasal verbs under the umbrella of word formation. Specifically, a Construction Grammar approach is adopted to account for both the word-like characteristics of phrasal verbs as well as their syntactic variability. Second, the emergence of phrasal verbs as they are used in present-day English is viewed as an epiphenomenon, namely as the outcome of the historical word order change from OV to VO. The following paragraphs will present a more detailed overview of the individual sections of the book; a final evaluation concludes this review.

The study consists of an introduction, five content chapters, and a conclusion. A sizable reference section of 47 pages and an extensive subject and name index complement the book. Chapter 1 (1–9) introduces the term 'phrasal verb' and lays out the leading question of the study: how did the Modern English phrasal verb evolve? It is already previewed here that this question is closely related to the common perception of phrasal verbs as distinctly English expressions, which motivates the complementation of a historical approach with a comparative perspective.

Chapter 2 (10–73) serves multiple tasks. First, it offers a comprehensive description of the semantic and syntactic characteristics of English phrasal verbs. A section on verb-particle constructions in other Germanic languages relates this account to a wider cross-linguistic context. Another section develops one of the main ideas of the book, namely a constructional approach to phrasal verbs. Here, the concept of a periphrastic word formation process (Booij 1990) is invoked to make the argument that phrasal verbs are a matter of morphology, rather than phraseology. A crucial argument in favor of this view is the apparent productivity of phrasal verbs: one can be *stressed out*, *tired out*, *bummed*

out, or *worn out* by exhausting activities, and speakers occasionally coin neologisms such as *to be conferenced out* 'to have enough of conferences' or *to be furnitured out* 'to have enough of looking at furniture'. In ad-hoc formations of this kind, an analysis would have to take into account that the verbal elements (*conference*, *furniture*) are verbs only by virtue of appearing in the phrasal verb construction.

Chapter 3 (74–116) lays out the second main claim of the book and discusses how the use of phrasal verbs developed as a consequence of general word order change. The general phenomenon that is at issue is the fixation of the particle to the postverbal position. So whereas in Old English forms such as *forðferde* and *ferde forð* 'depart, die' coexisted, this variability was lost during later stages of English. What is argued here is that this loss of variability is not so much a peculiarity of the syntax of phrasal verbs as such, but rather a consequence of the shift from OV to VO word order. Chapter 3 presents a model of this shift that comprises four stages (104, Figure 3–2). An upper case 'V' denotes a non-finite verb, a lower case 'v' a finite verb; both 'V' and 'O' are optional.[1]

Stage 1: O prt V v

forðæm	*hio*	*nanne*	*swetne*	*wæsðm*	***forð***	*ne*	***bringð***
because	DEM	no	sweet	fruit	forth	not	brings

'because it does not bring forth sweet fruit'

(CP 341.23)

Stage 2: v O prt V

þæt	*he*	***wearp***	*þæt*	*sweord*	***onweg***	*þæt*	*he*	*on*	*handa*	*hæfde*
that	he	threw	the	sword	away	that	he	on	hand	had

'that he threw away the sword which he held in his hand'

(Bede 38.20)

Stage 3: v V O prt

&	***hef***	*hire*	*honden*	***up***
and	raised	her	hands	up

'and raised her hands'

(St. Marg. 1, 22.9)

Stage 4: v V prt O / v prt V O

heo	***hef***	***up***	*hire*	*hond*
she	raised	up	her	hand

'she raised her hand'

(St. Marg. 1, 19.22)

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1 See examples (29), (37), (50) and (51), pp. 106, 108, 114.

The most important difference across the four stages is the changing place-
ment of the verbs, first of the finite verb in stage 2, and then of the non-finite verb
in stage 3. The final stage represents an extraposition of the object to the right
edge of the clause. Hence, in none of the shifts that take place is it the particle
that alters its position, even though its relative position appears to change.

Chapter 4 (117–144) continues the discussion with a review of earlier studies
on phrasal verbs. Among these, Kennedy (1920) is given special attention be-
cause its influence makes itself felt in much subsequent work. Whereas the pre-
vious two chapters elaborate on two original proposals that were discussed
above, this chapter mainly serves to deconstruct assumptions about phrasal
verbs that have been accepted as evidence, but which fail to hold up under
closer scrutiny. A central line of argument in this chapter is that the purported
rise of the phrasal verbs during Middle English has been perceived as such in
part because this construction type, like other multi-word constructions, is not
adequately represented in historical dictionaries.

Chapter 5 (145–196) probes whether the development of phrasal verbs can
be related to the loss of the Old English verbal prefixes. On this view, the phras-
al verbs of Modern English would be an indirect result of language contact in
the wake of the Norman Conquest. The chapter argues that such a view is in fact
unfounded, and that instead language-internal developments, notably phono-
logical attrition and the above-mentioned change from OV to VO, sufficiently
explain both the demise of the Old English prefixes and the usage patterns of
phrasal verbs.

Chapter 6 (197–246) addresses two separate issues. The first half of the
chapter offers a discussion of quantitative approaches to phrasal verbs, the sec-
ond half focuses on issues of style and attitude, specifically attitudes to the pur-
ported colloquiality of phrasal verbs. The main point of the first half is that
most diachronic quantitative studies of phrasal verbs are either flawed or incon-
clusive. Those that report long-term frequency increases tend to rest on rather
shaky empirical foundations, those that use larger or more balanced sources of
data tend to find considerable fluctuations in frequency. The second half of the
chapter questions the assumption that phrasal verbs are inherently informal,
which is a frequently-voiced commentary in style guides, often with the express
advice to replace a phrasal verb such as *go on* with a more highbrow verb such
as *continue*. In a case study that compares different editions of John Dryden's
Essay of Dramatick Poesy it is shown that, despite claims to the contrary, Dry-
den does not deliberately avoid phrasal verbs. Hence, even in extremely style-
conscious genres of writing, phrasal verbs belong to the core of unmarked Eng-
lish vocabulary. The common reputation of phrasal verbs as colloquialisms is
linked to the prescriptivist aversion against stranded prepositions, which super-

ficially resemble phrasal verbs in that a short element is found after the verb, at the end of a clause. Cautioning writers against the use of phrasal verbs is thus a case of hypercorrection.

Chapter 7, the conclusion (247–254), directs the reader's attention towards a number of topics for further research. Amongst others, these include a more detailed account of semantic changes in verb-particle constructions, a diachronic study of nominalizations on the basis of phrasal verbs (*plug-in*, *drop-out*, etc.), or the development of variety-specific uses of phrasal verbs.

In summary, the book offers the reader a diachronic account of English phrasal verbs that refreshingly goes against the grain of many persistent beliefs about this construction type. The rejection of these ideas is based on diligent engagement with the literature, the available data, and rather importantly, the wider philological context. Given these merits, the study will be highly appreciated in the research community. The only critical issues I would like to raise concern matters of organization and style, rather than content. As for the first, the book goes back and forth between the presentation of previous work and the development of original ideas. Chapter 4 reads essentially like a critical literature review that would prepare the reader for the arguments that are made in chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 2 and 6 include quite diverse subject matters, which may have been better served in chapters of their own. This does not take anything away from the quality of the scholarship, but it puts an extra burden on the reader who is trying to connect the pieces of the puzzle. As far as the style is concerned, there are passages in the book that may prove too dense for a readership of advanced students. Also, in some places the critique of previous work comes across as slightly acidic. It is of course necessary to point out where conclusions are unfounded, but this is probably most effective when it is done gently. These issues aside, this book deserves great praise for the insights that it delivers, and for the foundation that it provides for future research on the topic.

Works Cited

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