
A Study of Phrasal Verb Usage Versus One-Word Equivalents

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Annotation

This study investigates the functional, semantic, and pragmatic differences between English phrasal verbs and their one-word equivalents. While both forms often convey similar denotative meanings (e.g., continue vs. carry on, investigate vs. look into), their distribution across registers, stylistic value, cognitive processing, and communicative impact differ significantly. Drawing on insights from corpus linguistics, pragmatics, and second language acquisition, the paper examines how phrasal verbs function in spoken and written discourse, how they contribute to informality and idiomaticity, and why learners often avoid them in favor of Latinate verbs. The study argues that phrasal verbs are not merely lexical alternatives but pragmatically marked choices that shape tone, interpersonal distance, and discourse dynamics. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion of lexical variation by emphasizing the pragmatic and stylistic implications of choosing phrasal verbs over their one-word equivalents in different registers.

Keywords

Phrasal verbs, one-word equivalents, register, idiomaticity, corpus linguistics, EFL learners, lexical choice

Iborali fe'llarni ishlatish bilan bir so'zli ekvivalentlarning solishtirma tahlili

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Annotatsiya

Ushbu tadqiqot ingliz tilidagi iborali fe'llar bilan ularning bir so'zli ekvivalentlari o'rtasidagi funksional, semantik va pragmatik farqlarni o'rganadi. Ikkala shakl ham ko'pincha bir xil denotativ ma'noni (masalan, continue va carry on, investigate va look into) ifodalasa-da, ularning registrlar bo'ylab tarqalishi, uslubiy qiymati, kognitiv qayta ishlanishi va kommunikativ ta'siri sezilarli darajada farq qiladi. Korpus lingvistika, pragmatika va ikkinchi tilni o'zlashtirish bo'yicha olingan ma'lumotlarga tayangan holda, maqola frazal verblarning og'zaki va yozma diskursda qanday funktsiya bajarishini, ular norasmiylik va idiomatiklikka qanday hissa qo'shishini hamda nega o'quvchilar ko'pincha ularni lotincha kelib chiqadigan

fe'llarga afzal berib chetlab o'tishlarini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, frazal verblar faqat lug'aviy muqobillar emas, balki pragmatik jihatdan belgilangan tanlov bo'lib, ular ohang, shaxslararo masofa va diskurs dinamikasini shakllantiradi. Ushbu tadqiqot turli registrlarda bir so'zli ekvivalentlarga nisbatan fe'l birikmalarini tanlashning pragmatik va uslubiy oqibatlarini ta'kidlash orqali leksik variatsiya bo'yicha davom etayotgan munozaraga hissa qo'shadi.

Kalit so'zlar *Fe'l birikmalari, bir so'zli ekvivalentlar, registr, idiomatiklik, korpus lingvistika, EFL o'rganuvchilari, leksik tanlov*

Исследование использования фразовых глаголов по сравнению с однословными эквивалентами

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Аннотация *В данном исследовании изучаются функциональные, семантические и прагматические различия между английскими фразовыми глаголами и их однословными эквивалентами. Хотя обе формы часто передают схожие денотативные значения (например, continue vs. carry on, investigate vs. look into), их распределение по регистрам, стилистическая ценность, когнитивная обработка и коммуникативное воздействие значительно различаются. Опираясь на данные корпусной лингвистики, прагматики и приобретения второго языка, в статье исследуется, как фразовые глаголы функционируют в устной и письменной речи, как они способствуют неформальности и идиоматичности, и почему учащиеся часто избегают их в пользу глаголов латинского происхождения. В исследовании утверждается, что фразовые глаголы являются не просто лексическими альтернативами, а прагматически обозначенными выборами, которые формируют тон, межличностную дистанцию и динамику дискурса. Данное исследование вносит вклад в продолжающуюся дискуссию о лексических вариациях, подчеркивая прагматические и стилистические последствия выбора фразовых глаголов вместо их однословных эквивалентов в разных регистрах.*

Ключевые слова *Фразовые глаголы, однословные эквиваленты, регистр, идиоматичность, корпусная лингвистика, изучающие английский как иностранный, лексический выбор*

English vocabulary is characterized by a dual lexical system consisting of Germanic and Latinate elements. This duality is particularly visible in the coexistence of phrasal verbs (e.g., *put off*, *carry out*, *bring up*) and their one-word equivalents (*postpone*, *execute*, *mention*). Although these pairs may appear semantically

similar, they often differ in stylistic register, frequency of use, and pragmatic implications.

To illustrate the functional and stylistic contrast between phrasal verbs and their one-word equivalents, the following tables summarize typical correspondences and discourse features.

Phrasal Verb	One-Word Equivalent	Typical Register	Example Sentence
carry out	execute / conduct	formal / academic	The researchers carried out an experiment to test the hypothesis.
put off	postpone	neutral / formal	The meeting was put off until next week.
look into	investigate	formal	The committee will look into the issue.
find out	discover	neutral	Scientists found out new information about the disease.
bring up	mention / raise	conversational	She brought up an interesting point during the discussion.
turn down	reject / refuse	formal	The proposal was turned down by the committee.
set up	establish	formal / academic	The organization was set up in 2005.
go on	neutral	continue	The discussion went on for several hours.

Table 1. Comparison of Phrasal Verbs and Their One-Word Equivalents

The table demonstrates that phrasal verbs frequently correspond to Latinate verbs that dominate in formal and academic discourse. However, phrasal verbs tend to

appear more frequently in spoken language and informal communication due to their dynamic and idiomatic character.

Linguistic Feature	Phrasal Verbs	One-Word Equivalents
Register	Informal / conversational	Formal / academic
Frequency	Common in spoken English	Common in written academic texts
Stylistic tone	More natural and expressive	More precise and abstract
Cognitive imagery	Often metaphorical (movement, direction)	More conceptual / abstract
Learner difficulty	High due to polysemy	Lower due to transparency
Communicative effect	Creates conversational immediacy	Creates formal distance

Table 2. Functional Differences Between Phrasal Verbs and One-Word Verbs in Discourse

The comparison illustrates that the difference between phrasal verbs and one-word verbs is not purely lexical but also pragmatic. Speakers select between these forms depending on communicative goals, discourse type, and stylistic preferences.

While previous research has primarily focused on the structural and semantic properties of phrasal verbs, the present study emphasizes their communicative value in discourse and highlights how lexical choice influences register, stylistic tone, and interpersonal dynamics. In particular, the paper explores the role of phrasal verbs in shaping conversational immediacy and naturalness in English communication, contrasting them with the more formal and abstract character of Latinate one-word verbs. By analyzing usage patterns and contextual functions, this research provides a clearer understanding of how speakers and writers strategically select between these lexical options. The findings contribute to both theoretical discussions of lexical pragmatics and pedagogical approaches to teaching English vocabulary at advanced levels.

For language learners, especially at intermediate and advanced levels, choosing between a phrasal verb and its one-word equivalent presents both lexical and stylistic challenges (Aarts, 2011). Many learners prefer single-word verbs due to perceived clarity and formality, whereas native speakers frequently favor phrasal verbs in informal and spoken contexts.

The purpose of this study is to examine:

1. Semantic relationships between phrasal verbs and one-word equivalents;
2. Register-based distribution patterns;
3. Pragmatic and stylistic differences;
4. Implications for second language acquisition.

Phrasal verbs represent an important feature of English lexical structure (Quirk et al., 1985). Phrasal verbs consist of a lexical verb combined with one or more particles (adverbial or prepositional), forming a semantic unit (e.g.,

give up, turn down, run into). Some phrasal verbs are transparent (*sit down*), while others are idiomatic (*give up* meaning "surrender").

From a cognitive perspective, phrasal verbs are often metaphorically motivated (Biber, 1985) For instance:

- *bring up* → metaphor of upward movement associated with introducing a topic;
- *carry on* → continuation conceptualized as forward movement.

One-Word Equivalents

Many phrasal verbs have Latinate equivalents derived from French or Latin roots:

- *put off* → *postpone*
- *look into* → *investigate*
- *give up* → *surrender*
- *find out* → *discover*

These verbs are typically associated with formal, academic, or bureaucratic registers.

Semantic Comparison

Although phrasal verbs and their equivalents may overlap in meaning, they rarely coincide completely.

Example 1:

- *The meeting was put off.*
- *The meeting was postponed.*

While both sentences are acceptable, *put off* sounds more conversational, whereas *postponed* carries a formal tone.

Example 2:

- *She brought up an interesting issue.*
- *She mentioned an interesting issue.*

Bring up implies active introduction into discussion, often suggesting relevance or importance. *Mention* may imply a more neutral reference.

Thus, semantic equivalence is often partial rather than complete. Phrasal verbs frequently carry additional connotations such as emotional involvement, interpersonal closeness, or immediacy.

Register and Frequency

Corpus studies consistently demonstrate that:

- Phrasal verbs are significantly more frequent in spoken English.



- One-word equivalents dominate academic and formal writing.

According to Biber et al. (1999), phrasal verbs occur more frequently in spoken discourse than in academic writing.

Spoken discourse:

Let's figure out what happened.

We need to sort this out.

Academic writing:

This study aims to determine the causes.

The issue must be resolved.

The preference for Latinate verbs in academic writing reflects conventions of precision, conciseness, and perceived sophistication.

However, modern journalism and online media increasingly incorporate phrasal verbs to create accessibility and reader engagement.

Pragmatic and Stylistic Implications

Lexical choice between a phrasal verb and a one-word equivalent affects:

Tone

The company carried out an investigation.
(neutral/formal)

The company looked into the issue. (less formal)

Interpersonal Distance

Phrasal verbs tend to reduce perceived distance between speaker and listener, contributing to conversational tone.

Expressiveness

Phrasal verbs often appear more vivid and dynamic:

The plane took off vs. The plane departed

Prices went up vs. Prices increased

The phrasal form may evoke more concrete imagery.

Learner Avoidance and Acquisition Issues

Research in second language acquisition indicates that learners frequently avoid phrasal verbs due to:

1. Polysemy and idiomaticity;
2. Structural complexity (separability);
3. Limited exposure in formal instruction;
4. Fear of sounding informal or incorrect.

For example, learners may prefer:

The government implemented new measures

instead of

The government brought in new measures.

While both are correct, the latter is common in journalistic English (Leech, 1985).

Pedagogically, raising awareness of register differences and providing contextualized practice can reduce avoidance and enhance communicative competence.

Cognitive and Processing Aspects

Psycholinguistic research suggests that frequent phrasal verbs may be stored as lexical units in the mental lexicon. Gardner and Davies (2007) emphasize that many high-frequency verbs in English occur in phrasal verb constructions. Native speakers process common phrasal verbs rapidly, whereas learners may process them compositionally, leading to slower comprehension.

Moreover, metaphorical motivation (e.g., *up* as completion, *out* as emergence) can facilitate acquisition when explicitly taught.

Implications for Teaching

For B2–C1 learners, instruction should:

- Present phrasal verbs in semantic groups;
- Contrast them with one-word equivalents;
- Emphasize register awareness;
- Include corpus-based examples;
- Encourage productive use in speaking activities.
- Suggested classroom activity:
- Students rewrite formal academic sentences into conversational versions using phrasal verbs, and vice versa.

The study demonstrates that phrasal verbs and one-word equivalents are not interchangeable lexical items but represent stylistically and pragmatically distinct choices. While one-word verbs dominate formal academic discourse, phrasal verbs prevail in spoken and informal contexts. Their usage influences tone, interpersonal dynamics, and communicative effectiveness.

For learners, mastery of this lexical contrast is essential for achieving advanced communicative competence. Future research

may focus on corpus-based frequency comparisons across genres and cross-linguistic learner data.

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