

Collocational Restrictions of English Phrasal Verbs

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Abstract- *Idioms and phrasal verbs constitute a highly considerable portion of the English vocabulary and their mastery is often indicated as a native like competence. They pose many difficulties to foreign learners because of their syntactic and semantic abnormalities. On semantic terms phrasal verbs, and idiomatic ones in particular, are viewed as phrases which do not correspond to their literal meanings. Syntactically they could be recognized by their idiosyncratic behavior which often defies the usual syntactic operations. The view of idioms and phrasal verbs as bits of frozen units provides only little possibility of syntactic and semantic flexibility. This paper attempts to trace the flexibility of the structure of phrasal verbs with reference to the collocational restrictions that govern their structures.*

Key terms- *idioms; phrasal verbs; collocate; collocation; collocational restrictions*

1. INTRODUCTION

An idiom is a lexical item consisting of several words whose meaning may not be easily understood from the meanings of its constituent words. It becomes worse when this meaning cannot at all, in some cases, be predicted from the meanings of these words.

The relationship between the idiomatic structure and the meaning it conveys is an arbitrary one and the components of this structure are related to each other by means of convention to a particular meaning. So idioms belong to the massive class of conventionalized language forms. This class includes other chunks such as holophrases, formulas idioms...etc. Idioms are claimed to be more conventionalized than other forms. These conventionalized forms "despite their high frequency and pervasiveness has never found a place in the theories of language." (Yoris 1989:55)[18].

One of the most obvious characteristics of the spoken English is the high frequency of these conventionalized forms which are in fact lexical phrases. These lexical phrases" characterize language acquisition and language performance to such an extent (that).....they would seem to be an ideal unit for language teaching" [Nattinger & DeCarrico 2001:33][11].

Among the conventionalized language forms and among the figurative aspects of language idioms are the ones that most frequently occur in discourse. They are more common in speech than in writing and thus less frequent in formal contexts. But certain types such as the phrasal verbs (hereinafter referred to as PVs) are frequently used in formal contexts. The form of these idiomatic verbs shows a fixed grammatical structure. Their meaning is conventionally determined and indicates semantic restrictions. These guises are difficult to be dealt with. The

difficulties seem to be caused by the fact they have an irregular syntactic and semantic nature.

2. THE PROBLEM

Since PVs are expressions peculiar to a language, their perception is not often a great challenge to the native speaker of that language because they form a manner of speaking that is natural to that speaker. But for a non-native speaker it may be a difficult task. As far as English language is concerned one needs to consider the idiomaticity of this language. The cause of a combination of words to be an idiomatic expression is due to non-linguistic factors such as the social, historical and cultural factors relevant the use of language. It is something steeped in the history and the literature of the language. It adds a distinction to the quality of the expression. Such a conception of the idiom a learner should grasp.

The nature of idioms and PVs and the reasons that give rise to such guises of language are responsible for the problems they make. First they are not literal. They do not mean what they say [Riyad, F, Hussein et al 2000:24][4]. Second, they seem to defy regular rules of syntax and semantics that they cannot always be analyzed like other lexical and syntactic items and thus it would be difficult to identify their grammatical properties.

The nature of the structure of PVs is also problematic in a particular way that there are collocational restrictions that govern this structure. The choice of the particle of a particular phrasal verb and the choice of its collocate is not determined by clear cut rules. The present paper examines the collocations of PVs to show the range and restrictions of these collocations.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PVs are attracting more interest in recent linguistic research. Relevant literature raises many questions about

PVs. The first of these questions is the question about their definition and scope. One of the recent studies in this regard is Pye's paper [2011] [15] which aims at developing a framework for identifying PVs. As the paper aims at a lexicographic definition, a comparison of how PVs are identified by some major dictionaries is made. The lack of a uniform criteria for deciding what constitutes a phrasal verb is shown to result in different definitions. This, as judged by a pedagogical perspective will not, of course, satisfy learning and teaching needs. The paper emphasizes the clearly and easily specifying and providing the information about the syntactic and collocational restrictions of PVs.

Schröder [2012][16] has carried out a corpus based study to investigate the syntactic flexibility of idiomatic PVs. The idioms were grouped according to their thematic composition; fixed idioms as in 'kick the bucket', idioms with restricted flexibility as in 'break the ice' and idioms with unrestricted flexibility as in 'keep tabs on'. Results indicate that reliance on thematic composition of idioms is insufficient in explaining and predicting their syntactical behavior. It is also shown, when operating syntactic operations on idioms, that syntactic flexibility occurs, but overall, the degree to which they do is comparatively low. Kiativutikul, & Phoocharoensil 2014][7] is another corpus-based research on the grammatical patterns and the collocates of three PVs in English. The data of the study were based on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Required information about potential patterns and collocates about the three target PVs was based on Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. The grammatical patterns and collocates of each PV were investigated by the researchers. The study reveals significant syntactic information about the selected phrasal verbs in diverse registers. Results prove that grammatical patterns in the corpus, (COCA), are not, in general, different from those presented in the dictionary (OALD). The few differences found were attributed by the researchers to the fact that the scope of a dictionary may not cover all predictable patterns. As for collocates of the target PVs the finding "show that a combination of words that co-occur very frequently rather than by chance could eventually form a fixed or identifiable construction as suggested by OALDwould lead to a kind of natural-sounding verbal and written expression." [p.87]

Kovacs [2014][8] spotlights on the nature of English PVs "in order to make them a more manageable part of the vocabulary of English." [p.7]. The study spotlights on the semantic, syntactic and stylistic complexities of PVs which are seen to pose some learning and teaching difficulties. The syntactic complexities are the ones to be focused here since the present paper is dealing with the syntactic behavior of PVs. The syntactic structure of PVs, as assumed in the current paper, is governed by complex and unpredictable rules. The structure of the PV and the function of its particle whether a preposition or an adverb and the placement of this particle often confuse learners along with identification of their idiomatic meaning.

Learners' attention is also drawn to the collocates of PVs and how they could vary with the same grammatical structure of a given PV. Dictionaries of phrasal verbs are recommended by the study to provide help to solve the mystery of both the multiple meanings and the word-order problems of verb particle constructions.

4. COLLOCATIONAL AND COLLOCATIONAL RESTRICTIONS

There are, as assumed in this paper, collocational restrictions that govern the occurrence of idiomatic expressions in general and phrasal verbs in particular. Before going further in that, it would be appropriate to begin with reviewing the concept of collocation itself in contrast with free word combination at one extreme and with idioms at the other extreme, then we will attempt to trace the occurrence of these collocations with idioms and PVs focusing on the restrictions on the occurrence of these collocations.

To define collocations let's examine the following set of examples,

1. *run to catch the bus-move fast-*
2. *run a company/factory...etc.- manage -*
3. *run to seed-deteriorate,*

We can distinguish three different categories of word combinations.

In the first category, as shown by the first example, words can freely combine with each other to make semantic and syntactic units or simply stated; phrases. For instance, there are no limits for the word 'run' to be headword and combine with other words:

4. *run to catch the bus*
5. *run fast*
6. *run away*
7. *long run*
8. *on the run*
9. *come/go running*

Idioms constitute the third category where words illogically combined with each other to make larger strings, phrases or sentences. In fact there are no generalized combination rules that could apply to most idioms.

Collocations fall into the second category. In the given example, (2), the object of the verb 'run' contributes to its meaning and it is even predictable since one runs 'manage' a company, he might also run another similar business entity such as a factory, shop, restaurant....etc. The words that collocate with 'run' are not there by chance and thus collocation "is a group of words that occur together more often than by chance" (McKeown & Radev 1974:17)[10]. In linguistic research one can find many different definitions of the term. One of the frequently quoted definitions is the one provided by Firth 1957 you shall know a word by the company it keeps.

Some definitions of collocation (Mackey ibid:209) state that some words necessarily go with others. They depend

on them. For example, adjectives such as 'hot' and 'cold' go with words for objects that can be hot or cold:

10. *hot tea /weather/food*

11. *cold weather/drink/surface.*

Another view of collocation attributes it to the way in which series of words combine. They are "liner associations of one word with another that gives a rather special sense and denotation to one or both words, a meaning that the words may have by virtue of being together in a lexical form"(Kuipler & Allan ibid:177)[9].

In fact collocation is not a mere association of words as could be seen in the following example:

12. *white coffee*

13. *white milk**

14. *pretty girl*

15. *pretty boy**

The asterisked examples show an improper choice of collocates. This proves that although collocation [Palmer-II ibid77][14] is largely determined by meaning, it is sometimes fairly idiosyncratic and cannot easily be predicted in terms of meaning of the associated word".

Some selectional considerations would decide upon the occurrence of collocates in lexical phrases. Two types of selections are referred to in linguistic research (Bruce 1986, Nesselhauf 2004)[12] and these are 'selectional restrictions' and 'collocational restrictions. Selectional restrictions are the "semantic co-occurrence restrictions which are logically necessary in the structure of a phrase. (Cruse:278)[3]. Collocational restrictions, on the other hand, refer to the rules that govern the occurrence of particular words together. These rules as viewed by Cruse are arbitrary ones. He defines collocational restrictions "as co-occurrence restrictions that are irrelevant to truth-conditions" (ibid:279). Cruse specifies three types of collocational restrictions (systematic, semi-systematic, and idiosyncratic) based on potentiality of the semantic properties of the word to predict a collocates.

Another significant classification of collocational restrictions is the one provided by [Palmer II, ibid:79][13]. He suggests three types of collocational restrictions.

Firstly, there are those which are based wholly on the meaning of the item,

16. *'a brave soldier'*

17. *'but not 'a brave banana'.*

Secondly, some are based on the range; and these can be used with a set of words having some semantic features in common as in the example of pretty which is used with words denoting females so we have

18. *pretty girl*

19. *but not pretty boy**

The third type are the restrictions are collocational in the strictest sense involving neither meaning nor range as in

20. *kick the bucket.*

5. COLLOCATIONAL RESTRICTIONS OF IDIOMS

The basic similarity between collocations and idioms is that both require a habitual occurrence of particular words together forming a lexical unit. The resulting meaning of this lexical unit is literal in the case of collocations whereas it is has a varying degree of opacity in the case of idioms. But the combination [ibid: 79] that makes up an idioms is almost highly restricted. Idioms involve a special kind of collocation. 'Kick' for example could be involved in the combination of the following collocations:

21. *kick a ball*

22. *kick a goal*

23. *kick someone on the back/face/head*

But 'kick' also combines with 'bucket to mean 'die'. This is a special combination. And because the idiomatic phrase 'kick the bucket' is also a collocation, contextual clues are a necessity to distinguish the idiomatic set from the collocation so,

24. *X kicked the bucket and injured his/her toe, is a collocation,*

25. *X kicked the bucket and was buried near his mother, is an idiomatic expression.*

It could be argued that idiomatic expressions are types of semantic collocations. Like semantic collocations, idioms are lexically restricted combined words. But unlike semantic collocations, their meaning is not the sum of their individual parts. These lexical restrictions on collocations allow "only a subset of the synonyms of the collocators to be used in the same lexical context"[Mackeown ibid:6][10] In contrast to that, only the collocate is highly is restricted to a single lexical item as illustrated by the example involving the verb 'kick'.

Idioms could also be considered as collocations of special kind since their meaning is not understood the usual way as done with collocation. In some idiomatic expressions, collocations are chunks attached to the idiomatic structure:

26. *Mr. Mustafa's family moved to our village a couple of years ago.*

They are very nice to everyone except for their younger daughter. She is the black sheep of the family. (an idiom used to describe an odd member within a family)

6. COLLOCATIONAL RESTRICTIONS OF PHRASAL VERBS

We have so far discussed the relevance of collocations to idioms and show their impact on idioms. In following lines the collocational restrictions of one type of idioms will be dealt with. The type referred to here are 'PVs' which are the most frequent among other types of idioms.

The term 'PVs' is often a confusing one and has not yet received the merit of a single or universal definition. A survey in the relevant literature [see Ke 2014: pp.25-29] would reveal different perspectives and definitions provided for the term. The scope of PVs is sometimes broadens to include a massive class including all verb +

adverb and verb+ preposition combinations. Other times they are restricted to the class of verb + adverb combinations. A specialized dictionary like Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs [1991] defines 'PVs' as "idiomatic combination of a verb and adverb, or a verb and preposition (or verb with both adverb and preposition)" [1.15]. For the purpose of the present study a phrasal verb is defined as a combination of a verb plus a particle the meaning of which might not be predicted from the meaning of the parts of this combination.

The particle that collocates with the verb is either an adverb or a preposition:

27. *We'd better hurry. Time is running out, meaning be finished (out is a preposition).*

28. *She looks after her brother's kids, meaning take care of (after is an adverb)*

Although such combinations form a massive category, but they are well specified in structural terms or more specifically in terms of grammatical collocations as structures of a paired verb particle. The particles attached to the verbs are structure words and thus constitute a closed system. The verbs on the other hand, belong to an open class but some, (Palmer II ibid:76)[13] such as, 'put, take, get, make combine freely'.

In fact, these combinations (i.e phrasal verbs) are good examples of the collocational restrictions of idiomatic expressions. These restrictions apply to collocations of both types; lexical and grammatical. As for the grammatical collocations which refers to the internal structure of PVs or the collocations of verb and particle, we find that these combinations (of phrasal verbs) 'are not all freely formed....for there are severe collocational restrictions' [Palmer ibid:212][14] that determine the choice of the particle.

So in

29. *X has long lost in thoughts before he could finally made up his mind to accept the offer the particle up is not replaceable by any other particle and retain the same meaning of the phrasal verb 'make up' -to decide.*

So the particle 'down' is not applicable in this example. It is worthy to mention here that pairing phrasal verbs by pairing an opposite particle of the given one could work. Such pairing of particle and opposite could somehow be ground of classification of phrasal verbs for learning and teaching purposes. The use of the opposite particle may result in exactly the opposite meaning of the same verb as seen in the following examples:

30. *Making towards the door to put off the light, she couldn't help yawning.*

= 'to put' off means to make the light stop working.

31. *Street lights in our city are put on at 6 sharp.*

= 'put on' means make a light start working.

32. *Due to the great demand of sugar in Ramdan its price often goes up*

= go up means increase of (a price)

33. *After the first dose, the child's temperature went down.*

= go down means decrease of (a temperature)

34. *We'll move in our new house in a couple of days.*

= move in means start living in a new (house)

35. *The landlord refused to renew the indenture so the tenants were being moved out.*

= moved out means to leave or stop living in (a house).

It is obvious from the examples above that 'on & of', 'up & down', 'in & out' are opposite pairs. The first of each pair seems to have a positive sense and the second is more likely to have a negative one. But this is not always the case. Off for example may combine with 'get' to denote a rather positive meaning:

36. *If a criminal gets off a crime he or she receives a little or no official punishment.*

'On' on the other hand, may indicate a negative sense as shown in the following example

37. *The dog suddenly set on the stranger. 'Set on' means attack suddenly.*

The second type of collocation (i.e lexical collocation), as far as VPs are concerned, is when the verb and its particle collocate with another lexical item. Some of the lexical collocations are very familiar to language users while others not.

For PVs the area of lexical collocation reveals more complexity than that of grammatical collocation. The lexical collocates of PVs constitute an open class and are subject to restrictions of varying possibilities. These possibilities could best be seen in Cowie and Howarth's classification of collocations (Cowie & Howarth, 1996:83)[2]. This classification suggests four types of collocation: invariable collocation, collocation with limited choice at one point, collocation with limited choice at two points and overlapping collocations. This classification is inclusive as intended by the authors for the field of phraseology in general, but the first two classes are attempted here for providing a framework for grouping collocates of PVs. The first class (i.e. invariable collocations) is when the PV collocate cannot be replaced by another lexical item as in the case of the PVs kick over and skate on in the examples below:

38. *kick over the traces to disobey or rebel against authority or conventions: At the age of sixty, Walter kicked over the traces and ran away to Brazil.* [McGraw-Hill's Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs 2005:375)

39. *skate on a thin ice to be in a risky situation: Quarrelling with his boss most of the time, Ali is skating on a thin ice.*

The PVs with invariable collocates as seen in (38) and (39) above carry similar characteristics of opaque idioms that there is no variation of the collocates at all, nevertheless, they allow little analyzability of their structure. The verbs in each example could undergo inflectional processes so we can have someone who skates, skates, is skating, has skated...etc., on a thin ice.

The second group of collocates allows some variation with a limited choice where only one element can be substituted

by a limited set of collocates. This is the group where most of the restricted collocates of PVs fall into. Although the collocates of the given PV might be semantically relevant, but the choice of the collocate is not always determined on semantic basis. The phrasal verb (keep under), for example, has a restricted set of collocates; observation, surveillance and scrutiny.(Cowie & Howarth ibid:199). This phrasal verb has, of course, a set of collocates with selectional restrictions. The selectional collocates of verb include suspect, patients, premises, drug smugglers...etc. The restricted set referred to is not replaceable by any other item from the same semantic domain as illustrated by (40) below:

40. The police are keeping the suspect under observation.

The collocate observation cannot be replaced by watch, view or examination which share observation the a similar area of meaning.

The study of the collocation restrictions of PVs should consider along with it the idiomaticity of these verbs. The degree of idiomaticity corresponds to strength of restriction in general [Ke:215]. When it comes to opaque idioms more restrictions are imposed on the collocates. For the example the collocates of put down, are particular animals as seen below:

41. Put down a cat, pest, vermin or a dog means to kill it because it is old or sick.

So in e.g (41) above the phrasal verb put down expresses an idiomatic sense. The same phrasal verb has also a literal use as in:

42. Put the bag on the table means to place it on the table.

The following few lines present examples [Cowie ibid:pp 49,89,259,275][2] of idiomatic phrasal verbs and their collocates to show the restrictions that stick them to each other.

The object complement of the phrasal verb 'call off' is dogs, hounds or bloodhounds. It is restricted to this set of collocates to mean only 'order a dog or a hound stop attacking somebody'.

43. The policemen call off the dogs the moment the running thief gave up

It is understood that dogs and these particular varieties of dogs (i.e., bloodhounds) are possibly the only pets that used to be trained for hunting, chasing and attacking (people).

'Put on' is another example of a phrasal verb having restricted collocates acting as object complements, the meaning of which is to apply pressure to someone or blackmail him/her. The object collocates are screw, squeeze, heat and arm. The lexical meaning of these collocates contribute to the intended idiomatic meaning as seen in their quality to create an effect of tightness, pressure or making something different:

44. Guess what! He found about the manager's affair with the new secretary. What a strong chance! Now he would put on the arm on him.

This restricted choice of collocate (i.e. arm) is not justified for if the collocate arm could function as a means of pressure or force, then hand or finger would rather do that in a better manner. No, examples above since they go against the linguistic regularities.

We so far see that in addition to the restrictions that govern the verb particle combinations (grammatical restrictions), there are the restrictions that decide the occurrence of particular collocates with phrasal verbs (lexical restrictions) and this is an area of great difficulty to EFL learners. A native speaker would mechanically produce such structures but for an ELT learner these structures sound strange. The structure of an idiom in general and the structure that involves a phrasal verb plus a collocate in particular, could not be understood apart from understanding the nature of the structure of idiomatic expression itself. This structure cannot always be analyzed according to regular rules of syntax and semantics and the learner's learning strategy is, of course, primarily based on the assumption of the regularities of patterning of speech and this what most teaching methods focus on and syllabuses are designed according to these grounds.

7. CONCLUSION

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the structure of PVs is problematic in different aspects. A common view held about this structure is that it bears some idiosyncratic characteristics. It shows irregularities when put to proof at the linguistic rules. The main problem dealt with in this study relates to the collocational restrictions that shape the structures of PVs. These structures are strongly characterized by the occurrence of collocations of both types; lexical and grammatical collocations. Grammatical collocations refers to the particular particles stuck to the verbs whereas lexical collocations refers to collocates that may occur with the target PVs.

Illustrations in this study, using some frequent PVs, reveal that the verb particle structure is almost fixed. It is also shown that the collocate that may occur in this structure is arbitrarily selected.

It is indicated that idioms in general and PVs in particular are culture specific and thus their linguistic behavior could not always be interpreted on logical basis. The main challenge of understanding PVs is developing an awareness of their peculiar nature.

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