

# Contrastive Study of English Phrasal Verb Construction and Prepositional Verb Construction an Analytical Framework Based on Minimalist Syntax

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**Abstract:** English phrasal verb construction, which has special semantic and syntactic features, has been analyzed for decades. This study analyzes English phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction based on Labeling Algorithm and makes a contrast between them. The similarities between phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction mainly focus on the form and the property of transitivity. The differences lie firstly in the word order. In transitive phrasal verb construction, two kinds of order can be followed, while there is only one way to arrange the prepositional verb construction; secondly, the insertion of an adverb: if placed between verb and preposition, the new structure is acceptable; while the adverb is inserted into verb and particle, it is ungrammatical. The last method to make a difference between prepositional verb and phrasal verb is action nominalization.

**Keywords:** English phrasal verb construction, prepositional verb construction, minimalist syntax, contrastive analysis.

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## 1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

It is acknowledged that as a social semiotic system, language plays a central role not only in preserving and exchanging human experience but also in analyzing itself. While English phrasal verb construction is generally considered to be a significant component of the English language, and it is the typical characteristic of English language, thus it has long been a heated topic in the inquiry of English language. The heated topic of the English phrasal verb construction is the syntactic status of the particle and the syntactic as well as the semantic features of phrasal verb construction, thus, it is very necessary to have a description of the particle and features of the English phrasal verb construction. In the studies of English language, the nonverbal part of a phrasal verb is called “particle”, and the term “particle” refers to the word of non-inflecting class, which is similar to the word of functional category. Generally speaking, particle is the homonym of prepositions and adverbs, and sometimes they have similar properties with prepositions and adverbs, thus the issue of the word classification of particles has always been a heated topic in the study of English phrasal verb construction. The head of phrasal verb is verb, and verb is followed by an adverb, or a preposition, or both. The adverb and preposition in this situation can also be called particle. Hence, a phasal verb is broadly construed as a structure which consists of a verb and a morphologically invariable particle that functions as a single unit both lexically and syntactically (Quirk et al, 1985).

Besides the idea that phrasal verb construction is a syntactic oddity in the language world, another important reason why this construction attracts linguistics’ eyes is that for the transitive phrasal verb construction, it can take two alternating word orders: the continuous one and discontinuous one as is shown in (1):

- (1) a. The old woman *turned on* the light. (Continuous order)  
b. The old woman *turned* the light *on*. (Discontinuous order)

As we can see from (1) that the particle word *on* could not only be put on the left-hand of the object in continuous order, but also appear right after the object in the discontinuous order. Nevertheless, the meanings of the two sentences are almost the same.

From the semantic perspective, the most appealing feature of the phrasal verb construction is that it can be manifested in a wide range of idiomaticity (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Jackendoff, 2002; White, 2012). What's more, different degrees of idiomaticity can be shown within one construction as shown in (2):

- (2) a. He *picked up* some groceries in the supermarket.  
 b. He *picked up* a valuable antique at an auction.  
 c. He *picked up* a disease when he was traveling.

(Han. L., 2019: 15)

The syntactic and semantic complexities of phrasal verb construction make it notoriously difficult for English learners to acquire. Therefore, the phrasal verb construction deserves a systematical analysis because of the linguistic value, as well as its pedagogical value. The exiting studies on phrasal verb construction mainly focus on three aspects: the “verb + particle” configuration, the particle placement of the transitive phrasal verb construction, and the idiomaticity of phrasal verb construction. Nevertheless, this thesis intends to give a systematic analysis of the syntactic aspect of English phrasal verb construction based on the framework of the Minimalist Program and Labeling Algorithm. It also hoped that the observations and findings proposed in this study can provide a better understanding of phrasal verb construction.

## 2. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have deepened the research on this construction. For example, in the period of traditional grammar, the phrasal verb construction was described and classified, which laid a foundation for future studies. However, there are fewer discussions on the principle and parameter between this construction and the other constructions under the theory of Labeling Algorithm. The three main deficiencies are as followed:

Firstly, previous studies emphasize mostly on the classification and syntactic description of phrasal verb construction, but the respective usage and interaction between the syntactic and semantic factors are ignored. The features and attributes of English phrasal verb constructions are not only reflected in syntactic level, but also in the semantic level, they restrict and unify each other, in this case, the two levels should not be analyzed respectively.

Secondly, researches on the constructions of the phrasal verb and the prepositional verb are analyzed in isolation, and the consistency and difference between them are rarely analyzed in comprehensive and systematical way by contrasting. The structures of the transitive phrasal verbs and intransitive phrasal verbs are very similar, but there are also differences semantically and syntactically. We can find out their correlation and highlight their characteristics, so as to explain the similarities and differences in a more systematic and scientific way.

Lastly, previous studies have mainly proposed the Small Clause analysis, VCP analysis which is based on the assumption of V-bar Pied-Piping (Cheng Jie & Wen Binli, 2008), Word Formation analysis, Focus Feature analysis and some other methods to analyze the phrasal verb construction, but have failed to solve the three key problems related to the construction reasonably: firstly, the syntactic properties of the particles in a phrasal verbs; secondly, the relationship among the simplex verb, DP-object and the particle; thirdly, the alternation of word order between the object and particle in different situations.

This thesis tries to overcome the deficiencies of the studies on phrasal verb constructions based on the assumption of Labeling Algorithm under the Minimalist Program.

## 3. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TRANSITIVE ENGLISH PHRASAL VERB CONSTRUCTION AND PREPOSITIONAL VERB CONSTRUCTION

Transitive phrasal verb construction is very similar to prepositional verb construction in many aspects, including the word form, the property of transitivity, grammatical usage and so on. These features will be discussed in this section.

### 3.1 Morphology

Phrasal verb construction is briefly divided into two kinds based on whether transitive: transitive phrasal verb construction and intransitive one, and transitive phrasal verb construction is the chosen one in this thesis, since intransitive phrasal verb construction has no object, the feature of word order of phrasal verb can neither be highlighted, but particle placement is

one of the most important aspects in syntactic analysis of phrasal verb construction. Therefore, the objects contrastive study between phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction are transitive phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb. As mentioned in chapter four, the particle can be divided into two kinds: prepositional particle and adverbial particle. As the name implied, the prepositional particle has a great number of the similarities in usage, like, up, off, in, out, on, and so on.

From the aspect of the word formation, the configuration of transitive phrasal verb is “verb + particle +DP” or “verb + DP +particle”, while the only structure of prepositional verb is “verb + preposition + DP”. So prepositional verb has more similarities with the continuous word order of transitive phrasal verb, that is, they have similar structure. Since particle is the homomorph with prepositions and adverbs, such as, particles “in” in “give in”, “on” in “turn on”, “out” in “look out”, “off” in “put off”, and so on. Two sentences are given as examples in (3):

(3) a. He *turned* the light *on* when he comes into the bedroom.

b. He *put* the light *on* the desk.

As we can see the two sentences parallel to each other, except the verb. the particles in the phrasal verb “turn on” is the same as the preposition in “put on”, although the syntactic meaning of the two words is different. What calls for special attention is that phrasal verbs can be only similar to prepositional verbs in discontinuous order, that is because the objects in prepositional verbs are the complements of the verb, instead of the combination of verb and preposition, while the objects in phrasal verbs are the complements of the complex verb. Another two sentences provide strong evidence that phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs are morphologically similar in (4):

(4) a. It’s hot inside, she *took* her coat *off*.

b. She *took* her coat *off* the hanger.

Not only the verbs, but also the particle and preposition are the same, although the meanings have a great difference.

### 3.2 Transitivity

The configuration of prepositional verb can be divided into several types according to whether the verb in this construction is transitive or not. English prepositions mainly function as postmodifier introducers (Quirk, et al., 1985). That is to say, even though the preposition combines with a verb, they are two phrases in syntactic level, so the transitive property of prepositional verbs is depend on the verb, rather than the whole combination. When the verb is transitive, the two kinds of phrases are morphologically the same. A phrase “carry out”, which could be expressed as both phrasal verb and prepositional verb is illustrated in (5):

(5) a. The company *carries* the new rule *out* from today on.

b. The box is too dirty, please *carry* it *out* of our house.

The object “the new rule” in (5a) is the complement of “carries out”, and the object “it/the box” is the complement of the verb “carry”. Form the above sentences, it can be found that the transitive phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs are both transitive, a noun phrase is needed as the complement of the combination of verb and particle in phrasal verb construction and the complement of the proposition in prepositional verb construction.

To summarize, although phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction are different in some other aspects, they still have some similarities in morphology and transitivity.

## 4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH PHRASAL VERB CONSTRUCTION AND PREPOSITIONAL VERB CONSTRUCTION

Although phrasal verb constructions and prepositional verb constructions are similar in morphological way, as well as the requirement of a complement, however with differences expressed in semantic terms. This section, several specific criteria are offered to distinct the two constructions, namely the phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction. The parameters of them are analyzed based on those criteria including word order, the degree adverb placement, the behavior of the particle in action nominalization, question and so on.

### 4.1 Serialization

The criteria of word order could distinguish combinations which constituent transitive phrasal verb from those which constituent prepositional verb constructions. In English verb phrases, the continuous order is a criterion for the distinction

between elements that can function as particles and elements like prepositions or adverbs that cannot. In general, particles in English are homonymy with prepositions (like up, out, off, in...) or some monosyllable or disyllable adverbs (like right, away, back) (Jackendoff, 2002; Olsen, 2000).

Although at first sight, the structure of phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction are parallel to each other, they are not the same, for example:

(6) a. Travelers would *get off* the bus.

b. Travelers would *put off* them.

After all, they have similar components: DP “they”, a modal verb “would”, a verb “get/put”, a preposition or a particle “off”, a determiner “the”, as well as a DP “bus/them”. Yet, the two sentences have largely different constituent structures.

As Bolinger (1971) proposed, if the combination of verb and particle is transitive, the particle can either precede or follow the noun object. while on the contrary, prepositions must precede the object. Thus, the phrase “run up” are grammatical in (7a), (7b), and (8a), but not in (8b). This indicates that “run up” can function both as a phrasal verb and a prepositional verb.

(7) phrasal verb construction

a. I *ran up* a bill.

b. I *ran up* a hill.

(8) prepositional verb construction

a. I *ran* a bill *up*.

b.\* I *ran* a hill *up*.

In (7a) and (8a), “run up” is a phrasal verb and “up” here can be placed either right behind the verb or right behind the object. In (7b), “up” is not a particle but a preposition, and the prepositional verb phrase “ran up” cannot be broken down and can only be used in continuous order.

Except the full noun object, when the object is a pronoun, the particles’ position has been more much commented on. In general, the preposition precedes the pronoun object, while the particle follows it, which is shown in (9):

(9) a. Although the problem is very difficult, he *worked* it *out*.

b. The picture is so attracting that every is *looking* at it.

Another evidence that distinguishes the two structure is the possibility of the combinations between verbs and adjectives in phrasal verb construction, which is impossible in prepositional verb construction.

(10) a. I *opened* the window *up/opened up* the window.

b. She *talks* her voice *out/talks out* her voice.

c. We *painted* the wall *up/painted up* the wall.

d. They *cut* the conversation *off/cut off* the conversation.

(10’) a’. I *push* the window *open/push open* the window.

b’. She *talks* herself *hoarse/talks hoarse* herself.

c’. We *painted* the wall *blue/painted blue* the wall.

d’ They *cut* the conversation *short/cut short* the conversation.

(11) a. She *looked* at the picture.

b. They *smile* at me.

(11’) a’\*She *looked* me *at*.

b’\* They *smile* me *at*.

From (11) and (11'), we can find that the combination of verbs and particles are parallel to the combination of verbs and adjectives, and the verb and adjective constructions shows the change of locality or state of the objects. These adjectives, Poutsma (1926) states, may be found in the same position and function as particles. But the prepositions are not allowed to be replaced by an adjective, just as what shows in (10). The two kinds of word order that exists in phrasal verb construction is caused by the dilemma the configuration of  $[_{VP} v^* [_{VP} Vp \text{ particle } [_{AgrOP} AgrO DP [_{VP} t v t_{DP}]]]]$ , when neither of the constituents are head, they cannot be labeled, so two solutions are provided to solve this problem. Either the DP or the V can be removed away, with a head left behind in the set, and it turns to be  $\{X, YP\}$ , which can be labeled as XP.

#### 4.2 Adverbial Insertion

The second criterion that can be used to distinguish the two constructions is the possibility for positioning adverbs. In particular, it is preposition, rather than the particle, could forms a constituent with the noun. Examples in (12) and (13) denote that various manner adverbs may precede the combination of preposition + noun object, but do not precede the sequence of particle and noun:

(12) prepositional verb construction

- a. He *looked* carefully *over* the fence.
- b. We *talked* passionately *about* the topic.
- c. The driver *turned* suddenly *off* the street.

(13) phrasal verb construction

- a. \*He *looked* carefully *over* the client.
- b. \*The fisherman *reeled* quickly *in* the line.
- c. \*The driver *turned* suddenly *off* the light.

Conversely, the particle could form a constituent with the verb, while prepositions may not. That means it is not allowed to insert a unit between the preposition and the noun or the object, but a short and parenthetical phrase could be inserted into the particle and the object, which is illustrated in (14) and (15):

(14) prepositional verb construction

\*We *talked about*, with grin on our face, the situation.

(15) phrasal verb construction

The fisherman *reeled in*, with a grin on his face, the line from the sea.

What should be highlighted is that in (15), the object needed to be heavier so that the sentence sounds better. Furthermore, in fact, when the verb in a phrasal verb construction needed to be stressed or be modified, adverbs can be inserted into particles and the objects in discontinuous order, as is shown in (16):

(16) a. The boy *ran up*, in a rush, the first hill he saw.

- b. He *ran through*, in the period of infant life, emotions such as some never feel.
- c. He *went over*, in his mind, all the people that he could ask.

#### 4.3 Nominalization

Except serialization, and adverb insertion, the nominalization of the verb can serve to distinguish phrasal verb construction from some but not all prepositional verb constructions. Pairs of sentences are presented to show that the particle or preposition "of" in an action nominalization is allowed to appear the particle and the following object in (17), but not between the preposition and the following object in (18):

(17) a. The boy's *looking up* of the information cheered his parents.

- b. His *thinking over* of the questions helped him in passing the final exam.

(18) a. \*The boy's *looking at* the picture cheered his parents.

- b. \*His *shouting at* his friends annoyed them.

From these examples, we can assume that if the activity can be topicalized and be thought of as an action that has been done to the object, then the verb nominalization is allowed. So, whether the prepositional verb construction and the phrasal verb construction can appear in verb nominalization or not is determined by the nature of the action denoted. Why the nominalization of the action of the phrasal verb construction is grammatical, that is because the particle and verb in this construction can be seen as a single unit syntactically. As have mentioned in the derivation of the phrasal verb construction, the particle is not the complement of the verb, which is different from prepositional verb construction. As shown in (19) and (20):

(19) prepositional verb construction

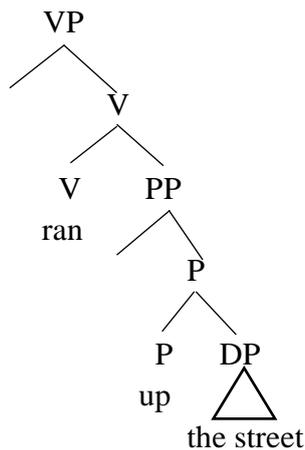
The little boy [<sub>VP</sub> ran [<sub>PP</sub> up the street]].

(20) phrasal verb construction

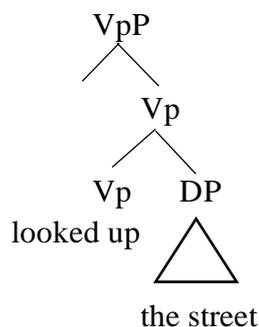
The little boy [<sub>VP</sub> looked up] [<sub>DP</sub> the answer].

The noun object “the street” in (22) is an internal argument of the preposition “up”, and according to LA, the prepositional phrase has been labeled as PP, while the verb “ran” is an external argument for the preposition, so the configuration of “verb + preposition” cannot be action nominalized. The phrasal verb is totally different from prepositional verb. The combination of verb and particle is viewed as a head or a complex verb, and the configuration can be labeled as VP, so the action nominalization is acceptable for phrasal verb. we can see clearly form the tree diagram.

(21)



(22)



There are also some other ways to test the differences between the phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction, such as cleft operation, pied piping and so on, which is briefly shown in (23) and (24):

(23) prepositional verb construction

Tom *ran up* the street.

a. It was *up* the street that Tom *ran*. (cleft)

b. *Up* which street did Tom *ran*? (Wh-movement with pied piping)

(24) phrasal verb construction

Tom *looked up* the answer.

- a. It was *up* the answer that Tom *looked*. (no cleft)
- b. *Up* which answer did Tom *look*? (no pied piping)

## 5. SUMMARY

The similarities between phrasal verb construction and prepositional verb construction mainly focus on the form and the property of transitivity. And the differences between the two constructions are mainly on the three aspects, serialization, adverbial insertion, and nominalization respectively.

The particles in phrasal verb construction are largely similar to prepositions, especially the prepositional particles. Another important aspect is the property of transitivity of the two constructions. When the phrasal verb construction is transitive and in “verb + particle + noun object” configuration, it is hardly to distinguish the prepositional verb construction, which is in “verb + preposition + noun object”. So, the similarity between the two structures is generally reflected more on the superficial aspect.

As for the distinctions between the two constructions, the most striking point lies on the word order. In transitive phrasal verb construction, two kinds of order can be followed, “verb + particle + noun object” configuration and “verb + noun object + particle” configuration, that is because of the dilemma of the labeling, and two methods of the problem provides two serializations of particle and the noun object. The second feature is whether the sentences with the two structures are grammatical or not when an adverb is inserted into them. If an adverb is put between verb and preposition, the new structure is acceptable; while if an adverb is inserted into verb and particle, it is ungrammatical. That is because in prepositional verb construction, the noun object is an internal argument, and verb is an external argument, so they can be separated by other constituents without affecting on the meaning by labeling. The last method to make a difference between prepositional verb and phrasal verb is action nominalization. Phrasal verb construction can be nominalized because they are merged from the Numeration to act as a head, instead of a phrase, and they are seen as a complex verb. On the country, the prepositional verb construction cannot be action nominalized, because the noun object of the preposition is an internal argument, they are labeled as PP, then PP merges with V to generate VP, if the VP is nominalized, the internal argument of preposition must move with preposition, otherwise, the prepositional verb is ungrammatical.

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