Contrasting phrasal verbs and Japanese case markers: Implications for Teaching and Learning

Michael Tasseron

Abstract

Phrasal verbs and other collocations are commonly found in English, and it could be argued that they are an intrinsic part of the language. However, they present challenges for learners of English due to the lack of concrete conventions regarding their formation and use. For Japanese learners of English, the difficulty of mastering the use of phrasal verbs might be compounded by the interference of case markers from their L1. This article contrasts phrasal verbs with Japanese case markers by analysing their lexical structure, with the aim of identifying possible reasons for these difficulties. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for teaching phrasal verbs to Japanese learners of English.

1. Introduction

The effective use of phrasal verbs presents a challenge to learners of English, primarily because no clearly defined conventions exist for the choice of the individual components required for the formation of phrasal verbs, and the existence of an often arbitrary semantic relationship between phrasal verbs and what they denote. Difficulties such as these are compounded by instances where a single phrasal verb may have multiple literal as well as idiomatic meanings, providing a further challenge for learners. For the Japanese learner of English, the formation and use of phrasal verbs presents additional difficulties which may be attributed to interference from Japanese, a language with grammatical rules markedly different from those of English. The aim of this article is to provide a contrastive analysis between English and Japanese, with a focus on particle use in phrasal verbs in English, as well as how case markers are used in Japanese. The article will begin with a grammatical analysis of phrasal verbs, focusing primarily on their structure. This will be followed by contrasting the use of phrasal verbs in

English and how similar concepts of phrasal verbs, if any, occur in Japanese. The discussion will conclude with the pedagogical implications of the teaching of phrasal verbs to adult Japanese learners of English.

2. What Are Phrasal Verbs?

Biber *et al.* (1999: 403) distinguish phrasal verbs as one of the four categories of what are described as multi-word combinations. These multi-word combinations function as single verbs and may be idiomatic in terms of what they denote. The other three components referred to comprise prepositional verbs, phrasal-prepositional verbs and other multi-word verb constructions.

Richards *et al.* (1992: 276) states that the meanings denoted by these constructions may be determined by their individual parts, although the meanings may also be idiomatic. Similarly, Greenbaum (1996) refers to phrasal and prepositional verbs as word combinations that form "idiomatic units" (p. 279), the meanings of which may be determined from the individual parts such as *accuse of*, or in other instances where determining the meaning from the individual components is impossible, as in *give in*.

A further category of multi-word verb combinations known as free combinations is also of particular relevance here. Biber *et al.* (1999: 403) state that phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and phrasal prepositional verbs may also occur as free combinations. However, contrasted with phrasal and prepositional verbs, where the combination of a verb and a particle, or a verb and a preposition, denote a particular meaning; the individual components of free combinations exist as semantic units. Quirk *et al.* (1985) and Biber *et al.* (1999) identify criteria for distinguishing between phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and free combinations; however, these criteria are not conclusive. Taking cognizance of this, references to phrasal and prepositional verbs in the proceeding discussion will encompass free combinations.

3. The Structure of Phrasal Verbs and Prepositional Verbs

As stated previously, a distinction may be made between phrasal verbs,

prepositional verbs, phrasal prepositional verbs and free combinations according to Biber *et al.* (1999: 403). Greenbaum (1996: 280) distinguishes seven additional types of multi-word verbs. The focus for this discussion, however, will be limited to phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs.

In many instances phrasal and prepositional verb combinations appear similar, as illustrated by Leech and Spartvik (2002: 355):

> Matthew called up his wife to tell her he'd met some of his old friends and could be home late.
> Megan went to the hospital to call on a friend after a serious operation.

However, the first sentence contains a phrasal verb, while the latter contains a prepositional verb. The distinctions between these expressions will be explored in more detail in the following section.

3.1 Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs consist of combinations of a verb and an adverbial particle, according to Leech and Svartvik (2002: 352). Some examples of adverbial particles they provide include *down, in, off, out* and *up*. Further examples are given by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1151), such as *against, among, as, at, from, into, onto, past, round* and *through*. These words may be commonly understood as being prepositions, but this is not always the case. This is demonstrated in the expressions *I ran down the road.* and *Please sit down.* (Swan, 1995: 14-15). The first expression has the object *road* and as such, *down* is a preposition, while the second expression does not have an object, and *down* is therefore regarded as an adverbial particle. The combinations of the adverbial particles with the verbs *take, drop,* and *get* can form phrasal verbs such as *take off, drop in* and *get up*.

Additionally, the position of the adverbial particle in the sentence may vary, and the particle may be placed before or after a noun object (Leech and Spartvik, 2002: 353; Swan, 1995: 608). In the sentence *Turn off the television!*, the particle *on* occurs before the noun object *television*. In contrast, in *Turn the television off!*, the particle occurs after the noun object. However, as stated by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1154), the noun object has to be placed before the particle if the noun object is a

personal pronoun, as in *She pulled it out of the bag.* If the noun object were placed after the particle, this sentence would be grammatically incorrect. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1155) further state that when a -ing clausal object occurs in a sentence, the particle cannot be placed after this object. Additionally, in terms of articulation, the particle in a phrasal verb combination may be stressed, whereas the verb is typically stressed in a prepositional verb combination (Richards *et al.*, 1992: 275).

However, aside from the grammatical rule dictating the position of the particle in relation to the personal pronoun object, few conventions exist which dictate whether the verb and the adverbial particle may or may not be separated. Greenbaum (1996) notes that in certain instances where an "idiomatic whole" (p. 281) is formed between a transitive phrasal verb and its object, as in the example, *shut up shop*; the position of the adverbial particle remains fixed. But he also notes that "sometimes the adverb follows the object" (p. 281), as demonstrated in *cry one's eyes out.* Quirk *et al.* (1985) contend that the particle is placed before the object "...if the object is long" (p. 1154). They also state that idiomatic expressions typically involve the "fixing" (p. 1155) of the verb and adverbial particle in a S+V+A+O sequence.

With regard to determining the meanings of phrasal verbs, some identical combinations often have different meanings as noted by Thomson and Martinet (1986: 315). For instance, *take off* may refer to the action of removing something, however, it may also refer to an aircraft leaving the ground. Furthermore, the transitivity of phrasal verbs may vary between expressions. *She took off her coat.* is a transitive expression, since it contains the object 'coat', whereas the expression, *They took off at six thirty.* is intransitive since it does not have an object (Thomson and Martinet, 1986: 315).

3.2 Prepositional verbs

Prepositional verbs may resemble phrasal verbs as argued by Greenbaum (1996: 282) and demonstrated in *He looked at her* (a prepositional verb), and *He looked up her number* (a phrasal verb). However, in *He looked her number up* (a phrasal verb), the adverbial particle follows the direct object, and as stated by Greenbaum (1996: 282), this only occurs with phrasal verbs. He further states that the preposition precedes its complement in a prepositional phrase, as in *He looked at her.*

Similarly, as Leech and Svartvik (2002: 355) state, with a prepositional verb, the preposition must precede the prepositional object. In contrast, when comparing this to the adverbial particle in a phrasal verb, the particle may occur before or after the direct object of the sentence (Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 353; Swan, 1995: 608). Prepositional verbs permit the insertion of an adverb between the verb and the preposition (Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 355), as is demonstrated in the following example: *They called early* (adverb) *on their friends.*

According to Biber *et al.* (1999: 413) prepositional verbs typically occur in two patterns: NP + verb + preposition + NP and NP + verb + NP + preposition + NP. When used in the passive, the prepositional object may become the subject in the sentence (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 414; Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 355). This is demonstrated in the first sentence, which is active: *Some employees looked upon the manager almost as a saint*; and the latter passive sentence: *The manager was looked upon almost as a saint* (Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 355).

Greenbaum (1996: 283) and Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1164) refer to an additional feature of prepositional verbs, where in some instances the preposition is left 'stranded' after the verb with the prepositional object absent. Examples of this are evident in the following: *That is the house they were talking about.*, *What are you staring at?* and *Paul was called on.*

In the preceding analysis, distinctions were made between phrasal and prepositional verbs. In the following sections, which will discuss phrasal verbs in the Japanese context, no such distinctions will be made. All references made to phrasal verbs will include prepositional verbs, phrasal-prepositional verbs, free combinations as well as other multi-word verb combinations.

4. The Structure of Japanese: Verbs, Prepositions and Particles

4.1 Verbs

The form of Japanese verbs changes in order to express a range of meanings such as tense and voice, as they do in English (Thompson, 2001: 300). Examples of how the verbs change when indicating tense are demonstrated in 私は火曜日に彼女に本をあげました, 私は明日彼に本を上げます and 彼に本を上げて下さい, with the verb *give*. Japanese verbs can stand alone according to Thompson (2001: 301), and the subject as well as the object of the sentence is often omitted, as in 分かり

ません and 分かりました. Bunt (2003: 20) states that Japanese verbs do not require pronouns to indicate the subject of the sentence, as this is typically determined from the context. Unlike in English, verbs in Japanese do not change according to person or number (Thompson, 2001: 301).

4.2 Prepositions:

Prepositional equivalents are not found in Japanese, but some particles may function in a manner resembling that of English, and are placed after the noun in a sentence (Bunt, 2003: 250). Japanese case markers are thus postpositions, as opposed to prepositions. For example, in 私は本をテーベルに起きました, the Japanese case marker に follows the noun phrase *table*. More attention will be given to these prepositional equivalents below.

4.3 Particles

Particles are found in Japanese, but how they occur and the functions they perform differ significantly from particles in English. As mentioned earlier, particles in English may exist as individual semantic units (Biber *et al.*, 1999: 403). This is not the case with Japanese particles, which cannot occur on their own Bunt (2003: 149). Particles are placed after the words they are attached to in order to demonstrate how those respective words function in a sentence. For example, as the sentence topic, subject or object (Bunt, 2003: 149). The number of particles in Japanese is not large, however, individual particles may perform several different functions, depending on the context in which they are used. Certain particles are also interchangeable in different contexts. For instance, as Bunt (2003) notes, the case marker に may function to mark time, as in ぼくは7:00に起きます. It can mark location as in 両親は飯田橋に住んでいます. に can also indicate the direction of movement. Thus, as is the case with particle use in English, using Japanese particles appropriately may prove challenging for non-Japanese speakers.

4.4 Particles in use

Particle use in Japanese bears no resemblance to that of English in terms of the formation and use of phrasal verbs. This will be demonstrated with regard to the features of interrogative forms and the passive, the passive in English contrasted with Japanese.

4.4.1 Interrogatives

Interrogative phrases using phrasal verbs, such as *What are you looking at*? and *What time does your train arrive*? are expressed differently in Japanese as indicated in 何を見ていますか？ and 電車は何時に到着しますか？

4.4.2 The Passive

The passive is used in Japanese, but its use differs from that of English (Bunt, 2003: 72; Thompson, 2001: 302). Thompson (2001: 302-303) claims Japanese learners of English find passive forms difficult to construct. A common error he cites that learners make is omitting the preposition of a prepositional verb when used in the passive, as in *His decision was based on past experiences.* The corresponding sentence in Japanese demonstrates this: 彼の決定は過去の経験に基づいています, and can be translated as *His decision was based past experiences.*

5. Teaching Phrasal Verbs and the Pedagogical Implications for Japanese Learners of English

A range of approaches exist concerning the teaching of phrasal verbs. Some traditional proponents argue that knowledge of productive use of phrasal verbs is an essential part of learning the English language (Jowett, 1951:156). Others leave this open to debate, instead posing questions about the needs of learners and the expectations of teachers (Wright, 1987). Regardless of the position adopted, it could be argued that agreement exists about certain aspects of teaching of phrasal verbs, namely that they are complex and problematic for learners to master for a number of reasons. Side (1990: 144-145) cites reasons such as the large number of verb-particle combinations which learners encounter, multiple meanings which may be ascribed to a single verb-particle combination, the

idiomatic nature of phrasal verbs and problems encountered due to interference of the learners' L1. Wright (1987) points out the often confusing syntactic criteria facing teachers and learners, particularly when trying to determine clear cut distinctions between different multi-word verb combinations such as phrasal and prepositional verbs. An aspect referred to is the passivation of phrasal and prepositional verbs, where he notes that while some phrasal and prepositional verbs may be used in the passive, others may not. However, which of these combinations this applies to remains unclear.

Japanese learners of English also encounter such challenges when dealing with phrasal verbs. Thompson (2001: 300) identifies difficulties these learners have with phrasal verbs such as the incorrect use of pronoun objects in the formation of phrasal verbs. The following example demonstrates this: *He looked up it on the Internet.* The pronoun here has been placed after the particle incorrectly. Thomson (2001: 302) notes further that common problems relating to prepositional verbs include omitting the preposition as in *She wants to speak her friend.* He adds that dealing with both declarative and interrogative sentences ending with prepositions or 'stranded' prepositions, referred to previously, also poses challenges for such learners (Thompson, 2001: 300).

In terms of L1 interference, the underlying fact that phrasal verbs do not occur in Japanese, may contribute to the difficulties learners have in trying to learn and use phrasal verbs correctly in English. Additionally, literal translations often do not exist between a number of English and Japanese words and expressions. Side (1990: 145) points out that the learners' own language may influence their ability to understand phrasal verbs. He states further that apart from linguistic interference, conceptual interference may also occur. For instance, In Japanese, *Turn on the stove.* translates as *Light the stove.*, and *Get on the train.* translates as *Ride the train.*

In my experience of teaching phrasal verbs in Japan, I have often encountered the same problems which occur in the Japanese context. When I have taught lessons dealing with phrasal verbs I have often been faced with questions from learners, such as "How do I know which components to use to make phrasal verbs?" and "How do I know when to use phrasal verbs?" These are valid questions and for many students the crux of the difficulties they face when they encounter phrasal verbs.

In attempting to deal with the above questions, what I found has not been

successful is to encourage learners to simply consult texts and advanced learner dictionaries. This is due to the approaches used which typically offer some grammatical explanations about phrasal verbs, but provide no context which demonstrates a practical application of their use. For instance, Taya-Polidori (1989) provides a selection of what she claims are commonly used phrasal verbs. Each section in the text contains a different verb along with possible adverbial particles or prepositions, which can form phrasal or prepositional verbs. A definition of the combination is then provided in English and in Japanese. A number of exercises are provided after the explanations. Soars and Soars (2003), in a widely published coursebook, offer the learner a short explanation of how phrasal verbs can be both literal and idiomatic, also accompanied by a series of practice activities. Learners are then later presented with an exercise where they are expected to determine whether a verb and its accompanying adverbial particle or preposition can be separated. However, no explanation is provided about the grammatical conventions which apply. Without providing a context within which they can experiment with different combinations of phrasal verbs, learners are likely to be overwhelmed by the number of possible verb-particle combinations.

An approach I have used with a reasonable amount of success is to limit the choice of verbs, particles and prepositions. I also believe it is important to provide a context as relevant as possible to the learners' experiences. Examples of such contexts include discussing daily activities, travel plans and personal interests. Contexts can also be provided in stimulating texts selected for specific learners. Tomlinson (2003: 110) refers to this as a text-driven approach. In this approach learners are given a newspaper article, advertisement or short story. Once they are familiar with the content of the text, the teacher can help learners identify the phrasal verbs in the text, and discuss their components and use. This provides examples of authentic use of phrasal verbs, which I believe is an effective way to teach them.

A lesson that I frequently use when I teach phrasal verbs is adapted from Jamall (1998), where the aim of lesson is teaching collocations. Collocations are word combinations which occur frequently (Richards *et al.*, 1992: 62). For example *hold a meeting* and *cause problems*. Collocations can include phrasal and prepositional verbs as well. The context of the lesson is daily routines, and learners study various collocations pertaining to the activities they perform on a

daily basis. I typically supplement the collocations with phrasal verbs and limit these to a number of combinations I believe the learners are capable of dealing with successfully. Examples of the phrasal verbs that I teach are *get up, sit down, get on, get off, get in, go for, get into, talk about and talk to*, as well as others relating to their daily routines. I believe this approach is successful due to the relevance it has for learners and their daily experiences, and allows them to build on their existing knowledge of phrasal verbs within a particular context.

A final point which I feel is important, is to make learners aware that although native English speakers use phrasal verbs routinely, an extensive knowledge of this aspect of English grammar is not a prerequisite for achieving a high level of proficiency.

6. Conclusion

Multi-word verb combinations such as phrasal verbs are used frequently in English and it might be argued that a reasonable knowledge of phrasal verbs and the ability to use them appropriately is necessary in order for learners to achieve a high proficiency in English. However, this view negates the fact that phrasal verbs are inherently complex with regard to the combinations of the components used to form them. Additionally, it is often impossible to determine the meaning of phrasal verbs from their individual components, as many are idiomatic. Added to these challenges, a vast number of phrasal verbs exist, and this number is increasing as new combinations are formed. This article discussed the structure of phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs, and contrasted this with the structure of Japanese case markers. Although the components used in the formation of phrasal and prepositional verbs occur in Japanese, their use does not correspond to that of English, thus possibly contributing to the difficulties Japanese learners of English encounter when dealing with phrasal verbs. The paper concluded with a discussion of the pedagogical implications for such learners, recounted from my experience of teaching phrasal verbs. What is recommended is that for effective learning to take place when dealing with phrasal verbs, a familiar context should be provided in which learners can relate phrasal verbs to their own experiences, while limiting the number of phrasal verb components that they are expected to deal with.

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