



### Libyan Students' Syntactic and Semantic Problems in Using Phrasal Verbs to Write English Texts

Abdelraouf Salem Mohammed<sup>1</sup>✉, Januarius Mujiyanto<sup>2</sup>, Abdurrahman Faridi<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Mergib University, Libya

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

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#### Abstract

This study aimed to explore the existence of syntactic problems and semantic problems and to explain the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs during writing English texts. The participants in this study were ten Libyan students studying in three Universities in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. The ten participants were from different majors of Master and Doctoral degrees. They can use English language in their study so they have a basic knowledge of English. The data were ten English which taken by Libyan students as previous papers. In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the data. The results showed that Libyan students have three problems related to adverb insertion, particle placement and fronting particle and they have semantic problems in understanding the meanings in the semantic classes of phrasal verbs and semantic (non-)compositionality. Finally, the researcher found out that the syntactic behaviour of particles depends on semantic (non-)compositionality.

✉ Correspondence Address:

Street Alriadia, Khoms, Libya.

E-mail: [raoofabushina@gmail.com](mailto:raoofabushina@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

There are several elements of vocabulary and grammar that are extremely difficult for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) to master and comprehend when they write English texts. Vocabulary items as a boring list of words that must be defined and memorized by the students, lexical forms are seen in their central role in contextualized, meaningful language (Rukmini, 2007).

As a big part of the English vocabulary is composed of phrasal verbs, if English students can learn and use common phrasal verbs, their vocabulary will be higher, their listening and reading comprehension and writing will improve, and their spoken and written English will be more perfect like a native speaker. From that statement, it can be seen that phrasal verb is an important vocabulary in learning English (Chen, 2007).

The term phrasal verb is generally illustrated as a verb plus particle combination or a lexical verb that has three separate parts (Darwin & Gray, 1999). There are two word classes of phrasal verbs; the first class is verb which is divided into three major categories, according to their function within the verb phrase, that are full verbs, primary verbs, and auxiliary verbs (Rizka et al., 2018). The second class is particle which is formed by analogy with each other or with other adverbial or prepositional phrases (Side, 1990). There are three types of particles serve two different syntactic functions: adverbial and prepositional (Sroka, 1972).

Phrasal verbs in English language are notoriously challenging for many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) (Choorit & Supakorn, 2014). Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) face semantic problems in understanding or realizing the meaning of phrasal verbs due to some syntactic problems. Yasir (2011) assumed that the syntactic problem that the learner may face in understanding or realizing the meaning of idiomatic phrasal verbs is, sometimes, due to some lexical features such as transitivity, word order and the object used. Some phrasal verbs have

completely different meanings when they are used transitively/ intransitively.

There are some studies have been done on syntactic and semantic analysis of phrasal verb combinations. One of them was conducted by Lindner (1981). This study focused on 600 verb particle constructions with Out and 1200 with Up to examine semantic structure of verb particle constructions. Lindner found that particles like out and up have many meanings and they contribute to the meaning of verb particle constructions (p. 70).

Some previous studies have been conducted to identify causes of syntactic and lexical of phrasal verbs. One of them was done by Dagut and Laufer (1985) about phrasal verbs have been concerned with ESL learners at different levels to see how learners avoid using them. They examined the use of phrasal verbs by Hebrew-speaking students of English. The study found that students do not use VPs consistently and literal phrasal verbs are easier than figurative ones. The results revealed that students' errors are related to the confusing structures of VPs and more advanced students comprehend and produce VPs better than less advanced students.

The other studies are concerned on the pedagogy of PVs has been selected for examination. For example, White (2012) conducted a seven-week study in two college-level ESL courses that allowed 30 participants to find their own examples of PVs, and then use their individual creativity to draw a sketch of the situation. The study reports "modest" results, yet the scores did increase for more than half of the participants, even though it seems that some of the phrasal verbs tested were not part of the exercise. Obviously this could be addressed in a further study (p.430).

Zarifi and Mukundan (2014) conducted a corpus-based content analysis of the EMAS corpus; however, they focused on Form Five Primary Level students to find the creativity and unnaturalness in the use of phrasal verbs. They found that although Malaysian learners tend to use phrasal verbs, they often use and create unusual forms of idiomatic phrasal verbs. They suggested that material developers and teachers should

provide students with materials and activities that enable them to produce phrasal verbs, especially idiomatic ones more effectively.

This study aimed to cover phrasal verbs combinations in English and the syntactic and semantic properties of phrasal verbs in order to explore the existence of syntactic and semantic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs to write English texts and to explain the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems in using phrasal verbs.

## METHODS

In this study, the researchers used a descriptive qualitative method. The researcher was interested to analyze ten English written by Libyan students as previous papers in order to explore the syntactic and semantic problems and to explain the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems in using phrasal verbs. The participants were ten Libyan students studying in three Universities in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia; namely (Semarang State University, Diponegoro University and Sultan Agung Islamic University). The ten participants were from different majors of Master and Doctoral degrees. They can use English language in their study so they have a basic knowledge of English.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The existence of syntactic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs

Based on analyzing and describing the mistakes, the researcher explored three main syntactic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs during writing English texts. The syntactic problems are adverb insertion, particle placement and fronting particles.

The first syntactic problem is adverb insertion. The researcher explored syntactic problem among Libyan students in inserting adverb between the elements of phrasal verbs. The researcher explains that adverbs cannot be inserted between the verb and its particle if the phrasal verbs are non-compositional and idiomatic e.g. *carries out and find out*. Fraser (1976) states that insertion of an

adverb between the verb and the particle (immediately before the particle) is, in principle, impossible in phrasal verbs (p. 26).

Particle placement is the second syntactic problem among Libyan students explored by the researcher in using phrasal verbs. The researcher states that Libyan students have difficulty in placing particle in many cases. For stance, Particles of phrasal verbs can either precede or follow a substantial (direct) object. On the other hand, particles of phrasal verbs can not precede and they always follow a pronominal (direct) object.

Biber et al., (1999); Bolinger, (1971); Fraser, 1976; and Quirk et al., (1985) stress that a preposition always precedes an (indirect) object NP, regardless of whether its head is a noun or a pronoun. Particles of PVs can either precede or follow a substantial (direct) object, and they always follow a pronominal (direct) object.

In the second case, the researcher points out that if the object (DO) is a long and/or complex NP, the particles of phrasal verbs cannot follow the DO even if it is substantial. Another case involves instances with a DO realized by a long and/or complex NP, where the particle cannot follow the DO even if it is substantial. Similarly, the particle must precede the DO in constructions involving PV + DO + preposition + indirect object (Fraser, 1976; Bolinger, 1971).

Fronting particles is the third syntactic problem faced by Libyan students in using phrasal verbs. The researcher stresses that if the phrasal verbs are non-compositional, a particle cannot occur in the initial position of a relative clause, but if the phrasal verb are fully compositional, a particle can occur in the initial position of a relative clause. Nevertheless, the particle can be fronted in case it retains its literal (spatial) meaning (Bolinger, 1971, p. 116).

The findings of the first question are different from the findings of previous studies. The researcher found out that the syntactic problems related to adverb insertion, particle placement and fronting particles. In comparison with earlier studies, for stance, in Sawyer's (1999) study, the findings showed that VACs are used more frequently and VAC errors are syntactic while VPC

errors are lexical. Moreover, other study was done by Liao and Fukuya (2002). They found out that avoidance of phrasal verbs by ESL learners is related to the level of language proficiency, type of phrasal verb constructions and type of test administered.

### **The existence of semantic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs**

Based on analyzing and describing the mistakes, the researcher explored two main semantic problems among Libyan students in using phrasal verbs during writing English texts. The semantic problems are in realizing and understanding the meanings of the semantic classes of phrasal verbs and semantic (non-) compositionality.

The first semantic problem is Libyan students have difficulty in realizing and understanding the meaning of the semantic classes of phrasal verbs. For stance, they cannot distinguish the meaning of aspectual phrasal verb from the meaning of literal meaning in using phrasal verbs e.g. the phrasal verbs *find out* and they cannot distinguish the meaning of idiomatic phrasal verb from the meaning of literal phrasal verb. The researcher explains that if the meaning of the verbs root of phrasal verb is literal and its particle has also literal meaning, the phrasal verb will be literal. In the aspectual phrasal verb, the meaning of the verbs root of phrasal verb is literal but its particle has idiomatic meaning. In idiomatic phrasal verb, the meaning of the verbs root of phrasal verb has idiomatic meaning and its particle has idiomatic meaning.

Cappelle (2005) proposes a two-by-two grid which yields four categories of PVs – first, PVs in which both the verb and the particle have a literal meaning (e.g. *fall down*), second, PVs in which only the verb retains its literal meaning and the particle has an idiomatic meaning (e.g. *labour away*), third, PVs in which the verb has an idiomatic and the particle a literal meaning (e.g. *spirit away* ‘carry off mysteriously’) and last, PVs in which both the verb and the particle have an idiomatic meaning (e.g. *make out* ‘understand’) (pp. 119-121).

The second problem is the difficulty in distinguishing the non-compositional PVs from

fully compositional PVs. The researcher points out that the literal phrasal verbs are fully compositional PVs. Some of the aspectual phrasal verbs are fully compositional PVs and the others are non-compositional PVs.

In distinguishing the three semantic classes, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) rely on the criterion of non-compositionality. Fully compositional PVs, in which the particle has a directional meaning, are literal; non-compositional ones are idiomatic. Aspectual PVs are defined as the class where “particles contribute consistent aspectual meaning” (p. 432). Aspectual particles can have inceptive (particles *off, out, up*, e.g. *start up*), continuative (particles *on, along, away, around, through*, e.g. *play along*), iterative (particle *over*, e.g. *write over*), or completive (particles *up, out, off, down, over*, e.g. *cut off*) meaning (pp. 432-433).

The findings in the second question are not line with Chu’s (1996) findings of comparing literal and non-literal meaning of English phrasal verbs and examining students’ errors. Chu found out that students do not use VPs consistently and literal phrasal verbs are easier than figurative ones. The results also revealed that students’ errors are related to the confusing structures of VPs and more advanced students comprehend and produce VPs better than less advanced students.

### **The relation of syntactic to semantic problems in using phrasal verbs**

Based on the analysis of the researcher regarding exploring the syntactic and semantic problems among respondents in using phrasal verb, the researcher found out that the syntactic behaviour of particles depends on semantic (non-) compositionality. The researcher explained that the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems among three cases.

The first case is distinguishing PVs from free combinations due to their different syntactic behaviour in relation to substantival and pronominal objects. The researcher states that in free combinations, preposition always precedes an (indirect) object NP whether it is a noun or a pronoun.

Biber et al. (1999); Bolinger (1971); Fraser (1976) and Quirk et al. (1985) argue that particle

placement has been heavily used as a rather reliable criterion to differentiate PVs from free verb preposition combinations due to their different syntactic behaviour in relation to substantival and pronominal objects. A preposition always precedes an (indirect) object NP, regardless of whether its head is a noun or a pronoun. Particles of PVs can either precede or follow a substantival (direct) object, and they always follow a pronominal (direct) object. Gries (2001) points out that while compositional PVs tend to occur in split constructions (verb + DO + particle), non-compositional ones generally behave the other way round (verb + particle + DO).

The second case is the possibility of adverb insertion depends on semantic (non-) compositionality. The researcher argues that adverb insertion is possible with compositional PVs but it is not possible with non-compositional PVs. As Bolinger (1971) argues, the possibility of adverb insertion in fact depends on semantic factors. Adverb insertion is possible with compositional PVs, but it is not with non-compositional PVs.

The third case is the possibility of fronting particles depends on their semantics. The researcher explains that phrasal verbs admit fronting of the particle if they are fully compositional PVs.

Bolinger (1971) also states that the fact that a particle cannot be placed in clause initial position only proves that such a particle has lost its literal meaning (pp. 116-117). Those cases in which the particle keeps (some of) its literal meaning, but “the phrasal verb is specialized in some other way” (p. 117).

Contrary to Lindner’s (1981) study in syntactic and semantic analysis of phrasal verbs to examine semantic structure of verb particle constructions in which he focused on 600 verb particle constructions with *Out* and 1200 with *Up* to examine semantic structure of verb particle constructions, the present study focused on all verb particle constructions in syntactic and semantic analysis of phrasal verbs to explain the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems. Therefore, the findings of the third question in this present study are not line with Lindner’s study.

Lindner’s findings showed that particles like *out* and *up* have many meanings and they contribute to the meaning of verb particle constructions. On the other hand, the findings of the third question in this study revealed that the syntactic behaviour of particles depends on semantic (non-) compositionality.

## CONCLUSIONS

The researchers concluded three main points. Firstly, Libyan students have three main syntactic problems related to adverb insertion, particle placement and fronting particles in using phrasal verbs. Secondly, Libyan students have semantic problem in realizing and understanding the meanings of the semantic classes of phrasal verbs and they also have semantic problem in distinguishing the non-compositional PVs from fully compositional PVs. Finally, the researcher analyzed the relation of syntactic to semantic problems in three cases. The first case is distinguishing PVs from free combinations due to their different syntactic behaviour in relation to substantival and pronominal objects. The second case is the possibility of adverb insertion depends on semantic (non-) compositionality. The third case is the possibility of Fronting particles depends on their semantics. Finally, the researcher found out that the syntactic behaviour of particles depends on semantic (non-)compositionality.

This study was limited for exploring the syntactic and semantic problems and explaining the relation of syntactic problems to semantic problems in using phrasal verbs during writing English texts. Therefore, for future researchers, they should focus on exploring the other linguistic problems and explaining how these linguistic problems relate to each other in using phrasal verbs during writing or speaking English texts.

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