

When little wretched words wield their weight: The effect of particles on a verb's arguments

'Phrasal verbs' in English are increasingly being analyzed not as verbs with an added particle but as particles with an added verb. That is, the particle is seen as the stable, lexically fixed element in a constructional idiom with an open slot for a verb (e.g. Jackendoff 2002, McIntyre 2002, Cappelle 2005). Quite often, the element plugged into the verb slot does not figure as a verb outside the verb-particle combination (e.g. *dumb down*, *goo up*), which is the main reason why the number of phrasal verbs is still growing. When the slot is filled by a 'real' verb, this verb may lose its standard arguments. In this paper, I will give an overview of the different ways in which the particle – or actually the particle pattern – can affect the normal argument realization of verbs: the pattern may require a direct object that is not selected by the verb itself (e.g. *He stank* (**the place*) – *He stank the place out*), it may cause the otherwise obligatory direct object to become optional (e.g. *She lit* *(*a cigarette*) – *She lit (a cigarette) up*), it may cause the direct object to appear as a subject argument (e.g. *The water had washed the ink out* – *The ink had washed out*), etc.

Particle patterns do not alter the argument structure of verbs at random. There is some correlation between, on the one hand, the aspectual value of the pattern as a whole and, on the other, the number of arguments a verb can have outside the combination and the number of arguments it can retain when combined with the particle. As a generalization, it appears that:

(1) particle patterns whose instantiations are either telic or atelic (depending on the context they are used in) can, as patterns, be transitive or intransitive and do not impose any transitivity requirements on the verb plugged into them: in *They pissed me off {for too long / in less than 60 seconds}*, the combination is transitive but the 'verb' is intransitive, while in *She squeezed my hand and I squeezed back*, the combination is intransitive but the verb is inherently transitive;

(2) telic particle patterns are always transitive as patterns but do not require the verb to have a direct argument outside the combination; if the verb is intransitive, the direct object is provided by the pattern (e.g. *sleep off a hangover*);

(3) atelic particle patterns require the verb to be intransitive or to have at least an intransitive use outside the combination (e.g. *snore away*, *dream on*, *play around*); atelic patterns are typically also intransitive as patterns, but some have a pre-installed NP (e.g. *work / laugh / party / ... one's ass off*).

The paper aims at a better understanding of an area in English grammar where syntax and lexicon, and event structure and argument structure interlock and interact.

References:

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