

ANA-MARIA TRANDESCU

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THE VERB PHRASE IN ENGLISH



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The author

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH VERB PHRASE

1.1. Definition

Linguists define the verb as the part of speech which expresses actions or states perceived as processes. This semantic definition must be completed with morphological and syntactic criteria. From the morphological point of view, the verb has forms according to the grammatical categories of person, number, mood, tense, aspect and voice. A finite verb discharges the function of predicate (syntactic criterion).

A **verb phrase** may consist of a main verb alone, or a main verb plus any modal and/or auxiliary verbs. The main verb always comes last in the verb phrase (Carter et al., 2011):

He may have studied the subject before.

According to Quirk et al. (1979: 72-73), the verb phrase can be **simple** and **complex**. It is simple when it consists of only one verb which may be in the Imperative Mood, the Present Tense Simple or Past Tense Simple:

He studied hard last year.

The verb phrase is complex when it consists of two or more verbs, as in:

She must have studied hard.

1.2. Classification of verbs

Further we shall approach the classification of verbs, taking into account various criteria: **form**, **lexical meaning** and **complementation**.

A. In accordance with the **criterion of form**, verbs may be classified taking into consideration their morphological structure and their base forms.

Classification of verbs according to their morphological structure

According to their morphological structure verbs fall into:

One-word verbs:

- a) **Simple verbs:** verbs which cannot be further subdivided into other morphological elements, e.g. *get, read, study, swim, work*;
- b) **Compound verbs:** verbs formed of two or more morphological elements written together, e.g. *babysit, broadcast, underline, blackmail, spotlight*;
- c) **Derivative verbs**, i.e. verbs formed by means of affixes (prefixes and suffixes): *discourage, enlighten, encourage, misprint, amplify, symbolize*.

Verbal derivational prefixes usually do not modify the word class, that is, a verb-forming prefix is attached to a verb base to form a new verb with another meaning:

move- remove

do- undo

Unlike prefixes, suffixes usually change the word category:

black- blacken

category- categorize

The productivity of an affix can be assessed by considering the totality of words formed with it. Uncommon verbs formed with an affix are likely to be new coinages or older coinages which have become obsolete.

In their corpus-based book, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (L.G.S.W.E)*, Biber et al. (1999: 403) have studied the frequency of affixes in a linguistic corpus consisting of different

registers. The research showed that the prefix *re-* and the suffix *-ize* are the most productive, both in terms of the total number of verb lexemes formed, and in terms of the number of relatively rare words.

There is a great similarity between conversation and academic register concerning the frequency of derivational affixes.

The prefix *re-* is utterly productive in academic prose and news.

The most productive suffixes in conversation and academic style are:

-ize: familiarize

-ate: differentiate

-ify: simplify

-en: awaken

The authors also mention that all these four frequent suffixes are used to form verbs meaning ‘become’ or ‘cause to be’.

The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999) describes the actual use of grammatical characteristics in various registers of English: conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose.

The *LGSWE* adopts a corpus-based approach, i.e. the grammatical descriptions are based on the patterns of structure and use found in an impressive collection of spoken and written text, stored electronically, and which can be searched by computer.

The book complements other grammatical descriptions by investigating the linguistic structures actually used by the speakers and writers in the last part of the twentieth century.

This is a proof that structure in use are not independent aspects in a language; analysis of both is necessary to understand how English grammar really works in the everyday communicative activities of speakers and writers.

d) Conversion or zero derivation refers to the derivational process by which a word belonging to a word class is changed into another word class, without the addition of an affix.

- a large number of *nouns* can be converted to verbs: *to book, to paper, to park, to service, to process, to water*. Most nouns representing

various parts of the body can be used as verbs: *to head, to elbow, to eye, to face.*

- *adjectives may also be converted to verbs: to clean, to dirty, to wet.*

Multi-word verbs:

A multi-word verb is a lexical verb which may be combined with a particle, with a preposition or with a particle and a preposition functioning as a verb with a unitary meaning. Grammarians divided multi-word verbs into three categories: phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs, phrasal-prepositional verbs.

a) Phrasal verbs: A phrasal verb consists of a verb and an adverbial particle (e.g., *make up, go away, get on, wake up, build up*, etc.). The verb is usually a common English verb (*be, break, come, fall, get, give, go, make, put, take, turn*). The adverbial particle is an adverbial of place (*across, away, back, down, in, off, on, out, over, up*). There are two kinds of problems raised by phrasal verbs: semantic and syntactic.

1. The semantic issues:

Many phrasal verbs have a 'literal' meaning. They retain the individual meanings of the (base) verb and the adverbial particle, i.e. the meaning of the phrasal verb is simply a result of the meanings of the two elements e.g. *to sit down, stand up, to run away*, etc.

In some cases, the base verb retains its meaning and the particle simply adds a special sense. For example, *on* can mean 'forward', as in *go on, read on*, etc.; *up, off, out* can mean 'completely', 'thoroughly', as in *eat up, drink up, finish off*.

Sometimes the particle can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence. However, the sentence seems more natural with the particle, for instance:

I always woke at six o'clock when I was in high school.

*I always **woke up** at six o'clock when I was in high school.*