

A CORPUS STUDY ON BRAZILIAN LEARNERS' USAGE OF ENGLISH

PHRASAL VERBS

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ABSTRACT: The present study attempts at using corpora to determine if the most common phrasal verbs used by Brazilian learners of English are the same as the most commonly used by native speakers; whether there is evidence of avoidance of phrasal verb usage by learners in Brazil; and finally if the most common meanings used by Brazilian learners match the most common meanings found in native-speaker language. The tools used for this research were a Brazilian learner corpus called CoMAprend and the toolkit AntConc. Results showed that there was significant avoidance of phrasal verb usage by the learners and that a large number of phrasal verbs found in the corpus was not within the group of most common phrasal verbs native speakers use. In spite of this a good part of the phrasal verbs' meanings appearing in the learner corpus were listed as the most usual in the Bank of English.

KEYWORDS: phrasal verb, learner, corpus, meaning, usage

RESUMO: O presente estudo objetiva determinar se as estruturas da Língua Inglesa conhecidas como phrasal verbs mais usadas por aprendizes brasileiros de Inglês são as mesmas que os phrasal verbs mais comumente usados por falantes nativos de Inglês; se há alguma evidência de que os aprendizes evitam usar tais estruturas; e finalmente se os significados dos phrasal verbs usados por aprendizes brasileiros coincidem com os significados mais frequentemente usados por falantes nativos de Língua Inglesa. As ferramentas utilizadas para esta pesquisa são o corpus de aprendizes brasileiros denominado CoMAprend e o programa AntConc. Resultados mostram que houve tendência significativa por parte dos estudantes brasileiros de evitar o uso de phrasal verbs, além de ilustrar que

grande parte das estruturas usadas pelos aprendizes no Brasil não pertenciam ao grupo dos mais freqüentes entre os falantes de Inglês nativo. Apesar destas descobertas, é mostrado que uma parte considerável dos significados dos phrasal verbs presentes na linguagem dos estudantes brasileiros estão listados como bastante comuns entre falantes nativos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: phrasal verb; aprendizes; corpus; significado; freqüência.

1. Introduction

Learning a second or foreign language can be included in the list of one of the most challenging feats human beings need to face at times. English has been the most required language for people to learn in the globalized world of today, and being a satellite-framed language (TALMY, 1985 AND SLOBIN, 1996, cited in: LITTLEMORE 2009:17), it could present a higher number of learning difficulties to L1 speakers of verb-framed languages, such as Portuguese. Satellite-framed languages are languages which provide the information of how the motion event was realized (manner) through the verb, and the direction or location (path) of the motion is provided by another element in the sentence. Verb-framed languages are the ones which provide the path in the verb, and usually do not provide information on the manner unless relevant (LITTLEMORE 2009).

Among the wider verbal category of English are multi-word constructions like phrasal verbs (henceforth treated as PVs), already considered by scholars as an unpopular feature of English to be learned by speakers of other languages (DIRVEN, 2001, AND RUDZKA-OSTYN, 2003, are two examples). There have been quite a few studies on the issue of avoidance of PVs by learners; DAGUT AND LAUFER (1985) and LIAO AND FUKUYA (2004) can be considered as good instances of studies that have attempted at explaining why

learners avoid the usage of PVs through observation of previous studies (the former) and application of tests to Chinese learners of English (the latter).

A particular piece of research by ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ (2010) identified that speakers of satellite-framed languages use PVs with the particle “out” more frequently than speakers of verb-framed languages. He reached these results through the use of Corpus Linguistics, more specifically the learner corpora ICLE (The International Corpus of Learner English) developed by the Université Catholique de Louvain. Another relevant study was the work carried out by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007), who attempted at determining a list of the most frequent PVs found in the British National Corpus.

Corpus Linguistics resources are known to help linguists and teachers to determine the frequency of usage of linguistic features by native speakers (HUNSTON, 2002); this can aid material developers and teachers to identify the most important linguistic features to include in lessons and materials, as well as check if language already acquired by learners is indeed useful.

Based on the previous studies here described it is possible to point out that investigating the frequency and use of PVs by learners of English whose L1 is Portuguese may be an interesting piece of research, and as far as this essay's author is concerned, not attempted at yet. Therefore, the first part of this essay will try to determine the most common PVs in the Brazilian Learner Corpus CoMAprend, as well as checking if avoidance of PV usage also occurs, thus mirroring a little of the studies by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007) and ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ (2010); the second part will be dedicated to a more detailed analysis of some PVs with higher occurrence in the Brazilian corpus, trying to discover which meanings attributed to the PVs by the Collins COBUILD PHRASAL VERBS DICTIONARY (2002) are used in the Brazilian corpus, in order to determine if learners' frequency of meaning usage corresponds to native-speaker's meaning usage. The research on the Brazilian

Corpus was complemented with the use of AntConc, a corpus-analysis toolkit, developed by LAURENCE ANTHONY (2004).

2. Definition of phrasal verbs and some information on the tools used on the analysis

A customary definition of PVs has been the one proposed by QUIRK ET AL (1985) and similarly reproduced by other authors such as CELCE-MURCIA AND LARSEN-FREEMAN (1999), defined and classified by several researchers as a combination of a verb and a particle that is invariable morphologically to form a single unit of meaning; this meaning cannot be predicted by separating verb and particle.

According to DARWIN AND GRAY (1999), scholars have classified PVs as elements composed of Verb + Particle that should be included in a set of common characteristics, treating it as a “guilty until proven contrary” matter since each and every PV would have to undertake a battery of tests to be considered an actual PV. DARWIN AND GRAY (1999), BIBER ET AL (1999) and GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007) prefer to treat PVs as an “innocent until proven contrary” matter, whereas each Verb + Particle construction should be given a chance to be considered a PV. This is the definition this paper shall follow, since the search for the PVs in CoMAprend will be carried out through the particles.

2.1 Searching for the learner texts in CoMAprend

CoMAprend Learner Corpus is a project developed by the University in São Paulo (USP), under the supervision of Professor Stella Tagnin and in partnership with another learner corpus in Brazil, the BrICLE from the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP). CoMAprend is a compilation of narrative, descriptive and argumentative texts

mostly in English, with student production from regular undergraduate courses and extracurricular on campus courses at USP (TAGNIN AND FROMM, 2008).

The chosen text genres in this study were the narrative and the argumentative ones, for the reason that they appeared to be the most representative for learners of English given the higher quantity of words (almost 100,000 word tokens). Once the texts were selected, they were downloaded to a txt format and the tool AntConc was activated to search for PVs in argumentative and narrative texts separately and later altogether, a process described in the next section.

2.2 Searching for frequent PVs with the use of AntConc:

AntConc is a corpus analysis toolkit designed by Laurence Anthony (ANTHONY, 2004) that is equipped with a concordancer, frequency generators for words and keywords, tools for cluster and lexical bundle analysis, as well as a word distribution plot. This tool was chosen because of its reliable calculating capacity.

In order to allow for a more effective and faster search, the plain txt files downloaded from CoMAprend were transformed into POS-tagged files using the free software made available by Oliver Mason, QTag. The tag used to search for particles was RP, which resulted in 5 different particles present in the corpus: up, out, off, back and down.

After that, a manual search was done to search for possible PVs with all the other particles that the COLLINS COBUILD PHRASAL VERBS DICTIONARY (2002:vi) brings, in accordance to the most commonly found in the BNC (GARDNER AND DAVIES 2007: 350), resulting in 8 more instances of particles: across, along, around, by, in, on, over and through.

The next step was to check each particle`s collocates, which also offered a first idea of how many hits each of these combinations would have in the corpus, and if there would be instances of 3rd person singular, past and participle and gerund. To confirm results, it was considered good measure to look for each combination verb + particle, either using wildcards or typing the verb form itself. Results were obtained for the number of PV hits for narrative texts and argumentative texts, followed by both altogether; only the latter ones are presented in appendix 1, for reasons of space.

Appendix 1 shows that PVs occur in the learner corpus 289 times in a total of 99,561 word tokens. That roughly accounts for 1 PV occurring in every 350 words of the corpus, a result that is a little over half of the estimates presented by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007: 349), regarding the presence of PVs in the BNC: 1 in every 192 words. Not surprisingly, after running a log-likelihood test with the help of an online calculator, results show that the difference between the two corpora cannot be attributed to pure chance, according to figure 1. O1 represents BNC and O2 CoMAprend.

Item	O1	%1	O2	%2	LL
Word	518923	0.52	289	0.29	+ 119.39

Figure 1: Log-likelihood calculator

Even though comparing two corpora of such different sizes may state obvious results regarding avoidance of PV usage by Brazilian learners of English when compared to native English speakers, perhaps the findings from ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ (2010:61/62) may aid the interpretation of this issue. ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ reports that native speakers of English use more than twice as many PVs with the particle ‘out’ when paralleled with speakers of verb-

framed languages such as Spanish and Italian. Brazilian speakers of Portuguese, a verb-framed language as well, seem to display similar behavior, perhaps characterizing avoidance of PV usage.

There were 85 types of PVs found in the Brazilian learner corpus, 39 of which listed within GARDNER AND DAVIES` s (2007) 100 most common PVs in the BNC; at least 54 % of the PVs used by Brazilian learners are not very frequently used by native speakers of English, not a very positive perspective regarding exposure by learners to the most common PVs for communication; however one should take into consideration the range of possible text genres present in the BNC contrasted with the only two genres researched in CoMAprend, an issue that may have had an influence on the types of PVs used. The picture does not become less gloomy when considering that out of the 24 PVs that occur at least 3 times or more in the corpus only about 55 % (13 occurrences) are listed within the top 30 most common PVs according to GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007).

Once the frequency of occurrence of the most common PVs used by Brazilian learners has been outlined, the next part of this study will be dedicated to establishing if the most frequent meanings of the PVs used by Brazilian learners match the most frequent meanings described by the COLLINS COBUILD PHRASAL VERBS DICTIONARY (2002).

3. Analysis of the most frequent meanings of some phrasal verbs in CoMAprend

It is to be expected that teachers and course book designers may at times be in doubt regarding which PVs are the best ones for teaching, and language educators in Brazil are not different. After finding out what are the most common PVs used by Brazilian learners so that a comparison can be drawn between what native speakers actually use and what the learners is aware of, this study proposes another analysis: are the meanings for the PVs most commonly

used by Brazilian learners the same as the most common meanings found in BNC? This analysis might facilitate teachers` and course designers` decisions on which meanings of PVs to focus on and to correct material that may influence learners to acquire less commonly used PVs.

The most important tool used in this analysis was the COLLINS COBUILD PHRASAL VERBS DICTIONARY, totally based in research done in the Bank of English Corpus and listing its PVs` meanings in the order of the most frequent up to the least frequent ones. Due to limits of space, a more thorough analysis of the most common PVs in the CoMAprend had to limit itself to selecting a few PVs under some criteria: the PVs should be in the 30 top Phrasal Verbs list presented by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007); the PVs should present at least two possible meanings in the COLLINS COBUILD PHRASAL VERBS DICTIONARY (2002); and the PVs should have presented at least 7 hits in the CoMAprend Corpus (due to limits of space).

Table 1 shows the PVs to be commented as well as their rank and frequency according to GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007) and the number of possible meanings according to the COBUILD (2002). Further considerations on each PV will be outlined by sections 3.1 to 3.8.

Table 1: PV hits to be more thoroughly analyzed

PV	CoMAprend hits	Gardner and Davies` rank (top 100 PVs in BNC)	Collins COBUILD number of of meanings
Make up	25	11 th	10

Take over	21	12 th	9
Come back	12	6 th	5
Find out	11	9 th	2
Go out	11	7 th	16
Point out	10	8 th	2
Go on	9	1 st	19
Carry out	7	2 nd	2

3.1 Make up

The construction “make up” occurs 25 times in CoMAprend, 5 times in narrative texts and 20 times in argumentative texts (this includes occurrences in Base Form, 3rd Person Simple Present, Past and Participle, and + ing form, as in all the following verbs to be discussed). Out of this total, 16 hits of ‘make up’ collocated with the phrase “one’s mind”.

The phrase “make up one’s mind” is displayed in the COLLINS COBUILD (2002: 211) as “to decide which of a number of things you will have or will do”, and it is treated as a very commonly used expression.

SINCLAIR (1991) sets a difference between word-meaning and phrase-meaning; word- meaning would be selected more independently and phrase-meaning would be a choice dependent on other items of the phrase in order to create what he calls a “multi-word unit of meaning”. HUNSTON (2002:140) complements the argument by stating that the meaning of a construction may not belong to each individual word, but instead to the whole phrase, characterizing an association between pattern and meaning so powerful that the meaning of a

particular word is altered to the benefit of the meaning of a whole phrase. The result then is that the whole phrase is used in a particular environment carrying a particular meaning, phenomena that SINCLAIR (1991) AND HUNSTON (2002) call “Semantic Prosody”.

The examples extracted from the corpus showed that learners frequently used the PV “make up” not with the individual meaning of the word, but with the phrase “one`s mind”, associating the construction to the idea of “difficult decision” or “difficult personality treat”. The examples taken from the Bank of English that the COBUILD (2002:212) presents illustrate similar ideas of “difficulty”, perhaps meaning that the Brazilian learners that composed the corpus were exposed to and acquired the semantic prosody of the phrase “make up one`s mind”.

3.2 Take over

The PV ‘take over’ is listed by the COBUILD (2002:382) as having nine possible meanings, and the four most commonly used are related to the act of gaining control of someone or something. In argumentative texts this PV did not raise any interesting issue; however hits on narrative texts appeared to match the description on BIBER ET AL (1999:410) that this PV is mostly found in news genres. News texts are very narrative in their essence, and fortunately Brazilian learners appeared to be aware of this characteristic.

3.3 Come back

The PV “come back” appears 12 times in the whole corpus, and all hits carry the meaning of returning to a point or place of origin, the most common use found to the verb in the Bank of English according to the COBUILD (2002:58). Brazilian learners frequently

paired the construction “come back” with the word “home”, just as in the example provided by the COBUILD dictionary: “Are you ever coming back home?” Interestingly, though, if one searches for the most common collocations in the BNC for all forms of “come back”, the word “home” does not even appear in the first 50 most frequent collocations. Could it be possible to say that learners demonstrated high frequency use of “come back home” because they were more exposed to pedagogical material that contains the construction instead of instances of real language?

3.4 Find out

The ten instances of “find out” in the learner corpus display the most common meaning elicited by the COBUILD (2002, p. 108): “if you find out something, you learn something that you did not already know”. BIBER ET AL (1999: 410) characterizes the PV “find out” as a verb quite evenly distributed in the BNC Corpus, occurring over 20 times per million words in Academic Registers and over 40 times/million words in News and Fiction Registers. The examples used by the learners seem to fit this description well, given the fact that the PV appears in texts classified by CoMAprend as argumentative, but with a few elements of narrative, like when writing a review of a book or movie.

Another feature is the construction being most often used in the Present Tense, a behavior expected when dealing with argumentative texts, since according to SWALES (2001) present tenses are often used to reference states of current knowledge. Learners contributing to the corpus apparently show awareness of these issues.

3.5 Go out

The PV construction “go out” appears 7 times in narrative texts and 4 times in argumentative texts, in a total of 11 hits. The meanings found match the first and the second most usual ones on the COBUILD (2002:142): “1- When you go out of a room, building, etc., you leave it. 2- When you go out, you leave your house and go somewhere else, for example in order to shop, visit friends, see a film and so on.”

Most occurrences of “go out” seem to be associated by the learners with the idea of having fun or of pleasant experiences, perhaps indicating that learners have acquired the verb with this semantic prosody (SINCLAIR, 1991; HUNSTON, 2002). Anyone with a minimum experience of teaching is aware that teaching materials often introduce the verb “go out” inserted in contexts of spare time and fun activities. For a better comparison to be made, it would be interesting to research semantic prosody behavior of the PV “go out” in the BNC or the Bank of English; however that is possible here for obvious reasons of purpose and space.

3.6 Point out

The 10 instances of “point out” in CoMAprend, occurred in argumentative texts, matching the statement by BIBER ET AL (1999:410) that this PV presents itself most frequently in academic registers; this feature may be interpreted as a result of considerable exposure by part of the learners composing the corpus to academic texts. The collocations “it is important to point out that” and “x point(s) out that” can also be frequently found in the BNC and match the second most common meaning in the COBUILD (2002:253): “if you point something out, you give people an important piece of information or correct their

mistaken ideas.” The meaning pointed by the COBUILD as the most usual is “if you point an object or person out, you cause people to notice them or look at them, perhaps by indicating with your hand or head”. Brazilian learners appear to use the least often meaning of the verb compared to native speakers from the Bank of English. A possible explanation could be that the most frequent meaning would be expected to happen more naturally either in narrative or spoken texts; the former showed no instances of “point out”, the latter being currently unavailable in CoMAprend learner corpus.

3.7 Go on

The PV ‘go on’ has 19 different possible meanings according to the COBUILD (2002: 141/142/143), being the most usually found in the Bank of English synonyms of the verbs ‘continue’ and ‘happen’, or when speaking about a period of time that passes (this latter one listed as 7th most commonly used). The Brazilian learner corpus has brought instances of argumentative texts that apparently fit the meaning of continuing an activity, and of narrative texts carrying the meanings of ‘happening’ or ‘passing’, indicating a use with the same common meanings as native speakers.

3.8 Carry out

CoMAprend instances of “carry out” were found in argumentative texts, in accord with Biber’s (1999:410) table that informs this PV occurs over 100 times per million words in news and academic texts in the BNC, displaying examples of both first and second meanings brought by the Collins COBUILD (2002:44): “1- If you carry out a task, you do it. 2- If you carry out an idea, suggestion, or instruction, you put it into practice.”

The line between the first and second meanings of “carry out” is difficult to identify; BIBER ET AL (1999:408) classifies PVs as belonging mostly to two semantic domains: the physical domain, in which meaning 1 from the COBUILD would fit, and the mental domain, matching meaning 2. BIBER ET AL also argues that many PVs change their original meanings when used in a different semantic domain. The collocates used by learners could have been inserted into mental or physical domains, implying that learners seemed to associate both semantic domains as co-related, hence the inter-use of both meanings. This issue could provide rich study material for cognitive linguists, who would benefit from the use of Corpus Linguistics in such case.

4. Conclusion

The present study focused on two objectives: the first was to determine the most common phrasal verbs (PVs) used by Brazilian learners of English and check if learners had a tendency to avoid the use of PVs, adapting from two previous studies by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007) and ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ (2010); the second was to establish differences and similarities regarding the most frequent meanings of PVs used by Brazilian learners and the most frequent meanings used by native speakers of English according to the Collins COBUILD Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2002).

The first aim of the study was apparently achieved through the use of a learner corpus in Brazil called CoMAprend and the toolkit AntConc. It was found out that PVs occurred 289 times in a total of almost 100 thousand words, characterizing roughly 1 PV appearing in every 350 words, a low estimate if compared to occurrences in the British national Corpus (BNC) presented by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007); furthermore, this number appears to match

the behavior of avoidance of PV usage described by ALEJO-GONZÁLEZ (2010) for speakers of verb-framed languages such as Portuguese.

The results also showed that a relatively high amount of PV types found in the Brazilian Corpus were not within the list of the most common PVs presented by GARDNER AND DAVIES (2007), picturing a serious disadvantage of communicative skills on the part of the learners. This could be explained by the learners having been exposed to pedagogical material that is outdated and not produced based on corpus studies, claiming urgently for a measure to be taken by teachers and pedagogical coordinators in Brazil.

The second aim of the study slightly improved the negative impression left by the first part of the study by exhibiting that if Brazilian learners do not use PVs very often, at least when doing so they use the most frequent meanings that native speakers use according to the COBUILD (2002), even presenting certain awareness of semantic prosody in some cases.

Despite that, some PVs in CoMAprend collocated with words that do not represent very frequent collocates for the PVs used by native speakers, a difference that again could be justified by the exposure of the learner to a certain kind of pedagogical material and/or the different nature of the corpuses (spoken and written, for instance).

The findings of this study are of course representative of the learners who participated on the Corpus, given that CoMAprend is still a tiny compilation of texts if compared to the BNC or the Bank of English. Nevertheless, HUNSTON (2002) argues that even a small corpus may be significant if collected under the guidance of criteria.

This study could help language educators shed some light into the issue of which PVs to work more thoroughly with in the classroom, taking into consideration the PVs and meanings that seemed to have already been acquired by learners. More research may develop from this small study to investigate strategies learners use to avoid phrasal verbs, for example.

The conclusion then is that the use of Phrasal Verbs by Brazilian learners of English offers yet enormous possibilities in several branches of Linguistics, and certainly more specifically in Corpus Linguistics, so that proper material can be offered to students and proper guidance be given to teachers on this matter.

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Appendix 1

Total hits of PVs in CoMAprend Learner Corpus

Total of word types: 10008

Total of word tokens: 99561

wake up	27	take on	5	go back	2
make up	25	sum up	4	go up	2
take over	21	keep on	4	lay down	2
come back	12	fall down	3	put up	2
end up	11	figure out	3	screw up	2
find out	11	pick up	3	take (x) off	2
go out	11	carry on	3	turn out	2
point out	10	pass on	3	work out	2
go through	10	come		count on	2
go on	9	across	3	turn on	2
carry out	7	fill in	3	get along	2
come out	5	act out	2	get around	2
give up	5	clear up	2	go by	2
grow up	5	cover up	2	fit in	2
move on	5	cry out	2	bring in	2

run over	2	move back	1
turn over	2	rise up	1
break		rule out	1
down	1	run out	1
bring out	1	run up	1
bring up	1	show up	1
chase		speak out	1
down	1	speed up	1
climb up	1	stand up	
come up	1	for	1
crack up	1	start up	1
drop off	1	take up	1
fall off	1	turn down	1
freak out	1	hang on	1
get off	1	come	
get out	1	along	1
get up	1	go along	1
go down	1	move	
head down	1	along	1
hold up	1	pass along	1
hurry up	1	stand by	1
keep up	1	turn off	1
laugh out	1		
look out	1		

Total: 289