

Assignment 2: Part A

Language Systems – Lexis:

Expanding Intermediate learners' vocabulary with Multiword Verbs

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I. Introduction

“One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter.”

– James Earl Jones

A speaker's range of lexical knowledge is a barometer of his proficiency in the language. Until recently, however, vocabulary was only incidental in second language teaching. Though the lexical approach is all the rage in syllabi and classroom teaching now, an important area of lexis – multiword verbs – continues to agonize learners.

Despite their high frequency and great communicative value, multiword verbs remain “...one of the major sources of bewilderment and frustration in the process of learning English.” (Marks 2005:1)

While intermediate level Japanese and Taiwanese learners I taught in San Francisco avoided using multiword verbs at all costs, an advanced Vietnamese learner dismissed the lexemes as “useless.” “Why should I use two words to say something I can say with one?” she asked.

In this assignment, I have chosen to examine this oft-neglected area of lexis, and focus on expanding Intermediate learners' vocabulary with multiword verbs. While multiword verbs are challenging at all levels, I find Intermediate learners reach a “plateau” (Lewis 2001:10) and find it difficult to transfer these from their receptive to productive vocabulary banks.

II. Analysis

What are multiword verbs?

Multiword verbs are made up of a verb (e.g. *take, keep, break*) and one or more particles (adverbs or prepositions – e.g. *off, from, up*). The verb and particle(s) constitute a lexeme – inseparable parts of a single meaning unit.

The meaning of a multiword verb is not always the same as the independent meaning of the verb and particle(s). (Parrott 2000:108) The same verb can combine with many different particles to express different meanings e.g. *take off, take on, take away, take up* etc. Also, the same multiword verb can express different meanings in different contexts e.g. *She broke down when she heard the news*, and, *If you have a big project, break it down into parts so you can tackle it more efficiently.*

Thornbury divides multiword verbs into four types:

Type	Syntax	Examples
1. prepositional verbs	verb + preposition particle + object	<i>Can you <u>deal with</u> it? I <u>ran into</u> Jacob yesterday.</i>
2. intransitive phrasal verbs	verb + adverb particle	<i>A storm <u>blew up</u>. It pays to <u>shop around</u>.</i>
3. transitive phrasal verbs	verb + adverb particle + object verb + object + adverb particle	<i>I'll <u>pick you up</u> at eight. I'll <u>pick up</u> the kids.</i>
4. phrasal-prepositional verbs	verb + adverb particle + preposition + object	<i>We've <u>run out of</u> gas. You should <u>cut down on</u> fats.</i>

(Thornbury 2006:166)

MEANING AND USE

Polysemy:

a. Literal multiword verbs:

Some multiword verbs are transparent and thus, literal (Murcia, Larsen-Freeman 1998:432); their meaning can be guessed from the particles they are made up of. If learners know the meaning of the words *sit*, *down*, *turn*, *around*, they can easily guess the meaning of the multiword verbs – *sit down* and *turned around*.

e.g. He stood up and turned around.

b. Idiomatic multiword verbs:

When the verb and particle(s) of a multiword verb abandon their usual meaning, they create idiomaticity. The meaning of such semantically opaque multi-word verbs (Moon 2005) cannot be inferred from its particles. Idiomatic multiword verbs are the most challenging for learners.

e.g. *give in* = *surrender*, *get along* = *be friendly* (Gairns & Redman 1986:34)

c. Semi-literal multiword verbs:

Sometimes, the verb in a multiword verb retains its literal meaning while the accompanying particle adds an aspectual meaning. While *flew* retains its meaning of moving through the air, the particle *on* adds the concept of continuation of flight.

e.g. *After stopping for fuel in New York, the plane flew on to Los Angeles.* (Workman 1996)

d. Multiple meaning of multiword verbs:

Polysemy, or a multiplicity of meanings – from literal to semi-literal to idiomatic – displayed by the same multiword verb adds further complexity for learners.

e.g. <i>The plate <u>broke up</u> when he dropped it on the floor.</i>	<i>(to break into many pieces)</i>
<i>Schools will soon <u>break up</u> for the summer holidays.</i>	<i>(close an institution for a holiday)</i>
<i>Paul and Lisa <u>broke up</u> last week.</i>	<i>(finish a relationship)</i>
<i>You're <u>breaking up</u>. Call me back.</i>	<i>(become inaudible over phone)</i>

Synonymy

Often, multiword verbs have synonyms, that are learned earlier, and hence preferred by learners.

Multiword Verb	One-word synonyms
They didn't get on well at all.	They didn't understand each other well at all.
I need to get on with this assignment.	I need to continue writing this assignment.
We should be getting on , it's late.	We should leave soon, it's late
I got on to the bus at Tran Hung Dao.	I boarded the bus at Tran Hung Dao.

Formality

Some one-word equivalents of multiword verbs are thought of as more formal, e.g. *carry out* = *conduct*, *put out* = *extinguish*. Also, a lot of colloquial multiword verbs are quite informal, e.g. *chill out*, *hang out*, *pop in*.

This leads one to believe that multiword verbs are useful only in spoken discourse and inappropriate in written language. Such generalization can, however, lead to an overuse of formal language by learners (Fletcher 2005), especially since multiword verbs are increasingly gaining acceptance in spoken as well as written formal discourse.

In fact, there are times when a multiword verb is more appropriate or neutral than its single-word equivalent, e.g. *slow down* is much more useful than its synonym *decelerate*. Also, some multiword verbs do not have one-word equivalents and are freely used even in very formal written register, e.g. *look forward to*. (Parrott 2000:115)

FORM

Transitivity

Transitive multiword verbs take an object while intransitive one do not. From the learners' point of view, this is particularly important with regards to word order, especially in terms of object placement in the case of transitive multiword verbs.

Transitive	Intransitive
She never asks me to look after her children.	The plane took off.

Parrott (2003:109)

In different contexts, the same multiword verbs can function as transitive or intransitive.

When he heard his bride had run away, he blew up.

She blew up big balloons for Raj's birthday.

Separability

Transitive multiword verbs can be separable or inseparable. In separable phrasal verbs, the particle *may* move into a position following the object, whereas there is no particle movement in inseparable multiword verbs (Cowan 2008).

Separable	Inseparable
She turned down his offer. She turned his offer down.	I've put up with your nonsense for years.
They put off the meeting until next week. The meeting was put off until next week.	He looks up to his teachers.

A small group of phrasal verbs is permanently separated, for example, *let off*, *do over*, *ask out*. In such phrasal verbs, the particle always comes after the object pronoun.

e.g. *He asked her out.*

but not, *He asked out her.*

PHONOLOGY

The pronunciation of multiword verbs is mainly concerned with the placement and distribution of stress on the verb, the particle(s), and how they relate to other words in a sentence. According to Underhill (2005), multiword verbs can be stressed in two different ways:

1. With one stress on the verb, and no stress on the particle:

ˈmake for The robber ˈmade for the door!
ˈLook at We'll ˈlook at all options before making a decision.

In the majority of multiword verbs with one stress, the particle is a preposition. e.g. *make of, care for, come from, take to* etc. These particles often have a strong and a weak form. e.g. of → /bʌv/ and /əv/. The strong form is used only if the particle comes at the end of a phrase:

What are you ˈlooking at? /æɪt/
What would you ˈcare for? /fɔː/

However, the speaker may stress the particle for emphasis, contrast, or correction. e.g.

I saw him ˌspeaking to the ˌpresident.
Yes, and later he spoke ˈfor the president!

2. With two stresses:

a. When the object in a separable transitive verbs is a pronoun, the primary stress is on the particle and secondary stress on the verb.

Can you ˌmake it ˈout?
Please ˌturn it ˈon.

b. When the object in a transitive verb is a noun – between verb and particle, or after the multiword verb – the stress is on the noun rather than the particle.

Can you ˌmake the ˈwriting out? Can you ˌmake out the ˈwriting?
Please ˌturn the ˈlight on. Please ˌturn on the ˈlight.

3. Connected Speech:

When looking at the pronunciation of multiword verbs, it is essential to examine the way in which the verb and particle(s) link together, or in relation to other words in the sentence. In continuous speech, all the phonemes are connected, grouped and modified through assimilation, elision, vowel reduction, liaison, intrusion, and juncture.

Did you hear about the big break up – Lisa and Joe! Unbelievable.

Break 'up → /breɪkʌp/

- Liaison at the word boundary between *break* and *up*
- No vowel reduction in *up* since the stress is on the particle

I heard they got back together last week.

Got back together → /gɒ(t)pæɡ təgeðə/

- Assimilation occurs at the word boundary between *get* and *back* → /p/
- Assimilation occurs at the word boundary between *back* and *together* → /g/

II. Problems and Solutions

1. Mystery of Multiple Meanings

Polysemy, or a multiplicity of meanings, is a problem inherent in the teaching and learning of multiword verbs. Learners are confused when a multiword verb they 'know' takes on a new meaning in a different context. An intermediate Korean learner in an overseas study preparation programme was perplexed when she came across “*He turned me on / off,*” because she had never seen *turn on / off* in the context of feelings before.

In the case of this Korean learner and most Vietnamese learners at the Intermediate level, this problem stems from having been taught vocabulary using a rule-based approach. Without contextualization and wide exposure to multiword verbs, learners are confined to the easiest, and usually the most literal meanings.

Suggestions for teaching:

In my experience, there is little exposure to multiword verbs in the early stages of second language learning, but at the intermediate level, course books begin to unleash combinations of verbs and particles and expect learners to memorize multiple meanings.

I believe, even at the Intermediate level, multiword verbs should be introduced and treated as any other lexical item – its meaning culled from context, recorded and recycled as any new vocabulary. The danger in introducing all the meanings of a multiword verb together – “tidy as the approach may seem – can be redundant as not all the meanings are equally appropriate for any group or level of learners”. (Gairns, Redman 2003:16)

I prefer teaching multiword verbs with different verbs and particles together which form a lexical set – such as:

Travel	check in, check out, get away, touch down, drop off
Food	pig out, eat out, wolf down, pick at, whip up
Relationships	hook up, hang out, fall for, break up, get along, get on

In the past, I have used texts from *Landmark Intermediate* (Appendix 1), to introduce multiword verbs in a context. Though the book stops at matching the verbs to meanings, I ask

learners to sequence the multiword verbs to tell their own travel story. Such personalization helps learners move the verbs from their receptive to productive vocabulary banks.

Authentic texts are a great resource to teach thematically linked multiword verbs. With intermediate Vietnamese learners, I use stories from Vietnamese blogs and news websites to focus on multiword verbs within the familiar context of local/national news (Appendix 2).

2. Recognition of Multiword Verbs

Separable multiword verbs are particularly hard to recognize for learners, especially if they are separated by a pronoun or noun phrase. Instead of seeing it as a whole “lexical chunk”, learners afford greater importance to the verb than the particle.

While some learners in a recent intermediate Vietnamese class I taught did not recognize the multiword verbs – “*keep* something *to* oneself,” and “*keep* something *from* somebody,” others were misled by the shared verb and separated particle. Both groups focused on the meaning of the verb *keep* in the multiword units and used them interchangeably. Missing the particle and its aspectual meaning leads learners to misinterpret the meaning of the sentences. (Parrott 2007:115)

Suggestions for Teaching:

In our teaching, we have to raise awareness of multiword verbs across texts to ensure that learners learn to recognize, analyze, and use them. While learners are often trained to look at texts and isolate words they want to look up in dictionaries, there is little emphasis on training learners to notice multiword verbs in their context, which can bring to attention the issue of separable verbs and particles.

According to Thornbury (2002:109), an approach that provides “plentiful exposure and consciousness-raising can help learners notice the patterns and regularities of language.” Understanding and noticing multiword verbs as chunks is necessary if input is to become optimal intake and facilitate output at a later stage. (Lewis 2001:180)

In my own experience, consciousness-raising activities have been useful in learners noticing particles in separable multiword verbs, and also how meanings change when the verb and particles are separated. Such activities work particularly well with intermediate learners since they already know some multiword verbs, and it's only a matter of acquiring a “critical mass of vocabulary to get them over the threshold of the second language” (Thornbury, 2006: 30).

A good way to draw attention to separability is by asking learners to find a limited number of separable multiword verbs in any given text, look up the meanings in a phrasal verb dictionary, and record these in personalized sentences.

During the review stage, learners can also sort the multiword verbs into separable and inseparable based on the examples in which they occur.

3. Persnickety Particles

Learners face a formidable challenge in transferring multiword verbs from their receptive to productive vocabulary. Multiword verbs take on idiomatic meanings as a result of the particle(s) in them. Unless they were learned as lexemes, learners may:

- **leave out the particle(s)** altogether, especially if it appears to have no intrinsic meaning. This is particularly common if the multiword verb has two particles.

e.g. I look forward our meeting.

He brought this subject during the meeting.

A Colombian lawyer with an advanced level of English often made the mistake of saying, “I will look the matter,” instead of “I will look into the matter.” Vietnamese learners are also prone to making similar mistakes since they are not used to seeing multiword verbs as a single lexical unit, and tend to leave the particle(s) out when forming sentences.

- **add unnecessary particles** creating a multiword verb, where none is needed:

e.g. We picked up apples in the field.

She attended to French lessons regularly before moving to France.

A colleague who worked in Kenya relates the case of Swahili speakers, one of whom wrote to her,

“When you reach at Benin, you can call to me.”

At the intermediate level, learners must become aware of which verbs can be combined with particle(s), and to what effect, in order to get their meaning across unambiguously.

- **choose the wrong particle**, especially if the chosen particle has a meaning similar to the idiomatic meaning of the multiword verb. In the case of a pre-intermediate level Urdu speaker I taught many years ago, L1 interference prompted her to say,

“My exams have been put away until next month.”

In Portuguese, *be careful* and *take care* share the same verb stem – *cuidado*. So learners may be predisposed to saying,

e.g. Be careful with him. Or, Take care with him. Instead of, Be careful of him.

(Swan, Smith 2001:126)

This is a common problem among Vietnamese learners too. At the intermediate level, learners often try to reuse newly acquired vocabulary but are not always able to produce it correctly. A few learners in my intermediate class are prone to say,

e.g. We take out our shoes before we enter the house. Instead of take off.

- **avoid splitting the verb from its particle** in separable multiword verbs. In my experience, this problem occurs frequently among Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese learners, who do not use multiword verbs in their L1. A Vietnamese learner in my intermediate general English class is particularly skeptical of splitting separable verbs with pronouns. He said,

“When I see a new word, I look up the word in my pocket dictionary.”

Greek learners face the same problem, placing the object pronoun after the particle instead of before.

"I rang up him yesterday." (Swan, Smith 2001:142)

Suggestions for Teaching:

To raise awareness of the possible permutations and combinations of multiword verbs, learners must have plenty of opportunities to "notice the linguistic wrapping in which the message is delivered" (Lewis 2006:159).

Though Lewis' lexical approach argues against focusing explicitly on some aspect of the linguistic form, I have found it useful to do it in the form of review games at the end of a lesson on multiword verbs, or the beginning of the next one.

In an overseas study preparation programme I taught, learners had to learn a lot of multiword verbs and it was essential to revisit newly learned vocabulary regularly. I often created puzzles based on a verb-particle-meaning matching activity in the Build Your Vocabulary series of books (Appendix 3). Such a consciousness-raising activity helps learners become more aware of particles, and avoid **leaving out** or **choosing the wrong particle**.

With the advanced Colombian learner and intermediate Vietnamese learners, I have used a sentence-building activity (Appendix 4) which directs learners' attention to the particles in multiword verbs and their position in the sentence vis-a-vis the object. The activity lends itself to a role-play which helps learners use the multiword verbs in a context.

4. Avoidance and Appropriacy

At the intermediate level, adopting a rule-based approach to teaching multiword verbs does not give learners the necessary tools to make lexis their own. In my experience, learners prefer to use one-word synonyms over multiword verbs even if sounds inappropriate, odd, or archaic.

Learners whose L1 shares Latinate roots with English, are tempted to substitute single word equivalents that resemble words in their own language in place of multiword verbs. According to a colleague, German learners prefer to say,

I reconciled with my boyfriend. Rather than, *I made it up with my boyfriend.*

I attribute it to his experience in the field. Rather than, *I put it down to his experience.*

Asian learners from China, Japan, and Vietnam, on the other hand, avoid using multiword verbs because similar lexical items have no equivalent in the L1. Both Vietnamese and Chinese learners at the intermediate level are more likely to say,

I have to continue doing my work. Rather than, *I have to get on with my work.*

Similarly, Polish learners are "more likely to say *return* than *give back*, *write* than *write down*, *cut* than *cut up*, *invent* than *make up*, *finish* than *use up*, *check* than *look up*, etc." (Swan,

Smith 2001:177) With multiword verbs being the norm rather than the exception in colloquial English, such avoidance and overuse of single-word synonyms makes learners sound formal and bookish.

Suggestions for Teaching:

Learners can be encouraged to use multiword verbs by not only exposing but also making them aware of the ubiquity of these lexical items in both formal and informal spoken and written discourse.

I try to use as much natural language as possible in the classroom, so that learners subconsciously become used to multiword verbs in speech, and draw attention to these from time to time. (Thornbury (2002:127) With higher level learners, I often bring authentic material into the classroom, and ask learners to identify, negotiate meaning from context, and personalize these multiword verbs such as the one in Appendix 2.

I also encourage learners to record new multiword units in tables such as the one I will use in my lesson on Thursday (Appendix 5).

IV. Conclusion

In order to sound natural and idiomatic, learners need to be able to use multiword verbs in discourse – both spoken and written. However, multiword verbs have traditionally been among the most difficult for learners to acquire, primarily because they are not introduced and treated as lexemes in the first place.

This affects learners' ability to chunk language lexically i.e. perceive and store new language in multiword units, or lexical chunks, which semantically and/or syntactically form a meaningful and inseparable unit.

In the process of researching this assignment, I have gained valuable insight into the value of multiword verbs in syllabus, the range of problems they pose to learners and ways to address them. I have also found a mine of resources that can be adapted and exploited in classrooms to introduce, practise, and review multiword verbs in a context.

By reflecting on problems inherent in the teaching and learning of multiword verbs, I have a better understanding of the reasons why such activities were not always successful in my lessons before, and how I can overcome these problems in the future.

Looking forward, I intend to integrate many more consciousness-raising activities that encourage learners to process language lexically, record it systematically, and use it regularly.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Landmark Intermediate Student's Book

Appendix 2 – Article from a Vietnamese news site

Appendix 3 – Build Your Vocabulary 3

Appendix 4 – Reward Intermediate Resource Pack

Appendix 5 – Vocabulary Recording Worksheet

“Time spent on half-known language is more likely to encourage input to become intake than time spent on completely new input. Again, Skehan suggests that “...very often, the pedagogic challenge is not to focus on the brand new, but instead to make accessible the relatively new.” (Lewis 2001:13)

Often, but not always, multiword verbs have one-word synonyms that are preferred by learners, especially those with Latin-based L1.

For e.g. Phrasal verbs usually have one-word synonym that sounds more formal and preferred in formal contexts than their equivalents phrasal verbs but both can replace each other and exist in language structure. (Grains, R. and Redman, S.1986). Since phrasal verbs could be sometimes replaced by Latinate word synonym, they said that, they have semantic coherence. We will illustrate this idea in the following table (McCarthy and O' Dell. 2008).

multiword verbs form a significant part of all communication – both verbal and written, informal and formal – and are hence, very important for learners.

The teacher's role is to present multiword items in authentic contexts, provide opportunities to use them for authentic purposes, and review them periodically until they become part of mental lexicon.

However, unlike German, in which a particle goes at the end of a long clause, English prefers its particles to stay generally closer to the verb. So a sentence like “I dropped the children at their new school off,” while grammatically correct, would sound very awkward to a native speaker (Cowan, 2008).

The publication of “Lexical Approach” (1992), development of corpus linguistics, and research into collocations and frequency firmly shifted the focus to vocabulary. After all, “Language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar.” (Lewis 1993:34)

Wilkins (1972:111) preempted the shift from grammar-based teaching when he said, “Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without lexis, nothing can be conveyed.”

Learners are always eager to expand their vocabulary, and find it rewarding to learn new words that help them communicate effectively.