Stefan Thim


Much has been written about the English phrasal verb, yet there are still some unsolved questions or misconceptions around. Most of these are critically (re-)examined in the book under review, in particular the following ones: phrasal verbs 1) are a typically English phenomenon (cf. the various special dictionaries of English phrasal verbs); 2) are and have always been marked as belonging to informal registers; 3) are of Germanic, not Romance etymology; 4) arise after the Middle English period and have become more and more frequent after that; 5) replace the older verbs with inseparable prefixes which are still frequent in Old English. As Thim shows in this book, many of these assumptions are not quite accurate. He particularly highlights the fact that all Germanic languages share a very similar development of such verb-particle combinations, and that what appears as a rise of the phrasal verb in the history of English is actually only an epiphenomenon of changes in word order.

Basically, the book is structured along the different focus areas in previous work on phrasal verbs. After the Introduction (pp. 1–9), where the aims of the study are laid out, Chapter 2 (pp. 10–73) focuses on the characteristics of the phrasal verb in present-day English. Based on their semantics, Thim proposes three idealized types of phrasal verbs (pp. 11–20): a) semantically compositional verb-particle combinations in which the particle is directional (e.g., *to come in*), b) semantically compositional verb-particle combinations in which the particle is aspectual (e.g., *to finish up*), and c) non-compositional, i.e. idiomatic, verb-particle combinations (e.g., *to give up*). While group a) is not always covered in the traditional use of the term *phrasal verb* (cf., e.g., Quirk et al.’s *free combinations* (1985: 1152–1154), and Biber et al., 1999: 403–404), it is of course necessary to include these combinations in a diachronically oriented study, in particular since verbs of this type are sources of the other two. Yet, claims in the literature that phrasal verbs tend to belong to informal registers sometimes explicitly refer to the idiomatic combinations alone (Thim’s group c); e.g., Quirk et al., 1985: 1152), so that some of the debate (question 2 above) might also be a consequence of different views of what a ‘phrasal verb’ is.

This categorization is followed by a description of the syntactic features of phrasal verbs and by their delimitation from prepositional verbs and the concept of ‘multi-word-verbs’ in general. An overview of particle verbs in other present-day Germanic languages (pp. 45–55) then shows that “the semantic and syntactic properties of the English phrasal verbs are in essential aspects identical to those of the particle verbs in the other Germanic languages” (p. 54),
and are hence not particular to English. The ‘synchronic’ Chapter 2 ends with a convincingly argued proposal to treat phrasal verbs as periphrastic word-formations (pp. 55–72; based on Booij, 2002 for Dutch), with the idiomatic phrasal verbs (group c) above) simply representing more lexicalized formations than the compositional phrasal verbs (groups a) and b)).

Chapter 3 (pp. 74–116) puts the phrasal verb into a diachronic and crosslinguistic perspective. Thim begins very broadly with a discussion of the notion of ‘preverbs’ in general (e.g., Booij and van Kemenade, 2003); this notion from comparative linguistics proves to be a fruitful alternative to the part-of-speech based discussion of the Old English particles (adverb? prefix? preposition?) predominant in English studies. With examples from different non-Indo-European (pp. 78–81) and Indo-European languages (pp. 81–89), preverbs and their diachronic developments are illustrated: like adpositions, preverbs have their origin in adverbial particles connecting a verb and a noun. If the particle develops a closer association with the noun, it becomes an adposition; if it develops a closer association with the verb, it becomes a preverb. In a language with predominant ov order, the preverb will commonly be placed before the verb and develop into a prefix; in a vo language, by contrast, it will be realized after the verb and develop into the postverbal particle of a verb-particle construction (cf. the different orders in Modern German main and subordinate clauses: postverbal particle position in main clauses, e.g. sie geht hinaus ‘she goes out’; preverbal position in subordinate clauses, e.g. dass sie hinausgeht ‘that she out-goes’). Applied to Modern English, this means that the native prefixes (e.g. be- in to beset) still reflect the language’s earlier ov stage, while the postverbal particles (e.g. up in to give up) reflect the later vo stage that was reached towards the end of the Middle English period (p. 88). Both, however, share a common origin.

The development of English word order, from earlier Germanic to Modern English, and the resulting position of the particle are discussed next (pp. 89–115), since the position of the particle is dependent on word order. Building heavily on previous work by Hiltunen (1983), Thim argues that what changes position is actually not the particle, but first and foremost the finite verb: from the original o prt v v1 in ov order via v o prt v in the clausal brace to v v o prt or v v prt o with exbraciation (p. 104). Roughly, the move of the verb from ov to vo entails that the verb comes to be placed before the particle. The illustrating examples provided in this section would have benefited from more context and discussion at times; it does not become clear, for instance, why fordam

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1 o: object; prt: particle; v: non-finite verb; v: finite verb.