

## THE TREATMENT OF *PHRASAL VERBS* IN BILINGUAL LEARNER DICTIONARIES: IMPLICATIONS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how reference materials (i.e. dictionaries) commonly prescribed to Malaysian school learners address and describe a very common and important linguistic feature - phrasal verbs. Two bilingual learner dictionaries frequently recommended for secondary school learners in Malaysia were examined. Analysis of common phrasal verbs like pick up, come out, and go out was carried out by examining entries in the dictionaries that discuss this linguistic feature. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine how this particular language form is described by looking at the selection of phrasal verbs, as well as information provided with respect to phrasal verbs. Results of the analysis have revealed some interesting findings with regard to the selection and description of phrasal verbs in these dictionaries, which may have also contributed to learners' difficulties in understanding and learning the language form. The paper will be concluded by discussing some recommendations with respect to the inclusion and selection of phrasal verbs in language reference materials particularly dictionaries in Malaysian schools.

**Keywords:** *Corpus, Phrasal Verbs, Reference Materials*

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### Introduction

Phrasal verbs (PVs) are ubiquitous and very common in English - in formal or informal registers as well as in written and spoken discourse (De Cock 2005). Generally PVs are defined as a combination of two lexical elements: a verb and a particle, which carries a particular meaning (*carry out=perform; look into=investigate; go up=increase*). In many cases, the use of PVs is believed to be more appropriate and sound more natural in expressing certain ideas (Fletcher 2005).

Most PVs are metaphorical in meanings and it is believed that 'metaphoric intelligence' has an important role to play in all areas of communicative competence and can contribute to language learning success (Littlemore & Low 2006). Many PVs have multiple meanings which can be literal or non literal (e.g *take off* - remove clothing; leave the ground and fly). It was reported that the 100 most frequent PVs in the British National Corpus (BNC) have 559 potential meaning senses, or an average of 5.6 per PV. This clearly suggests the importance of PVs in language learning and without having good knowledge of PVs and an ability to use them appropriately, it is almost impossible for learners to gain fluency in English and be successful in learning the language.

Despite the importance of PVs in language learning, there is general consensus that they are difficult for second language (L2) learners to master (Littlemore & Low 2006; De Cock 2005). Cross-linguistic factors, particularly the influence of learners' first language (L1) and the non-existence of PV structure in learners' L1s may affect learners' understanding of PVs, which may result in the avoidance of PVs (El-Dakhs 2016; Kamarudin 2013b). Apart from that, learners' lack of awareness of common collocates, regular patterns and usage, is also reported to lead to deviant or non-standard use of PVs by language learners (Littlemore, & Low 2006; Zarifi & Mukundan 2014).

'Transitivity' and 'separability' of PVs elements is among other aspects of PVs that can cause further confusion for learners. While transitive PVs allow particle movement in which the lexical verb and the particle can be separated (e.g. He *picked* the phone *up*); intransitive PVs do not (e.g. He *sat down*). Learners may also avoid PVs due to their semantic complexity (Houshyar & Talebinezhad 2012) as most PVs carry multiple meanings which can be literal or idiomatic. It is reported that ESL learners at all levels use less idiomatic PVs (Akbari 2009). Thus, due to the complex nature of the PV itself, language learners may find this linguistic form difficult to learn and understand.

In Malaysian schools, apart from the prescribed textbooks, a 'good' dictionary is another additional source of information that is highly encouraged in language classrooms. The choice of dictionaries to be used is usually recommended by the language teachers. Even though the use of monolingual (English-English) dictionaries is always encouraged, learners seem to be more comfortable in using the bilingual versions (Malay-English or English-Malay), which is the type of dictionary frequently referred to by school learners in learning the target language. Even though on-line dictionaries are freely available, learners can rarely use them in language classrooms, mainly due to the limited access of computer facilities and networking. Generally, the use of electronic dictionaries is hardly found in language classrooms in Malaysia, particularly in schools, perhaps due to the cost and availability.

As far as pedagogical aspect is concerned, it is often suggested that learners should be first introduced to the high frequency PVs rather than the less frequent ones (Gardner & Davies 2007) as they are more useful to learners in the real world. In other words, the 'core sense' or most common and useful meanings of PVs should be the first sense to be taught and learned. This suggests that reference material providers including learner dictionaries should take this fact into consideration in the selection of PVs to be included in their dictionaries.

With regard to the treatment of PVs in dictionaries, Alanaser (2010) found that L1 (in his case Arabic) multi-word items were treated better than the English multi-word items in their respective dictionaries indicating that English multi-word items like PVs receive less attention by dictionary providers. Findings of Dezortová's (2010) study also indicate bilingual dictionaries (in her case English-Czech) do not provide a large number of PVs meanings and they do not sort these meanings according to the frequency of occurrence; and the dictionaries also do not provide more complete information with respect to PVs.

Hence, the present study is conducted to examine how PVs are treated in two bilingual dictionaries commonly used by school learners in Malaysia. An analysis is carried out to determine whether such dictionaries take into account the PVs 'frequency of occurrence' factor and whether they also provide sufficient and relevant information with respect to PVs to improve learners' understanding and their productive use of this language form.

### Methods

Two bilingual dictionaries selected for examination in the present study are produced by leading publishers in Malaysia and commonly recommended by teachers: Oxford Fajar Sdn. Bhd. and Pearson Longman Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. Besides dictionaries, they also produce many other supplementary materials, specifically for language teaching and learning in Malaysia (e.g. reference books, examination practice, techniques in answering exam questions). However, these supplementary materials are not compulsory materials in language classrooms, though learners are usually encouraged to purchase them for individual, additional practice outside classrooms. For the purpose of this study, two bilingual dictionaries that are frequently recommended by language teachers and commonly used by learners in and outside the language classrooms will be investigated. The two bilingual dictionaries are:

- 1) Kamus Dwibahasa Longman (KDL), 2nd edition (2009)
- 2) Kamus Dwibahasa Oxford Fajar (KDO), 4th edition (2008)

The reasons for choosing these bilingual dictionaries are because they are the ones frequently used by learners in language classrooms, even though the use of monolingual dictionaries is always encouraged. Although monolingual dictionaries are available on the market and there are a few that specifically focus on PVs, this type of dictionary is infrequently used by school learners. Instead, bilingual dictionaries which combine both single and multi-word items in the same entry are always the most popular choice of learners, while monolingual dictionaries are usually preferred by learners at a higher level of learning (i.e. college or university level).

These two dictionaries were manually scrutinised and descriptive analysis was conducted particularly to examine the selection of PVs included in the dictionaries, as well as how these selected PVs are addressed and explained.

### Results and Discussions

In common with bilingual dictionaries, both dictionaries are divided into two main sections: English to Malay, and Malay to English translation. KDO has approximately 50,000 headwords and derivative words while KDL claims to have more than 50,000. More pages are allocated for the English-Malay section with 713 and 470 pages in KDL and KDO, respectively. The present analysis however, will only focus on the English-Malay section.

In general, PVs are listed under headword entries in both dictionaries. For instance, *come up* is listed under the headword *come*; *take off* can be found under the headword *take*, etc., as shown in Figure 1 below.

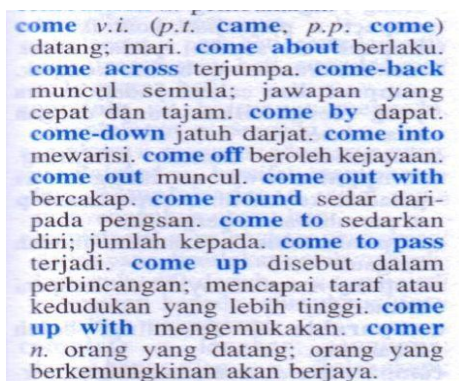


Figure 1. Headword entries in KDL and KDO

As far as KDL is concerned, PVs are presented together with L1 meanings and L2 synonyms (SYN), as shown in the example taken from the KDL below.

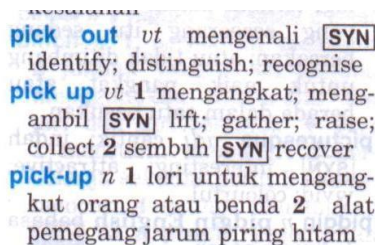


Figure 2. PVs in KDL

The KDL in this respect is very clear in its way of informing learners of two possible meanings of *pick up*, indicated by numbers (see above). At the same time, the dictionary also provides L2 synonyms or one-word verb equivalents of that particular item, which, to a certain extent, is helpful

for learners as they can get the meanings of a particular PV in both L1 and L2 simultaneously. However, Side (1990) points out that this approach will cause learners to “stick to and use the Latin definition rather than the Anglo-Saxon phrasal verb, especially if it is a one-word definition” (p. 145). Kamarudin (2013a) in her corpus analysis of PV *pick up* (to get better in health) for instance, further confirms Side’s (1990) claim in which she found no instance of *pick up* in this sense appears in the learner corpus, instead learners show great tendency to use the one-word verb *recover* (e.g. ‘Izal and the girl was admitted for two days in the hospital and *recovered* very fast’). This is probably because *recover* is easier to learn, and it also has an equivalent in learners’ L1 (*sembuh*), thus it seems to make more sense to learners.

However, according to Parkinson (2001), providing learners with synonyms will allow them to decide whether a PV or a single-word equivalent is the more appropriate choice. This is perhaps true in the case of advanced or more proficient learners as they may be able to decide whether PVs or one-word verbs are more appropriate to be used in a particular context. On the other hand, learners at a lower school level may have difficulty in making an appropriate choice, as they are not aware of the context or register that influences the choice between a one-word equivalent and a PV. For instance, although *resemble* (‘to be similar to someone or something else’) is equivalent to *take after*, the PV *take after* is only used to refer to people in the same family who resemble each other; similarly, the PV *carry out* is commonly used in a less formal register than its one-word verb *perform* (‘to do something that you have a responsibility to do’). Thus, providing PV synonyms to learners at a lower level may not be very helpful as this will increase their tendency to use the one-word equivalents, which may be less appropriate in a particular context than their PV counterparts.

Clearly, the provision of a synonym or equivalent needs to be supplemented with clear examples to illustrate differences in terms of usage and register in order to help learners in making appropriate choices, and to avoid learners, especially those at a lower school level, assuming that the one-word verb synonyms given are an exact replacement of PVs and can be used interchangeably. As examples are not provided in the dictionaries to further illustrate the context of use, this approach is probably more useful for learners in ‘decoding’ word meanings, such as in reading comprehension activities, but not very helpful as a learning aid to understand and encourage appropriate and frequent use of this language form for better fluency in the target language.

As far as the KDO is concerned, it simply provides a list of possible meanings of an L2 lexical item in learners’ L1. However, for L2 neither synonyms nor examples to illustrate the different contexts of use are provided. Below is an example taken from the KDO to illustrate this:

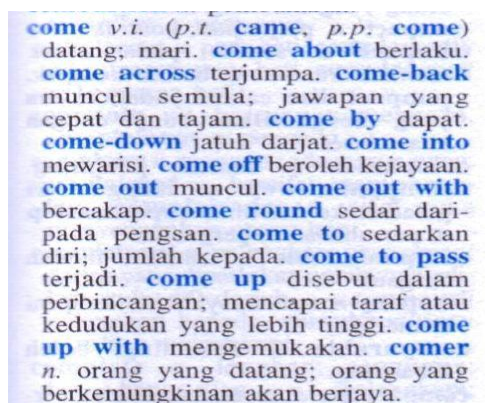


Figure 3. PVs in KDO

Even though KDO actually provides more meanings (e.g. three different senses of *pick up*) compared to KDL, these different meanings should have been presented more systematically (e.g. use of numbers to indicate different senses) and in a more meaningful way (e.g. examples to illustrate usage)

for learners to gain a better understanding of the PVs they learn instead of simply listing all possible meanings in isolation.

It is rather surprising that none of these dictionaries provide examples to illustrate how lexical items are used in context. As many English words including PVs are polysemous and have multiple meanings, it is important that learners are provided with examples to facilitate better understanding of lexical items that they are looking for. Provision of examples is also essential so that learners are aware of common collocates, and grammatical patterns of a particular lexical item presented in a dictionary. Closer examination of the two dictionaries shows that none of them provide examples in context to illustrate the meaning and usage of PVs, and no information with respect to grammatical pattern (e.g. aspects related to transitivity and separability of PVs) is presented. As a result, this may lead to the non-standard use of many common PVs by language learners (Kamarudin, 2013b).

Further examination of the two dictionaries has also revealed that a number of core meanings of high frequency PVs are not provided. Although the core meanings of PVs are very transparent and can be easily understood by learners simply by combining the meanings of each individual unit, it was reported that learners still have problems in using core meanings of high frequency PVs, such as *come out*, *go out*, *fall down*, *take off* (Kamarudin, 2013b) indicating that they should also receive equal attention in learner dictionaries. In the case of *get off*, for instance, it is rather surprising that KDO does not include the core meaning of *get off* (to leave a bus/train), which is very common in native speakers' discourse and more useful to learners is not listed. Similarly, the core meaning of *go out* (to leave a place/building) is also not provided in the KDO. Figure 4 below shows an entry containing *get off* and *go out* taken from the KDO:

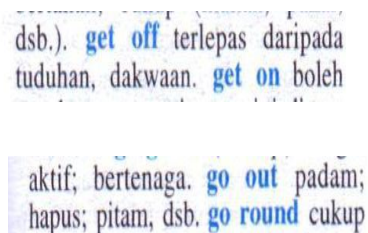


Figure 4. PVs *get off* and *go out* in KDO

A similar example can also be found in the KDL. PV *set up* is simply defined as *menubuhkan organisasi* (to *set up* an organization) in this particular dictionary as shown in Figure 5 below:

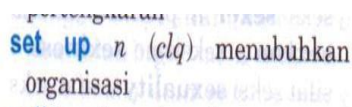


Figure 5. PV *set up* in KDL

Other common associations of *set up* (e.g. *set up* a structure/a piece of equipment/home/shop/business), which can be illustrated through examples are not provided to inform learners about other core meanings and usage of this PV. Thus, learners may not be aware of other core meanings of *set up*, which is perhaps part of the reason for the non-occurrence of *set up* with nouns like *home*, *shop* and *business* in the EMAS corpus as reported in Kamarudin's (2013a) study.

Further analysis also indicate that the dictionaries do not give enough attention to the selection of high frequency PVs Table 1 below summarizes the occurrence of the top 20 high frequency PVs listed by Garner and Davies (2007) in both dictionaries:

Table 1. The occurrence of 20 high frequency PVs in the KDO and KDL

<i>Phrasal verbs (PVs)</i>	<i>Kamus Dwibahasa Oxford (KDO)</i>	<i>Kamus Dwibahasa Longman (KDL)</i>
<i>go on</i>	X	X
<i>carry out</i>	/	/
<i>set up</i>	X	/
<i>pick up</i>	/	(coded as noun)
<i>go back</i>	X	/
<i>come back</i>	X	X
<i>go out</i>	/	X
<i>point out</i>	/	X
<i>find out</i>	/	X
<i>come up</i>	/	/
<i>make up</i>	/	X
<i>take over</i>	/	/
<i>come out</i>	(coded as noun)	X
<i>come on</i>		X
<i>come in</i>	/	X
<i>go down</i>	X	X
<i>work out</i>	X	X
<i>set out</i>	X	/
<i>take up</i>	/	/
<i>get back</i>	/	/
	/	X
	X	

\* X=not listed  
/ =listed

Table 1 above shows that of all the 20 high frequency PVs, the KDO lists 12 of them, and only 8 are found in the KDL. This indicates that many of the high frequency PVs that are widely used by native speakers in everyday settings and thus very useful for learners are not listed in the two dictionaries investigated. Table 1 shows that PV *go on* is first in the list, and the *Collins COBUILD Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* provides 19 different senses of *go on* which suggests that this PV has a wide range of meanings and usage in everyday settings, and, therefore, is very useful for learners. However, this high frequency PV is not listed in both dictionaries under investigation. Similarly, PVs *go back*, *come back*, *come in*, *go down*, *get back* are also not listed in both dictionaries; and high frequency PVs *go out*, *come out*, *go up*, *go down*, which are found to be problematic to learners (Kamarudin, 2013a) are also not listed in the KDL.

In fact, closer examination of the two dictionaries indicates that neither of the publishers claim that their dictionaries are corpus-based and produced with the benefit of frequency counts, which are very helpful in identifying those PVs that are very frequent in native speakers' discourse, commonly used in everyday settings, and, therefore, most useful for learners. Poor selection will undoubtedly result in presenting less frequent and less useful lexical items, including PVs to learners.

Apart from that, there is also a lack of consistency in the way the various meanings of PVs are presented in these two dictionaries. Both KDL and KDO for instance, provide literal meanings of

certain PVs (e.g. *pick up*, *come out*), but fail to include literal meanings of many other high frequency PVs (e.g. *look up*, *go out*, *put down*, *fall down*). As many learners are still having difficulties in dealing with the literal meanings of PVs like *go out* and *fall down*, literal meanings should therefore be included in learner dictionaries. Inconsistency can also be seen in terms of the selection of senses to be included in the dictionaries. Closer examination of the dictionaries reveals that, in most cases, the core meanings of PVs are presented but there are also instances in which core meanings are absent (see discussion above).

Another example to illustrate the inconsistency in the KDL – a rather surprising example which may even confuse learners – is the categorization of *set up* ('*menubuhkan organisasi*': to *set up* an organization), which is denoted as a noun (*n*) instead of a verb (*vt*) (see Figure 5). This combination can appear in a noun form as *set-up* (a way of organizing something) instead of *set up* which is clearly a PV. Thus, learners who refer to this dictionary may get confused with respect to the classification of the PV *set up* above, whether it is a verb, noun or both. Similarly, although a combination of *break* and *down* can function as both a PV (i.e. *break down* – stop working) and a noun (i.e. *breakdown* – a mechanical failure), only *breakdown* (*n*) is listed in the KDL but not the PV *break down*. Even though both may share a close meaning associated with a machine or vehicle, their grammatical pattern and usage are clearly different and they should be both included and addressed separately to avoid confusion among learners. Figure 6 below are examples to illustrate this.

**breakdown** *n* 1 kegagalan (sistem atau perhubungan) 2 keadaan seseorang menjadi sakit secara mental akibat tekanan hidup atau kerja 3 kerosakan (kenderaan atau mesin) 4 pecahan 5 [S] penguraian

Figure 6. PVs *break down* in KDL

Closer analysis also indicates that various types of 'lexical phrase', such as compounds, collocations, idioms, PVs, prepositional verbs, are listed together in the same entry. For instance, in the KDO, under the headword *go*, a learner may find a compound (*go-cart*), prepositional verb (*go for*), PV (*go out*, *go up*), and phrasal prepositional verb (*go back on*), and other common phrase (*on the go*). Similarly, collocations (*take care of*, *take part*, *take place*), PVs (*take after*, *take down*, *take off*), and other common phrases (*take a bite*, *take a break*) are listed together in the same entry in the KDL, under the head word *take*. There is no indication provided to inform learners of their differences. Figure 7 below are examples to illustrate this.

**go** *v.i.* (*p.t.* **went**, *p.p.* **gone**) pergi; lalu; lulus; jadi; jalan; berjalan; hilang; hapus; habis; pimpin; bimbing. —*n.* (*pl.* **goes**) tenaga; kuasa; giliran; cubaan; kejayaan; serangan penyakit. **be going to** akan; hendak (buat sesuatu). **go-ahead** *n.* isyarat agar memulakan (sesuatu); kebenaran; izin. **go back on** mungkir. **go-between** *n.* orang tengah. **go-cart** *n.* go-kart; kereta lumba yang kecil. **go-karting** perlumbaan go-kart. **go for** (*sl.*) serang. **go-getter** *n.* (*colloq.*) orang yang bersungguh atau berusaha untuk mencapai atau mendapatkan sesuatu. **go-go** *a.* (*colloq.*) sangat aktif; bertenaga. **go out** padam; hapus; pitam, dsb. **go round** cukup untuk semua. **go-slow** *n.* perbuatan melambatkan kerja (mogok). **go under** gagal; kalah. **go up** naik harga; meningkat; meletup; terbakar dengan cepat. **go with** sepadan; serasi; sesuai. **on the go** sentiasa bergerak.

7 memilih [SYN] select 8 mengerti 9 mencatat 10 menyangka [SYN] assume; believe; perceive 11 menggunakan 12 mengikut jalan 13 makan atau minum **taker** *n* pengambil **taking** *adj* menawan hati [SYN] attractive; charming **takings** *n* wang perolehan [SYN] income; profits; revenue **take a bite** merasa sedikit **take a break** berehat sekejap **take air** bersiar-siar **take after** 1 serupa dengan 2 mengejar **take care of** mengurus **take down** mencatat **take force** merampas **take in** 1 memahami; mengerti [SYN] understand; comprehend 2 tertipu; terpedaya [SYN] deceive; cheat **take off** 1 berlepas (dengan kapal terbang) [SYN] departure; lift off 2 menanggalkan pakaian **take part** mengambil bahagian [SYN] involved in **take place** terjadi; berlaku **take sides** memihak **take up** mengambil; mempelajari [SYN] occupy; adopt

Figure 7. Mixture of 'lexical phrase' in one entry

If learner dictionaries are to be regarded as a learning aid to improve fluency in the target language, clearly, further information concerning the differences is needed. Thus, having separate sections on PVs and other 'lexical phrases', or, better, a specialized bilingual PV dictionary with all the relevant information might be more helpful for learners. As stated earlier, with the limited period of learning English in classrooms, it is quite impossible for language teachers to discuss PVs in depth. However, with the help of more systematic and comprehensive dictionaries, learners would at least be aware of other important information with respect to PVs not addressed in classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

In brief, analysis of the two learner dictionaries above has highlighted several shortcomings of the present dictionaries, which are commonly recommended to and used by Malaysian school learners, particularly with respect to PVs. In general, learners may find that these dictionaries are not very helpful when it comes to learning and understanding PVs because of the absence of examples or sentences to illustrate various meanings, usage and typical grammatical patterns of PVs. The lack of consistency in the way PVs are presented may even confuse learners in their effort to understand this language feature. Most importantly, the selection process of PVs to be included in the two selected dictionaries was conducted without sufficient consideration with respect to frequency to ensure that high frequency PVs, which are more useful to learners, are first presented rather than the less frequent ones. Thus, it is suggested that dictionary writers should make use of corpus data to identify high frequency PVs and their core meanings rather than using their own assumption and intuition, which may not always be correct. This is to ensure that learners are provided with PVs, which are useful for them in everyday communication.

As learners rely greatly on this type of dictionary (bilingual), especially in language classrooms, it is suggested that dictionary writers in Malaysia should also consider including more information (e.g. examples, core meanings, grammatical patterns) to further facilitate learners in learning and understanding L2 lexical items, particularly PVs. Failure to do so will not only lead to confusion among learners, but, most importantly, they will not be able to use the target language appropriately and fluently. However, it is not the intention of the present analysis to find fault in the two dictionaries above, but more towards helping dictionary writers in Malaysia, in particular, to improve the present approach of selecting and presenting lexical items, specifically PVs, to language learners. Perhaps with so much information with respect to PVs that needs to be included and explained to learners, it is suggested that publishing a separate section focussing on PVs, or a special dictionary of PVs, might be a better option. However, as far as learner dictionaries are concerned, it is rather unfair to conclude that dictionary writers are solely responsible for the inability of learners to understand and use PVs appropriately. Apart from the deficiencies with respect to PVs found in the two dictionaries above, it was also reported that Malaysian learners of English are also poor dictionary users (Abd. Manan & Al-Zubaidi, 2011). Thus, on the part of teachers, it might also be helpful to emphasize good dictionary skills so that learners can utilise their dictionaries more effectively.

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