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5. Phrasal Verbs and Phrasal Units: Political Corpora Within the Walls of the Classroom

1. Introduction

This chapter has a twofold purpose. First, it focusses on a feature much dreaded by learners, that is phrasal verbs, those verbs followed by one, two or even more adverbial or prepositional particles, each of which has a semantically autonomous existence but together they make a meaning that cannot be predicted from the meanings of the parts. All the examples provided here are taken from an 18 million-word corpus of political speeches (henceforth ABC)[1] delivered by British and American politicians from November 2001 to November 2011. Second, the present research aims to prove the several advantages of teaching and learning through corpora, drawing only on real-life language data, i.e. on language that has in fact occurred (Römer 2008: 116), giving students a richer language-learning experience (Dodd 1997: 131) in a significantly enriched learning environment (Aston 1997: 51).

After more than three decades of research on electronic corpora, many course books are still lagging behind this development and seem to be rather unaffected by advances in Corpus Linguistics. Kennedy (1992: 366) cautions that "invented examples can present a distorted version of typicality or an over-tidy picture of the system"; Sinclair (1991: 5) calls it "an absurd notion that invented examples can actually represent the language better than real ones": we cannot trust

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1   The corpus, originally called BBB from the initials of the three politicians under investigation, Blair, Bush and Berlusconi, has recently been baptized ABC, American British Corpus.

our ability to make up examples, and this practice would also be "just nonsense" from a semantic point of view (Firth 1957: 24).

As Tribble (2012) has shown, Corpus Linguistics in the classroom still remains a minority sport. In his last survey it emerged that the gap between corpora and the teaching reality is still far too wide, and the extent to which corpora and concordances are being used in the classroom is as yet fairly limited (Römer 2008: 123). After an informal survey carried out among colleagues, it seems to me that the reason why corpora are still not relied on as much as they should be lies in the fact that, being corpora genuine language, it is often believed that they are likely to include language which is too convoluted, too complicated to start with, hence they should become part of the syllabus only in higher levels of achievement. Thus, most educators prefer, for example, to teach one-word rather than multi-word verbs, starting with expressions like *Barack Obama took office in January 2009*, or *Barack Obama took the sacred oath in January 2009*, procrastinating structures like *Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States in January 2009* to the latest possible moment. Hence, not only do teachers tend to postpone the teaching of phrasal verbs, but also learners tend to avoid their use as long as they can although native speakers not only manage them with aplomb but seem to prefer them to single-word alternatives.

Undoubtedly, learning the Latinate verb is easier than learning the phrasal verb, especially when such a form has a correspondent in the students' native language (Side 1990: 145), as is the case of *tolerate* for Italian students, even though the instances of *put up with* in our spoken political corpus are higher in terms of frequency than those of *tolerate*. Contrary to common belief, substituting the phrasal verb with a single-word equivalent or synonym very often seems out of place and sounds rather awkward, given that in several cases phrasal verbs and their synonyms have different ranges of use, meaning and collocations (Sinclair/Moon 2011: v). Students are often taught phrasal verbs in combination with their Romance one-word 'equivalent' – *tolerate* equals *put up with*, *postpone* is the same as *put off*, *look into* means *investigate* – but, as Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1162) maintain, the substitution of a multi-word verb with a single-word verb may not be entirely reliable. In this respect, McArthur and Atkins (1974: 6) add that verbs of classical origin may have similar meanings

but may have often unsuitable overtones of formality, pomposity or difficulty.

It is often said (Sinclair/Moon 2011) that phrasal verbs tend to be rather colloquial or informal and more appropriate to spoken than written English: this was confirmed in our analysis of EU documents, where only five phrasal verbs were found: *lay down*, *provide for*, *set out*, *agree upon*, *carry out*. Such scant presence in this type of specialized language is hardly surprising, given also that legal language, and European legal language in particular, exhibits several differences with respect to general written English, being even more restricted and farther from spoken language. In this respect, Reppen (2010) shows that in academic writing almost overwhelmingly a single-word verb is preferred to a multi-word verb which, instead, is usually avoided. Conversely, spoken English abounds in multi-word verbs, be they phrasal, prepositional, or phrasal-prepositional, hence they do need to be taught if we want our students to sound native-like and if native English is still to be regarded as a target model. It is worth underlining that, even though the current debate on English as an international language is questioning the status of the idealized native speaker as a target model (Bernardini 2004: 30), we cannot deny that most of us rely on native speaker language performance and strive to achieve the native standard as closely as possible.

It is worth adding, at this point, that most political speeches are not *ad lib*, off-the-cuff, as it were: speeches proper and statements are often pre-prepared, written-to-be-spoken, whereas interviews are the most extemporaneous, thus exhibiting similar features to spoken English. It is in fact in interviews that we most frequently encounter phraseology, in the form of both phrasal verbs and phrases. We are not going to delve here into the complicated issue of the differences between spoken and written language, but it cannot be denied that spoken language is often believed to be more chaotic, incomplete, convoluted, and containing linguistic phenomena that defy traditional written norms, which would be regarded by pedagogical grammars as proscribed and unacceptable. Whether this is true or not, what students need the most is to be exposed to real language, and setting these features aside from the teaching material would mean to make them a disservice. We need spoken data for teaching spoken language, and we need authentic data to teach authentic language. Spoken data can

achieve high authenticity, serve as communication aids, and provide irreplaceable models of the target language (Mauranen 2004a).

The present chapter presents a project carried out with undergraduates at the Department of Political Science at the University of Bari. The main purpose of the research was to allow students to work exclusively with real and attested spoken language, in order to capture the regularities/irregularities that are reflected only in authentic data. Phrasal verbs, in the case in point, receive scant attention both in traditional books and dictionaries, and are usually relegated to the end of the book. It is well-known that phrasal verbs create endless problems for learners: they seem to be anarchic, unstable, one-off items that do not fit into a tidy description and relate in mysterious ways to word meaning (Sinclair 1996); yet they are very common in spoken language, in both political and general language, and corpora are an invaluable resource to enable students, and teachers alike, to learn (and teach) the words and the phrases that the learners will use later on in order to handle texts in their subject areas (Gavioli 2006).

2. Ambiguity and disambiguity of one-word and multi-word verbs

Students at Political Science are particularly motivated and interested in analysing political speeches, not only because being informed on topical issues is part of their syllabus, but also because they do not major in English nor are they likely to become language professionals, and one of the main skills they will need in their professional lives is giving presentations: what they mostly need is record language spoken in situations in which they are likely to find themselves (Aston *et al.* 2004).

As to their level of linguistic competence, the initial entry test submitted on the first day of the semester (March 2010) had shown that 70% of students had reached a B1 level (although not all of them had earned the PET certificate), 20% had reached a B2 level (with

only ten students holding a FCE). Only a very tiny percentage had a good mastery of the English language, with two students holding the TOEFL certificate and one the Proficiency Certificate of English released by Cambridge University. The remaining were students who had never studied English before (at least so they claimed), or had attended an English course many years ago, mainly adults and working students.

We very often watch and listen to the videos in class, despite the lack of ad-hoc labs and the huge number of attendees – between 400 and 500. Our courses, apart from a short module on the language of the Treaty of Lisbon and the failed European Constitution, focus mainly on spoken language, in particular on the language as uttered by British and American politicians in government and in opposition. At the end of the semester, students are invited to carry out their own project choosing one or more items to investigate: those who accept the challenge become enthusiastic about the insights they gain and come up with very interesting results that may be sometimes unknown to the teacher. Most students are particularly attracted by ambiguity and synonymy and, unsurprisingly, phrases and phrasal verbs. The verbs they usually choose as an item to analyse are *take*, *make*, *give* and *turn*: these are verbs they are all familiar with when taken individually, and what fascinates them most is how they change their meaning when in context and, first and foremost, how several multi-word verbs have no semantic relationship with the single-word lexical verb.

A phrasal verb is a difficult word to isolate semantically and it has to be put into context because in most of its usage it contributes to meaning in combination with other words. Frustrating enough for the student, most of the time also the one-word lexical verb needs its language environment in order to carry meaning, as is the case of the verb *turn*, which, as mentioned earlier, is well-known to students in their first year of university. What needs to be highlighted, though, is that the meaning they are familiar with is the one that the dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, rank first, as the figures below show:
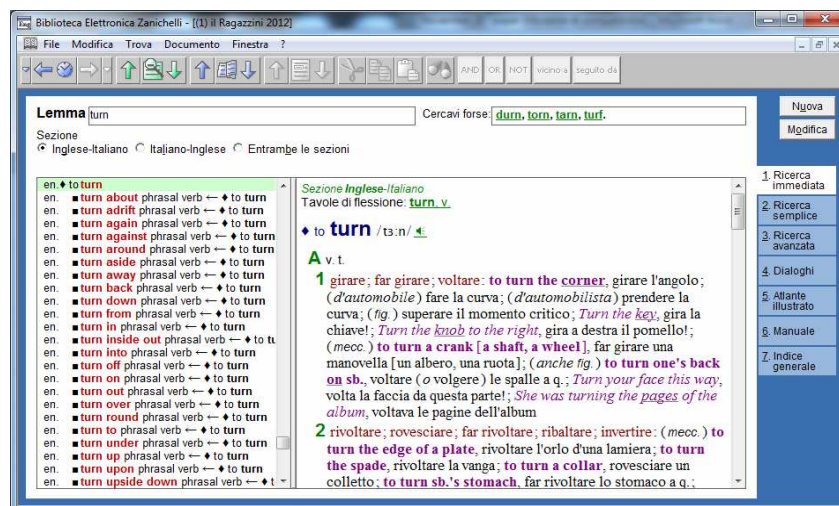
Figure 1a. The verb *turn* in the *Ragazzini* (2012).
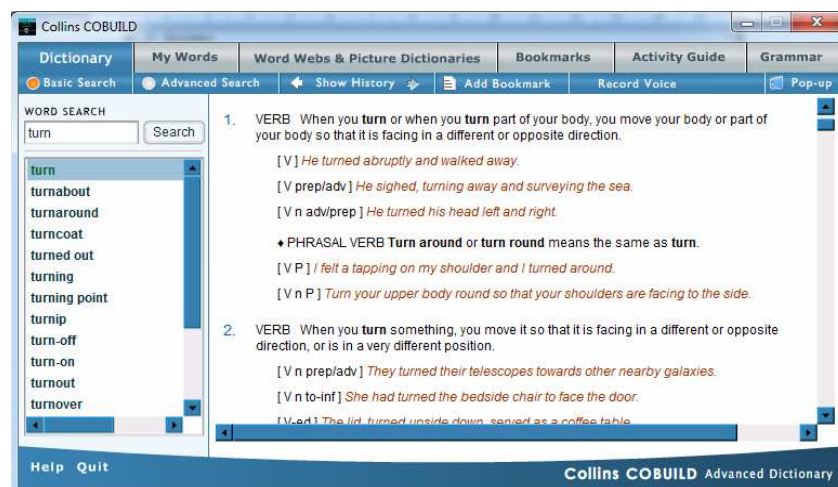
Figure 1b. The verb *turn* in the *Collins Cobuild* (2011).

It did not come as a surprise that the verb *turn* with the meaning of "move something / move your body or part of your body so that it is facing in a different or opposite direction" was hardly found in the

spoken political corpus, where the semantic preference of this verb is made of collocates belonging to the field of age:
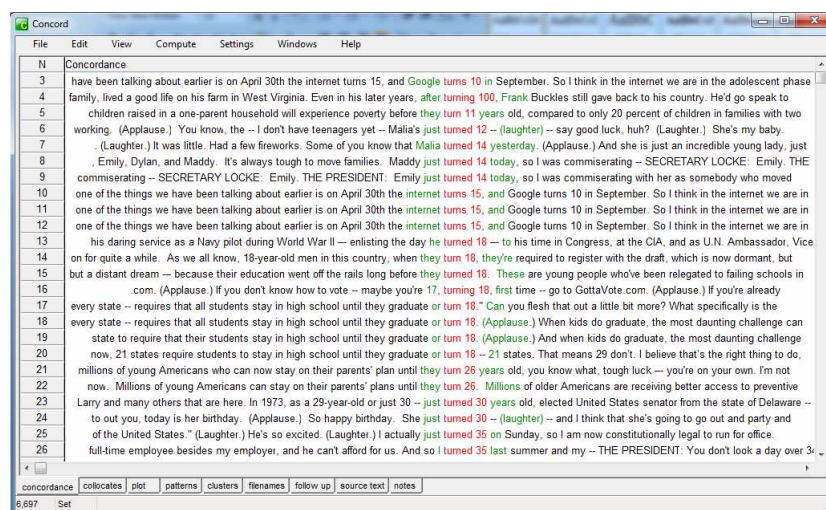
Figure 2. The verb *turn* in the spoken political corpus.

Even though the sense of *turn* followed by a number, as shown in Figure 2, was somewhat unfamiliar to most students, its meaning was eventually disambiguated in context. Yet, the semantic field of age was not immediately clear, given that the well-known expression *years old* was spelt out only in very few cases (lines 5, 21 and 23). Conversely, in the bilingual dictionary, only after the 20 transitive meanings and the 15 intransitive meanings of the verb *turn*, and only after all the idiomatic phrases that the verb lends itself to create, was one example provided with the meaning which, instead, is the most common in ABC (namely, "he has just turned twenty").

The verb *turn* is particularly rich in making combinations with grammatical words like *about, away, back, down, in, off, on, out*, and these words are themselves very common. The phrasal verbs with *turn* that the vast majority of students had already encountered in their high school studies were *turn on* and *turn off*, and to a lower degree, *turn down* and *turn up*, but for all of them the collocates were usually a heater, the radio, or other piece of equipment, thus with the meaning

of "increasing/lowering the amount of sound, heat or power being produced, by adjusting the controls" (*Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary* 2011: 1685).

Apart from the very frequent cluster *turn a blind eye*, in the investigation of the verb *turn* we found out that the most frequent particle collocating with *turn* was *out,* followed by *over* and *back*, as the two-word and the three-word clusters generated by *WordSmith Tools* (Scott 2007) illustrate below:

N	Cluster	Freq.
1	TO TURN	1,008
2	TURNS OUT	543
3	IT TURNS	478
4	TO THE	337
5	TURN OUT	305
6	INTO A	291
7	TURN TO	282
8	OUT THAT	282
9	OVER TO	277
10	IN TURN	266
11	TURNED OUT	261
12	TO BE	254
13	TURN THE	254
14	TURN IT	245
15	TURN BACK	240

N	Cluster	Freq.
1	IT TURNS OUT	464
2	TURNS OUT THAT	221
3	IT OVER TO	164
4	OUT THE VOTE	154
5	TURN IT OVER	152
6	GOING TO TURN	150
7	OUT TO BE	149
8	TURN OUT THE	135
9	TURN BACK NOW	132
10	TURNED OUT TO	117
11	AND WE'RE NOT	115
12	I WILL NEVER	110
13	WILL NEVER TURN	109
14	NEVER TURN OVER	104
15	NATIONAL SECURITY DECISIONS	103

Figure 3. Two- and three-word clusters around the verb *turn* in ABC.

Interestingly, the verb *turn out* was new to most students. It was thus found out that the dictionary, which used to be an invaluable and crucially important resource in traditional courses, barely helps on some occasions: what is really needed is the context of a word, that only corpora can provide. It was soon evident that the verb *turn out* had no semantic relationship with *turn*, and that, just like single-word lexical verbs, phrasal verbs are prone to multiple ambiguity, with some having a meaning when used transitively and another meaning when used intransitively (*Collins Cobuild Phrasal Verb Dictionary* 2011).

Confusing enough for the students, it soon emerged that the two most frequent uses of *turn out* in ABC were both intransitive, as the concordance lines below indicate:
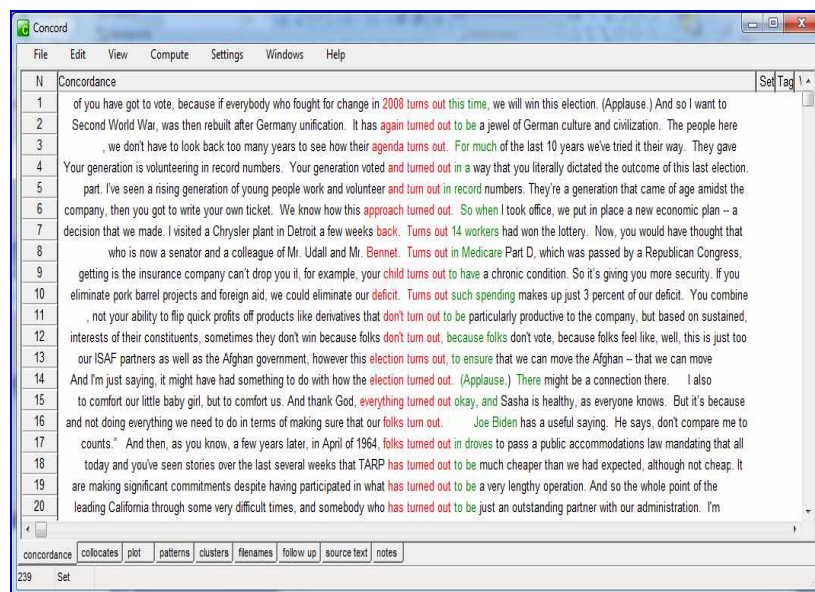
Figure 4. Concordance lines of the verb *turn out* in ABC.

Enlarging the context in lines 1 and 4 respectively, we read that "all of you have got to vote, because if everybody who fought for change in 2008 turns out this time, we will win the elections", and "Your generation voted and turned out in a way that you literally dictated the outcome of this last election". It is clear from the evidence of the data that ABC features less salient meanings than those provided in dictionaries.

Students immediately noticed that in lines 7 and 10 in Figure 4 the subject of the sentence is omitted: this omission would be regarded as an aberration by written grammarians; indeed aberrations do occur in spoken performances, even more "important" than the simple omission of the subject, and it would be a disservice to our learners to have them believe the contrary.

Relying on the two-, three- and four-word clusters facility provided by *WordSmith Tools*, of all the phrasal verbs we managed to unveil in ABC, *turn out* ranked 21st (Figure 5). Even though it was not positioned top of the list, students found it to be one of the most "political" verbs in the whole corpus, together with *look forward to* (rank 9th), *move forward* (rank 10th), *fire up* (rank 20th), *give up* (rank 24th), *give up on, give it up for, be sworn in* (rank 30th), and *opt out of* (rank 45th); the phrase *make sure* (ranking 1st in the phrases around the verb *make*) was also labelled the most "political" cluster, followed by *make clear*, uttered repeatedly by British and American politicians.

Below is a list of the most frequent two-word phrasal verbs in the spoken political corpus as generated by *WordSmith Tools* (Milizia 2012):

1. deal with	16. come back	31. set out
2. look at	17. keep on	32. take on
3. talk about	18. stand up	33. find out
4. think about	19. get up	34. come in
5. provide with	20. fire up	35. come out
6. set up	21. turn out	36. point out
7. go back	22. open up	37. go through
8. look for	23. come up	38. look like
9. look forward	24. give up	39. look back
10. move forward	25. get into	40. meet with
11. figure out	26. go up	41. come together
12. end up	27. call on	42. go ahead
13. go on	28. put forward	43. hand down
14. be back	29. call off	44. turn up
15. go ahead	30. swear in	45. opt out

Figure 5. Two-word verbs in ABC.

Needless to say, providing the students with long lists of phrasal verbs out of context is virtually pointless for the reasons mentioned above. The list was produced only to find out which verbs politicians are more likely to utter in their speeches and interviews; only some of these were investigated in depth.

In the paragraphs below first the most frequent one-word verbs and the most frequent as well as the most productive particles will be shown. In this chapter only two verbs will be examined in greater detail: *deal with*, because it was found to be the most recurrent in the two-, three-, and four-word clusters, and *figure out*, because, in spite of its high frequency in the spoken corpus, it seems indeed rather infrequent in general English and, correspondingly, receives scant attention in traditional reference texts. As a consequence, students are usually not familiar with it.

3. Most typical and most common phrasal verbs in spoken politics

After generating a list of two-word phrasal verbs, we became eager to check whether the verbs that were occupying a top position in the list of two-word phrasal verbs were ranking so high also in the list of single-word lexical verbs. Thus a wordlist was produced, and the most frequent verbs were unveiled manually. For the sake of convenience, Figure 6 exhibits only the first 45 verbs, where, of course, auxiliaries and modals were left out[2]:

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2   The verb *have*, in fact, was ranking 1st, followed by *are, be, was, can* and *has*. The first lexical verb was *go*, which in ABC was first found in the form of *going*. Yet, it may be argued that this form of the verb *go* is also found in expressions such as *We are not going to turn a blind eye*, or *Our problems are going to be discussed in several meetings* where the verb *go* is not to be regarded as a lexical verb proper, but rather as an auxiliary to express future or already decided events (Murphy 2011: 40-46), or for plans and intentions, predictions and commands (Carter *et al*. 2011: 224). This manual analysis was not carried out.

1. go	16. come	31. deal
2. want	17. give	32. talk
3. make	18. put	33. build
4. know	19. look	34. meet
5. think	20. keep	35. find
6. get	21. believe	36. face
7. work	22. tell	37. ask
8. thank	23. hope	38. bring
9. like	24. create	39. try
10. need	25. set	40. stand
11. say	26. mean	41. use
12. help	27. provide	42. remember
13. take	28. move	43. lead
14. see	29. clean	44. afford
15. let	30. cut	45. ensure

Figure 6. Most frequent lexical verbs in ABC.

It was interesting to notice that the two lists (Figure 5 and Figure 6) shared only very few rankings: with the exception of the verb *think*, ranking 5th in the wordlist and 4th in the phrasal verbs lists (i.e. *think about*), the others displayed a very different order. For instance, the first verb of the wordlist, *go*, ranks only 7th in the multi-word verbs list, i.e. *go back*, and only further down in the list do we find *go on*, *go up*, *go through* and *go ahead* (Figure 5). Furthermore, it came as a big surprise that the verb *deal*, ranking down in the list in position 31, was instead the most frequent two-word phrasal verb uttered by politicians. Students were expecting to find *make* top of the list of the phrasal verbs as well, given that it ranked 3rd in the list of single-word verbs, but it was later found that the verb *make* ranks so high because it lends itself to create several phrasal units rather than phrasal verbs, *make sure* being the most recurrent in politics (Milizia 2013). It was apparent, at this point, that many words are frequent because of their strong constructional tendency: they occur in many phrases (Summers 1996: 262; Sinclair 1992: 162), and *make*, in fact, did not rank so high

carrying the meaning of "create or produce something by working" (Milizia 2013).

Once the single-word lexical verbs were generated, we started to wonder also whether the most frequent adverbial and prepositional particles in the corpus were also the most productive, namely those more willing to combine with a verb to form a phrasal verb. With this purpose in mind, two lists were produced, one displaying the most common and the other the most productive particles in ABC:

1. to	1. up
2. in	2. out
3. for	3. in
4. on	4. on
5. with	5. down
6. at	6. for
7. by	7. with
8. up	8. back
9. out	9. forward
10. over	10. into
11. back	11. through
12. down	12. like
13. forward	13. together
14. after	14. off
15. across	15. away
16. under	16. aside
17. off	17. over
18. ahead	18. ahead

Figure 7. Most frequent particles (on the left) and most productive particles (on the right) in ABC.

It was very interesting to find that the order of the particles appears somewhat different when it comes to displaying the most productive ones: *up* and *out* are by far the most productive particles combining with a large number of different verbs in ABC (these findings are also corroborated by Biber *et al.* 1999: 413). Phrasal verbs with *up* usually convey perfectivity in the sense of thoroughness and are often referred to as 'completive phrasal verbs', even though, confusing and frustrating enough for the learner, also *out*, in combination with some verbs, describes activities carried out thoroughly or completely

(*Collins Cobuild Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* 2011: 39; McCarthy/O'Dell 2009: 30-32).

It has been noted (cf. Sinclair/Moon in *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* 1989), in this respect, that it would be more proper if, in dictionaries, verbs were grouped by particles (*give over, get over, tide over, take over*) rather than their verbal component (*give up, give out, give over*), as is still common practice. By doing so, we would notice that the semantics of phrasal verbs is not as arbitrary as is often held to be, and this categorization might be helpful also for students who would have a less abstract and more systematic and logical picture of these problematic and opaque verbs.

Dictionaries are, in the case in point, somewhat misleading because, as is in fact shown in Figure 1a, all the phrasal verbs are grouped under the verb *turn*, even though they are not semantically related[3].

The approach of citing the phrasal verb under the preposition or the adverb would be more sensible, in that the main communicative function is carried out by the particle (Side 1990: 146), and it is the particle which indeed receives the semantic focus of the sentence (Declerck 1977: 306).

This said, it is easily understandable why phrasal verbs are a language feature that are known to cause perpetual problems to learners: the two (or three, or even four) words composing the verb create a new meaning that does not seem to be systematically related to either or both of the original words. Dictionaries usually make special provision for them, and grammars for learners seem to make apologies for their very existence (Sinclair 1991).

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3   Also the visual layout is, in a way, confusing: the arrow next to the verb would seem to suggest that the preposition or the adverb co-occurring with the verb simply extends the meaning of the verb alone. Indeed, the meanings of the phrasal verbs around *turn* are more often than not far from being transparent or simply an extension of the verb.

3.1. Deal with

As mentioned earlier, the verb *deal with* was chosen as an item to investigate in some of the students' final project because it emerged as the most prominent in terms of frequency in the two-word and three-word clusters, and it ranked 3rd in the four-word clusters list (i.e. *to deal with the*, after *I look forward to* and *to figure out how*), as can be seen in Figure 8:

1. deal with	1. to deal with	1. I look forward to
2. look at	2. look forward to	2. to figure out how
3. talk about	3. look at the	3. to deal with the
4. think about	4. to move forward	4. it turns out that
5. provide with	5. to figure out	5. going to keep on
6. set up	6. it turns out	6. I was sworn in
7. go back	7. get out of	7. if you look at
8. look for	8. set up a	8. to get out of
9. look forward	9. come up with	9. put people back to
10. move forward	10. was sworn in	10. I ran for President
11. figure out	11. go ahead and	11. what's going on
12. end up	12. live up to	12. to pay for it
13. go on	13. I ran for	13. going to call on
14. be back	14. to stand up	14. to live up to
15. go ahead	15. to give up	15. you put it in

Figure 8. Multi-word verbs included in the two-, three- and four-word clusters in ABC.

Most students were familiar with *deal with* and could use it proactively, but mainly with the meaning of "be about something" (*Collins Cobuild Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* 2011: 52). What they were not aware of was the negative semantic prosody that is almost always associated with it, which emerged very clearly from the concordance lines, where *crisis* is omnipresent in the vicinity of *deal with*, together with *a H1N1 virus*, *a broken health care system*, *a child's sickness, a common problem, a common threat, a budget's deficit, criminality,*

corruption, among others, as can be observed in the concordance lines below:

N	Concordance
34	can do what we've always done — whether it was on a farm or dealing with a crisis overseas. We shape our own destiny as a
35	. So we've had a real challenge over the last couple of years of dealing with a crisis but not taking our eye off the ball in terms of
36	was not just to rescue the economy. Our job, as I said, was to deal with a decade of putting off tough decisions. I'm not just
37	that African leaderships and governments have to take. They are dealing with a different scale of problem, and therefore this is the
38	. In the long run, our economy is going to be fine. Right now we're dealing with a difficult situation and, Mr. Secretary, I want to
39	tomorrow, it's much easier for a man of peace, like Uribe, to deal with a difficult problem that he inherited. Q President Bush,
40	possible for business to locate. That's why in Britain, in spite of dealing with a difficult deficit, we are cutting our rate of
41	Turkish and the Armenian people. If they can move forward and deal with a difficult and tragic history, then I think the entire world
42	reform? Lisbon At the Lisbon summit next month, Europe will be dealing with a dilemma confronting us all: economic reform. How
43	we can do. We are dealing with a trebling of oil prices, we are dealing with a doubling of food prices and we are dealing with a
44	once in a while you'd go to a specialist, but basically you were dealing with a family doctor. Increasingly, the economics of
45	. That's just not fair. You shouldn't be punished for getting sick or dealing with a family crisis. That's why I'll require employers to
46	a state that was able to make critical investments even as it was dealing with a fiscal crisis; a state that became better positioned
47	that was able to make investments in education even as it was dealing with a fiscal crisis; a state that has now been able to
48	Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that as well as having to deal with a fiscal crisis-which has been handed over to us by the
49	wrongs of that dispute, but more about the ways and means one deals with a given crisis, like this one for instance. And I think it
50	whole point of the G20 is that the whole world must take action to deal with a global problem, which requires global solutions. The
51	market is affected, home building has come to a halt. So we are dealing with a global financial situation. I believe that we have
52	of taxpayers. I think some of your questions forget we are dealing with a global financial turbulence that is affecting every
53	today. Why are we in London? We are in London because we are dealing with a global economic recession, and we are in London
54	had a shower. (Laughter.) So I came off the plane. I knew I was dealing with a good man when I looked in his eyes and he was

Figure 9. Concordance lines of *deal*with* in ABC.

No clear and detailed guidance is given in traditional reference texts as to the typical behavior of this verb, that is its preferred collocates, the "best friends" it likes to occur with, even though two of the three items it is associated with in the *Ragazzini* (2012) are *problems* and *complaints*, together with *enquiry*.

The *Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus Dictionary* (2009) provides seven meanings of *deal with*: 1) do sth; 2) control an emotional situation; 3) buy and sell something; 4) take necessary action; 5) be about sth; 6) talk about sth; 7) punish s.b. A wider context of some of the lines in Figure 9 shows that the most frequent use is no. 4, "take necessary action". A few instances are displayed below:

(1)   No decisions can be quite as difficult as the decisions that African leaderships and governments have to take. They are dealing with a different scale of problem, and therefore this is the moment I think to help that African leadership by coming up to the mark with the things that we need to do. (Prime Minister Tony Blair, May 2005)

(2)   I'll also stand up for paid leave. Today, 78 percent of workers covered by FMLA don't take leave because it isn't paid. That's just not fair. You shouldn't

be punished for getting sick or dealing with a family crisis. (President Barack Obama, June 2008)

(3)   My hon. Friend is right to say that as well as having to deal with a fiscal crisis – which has been handed over to us by the Labour party – there is also a social crisis: social mobility has gone down; inequality has gone up; the gap between rich and poor has increased; and child poverty has increased by 100,000 since 2004 alone. (The Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, July 2010)

The overall unfavourable prosody that this verb carries within itself has already been analysed (Partington 2003: 18), and it is confirmed in ABC. From a careful look at the many instances in the spoken political corpus, some collocates carry a prima-facie good prosody, like the extract below:

(4)   I will tell you that part of the warmth I feel toward Germany is because I like Chancellor Merkel a lot. I've now dealt with a lot of world leaders, and I think that Chancellor Merkel is smart, practical, and I trust her when she says something. (President Barack Obama, June 2009)

Starting from the assumption that a word is learnt through encounters with it in speech and writing, and that a word is loaded with the cumulative effects of those encounters such that it is part of our knowledge of it (Hoey 2005), we might speculate that in the expression "dealing with a lot of world leaders" such an action is represented as a difficult and complicated business.

In the investigation of this phrasal verb, Partington (2003) found instances of *deal with* occurring with positive items, such as *success*, in the collocation *deal with success*. The occurrence of *deal* with a positive concept such as that of *success* is certainly referring to all the success-related novelties and possible problems that are usually inextricably linked to success.

It very often happens that the words in the vicinity of the node carry an apparently neutral semantic aura, as is the case in the concordance lines below, where *members of Congress*, *a population*, *a world which is changing so fast* do not clearly carry a positive or negative pragmatic load:

(5)   That said, we do have a population that we have to deal with, a population that has a role in our economy, a population which I think all Americans want to see treated humanely. And so the President had proposed some time ago a guest worker program, a temporary worker program, not an amnesty, because our laws have to be respected. (Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, April 2006)

(6)   Many of them have confronted circumstances more perilous than those which face Britain today. But perhaps few will have dealt with a world which is changing so fast. From Beijing to Seoul, from Washington to San Paolo, leaders must work out what it all means for their countries and where their national interest lies. (Prime Minister David Cameron, November 2010)

Endorsing Sinclair's (2003) claim that rarely are words neutral, a careful reading of the extracts above shows that even though the words co-occurring with the node verb are neutral, the aura of difficulty is strongly perceived in the less immediate cotext, where items like *ugly process, something wrong, perilous, dark times, difficulties* corroborate the general tendency that *deal with* likes to co-occur mainly in negative situations and unpleasant circumstances.

Semantic prosody, as well as semantic preference, are extremely important, therefore students should be made aware of these features of language. The prosody is not reported in dictionaries and may not even be accessible to an individual's introspection: its trace may only really be evident by concordancing numerous examples.

Needless to say, students are usually not made aware of these restrictions, which are often swept under the carpet in teachers' and course books' explanations and definitions of phrasal verbs (Waibel 2008).

3.2. *Figure out*

As Figure 8 shows, the verb *figure out* ranks 11th in the two-word list, occupying an even higher position in the three- and four-word list, i.e. respectively position 5 and 2. Hardly any student was familiar with this verb, which is barely encountered in textbooks and rarely used by high school teachers. As the data in ABC shows, instead, the verb *figure out* was found to be very common in spoken political discourse, corroborating the assumption that phrasal verbs tend to be rather

colloquial or informal and more appropriate to spoken than written English.

This discrepancy provides evidence that different phraseology occurs with different frequency in different text-types, and, conversely, that different text-types have significantly different phraseology (Stubbs 2007).

The verb *figure out* is one of those phrasal verbs which rarely have an independent existence from the preposition: no instance of *figure* was found in ABC and there is brief mention of *figure on* in the *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary* (2011) and in the *Collins Desktop* (2005), but not even a star was provided to indicate the frequency of the verb *figure out*. Unsurprisingly, not one occurrence of *figure out* was found in EUC, the written European Union Corpus that students of Political Science have been assembling in the last eight years and have been using as a study corpus as well as a reference corpus. In the *Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus Dictionary* (2009), *figure out* is marked by two stars, clearly indicating that it is not a very frequent item. The *MPVPD* provides the two following meanings: 1) to be able to understand something or solve a problem = work out; 2) to understand what someone is like and why they behave the way they do = work out, make out. Figure 10 displays some typical uses of *figure out* as uttered by British and American politicians:
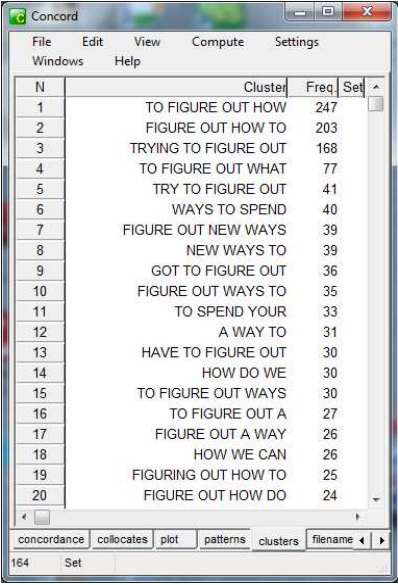
N	Concordance
121	a series of meetings taking place all over the Capitol trying to figure out how to get the thing together -- that was a messy
122	for it. If you want to cut taxes, great, cut taxes. But you've got to figure out how to fill the revenue that results when you lose that
123	They're barely keeping their heads above water. They're trying to figure out how to retire. They're seeing more and more of their
124	what it was like for a worker who was struggling to get by, to figure out how to take advantage of opportunities at community
125	people in Elkhart can't afford it. The single mom who's trying to figure out how to keep her house can't afford it. And whether
126	and our long-term economic success. But we've got to figure out how to pay for that. I think it's really important to
127	particularly when unemployment is 10 percent. What's hard is to figure out how to solve these problems. Our long-term deficit, if
128	tough days over the next several days. People are still trying to figure out how to organize themselves. There's going to be fear,
129	neighbor had gotten the same car for $6,000 less, you'd want to figure out how to get that deal. And that's what reform is all
130	as a society to not leave people out, then we're going to have to figure out how to pay for it. If we don't, then we should
131	. It's a big entitlement. Medicare -- it exists. We've got to figure out how to keep it from bankrupting the country without
132	issue is something that I have dealt with my whole life, trying to figure out how to juggle work-family balance in the process of
133	years. Everything we spend on our veterans -- we would have to figure out how to come up with that much money. That's the
134	millions of people out there who are struggling, who are trying to figure out how to pay the mortgage; they're seeing their homes
135	to be made tooling around with these computers, trying to figure out how to communicate with each other more efficiently.
136	you, Mr. President. Congress, as you alluded to, is trying to figure out how to pay for all of this reform. Have you told House
137	now, whose homes are underwater right now, who are trying to figure out how to pay the bills or send their kids to college right
138	fact that we had some breakout sessions, we're going to have to figure out how to break out of these silos and integrate these
139	markets, community gardens are really critical. But we have to figure out how to make this more affordable. And Bancroft
140	willing to cooperate with you. It's just not that difficult to figure out how to deal with the disease of which thousands of
141	banks, the vast majority of banks are healthy. We've got to figure out how to raise their capital -- the point that you were

Figure 10. Concordance lines of *figure*out* in ABC.

It is evident from the concordance lines that there is a great consistency of patterning around the verb both to the left and to the right: the first position to the left of *figure out* (N-1) is occupied by the word *to* in 70% of the examples, suggesting a preponderance of infinitive usage. In position N-2, the verb *try/trying* is frequently found, together with *have to*, *hard*, *difficult*: it seems that *figure out* has a semantic feature of 'difficulty' and is found in a slightly negative prosodic environment, occurring with items like *problems*, *bankrupt*, *diseases*, *taxes* in its proximity.

Turning to position N+1, two words dominate the pattern: *how* and *ways* (which are identical in terms of semantics), followed in a much lower percentage by *why*. A close look at the concordances shows that both *how* and *ways* are most of the time followed by *to*, and the two bundles, *how to* and *ways to*, are so common at position N+1 and N+2 that they almost seem an inherent component of the phrase *figure out how to* and *figure out ways to*. Figure 11 shows three- and four-word clusters around the verb *figure out*:

Figure 11. Clusters around *figure out* in ABC.

The table shows that *figure out a way to* is also very recurrent, even more so when an adjective premodifies the noun, as in expressions such as *figure out a better way, figure out a coy way, figure out a different way*, etc.

It was interesting to find out that, when providing a synonym for *figure out*, the *Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Plus Dictionary* (2009) gives two more phrasal verbs rather than a single word lexical verb, that is *work out* and *make out*. Yet, reviewing the evidence of usage, we noticed that while *figure out* seems to share quite a few collocates with *work out* – like the verb *try to* the left and *how to* and *a way to* to the right (no instance of *work out ways to* was found) – hardly any instances where *figure out* can be interchanged with *make out* were found.

Let us now look at some extended concordances extracted from ABC:

(8)   I'm very glad to see the terminology "war on terror" has been banned because the bottom line is that the people who attacked us on 9/11 or in London or in Mumbai are murderers, and if we talk about a war on terror, we enlarge them in their own societies to be warriors. They are not warriors, they want to be known as warriors, but they are murderers, and we have to figure out a different way to deal with it. (Madeleine Albright, March 2009)

(9)   Let's start thinking of each other as Americans first, figuring out how we can help one another, figuring out how we can move this country forward. I'm confident we'll do great. Thank you, everybody. God bless you. Thank you. (President Barack Obama, January 2010)

(10)   And folks who are out of work right now, whose homes are underwater right now, who are trying to figure out how to pay the bills or send their kids to college right now – they don't have five or 10 years to wait. And so we've got to still work very hard in the short term to dig ourselves out of this enormous hole. (President Barack Obama, September 2010)

The several examples that were randomly chosen to illustrate the behaviour of *figure out* seemed all to belong to American speakers. With this purpose in mind, students carried out a manual analysis, confirming that all the instances of the node verb were found in speeches by American politicians. McCarthy and O'Dell (2009: 142) include *figure out* in the American list of phrasal verbs, adding that the British equivalents are *suss out* and *work out*, even though not one instance of *suss out* was found in ABC as uttered by British politicians.

In the distinction that Sinclair and Moon (2011: vi) make among the four different types of phrasal verbs, *figure out* belongs to the first category, namely those combinations "where the meaning of the whole cannot be understood by knowing the meanings of the individual verbs and particles"[4]. These are certainly the most problematic for foreign learners, even more so for those who have

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4   The other types of combination are the following: combinations where the verb is always used with a particular preposition or adverb, and it is not normally found without it; combinations where the particle does not change the meaning of the verb, but it is used to suggest that the action is performed thoroughly, completely, or continuously; combinations where the verb and particle both have meanings which may be found in other combinations and uses, but there is overwhelming evidence in data that they occur together.

several years of English behind them, for whom learning was based on the memorization of a large number of small items and on a literal rote learning of long lists of items, thus on an analytic rather than a holistic learning style. What I am arguing here is that if students are made aware from the start that *figure out* is a two-word verb with its own meaning which has no semantic relationship with the individual verb nor with the preposition *out*, learners will store in their mind the two-word verb as a holistic unit, as a single "big word" (Ellis 1996: 111), just like a native speaker who has acquired the larger units as single wholes in the first place (Mauranen 2004a: 205). What is needed is certainly an enormous amount of exposure to real data, so that students can acquire not only the phrasal verbs but also the strong collocational associations between phrasal verbs and other words.

As mentioned earlier, *figure out* is not usually covered in traditional reference texts. In this respect, I agree with Mauranen (2004b: 97) that spoken language is a domain where learners need to work out many linguistic features on their own, in that they cannot expect enough help from textbooks, teachers or reference materials.

This is exactly one of the many advantages of corpora: they allow us to observe *what* is typically said in given circumstances, in political speeches in the case in question, and *how* it is typically said, and to relate the two.

4. Conclusion

After a very intensive course on phrasal verbs and phraseology in general, students said, in an anonymous form they were given at the end of the semester, that they very much enjoyed working on real and authentic language, despite a certain initial skepticism: even if modern students are today Internet savvy and *au fait* with technology in general, this change in approaching a foreign language initially scared more than fascinated them, with some of them who would have rather attended a traditional course based on books and dictionaries only, given that any kind of *change* causes anxiety to the human psyche

(Hunston 2007). Needless to say, it was up to the teacher to motivate the students and start with easy tasks, as difficult tasks would certainly turn any novice against corpora and they would very likely lose interest soon (Mauranen 2004b: 100).

After several years of teaching through corpora, both to undergraduate and graduate students, it is possible for me to claim that they respond extremely well to being offered corpus data, even though it is not an easy task to start reading "vertically" – as we do with concordance lines – after having read "horizontally" all our life, nor to free our mind of existing assumptions. Experience has shown that students like to get their hands on corpora and concordances themselves and find out about language patterning and the behavior of words in an "autonomous" way (Bernardini 2002: 165), and that they like to be confronted as directly as possible with the data, thus becoming linguistic researchers, or "language detectives", to borrow John's (1997: 101) words.

When we read concordances, we feel like we are in a new territory even if we are re-examining patterns which have been described before. Even though most students are eager to learn, it is common belief that the English taught at university must be somehow a "repetition" of what was already taught in school. Students were surprised to learn that the course was not a "repetition" but was altogether "new stuff", not only because the syllabus included the language of politics but mainly because it included attested spoken language.

It is well known, in fact, that the language that is generally taught is written language, and most traditional grammar texts, despite ideological lip-service to the priority of speech, do not describe the spoken register adequately. The differences between speech and writing come to the fore when it comes to investigating phrasal verbs, and despite the centrality of spoken language in most language teaching syllabi, pedagogic descriptions tend to be far from adequate in L2 teaching materials (Mauranen 2004b: 96). In conventional grammars phrasal verbs proper, prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs are tucked away, well off-centre, considered as marginal phenomena, almost aberrations (Sinclair 1996).

The examples illustrated in this chapter only aimed to provide a short outlook of the complex area of phrasal verbs: many features

have been left out, as well as the many restrictions on their use which add to their complexity, constituting a further problem for learners who, as a result, tend to avoid phrasal verbs as long as they can, preferring to rely on larger, rarer and clumsier words which can make their language sound stilted and awkward (Sinclair 1991: 79). The whole trend in the historical development of English has been towards the replacement of words by phrases; yet, if learners have to choose between *carry out* and *perform* or *undertake*, or between *put up with* and *tolerate,* evidence shows they opt for the latter (Milizia 2012: 156), strongly avoiding the former.

As to the phenomenon of avoidance, it has been argued (Liao / Fukuya 2004: 211) that the tendency to avoid phrasal verbs decreases with increasing proficiency, but it is also true that structural dissimilarity is impedimental to the acquisition of phrasal verbs (Dagut / Laufer 1985): Swedish and German learners, in fact, seem to have fewer problems in actively using them than Italian and Chinese learners who do not have an equivalent to English phrasal verbs, even though Waibel (2008) in her research speaks of Italian phrasal verbs in instances like *Metti giù la valigia*, *Metti la valigia giù*. In her paper where she looks at the factors that make the learning of phrasal verbs so complex, McPartland (1989) argues that semantic complexity plays a major role and that idiomatic, non-transparent and non-compositional phrasal verbs are in general more avoided than literal ones: the more idiomatic, the less familiar students are with them. This is corroborated by Italian learners who seem to handle verbs such as *find out* or *look for*[5] fairly easily, hardly managing verbs such as *live up to* or *stand up for*.

It seems that Italian students passively know more phrasal verbs than they actively use, thus performing better in the receptive than in the productive tasks, so they would all understand *It's my pleasure to introduce the newly sworn-in Director of the Peace Corps to the*

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5   The verbs *find out* [*scoprire*] and *look for* [*cercare*] are among the most widely used by Italian students, and are usually covered at the beginning of grammar books. Conversely, *live up to* [*essere all'altezza di*] and *stand up for* [*prendere le parti di, essere favorevole a*] are usually avoided by Italian learners, most likely because of their opaqueness.

American people but would certainly say *It's my pleasure to introduce the new Director of the Peace Corps to the American people*, avoiding the adjectival phrasal verb altogether.

What our students need is a huge amount of exposure to genuine data: this way they will appreciate that each phrase operates as a whole, as though a single big word, and will not expect *look, forward, to* or *turn, a, blind, eye, on* to have a meaning on their own, because the words have been stored in the mind like a holistic unit. The evidence of the data shows that the set of English phrasal verbs is constantly growing and changing, and new combinations are appearing and spreading in both general and specialized language, thus this is not a feature of language that can be overlooked.

I conclude quoting Searle (1975: 68), when he says that there is a conversational maxim that reads "Speak idiomatically unless there is some special reason not to", and agreeing with Henry and Roseberry (2001: 121) when they claim that the ability to master a specialized language, political language in the case in question, can "bring the learner more success in job hunting".

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