

AMERICAN VS. BRITISH PHRASAL VERBS: LINGUISTIC VARIATION AND MULTICULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Phrasal verbs - verbs combined with particles (e.g., *carry out*, *fill in*, *knock up*) are highly frequent and polysemous in English, but their use varies between American and British English. This paper examines corpus-based studies of phrasal-verb frequency, register, and meaning in the two varieties, with a focus on business and academic contexts. We draw on large corpora like the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the British National Corpus (BNC), American National Corpus and recent research (Gardener and Davies, 2007; Liu, 2011; Oros, 2006) to compare usage patterns. Key findings show that a small set of high-frequency phrasal verbs accounts for a large share of usage in both dialects, and that spoken informal registers employ much more phrasal verbs than academic writing. Some verbs (e.g., *fill out* vs *fill in a form*) or idioms (e.g., *knock someone up*) differ markedly in British vs. American English. The paper provides numerous authentic example sentences (particularly from business and academic sources) and discusses how mismatches can cause confusion in international or multilingual settings. For instance, at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova (ASEM), faculty note that ‘*to carry out market research*’ (neutral in business English) is common usage, whereas informal variants might be avoided in formal writing. Misuse of phrasal verbs or unawareness of dialectal preferences can lead to misunderstandings. For example, an American use of *knock up* (*impregnate*, *make a woman pregnant*) can embarrass a British listener used to it meaning *wake up*. This article, thus, explores the linguistic variation of phrasal verbs and emphasizes pedagogical and pragmatic implications for global communication.

Key words: phrasal verbs, corpus, register, multicultural communication, AmE vs BrE, polysemous

JEL Classification: A23

Introduction

Why do phrasal verbs matter so much and why do they confuse even advanced learners? Phrasal verbs (PVs) meaning a verb plus one or two particles (often prepositions or adverbs) are widely used in English. They are surprisingly frequent: roughly 0.2% of running text, or about 2,000 tokens per million words (Biber *et al.*, 1999). That might not sound like a lot at first, but because many PVs are highly idiomatic, they surprise us in many contexts. Learners who avoid or mistranslate these constructions often come across as non-idiomatic or awkward in speech and writing (Gardner and Davies, 2007). In short, get PVs right, and you sound fluent; get them wrong, and the meaning or tone can slip away.

PVs are also highly polysemous. Take *look up*: it can mean ‘*search for information*’, ‘*improve*’ (‘*things are looking up*’), or ‘*visit someone*’ (‘*look me up sometime*’). Many frequent PVs carry several related senses, on average multiple senses per item, so a single PV cannot always be replaced by one close synonym. Corpus work shows another useful fact for teachers and learners - usage is concentrated in a surprisingly small set of items. Gardner and Davies (2007) report that just a few dozen PVs account for a large part of all occurrences in the British National Corpus. Practically speaking, that means targeting high-frequency PVs (*get up*, *set up*, *carry out*, *make up*, etc.) provides learners with substantial communicative competence in a short period of time.

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“Competitiveness and Innovation in the Knowledge Economy”
September 26-27, 2025
Chisinau, Republic of Moldova

However, PVs are not the same everywhere. In our globalized classrooms and particularly in Business English contexts students meet both American and British varieties, and small particle or idiomatic differences can matter. Americans say *fill out a form*; Britons usually say *fill in a form* (Liu, 2011). Some contrasts are harmless, whilst others can be embarrassing or even problematic (the infamous *knock up* example is a favorite anecdote). Therefore, this paper takes a corpus-driven look at AmE vs BrE PVs, drawing on COCA, the BNC, and comparative studies (e.g., Liu, 2011; Oros, 2006). I shall also refer to classroom examples and short case notes from Business English seminars at the Academy of Economic Studies (ASEM), so the findings stay grounded in my daily practice of teaching English.

In this paper, after defining key terms, we first present broad frequency and register differences between American and British use. Next, we examine idiomatic and particle-level contrasts with real-sentence examples used with university students. Finally, we consider multicultural-pragmatic implications: how subtle PV choices can affect clarity, formality and cross-cultural rapport in professional settings. Along the way I will highlight practical teaching points for ASEM-style courses, so instructors and learners can avoid the common traps.

To make it clear from the very start we first look into some definitions and general patterns. Phrasal verbs (PVs) are multiword expressions made from a base verb plus an adverbial or prepositional particle or sometimes both. What sets them apart from fixed idioms is that PVs often keep a semantic link to the verb: *carry out* = *execute*, whereas an idiom like *kick the bucket* has no transparent connection to its literal parts. Crucially, many PVs are polysemous: the same verb + particle can cover several related senses. Research gives an instructive example: frequent PVs average multiple meaning senses each (about 5.6 senses per frequent item). For example, *look up* can mean *search for information*, *improve (things are looking up)*, or *visit someone (Look me up when you're in town)*. Because one PV may fit onto several uses, you cannot always replace it with a single neat synonym and that is why PV knowledge matters for nuance. (Nottingham Repository; Gardner and Davies, 2007).

Corpus counts make the practical importance of PVs even clearer. PVs occur far more often in running text than many learners expect: around 2,000 tokens per million words, roughly one PV every 500 words. In the British National Corpus, Gardner and Davies (2007) show that usage is heavily concentrated: a surprisingly small subset of PVs accounts for a very large share of all occurrences - 20 lexical verbs combining with eight particles (160 combinations) account for more than half of the corpus's PV tokens, and only 25 PV forms make up roughly one-third of all occurrences. In classroom terms, that is good news: if learners master the high-frequency items (*get up*, *set up*, *carry out*, *make up*, etc.), they quickly cover a large portion of everyday, business, and academic language.

Which PVs dominate depends on register, of course, but some items are consistently high-frequency across genres. Neutral PVs such as *point out*, *carry out*, *go on*, *make up*, and *set up* regularly appear even in formal academic writing which is a fact confirmed by recent corpus checks (Writefull, 2020). Other PVs, the more colloquial ones, are concentrated in speech and informal writing. The final outcome for teachers and course designers, for example in ASEM's Business English classes, is straightforward: we prioritize neutral, high-utility PVs first, then introduce more register-specific or idiomatic items with contextualized practice.

Finally, we should remember the learning implication of polysemy and concentration together: learners need both breadth (to know which PVs are common) and depth (to recognize the different senses and registers in which those PVs appear). A short classroom activity that I have found useful is to give students multiple short sentences with the same PV and ask them to infer the different senses from context. This helps link the form, meaning, and usage in a way that single-synonym exercises rarely do.

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 September 26-27, 2025
 Chisinau, Republic of Moldova*

Table 1. Classroom Activity for Teaching Phrasal Verb Polysemy

Verb	Activity description	Example sentences	Task for students	Learning focus
PUT	Provide short sentences using <i>put up</i> in different contexts.	1. <i>They put up a tent in the garden.</i> 2. <i>The prices were put up again.</i> 3. <i>She’s putting me up for the night.</i>	Infer the different meanings of 'put up' and group them (literal / figurative).	Recognizing meaning shifts through context.
TAKE	Use <i>take off</i> in various sentences to highlight its multiple senses.	1. <i>The plane took off on time.</i> 2. <i>His career took off after the show.</i> 3. <i>Please take off your shoes.</i>	Explain each meaning and identify which is literal vs. idiomatic.	Linking meaning and metaphorical extension.
GET	Show contextual variation in <i>get over</i> .	1. <i>It took her months to get over the flu.</i> 2. <i>He can’t get over how tall you’ve grown.</i> 3. <i>We finally got over the fence.</i>	Discuss semantic differences and propose a general “core meaning.”	Developing awareness of phrasal verb networks.

Source: Own work based on research

Shortly, PVs are frequent, polysemous, and unevenly distributed across items and registers. That combination makes them indispensable for fluent, native-like English and a high-value target for focused instruction.

Further the paper compares how these patterns behave in American vs British corpora. When we look at massive text collections (corpora) from the U.S. and U.K., we see that Americans and Brits actually draw on almost the same pool of phrasal verbs. In fact, Liu’s 2011 study used both the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) to list the top phrasal verbs in each variety. He found that the core inventory of high-frequency phrasal verbs overlaps heavily. In plain English, that means the big, common idioms like *carry out*, *give up*, *turn down* are popular on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, the **frequency** with which each group uses those shared verbs may differ a lot. For example, let us take *filling out a form*. In the U.S., they often say *fill out a form*, whereas in the U.K. people say *fill in a form*. Corpus data confirm this: COCA (American) shows dozens of examples of *fill out a form* but almost none of *fill in a form*, while the BNC (British) shows the opposite pattern. In Liu’s own words, ‘while Americans tend to fill out a form, the British typically fill in a form’. In other words, both sides know the expression, but American speakers use *fill out* far more often and British speakers use *fill in* more.

This kind of dialectal tendency happens with several verb-particle pairs. For instance, researchers have noted that Americans will often say *take over* when one company buys another, whereas British English speakers might say *take on* in a similar context. Likewise, Americans commonly use the verb *reschedule* to push a meeting to a new time, while in the UK you might more often hear *put off* or *call off* for postponing an event. These examples are not as systematically documented as the *fill out* case, but they fit the same pattern, the same basic idea is expressed with different preferred phrasal verbs in each dialect. Here are some more examples:

fill out vs. *fill in* forms: Americans overwhelmingly say *fill out a form*, Brits say *fill in a form*. As the corpus numbers show, COCA had about 92 hits for *fill out a form* and only 2 for *fill*

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in a form, while the BNC had 26 *fill in* vs. 6 *fill out* (Liu, 2011). Thus, we can notice a clear flip in preference.

stand in for vs. *fill in for substitution*: Both varieties know *stand in for someone* (to temporarily replace a person), but *stand in for* turns up far more often in each corpus. One analysis found roughly three times as many instances of *stand in for* in British sources than *fill in for*, and a similar American pattern, though Americans use *fill in for* a bit more frequently than the Brits do. Again, the meaning is shared, but *stand in for* dominates both, with *fill in for* being wider used in American English.

Other verb-particle pairs: Even when the same verbs exist on both sides, one form usually wins out. For example, *carry out* is far more common than *carry through* in both U.S. and U.K. data. And for making phone calls, Americans say *call up someone*, while Brits often say *ring up someone*. Table 3 below provides more examples of divergent usage and neutral examples.

Table 2: British vs. American phrasal verb usage

Meaning	British usage	American usage	Example sentence
Postpone discussion	<i>table the motion (begin debate)</i>	<i>table the motion (delay)</i>	<i>The chair moved to table the proposal (UK = begin debate; US = postpone discussion).</i>
Request help	<i>call for assistance</i>	<i>reach out for help</i>	<i>The student called for assistance (UK) vs The student reached out for help (US).</i>
Visit briefly	<i>pop round</i>	<i>drop by</i>	<i>We popped round to see our neighbors (UK) vs We dropped by to see our neighbors (US).</i>
Refuse participation	<i>opt out of</i>	<i>back out of</i>	<i>Several members opted out of the survey (UK) vs Several members backed out of the deal (US).</i>
Investigate	<i>look into</i>	<i>check out</i>	<i>The committee will look into the matter (UK) vs The manager will check out the issue (US).</i>
Meet unexpectedly	<i>bump into</i>	<i>run into</i>	<i>I bumped into my professor at the station (UK) vs I ran into my professor downtown (US).</i>
Resolve a problem	<i>sort out</i>	<i>figure out</i>	<i>The manager sorted out the issue (UK) vs The engineer figured out the problem (US).</i>

Sources: corpora and usage guides

In summary, the research shows that Americans and British use largely the same phrasal verbs, but how often they use each one can differ. They tend to share a ‘core’ vocabulary of idioms, yet subtle preferences emerge. These dialectal biases are visible in corpus counts which show that an expression might be common everywhere, but one side of the Atlantic just uses it a bit more. This helps explain why a phrase that sounds natural to you might strike someone from the other side as a bit odd, although they are all part of the shared inventory, just in slightly different proportions.

The findings of the study that has been carried out show that phrasal verbs are strongly influenced by register. Certain studies (Biber 1988) have shown that they occur far more frequently in spoken and informal communication than in formal written texts. In fact, Biber (1988) identified phrasal verbs as one of the clearest markers of an informal and concrete style. Therefore, phrasal verbs would appear more often in spoken text than in written text and their corpus analysis confirmed this expectation. When comparing spoken data from the London-Lund Corpus with

written material from the LOB Corpus, they found that phrasal verbs appeared almost twice as often in spoken registers. (Dempsey B., *et al*)

Everyday conversations, meetings, and TV dialogues are therefore rich in expressions like *come up with* or *find out*, while formal genres such as newspaper editorials or academic papers tend to favor more single-word verbs, for instance *discover* or *establish*. This register-based difference is true across both American and British English. Data from the COCA corpus reveal that phrasal verbs are up to ten or eleven times more frequent in TV and movie subtitles and in web texts than in academic texts. A Writefull’s analysis of COCA further confirms that phrasal verbs are ‘considerably more frequent in other genres than academic writing: up to 11 times more frequent in TV and movies subtitles, and close to 10 times more frequent in blogs, webpages and fiction’.

In business communication, which often balances between formal and informal tones, for instance, reports versus internal emails, the use of phrasal verbs is moderate. Neutral and widely accepted forms like *carry out*, *set up*, *come up with*, or *turn down* often appear in financial reports or news articles, while highly colloquial ones such as *shoot the breeze* or *pig out* are naturally absent. Within professional and academic contexts, certain phrasal verbs are not only acceptable but sometimes preferred. Garnier (2020) observes that in research writing, *carry out* is used much more frequently than its single-word equivalents like *do* or *perform*, as in ‘*Researchers carried out the experiment*’ rather than ‘*did the experiment*’.

Table 2 below lists some of the most frequent and stylistically appropriate phrasal verbs used in business and academic English, together with example usages.

Table 3. Frequent phrasal verbs used in business and academic English.

- *point out* - e.g. *The speaker **pointed out** several market risks.*
- *carry out* - e.g. *The auditor **carried out** a review of accounts.*
- *set up* - e.g. *The firm **set up** a joint venture in Asia.*
 - *turn out* - e.g. *It **turned out** that sales had increased.*
 - *bring about* - e.g. *New regulations **bring about** closer oversight.*
 - *give up* - e.g. *The nation **gave up** certain export controls.*

Source: Own work based on research

These examples from academic corpora illustrate that many PVs are neutral and fit formal writing if chosen appropriately. Nonetheless, learners often find it safer and easier to use single-word equivalents (e.g., *propose* instead of *put forward*, *construct* vs. *build up*) in formal contexts, to avoid what may be interpreted as colloquialisms. Thus, corpus evidence presents a clear picture of how phrasal verbs behave across English varieties and registers:

1. Vocabulary overlap: The core set of high-frequency phrasal verbs is largely shared by both American and British English. Common verbs such as *get up*, *turn on*, *set up*, and *come out* occur frequently in both varieties, forming a shared lexical foundation.

2. Frequency differences: When it comes to individual phrasal verbs or synonymous pairs, one variety often favors a particular form. For instance, *fill out* is more typical of American English, while *fill in* tends to appear in British English. Similarly, *stand in for* is used in both varieties but is somewhat more common in British English, whereas Americans more often say *fill in for*. Weather-related expressions show the same pattern: Americans talk about games being *rained out*, while the British say they were *rained off*.

3. Register: In all studies, phrasal verbs emerge as a characteristic of informal, spoken, and popular registers, while formal or academic texts make much more limited use of them.

These findings have direct classroom relevance. For teachers, especially in contexts such as ASEM’s Business English programs, it is important to help learners understand not only what

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phrasal verbs mean, but also where and how often they are used. Using the non-standard variant in the other country may sound slightly odd, even though it remains understandable. Although most phrasal verbs are mutually understandable across the Atlantic, their frequency and stylistic suitability can vary considerably.

The next section examines some of these idiomatic and particle-based differences that students commonly encounter which highlight some of the most illustrative contrasts between American and British English. Besides *fill in* vs. *fill out* forms there are plenty of other examples of a certain preferred form.

Fork out vs. *fork over* pay. In the UK, people often *fork out* money usually implying they do so reluctantly. Americans express the same idea with *fork over*, or simply *fork*. For example, *Britons may have to fork out a high fee to enter*, but Americans might say *fork it over*. Both forms are recognized on either side of the Atlantic, but each has its preferred home.

Rained off vs. *rained out*. When an outdoor event is canceled because of bad weather, a Brit would say *it was rained off*, while an American would call *it rained out*. For example: *‘Our golf match was rained off,’ said the Brit. ‘You mean rained out,’ replied the American*. Such subtle lexical choices often reflect deeper cultural conventions and idiomatic patterns.

Beat up vs. *beat up on*. Both varieties use *beat (someone) up* to mean ‘attack physically’. However, in American speech, *beat up on* also occurs, often in informal or slang contexts (e.g., *Don’t beat up on yourself*). British speakers generally stick to *beat up*.

Knock up (*wake* vs. *impregnate*). This is one of the most famous cross-cultural pitfalls. In British English, *knock someone up* means ‘wake them up’, while in American English, it means ‘impregnate someone’. For example, a Brit might say, *‘I’ll knock you up at 7 AM,’* meaning *‘I’ll wake you.’* To an American listener, however, that same phrase can sound shocking. Conversely, when an American says, *‘He knocked her up,’* the meaning is different and likely to cause laughter or confusion in the UK. Such differences have inspired countless humorous moments in films and intercultural encounters.

A useful way to make these contrasts understandable, especially in teaching contexts like ASEM’s Business English classes, is through short comparative dialogues. For instance, a U.S. manager might say, *‘We need to wrap up this deal by Friday.’* A British colleague understands *wrap up* to mean ‘finish,’ though in very formal writing they might prefer *finalize*. Likewise, a British speaker might suggest, *‘We should put off the meeting due to delays,’* while an American might say *‘postpone it’* or even *‘table it’* (with *table* itself having opposite meanings in AmE and BrE).

Recognizing and practicing such equivalents helps teachers and learners navigate real-world communication with greater confidence and cultural awareness. So, what are the pragmatic and cross-cultural implications?

In international business and academia, choosing the right phrasal verb is more than a style decision, it shapes clarity, tone, and how professional you sound.

Register and formality. British English often treats phrasal verbs as more colloquial alternatives to Latin verbs, whereas American English tolerates or even prefers many phrasal forms in business contexts. For example, an American report may say *‘carry out an analysis,’* while a British writer might prefer *‘undertake an analysis.’* (Garnier, 2020). At ASEM we teach students that such items like *carry out* and *set up* are perfectly acceptable in academic writing (indeed, *carry out* is far more common than its single-word alternatives). Very informal phrasal verbs like *cowboy up*, *shut up shop* remain inappropriate in formal communications.

Miscommunication. Using the ‘wrong’ phrasal verb can confuse or even offend. The *knock up* example is extreme but instructive: what sounds harmless in the UK can be embarrassing in the US. Smaller cases are subtler but still real, telling someone *to give up the search* may be interpreted differently as a literal or figurative urge, depending on the audience or context. A sentence like

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‘I’ll call you back’ could first puzzle a non-native listener who might perceive *back* as an adjective. These mismatches are usually resolved by context, but awareness can prevent awkward moments.

Business settings. In multinational meetings, phrasal-verb choice signals formality. A British executive might prefer ‘*finalize the contract*’ over ‘*wrap up the contract*,’ while an American counterpart may find ‘*wrap up*’ brisk and positive. AmE press releases commonly use idiomatic PVs such as *roll out*, *ramp up*, or *hammer out*. These have become international business jargon, but localizing language for the target audience still helps avoid sounding too formal or too colloquial.

Interpersonal contexts. In networking or small-talk, pragmatic approaches matter. If an American says, ‘*We need to sort it out*,’ a Brit will likely understand ‘*address the problem*.’ But an American hearing ‘*sort out*’ as ‘*tidy up*’ might pause. Listeners regularly use context to decode the intention, but teaching these pragmatic twists reduces confusion in everyday exchanges. The better-known traps (e.g., *table*, *knock up*, *fill in/out*) deserve special classroom attention.

Thus, we can state that phrasal verbs carry cultural weight: an unexpected variant can sound refreshingly new or absolutely wrong. Consequences range from a momentary smile to genuine misunderstanding or a professional faux pas, for instance, a Moldovan student telling an international chat, ‘*Let’s table this topic for later*,’ may confuse both British and American peers who interpret *table* differently. In British English, *to table* usually means *to bring something forward for discussion* or to put it on the agenda, i.e., *to present or raise an item*. While in American English, *to table* commonly means *to postpone or suspend discussion* (i.e., *put it aside*). Therefore ‘*Let’s table this topic for later*’ can be read two opposite ways and the speaker must use less ambiguous words or be more explicit. For this reason, intercultural communication training often includes focused practice on phrasal-verb differences as pragmatic, not merely lexical points.

Conclusion

Phrasal verbs are a dynamic, high-frequency layer of English that speakers of both AmE and BrE largely share, but they differ in which verbs they prefer and in which registers those verbs appear (Liu, 2011). These distributional differences mean PV choice affects clarity, tone and perceived professionalism: some PVs (e.g., *carry out*, *set up*) are neutral in business and academic contexts, while others are strongly colloquial and risky in formal settings.

Because misuse can cause misunderstanding, from mild confusion (*fill out* vs *fill in*) to serious embarrassment (*knock up*), teachers and language learners should treat PVs as pragmatic choices, not just vocabulary. Practical strategies include teaching contrastive examples, preferring one-word synonyms when precision matters (e.g., *cancel* vs *call off*), and signaling intent explicitly in international exchanges (Oros, 2006; Liu, 2011).

Finally, integrating corpus evidence and local case studies into Business English curricula gives learners concrete tools to navigate register and variety: showing the same message in US vs UK sources makes differences visible and manageable.

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