

DEBATE AND EDUCATION

Understanding and use of phrasal verbs and idioms in medical/nursing texts

Polackova G

Department of Foreign Languages, Jessenius Faculty of Medicine, Martin, Slovakia.
polackova@jfm.uniba.sk

Abstract: Phrasal verbs and idioms are frequently used in everyday English. They are also used in more specific language as equivalents for special terms. The use of phrasal verbs and idioms by native patients and health care workers makes their communication easier and less confusing. Non-native medical workers often come across with English phrasal verbs (idioms) in authentic texts and communication. They should be able to recognize them and after analyzing their meaning include them into their own active vocabulary (Ref. 5). Full Text (Free, PDF) www.bmj.sk.

Key words: phrasal verb, idiom, preposition, adverb, language unit, phrase, equivalent, term.

The aim of teaching ESP (English for Specific Purposes) to will be doctors (nurses) is developing language competence and skills in medical and nursing English. The teaching/learning process at medical faculties includes a regular work on specific texts and practising situations and activities that result from them. Apart from highly specific authentic texts medical/nursing students often come across with everyday language used by native medical/nursing workers when speaking to their patients or with language used by patients themselves. Practising oral skills student get acquainted with phrasal words and idioms that often arise difficulties in understanding or translation.

Phrasal words are used in preference to formal words (terms) mostly in everyday communication and just like idioms are not always easy to recognize.

Phrasal verbs, sometimes called multi-word verbs are defined as “those combinations of verb plus preposition or adverbial particle from which we have now hundred of phrases to describe everyday events and activities. The most commonly used phrasal verbs are formed from the shortest and simplest verbs in the English language such as come, do get, go, make, put, take, followed by words such as down, from, in, out, up, to. A phrasal verb consists of two (sometimes three) parts: a verb followed by preposition or adverbial particle. It is essential to consider the parts together, for the combination often makes a different meaning. Some phrasal verbs have several meanings.” (Parkinson J, Brooker Ch. English for International Nurses, Churchill Livingstone 2004, p. 169.)

As we know in English verbs are often put together with adverbs or prepositions. Combinations like to come back, sit down, look at , etc. are easy to understand because we can recognise their meaning from those of particular verbs and particles or prepositions, e.g. sit down means ,to place your body in lower position‘ – sadnúť si.

But often the combinations of several lexical units are difficult to understand: Tuberculosis broke out in developing countries. In this example *break* doesn't have the meaning it has in phrase like *break a pencil* or *break a window*. And *out* doesn't mean ,outside'. The combination is a phrasal verb that has to be understood as one unit, meaning start suddenly or violently, = prepuknúť.

Phrasal words are frequently used in everyday English but they are also used in more specific environment like hospitals or other health care settings are. Here the phrasal verbs are used by doctors, nurses or other health care workers to substitute more formal expressions or terms. Doctors, nurses or other health care workers should use language the patient can understand, therefore they avoid using special terms in mutual communication. So when asking about *onset of the pain* they prefer the verb *come on*: When did your pain first *come on*? to the expression *onset (nástup, začiatok bolesti)*, or the recommendation *to reduce* fatty food *intake* it is easier to understand for patient when speaking about *cutting down on* fatty food.

These less formal verb combinations are easy to understand for native speakers, therefore they can be found even in authentic case histories. But how can they be understood to those who study and use English as a second language? How can they know that verb functioning in the sentence together with the particles (adverbs, prepositions) is a phrasal verb, i.e. the translation of its meaning is shifted and does not denote the primary meaning of its components ? Phrasal verbs “can be recognized by number

Department of Foreign Languages, Jessenius Faculty of Medicine, Martin, Slovakia

Address for correspondence: G. Polackova, Dept of Foreign Languages, Jessenius Faculty of Medicine, Zaborskeho 2, SK-036 57 Martin, Slovakia.

of simple tests and these have to do with meaning rather than grammar. One test is to ask whether one word can be substituted for the whole phrase”, e.g. (tuberculosis *broke + out* = started) – it is possible in this case, the verb *break out* can be substituted by the verb *start*. “Another test is to ask whether the second word can be deleted” (tuberculosis *broke out*) – it is not possible to replace the particle *out* here with another particle. (Cowie AP, Mackin R. Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, OUP, 1993, str. ix). We can see from these tests that the verb *break out* cannot be broken up, its form is fixed. This information can be found in dictionary entries (*break out* = *start suddenly*).

Another very similar problem non-native speakers can come across are English idioms. “An idiom is a phrase whose meaning is difficult or sometimes impossible to guess by looking at the meanings of the individual words it contains” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary of Current English. A.S. Hornby, Oxford University press 2000, p. B 12) There are several kinds of idioms in English, some of them are easier to understand than others (*to be in the same boat* = byť na tej istej lodi – may be used literally but it also has common idiomatic meaning: *to be in the same situation* – byť v rovnakej situácii).

Some idioms are imaginative therefore we can guess the meaning quite easily: *to stand on one’s own feet* = to earn one’s own living and be independent = stáť ma vlastných nohách = mať vlastný príjem a byť nezávislý).

Many idioms are not vivid in this way and their form is fixed: *to pull someone’s leg* = *to play a joke on smb.* = uťahovať si z niekoho.

In English there are many idioms of parts of the body non-native medical workers may never need to use themselves, but they should be able to recognize them. Nearly all the parts of human body are included in idiomatic meanings, therefore they can serve as fixed words (first “full” words) when looking for the meaning of idioms in a dictionary. The following are the nouns (parts of body) that can serve as „full“ words at the entries in the dictionaries: *arm, back, blood, bone, brain, breast, cheeks, chest, chin, ears, elbow, eye, face, fingers, flesh, foot, feet, hair, hand, head, heart, heel (s), knee, knuckles, lap, leg, lip, mind, mouth, nail(s), neck, nerve, nose, palm, shoulder, skin, skull, stomach, teeth, throat, thumb, toe(s), tongue*.

When looking up idioms including particular part of body in the dictionary we can see that the nouns *eye, hand, head* and *heart* are those developing the largest number of idiomatic phrases (32–46). The smallest number of idiomatic phrases develop the nouns *knee, knuckles, lap, skull* (2–4).

“If you cannot find an idiom in the dictionary, look it up at the entry for one of the other main words in the expression”. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary of Current English. A.S. Hornby, Oxford University press 2000, p. B 12) Example: *A shot in the arm*, i.e. something that does a person good, can be found easier at the entry *arm* not *shot*.

Understanding and use of phrasal verbs and idioms require a lot of language experiences and work especially in non-native speakers. On the other hand specific medical expressions – terms do not cause many difficulties since they are often of Latin (Greek) origin and are used as international words. Their meanings are unambiguous, i.e. they have no more possible meanings to use. In practice, medical/nursing students are able to translate or use the medical terminology without problems while phrasal verbs and idioms require extra effort and time. (Compare: Patient is *regaining consciousness* – Patient *is coming round* = Pacient prichádza k vedomiu, or: Did you *expectorate* anything? – Did you *cough up* anything? = Vykašľali ste niečo ?)

As we can see English is a variable and vivid language. Phenomena like phrasal verbs and idioms make it even more special mainly for non-native speakers. Phrasal verbs and idioms are frequently used by native speakers in preference to more formal words or terms, therefore they function in different kinds of communication. The users of English as the second language should be able to recognize these phenomena. They should pay a special attention to those verbs that are used in particular field as equivalents for specific expressions (phrases).

These units should be included into their active vocabulary and used in particular field of communication as equal expressions for more formal words.

References

1. **Parkinson J.** A Manual of English for Doctors. Longman Group UK Limited 1991.
2. **Parkinson J, Brooker C.** Everyday English for International Nurses. A guide to working in the UK. Churchill Livingstone 2004.
3. **Cowie AP, Mackin R.** Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, OUP, 1993.
4. **Longman Dictionary of English and Culture.** Longman group UK limited, 1992.
5. **Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionary of Current English.** Hornby, A.S., Oxford University press 2000.

Received July 2, 2008.
Accepted September 20, 2008.