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Polysemy of Phrasal Verbs in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe

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Abstract: This article investigates the polysemous nature of phrasal verbs in Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. The study focuses on three phrasal verbs—take up, go on, and break off—and analyzes their contextual meanings within the novel. By comparing dictionary definitions from the Cambridge Dictionary and the Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary with actual usage in the text, the research reveals how phrasal verbs shift between literal and figurative senses. The analysis also applies theoretical insights from cognitive linguistics, particularly Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Tyler and Evans's (2003) Principled Polysemy Model, to explain how multiple meanings develop systematically. The findings demonstrate that phrasal verbs play a vital semantic and stylistic role in literary discourse, while their polysemy poses challenges for interpretation and translation.

Keywords: Phrasal verbs; polysemy; semantics; cognitive linguistics; metaphor; Robinson Crusoe; Daniel Defoe; translation.

Introduction: One of the most versatile and complex aspects of the English language is its richness in phraseological units. Among these units, one of the most common and multifaceted elements is the phrasal verb. Phrasal verbs are phrases composed of two or more components, and their meanings often differ significantly from the meanings of the individual parts. Typically, these units consist of a verb and a preposition or an adverb, where the second part is often referred to as a particle. From a quantitative perspective, it has

been observed that nearly 700 phrasal verbs are regularly used in everyday English (Hanif, 2011), which clearly illustrates their significance in the lexicon of the language. It is worth noting that one of the key semantic complexities and challenges of phrasal verbs lies in their polysemy, meaning their capacity to convey multiple meanings. A single phrasal verb can carry different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. According to Gardner and Davies, a single phrasal verb can have an average of 5.6 meanings. For example, the verb *run out* can mean "to be finished," "to expire," or "to run outside," depending on the context. This polysemous nature complicates both the learning and the translation of phrasal verbs, as they are an integral part of the English language and are widely used in everything from everyday speech to academic writing, and from literary texts to scientific materials. In addition, their semantic characteristics pose particular difficulties because the meaning of a phrasal verb is not always predictable from the sum of its parts, reflecting their non-compositionality as well as their polysemy (Radišić, 2018). These characteristics, in particular, create challenges in both translation and the semantic analysis of literary texts.

To study the polysemy of these units, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was chosen as the subject of research, as the author makes skillful use of phrasal verbs to convey the themes of the novel. The main aim of this research is to identify and analyze the polysemous characteristics of phrasal verbs used throughout the novel. This study serves to shed light on the role of phrasal verbs in the semantic analysis of literary texts and helps understand the difficulties faced in the process of translation.

Several linguists have investigated the semantic — particularly the polysemous — features of phrasal verbs. Gardner and Davies, analyzing phrasal verbs based on the British National Corpus, concluded that a single phrasal verb can have an average of 5.6 meanings. They also emphasized that, in order to master phrasal verbs effectively, learners need to analyze them in a variety of contexts.

McCarthy and Felicity O'Dell (2004) also emphasized that phrasal verbs are inherently polysemous and that, often, the meanings of a phrasal verb are not directly related to each other. However, in some cases, the basic meaning and the extended meanings of a phrasal verb may be linked. According to them, certain additional meanings develop through metaphor and imagery, which may still be rooted in the literal meaning. For example, the basic meaning of *blow up* is "to fill with air" (*blow up a balloon*), while one extended meaning is "to explode" (*blow up a building*). Metaphorically, it can mean "to suddenly become very

angry" (*someone blows up*).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that many abstract meanings in language emerge through conceptual metaphors, where physical experiences are mapped onto more complex, intangible domains. This phenomenon can be observed in phrasal verbs such as *fall apart* and *carry on*. The verb *fall apart* literally describes an object breaking into pieces (e.g., *The old chair fell apart*), but it metaphorically extends to describe emotional breakdown (*She completely fell apart*) or the failure of a plan (*The project fell apart at the last minute*). Here, the metaphorical mapping relies on the conceptualization of EMOTIONAL STABILITY or SYSTEMS AS STRUCTURES, which can be "broken" when they collapse.

Similarly, the phrasal verb *carry on* literally refers to physically carrying something further (e.g., *He carried on the box to the next room*), but metaphorically it develops the sense of persisting in an action despite obstacles (e.g., *Despite difficulties, they carried on working*). This shift demonstrates the metaphor ACTIONS AS BURDENS, where the physical act of carrying is extended to the abstract notion of sustaining effort.

These examples support Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) claim that metaphor is central to human thought and language, and that phrasal verbs are a rich site for observing such metaphorical extensions, which in turn contribute to their polysemous nature.

Tyler and Evans (2003) developed the Principled Polysemy Model, which explains how particles in phrasal verbs give rise to networks of related meanings. For instance, the particle *up* in *take up* can indicate both a literal upward movement and an abstract extension such as adopting a resolution. This model shows that the polysemy of phrasal verbs is not random, but systematically motivated by spatial and conceptual schemas.

The studies discussed above show that context plays a crucial role in determining the different meanings of phrasal verbs. This research specifically focuses on this aspect by analyzing the polysemous features of phrasal verbs based on examples taken from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach to analyze the polysemous nature of phrasal verbs in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The methodology is based on a combination of corpus-based analysis and cognitive-semantic interpretation.

First, specific phrasal verbs that occur frequently in the novel—such as *take up*, *go on*, and *break off*—were

selected for detailed analysis. Instances of these verbs were identified directly from the text of Robinson Crusoe. Each occurrence was then categorized according to its contextual meaning, with attention to how the sense is shaped by the surrounding discourse.

To establish the semantic values of these phrasal verbs, standard lexicographic sources were consulted, primarily the Cambridge Dictionary (online) and the Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2000). These references provided core literal and extended meanings, which were then compared to the contextual uses in the novel.

Beyond dictionary definitions, the study also draws on theoretical frameworks from cognitive linguistics. In particular, Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor and Tyler and Evans's (2003) Principled Polysemy Model were employed to explain how literal senses of phrasal verbs extend into figurative meanings. For example, the literal sense of break off ("to separate physically") is metaphorically extended to "interrupting communication," and carry on ("to carry something physically") develops into "to persist in action."

The methodology therefore combines textual analysis with semantic interpretation, linking literary usage to established linguistic theories. This mixed approach allows the study to demonstrate how phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe reflect both the polysemous richness of English and the cognitive mechanisms that underlie meaning extension.

Phrasal Verb: take up — Detailed Polysemy Analysis (Robinson Crusoe)

1. To occupy or settle in a place (space/position) "I took up my lodging..."; "...taken up my lot on the worst side of the island..."

Meaning: settled/established oneself in a location

Semantic note: literal, spatial occupation (choosing and holding a place)

Metaphorical nuance: "up" profiles appropriation/establishment—the speaker claims a spot or circumstance as his own

2. To occupy or consume time/attention (temporal & cognitive resource) "...things which took up some of my thoughts."; "I took up [two days] in grinding my tools..."; "These works did not take me up less than three months..."; "...taken up with very serious thoughts..."; "...my head was for some time taken up in considering..."

Meaning: absorbed mental focus and/or consumed a stretch of time

Semantic note: figurative extension—time and

attention conceptualized as resources that can be "occupied"

Metaphorical shift: SPACE → TIME/MIND mapping (activities "fill" time; concerns "fill" mental space), highlighting preoccupation or duration

3. To lift or pick up physically / to be rescued (physical uptake) "I took up the Bible and began to read..."; "...taken up at sea by the Portugal captain..."

Meaning: physically picked something up; in passive, "was picked up/rescued"

Semantic note: literal manipulation (lifting an object); extended to maritime rescue as "picking up" a person

Metaphorical nuance: the rescue sense preserves the core UP image schema (raising from danger to safety)

4. To adopt or begin (a decision/stance/plan) "I took up another resolution..."

Meaning: adopted a new plan or commitment

Semantic note: figurative—resolutions treated as objects one can "take up"

Metaphorical shift: ACTION/STANCE AS OBJECT—assuming a commitment parallels picking up and carrying a burden or tool

Across the ten occurrences, take up consolidates into four core senses—(1) spatial settling, (2) temporal/cognitive occupation, (3) physical uptake/rescue, and (4) adoption of a plan—showing systematic shifts from a literal "lift/occupy" schema to metaphorical mappings over time, attention, mind, and stance. This pattern exemplifies how a single phrasal verb's core schema ("take" + directional particle "up") underlies diverse contextual meanings in the novel.

Phrasal Verb: go on — Detailed Polysemy Analysis (Robinson Crusoe)

1. To continue in a social relationship

"...we went on very sociably together."

Meaning: continued to get along or cooperate

Semantic note: figurative extension of the core sense continue into the domain of relationships

Metaphorical shift: LITERAL MOVEMENT → SOCIAL HARMONY; interpersonal cooperation conceptualized as "moving forward together"

2. To proceed slowly or with difficulty

"...every work I did go on heavily."

Meaning: progressed with difficulty, lacking smooth continuation

Semantic note: here go on retains the basic meaning continue/proceed, but modified by adverbial "heavily" to mark struggle

Polysemous shift: the manner of continuation is highlighted—effort, resistance, and hardship are mapped onto the process of “going on”

3. To continue walking or moving with fear

“...not feeling, as we say, the ground went on...”

Meaning: continued moving forward while terrified

Semantic note: literal motion is still present, but accompanied by psychological state (fear, anxiety)

Metaphorical nuance: BLENDING of physical movement and emotional condition—motion under fear conceptualized as shaky or uncertain continuation

To sum up, in Robinson Crusoe, go on exhibits three context-dependent senses:

1. social continuation (getting along),
2. struggling continuation (progress with difficulty), and
3. literal fearful movement (continue walking under anxiety).

All derive from the core semantic schema of “continuing forward”, which then extends metaphorically into domains of social relations, effortful work, and emotionally charged action.

Phrasal Verb: break off — Detailed Polysemy Analysis (Robinson Crusoe)

1. To stop speaking suddenly due to emotion

“...he broke off the discourse...”

Meaning: interrupted speech abruptly because of strong feelings

Semantic note: figurative extension of the literal break (“to separate”) applied to communication

Metaphorical shift: COMMUNICATION AS A CONTINUOUS THREAD; “breaking off” means cutting the flow of speech under emotional pressure

2. To reduce or block the force of something

“...the land broke off a little the violence of the wind.”

Meaning: diminished, diverted, or blocked the wind’s force

Semantic note: extension of break to mean interrupting or weakening a natural force

Metaphorical shift: PHYSICAL OBSTRUCTION conceptualized as “breaking” continuous motion or energy; wind’s violence treated as something that can be fractured

3. To detach physically (literal separation)

“...forepart broken off...”

Meaning: literally separated or torn away from the rest of the ship

Semantic note: this is the core literal meaning of break

off—physical disconnection

Metaphorical base: SOLID OBJECTS conceptualized as units that can lose parts by “breaking off,” here applied to the ship’s structure

In Robinson Crusoe, break off demonstrates three distinct senses:

1. abrupt interruption of speech (figurative),
2. reduction of force (semi-figurative extension), and
3. literal physical separation (core sense).

All senses emerge from the prototypical image schema of “breaking” as separation, extended from objects to communication and even to abstract natural forces.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the polysemous nature of phrasal verbs in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, focusing particularly on take up, go on, and break off. The analysis has demonstrated that these phrasal verbs occur in multiple senses, ranging from literal, physical meanings to highly figurative and abstract uses. Such variation reflects the central characteristic of phrasal verbs: their semantic flexibility and context-dependency.

By comparing dictionary definitions from the Cambridge Dictionary and the Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary with contextual meanings in the novel, it was shown that a single phrasal verb often carries several distinct senses. This confirms Gardner and Davies’s (2007) observation that an average phrasal verb may have more than five meanings. Furthermore, the study has highlighted how metaphorical extension, as discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), contributes to the semantic expansion of phrasal verbs, while Tyler and Evans’s (2003) Principled Polysemy Model provides a systematic account of how such meanings are related within semantic networks.

The findings also reveal that phrasal verbs are not only central to everyday English but also play a crucial stylistic and semantic role in literary texts. In Robinson Crusoe, Defoe uses phrasal verbs both to depict physical actions and to convey complex psychological or abstract states, thereby enriching the narrative.

Overall, this research underscores the importance of studying phrasal verbs from both semantic and cognitive perspectives. Understanding their polysemy is essential not only for translation and language teaching but also for appreciating their role in literature. The study contributes to the growing body of research on phrasal verbs by demonstrating how cognitive linguistics can illuminate their multifaceted meanings in literary discourse.

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