

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Phrasal Verbs in Robinson Crusoe: A Semantic Classification

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VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue04 2026

PAGE: 11-14

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Abstract

This article examines the semantic characteristics of phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe. The study focuses on their classification according to semantic types and contextual meanings. A qualitative approach was used to identify and analyze verb-particle constructions in the narrative. The phrasal verbs were grouped into semantic categories such as movement, physical action, cognition, change of state, and emotion. The findings demonstrate that phrasal verbs operate across a semantic continuum ranging from literal to idiomatic meanings and contribute to the representation of actions and mental processes in the novel.

KEY WORDS

Phrasal verbs, semantics, semantic classification, verb-particle constructions, literal meaning, idiomatic meaning, qualitative analysis, narrative structure, English linguistics, semantic groups.

INTRODUCTION

Phrasal verbs represent one of the most distinctive and productive features of the English verbal system. They are widely used in both spoken and written discourse and play an important role in conveying dynamic and context-dependent meanings. Linguistic studies indicate that English contains more than 3,000 phrasal verbs, of which approximately 700 are frequently used in everyday communication. This high level of productivity demonstrates their central position in modern English vocabulary and highlights the necessity of their systematic analysis. From a structural perspective, phrasal verbs consist of a lexical verb combined with one or more particles that modify the meaning of the base verb. According to A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, phrasal verbs form a semantic and syntactic unit in which the particle contributes significantly to meaning formation and often results in idiomatic or non-compositional

interpretations. This characteristic distinguishes them from simple verbs and makes their semantic analysis particularly complex.

As regards the semantics of phrasal verbs, scholars have proposed various but overlapping frameworks of classification. Bruce Fraser (1976) argues that phrasal verbs exist on a continuum of transparency, ranging from highly compositional combinations such as stand up or take away to fully opaque and idiomatic expressions like give in or put up with. In a similar vein, Stefan Thim (2012) distinguishes between two broad categories: compositional and non-compositional phrasal verbs. Building on this idea, Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 425) outline three major groups: literal/directional, aspectual/completive, and idiomatic/opaque. This taxonomy underscores that phrasal

verbs are not confined to rigid categories but rather distributed across a semantic continuum. At one end of the continuum are literal or directional phrasal verbs, where meaning is transparent and derived directly from the verb–particle combination (e.g., sit down, come in). In the middle lie aspectual or completive phrasal verbs, where the particle modifies the aspect of the action by signaling completion, continuation, or intensity (e.g., burn down, eat up, carry on). At the opposite end are idiomatic or opaque phrasal verbs, whose meanings cannot be inferred from their components (e.g., give up, put up with).

The classifications proposed by Fraser, Thim, and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman may therefore be synthesized into three broad semantic groups: compositional (literal/directional), aspectual/completive, and non-compositional (idiomatic/opaque). Such a classification provides a useful framework for analyzing phrasal verbs in literary texts, as it allows both transparent and idiomatic meanings to be examined within a unified semantic perspective.

However, alternative semantic classifications have also been proposed in linguistic literature. For instance, T. B. Pivonenkova (2013) approaches the semantics of phrasal verbs from a broader perspective by analyzing them as a system rather than as isolated units. Based on this approach, nine semantic groups are identified, including phrasal verbs denoting success or failure in activities, changes in a person's state, interpersonal relationships, social behavior, the beginning or end of actions, involvement in activities, stability of states, cognitive processes, and the initiation or cessation of movement. This classification emphasizes the functional diversity of phrasal verbs and demonstrates that their meanings extend beyond purely structural combinations to encompass a wide range of conceptual domains. A similar perspective is reflected in the work of Oksana Vorobiova and Larysa Saienko, who identify common semantic types associated with phrasal verbs containing the particles on and off. Their analysis distinguishes eight general semantic categories, including physical action, mental-psychological action, abstract action, emotive action, possession, phase of action, relateness, and existence. These broader categories are further subdivided into more specific meanings such as movement, location, speaking, mental activity, change of quality, interpersonal relations, and creation. Such classifications illustrate that phrasal verbs operate within

complex semantic networks and that their interpretation depends on both contextual and conceptual factors.

These diverse approaches to semantic classification highlight the absence of a single universally accepted model and confirm that phrasal verbs demonstrate considerable semantic variability. Consequently, the semantic analysis of phrasal verbs in literary texts requires a flexible framework capable of accounting for both structural and contextual meanings. This perspective forms the basis for the present study, which examines the semantic distribution of phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe. The data were collected through close reading of the novel, during which verb–particle constructions were manually identified. Each example was examined in its original narrative context to determine its semantic function. The identified phrasal verbs were grouped into semantic categories based on their contextual meanings. The classification was guided by established semantic approaches in phraseology, with attention paid to literal, semi-figurative, and idiomatic interpretations. Additionally, dictionary definitions from reliable online lexical resources were consulted to confirm meaning distinctions.

The analysis focuses on five major semantic groups: movement, physical action, cognition, change of state, and emotion. These categories reflect both concrete and abstract domains of meaning, allowing for a comprehensive description of semantic variation within the text.

Semantic Classification of Phrasal Verbs

Movement

Movement represents one of the most frequent semantic groups of phrasal verbs in the novel. These constructions describe physical motion and spatial orientation. The verb typically expresses manner, while the particle indicates direction or path. Examples such as go out, come back, and run away illustrate literal movement within the narrative. These phrasal verbs contribute to the depiction of Crusoe's exploration, travel, and survival activities. Their meanings remain largely transparent, though contextual nuances occasionally extend their semantic range.

Physical Action

The group of physical action includes phrasal verbs that describe manipulation of objects or construction activities. In Robinson Crusoe, these verbs frequently appear in descriptions of building, arranging, and preparing materials. Constructions such as set up, make up, and put up illustrate practical actions related to survival. Although primarily literal, some examples display slight semantic extension depending on context. These verbs emphasize the material and practical aspects of Crusoe's daily life.

Cognition

Cognitive phrasal verbs express mental processes such as thinking, understanding, or decision-making. Examples include think over, make out, and figure out. In the narrative, such constructions often reflect Crusoe's reflections, planning, and interpretation of events. Unlike movement verbs, cognitive phrasal verbs tend to show more semantic abstraction. Their meanings may shift from concrete interpretation to metaphorical understanding, demonstrating the flexibility of verb-particle constructions.

Change of State

This group includes phrasal verbs that indicate transformation or transition. Constructions such as break down, grow up, and turn into express changes in condition, development, or situation. In Robinson Crusoe, these verbs frequently describe environmental changes, personal development, or shifts in circumstances. Their meanings often combine literal and figurative elements, reflecting gradual semantic extension.

Emotion

Emotional phrasal verbs convey psychological reactions and affective states. Examples such as give up, break down, and cheer up illustrate emotional responses within the narrative. These constructions often function figuratively, expressing internal states rather than physical actions. Their use contributes to the representation of Crusoe's isolation, anxiety, and adaptation to new conditions.

DISCUSSION

The analysis shows that phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe operate across a semantic continuum. Movement and physical action groups tend to maintain literal meanings, reflecting the practical nature of the narrative. In contrast, cognition and emotion groups demonstrate higher levels of abstraction and figurative usage. Change of state constructions occupy an intermediate position, combining both concrete and

metaphorical elements.

This distribution highlights the functional versatility of phrasal verbs. They not only describe physical activities but also express mental and emotional processes. The semantic diversity of these constructions contributes to the dynamic narrative style of the novel.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that phrasal verbs in Robinson Crusoe form an important component of the novel's linguistic structure. Their classification into movement, physical action, cognition, change of state, and emotion reveals systematic semantic patterns. Movement and physical action groups appear most frequently, reflecting the survival-oriented narrative. However, cognitive and emotional phrasal verbs play a crucial role in representing psychological development.

Overall, phrasal verbs in the novel function as flexible semantic units that range from literal to idiomatic meanings. Their usage enhances descriptive precision and contributes to the stylistic richness of the text.

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