

# English transitive particle verbs

## Particle placement and idiomaticity

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Adopting the Cognitive Linguistic (CL) framework, this study focuses on the particle placement phenomenon of English transitive particle verbs and its relationship with idiomaticity. Construal is argued to play a key role in determining which order a transitive particle verb should take. When a caused motion event or state change event is construed sequentially, the discontinuous order is taken to emphasize the final resultant state of the object. When the holistic construal is taken to view the same situation, the continuous order is adopted to profile the object or the interaction between the subject and the object. The holistic construal requires two conditions. First, the particle has a dynamic sense. It can designate both the process and the endpoint of motion. Second, the final state denoted by the particle is directly caused by the action denoted by the verb. In contrast, the sequential construal is allowed as long as a causal link can be established between the two participants under discussion or between the verb and the state change of one participant. In addition, the present study argues that the particle placement of idiomatic particle verbs depends on the processes in which the particle verb has developed its idiomaticity. If the idiomatic meaning develops from the inference associated with the sequential construal, the discontinuous order is preferred. On the other hand, if the idiomatic meaning is based on the holistic construal, the continuous order is then preferred. Moreover, item-by-item analyses of particle verbs that only allow one order listed in the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* provide corpus-based support to the CL view of the relationship between construal, particle placement, and idiomaticity proposed in this study.

**Keywords:** particle verbs, particle placement, idiomaticity, construal, cognitive linguistics

## 1. Introduction

Particle verbs are pervasive in the English language, especially in spoken language (Bolinger 1971; Gardner & Davies 2007) and display syntactic and semantic complexities (Dehé 2002; Jackendoff 2002; Thim 2012; Goldberg 2016).

The syntax of particle verbs attracts linguists' attention mainly for the following two reasons. First, the Verb + Particle syntactic structure is rare outside of the Germanic family, which poses "a syntactic oddity in the language world" (Darwin & Gray 1999: 65; Dewell 2011). Second, transitive particle verbs can take two possible alternating orders: the continuous order and the discontinuous order as illustrated in (1).

(1) Transitive particle verbs' continuous and discontinuous order

- a. He *looked up* the information. (Continuous)
- b. He *looked* the information *up*. (Discontinuous)

(The *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* 1989)

As can be seen from (1), the particle *up* can appear right after the verb *look* in the continuous order. It can also occur after the object, disconnected from the verb in the discontinuous order. However, the meanings of the two sentences are very similar. The syntactic variation of transitive particle verbs is termed as *the particle placement phenomenon* in the present study. The particle placement of transitive particle verbs in English has attracted the attention of many linguists (Gries 1999; Dehé 2002).

The semantic complexity of particle verbs is manifested in a wide range of idiomaticity (Bolinger 1971; Jackendoff 2002). Many particle verbs show different degrees of idiomaticity as shown in (2).

(2) Degrees of idiomaticity in particle verbs

- a. He *picked up* some groceries in the supermarket.
- b. He *picked up* a valuable antique at an auction.
- c. He *picked up* a disease when he was travelling.

Although idiomatic particle verbs are not compositional, native speakers, most of the times if not always, are aware that the verb component and the particle component contribute to the meaning of the particle verb (Morgan 1997; Gibbs 1990). In other words, many, if not all, idiomatic particle verbs are analyzable. Many scholars (Dirven 2001; Gries 1999) have observed that more idiomatic particle verbs tend to prefer the continuous order. Nevertheless, this view may risk being too simplistic as many highly idiomatic particle verbs can only take the discontinuous order (The *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* 1989).

In the traditional view, the study of particle placement of English transitive particle verbs belongs to the study of syntax whereas the study of idiomaticity of particle verbs is seen as a typical semantic topic. As the study of semantics is distinctly separated from the study of syntax in traditional linguistics, the particle placement and idiomaticity of English particle verbs have not been given a unified explanation within a coherent theoretical framework.

Cognitive Linguistics (CL) views language as a result of conceptualization. In this framework, language is characterized as a structured complex network of symbolic units of mental representations (Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987, 1990; Talmy 2000). Thus, instead of establishing a clear-cut distinction between syntax and lexicon, cognitive linguists believe lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum of symbolic units, dividing only arbitrarily into separate components (Langacker 1987, 1990). From the symbolic nature of language follows the centrality of meaning to virtually all linguistic concerns (Lakoff 1987; Langacker 1987). Consequently, the study of language, including the study of syntax, boils down to the study of meaning, which is, in turn, equated to conceptualization.

Therefore, the present study adopts the CL framework in an attempt to provide a unified explanation of the semantic and syntactic complexities of the particle verb in English. More specifically, this study intends to examine (1) What are the conceptualization processes motivating the particle placement phenomenon of the English particle verb? and (2) How is particle placement related to idiomaticity?

## 2. Literature review

The English particle verb has continuously attracted the attention of many linguists in the past decades. Studies that are highly relevant to the aims of the present one include: functionalist studies on factors associated with particle placement, Gries' (1999) psycholinguistic analysis of the particle placement phenomenon, and the construal analysis of particle placement proposed by Driven (2001).

### 2.1 Factors identified by functionalists

Functionalists have identified a wide range of discourse factors as contributing to the particle placement of English transitive particle verbs, including the category of direct object, stress pattern, the length or syntactic complexity of the direct object, the presence of a directional adverbial after the construction, modification of the particle, the news value of the direct object, and the idiomaticity of the particle verb.

The most frequently discussed factor governing particle placement is the category of the direct object. As demonstrated in many studies (Bolinger 1971; Fraser 1976; Olsen 1996), the discontinuous order is usually required if the direct object of the particle verb is a pronoun. Both orders are, in general, acceptable if the direct object is a full lexical noun. See the examples illustrated below.

- (3) a. John *picked up* the book.  
 b. John *picked* the book *up*.  
 c. John *picked* it *up*.  
 d. \*John *picked up* it. (Gries 1999: 105–106)

Some grammarians (Van Dongen 1919; Quirk et al. 1985) postulate a threefold distinction of the direct object as pronouns, referentially vague nouns, and full lexical nouns. It is observed that the preferred order with referentially vague nouns such as *matters* or *things* as the direct object is the discontinuous order.

The second widely discussed factor is the stress pattern factor (Van Dongen 1919; Fraser 1976; Svenonius 1996). The continuous order of the particle verb is obligatory when the direct object is stressed, whereas the discontinuous order is required when the particle is stressed. The factor of stress pattern is very strong, which even overrides the above-mentioned obligatory rule of pronouns requiring the discontinuous order. Examples are represented in (4).

- (4) a. I knew that the school board contemplated *throwing out* Spanish in order to *throw out* ME.  
 b. The lady bade her *take away* the fool; therefore, I say again, *take her away*. – sir, I bade them *take away* you.  
 c. If you want to ease your mind by *blowing up* somebody, come out into the court and *blow up* me.  
 d. You may *give up* society without any great pang...but severe are the modifications and pains you have if society *gives up* you.  
 e. He *bought back* him (not her)!  
 (a–d from Bolinger 1971: 39; e from Gries 1999: 109)

The third factor that has been suggested as contributing to the choice of one order over the other with the particle verb is the length or syntactic complexity of the direct object (Fraser 1976; Chen 1986; Olsen 1996). As shown in (5), when the direct object is long or syntactically complex, the continuous order is strongly preferred; when the direct object is short and simple, both orders are allowed.

- (5) a. He *brought back* the books that he had left at home for so long.  
 b. ?? He *brought* the books that he had left at home for so long *back*.  
 c. She *sewed on* the sleeves with lace around the cuff.

d. ?? She *sewed* the sleeves with lace around the cuff *on*.

(a-b from Gries 1999: 110; c-d from Olsen 1996: 279)

The fourth factor is concerned with the structure following the particle verb other than the direct object, described as the presence of a directional adverbial after the particle verb by Dehé (2002) and Gries (1999). As the examples in (6) shows, if a directional prepositional phrase (PP) is added to the particle verb, the discontinuous order seems to be more frequently chosen (Fraser 1976: 17).

(6) a. He *put* the junk *down* onto the floor.

b. ? He *put down* the junk onto the floors. (Gries 1999: 110)

The fifth factor that has been suggested as governing the alternation is the modification of the particle (e.g., Den Dikken 1995; Svenonius 1996). If a modifying element precedes the particle, the discontinuous order is obligatory and the continuous order is not allowed, as illustrated by the examples in (7).

(7) a. I'll *look* the answer right *up*.

b. \*I'll *look right up* the answer.

c. Bill *brought* the wagon right *back*.

d. \*Bill *brought right back* the wagon. (a-d from Jackendoff 2002: 71)

The sixth factor associated with the choice of word order of the transitive particle verb goes to the news value of the direct object (Bolinger 1971; Chen 1986; Olsen 1996). If the direct object introduces new information to the context, the continuous order is preferred; if the direct object has been mentioned in the preceding discourse or can be inferred from the context, the discontinuous order is preferred. Examples in (8) demonstrate the contrast.

(8) a. ?We'll *make up* a parcel for them.... On the morning of Christmas Eve together we *made up* the parcel.

b. We'll make up a parcel for them.... On the morning of Christmas Eve together we *made* the parcel *up*.

c. It's late and I want to go to bed. I would like you to *turn down* the radio. The music is too loud; I won't be able to sleep.

d. – “Do you know where that noise is coming from?”

– “Yes, I do. It's the radio of our next-door neighbor, a student. She likes her music loud”.

– “Fine, but I can't stand it. I'll go and ask her to *turn* the radio *down*”.

(a-b from Gries 1999: 111; c-d from Dehé 2002: 164)

In my view, the news value of the direct object is a very important criterion because it can account for at least two of the above-mentioned factors, namely, the category of the direct object and the syntactic complexity of the direct object. This factor

alone can explain why pronouns require the discontinuous order whereas the long and complex direct objects occur in the continuous order. Pronouns usually refer to the before-mentioned entities and thus do not introduce new information. In contrast, heavily modified nouns often increase the news value of the constituent.

The seventh factor as identified in the literature is the idiomaticity of the particle verb (Fraser 1976; Chen 1986; Den Dikken 1995). Many scholars (Fraser 1976; Gries 1999; Dirven 2001) have argued that more idiomatic particle verbs tend to prefer the continuous order, as shown in the examples below.

- (9) a. He has tried to *eke out* a profitable living.  
 b. \*He has tried to *eke* a profitable living *out*.  
 c. He wanted to *lay down* the law.  
 d. ?? He wanted to *lay* the law *down*.  
 e. *Shut up* shop/ \* *shut* shop *up* (to stop any kind of work)  
 f. *Let off* steam/\* *let* steam *off* (to behave actively, using up strength)  
 g. *Give up* the ghost/\* *give* the ghost *up* (to die)  
 (a-b from Gries 1999: 111; c-d from Gries 1999: 128; e-g from Dehé 2002: 78)

However, this view is questionable as scholars (Fraser 1976; Den Dikken 1995; Jackendoff 2002) have also observed that some idiomatic particle verbs can only occur in the discontinuous order, as illustrated in (10).

- (10) a. *Take* Friday *off*/\* *take off* Friday  
 b. *Boss* someone *about*/\**boss about* someone  
 c. *Sing* one's heart *out* / \**sing out* one's heart (Dehé 2002: 78)

Therefore, the relationship between the particle placement and idiomaticity of English transitive particle verbs needs to be further explored. In addition, the above-mentioned factors associated with the particle placement of English transitive particle verbs identified in the literature are descriptive rather than explanatory in nature. More efforts need to be made to explain why native English speakers prefer one order over the other under certain contexts when using transitive particle verbs.

## 2.2 Gries' (1999) Study

Gries (1999) investigates the two possibilities of particle placement with English transitive particle verbs and discusses what factors determine the choice of the particle position. He hypothesizes that the consciousness principle, namely, the degree of attention needed to set up mental contact with the NP's referent, governs all the above-mentioned factors. The consciousness principle is formulated as follows:

Construction 0 (the continuous order) will be preferred with objects requiring a high amount of consciousness and construction 1 (the discontinuous order) will be preferred with objects requiring none or only a limited amount of consciousness for their processing. (Gries 1999: 64, *brackets from the author*)

According to Gries (1999), the human brain allocates attention to the processing of important aspects of experience, whereas the processing of unimportant aspects is left to the subconscious. The two conditions that influence the degree of consciousness are: the discourse context and the entrenchment of the direct object of the particle verb denoting a referent. Objects that are new in the discourse context prefer the continuous order, whereas objects that are accessible or active via the discourse context preferably occur in the discontinuous order. Similarly, poorly entrenched objects prefer the continuous order, but fairly well entrenched objects are more frequent and therefore more acceptable in the discontinuous order.

Gries (2002, 2003) further pursues the analysis and carries out a series of corpus-based experimental studies to find out the rank of importance and the interaction of all the factors determining the choice of the particle position. He computes values by application of monofactorial and multifactorial correlation and provides interesting hypotheses about the processing efforts for deviant particle verbs. Based on the cognitive-psychological understanding that processing cost is dependent on attention allocation, the storage and retrieval of concepts, and structural complexity of linguistic expressions, Gries (2002, 2003) argues that the phenomenon of particle placement is a manifestation of processing requirements on the speaker.

The series of studies conducted by Gries (1999, 2002, 2003) have undoubtedly advanced research on English particle verbs. However, there seem to be areas still remaining to be explored. First, it seems that exceptions can be easily found for his hypothesis concerning the entrenchment of the direct object of particle verbs. For example, the direct objects of the two particle verbs in (11) are both highly entrenched. Based on the hierarchy of entrenchment proposed by Gries (1999), the discontinuous order should have been preferable in these two examples. However, according to the *Collins COLBUID Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* (Sinclair, et al., 1989), the continuous order rather than the discontinuous order is the preferred placement in both of the examples.

- (11) a. He *dusts off* his trousers and gets in the car.  
 b. I need a handkerchief to *wipe away* the sand.

(The *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*, 1989: 94, 430)

Second, Gries' proposal may not be able to provide a satisfactory explanation for the particle placement of idiomatic particle verbs. Notably, Gries has realized that

idiomatic transitive particle verbs do not behave as he has predicted. He points out that “idiomatic expressions containing transitive phrasal verbs do not undergo a change in word order ... just because the referents of the direct object display a low degree of entrenchment” (Gries 1999: 129). He argues that this can be explained by considering general syntactic properties of idiomatic expressions. Because many idiomatic expressions are usually syntactically unproductive and resist the rearrangement of their component parts, it is only logical that idiomatic transitive particle verbs are also less susceptible to syntactic rearrangements (p. 128–130). It seems that the unique syntactic behavior of idiomatic particle verbs deserves much more in-depth investigation than Gries’ explanation.

### 2.3 Dirven’s (2001) Study

Pedagogically oriented, Dirven (2001) intends to use the teaching of English phrasal verbs as an example to show that “an applied linguist must be informed about the continued evolutions in the field and base his programming of learning problems on the best, ... descriptive proposals” (p. 3). He thus presents a descriptive analysis of the developing processes of the semantics and syntax of one particle verb: *brush off*, which provides valuable insights into the particle placement phenomenon of transitive particle verbs. Examples of the particle verb *brush off* are presented as below.

- (12) a. She *brushed* the crumbs *off* the table.  
 b. She *brushed* the crumbs *off*.  
 c. She *brushed off* the crumbs.  
 d. She *brushed off* the table.  
 e. She *brushed off* the shoulders of her coat.  
 f. \*She *brushed* the shoulders of her coat *off*. (Dirven 2001: 8–9)

In (12a), “the crumbs” is the figure that can be removed; *off* is a preposition and “the table” is the ground. In (12b), the ground is not emphasized and *off* is a particle, indicating the resultant state of “the crumbs.” Usually, the particle can also be placed right after the verb, as shown by the sentence example in (12c). When one brushes off all the crumbs from the table, an inference is that the table is cleaned. Through entrenchment, this inference of “cleaning” becomes a conventionalized meaning of *brush off* as in (12d), although “the table” is something irremovable. As the meaning of “cleaning” develops from “global metaphorization” of the particle verb *brush off* (Dirven 2001: 11) or, in other words, from semantic extension at the level of the whole particle verb, the internal structure of *brush off* is frozen to a certain degree and the particle *off* becomes “unmovable.” Thus, the position of the particle *off* in (12f) is then not allowed because “the shoulders of her coat”

are not removable either. Following this argument of the semantic extension process of *brush off*, Dirven (2001) claims that *brush something off* is diachronically unmarked compared to *brush off something*, although *brush off something* is synchronically more frequent.

According to Dirven (2001), the discontinuous order focuses on a resultant state with the particle retaining an adverbial status while the continuous order reflects a strong integration of the particle with the verb. Furthermore, he argues that the two orders of English transitive particle verbs reflect two different methods of conceptualizing the same scene. His original argument concerning the particle placement is presented as follows:

The alternation which is possible with concrete particle verbs expresses two different construals of the same scene: a sequential one, making a distinction between the action of the verb and the resultant state, and another holistic one, not making that distinction explicitly, and not focusing on, but only implying the result. (Dirven 2001: 11)

Dirven's insight of attributing the two alternating syntactic orders to different ways of construing the same conceptual scene is enlightening. Yet, it is a pity that Dirven (2001) does not provide a detailed description or interpretation of the conceptual scene or the two ways of construal. For example, what is the conceptual scene like? How is this scene linguistically coded in the particle verb? Are there any conditions to be met for both ways of construal? Under what kind of circumstances is one construal preferred over the other? Can the two ways of construal account for the factors associated with the particle placement identified in the literature? It seems that all these questions remain to be further explored.

In addition to his insightful thought on the particle placement phenomenon, Dirven (2001) recognizes that idiomaticity is a matter of degree and that the level of idiomaticity is related to the particle placement. However, similar to other scholars, Dirven seems to agree that the more idiomatic a particle verb is, the more likely it takes the continuous order. However, as discussed previously, this claim is not supported by corpus-based linguistic data because many extremely idiomatic particle verbs, as a matter of fact, can only take the discontinuous order.

In my view, Dirven's proposal of two ways of construal has the potential to account for the relationship between the idiomaticity and the particle placement of English transitive particle verbs. More specifically, the investigation of the processes in which a particle verb develops its idiomatic meaning may be related to the particle placement of particle verbs. Therefore, the present study intends to build on Dirven's (2001) idea and further analyze the conceptualization processes underlying the particle placement phenomenon and the relationship between the particle placement and idiomaticity.

### 3. Particle placement and construal

It is commonly agreed that human beings are capable of mentally construing a conceived situation in alternate ways (Langacker 1987; Fauconnier 1997). Construal is viewed as “the way a speaker chooses to ‘package’ and ‘present’ a conceptual representation” (Evans & Green 2006: 536). Along with Dirven (2001), the present study argues that the particle placement of transitive particle verbs results from two different ways of construing the same conceptual content, i.e., the sequential construal and the holistic construal.

#### 3.1 Sequential construal and holistic construal

The conceptual content evoked by transitive particle verbs can be prototypically described as a caused motion event or state change event (Talmy 2000): the agent carries out an action; some energy is transmitted to the patient; as a result, the patient moves or changes state. When this conceptual content is coded linguistically in the transitive particle verbs, the subject and the object denote the agent and the patient respectively. The verb describes the action carried out by the agent and the particle designates the path of motion or the state change of the patient. To further illustrate how the two different construals of the above-mentioned conceptual content are represented linguistically by the two orders of English transitive particle verbs, the examples in (13) are analyzed below.

- (13) a. *He picked up the pen.* (continuous order)  
 b. *He picked the pen up.* (discontinuous order)

The discontinuous order *He picked the pen up* as in (13b) denotes a sequential construal. As observers, we first see the agent; then we see the agent do something to the patient, and finally the patient moves or undergoes some kind of internal or external change. The sequence of this whole event is correspondingly encoded in the discontinuous order of transitive particle verbs. In this construal, the speaker’s attention finally lands on the motion or the state change of the patient. As a result, the state change or path of motion denoted by the particle is stressed. In (13b), the particle *up*, which designates the path of motion as well as the final state of *the pen*, is emphasized.

In contrast, the continuous order, *He picked up the pen* as in (13a), encodes a holistic construal. When the same event is construed in a holistic manner, the interaction between the agent and the patient is profiled and the speaker’s attention finally focuses on the patient that moves or changes state. As a result, the continuous order attaches importance to the patient.

The specific conceptualization process that enables the two different construals is the mechanism of profiling, a process of assigning special attention to and imposing salience on a certain part of the background frame (Croft & Cruse 2004; Langacker 1987). The sequential construal profiles the state change or the final state of the patient, while the holistic construal profiles the interaction between the agent and the patient, assigning special attention to the patient. More examples are given in (14)–(16) to lend further support for this analysis.

- (14) a. He *brought back* his Peugeot from France.  
 b. He *brought* his Peugeot *back* from France.
- (15) a. He *brought back* a wife from France.  
 b. ?He *brought* a wife *back* from France.
- (16) a. I'm going to *do over* this dress and see if I can't make it look more in style.  
 b. I'm going to *do* this dress *over*; I didn't get it right the first time.
- (14–15 from Bolinger 1971: 162–163; 16 from Bolinger 1971: 121)

The two sentences in (14) are both grammatically acceptable, but they imply slightly different meanings. It is indicated in (14a) that he acquired “the Peugeot” in France. As Bolinger (1971) points out, “*bring back* is existential and ‘Peugeot’ is introduced on the scene” (p. 163). In other words, “Peugeot” is something he newly obtained in France and very much stressed in (14a). Thus, (14a) denotes a holistic construal of the situation that attaches importance to “his Peugeot”. In contrast, the sentence in (14b) designates a sequential construal of the same situation. In this construal, “his Peugeot” is presumed to be known information and importance is attached to the fact that “his Peugeot was back”. This semantic contrast also applies to the two sentences in (15). However, “a wife” is obviously not known information. Instead, he got to know his wife and married her in France. Therefore, “a wife” naturally needs special attention and the sequential construal is not appropriate here, which explains why (15b) sounds a little awkward. Similarly, different positions of the particle *over* in (16a) and (16b) result in a slight semantic difference in the particle verb *do over*. In (16a), the interaction between “I” and “the dress” or the act of altering the dress is profiled as a whole, whereas (16b) puts stress on the final state of the dress being altered, denoted by the particle *over*. Thus, the continuous order in (16a) reflects the holistic construal of the situation, while the discontinuous order in (16b) designates the sequential construal.

### 3.2 Constraints on the holistic construal

As the above analysis shows, prototypical caused motion events or state change events can be construed in two different ways, which are linguistically represented

by the two alternating orders of English transitive particle verbs. However, as the examples in (17) demonstrate, not all caused motion events or state change events can be readily construed in two different ways. Correspondingly, not all transitive particle verbs allow two alternating orders.

- (17) a. You've *left* the clothes *out* and they are all wet from the rain.  
 a'. \*You've *left out* the clothes and they are all wet from the rain.  
 b. They *put* the man *out*. (He is out, literally)  
 b'. \*They *put out* the man. (a-b' from Bolinger 1971: 124–125)

The examples of transitive particle verbs in (17) can take the discontinuous order, but reject the continuous order, which is represented by the asterisks. It is argued that the holistic construal requires a prototypical scene of caused motion event or state change event and thus two conditions have to be satisfied for such a construal. They are: (1) the particle has a dynamic sense, which can designate both the process of motion or state change and the endpoint of motion or state change; (2) the final state of the patient denoted by the particle is directly caused by the action denoted by the verb. If either condition is violated, the holistic construal is not appropriate. In contrast, the sequential construal does not require the caused motion event to be prototypical. The sequential construal is allowed as long as a causal link can be established between the two participants under discussion or between the verb and the state change of one participant, however indirect the causal link may be.

In (17a–a'), the particle *out* does not have a dynamic sense as it does not designate the path of the clothes' motion, but only the final static state of the clothes of being located outside. Moreover, the final "being outside" state of the clothes is not directly caused by the action denoted by the verb "left". When "you" left, the clothes were already outside. In this case, the two conditions of the holistic construal are not satisfied; thus, the continuous order of the particle verb *left out* in (17a') is not acceptable. However, the sequential construal of the described event is perfectly fine as there is indeed a causal link between the participant denoted by "you" and the final state of the clothes. Therefore, the discontinuous order of the particle verb is appropriate as shown in (17a).

According to Bolinger (1971), the continuous order in \**They put out the man* in (17b'), is not acceptable. I agree and offer the following two reasons. First, the final state of the man is emphasized in (17b). The particle *out* in this example denotes the resultant state of "being outside," rather than the path of the man's motion. Because of this, the dynamic sense of the particle is lost. Second, in the usual context described by *They put the man out*, "they" did not physically do anything to "the man" to make him *out* although "they" may have obviously showed that the man was extremely unwelcome. Even if there was physical contact, the

contact alone was not strong enough to cause the man to move out of the house. The man probably went out of the house by himself when he found “they” were extremely unfriendly or he was in danger of being physically or mentally hurt if he continued to stay there. In this case, the man did not physically receive energy from the agent denoted by “they”. Thus, the man’s final state of “being outside” was not directly caused by the action denoted by the verb “put.” Since the two conditions for holistic construal are both violated, the continuous order in (17b’) is then unacceptable. The sequential construal of this non-prototypical caused motion event is, however, legitimate as the final state of the man being outside of the house was caused by the unfriendliness of the agent denoted by “they.” Thus, the discontinuous order of the particle verb *put someone out* as demonstrated in (17b) is perfectly appropriate.

Personally, I think the continuous order of the particle verb as in *They put out the man* can be possible in particular situations, where “they” were extremely strong and angry people in a night club, for example, and physically grabbed the man and threw the man out of the club house. In this case, the final state of the man denoted by the particle *out* is caused by the action denoted by the verb “put”. Meanwhile, the particle *out* in this case implies the path of motion of the man and carries a dynamic sense.

It should be noted, however, that the constraints on the holistic construal should not be considered absolute. This is because construal is subjective in nature. A certain construal can be forced on a situation with some amount of cognitive effort when necessary, even if this means this way of construal is not completely natural.

- (18) a. They went to the airport to *see* the guests *off*.  
 b. They went to the airport to *see off* the delegates from the United States.  
 (The *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*, 1989)

The state change of “the guests” denoted by the particle *off* in (18a) is not directly caused by the action indicated by the verb “see” although it is accompanied by that action. Thus, the holistic construal may not be automatic in this context. However, when the object taken by the particle verb *see off* is very long and needs emphasis, the holistic construal can be imposed on such situation with extra cognitive effort as illustrated by the sentence in (18b). Although the holistic construal for such a non-prototypical scene of caused motion event is not natural, it is still possible when extra cognitive effort is applied.

#### 4. Idiomaticity and particle placement

The relationship between the idiomaticity and particle placement of English transitive particle verbs is a frequently discussed topic, but a satisfactory analysis that explains or even describes this issue has yet to be established. Traditionally, scholars have observed that the more idiomatic particle verbs are, the more likely they require the continuous order (Fraser 1976; Gries 1999; Dirven 2001). However, one may easily find counterexamples to this view as many idiomatic particle verbs only take the discontinuous order as illustrated in 19(a-c).

- (19) a. You'll just have to *put your foot down* and tell him he can't stay out on school nights.  
 a'. \*You'll just have to *put down your foot* and tell him he can't stay out on school nights.  
 b. If you don't *pull your socks up*, you'll fail the exam.  
 b'. \*If you don't *pull up your socks*, you'll fail the exam.  
 c. The Party gave us all a dance to really *let our hair down*.  
 c'. \*The Party gave us all a dance to really *let down our hair*.  
 (The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995)

Based on a close examination of a vast number of idiomatic transitive particle verbs in English, especially those that only allow the continuous or the discontinuous order, I argue that: (1) if the idiomatic meaning of a transitive particle verb is extended from the inference associated with the sequential construal, the discontinuous order is usually preferred; (2) if the idiomatic meaning of a transitive particle verb develops from the implicature of the holistic construal, this idiomatic particle verb prefers the continuous order; (3) idiomaticity is a matter of degree: if a transitive particle verb is perceived to be highly idiomatic, usually only the continuous or the discontinuous order is allowed.

The three idioms in (19a-c), namely, *put your foot down*, *pull your socks up*, and *let your hair down*, can only take the discontinuous order. However, when used in their literal meanings, the three phrases can allow two positions of the particle component reflecting two construals of the described situations. Take *let one's hair down* as an example. In the sequential construal, the final state of "the hair" is stressed denoted by the particle *down* in the discontinuous order as in *He let his hair down*. People normally let their hair down after they get home from work or before going to bed. Thus, when someone's hair is down, the decision to relax or to feel relaxed is usually underway. Therefore, the inference of "starting to relax" begins to be associated with the expression *let one's hair down*. When this inference gets conventionalized through frequent usage, it becomes an idiomatic meaning of *let one's hair down*. In contrast, if the same situation is construed

holistically as represented in *He let down his hair*, the interaction between “he” and “the hair” is emphasized, which can hardly lead to the implicature of “starting to relax.” Therefore, the idiomatic meaning of *let your hair down*, “to enjoy oneself and start to relax, especially after working very hard,” is based on the inference associated with the sequential construal, linguistically coded in the discontinuous order. Moreover, the meaning of to “start to relax” is developed from the contextual inference at the level of the whole expression *let ones’ hair down*, beyond the combined meanings of each individual component in the phrase. Therefore, the particle verb *let ones’ hair down* in this meaning is then perceived to be frozen or unanalyzable and categorized as having a high degree of idiomaticity. Thus, only the discontinuous order (i.e., *let ones’ hair down*) is acceptable. A similar analysis applies to the other two idioms: *put your foot down* and *pull your socks up* in (19) and many other examples such as *work one’s tail off*, *pull your finger out*, *put one’s head down*, *keep one’s shirt on*, *tear one’s hair out*, *shoot one’s mouse off*, and more.

- (20) a. She *fought back* the tears.  
 a'. \*She *fought* the tears *back*.  
 b. A government should *lay down* a national policy for various sectors of education.  
 b'. \*A government should *lay* a national policy *down* for various sectors of education.  
 c. She didn’t want to be too controlling, she didn’t want to *lay down* the law.  
 c'. \*She didn’t want to be too controlling, she didn’t want to *lay* the law *down*.  
 (The Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs, 1989)

In contrast, the idiomatic particle verbs in (20) require the continuous order. When used in its literary meanings, the particle verb *fight back* allows two positions of the particle component as demonstrated in *We fought back the enemies* or *We fought the enemies back*. The difference between the two sentences lies in their contrastive emphasis. The sequential construal as encoded in *We fought the enemies back* puts stress on the result that “the enemies were back.” The holistic construal as reflected in *We fought back the enemies* emphasizes the relationship or the interaction between “the enemies” and “we”. The implicature that “we controlled the enemies” allows *fight back* to gain a meaning of “control” in this specific context. When the “control” meaning of *fight back* becomes more conventionalized in frequent usage, *fight back* can be extended to describe the interaction between someone and his or her emotion, to be more specific, his or her tears as in *She fought back her tears*, although the tears might never have come out. What “she” really did was just to hold the tears or to “control” the tears. As can be seen, the “control” meaning of *fight back* is based on the contextual inference associated with the holistic construal and this meaning is not attributable to the individual

meanings of “fight” and “back” alone. Thus, when used in the meaning of “control,” *fight back* is a highly idiomatic particle verb that only allows the continuous order.

In order to explain how the particle verb *lay down* has developed the idiomatic meaning of “officially state,” it would be helpful to imagine a hypothetical situation. For example, when there was still no concept of law, a king thought of some ideas to govern his people. Then he *laid those ideas down* on a piece of paper. However, what matters here is not whether those ideas are down on the paper, but instead, the relationship between the king and the ideas. Because the ideas were created by the king, the ideas that had been put down on the paper became the laws that the people must obey. Thus, the holistic construal is adopted in this context, in order to attach importance to the unique relationship between the king and the ideas. Because of this, the continuous order (i.e., *The king laid down the law*) is more appropriate than the discontinuous order. Since the king stands for the power of authority, *lay down* no longer simply describes a concrete or specific event, but gradually developed a new meaning of “officially stating” or “stipulating” the law. As this newly developed meaning became conventionalized, *lay down* turned into a frozen particle verb that could be replaced by a single verb, to “stipulate.” Since the “officially state” or “stipulate” meaning of *lay down* is based on the contextual inference associated with the holistic construal, the continuous order is taken and the discontinuous order is prohibited in relation to this meaning.

Furthermore, the scenario described by the sentence *The king lay down the law* can be accompanied with negative inferences associated with some specific contexts. For example, there were countless historical cases of when the king stipulated policies that were unfavorable to his people and he did not care how his people felt about it at all. Over time, the phrase *lay down the law* has integrated negative inferences that were gained from specific contexts, into its meaning. Gradually, these undesirable notions became linked to this phrase through repeated usage. As the example in (20c), *She didn't want to be too controlling, she didn't want to lay down the law* shows, the phrase *lay down the law* is now used as an idiom, meaning “to tell other people what to do, how they should think etc, in an unpleasant or rude way.” In this meaning, the discontinuous order *lay the law down* is not allowed as this meaning has been developed from inferences associated with the holistic construal in the first place. When the meaning of a particle-verb phrase is loaded with inferences associated with specific contexts, the phrase then becomes frozen and so does its syntactic structure.

However, it should be noted that whether an idiomatic particle verb is frozen or whether the particle is “movable” is a matter of degree, which varies from particle verb to particle verb. The extent also depends on how speakers perceive the analyzability of the particle verb or the connection between the idiomatic meaning and the literal meaning of the particle verb.

- (21) a. He *picked a pen up* from the ground.  
 a'. He *picked up a pen* from the ground.  
 b. He *picked up a disease* in Africa.  
 b'.<sup>??</sup> He *picked a disease up* in Africa.  
 c. He was *picking up a lot of support* because the public admired his policies.  
 c' \*He was *picking a lot of support up* because the public admired his policies.  
 (a-a' from British National Corpus, b-b' from Dirven 2001; c-c' from the Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs 1989)

As illustrated in (21), the first two sentences in (a-a') describe a prototypical caused motion event and the two orders of the particle verb *pick up* are equally acceptable. The continuous order designates a holistic construal of the described event, highlighting the interaction between “he” and “a pen”. A contextual inference is that “he now possesses the pen.” In the sentence (21b): *He picked up a disease in Africa*, *pick up* means “acquire by chance”, which is believed to have developed from the possession inference associated with the holistic construal. Most speakers may find it difficult to establish the connection between this idiomatic meaning of *pick up* and its literary meaning. Therefore, they tend to perceive *pick up* in this sense to be unanalyzable and the particle *up* unmovable. On the other hand, a minority of speakers may find the imagery associated with meaning development is still clear. As a result, most speakers may view the discontinuous order, *He picked a disease up in Africa*, as unacceptable, but a very small number of people may judge it to be appropriate.

In the sentence (21c), *pick up* means “to gain or win a prize, a reputation or something else that improves your situation.” This meaning of *pick up* is loaded with contextual inferences conventionalized over time and is hardly analyzable. Since the contextual inferences that gave rise to this meaning were associated with the holistic construal, only the continuous order is acceptable. As a matter of fact, the discontinuous order for *pick up* in this sense is completely absent in the British National Corpus. The meanings of *pick up* in sentences (21a-c) are getting more and more idiomatic and thus increasingly less analyzable, so the position of the particle *up* is becoming more “unmovable.” Since idiomaticity and analyzability of particle verbs are both a matter of degree, whether an idiomatic transitive particle verb can take two orders or just one order is also a matter of degree.

## 5. Corpus-based evidence

The *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* is a corpus-based dictionary, which includes 500 particle verbs and provides information on whether a particle verb takes both orders or only allows one order. An item-by-item examination of the dictionary shows that 109 particle verbs with 150 meanings only allow one order, among which 85 can only take the discontinuous order and the remaining 65 require the continuous order.

### 5.1 Particle verbs that require the discontinuous order

A close examination of the 85 particle verbs that can only take the discontinuous order shows that 71 of them take “someone” rather than “something” as the direct object. The four particle verbs in (22) are some selected examples.

- (22) a. Whatever he said seemed to *bring Sally down*.  
 b. It's really *brought him out*, and it's done him a world of good.  
 c. *Sending their children away* meant an appreciable increase in fees.  
 d. I *sent George off* with strict instructions not to come back till later.

The particle verb to *bring someone down* in (22a) means “to make someone feel unhappy, depressed, or disappointed.” In (22a), the final state of “Sally” is emphasized, as opposed to the interaction between “he” and “Sally.” In addition, there is no direct energy transmission between “he” and “Sally;” Sally’s feelings of unhappiness are only indirectly caused by “what he said.” Thus, a sequential construal of the situation is natural whereas a holistic construal is difficult. Therefore, only the discontinuous order is allowed for the particle verb to *bring someone down* in this meaning.

The particle verb to *bring someone out* in (22b) means “to encourage someone to be less shy or quiet.” Obviously, the sentence in (22b) puts stress on the final state that “he is less shy or quiet,” rather than what has happened between the subject and the object. In addition, his final state of being less shy or quiet denoted by *out* is not directly caused by the action denoted by the verb “brought;” instead, it mainly results from his own will. Thus, only the sequential construal is appropriate for this situation and only the discontinuous order is allowed.

In the sentence as shown in (22c), *send someone away* means “to make arrangements for someone to go somewhere else.” If someone sends their children away, the children normally go somewhere else by themselves under the parents’ arrangements and it usually does not involve direct physical energy transmission between “the parents” and “their children.” In other words, the child’s motion of going away is indirectly caused by the action denoted by the verb “send.” In

addition, it is the child's final state of being away rather than what happened between the child and their parents that caused "appreciable increase in fees." Thus, the final state of the child, denoted by the particle *away*, should be emphasized in sentence (22c). Similar analyses apply to the particle verb *send someone off* in (22d). If you send someone off, you tell them to go somewhere else and they go on their own. The motion of going off is also just indirectly caused by the action denoted by "send." In the specific example of (22d), George's final state of being "off" should be emphasized because the goal of sending him off was to ask him not to "come back until later." Therefore, the sequential construal matches the situations as described in (22c) and (22d) well, and thus the discontinuous order is required for particle verbs in (22c-d).

Similar explanations can be given to all the above-mentioned 71 particle verbs that take "someone" as the direct object with only four exceptions. Therefore, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that when the direct object of a transitive particle verb is person, this particle verb is more likely to take the discontinuous order. This is because a person with his or her own will is less likely to be a prototypical patient that changes states as a result of an energy transmission. Instead, a person's state change or motion is more likely due to his or her own decision.

The four exceptions as mentioned above are to *pay someone back*, to *hit someone back*, to *call someone back* and to *ring someone back* presented below in (23).

- (23) a. I felt that I would like to wake her up to *pay her back* for keeping me awake.  
 b. Then Mark will pretend to *hit the child back*.  
 c. I told him I would *call him back* when I had some news.  
 d. He asked if you'd *ring him back* when you got in.

The particle *back* in the verb constructions presented in (23) does not seem to denote the final state of the direct object; rather, it is very similar to the adverbial phrase "in return." The particle *back* functions as an adverb modifying the verb, instead of an adjective modifying the direct object. For example, the particle *back* in (23b) does not indicate "the child is back", but works as an adverb describing the manner of the action of hitting. Therefore, the four transitive particle verbs do not describe caused motion events or state change events and my analysis of construal does not apply to them.

Therefore, these exceptions do not necessarily threaten the validity of my proposed analysis for the particle placement of English transitive particle verbs. First, verb-particle constructions of this type are very few in number. Second, these four exceptions cannot be properly labeled as particle verbs. Instead, they are just VERB + NP + ADVERB constructions that happen to look like particle verbs. To *hit someone back* or to *call someone back* shares the same syntactic structure with

VERB + NP + ADVERB constructions such as “do the job quickly” and “eat the food completely,” which are very common in English.

In addition to the 71 particle verbs mentioned above, the remaining 14 out of the 85 that require the discontinuous order take “something” as the direct object, as presented in (24).

- (24) a. **get food down:** I felt better yesterday, but I’m finding it hard to *get food down*.
- b. **keep your head down:** They *kept* their heads *down*.
- c. **take your breath away:** The idea fairly *took* my breath *away*.
- d. **put the baby down:** If they think they can get away with slandering our name like that they are mistaken. It’s time to *put* the baby *down*!
- e. **get time off:** Years ago, a nanny was lucky to *get* an afternoon *off* a week.
- f. **take time out:** She would have to *take* a day *out* for her bread baking.
- g. **put the back or a joint in the body out:** It becomes weak and *puts* the kneecap *out*.
- h. **see a task or project through:** The joy that comes from *seeing* each job right *through*.
- i. **get something out that you are trying to say:** She couldn’t *get* a word *out* for the moment.
- j. **stick something in when you are drawing or writing:** I’ve endeavored to avoid legal jargon in this book; I *stick* it *in* only when it is vital.
- k. **turn something around:** After much effort, he manages to *turn* the car *around*.
- l. **move something around:** Don’t *move* the injured limb *around*.
- m. **blow something off:** I’ve never seen him get down about anything. I’ve seen him angry, but he sort of *blows* it *off*.
- n. **write something back:** You could *write* a letter *back* saying that you don’t want to go.

All the 14 particle verbs in (24) share one thing in common: their idiomatic meanings develop from inferences associated with the sequential construal of the originally described situations, in which the final state of the patient is profiled. For example, the idiomatic meaning of to *get food down* is “to be able to eat or drink something without vomiting.” In an effort not to vomit, the food must be DOWN in one’s stomach. The purpose of *keeping one’s head down* is to remain inconspicuous in difficult or dangerous times. In order not to be noticed by others, it is important to lower one’s head DOWN. If something *takes your breath away*, you are astonished or shocked with pleasure, surprise, or another emotion. This idiom alludes to the way one holds one’s breath when overcome with sudden emotion. The key in this scene is that one is breathless for a moment or their breath is taken

AWAY. If someone starts to *put the baby down*, he or she decides to take a situation seriously and finally engage in conflict, competition, or confrontation. This action is usually characterized by a shift in priorities from general agreeability, care, and nurturing to force of will and fighting. However, only after the baby is DOWN and safe in a crib, for example, can the mother feel free to compete or fight. If one wants to see a task through, one needs to stay with the task to the end until everything is THROUGH and completed. Similar analyses demonstrating the emphasis of the final state of the patient denoted by the particle apply to all the particle verbs in (24).

## 5.2 Particle verbs that require the continuous order

A close examination of the 65 cases that require the continuous order shows that the idiomatic meanings of all these particle verbs developed from inferences associated with the holistic construal of caused-motion events or state change events, in which the patient or the interaction between the agent and the patient is profiled. Some of the previously analyzed particle verbs such as *fight back the tears* and *lay down the law* belong to this category. Four more examples were randomly selected from the 65 particle verbs and are presented below in (25).

- (25) a. Governments try to *block out* unwelcome ideas from abroad.  
 b. She is unwilling to *put off* the lovely dress for the last time.  
 c. At 10 p.m. Prince Charles *kicks off* 45 minutes of fireworks.  
 d. Not so many people are willing to *lay down* their lives for their country anymore.

The meaning of *block out* can be very transparent as in *The dark curtain blocks the sunlight out* or *The dark curtain blocks out the sunlight*. The purpose of using dark curtains in a room is typically to shield the sunlight so that no one is disturbed by the sunlight during sleep. In this scenario, what people really care is whether the room has sunlight or not, rather than where the sunlight goes. In other words, the direct object, “the sunlight,” is emphasized, whereas the final state of the sunlight, denoted by the particle *out*, is not the focus of attention. Thus, the holistic construal is more natural for this situation. The particle verb to *block out* developed the meaning of “to hide or cover something so that it cannot be seen, felt, or heard.” The particle verb *block out* in (25a) can be paraphrased by one single verb, “suppress.” When governments try to make unwelcome ideas from abroad unheard or invisible to their people, what they do is to “suppress” these undesirable ideas. In this context, the unwelcome ideas as well as measures that governments have taken to suppress these ideas are the focus of attention, which matches well with the attention allocation of the holistic construal. Because the “suppress” meaning

of *block out* developed from the inference associated with the holistic construal, the continuous order is required.

If you *put off* a piece of clothing, you take it off and never wear it again. The clothes here are usually something special to you, such as a uniform, a birthday gift, a wedding gown, and so on. As in (25b), it is because the lovely dress has a special meaning to “her” that she is unwilling to put it off. Thus, the direct object (i.e., a piece of clothing) of the particle verb *put off* in this idiomatic meaning is naturally emphasized. Such emphasis corresponds well to the holistic construal of the situation. In addition, the particle verb *put off*, in this meaning, is of a high level of idiomaticity as its established meaning is loaded with contextual inferences such as the “special emotional feeling towards the piece of clothing” and the factor of “never wearing it again,” which has become attached to this phrase through conventionalized usage. Therefore, the particle verb *put off* can only use the continuous order.

The particle verb *kick off* in (25c) means “to start an event.” Those who are familiar with football may find it easy to understand how the phrase *kick off* has developed its meaning. In a football game, a player kicks off the ball to start. In this context, people do not care what happens to the ball or where the ball finally moves. Instead, the event that a player kicks off the ball to start draws peoples’ attention. In other words, the activity of kicking off the ball as a whole, i.e., the interaction between the player and the ball, symbolizes the starting of the game. Therefore, the holistic construal is more appropriate when describing this scenario. Since the starting of the football game is repeatedly associated with the action of kicking off the ball, “to start” then becomes a conventionalized meaning of *kick off*. As this idiomatic meaning of the particle verb *kick off* is based on the holistic construal, the continuous order is required.

In its literal meaning, the particle verb *lay down* can take two orders as in *He laid down his pen* or *He laid his pen down*. The discontinuous order denotes the sequential construal of the scene, giving emphasis to the path of motion or the final position of the pen; in contrast, the continuous order designates the holistic construal of the event, attaching importance to the pen and the interaction between the agent and the patient. The holistic construal of the situation as described in *He laid down his pen* has one implication: the pen is not in his hand or does not belong to him anymore, from which the particle verb *lay down* gradually developed the meaning of “to lose.” One’s life is the most important thing in the world that no one can afford to lose. If one *lays down* his life for his country, he sacrifices it for the great cause of the country. Since the “sacrifice” meaning of *lay down*, as in (25d), was developed from the inference associated with the holistic construal, only the continuous order of this particle verb is acceptable.

Similar analyses can be conducted for all the 65 particle verbs that only allow the continuous order. All these examples provide support for my argument that the idiomatic meanings of these particle verbs develop from inferences associated with the holistic construal of certain caused motion events or state change events in the real world. Given that all the examples listed in the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs* is corpus-based, it is reasonable to say that corpus-based evidence supports the CL analysis of the particle placement of English transitive particle verbs proposed in this study.

## 6. Conclusion

This study focuses on the particle placement phenomenon of English transitive particle verbs and its relationship with idiomaticity. Construal is argued to play a key role in determining which order a transitive particle verb should take. Unlike the traditional claim that more idiomatic particle verbs prefer the continuous order, the present study argues that the particle placement of idiomatic particle verbs depends on how the particle verb has developed its idiomatic meaning.

Due to limited time and resource, the present study has a few limitations. First, this study mainly relies on linguistic data taken from published studies and corpus-based dictionaries. For a top-down CL study like the present one, support from linguistic data is essential for the proposed linguistic analysis. Future studies on English particle verbs may collect richer corpus-based linguistic data to test the hypotheses proposed in this study.

Second, the particle verb construction is a peculiar structure of Germanic languages, but the present study only focuses on particle verbs in English, without examining this construction in other Germanic languages. The analysis of the semantics and syntax of the particle verb construction in various languages can potentially enrich our understanding of the nature of language (Dewell 2011). Therefore, comparative linguistic studies on particle verbs in English and other Germanic languages deserve further attention.

Finally, the present study is a synchronic study of English particle verbs that does not incorporate a diachronic perspective. An in-depth diachronic analysis on a small group of particle verbs or even a single particle verb can be theoretically significant and linguistically revealing. Future studies on particle verbs may adopt a diachronic approach and provide thorough analyses of frozen particle verbs such as *put up with*, from a historical linguistic perspective.

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