

Grammar Guru 8

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A patient rushed into his doctor's clinic and said, "Doctor, I can't sleep at night. What shall I do?" The doctor advised him, "Lie on the edge of your bed and you'll soon *drop off*." The patient was horrified thinking that the doctor was teasing him and suggesting that he fall off his bed. But what the doctor meant in all sincerity was that he would immediately go into deep sleep. There is communication breakdown for you and the villain is known as **Phrasal verb** in grammatical parlance.

What is a **Phrasal verb**? It is a fixed combination of a verb and a particle. The particle could be a preposition, or an adverb, or a combination of both. How does it differ from an ordinary verb followed by a preposition or adverb? The following examples should help:

- (a) Navin was **looking at** the shirt in the shop window.
- (b) Did you **look up** the meaning of the word in the dictionary?

In (a), the meaning of *look at* is easily understood as the combination of the meanings of *look* and *at*. But in sentence (b), *look up* means *consult* or *refer to*. It is a new meaning, which is **not** the combination of the meaning of *look* and *up*. A phrasal verb thus forms a single unit of meaning.

Often verbs plague us by their ambiguity. They function as ordinary as well as phrasal verbs. Here are some examples:

- (a) Customer: Waiter, waiter, why has my food got footprints on it?
Waiter: Well, sir, you said you were in a hurry and so I told the chef to **step on it**. (=speed it up)
- (b) Student: What training do I need to become a rubbish collector?
Teacher: None. You **pick it up** as you go along. (= learn)

It is fascinating to find the same verb turning up in new avatars in combination with different particles. Consider, for instance, the verb **take** in the company of his friends:

- You can't **take me in** easily with your stories. (= deceive)
- He has recently **taken to** going for long walks in the evening. (= developed the habit of)
- Munir has just **taken over** the family business. (= assumed responsibility for)
- They have **taken on** more work than they can manage. (= accepted)
- Let us move the table as it **takes up** a lot of space. (= occupies)
- Little Joe **takes after** his dad in his mannerisms. (= resembles)

So let us not be overconfident that we know the meaning of the verb **take**.

Would you like to do a fill in the blank exercise on phrasal verbs?

- (1) Is it true that people who fly _____ people who don't fly?
- (2) I was offered a job as a babysitter but I _____ it _____. Who wants to sit on babies?
- (3) He has read so much about the bad effects of smoking that he has finally decided to _____ reading.

[Key: 1. look down upon 2. turned . . . down 3. give up]

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