

# The Acquisition of English Phrasal Verbs by Native Spanish Speakers

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## What are phrasal verbs?

A phrasal verb (PV) consists of a verb and preposition that function as a verb.

- Please pick up your books / pick your books up.
- He let me down.

## Prior Research

- Zato, Z. (2014): Establishes the differing structures of Spanish vs. English prepositional verbs, i.e., PVs do not exist in Spanish syntax.
- Garnier, M., & Schmitt, N. (2016): Demonstrates learners' difficulty with the multiple meanings of PVs. Frequency of the PV, reading, and social media use facilitated PV knowledge.
- Moore Hanna, P. (2012): Identifies the presence of PVs in casual contexts and the ability for Spanish speakers to avoid them using cognates ("extinguish" from *extinguir* instead of "put out").
- Rovira Diaz, M. (2017): A study of Catalan speakers confirms L2 English speakers' avoidance and difficulty regardless of language background.

## Methodology: Corpus Study of 15 Essays

- 5 by native Spanish speakers who began learning English after age 13
- 5 by native Spanish speakers who began learning English before age 5
- 5 by native English speakers (for comparison)

All essays were argumentative on social topics.

PV frequency was calculated per 500 words.

## Findings

- RQ1: With an age of early contact with English, there is more variety and greater frequency compared to speakers who began to learn English after the critical period.
- RQ2: While study abroad can increase the usage of PVs, this does not always happen. The effect of this variable can be strong or weak, likely due to unknown factors.

Native Spanish speakers of English as an L2 use PVs with less variety and less frequency than native English speakers.

## Implications & Future Research

- PVs should be targeted as part of foreign or second language English instruction.
- Further investigation is needed to understand the effect of study abroad.
- Research should be conducted on how best to give instruction on PVs to facilitate acquisition.

## Research Questions & Hypotheses

1. How does age of first contact with English affect the usage of phrasal verbs?
  - Younger learners have an advantage due to the critical period hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967).
2. How does study abroad affect the usage of phrasal verbs?
  - Study abroad increases exposure to idiomatic language, including PVs.

## Limitations

- This is a small study.
- One essay was an outlier and was excluded.
- Essays are not representative of informal language, which is where PVs are common.
- Human error

## Questions for Conversation

How can we test whether a verb is a PV?  
Are certain PVs preferred by learners?  
What causes PV avoidance?  
How are Spanish prepositional verbs different from English prepositional verbs?

