

Phrasal Verbs and Academic Formality: Navigating The Syntax-Semantics Interface in Student Writing

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of phrasal verbs in undergraduate academic writing, focusing on their syntactic features and semantic transparency in relation to academic formality. Despite prescriptive norms favoring explicit and Latinate vocabulary, students frequently employ phrasal verbs, which can introduce ambiguity or informal tones. The study aims to identify the types of phrasal verbs in undergraduate theses, analyze their syntactic characteristics, and interpret how semantic transparency positions them along the formality continuum. A qualitative, corpus-informed approach was adopted, examining 248,987 tokens from undergraduate theses in an English Language Study Program. Phrasal verbs were identified using AntConc and manually verified according to Biber et al.'s (1999) constructional categories. Syntactic features, including transitivity, separability, and particle behavior, were analyzed as indicators of semantic transparency. Exemplification was employed to illustrate patterns and interpret their alignment with academic register expectations. Findings reveal that verb + adverbial particle constructions were the most prevalent, with a preference for inseparability. High semantic transparency phrasal verbs, such as carry out and point out, aligned closely with formal academic norms, while low-transparency verbs, including break down and open up, introduced metaphorical or idiomatic meanings, creating register tension. The study concludes that academic formality is a continuum, and the acceptability of phrasal verbs depends on semantic clarity. These insights inform pedagogical strategies for EAP instruction and suggest further research on cross-disciplinary and longitudinal usage patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Phrasal verbs are multi-word constructions consisting of a verb combined with one or more particles, either an adverbial particle, a prepositional particle, or both, whose collective meaning frequently extends beyond the sum of their individual components (Biber et al., 1999). This constructional nature is precisely what makes phrasal verbs semantically versatile (Han, 2025; Kumar & Sathyanathan, 2026; Абдикаримова, 2026). The particle introduces directional, aspectual, or metaphorical dimensions that allow a single verb to express a wide range of meanings with economy and expressiveness (Lewandowski & Bisiada, 2025; Othman, 2025; Qayyum et al., 2025). A construction such as give up conveys cessation, bring about conveys causation, and come up with conveys ideation—meanings that are richly

communicative but often difficult to recover without contextual or idiomatic knowledge. It is this expressive flexibility, rooted in the interplay between verb and particle, that renders phrasal verbs a natural resource of informal and spoken English, where immediacy and accessibility are prioritized over precision (Thim, 2012).

Academic writing, however, operates under a different set of communicative demands. Formal academic register favors constructions that are explicit, stable, and semantically recoverable, qualities associated with Latinate vocabulary that has long been regarded as the benchmark of academic prose (Biber et al., 1999; Biber & Conrad, 2019). Where a phrasal verb such as *find out* relies on a conventionalized pairing whose meaning must be recognized as a unit, its Latinate counterpart *discover* carries its meaning transparently within its morphological form (Wild, 2011; Riguel, 2014). This preference for explicitness and precision places phrasal verbs in an uneasy position within academic convention; their idiomatic tendencies, informal associations, and variable degrees of semantic opacity appear fundamentally misaligned with what formal academic writing is expected to be (Alangari et al., 2020). By this understanding, the ideal of academic register would seem to leave little room for verb-particle constructions of any kind.

Yet the reality of academic writing, particularly at the undergraduate level, tells a more complicated story. Phrasal verbs do appear in student academic writing in undergraduate theses and essays, and across disciplines, suggesting that the boundary between what belongs and what does not belong in academic prose is far less clear than prescriptive convention implies. This persistence is not simply a matter of student error or insufficient exposure to academic norms. It reflects something more fundamental: that formality itself is not a fixed category but a continuum, and that phrasal verbs are not a homogeneous class but a highly varied one, ranging from constructions that are semantically transparent and register-appropriate to those that are opaque and conventionally informal (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999; Larsson & Kaatari, 2020). The question, then, is not whether phrasal verbs should exist in academic writing—they already do—but what kinds appear and how their presence can be understood in relation to the demands of academic register.

Recent data indicate that undergraduate students regularly incorporate phrasal verbs in their theses and essays, but with varying degrees of semantic transparency and register appropriateness. For instance, a specialized corpus of approximately 248,987 tokens of student academic writing revealed 135 phrasal verb occurrences across 33 distinct constructions, with verb + adverbial particle types being most prevalent. These findings corroborate prior studies showing that phrasal verbs are commonly found in informal spoken registers but are often misaligned with formal academic expectations, emphasizing a gap between learner usage and prescriptive norms (Alangari et al., 2020; Larsson & Kaatari, 2020).

Despite this prevalence, phrasal verbs in student writing remain underexplored in terms of their syntactic and semantic characteristics. Existing research has acknowledged the role of semantic transparency in register selection, yet systematic analysis of how phrasal verbs navigate the syntax-semantics interface in academic contexts is limited (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999; Bell & Schäfer, 2016). This constitutes a research gap: while pedagogical literature often advises reducing phrasal verb usage in academic writing, little empirical evidence clarifies which constructions are semantically transparent and thus acceptable within formal registers.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the increasing globalization of higher education. As universities attract multilingual cohorts, understanding how learners employ phrasal verbs in academic writing becomes critical for curriculum design, instructional scaffolding, and assessment of written proficiency. Without empirical evidence distinguishing high- and low-transparency constructions, educators risk either over-correcting or under-guiding students, potentially limiting their expressive capability and academic performance.

In addressing this gap, the study presents a novel corpus-informed approach that combines syntactic analysis with semantic transparency evaluation. By examining constructions through features such as transitivity, separability, and particle behavior, the research operationalizes transparency as a continuum rather than a binary property. This perspective extends prior theoretical frameworks (Fraser, 1976; Bolinger, 1971), providing nuanced insight into how phrasal verbs function in academic texts and offering practical implications for teaching formal writing.

The study specifically investigates two research questions: which types of phrasal verbs appear in undergraduate theses, and how their syntactic features reflect semantic transparency relative to academic formality. By focusing on undergraduate theses, the study ensures that data come from sustained, high-stakes writing tasks where register expectations are explicit. This methodological choice enhances relevance and generalizability within higher education contexts, addressing both pedagogical and linguistic concerns.

Previous studies have examined phrasal verbs either in isolation, in spoken English, or in generic learner corpora (Garnier & Schmitt, 2016; Angelica et al., 2025). However, few have linked syntactic realization to register alignment in formal academic prose. The current research contributes by bridging this divide, providing empirical evidence of which phrasal verbs are semantically transparent, their syntactic realization patterns, and how these patterns inform academic acceptability. This novelty lies in correlating detailed corpus analysis with register theory.

The research purpose is to generate actionable insights for both linguistic research and educational practice. By mapping phrasal verb types and their transparency across a formal academic corpus, the study informs curriculum development, teacher training, and resource design for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) programs. It simultaneously contributes to theoretical linguistics by clarifying the syntax-semantics-register interface, particularly in learner texts.

In terms of research objectives, the study seeks to (1) classify phrasal verb constructions in undergraduate academic writing, (2) analyze their syntactic features including transitivity and separability, (3) evaluate semantic transparency, and (4) interpret these findings relative to the academic formality continuum. Collectively, these objectives operationalize a framework for understanding the nuanced role of phrasal verbs in academic discourse and provide a foundation for evidence-based instructional strategies. Finally, the research benefits multiple stakeholders. Students gain a clearer understanding of acceptable phrasal verb usage; instructors receive empirically grounded guidance for teaching register-appropriate language; and researchers obtain a replicable methodological framework for corpus-informed studies. Ultimately, the study advances knowledge on language use in formal academic contexts while simultaneously bridging theoretical and applied linguistics.

METHOD

This section explains the research methods used, including Research Design, Data and Source of Data, Data Collection and Data Analysis.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach. This approach was selected because qualitative research is fundamentally concerned with understanding meaning, interpretation, and the contextual conditions under which phenomena occur, rather than with establishing statistically generalizable patterns (Creswell, 2009). Within applied linguistics specifically, qualitative approaches are particularly suited to investigations that treat language as both the subject and the site of analysis, where interpretation is guided by theoretical frameworks rather than numerical measurement (Dörnyei, 2007).

To support the systematic identification of phrasal verb constructions across the dataset, AntConc is employed instrumentally as a concordancing tool rather than as an analytical engine. This places the study within the tradition of corpus-informed rather than corpus-driven research. McEnery and Wilson (2001) draw a distinction between studies that use corpus evidence to support and inform qualitative interpretation and those that allow the corpus data itself to generate the analytical findings. In corpus-informed research, the interpretive work remains with the researcher and is guided by existing theoretical frameworks rather than derived statistically from frequency patterns alone.

The research procedure consists of several interrelated stages, each building upon the previous to form a coherent analytical progression. The first stage involves the formulation of research questions that guide the entire study. Accordingly, this research addresses two research questions: (1) What types of phrasal verbs are found in undergraduate theses based on their syntactic constructions? (2) How do the syntactic features of these phrasal verbs reflect their semantic transparency, and what does this reveal about their use along the academic formality continuum? These questions establish the analytical direction of the study and determine the framework through which the data is collected, identified, and interpreted in the subsequent stages.

The second stage concerns data collection. The data for this study consists of undergraduate theses selected as the primary source of student academic writing. Undergraduate theses were chosen because they represent one of the most sustained and formally demanding forms of writing that students at this level produce, making them a productive site for examining how students navigate the register expectations of academic prose. The collected theses constitute a small specialized corpus totaling approximately 248,987 tokens, deliberately bounded by academic text type and student authorship. This boundary ensures that the data reflects a consistent register context, allowing the analysis to remain focused on the specific communicative demands of formal student academic writing.

The third stage involves data identification, in which phrasal verb constructions are systematically retrieved from the dataset using AntConc. The software is used to locate verb-particle combinations across the corpus, generating a working inventory of constructions for further analysis. It is important to note that AntConc functions here solely as an identification tool; the interpretive work is conducted manually and guided by the theoretical framework established. Following retrieval, the identified constructions were classified according to Biber

et al.'s (1999) three constructional categories, resulting in 135 phrasal verb occurrences representing 33 distinct constructions across the dataset.

The fourth stage concerns data analysis, which proceeds through three interrelated analytical steps. First, the identified phrasal verbs are examined for their syntactic features, specifically transitivity, separability, and particle behavior, as these features function as surface indicators of semantic transparency at the syntax-semantics interface. Second, the syntactic findings are reframed through the lens of semantic transparency, interpreted as a continuum ranging from fully compositional constructions whose meanings are readily recoverable to opaque constructions whose meanings resist decomposition. Third, the degree of transparency observed in each construction is interpreted in relation to the academic formality continuum, drawing on the scholarly frameworks of Biber et al. (1999), Biber and Conrad (2019), and Halliday (1985) to ground each interpretive claim.

Given that the dataset yielded approximately 135 phrasal verb occurrences, the analysis employed exemplification as its primary analytical strategy. This approach is consistent with established practice in corpus-informed linguistic analysis, where representative examples are examined in depth as illustrations of broader patterns identified across the dataset rather than as exhaustive accounts of every retrieved instance (Biber et al., 1999). As Dörnyei (2007) notes, qualitative analysis in applied linguistics prioritizes analytical depth over comprehensive coverage, selecting data that most richly illuminates the phenomenon under investigation.

Data and Data Source

The data for this study consists of written academic texts produced by undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Study Program at the researcher's home institution. Two categories of texts were collected to constitute the dataset. The primary source comprises writing samples gathered from courses specifically oriented toward academic writing production, most notably Writing for Academic Purposes, where students are explicitly introduced to the conventions and expectations of formal academic prose. To broaden the dataset and capture a more representative range of student academic writing, the collection was extended to include additional academic texts produced outside of this course, provided that the texts were written after the students had completed their foundational linguistics courses, specifically English Grammar, Syntax, and Morphology. This criterion was applied deliberately, as students who have passed these courses can reasonably be assumed to possess sufficient grammatical awareness to make informed, if not always conscious, linguistic choices in their writing. Their texts therefore offer a more meaningful site for examining how phrasal verbs are used in relation to academic register than writing produced at earlier stages of linguistic development.

The decision to source data exclusively from the English Language Study Program reflects both practical and methodological considerations. Practically, access to student writing within the researcher's own program allowed for the compilation of a sufficiently sized dataset within the scope of an undergraduate study. Methodologically, bounding the data within a single program and institutional context ensures a degree of consistency in the register demands and writing conventions to which all student writers in the dataset have been exposed. This consistency is particularly important for a study concerned with academic formality, as it reduces the risk of disciplinary variation, differences in writing norms across fields, confounding the interpretation of phrasal verb use.

Data Collection

The data collection process was carried out in several steps designed to ensure that the texts gathered were consistent with the selection criteria outlined in the preceding section. The first step involved identifying and compiling written academic texts from two sources within the English Language Study Program, writing samples from the Writing for Academic Purposes course and additional academic texts produced by students who had completed their foundational linguistics courses. Texts that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the dataset to maintain the contextual consistency necessary for a study concerned with academic register. The collected texts were then compiled into a single dataset and processed for analysis, resulting in a specialized corpus of approximately 248,987 tokens representing a focused body of student academic writing.

The second step involved the systematic identification of phrasal verb constructions across the dataset using AntConc, a corpus analysis software widely used in linguistic research for concordancing and lexical pattern retrieval. AntConc was employed to search for verb-particle combinations across the corpus, generating a preliminary inventory of potential phrasal verb instances. Given that not all verb-particle combinations constitute phrasal verbs in the technical sense, as some may represent free verb and preposition pairings rather than lexicalized multi-word constructions each retrieved instance was examined manually against the definitional and constructional criteria established by Biber et al. (1999). Constructions that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the final inventory. This manual verification step ensured that the dataset reflects genuine phrasal verb constructions rather than superficially similar but structurally distinct combinations.

Following verification, the confirmed phrasal verb instances were coded according to Biber et al.'s (1999) three constructional types (verb + adverbial particle, verb + prepositional particle, and verb + adverb + prepositional particle), resulting in 135 phrasal verb occurrences representing approximately 33 distinct constructions. Each instance was recorded alongside relevant contextual information, including the surrounding sentence and the broader passage in which it appeared, to support the interpretive analysis conducted in the subsequent stage. This contextual documentation was particularly important given the study's interpretive orientation, as meaning and register can only be reliably assessed when a construction is examined within its actual context of use rather than in isolation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study proceeded through three interrelated stages, each building upon the previous one to form a coherent interpretive progression from syntactic description to register interpretation. These stages were not treated as discrete or independent procedures but as a continuous analytical movement guided by the theoretical framework and oriented toward addressing both research questions.

The first stage involved the syntactic classification of the identified phrasal verb constructions according to their constructional type, as established by Biber et al. (1999). The 135 identified phrasal verb occurrences, representing approximately 33 distinct constructions, were categorized into three constructional types (verb + adverbial particle, verb + prepositional particle, and verb + adverb + prepositional particle), and their distribution across these categories was documented. Following this initial classification, each construction was further examined for its syntactic features, specifically transitivity, separability, and particle behavior.

Transitivity was determined by whether the construction required or permitted a direct object; separability was assessed by whether the particle could be displaced from its position immediately following the verb; and particle behavior was examined in terms of whether the particle retained directional or spatial meaning, carried aspectual or completive force, or had drifted toward a more abstract or idiomatic function. The findings of this stage are presented in tabular form in the results section to provide a transparent and organized overview of the syntactic landscape of the data and directly address the first research question concerning the types of phrasal verbs found in undergraduate theses.

The second stage involved the reframing of the syntactic findings through the lens of semantic transparency. Drawing on the established relationship between syntactic behavior and semantic compositionality, as articulated by Fraser (1976), Bolinger (1971), Dixon (1982), and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), each construction's syntactic profile was interpreted as an indicator of its degree of semantic transparency. Constructions exhibiting syntactic flexibility, such as those allowing particle separation or retaining a directional particle meaning, were interpreted as tending toward higher transparency, as their meanings remain more readily recoverable from their component parts. Constructions exhibiting syntactic rigidity or particle abstraction, by contrast, were interpreted as tending toward lower transparency, as their meanings have drifted further from compositional predictability. Rather than assigning fixed transparency labels, this stage treated transparency as a continuum, a gradient along which constructions were positioned based on the convergence of their syntactic features and their observed behavior in context.

The third and final stage involved the interpretation of semantic transparency in relation to academic formality. Drawing on the register frameworks of Biber et al. (1999), Biber and Conrad (2019), and Halliday (1985), each construction's position along the transparency continuum was interpreted in terms of how it aligns with or diverges from the explicitness and precision demands of formal academic register. Constructions with higher semantic transparency, whose meanings are stable, recoverable, and compositionally grounded, were interpreted as more readily accommodated within academic register, while those with lower transparency were examined for the register tension their opacity introduces into formal prose.

This interpretive stage directly addresses the second research question concerning how the syntactic features of phrasal verbs reflect their semantic transparency and what this reveals about their positioning along the academic formality continuum. Throughout this stage, the analysis employed exemplification as its primary analytical strategy, whereby representative constructions were selected for in-depth interpretive discussion based on their analytical richness and their capacity to illuminate broader patterns observed across the dataset. Constructions not discussed individually are acknowledged where relevant, and a full inventory of all identified phrasal verb instances is provided in Appendix.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study, organized into two main sections that correspond to the two research questions guiding this investigation. The first section, addressing the types of phrasal verbs found in student academic writing. The second section addresses how these phrasal verbs are used in relation to academic formality, examining

the syntactic findings through the lens of semantic transparency and interpreting their positioning along the academic formality continuum.

Findings

This section presents the findings related to the first research question concerning the types of phrasal verbs found in student academic writing, examined through three syntactic features: constructional classification, transitivity, and separability.

Syntactic Features of Phrasal Verbs in Student Academic Writing

The identification and classification of phrasal verb constructions across the dataset are presented through three interrelated analytical lenses: constructional classification following Biber et al. (1999), transitivity, and separability.

These three features are not examined in isolation but as a layered syntactic profile, each one revealing a different dimension of how phrasal verbs are structurally realized in the data. Constructional classification establishes the foundational typology of the identified constructions, transitivity examines the argument structure each construction operates within, and separability addresses the degree of cohesion between verb and particle. These three features provide the syntactic basis from which the semantic and register analysis in the following section proceeds.

Constructional Classification

The phrasal verbs identified in the dataset were classified according to the three constructional types established by Biber et al. (1999): verb + adverbial particle, verb + prepositional particle, and verb + adverb + prepositional particle. It is worth noting that this classification required careful manual verification of each retrieved instance, as surface form alone does not reliably determine constructional type. Particles such as *in*, *out*, and *up* though resembling prepositions in their written form may function as adverbial particles depending on their syntactic behavior in context.

Following Biber et al. (1999), the determining criterion was whether the particle introduced a noun phrase complement, as prepositions do, or attached directly to the verb to form a unified construction, as adverbial particles do. Each instance was examined against this criterion before being assigned to its respective category.

Verb + adverbial particle

Phrasal Verbs	Example from the Data
Back up	Supporting reasons or evidence to back up the writer's thesis statement.
Break down	Both types aim to break down language barriers and facilitate communication between parties.
Bring in	Social media bring in new language trends and elements.
Bring up	Prior to these considerations, numerous studies bring up psycholinguistics as a research focus.
Build up	We may gradually build up an educational scenery that offers people something more than just academic success.
Carry out	It is necessary to carry out an objective analysis of needs in order to obtain the correct information.
Come out	Adolescents' mental health is often seen as suffering from the impact of social media usage. On the other hand, there is much good to come out .
Come up	The application of social networks in the English learning process needs to come up with new solutions to achieve this goal.

End up	Firstly, poorly managed plastic waste often ends up in rivers, seas and landfills, polluting ecosystems and destroying natural habitats.
Find out	Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out students' perceptions on the use of podcast as media for learning listening comprehension.
Get out	These characters are shown to be more independent and have a desire to get out of domestic demands.
Go out	The student who is interested in the environment and ecological science may go out and experience these concepts himself.
Grew up	The digital lifestyles of millennials and generation Z are heavily influenced by the historical and social context in which they grew up .
Jump in	Instead of just sitting and listening passively, learners can jump right in and play interactive games, making the whole experience more fun and engaging.
Link up	To link up with the previous point United States use English as their official language.
Make up	Learning plan, to help teachers in standardly describing the competencies that make up the learning activity plan.
Move away	"The Art of Listening" encourages a shift in perspective, a move away from passive consumption toward an active and participatory experience of music.
Open up	Many people believe that formal education can open up better career opportunities.
Point out	Scholars point out the value of good peer support, saying that students who get support from their peers would find it easier to handle academic issues.
Speak up	Teachers can create a fun and engaging learning environment that encourages students to speak up and participate actively.
Step away	To really immerse yourself in a culture, you'll need to step away from your role as an outsider.
Taken on	In today's rapidly evolving world, education has taken on new forms with the rise of technology.
Try out	On the other hand, informal education allows for the flexibility of trying out and maintaining a variety of learning styles.

See Figure 1

Verb + prepositional particle

Phrasal Verbs	Example from the Data
Look at	Sociolinguistics looks at how language use affects the formation of individual and group identities in society.
Fall into	Understanding falls into three categories, literal understanding, interpretation, and critical response.
Take into	If we take into account another contour belonging to the same system.
Step into	When we read, we can step into different worlds and see things from different perspectives.
Grow in	As the use of English grows in popularity, there is no doubt that the demand for qualified teachers to teach English is indispensable.

See Figure 2

Verb + adverb particle + prepositional Particle

Phrasal Verbs	Example from the Data
End up in	Poorly managed plastic waste often ends up in rivers, seas and landfills, polluting ecosystems and destroying natural habitats.
Grew up in	In my own context, I grew up in a culture where women were often expected to prioritize family over career.
Caught up in	Many people get caught up in overuse, spending hour on social media.
Keep up	This requires quick thinking and multitasking to keep up with the pace of the conversation.
Live up to	Meanwhile, there's a chance that the item you buy online won't live up to your expectations

See Figure 3

As shown in the tables, verb + adverbial particle constructions constitute the largest category in the dataset, accounting for 23 of the 33 identified constructions. Verb + prepositional particle constructions represent the second largest category with 5 constructions, while verb + adverb + prepositional particle constructions appear least frequently with 5 constructions. The dominance of verb + adverbial particle constructions in the data is consistent with the broader corpus findings of Biber et al. (1999), who similarly identify this type as the most prevalent across written registers. This distributional pattern establishes the syntactic landscape of the data and provides the foundation for the transitivity and separability analysis presented in the following subsections.

Transitivity

Having established the constructional types present in the data, the following analysis examines the transitivity of the identified phrasal verb constructions, that is whether each construction operates with or without a direct object.

Transitivity was determined by examining whether the phrasal verb required or permitted a noun phrase object in its realized form within the dataset. Constructions that took a direct object were classified as transitive, while those that did not were classified as intransitive. Figure 4 presents the distribution of the 33 identified constructions according to this classification.

Transitivity	Constructional Type	Phrasal verbs		
Transitive	V + adverbial particle	Back up		
		Bring in		
		Bring up		
		Build up		
		Carry out		
		Find out		
		Make-up		
		Open up		
		Point out		
		Taken on		
		Try out		
			V + prepositional particle	Look at
				Take into

	V + adverbial + prepositional particle	Live up to
		Keep up with
Intransitive	V + adverbial particle	Break down
		Come out
		Come up
		End up
		Jump in
		Get out
		Go out
		Grew up
		Link up
		Move away
		Speak up
		Step away
Intransitive	V + prepositional particle	Fall into
		Grow in
		Step into
	Verb + adverbial + prepositional particle	Caught up in
		End up in
		Grew up in

See Figure 4

As Figure 4 shows, intransitive constructions account for the larger share of the dataset with 18 constructions, while transitive constructions number 15. Although the distribution is not dramatically uneven, the higher frequency of intransitive constructions is a notable syntactic characteristic of the data. Intransitive phrasal verbs, those operating without a direct object include constructions such as break down, come out, end up, and speak up, while transitive constructions, those taking a direct object, include items such as carry out, find out, make up, and take on.

Although constructions such as keep up are potentially transitive in general English usage, as in "keep up their performance" where a direct object follows the actual realization of this construction in the present dataset reveals a different syntactic profile.

In the collected texts, keep up consistently appears as part of the three-word construction keep up with, as evidenced by the sentence "This requires quick thinking and multitasking to keep up with the pace of the conversation." In this realization, with functions as a prepositional particle introducing a complement rather than a direct object, rendering the construction intransitive and reclassifying it as a verb + adverb + prepositional particle construction following Biber et al.'s (1999) framework. This instance illustrates a broader methodological point, that constructional classification in this study is determined not by the theoretical possibilities a phrasal verb carries in general usage, but by how it is actually realized in the data. It is the realized syntactic form in context, rather than the abstract potential of the construction, that governs classification throughout this analysis.

This distribution indicates that the phrasal verbs found in student academic writing span a range of argument structures, a syntactic diversity whose implications for meaning and register will be examined in the analysis that follows.

Separability

Separability refers to the syntactic capacity of certain phrasal verb constructions to allow the direct object to appear between the verb and its particle, as in *pick the book up* alongside *pick up the book*. As established in the preceding section, this property is applicable exclusively to transitive phrasal verb constructions, intransitive ones are inherently inseparable by virtue of the absence of a direct object. Among the transitive constructions identified in the present dataset, several are theoretically capable of particle separation, including *carry out*, *find out*, *bring in*, *build up*, *make up*, *open up*, *point out*, *take on*, and *try out*, constructions whose syntactic flexibility has been documented in the broader linguistics literature (Biber et al., 1999; Fraser, 1976).

However, an examination of how these constructions are actually realized in the data reveals a striking syntactic tendency: particle separation is entirely absent across the dataset. Without exception, all transitive phrasal verb constructions appear in their unseparated form, with the particle immediately following the verb regardless of object length or syntactic context. The one instance that superficially resembles separability, *jump right in*, as realized in the sentence "Instead of just sitting and listening passively, learners can jump right in and play interactive games, making the whole experience more fun and engaging", does not constitute genuine separability in the syntactic sense. Here, *right* functions as an adverbial intensifier rather than a displaced direct object, and the construction itself is intransitive, rendering particle separation structurally impossible.

Furthermore, the register of this sentence warrants attention, its informal and motivational tone places it at some distance from the formal academic register that the broader dataset represents, making it a notable instance that will be revisited in the analysis of academic formality in the following section.

The complete absence of genuine particle separation in the data is itself analytically significant. Rather than treating this as a null finding, it points toward a meaningful syntactic tendency, students consistently realize phrasal verbs as lexically unified wholes, maintaining verb-particle cohesion even in constructions where separation is theoretically available. This preference for inseparability, as Fraser (1976) suggests, reflects the degree to which verb and particle have coalesced into a single semantic unit, a tendency that carries direct implications for how these constructions are interpreted in terms of semantic transparency and, by extension, academic formality. These implications are examined in detail in the following section.

This section addresses the second research question concerning how the identified phrasal verbs are used in relation to academic formality, interpreting their syntactic features through the lens of semantic transparency along the formality continuum.

Phrasal Verbs in Relation to Academic Formality

To address the second research question concerning the use of phrasal verbs in relation to academic formality, the following discussion is organized into two analytical categories: phrasal verbs with high semantic transparency and those with low semantic transparency.

This classification is informed by the syntactic features examined in the preceding section, as transitivity and separability have been shown to shape how meaning is structured

and recovered in context. Since academic register favors constructions whose meanings are explicit and stable, the degree of semantic transparency a phrasal verb carries serves as a meaningful indicator of its positioning along the formality continuum.

Phrasal Verbs with High Semantic Transparency

A prominent pattern in the dataset is the use of phrasal verbs whose meanings are relatively transparent and stable across contexts. This is particularly evident in high-frequency verb + adverb particle constructions such as carry out, find out, and point out. In examples such as:

- (1) The researcher made the decision to carry out the study
- (2) The purpose of the study is to find out students' perceptions on the use of podcast
- (3) Scholars point out the value of peer support.

These constructions show phrasal verbs function in a predictable and contextually appropriate manner. Structurally, all three are transitive phrasal verbs and separable in principle, yet they are consistently realized in their non-separated form, indicating that their syntactic flexibility is not exploited in actual usage.

The role of transitivity is central in explaining this transparency. Because these constructions take objects (the study, students' perceptions, the value of peer support), the meaning is anchored to a clearly defined entity. This anchoring constrains interpretation and keeps the verb-particle combination close to its conventional academic meaning. In this sense, the object functions as a semantic stabilizer, ensuring that the construction remains interpretable even when the particle could potentially introduce additional nuance.

This can be further illustrated by considering their potential separability. Forms such as carry the study out, find the reasons out, or point the value out are grammatically possible.

However, even if such separated forms were realized, the meaning would remain unchanged. This suggests that semantic transparency in these cases is not dependent on syntactic arrangement, but also on the presence of an object that grounds the meaning. As a result, while separability offers flexibility, it does not significantly affect interpretation in these contexts.

This observation becomes particularly relevant when considering the issue of redundancy in verb-particle constructions. As verb + adverb particle units, phrasal verbs such as find out raise the question of whether the particle contributes meaning beyond what is already expressed by the verb. In the dataset, there are cases where the removal of the particle does not result in grammatical breakdown. As the example sentences below:

- (4) This research aims to find out the reasons for student preferences.
- (5) This research aims to find the reasons for student preferences.

In example (5) show that the sentence could be reduced in with removing the particle out without ruin the grammar structure and the overall meaning remaining largely intact. This appears to support the position proposed by Fraser (1976), who argued that the verb carries the primary semantic load, while the particle does not contribute an independent semantic feature and is therefore difficult to analyze in a systematic way.

However, a closer examination of other examples in the dataset complicates this view. As in the examples below:

- (6) The post-test was conducted to find out how far the treatment had influenced the student.
- (7) The post-test was conducted to find how far the treatment had influenced the student.

The removal of the particle results in a construction that is ungrammatically or at least less natural in academic prose. Because *find* commonly followed by nouns as objects (*find the answer, find the cause etc.*) It can take a clause, but it is less natural when the clause refers to degree, extent, or process. Similar patterns can be observed with *point out* and *carry out*, where the omission of the particle either reduces clarity or disrupts conventional usage.

This suggests that the particle plays a role not only in syntax but also in shaping meaning and usage conventions. In line with Bolinger (1971), the particle can be understood as contributing a sense of completion, direction, or result, thereby influencing the interpretation of the entire construction rather than functioning as an arbitrary addition.

In addition to these verb + adverb particle constructions, verb + prepositional particle constructions found in the data demonstrate high transparency. As in the examples:

(8) The researcher looks at relevant concepts and findings from previous research.

(9) This concept falls into three categories.

These are transitive but inseparable constructions, and their meanings are directly inferable from their components. In the sentences above, the object plays a crucial role in anchoring interpretation, ensuring clarity and predictability.

With regard to the role of particles in contributing to semantic transparency, the data show that in verb + prepositional particle constructions such as the sentences above, the particle cannot be removed without resulting in grammatical inaccuracy or incomplete meaning. This aligns with the nature of these constructions as inseparable units, where the verb and particle function together to produce a complete and interpretable meaning. Unlike some verb + adverb particle constructions, the particle in this group is essential and cannot be reduced without compromising the structure and meaning of the expression.

Phrasal Verbs with Low Semantic Transparency

In contrast, phrasal verbs with lower semantic transparency exhibit meanings that are more dependent on metaphorical extension or contextual interpretation. This group includes verb + adverb particle constructions such as *break down*, and *open up*, which, despite being structurally similar to those in the previous group, display different semantic behavior.

The phrasal verb *break down* show how particle could affect meaning. Unlike the example of *find out* mentioned in the previous subsection, when particle *down* removed, instead leaning to redundancy it highlights a different meaning with correct grammar. As in the examples:

(10) Plastics that break down into microplastics.

(11) Plastics that break into microplastics.

This is a transitive construction with a following complement. In sentence (10) although the object provides some grounding, the meaning affected by the particle *down* involves a gradual process rather than a direct action. When compared to sentence (11), both constructions are grammatically correct but differ semantically: (10) implies decomposition over time, while (11) suggests immediate fragmentation. This demonstrates that the particle *down* contributes an aspectual meaning related to process and progression, which is not recoverable from the verb alone. But it is still mandatory to acknowledge that this distinction is context-specific and does not apply uniformly across all uses of *break down*.

An important case in this group is *jump (right) in*, which represents the only instance in the dataset where syntactic flexibility is visibly realized. This construction is transitive and separable, as shown in:

(12) Learners can jump right in and play interactive games.

The presence of the modifier *right* highlights the flexibility of the construction.

However, the meaning of *jump in* is not grounded in a literal sense of movement, but rather expresses immediacy or engagement. This indicates that even when structural flexibility is realized, the meaning remains dependent on contextual and metaphorical interpretation.

Unlike the high-transparency group, the presence of an object in these constructions does not fully stabilize meaning. While transitivity provides a structural framework, the interpretation still depends on the interaction between the verb and particle. In cases where the particle encodes aspectual or metaphorical meaning, the construction becomes less predictable, even when an object is present.

Summary

This study has examined the phrasal verbs found in student academic writing through two interrelated analytical sections, each corresponding to one of the study's research questions. The first section identified 33 distinct phrasal verb constructions across the dataset, classified according to Biber et al.'s (1999) three constructional types. Verb + adverbial particle constructions emerged as the most prevalent type, followed by verb + prepositional particle and verb + adverb + prepositional particle constructions. An examination of their syntactic features revealed a higher proportion of intransitive constructions relative to transitive ones, while separability, though theoretically available to several transitive constructions, was found to be virtually absent in actual realization, with the dataset showing a consistent preference for unseparated forms across all identified constructions.

The second section addressed how these phrasal verbs are used in relation to academic formality, interpreting their syntactic features through the lens of semantic transparency along the formality continuum. The analysis, conducted through exemplification, revealed that the relationship between syntactic features and semantic transparency is neither uniform nor straightforwardly predictable.

Among constructions with high semantic transparency, including *carry out*, *find out*, *point out*, *look at*, and *fall into*, meaning was found to be stable and recoverable, anchored by the presence of a direct object that constrains interpretation and keeps the construction close to its conventional academic meaning. The consistent realization of these constructions in their unseparated form further reinforces their lexical cohesion, suggesting that students treat them as unified semantic units rather than syntactically flexible combinations.

The particle's contribution in this group ranges from redundant, as Fraser (1976) would suggest in cases where its removal leaves meaning intact, to conventionally necessary, as Bolinger (1971) argues, where the particle encodes completion or direction that shapes the overall meaning in ways the verb alone cannot.

Among constructions with lower semantic transparency, including *break down*, *open up*, and *jump right in*, meaning was found to be more dependent on aspectual extension or metaphorical interpretation, rendering these constructions less immediately recoverable from their component parts. In these cases, the presence of a direct object does not fully stabilize meaning, as the particle introduces semantic dimensions gradual process, engagement,

immediacy that resist compositional analysis. The one instance of realized syntactic flexibility in the dataset, jump right in, belongs to this group, further suggesting that structural looseness and semantic opacity tend to co-occur in the data. Together, these patterns point toward a broader tendency in student academic writing constructions whose meanings are more transparent and stable gravitate toward alignment with academic register conventions, while those with lower transparency introduce a degree of register tension that reflects the inherently continuum-based nature of formality itself.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that phrasal verbs continue to appear in undergraduate academic writing despite formal register expectations. The verb + adverbial particle constructions emerged as the most frequently used type, with a strong tendency toward inseparability. Phrasal verbs with high semantic transparency, such as carry out and point out, were more readily accommodated within academic writing because their meanings were stable and clearly recoverable. Conversely, phrasal verbs with lower semantic transparency, including break down and open up, often introduced metaphorical or idiomatic nuances, which could create ambiguity and tension with formal register conventions. Overall, academic formality operates along a continuum, and the acceptability of phrasal verbs depends more on semantic clarity and contextual appropriateness than on their structural classification alone.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the corpus to include multiple disciplines and levels of higher education to examine potential disciplinary variation in phrasal verb usage. Longitudinal studies could also explore how students' semantic awareness and register sensitivity develop over time. Additionally, experimental studies that incorporate pedagogical interventions, such as explicit instruction on semantic transparency and phrasal verb appropriateness, could provide actionable insights for EAP curriculum design. Investigating cross-linguistic influences on phrasal verb usage among multilingual students may further enrich understanding of register negotiation in academic writing.

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