Phrasal verbs in spoken L2 English: The effect of L2 proficiency and L1 background

Irene Marin Cervantes¹, Dana Gablasova²

¹Department of Linguistics and English Language, Lancaster University, United Kingdom
²Department of Linguistics and English Language, CASS, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Phrasal verbs (PVs), i.e., the combination of a lexical verb and an adverbal particle, have recently been the subject of several corpus-based studies focusing on their use by native speakers (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Liu, 2011; Garnier & Schmitt, 2015) in spoken and written production. Corpus-based studies of PVs in learner language most often report on the speech of highly proficient learners from a small range of L1 backgrounds (Wabel, 2007; Weirszycka & Mickiewicz, 2013; Gilquin, 2015). This study seeks to extend our understanding of PV use in L2 speech by exploring the effect of L2 proficiency and L1 background on the frequency of PV use by learners.

The study is based on data from the Trinity Lancaster Corpus, a large corpus of spoken L2 English production (for a description see Gablasova et al, 2015). The corpus consists of approximately 2 million words of learner speech from three proficiency (CEFR) bands: B1 (595 speakers), B2 (583 speakers) and C1/C2 (271 speakers) and eight different L1 backgrounds (e.g. India, Spain, Russia, China). A one-way ANOVA and Bonferroni post-hoc test were used to establish the effect of the independent variables (L2 proficiency and L1 background) on the frequency of PVs in learner speech.

The results showed that the effect of L2 proficiency on the production of PVs was statistically significant and that the number of PVs increased with speaker’s proficiency. The results also confirmed that there was a statistically significant main effect of L1 background, with Bonferroni post-hocs revealing further patterns in the data. These findings will be discussed in light of relevant research on the reasons for learner PV underuse at different stages of language development and the L1-L2 correspondence phenomenon assumed to trigger PV use.

Keywords: L1 background, learner corpus, L2 proficiency, phrasal verbs.