Phrasal verbs in learner language: overused, underused, or yet to be learned?
Jeeon Ja Yeo (Seattle University) & Jian Yang (Seattle University)

This study used a 311,000 word-written Chinese EFL learner corpus to examine 15 phrasal verbs (PVs) found to be avoided by such learners in a previous study. For comparison, these items were also checked in a comparable native-speaker section of the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP) matched with the learner corpus on writing types, writer age, and writer educational level. COCA was also consulted in the data analysis.

As shown in COCA, seven of the PVs have relatively low frequencies each with less than 10 tokens PMW. Four of the seven also occur as infrequently in MICUSP. Therefore the Chinese learners may not have noticed some of the PVs in their input. Compared with MICUSP, the Chinese learner corpus exhibits an overuse of six of the 10 PVs found in both corpora. These include the highly colloquial get up, approximately 15 times as frequent as in MICUSP, along with come in, let down, put out, make up, and turn down. Additionally, the token frequency of all PVs totals 398.71 in the Chinese learner corpus, almost twice as frequent as the 206.16 in MICUSP.

Findings are mixed concerning the literal vs. idiomatic PVs distinction. Most literal PVs are evidently overused in the Chinese learner corpus than in MICUSP. However, some idiomatic PVs difficult to use, such as make up, let down, turn down, and show off also occur much more frequently than in MICUSP.

There are several implications in light of the findings. First, frequent PVs may be overused rather than avoided by intermediate ESL learners. Next, PVs should be treated differently, with far more attention and class time devoted to the most frequent ones. Finally, teachers should help students be aware of register-specific PV use.

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