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Multi-word verbs in student academic presentations



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ABSTRACT

The study examined three categories of multi-word verbs (phrasal, prepositional, and phrasal-prepositional verbs) in comparison to free combinations. It explored four aspects of their usage in student presentations—their frequency, the preferred order and meanings the presenters favored, their choices of unique vs. repeated uses of verb combinations, and the relationship between the lexical diversity of the presentations and students' use of multi-word verbs. The research is based on the individual presentations of English native-speaking college students ($n = 30$).

The analysis revealed that students used multi-word verbs as frequently as they did free combinations. It also showed that prepositional verbs were twice more prominent than phrasal verbs, followed by the relatively infrequent use of phrasal prepositional verbs. The students tended to use the multi-word verb structures repetitively and the lack of strong correlations between the lexical diversity of the presentations and the three multi-word verb subcategories pointed to the relative independence of the variables. The semantic analysis of the phrasal verbs revealed that, even though the majority of them had multiple meanings, they were predominantly used with a single meaning in the presentations. The findings have implications for ESL teaching and material design purposes.

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1. Introduction

In one of the most comprehensive corpus-based studies of academic discourse, Biber (2006) has pointed out that the linguistic analyses of academic discourse, at least, at American universities show that “the informational communication is accomplished through very different linguistic means in speech and writing” (p. 222). Along the same lines, both Swales (2004) and Biber (2006) have noted that, unlike academic writing, academic speech in the U.S. tends to be more interactive and informal as instructors often incorporate different communicative activities in their delivery of informational content. College students are also expected to engage in the delivery of informational content across different academic genres in an appropriate manner. One such genre they are commonly involved with at both undergraduate and graduate level of education is the academic presentation. Given that the informational content of presentations is primarily derived from written academic sources while they are delivered orally as a rehearsed or semi-rehearsed monologic speech act, we can reasonably expect that the academic presentation as a genre will share certain linguistic features with both written academic prose as well as speech. However, the full range of features shared between written and oral academic discourse as well as the ones that are typical of academic speech and distinguish it from the more formal written academic register is yet to be uncovered.

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Interest in this line of research has picked up in the last couple of decades. There is a good number of corpus studies, comparing the oral and written academic registers (e.g., Biber, 2006; Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2001; Swales, 2004; etc.) as well as studies on oral academic discourse produced by both students and experts, including conference papers (Rowley-Jolivet, 1999; Thompson, 2002; Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002; Webber, 2005), lectures (Crawford-Camicciottoli, 2004), graduate student seminars (Weissberg, 1993), metatalk (Swales, 2001) and evaluation in academic talk (Mauranen, 2002), university classroom talk (Csomay, 2006; 2007), student presentations (Boyd, 1989; Csomay, 2015; Morton & Rosse, 2011; Zareva, 2009a, 2009b, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), student PowerPoint presentation designs (Zareva, 2011), etc. Many of these studies have been primarily concerned with shedding more light on each of the academic registers or a specific genre within a given register so that, on the one hand, instructors are better prepared to give language-specific assignment guidelines, feedback, recommendations, and advice to their students based on research findings rather than on prescriptive 'tips' or personal intuitions. On the other hand, students are more consciously aware of the differences between the oral and written registers and, respectively, the genres in which they are expected to perform academically.

One aspect of oral academic discourse that has received relatively little research attention is the use of multi-word verbs in academic speech and, more specifically, in student academic presentations. Multi-word verbs are traditionally described as lexical multi-word verb structures that "behave as a single unit" (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 1150). Most grammars agree on three main subcategories of multi-word verbs (phrasal, prepositional, and phrasal prepositional verbs), though some (e.g., Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Quirk et al., 1985) add a fourth category of "other" to include structurally diverse idiomatic expressions with verbs (e.g., *make do with*, *make fun of*, *take into account*, etc.). In this paper, the term multi-word verbs will be used only in reference to the three most common subcategories of multi-word verb constructions—i.e., phrasal verbs (e.g., *look at* = to examine, to investigate), prepositional verbs (e.g., *talk about*), and phrasal prepositional verbs (e.g., *come up with* = to think of an idea) and the study itself will also be concerned only with those constructions.¹ Of the three most common subcategories, phrasal verbs have received the most attention in the applied linguistics literature either as a sole research focus or as part of collocational studies. The main focus of these studies has been primarily on how second language (L2) users of English compare to native speakers (L1) on their knowledge of collocations (including phrasal verbs). The other two subcategories—prepositional and phrasal prepositional verbs—have remained largely under-represented in the research literature.

Multi-word verbs are a prominent feature of the English language as they have been found to be used in all registers though, overall, they are more prevalent in the conversation register than in academic writing (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). At the same time, some subcategories are more prominently represented across the registers than others. For instance, based on the over 40-million-word *Longman Spoken and Written Corpus* (Biber et al., 1999, p. 24), it was found that, on average, prepositional verbs (approx. 4,800 per million words) are about three to four times more frequently used than phrasal verbs (approx. 1,400 per million) and 16 times more common than phrasal prepositional verbs (approx. 300 per million) (Biber et al. p. 424). While this average trend is more or less preserved in the more colloquial and informal spoken register, the written academic register shows a different pattern of frequency though the same hierarchy is preserved. That is, the prepositional verbs still dominate the multi-word verb category (approx. 4,200 per million), followed by a much less frequent use of phrasal verbs (approx. 800 per million) and phrasal prepositional verbs (approx. 50 per million).

As mentioned earlier, of the three subcategories of multi-word verbs, the phrasal verbs have been most extensively researched as they have been found to be notoriously difficult to master for L2 learners of English (e.g., Chen, 2013; Gardner & Davies, 2007; Liu, 2011; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). The general consensus among researchers is that phrasal verbs are a prominent feature of the English language and their frequent use in natural language, coupled with their multiplicity of meaning, make them functionally useful in different contexts and registers (Gardner & Davies, 2007; Liu, 2011; Siyanova & Schmitt, 2007). For instance, based on their research on the *British National Corpus* (BNC) (a 100-million-word corpus of spoken and written British English), Gardner and Davies (2007) estimated that a person is likely to encounter on average one phrasal verb in every 192 words of text. Liu (2011) conducted a phrasal verb investigation using the *Contemporary Corpus of American English* (COCA) (Davies, 2008) and concluded that the distribution patterns between American and British English are similar in both corpora. His findings also confirmed Biber et al.'s (1999) findings about the distribution of phrasal verbs across the registers in that the phrasal verbs were four to five times more prominent in spoken language (approx. 5,200 per million) than academic written discourse (approx. 1,200 per million).

Given the prominence of multi-word verbs in the English language, the present study will explore their use in English native-speaking college students' presentations. The investigation is driven by three primary motivations: 1) The relatively

¹ Both Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (1999) rightly note that, apart from the three most prominent categories of multi-word verb constructions (V + Preposition, V + Particle, V + Particle + Preposition), there is a fourth one of "other" verb combinations which includes idiomatic structures headed by verbs such as V + V combinations (e.g., *let sb. go*), V + PP (e.g., *take into account*), V + Adj. (e.g., *make sure*), V + NP (e.g., *take care of*), etc. This category, though, is more heterogeneous than the three main ones in several ways. In other words, it shows greater diversity syntactically (in terms of elements with which verbs combine), structurally (in terms of length and complexity of the verbal idiomatic expressions), and semantically (in terms of range of idiomatic meanings which may go from pure idioms to restricted collocations [Cowie, Mackin, & McCaig, 1983]). Additionally, verbal idioms are relatively rarely used in natural language (fewer than 10 times per million words in LSWE Corpus [Biber et al., 1999]) and, in that, significantly less frequent in academic prose compared to prepositional verbs (approx. 4,200 per million words), phrasal verbs (approx. 800 per million) and phrasal prepositional verbs (approx. 50 per million). Thus, given the smaller impact of the category of "other" verbal idioms on academic prose, it seemed reasonable to assume that it would have a similar status in the small data set of the current study, which lead to the decision not to exclude it from the present study of multi-word verbs.

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