Particle Placement of Idiomatic Verb-Particle Constructions in English

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This paper aims to explore particle placement of idiomatic verb-particle constructions (henceforth, VPCs, for expository convenience) in English from the viewpoint of cognitive semantics.　Idiomatic VPCs can be classified into three types in terms of the position of the particle.　Some instances of idiomatic VPCs of the three types are presented as follows:

(1)　Type A … *ring the curtain down*, *make one's mind up*, *blow the cobwebs away*, etc.

　　　Type B… *dance one's legs off*, *cry one's eyes out*, *work one's head off*, etc.

　　　Type C… *lay down one's arms*, *take up the challenges*, *let off steam*, etc.

The particle in Type A can be placed on either side of the postverbal NP, the particle in Type B has to follow the postverbal NP, and the particle in Type C has to precede the postverbal NP.

　The semantic property of the particle plays an important role in the particle placement of the idiomatic VPCs.　Tenny (1994: 148) points out that the class of verb particles have the semantic property of imposing delimitedness on the event described by a verb phrase or sentence, as well as the syntactic property of appearing on either side of the noun phrase object (e.g. *eat up an apple in an hour/ *for an hour*, *eat an apple up in an hour/ *for an hour* (Tenny (1994: 149))).　This applies to the following idiomatic data.　One of the tests is what we call the *for/in* test:　a non-delimited eventuality can occur with a *for*-phrase, whereas a delimited eventuality can occur with an *in*-phrase.　Type A is compatible with only the *in*-adverbial, as in (2):

(2)　a.　ring the curtain down *in an hour/ *for an hour*

　　　b.　ring down the curtain *in an hour/ *for an hour*

In contrast, the compatibility of the durative adverb with Type B and Type C shows that there is no choice of the position of the particles, as in (3):

(3) a. dance one's legs off *for an hour*/ **in an hour*

b. lay down one's arms *for an hour*/ **in an hour*

Why is it that the particle is anchored in position in these two types?

With respect to the position of the particles, idiomatic VPCs can be represented in the two syntactic structures: [NP V NP P] / [NP V P NP] (P: particle). As discussed in my paper (2004) on the relationship between resultative phrase movement and particle movement, in terms of markedness and focalization, the syntactic form [NP V NP P] is regarded as an unmarked form; on the other hand, the form [NP V P NP] is regarded as marked. One of the characteristics of the marked form is that it focuses on the action (e.g. *He's getting out a paper.* (*publishing*), *We'd better get this paper out.* (*issued*) (Bolinger (1971: 82))). Taking into the consideration that the particle inherently encodes the result state (cf. Visser (1963)), the delimited reading in the idiomatic VPCs is taken to be semantically unmarked. This meaning, in general, is encoded by the unmarked form. The important point to note is that it is also encoded by the corresponding marked form, and in this case the action rather than the result state is focused upon.

Type A can be represented by either an unmarked or a marked form, since this type of idiomatic VPCs is semantically unmarked. On the other hand, Type B denotes a marked meaning in the sense that it describes a non-delimited eventuality and focuses on the action by using the unmarked form. In fact, this type can be asked by using the interrogative how sentence. Therefore, the corresponding marked form is blocked. Type C focuses on the action, and therefore, the marked form is primarily selected.

REFERENCES

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