

Phrasal Verbs with Special Reference to the Verbs *break* and *fall*

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1. Introduction

Phrasal verbs are really easy for us native speakers to use, but often cause problems for non-native speakers of English. Unlike synonymous adjectives, synonymous nouns and synonymous verbs, it is very difficult to explain the reasons for the various meanings of phrasal verbs. Usually there is not any single rule to follow about how and in what situations to use the phrasal verbs. Practically all of the ability of being able to use them comes naturally to us native speakers simply for the reason that they are a part of our mother tongue and we do not usually need to study them explicitly. They are learned naturally as we grow up. On the other hand, nonnative speakers of English have to spend countless hours in not only learning and memorizing their meanings, which are usually different from the meanings of the individual words that make up the phrasal verbs, but nonnative speakers must also learn in addition to how to use them, the varying nuances in meanings that often depend on the context in which they are used.

This paper is based on research and findings from The Third Asian Association for Lexicography⁽¹⁾, JACET SIG Group on English Usage⁽²⁾, the symposium presentation at the 42nd National Conference of JACET⁽³⁾, and the chapters dealing with phrasal verbs with break and fall in the textbook that resulted in the research done by JACET SIG Group⁽⁴⁾.

2. Definitions of a phrasal verb

2.1 Kenkyusha Luminous English - Japanese Dictionary defines phrasal verb in Japanese. The dictionary defines phrasal verb as “2つ以上の語がまとまって1語の動詞のような働きをするもので、普通は動詞に down, off, out, up のような副詞や at, for, with のような前置詞が結びついたものをいう。”

2.2 Collins COBUILD English Dictionary (Grammar, xxvii), (CCED) says, “A phrasal verb consists of a combination of a verb and an adverb or preposition, for example ‘look after, look back, look down on’ which together have a particular meaning. Some phrasal verbs are ergative, reciprocal, link, or passive verbs.”

2.2.1 ergative (Grammar, xxix):

Some phrasal verbs are ergative verbs, e.g. *Powdering a sweaty nose will*

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- (1) The Third ASIALEX Biennial International Conference held at Meikai University, Urayasu, Chiba, Japan on August 27-29, 2003. Along with Prof. Takagi, who handled the two sets of phrasal verbs of *get* and *go*, a presentation with handouts was presented as the following:

ASIALEX '03 Tokyo August 28, 2003

Phrasal Verbs and Their Synonymous Counterparts —With Special Reference to the Verbs, *get*, *go*, *break*, and *fall*, respectively—

Michinobu Takagi (Chiba University of Commerce)

Warren R. Elliott (Chiba University of Commerce)

- (2) Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET)-SIG (Special Interest Group) on English Usage: Special study of phrasal verbs.
- (3) “Research on Phrasal Verbs” (JACET Special Interest Group), Panelists: Chief: Hiroshi Yada and in order of presentations: Warren R. Elliott, Michinobu Takagi, Yoshihisa Morita, Yoshifumi Kida, Shigeyuki Suzuki; Sept. 5, 2003 at Tohoku Gakuin University in Sendai, Miyagi, Japan.
- (4) *Phrasal Verbs—in Action* (2004) Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET) — Special Interest Group on English Usage. MACMILLAN LANGUAGEHOUSE.

only block up the pores (v p n); *With this disease the veins in the liver can block up (v p).*

2.2.2 reciprocal

e.g. *He felt appalled by the idea of marriage so we broke up...*(pl-n v p); *My girlfriend broke up with me.* (vp with n).

2.2.3 ergative reciprocal

e.g. *Men and women pair up to dance.* (pl-n v p); *They asked us to pair up with the person next to us.* (p v with n); *They paired up smokers and non-smokers.* (v p pl-n); *They paired smokers up with non-smokers.* (v n p with n).

2.2.4 link

e.g. *I was sure things were going to turn out fine.* (v adj).

2.2.5 passive

e.g. *The civilians were just caught up in the conflict.*

2.3 Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE) has the same meaning but says that a phrasal verb is used as a verb.

2.4 Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs says,

“What are phrasal verbs? Phrasal verbs are idiomatic combinations of a verb and adverb, or a verb and preposition (or verb with both adverb and preposition). They cause difficulties for students of English because of their meaning and grammar.” (LDPV, preface).

2.5 Cambridge International Dictionary of English (CIDE) defines it as, “a phrase which consists of a verb in combination with a preposition or adverb

or both, the meaning of which is different from the meaning of its separate parts.” (p. 1059).

2.6 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD) has, “a simple verb combined with an adverb or a PREPOSITION, or sometimes both, to make a new verb with a meaning that is different from that of the simple verb, eg *go in for, win over, blow up.*”

2.7 Bolinger (1971) says, “Phrasal verbs by the simplest definition must contain a verb proper and something else. What that something else is can be disregarded while we ask whether there is any significance in the simple fact of there being more than one word.” (p. 45)

3. Synonymous words with phrasal verb set of *break*

3.1.1 Quit means almost the same as break down.

I'm late because my car engine broke down (quit).

3.1.2 Lose control also means almost the same as break down.

She broke down in tears (lost control and started crying) when she heard about the death in her family.

3.1.3 Analyze also means almost the same as break down.

The coach looked at the game tapes and broke down (analyzed) the plays.

3.2.1 Enter illegally means almost the same as break in.

Someone broke in (illegally entered) my house last night, but didn't steal anything.

3.2.2 Try out also means almost the same as break in.

I have to break in (try out) my running shoes before the race next week.

3.3 Interrupt means almost the same as break in on.

I'm sorry to break in on (interrupt) your talk, but something very important has happened.

3.4.1 Start means almost the same as break into.

We broke into laughter (started laughing) when the teacher told about his funny story.

3.4.2 Enter also means almost the same as break into.

A hacker broke into (entered) our computer system.

My son hopes to break into (enter) the Major Leagues in the near future.

I didn't have enough cash so I had to break into (enter) my savings account.

3.5.1 Stop means almost the same as break off.

We have to break off (stop) our Internet connection before class starts.

The Golden Rookie broke off (stopped) contract talks with the team yesterday.

3.5.2 Separate also means almost the same as break off.

Do you want me to break off (separate) a piece of this chocolate and give it to you?

3.6.1 Start means almost the same as break out.

A big fire broke out (started) in a house in my neighborhood.

A bad rash broke out (started) on my skin after I ate the oysters.

3.6.2 Escape also means almost the same as break out.

The wrestler was able to break out of (escape from) the bear hug hold.

After breaking out of (escaping from) prison, the police soon caught him.

3.7. Start means almost the same as break out in.

I broke out in a big sweat (started really sweating) when the director called my name.

3.8.1 Penetrate means almost the same as break through.

The crowd broke through (penetrated) the restraining lines to get the star's autograph.

3.8.2 Appear also means almost the same as break through.

It's not going to rain. The sun will break through (appear among) the clouds in an hour or so, I think.

3.9.1 Stop means almost the same as break up.

The couple broke up (stopped) after seeing each other for four years.

Let's break up (stop) for a short coffee break and then meet again in 30 minutes.

3.9.2 Disintegrate means almost the same as break up.

The mob broke up (disintegrated) as soon as the police arrived.

The tornado broke up (disintegrated) my house into tiny pieces.

3.10 Separate from means almost the same as break with.

The neo-liberals broke with (separated from) the liberals after the vote.

4. Two phrasal verbs with similar meanings in the set of *break*

4.1. Break down and break up.

Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs lists seven different meanings for both *break down* and *break up*. The Oxford Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs lists eight meanings for *break down* and seven for *break up*.

4.1.1 One meaning of *break down* is fail; *The factory had to close because the machine broke down*. One meaning of *break up* is also fail; *Their marriage broke up after four years*. This is interesting because we can say *The factory had to close because the machine failed* and *Their marriage failed after four years*. We can also say *Their marriage broke down after four years* or *Their marriage broke up after four years*, but it is not acceptable to say *The factory had to close because the machine broke up*. A machine can not break up by itself, but can be broken up (separated into several parts) by a person. This however does not imply failure on the part of the machine.

4.1.2 Another meaning of *break down* is collapse or disintegrate; *The ship communications broke down during the storm*. Another meaning of *break up* is *The ship communications broke up during the storm*. These two sentences can have exactly the same meaning in that it was impossible for the ship to communicate, although I would imagine for different reasons.

4.1.2.a In the first sentence where the communications broke down, I would guess that it was because the equipment actually went bad or possibly there was a disagreement between the two sides trying to communicate and thus they could not agree on something—which resulted in the communications breaking down.

4.1.2.b In the second sentence of the communications broke up, I would guess communication possibilities were lost because of weather problems such as an electrical storm or high waves causing the ship to rock in the water too much.

4.1.3 Another meaning of *break down* is to be analyzed; *The ore was broken down into its main elements*. Another meaning of *break up* is to be analyzed; *The ore was broken up into its main elements*. With these meanings they both must be used in conjunction with *into*. These two phrasal verbs also have the same meaning of being analyzed for value or content.

4.1.4 Although *down* and *up* by themselves have opposite meanings, I can think of no instances where *break down* and *break up* also have opposite meanings. If this distinction was included in dictionaries, both phrasal verb dictionaries and regular dictionaries, it might be very helpful for learners of English to understand not only the meaning, but also the usage of these two phrasal verbs.

5. Two phrasal verbs in the set of *break* with opposite meanings

5.1 *Break up* and *break down* are examples of when the prepositions have the opposite meanings, the phrasal verbs also have the opposite meanings. *Break up* equals start laughing. *The audience broke up in guffaws at the slapstick comedy*. *Break down* equals start crying. *My sister broke out in tears when no one asked her to the school prom*.

5.2 *Break in* and *break out* are also examples of when the prepositions have the opposite meanings, the phrasal verbs also have the opposite meanings. *Break in* equals enter by force and *break out* equals exit by force. An example sentence might be *The gangster broke in the jail door and broke his friends*

out. This would usually be used as *broke into the jail* instead of *broke in the jail door*, but the meanings are basically the same. Again, this could be useful information for learners of English to help ease their learning burdens if it were to be included in the dictionaries that students use.

6. Phrasal verbs used both literarily and colloquially

6.1 Break off and break up

6.1. If the President of one country is angry or disappointed with the Prime Minister of a second country, he could informally let it be known that unless the situation improves, the two countries will break off relations, or he could formally release the information that relations will break off if the present situation continues. The President might even use words such as ‘end’ or ‘terminate’ and these must be considered possibilities. The fact is, however, that ‘break off’ can be used in both situations.

6.2 If the police are called to control a mob, they can shout out *Hey, break it up right now!* When the crowd disperses and the police go back to headquarters, they can write in their official report that they broke up the mob. This phrasal verb can be used in both situations.

7. Two phrasal verbs with both similar and opposite meanings in the verb set of *break*.

7.1 Break out vs. break through

7.1.1 *Break out* and *break through* can both have the meaning of escape. *The lion broke out of his cage door* and *The lion broke through his cage door* both

mean that the lion got out of his cage and escaped.

7.1.2 *Break out* and *break through* can also have opposite meanings. *Break out* can mean start or commence and *break through* can mean end or finish. A couple of examples might be *War broke out in 1941* and *There was a break through in the negotiations for peace in 1945*.

7.2 *Break in* vs. *break out*

7.2.1 *Break in* and *break out* can both have the meaning of try. *I'm going to break in my new jogging shoes* and *I'm going to break out that new bottle of wine* both mean try. The first means to try the shoes before running very far and the second means to taste or try the wine.

7.2.2 *Break in* and *break out* can also have opposite meanings. *Break in* can mean go in and *break out* can mean go out. *I forgot my key so I had to break in my house* means go in or enter. *The night watchman had already locked the doors so I had to break out of the office in order to go home* means go out or escape.

8. Some phrasal verbs in the set of *break* used in literary or colloquial language, or both

8.1.1 *Break down*

8.1.1.a If you are a factory worker who has fallen behind in your production quota, it is perfectly natural and acceptable to explain to your foreman on the factory floor that the machine you had been operating had broken down and therefore you were not able to keep up with production expectations.

8.1.1.b On the other hand, if for the reason that your failure to get your required quota of products has cost your company a great sum of money, and you are required to submit a formal report stating the reason for your failure, you probably would not say the machine broke down. You are much more likely to write that the machine malfunctioned. This is just one instance of when a phrasal verb is accepted colloquially, but not in literary or formal English.

8.2. *Break in on*

8.2.1 If you go into a restaurant and see two of your friends sitting at a table eating dinner, it is okay to go up to their table and say *Sorry to break in on your conversation, but I just wanted to say hi*. There is no problem with this spoken colloquially.

8.2.2 But if later you realize that the two of them were having an important business meeting and you want to formally apologize to them, you would probably write a letter saying *I'm sorry that I interrupted your conversation last night*. In this example, most native speakers, I am sure, would not use *break in on* in the formal letter of apology.

9. Some phrasal verbs in the set of *break* have negative meanings.

9.1 *Break down*

9.1.1 Break down can have the meaning of give up. *The prisoner broke down after several hours of police questioning and told them all of the details*.

9.1.2 Break down can also have the meaning of collapse. *The lady broke down*

in sorrow when she found out her daughter had failed the entrance exams.

9.2 Break into

9.2.1 Break into can have the meaning of violate. *The thieves broke into our security system and got away with a lot of secret data.*

9.2.2 Break into can also have the meaning of last resort. *We didn't want to break into our savings account to pay all of our bills, but in the end we were forced to do it.*

9.3 Break off

9.3.1 Break off can have the meaning of stop or discontinue something. *I had to break off the relationship with her because of our many differences of opinion.*

9.3.2 Break off can also have the meaning of hurt, mar, or destroy. *The moving company broke off one of the legs of our easy chair when they were taking it downstairs.*

9.4 Break out

9.4.1 Break out can have the meaning of suffer or suffer from something. *Our son broke out with the measles a week before school started.*

9.4.2 Break out can also have the meaning of start some kind of disaster or terrible event. *The peaceful crowd broke out into a mob when the orator incited them to rebel. A terrible fire broke out in the slum area of the city.*

9.5 *Break up*

9.5.1 Break up can have the meaning of stop or destroy something. *My parents' marriage finally broke up after several years of bickering between them.*

9.5.2 Break up can also have the meaning of interrupt someone or something. *I hate to break up your meeting, but we have to finish this report sometime today.*

10. **Synonymous words with phrasal verb set of fall**

10.1 Rely means almost the same as fall back on.

The pitcher has lost the speed on his fast ball and has to fall back on (rely on) his experience.

10.2 Lag means almost the same as fall behind.

The runner is falling behind (lagging) the leading group.

10.3.1 Like or love means almost the same as fall for.

I fell for (liked, loved) my wife the first time I met her.

10.3.2 Be gullible also means almost the same as fall for.

I fell for (was gullible about) the salesman's pitch completely.

10.4.1 Decrease means almost the same as fall off.

Business fell off (decreased) after the Christmas sales season.

10.4.2 Drop from also means almost the same as fall off.

The rider fell off (dropped from) his horse at the first obstacle.

10.5 Fight with or argue with mean almost the same as fall out with.

I fell out with (fought with) my wife over our family budget.

She fell out with (argued with) her boss and had to change sections.

10.6.1 Fail means almost the same as fall through.

I think the peace talks will fall through (fail) if something isn't done.

10.6.2 Go between also means almost the same as fall through.

The coin fell through (went between) the bars of this sewer cover.

10.7 Is means almost the same as fall on.

Christmas falls on (is) a Monday this year.

10.8.1 Hit means almost the same as fall upon.

Lightning is likely to fall upon (hit) anything iron, like golf clubs.

10.8.2 Depend on also means almost the same as fall upon.

The blame falls on (depends on) all of the workers in the company.

10.9.1 Recoil means almost the same as fall back.

She fell back (recoiled) when she saw the snake on the sidewalk.

10.9.2 Lag also means almost the same as fall back.

Profits have fallen back (lagged) compared to last year.

10.10 Drop off means almost the same as fall off.

Leaves start falling off (dropping off) the trees after the first frost.

11. Other phrasal verbs in the *fall* set have negative meanings.

11.1 Fall back on means fail to be successful on the first option, no matter what that might be, and rely on the second option. *We will have to fall back on our defense since our offense is not working.*

11.2 Fall behind means to fail to keep up with something or someone.

He is falling behind in his grades at school because of his illness.

11.3 Fall off means either to fail to stay on something, such as a bicycle, or fail to maintain the previous pace of something, such as the amount of sales per month. *Production fell off by 5% last quarter.*

11.4 Fall out with means to fail to maintain a good relationship with someone.

The coach was fired because he fell out with his players.

11.5 Fall through means to fail to succeed or fail to make progress. *Our plans for a trip to Las Vegas fell through at the last minute.*

11.6 Fall upon means to fail to maintain your footing. *I fell upon some jagged rocks while mountain climbing.*

13. Special Cases

13.1 A problem that probably confuses nonnative speakers of English is that some of the phrasal verbs have a different meaning than what we would

image from the root meaning, or deep meaning of the words. For example, I would imagine that most of us suppose that the word *fall* has some negative meaning, such as dropping, decreasing, or failing. But then how can we explain that *fall in love* has a good and generally positive meaning? Did the person drop from a better feeling into a lower or feeling by falling in love? I think all of us would say just the opposite; that the person raised or elevated his or her feelings from something not as good up to, not down to, something better. So why do we say fall in love? I seriously doubt if the average native speaker would know the answer, let alone even be able to explain it.

13.2 A phrasal verb sometimes does not fit the image that its root meaning has. How can we explain a sentence like *I fell upon a great fortune when I chose the winning lottery numbers*. This implies only good things, unless you consider gambling itself and the winnings made from gambling as something bad. And many people really do. But the sentence *I fell upon a great fortune when my grandfather died* has two implications. The first is that I was lucky that my grandfather was a rich man and that he left me a great fortune. The second is that I was unlucky that I lost my grandfather, even though I benefited financially from his death. So if you ever hear someone say *I fell upon a great fortune when my grandfather died*, you would have to listen to the tone of voice for which words the emphasis are put on to know if the speaker is happy to get the fortune or happy that the grandfather died.

13.3 Some different phrasal verbs can have the same meaning. *Fall behind* and *fall off* can both have the meaning of lag. Examples of sentences with this meaning are: *The runner fell behind the leaders of the race* and *The runner fell off the pace of the race*. Although the objects of the two sentences are different, they both have exactly the same meaning.

13.4 On the other hand, some of these phrasal verbs can have the opposite meaning. Take for example *fall in with* and *fall out with*. The former means to get on good terms with someone and the latter means to get on bad terms with someone. An example sentence using these two phrasal verbs might be: *I fell out with my best friend because I fell in with his wife too intimately.*

13.5 Different phrasal verbs in different sets can have the same meaning and can be used interchangeably. Compare *break down*, *break up*, and *fall through*. All three can have the meanings of collapse or disintegrate or simply put, fail. Look at the following three sentences. 1) *Our big business deal broke down at the last minute.* 2) *Our big business deal broke up at the last minute.* 3) *Our big business deal fell through at the last minute.* All three of these mean the same thing and can be restated as: *Our big business deal failed at the last minute* or *Our big business deal collapsed at the last minute.* For a learner of English to produce a sentence with such a meaning, it would be necessary to learn only one, probably the easiest, of these sentences to get his message across to the listeners. On the other hand, if the learner is the listener, it will be necessary to learn all, or most, of the possible varieties of the sentence because it is impossible to know or guess which of them the speaker will use. Thus the fact that the learners' receptive knowledge will be much more than his or her productive knowledge is a given.

14. Phrasal verbs in the set of *fall* used in literary or colloquial language, or both

14.1 Fall out with

14.1.1 Suppose you have had some trouble at your place of employment with the assistant manager. It has become a bad situation that you do not wish to

continue. You have two choices.

14.1.1.a One choice is to walk into the manager's office and explain that you have fallen out with his assistant and wish to either be transferred or to resign.

14.1.1.b The second choice is to inform the manager by a written letter, or maybe these days by email, that you have had a major disagreement with his assistant and wish to be transferred or to resign. In the formal letter, I doubt if many native speakers would use *fall out with* instead of disagreement.

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