

Two Word Verbs

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In any living language there are changes which are constantly taking place. Certain characteristics become dominant and have their rise and fall depending on the life and customs of the users of that language. This is particularly true in the case of a feature that in the last two centuries has become increasingly evident in English, -- the feature that is called by linguists, the "two word verb." It consists of a verb with which a particle, either an adverb or a preposition, is used as in the case of *put off* meaning *to postpone* or *call on* meaning *to visit*, and so forth.

This feature in English has had a hard time for survival through the ages because for many years the purists have identified it with slang. The psuedo-classicists reasoned that "learned words" from the classics should ornament the language of the people in preference to the monosyllabic combinations that showed no signs of "culture." Sam Johnson saw this feature rearing its inevitable head, made deprecating remarks about it, and refused to give it a place in his lexicon. Some have said that it is the "language of Tom, Dick and Harry" instead of that of Thomas, Richard and Henry"; others have accused the users of the two word verb of being "linguistically lazy." However, in spite of the many attempts to suppress completely this feature of the English language, it has survived and will continue to do so; it is inevitable.

The editors of the 1909 Webster's Unabridged International Dictionary discovered that on the average, each of twenty-five verbs could be combined with seven or eight of a list of sixteen adverbs. Interestingly enough, the verb *get* headed the list with an ability of

fourteen combinations, while *go*, *come* and *put* had practically as many. If the verbs *take*, *go*, and *put* were used in all their varying meanings, they were able to express more than sixty meanings. *Make up* topped the list with fourteen different meanings. In the twenty-five years between the two editions of the Webster's Dictionary, other combinations had apparently become popular, for the second edition included entries not found in the previous one. Thus the growth of the two word verb is unmistakably evident. Because it is as intrinsic to our speech as salt is to sea-water, it is important to understand instead of repress it.

If the two word combinations are studied, it will be seen that the two parts consist of the verb and particle, both of Teutonic stock. It can, therefore, be said that it is not a borrowed importation, but inherent in the roots of the language. In order to find the embryonic seeds of the feature, selections from each century were surveyed with the idea of finding the forerunners to this common feature of today.

As one examines the text of the Aelfric selections of the year 1000, he finds a tendency for Anglo-Saxon to use the prefix at the beginning of words. This can be seen in such words as *forsih* ‡, *upahafen*, *for-sewen*, *on-winnede* and *underfenge*. It will be observed that in Old English the prefixes were attached to the roots of words; furthermore, these prefixes signal meaning, usually emphasizing or strengthening the meaning of the root verbs. Remnants of these verbs remain in such words as *withstand*, *foresee*, and *forgive*. The same selection from Aelfric includes particles as *on*, *fram*, ‡ *urh*, *into*, *on*, *for*, *wi* ‡ and *mid*, but these are used as prepositions taking objects and they do not meld into the meaning with verbs as do the prefixes or the two word verb combinations in many instances today. The characteristic of English at this early stage then, is the addition of the prefix to the verb; no two word verbs as such have made their appearance in the language.

In the writings of 1100 the observation is about the same. In the

Poema Morale (1200) the language is found to continue instances of prefixes attached to verbs. The poem also contains occurrences of prepositions but these are used adverbially and do not affect the meaning of the verb. In *Robert of Gloucester* (1300) one hundred lines of poetry show fewer verbs with inseparable prefixes as in *bitok*, *bisoghte*, *a-venge*, and *overcome*. In these words as in those of previous periods, it is seen that the prefix tends to intensify or change the root meanings of the verb.

In conclusion, after a sampling of writings from the eleventh through the fourteenth century, a study of the materials would indicate that the appearance of two-word verbs was negligible or almost non-existent; it had not become a part of the written language during this time. Where it did occur, the adverbial particle was mostly adverbial in character, and the prepositions attached themselves to the nouns rather than the verbs in most instances. Furthermore, the particles had only a literal meaning. The reason for the non-appearance of the combination cannot be given and need not be given. If we wish, we can conjecture that there was a feature parallel to the modern use of the two word verbs in the inseparable prefix on the roots of the verbs and that these prefixes signalled shades of meanings that did not exist in that same stem without the prefix. The speakers of language of those centuries found this feature sufficient to express their experiences.

The Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

Dr. A. G. Kennedy in his monograph "The Modern English Verb-Adverb Combination"⁽¹⁾ has asserted that "during the Middle English Period, the development of the verb-adverb combination is more marked, though it is not easy to conclude from the varying types of literature available, just how far this usage advanced in each

(1) Kennedy, A. G., *The Modern English Verb-Adverb Combination in Stanford Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Stanford Univ., 1920, p. 12.

century and dialect - - -. The inrush of a multitude of Romanic verbs with inseparable prefixes complicates the matter greatly." In this study of the two word verb, it now becomes necessary to ascertain whether there was actually the "inrush of a multitude of Romanic verbs with inseparable prefixes" and if so, whether it could have influenced the development of the combination. In addition, the words with inseparable prefixes of Anglo-Saxon source must be observed. In the samplings from these two centuries, these three linguistic features will be pointed up and conclusions will be drawn.

In the first 330 lines of Chaucer's *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, representative of the writings of the very early fifteenth century, there were six appearances of the Romanic compound verb as seen in *engendered*, *inspired*, *embranded*, *endite*, *purfiled*, *avant*, and *endite*. The same lines include seven instances of older native compounds including the following: *befil*, *bigynne*, *bismotered*, *entuned*, *besette*, and *undertake*. There were only two instances of the newer verb-adverb combination as seen in *riden out* and *pinche at*.

Peacock's writings of 1450 show an increased number of two syllabled words of Romanic derivation as a result of the changes in vocabulary due to the Norman Conquest; on the other hand, the two-syllabled words composed of Old English roots and inseparable prefixes were comparatively few. This increase of Latinate words is seen also in the works of Caxton (1475), Tyndale and More (1525), Lattimer (1550) and Lyly (1575). To give concrete examples of the Latinate words, those of stock Anglo Saxon combinations and of the two word verb combinations might become tedious in this paper. Merely a conclusion of that study will be given.⁽²⁾ Chaucer in his *Prologue* uses very simple language with the exclusion of cumbersome compounds in either the native or Romanic inseparable prefixes. The

(2) For a detailed study of this, see my unpublished paper "The Development of the Two Word Verb Combination during the Eleventh through the Sixteenth Centuries."

sparing use of the two word combinations shows that it has not yet come into its own, for certainly if it had already become embedded in the vernacular, it would undoubtedly have made its appearance in this largely monosyllabic, rhythmic poetry. The greatest difference occurs in Lyly's works; his erudition is exemplified in the large number of words of Latinate derivation that is used. It is, indeed, at the expense of the simpler two word verb combination. It is evidence as this that may cause Kennedy to say that the combination is "evidently a part of the language of the common man, even as it has ever been."⁽³⁾

From the study of the writings of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, it is possible to conclude that "the development of the verb-adverb combination would have been more rapid had it not been weakened for some generations or even centuries, by the adoption into the English of numerous Romanic verbs with inseparable prefixes which drove out the native compounds, and for a time made the newer combinations unnecessary."⁽⁴⁾ The development may also have been retarded by those who like Tyndale's contemporaries argued that the Bible should not "be translated into our tonge, it is so rude,"⁽⁵⁾ the implication being that it should be in Latin. Because English was considered "rude," it is easy to see why a large number of Latinate words were taken over into the writings of the day rather than the simpler words of Teutonic stock. Though this philosophy may have been that of the groups privileged intellectually and educationally, it is impossible to estimate accurately what the speech of the man of the street actually was. It must be remembered that all conclusions are drawn on written materials and those written by the educated. Written and oral speech show up the same linguistic features in different ways. However, it can be said that during the sixteenth century, the combination was beginning to show itself

(3) Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

(4) Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

(5) p. 25. line 160 from the selections by William Tyndale in *Selections from Specimens of English Literature.*

unmistakably. Most of the combinations, then, as now, were of the one syllabled verb of Teutonic stock with the particle. It had already the characteristics of those of present day English; the only thing left was for it to gain popularity and momentum.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century to the present day, the feature has come into its own. Regardless of its history, of the grammarians dislike of its treatment, or of our personal feeling about it, the two word verb is an integral part of the English language. Furthermore, it presents one of the greatest difficulties for those learning English as a foreign language. Rather than gloss over this grammatical difficulty, a greater interest in its patterning in the structure of the language should be shown. When an idiom is learned, its patterning is as important as its meaning. No rules can be found to govern the patterning of the two word verbs, but it is possible to classify them according to certain characteristics. After making a study of the two word verbs from Dr. Charles Staubach's "Two Word Verbs, A Study in Idiomatic English," published in 1945, it was found that the largest number of verbs in the study patterned in the following test frames:

1. The girl thought out the plan.
2. The girl thought the plan out.
3. The girl thought it out.
4. (Quickly) the girl (quickly) thought out the plan (quickly).
5. The girl never thought out the plan.
6. The plan was thought out.
7. (Quickly) the plan was (quickly) thought out (quickly).
8. The plan was never thought out.

The following characteristics show themselves in the sentences above. In utterance 1, there is a performer of the action and a receiver thus making the sentence active in voice. In utterance 2, the receiver of the action comes between the two word combination. In number 3, the substitute *it* can be used *between* the combination,

but never *after* it. In 4, a "manner" verb can be inserted in three possible positions, however, adverbs, as *seldom*, *never*, *rarely* and so forth, pattern in one position only as seen in No. 5. In utterance 6, the word in the subject position is taken by the "object" word of utterance 1. Adverbs in that sentence are patterned according to 7 and 8.

It was found that 218 of the combinations, or 40% of the entire group of Staubach's list, fell into this category. To write these all would be tedious to both the reader and writer of this report so that only ten examples taken at random are given :

break up (bring to an end)	give up (sacrifice)
bring up (raise, educate)	give up (surrender)
bring up (mention)	put off (postpone)
fill out (write information requested)	quiet down (soothe)
hold up (rob)	ring up (call by telephone)

The second largest group of verbs fell into one with differing characteristics. Most outstanding of these is that the meaning was complete when the end of the combination was reached. In other words, no "object" followed it. Additional information of *thus*, *then*, and *there* might be added but it was not an essential for the utterance to have meaning. The combination could not be divided; adverbs patterned in the methods of 2 and 3. These verb combinations patterned in the following manner :

1. The girl caught on.
2. (Quickly) the girl (quickly) caught on (quickly).
3. The girl never caught on.

Other examples of this group of verbs are :

quiet down (become quiet)
eat out (dine elsewhere other than home)

There are many other patternings of two word verbs though it will be found that these two are the most commonly used.

When the student of English acquires into his vocabulary a two word verb combination, not only should he acquire it semantically but also in its method of patterning. For this idiomatic usage to sound natural to the speakers of the language, its patterning is very important. It is a part of the complete mastery of the speech. Students and teachers alike should become aware of this important feature and together work out a solution to this admitted difficulty in the English language.