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An Analysis of *NTC's Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs and Other Idiomatic Verbal Phrases* (2)

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7. Etymology

Etymological information is occasionally given typically in parentheses after the definition:

pull all the stops out to do everything possible; . . . (Refers to drawing all the stops on a pipe organ, resulting in the loudest possible sound.) . . .

See also: **play one's cards to one's chest** AND **play one's cards close to one's vest**, **put one's foot in one's mouth**, **rise to the bait**, **stink on ice**, **tilt at windmills**, **turn belly-up**.

Etymological information may be given in the definition:

smell to high heaven to smell very bad; to smell with a smell so bad that it would not disperse even high in the sky. . . .

It may also be given as one of the senses of a particular phrase. For instance, **drop by the wayside** AND **fall by the wayside** (def. 1) has a note: "The origin of the figurative usage in sense 2". This is an unusual note; in many cases literal senses, from which one or more figurative senses are derived, are shown without such a note (but sometimes with the label "literal"; see 9.1.1).

It is regrettable that etymological comments are very often omitted. For example, **get sb's back up** has a note: "Refers to the way a cat puts its back up when it is threatening". However, **get up on one's hind legs** (in the sense "to get angry and assertive") is only given a "Figurative" label. Neither a note nor a label is given in **get sb under one's thumb**.

Etymological information is useful for foreign learners and perhaps for

native users, too. It should be given to much more idiomatic phrases, whether or not they contain a “Figurative” or “Idiomatic” label (cf. 9.1.3).

8. Definitions

The entry head is “*usually* followed by a definition” (p. xi; my italics). There are entries where a definition is missing, perhaps carelessly (**assimilate with sb, figure sb as sth, mop sth up with sth**).

8.1. Defining vocabulary

NTCPV does not use any controlled defining vocabulary. Alternate definitions may be given “when the vocabulary of the first definition is difficult or idiomatic” (p. xi).

8.1.1. Difficult words

There are definitions where ‘difficult’ words are used:

- drown in sth** (def. 1): to be asphyxiated in some liquid.
- listen in (on sb or sth)** (def. 2): to eavesdrop on someone.
- run away with sb** (def. 2): [for two people] to elope.

In these entries the defining words are much more difficult than the phrases defined, but no alternate definition is given.

8.1.2. Idiomatic phrases

Words and phrases that are used in the idiomatic sense may be shown in quotation marks:

- have at sth**: to begin to do something to something; to “attack” something.
- kick back** (def. 2): [for an addict] to return to an addiction or a habit, after having “kicked the habit”.

However, idiomatic definitions are in most cases due to other phrasal verbs or set phrases (abbreviated to PV) used as a (part of a) definition:

- (1) when the PV is included in *NTCPV*
 - (1a) the PV is shown in slanted type
(e.g. **bank on sth**: to *depend on sth*; . . .)

- (1b) the PV is shown in ordinary (i.e. roman) type
(e.g. **bargain on sth**: to depend on something; to count on something.
turn sb’s water off: to take someone down to size.)
- (2) when the PV is not included in *NTCPV*
 - (2a) the PV is shown in slanted type
(e.g. **barf out**: to *freak out*; . . .)
 - (2b) the PV is shown in ordinary type
(e.g. **calculate on sth**: . . . ; to reckon on something.
wipe the floor up with sb: to beat someone to a pulp.)

(1a) is a kind of cross-reference (see 10). In some entries the PV given is misleading. For instance, “*answer back (to sb)*” and “*talk back (to sb)*” are shown in the definition of **argue back**. If they are all synonymous, the last entry head should be corrected to “**argue back (to sb)**” See also: **step aside for sb (def .2)/step down from sth (for sb)**).

It seems that there are no clear principles to decide when to show PVs in slanted type and when to show them in ordinary type (compare **bank on sth/bargain on sth**).

(1b) may create a circular definition. Circular definitions are common in *NTCPV*. Compare, for instance, **count (up)on sb or sth/depend (up)on sb or sth/rely (up)on sb or sth**. At **make sb up** the nominal form “makeup” is used in the definition (“to put makeup on someone”).

The definitions listed under (2a) are inappropriate. For instance, such an entry head as “**freak out**” is not found: it should be either **freak out (on sth)** or **freak out (over sb or sth)** AND **freak out (at sb or sth)**, or else **freak out** should be included.

The most serious problem lies in (2b). Although it is virtually impossible for specialised dictionaries like *NTCPV* to obey the “Word Not In” rule (Landau 1984: 129–131), the user will have to consult other dictionaries unless he happens to know the PV shown in the definition.

8.2. Different information given in related entries

As mentioned in 5.5.2 and 5.5.3, related entries often have different infor-

mation in a misleading way. Here is another example: **poke along** is defined as “to move along slowly; to lag or tarry”, while **poke around** means “to move slowly or aimlessly; to waste time while moving about”. Is the semantic difference significant (especially with or without “aimlessly”)? (Note that very similar examples are given in these entries.) The two entries could be combined.

8.3. Selectional restrictions about the subject

Semantic restrictions about the subject are indicated in square brackets (e.g. **lather up** (def. 1) “[for a horse]”, (def. 2) “[for soap]”, (def. 3) “[for one]”). However, this kind of information is often omitted. For instance, “[for one]” is not given in **lather sth up**. The user has to decode the necessary information from the examples in such entries.

8.4. Senses covered

Contrary to its title, *NTCPV* often omits idiomatic uses (cf. 3.3). Including literal senses is not a bad practice. The problem is, after all, that it is not clear what sources the lexicographers relied on and what principles they obeyed in order to select phrases for this dictionary. For instance, the following entries only explain literal senses: **brighten up**, **carry sb or sth out**, **drop across sb or sth**, **slide over sth**.

The senses covered are sometimes different, perhaps from carelessness, at a pair of phrases that have opposite meanings each other. Compare:

campaign against sb or sth: 1. to crusade or battle against someone or something. . . . 2. to run one’s political campaign against someone or something. . . .

campaign for sb or sth: to support actively someone or someone’s candidacy for political office. . . .

The latter entry does not accept a sentence like “*We are campaigning for the law reform*”. Also compare: **be in season/be out of season**.

8.5. The arrangement of senses

There is no explanation in the front-matter articles about how senses of a polysemous phrase are arranged. Here is a result of my survey ((1) and (2)

are added for comparison):

- (1) literal sense only (e.g. **carry sb or sth out**)
- (2) figurative sense only (with a ‘Figurative’ label) (e.g. **bring the house down**)
- (3) both literal and figurative senses shown
 - (3a) both literal and figurative senses shown under the same sense number (with a note: “Both literal and figurative uses”) (e.g. **bring sth out of mothballs**)
 - (3a’) with a note: “Also the obvious literal meaning” (e.g. **step on sb’s toes AND tread on sb’s toes**)
 - (3a’’) with no note (e.g. **bring sb or sth forward**)
 - (3b) literal sense followed by figurative sense(s) (with a ‘Figurative’ label) (e.g. **lay sth at sb’s feet AND put sth at sb’s feet**)
 - (3b’) without a ‘Figurative’ label (e.g. **bring sth down**)
 - (3c) figurative sense(s) followed by literal sense (with a ‘Figurative’ label) (e.g. **explode with sth**)
 - (3c’) without a ‘Figurative’ label (e.g. **cut sb to the quick AND cut sb to the bone**)

No definite principles have been found about the order of senses.

Senses can be arranged in order of transparency in meaning (like *LDOPV* and *ODOPV*), or of frequency (like *CCDPV*).

8.6. Strange or inappropriate definitions

Sometimes definitions do not match the construction being defined (e.g. **bandy with sb**: “to argue [with someone]; . . .”). Some definitions are misleading (e.g. **connect sb or sth (up) to sb or sth AND connect sb or sth (up) with sb or sth** (def. 1): “in one’s mind” can be misleading). Some definitions are too specific (e.g. **crow about sth AND crow over sth** (def. 1)). The definition of **sit on a gold mine** is verbose. The second sense of **induct sb into sth** is redundant.

9. Usage labels and usage notes

9.1. Usage labels

NTCPV explains stylistic varieties after a definition by terms such as ‘formal’, ‘informal’, ‘slang’, etc. They are treated as ‘usage labels’ in this

article.

9.1.1. Labels employed

Most of the labels are listed and explained in the glossary ("TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS", pp. xv-xvii). Some labels are only mentioned in the publisher's blurb on the back cover ('cliché', 'folksy', and 'stilted'), and others are explained nowhere:

'euphemism' (**go to the bathroom** (def. 2)), 'euphemistic' (**give up the ghost**), '(an) exaggeration' (**hang sb for sth** (def. 2)), 'jargon' (**age out (of sth)**), 'literary' (**sin against sb or sth**), 'nonstandard' (**know where sth is at** (def. 1)), 'theatrical' (**dim sth up**), 'underground slang' (**take care of sb** (def. 2)).

Labels may be linked (e.g. 'stilted and jocular' (**swoon over sb or sth**), 'idiomatic slang' (**knock sb's block off**; see also 9.1.2)).

9.1.2. Synonymous labels

A serious problem about the labelling system of *NTCPV* is that some labels are defined in a circular way.

'Colloquial' and 'informal' are virtually synonymous:

colloquial: refers to spoken or informal language style . . . (p. xv)

informal: refers to a very casual expression that is most likely to be spoken and not written. (p. xvi)

In fact, they are considered interchangeable in **connect sth (up)(to sth)**: "Colloquial or informal with *up*". The whole sequence of **hit upon sb or sth** is 'colloquial' but the particle is 'formal'. It is confusing.

'Colloquial' overlaps with 'nonstandard' (see 9.1.1) to some extent: "Sometimes *colloquial* is used to describe an expression . . . that violates any rule of grammar or style" (p. xv). For instance, the second sense of **connect (up) with sb or sth** is 'informal' and the use of the *up* is 'colloquial'.

In *NTCPV* 'slang' refers to "highly playful spoken language involving an element of wordplay" (p. xvii). However, it partially overlaps with 'colloquial'. For example, **cut out** is a 'slang', while **cut out for some**

place is 'colloquial'.

'Figurative' and 'idiomatic' are also synonymous:

figurative: refers to nonliteral expressions. . . . Most *figurative* expressions are also *idiomatic* to some extent. (p. xvi)

idiomatic: refers to a phrase whose meaning cannot be figured out by studying the meanings of the individual words in the phrase. (ibid.)

For instance, **lead sb down the garden path** is 'figurative' but **lead sb up the garden path** is 'idiomatic'; **jump on the bandwagon** AND **leap on the bandwagon** are 'figurative', while **get on the bandwagon** AND **hop on the bandwagon** are 'idiomatic'. If the two labels are synonymous, the following usage note is confusing: "Idiomatic and figurative. Taken literally, this is nonsense" (**slip between the cracks**).

9.1.3. With or without a label?

Another serious problem is that labels are applied in an inconsistent manner. For instance, **con sb into sth** is a 'slang' but **con sb out of sth** is unmarked; **lay sth out (for sb)** is 'colloquial' but **lay sth out** is unmarked.

The label 'figurative' is very often omitted, leaving the phrase unmarked. A survey was conducted to every sense of every entry head consisting of 'come + particle' (except set phrases). The result clearly proves that:

figurative use	
with 'figurative'	0
with 'idiomatic'	1
with 'colloquial'	3
with no label	73
total	77
literal use	40

Applying a 'figurative' label in such a random way can confuse the foreign user.

9.2. Usage notes

A definition may be followed by notes or "comments" in parentheses (p. xi). They give various kinds of information other than that mentioned so

far and are usually useful (especially warnings about the use of offensive terms).

However, there are a few unclear or misleading comments. For instance, the note given in **tell (sb) on sb** is misleading; the note could mean “**tell on sb to sb**” is a possible construction. The note “Usually with *have*” (**go through the mill**) is also misleading; the *have* stands for both perfective *have* and *have* in *have to*. “Also without *away*, but not eligible as an entry” (**cower away from sb or sth**) is confusing; the note should be replaced with a better entry head: **cower (away)(from sb or sth)**. The comment “When both *out* and *of* are used, no direct object can intervene” given in **cut sth out (of sth)** AND **cut sth out (from sth)** could be replaced with an “F” example.

10. The cross-reference system

The cross-reference system assures that “the selection of the FIRST particle occurring after the verb will lead the user to the correct entry head” (p. ix). “Both index heads and an [sic.] entry heads appear in *slanted type* whenever they are referred to in a definition or cross-reference” (p. xiii).

When a phrase is treated as an alternate form of another phrase, it is cross-referenced (cf. 5.6).

The meaning of a phrase may be explained by another phrasal verb or verbal phrase (PV). There are different ways to do this:

- (1) shown in slanted type
 - (1a) PV only (e.g. **foul up**: to *mess up*.)
 - (1b) PV with usual definition (e.g. **louse sb or sth up**: to ruin something; to *mess sb or sth up*.)
- (2) shown in normal (i.e. roman) type (cf. 8.1.2)
 - (2a) PV only (e.g. **crinkle up**: to wrinkle up.)
 - (2b) PV with usual definition (e.g. **black out** (def. 1): to pass out; to become unconscious.)

The PVs shown in slanted type ((1a) and (1b)) function as a kind of cross-reference. The PVs shown in normal type ((2a) and (2b)) should be printed in slanted type, if they are included in *NTCPV* (see 8.1.2).

Notes to lead the user to other (usually synonymous and occasionally

antonymous) phrases may also be added in parentheses after a definition (p. xii):

- sit right with sb**: to be acceptable or understandable to someone. (Figurative. Very close to *sit well with sb*.) . . .
- sit well with sb**: to be acceptable to someone. (Figurative.) . . .

The former phrase can be explained in the entry for the latter phrase, and vice versa.

The most serious problem about the cross-reference system of *NTCPV* is that cross-references are very often shown in the one-way direction, even when the related phrases should be referred to from each other. For instance, **beat one's head against the wall** is cross-referenced from **bang one's head against a brick wall**, but not vice versa. Also compare: **be in over one's head (with sb or sth)/be in (sth) over one's head, butt in (on sb or sth)/butt out, dim sth down/dim sth up, leave word for sb to do sth/leave word with sb, start (off) with a clean slate/start (over) with a clean slate**.

Another problem is that cross-references are often omitted, even when the two entries are very closely related in meaning (e.g. **clash against sth** (def. 2)/**clash with sth, conk off/conk out, sit on sb or sth/sit (up) on sb or sth**).

Cross-referenced phrases may not be included in *NTCPV*; perhaps they were omitted carelessly. For instance, *lie about* and *build up* (used in the context of traffic) are mentioned in **lay around** AND **lay about** and **build down**, respectively, but they are not included in *NTCPV*.

11. Examples

It is true that “Each entry has at least two examples” (back cover). Examples are introduced by a box (□). The box is also used to show structural differences (see p. xiii). This is an excellent feature. For instance, the entry head **figure on sb or sth** means the particle always precedes the object, while **figure sb or sth out** means the particle usually comes after the object and a “**T**” example shows the particle can be transposed before the direct object. It is regrettable, however, that “**T**” is carelessly omitted

in some entries (e.g. **bash sb or sth around**, **count sth out**, **lay sth out on sb or sth** AND **lay sth out for sb or sth**, **turn sb out**).

11.1. Invented examples or citations?

There is no explanation about this question. It seems to me that (perhaps all) examples of this dictionary were written by the NTC lexicographers. There are a couple of reasons to guess so.

First, there are some unnatural examples: "*He accidentally left his grandfather out in the cold*" (**leave sb or sth out in the cold** (def. 1)), "*The cat came up to me and laid a mouse at my feet*" (**lay sth at sb's feet** AND **put sth at sb's feet** (def. 1)). Employing invented examples is one thing; showing unnatural examples is another.

Secondly, very similar examples are often repeated (e.g. "*I posed as Gerald and got the job*", "*I posed as a nurse and got a job at a summer camp*" (**pose as sb or sth**); see also **clap sb in(to) sth**, **float (up)on sth**, **fold back**, **throw sth across sb or sth**). Except cases where the same group of words are intentionally used to show different grammatical patterns, such examples provide less information and are not very interesting.

11.2. Set phrase?

When all the examples that are given of a particular (sense of a particular) combination contain the same set of words (except the verb and particles), the whole phrase could be treated as a fixed phrase (see 6.2.4).

11.3. The same example shown in different entries

The same example or very similar examples may be shown in different entries (see 5.5.2).

11.4. Examples and other information

One of the excellent features of *NTCPV* is that it spares a good deal of space for examples. Usually they illustrate all the possible grammatical patterns of an entry head. However, there are exceptions. For instance, "**with sth**" in **lay sb up (with sth)** is illustrated by none of the examples given there. The phrase being defined as "to make someone ill abed with

something, to debilitate someone with something", it is not clear what words can actually follow the preposition. See also: **fade back (into sth)**, **foul out (of sth)**.

The entry for **flutter over sb or sth** has a note "Also said of a person being fussy about someone or something", but neither of the two examples given there show this context. The examples in **fall off (of) a log** are both misleading; *of* is included in neither of them, even though the usage note reads "The *of* is colloquial, but almost always included in the expressions".

Examples employed to illustrate a set phrase often simply repeat the phrase itself. For instance, the following examples are not very useful: "*Blow it out your ear, you jerk!*", "*Oh, blow it out your ear!*" (**Blow it out your ear!**) See also **throw oneself at the mercy of the court** AND **throw oneself on the mercy of the court**. An example that shows a typical context would be useful in such entries.

11.5. Inappropriate examples

There are some examples which illustrate a different construction from that of an entry head. For instance, "*She could not distinguish between basil and oregano*" is a misleading example shown in **distinguish sb and sth from sb and sth**.

Some examples are totally irrelevant (e.g. **stop sth up**: "*The leaves that had fallen in the night clogged the storm sewer up*"). I counted 70 misleading or irrelevant examples in *NTCPV*. They should be corrected.

12. Conclusions

NTCPV is surely a useful reference book, particularly because it is "the only American dictionary of phrasal verbs". It is regrettable, however, it has presented the problems mentioned so far. They can be summarised as follows:

(1) Differences in the information provided

The most crucial problem is that the information provided in *NTCPV* is not always reliable. It is often doubtful whether the differences in the information provided in different entries are really significant, particularly

in the following respects: (a) entry heads (5.2), (b) optional elements (5.5.3), (c) the indication of selectional restrictions (6.2.3, 6.2.4), (d) definitions (8.2.2), (e) usage labels (9.1.2, 9.1.3), (f) examples (11.3).

If a particular set of phrases are considered grammatically and/or semantically identical, they should be treated as such.

(2) Errors

Editorial errors as well as misprints will spoil the reliability of a reference book. For instance, **bicker (with sb)(about sb or sth) AND bicker (with sb or sth)(over sb or sth)** is confusing; "**or sth**" should be added in the former *with* phrase. I counted 40 errors and misprints except those in examples (11.5).

(3) The selection of phrases/senses

The definitions of 'phrasal verb' and 'particle' should be reviewed (3.1, 3.2), and more idiomatic phrases/uses could be included (3.3, 8.4). Perhaps the intended user groups should be more specific (2).

(4) Sources of information

Both the quality and the quantity of information can vary depending on the source of information. It is unclear what kinds of sources were employed to compile this dictionary (cf. 3.4, 11.1).

(5) Inconsistent presentation

The same kind of information should always be shown in the same manner, otherwise it becomes unclear whether or not a difference is meaningful (cf. 5.4, 6.2.5–6.2.11, 8.1.2, 10). *NTCPV* lacks consistency in arranging different senses of a phrase (8.5) and applying usage labels (especially 'figurative'; 9.1.3).

(6) Distinction of different kinds of information

On the other hand, different kinds of information should be distinguished from each other clearly. The indication of constructions (i.e. entry heads) may be reviewed in this respect (5.1, 6.1). Ambiguous descriptions

should be avoided (cf. 5.3).

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