



## Phrasal Verbs with “Around” and “About” as a Grammatical Pattern

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### ABSTRACT

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The paper explores the semantics of phrasal verbs, focusing on two groups with particles “around” and “about” that share the meaning of aimless or silly actions. The study suggests to treat them as a grammatical pattern, proposing a framework that imposes semantic constraints on the verb and particle combinations. The research focuses on delineating the grammatical patterns and semantic restrictions, showcasing how the verbs and particles align within these constructions within corpus data. The study highlights the significance of these patterns, emphasizing their role in understanding language use beyond the sum of individual parts. Beyond traditional lexical analyses, this research illuminates the pragmatic and semantic regularities within these phrasal verbs. A formal representation is introduced to illustrate how the pattern may be represented in mental lexicon. This approach is tested with another group of phrasal verbs featuring the particle “up,” emphasizing the notions of completeness and carelessness. The study highlights the importance of examining synonymy and recognizing grammatical patterns beyond traditional lexical analyses. It asserts that while not all phrasal verbs may fit these patterns, they provide valuable insights into language use, revealing the dynamic relationship between verb semantics, particle meanings, and pragmatic considerations.

### KEYWORDS

corpus, cognitive semantics, construction grammar, grammatical pattern, particles, phrasal verbs, synonymy

## 1. Introduction

The semantics of phrasal verbs in the English language is a challenge that attracts a lot of research interest. Diverse approaches have emerged, varying in their predictions of phrasal verb meanings, their polysemy, and in-depth analyses of the constituent verbal parts and particles. Additionally, investigations into the semantic motivations underlying phrasal verbs, including metaphorical expressions, have added depth to this field of study.

This study commences by noting two distinct groups of phrasal verbs with particles “around” and “about” that share the meaning of aimless or silly actions, for example, “fool around/about,” “mess around/about,” and so on. These phrasal verbs differ from others with the same particle but different meanings, as well as combinations of verbs and prepositional phrases with prepositions “around” and “about.” The two synonymous groups, however, exhibit a variety of verbal parts used in different contexts, conveying varying pragmatic intentions of speakers. Among these verbal parts are neutral verbs, denominal verbs derived through animal metaphors, and an array of profanity-laden verbal elements. Despite this diversity, all phrasal verbs have roughly the same meanings, and speakers can choose verbal parts based on the context and intent. The metaphorical extensions used in the particles “around” and “about” are grounded in similar spatial image-schemas. Some verbal parts can be used with either particle without altering the phrasal verb’s meaning.

Previous research available on the phrasal verbs with “around” and “about” is limited to discussion of the instances that can be contributed to the animal metaphors. This study aims to extend its investigation beyond animal metaphors, encompassing various other expressions utilizing the same particles and conveying similar meanings. Contrary to prior studies focusing primarily on animal metaphors, this research seeks to explore the inherent patterns within these phrasal verbs rather than focusing on particular verbs’ meanings.

This paper suggests that these phrasal verbs manifest as a construction, or, in other words, a grammatical pattern. It comprehensively presents and analyzes this grammatical pattern using corpus examples and posits that this underlying grammatical pattern imposes semantic restrictions on both the verbal components and the particles employed within it. Specifically, the verbal part and the particle can form an expression within this grammatical pattern only when they both convey the notion of silliness or aimlessness. Due to the semantic restriction within this pattern, the choice of particles is limited to “around” and “about.” The paper delves into potential motivations guiding the selection of the particles. It illustrates how these manifestations of the grammatical pattern distinctly differ from other combinations of verbs using “around” and “about” by emphasizing that the pattern can only be used without an object. The pattern’s restriction of transitivity blocks meanings of the particle that do not align with the pattern and distinguishes it from other possible combinations. The paper also explores the variety and conditions of the elements that can fit into the verbal slot.

Expanding the scope, the study attempts to apply the concept of grammatical patterns to another group of synonymous phrasal verbs utilizing the particle “up” and signifying a careless mistake. It introduces a formal representation of this grammatical pattern and explores its instances within the corpus. The suggested grammatical pattern effectively characterizes the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic aspects of this specific group of phrasal verbs with the particle “up,” confirming viability of treating certain phrasal verbs as grammatical patterns.

This study highlights the significance of representing grammatical patterns, encompassing lexical, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic aspects. It emphasizes the importance of examining phrasal verbs not merely within their polysemy but in discovering fundamental principles within their synonymy. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how the formalization and application of grammatical patterns can elucidate various groups of phrasal verbs

sharing similar semantics and structures yet differing in pragmatic usage.

The paper continues by presenting a summary of previous research in section 2. Section 3 describes the problem statement and introduces a proposed formal representation of a grammatical pattern that serves as the foundation for the targeted phrasal verbs. Section 4 engages in an analysis of the phrasal verbs utilizing the particles “around” and “about” as instances of this pattern, supported by corpus examples. Subsequently, the exploration extends to another grammatical pattern that underlies a distinct group of phrasal verbs employing the particle “up,” illustrating the validity of the proposed approach.

## **2. Previous Studies**

### **2.1 Complexity of Phrasal Verbs**

Numerous studies have investigated phrasal verbs, which are combinations of verbs and particles, with the aim of understanding how their composite meanings arise from their constituent elements. Despite the extensive attention devoted to phrasal verbs, a universally accepted account for them remains elusive. McCarthy, Keller, and Carroll (2003, p. 73) define phrasal verbs as “lexicalized expressions that require special interpretation due to a certain degree of non-compositionality or semantic opacity.” The overall meaning of a phrasal verb does not straightforwardly derive from the sum of its parts; rather, it should be perceived as a lexical item influenced by its constituents (Kövecses 2010).

Some studies also show that the combination of these two components allows for a degree of polysemy. For example, Mahpeykar and Tyler (2015, p. 1) examine phrasal verbs and argue that their multiple meanings can be “systematically accounted for through the interaction of the polysemy networks of the component verbs and particles.” This approach challenges the notion that phrasal verbs are merely unmotivated combinations, highlighting their regular patterns in construction and semantics. Mahpeykar and Tyler (2015) particularly attribute the diversity in phrasal verb semantics to the polysemy of spatial particles, emphasizing the systematic nature underlying these linguistic constructions.

### **2.2 Particles in Phrasal Verbs**

Morgan (1997) posits that in verb-particle constructions, both the verb and the particle jointly contribute to the overall meaning of the combination. She demonstrates the existence of systematic correspondences between the verb and particle within phrasal verbs, revealing a structured, non-arbitrary relationship. In many cases, these correspondences are grounded in metaphorical and metonymical extensions of both parts. Furthermore, Morgan (1997) illustrates that the verb part in phrasal verbs contributes to the source domain of the metaphor, while the particle provides a spatial image schema, which can also be metaphorically extended. Praggeljaz Group (2007, p. 26) shares a similar perspective on phrasal verbs, affirming that “the verbal component retains its usual meaning, while the particle adds supplementary meaning.”

Tyler and Evans (2003) propose that the central meaning of a preposition, including a particle in phrasal verbs, represents a spatial arrangement between a trajector and a landmark. These landmarks and trajectors interact uniquely, following specific image schemas, which results in the creation of distinct prepositions to convey the nuances of motion. Taylor (1993) interprets particle meanings as extensions of spatial schemas presented by corresponding prepositions. These spatial schemas, rooted in bodily experiences, can take on diverse

interpretations depending on the context, leading to disambiguation. In each lexical item, only a specific set of potential meanings is relevant. This concept is significant because it will be demonstrated later that phrasal verbs do not utilize the complete range of meanings available from the particles within them. Instead, they selectively incorporate relevant features of the particle, contributing to the overall meaning of the phrasal verb.

Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) further asserts that particle meanings have their origins in core image schemas associated with them. The author underscores the pivotal role of particles in the semantics of phrasal verbs because they are integral constituents that significantly contribute to the meanings of these verbs, often through their metaphorical extensions. Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) endeavors to elucidate the spatial and metaphorical meanings of the most frequently used English particles. For instance, she characterizes “about” as a particle denoting location or motion in proximity without specifying a particular direction, while “up” is attributed to the meaning of encompassing an area entirely or reaching the utmost limit. These spatial meanings are subsequently shown to have metaphorical extensions.

Another reason to emphasize the significance of particles in phrasal verbs is demonstrated by Cappelle, Shtyrov and Pulvermuller (2010), who show that during the processing and recognition of verb-particle combinations, there is heightened brain activation in response to particles compared to the verbal components. While they do not dismiss phrasal verbs as lexical units, they underscore the importance of considering particles as central to the semantics of phrasal verbs. Given the aforementioned findings of other researchers, this study also asserts that particles play a significant role in the overall meaning of the phrasal verbs under investigation.

### **2.3 Metaphoricity of Phrasal Verbs**

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory, initially outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), underscores the crucial role of metaphors in human cognition, suggesting that many phrasal verbs can be deconstructed as metaphorical expressions combining metaphorical extensions of both verbs and particles (Pragglejaz Group 2007, Radden 1996).

In cognitive semantics, it is widely accepted that particles in phrasal verbs are influenced by spatial image schemas fundamental to human conceptualization, often rooted in bodily experiences. Numerous metaphorical expressions find their basis in bodily experiences. For instance, the metaphor MORE IS UP is evident in phrasal verbs like “prices go up,” where a vertical increase signifies reaching the highest level, as elaborated upon in Lakoff (1987), Johnson (1999), and Grady (1997). This metaphor extends to particle “up,” which can convey a sense of completeness when used in phrasal verbs, such as “use up” or “clean up.” The sense of completeness associated with the particle “up” will be shown to be instrumental in understanding a group of phrasal verbs in this study.

Despite the considerable focus on particles in phrasal verbs, there is not as much research examining the semantics of the verbal components. However, when considering phrasal verbs as combinations where both parts contribute to the overall meaning, it becomes evident that the verbal components cannot be overlooked. Verbal components in phrasal verbs appear to possess a lesser degree of abstraction compared to particles, potentially drawing from diverse source domains. Research into the polysemy of phrasal verbs often explores how different facets of the same source domain contribute to various metaphorical expressions.

### **2.4 Phrasal Verbs in Construction Grammar**

Construction grammar is a linguistic framework that provides an alternative to traditional generative grammar by focusing on the idea that linguistic knowledge is encapsulated in form-meaning pairings known as constructions.

This approach is particularly useful for understanding phrasal verbs, as they are considered constructions with specific syntactic and semantic properties.

At the core of construction grammar lies the notion of constructions as units encapsulating both form and meaning (Goldberg 1995). Goldberg (2016, p. 12) defines construction as “as pairings of form and function that are learned and represented within a network of linguistic knowledge.” In cognitive semantics, a construction is viewed as a form-meaning pairing that arises from repeated patterns of language use. These patterns, or constructions, are considered the building blocks of language, and their meanings are derived from the usage instances rather than from abstract rules. Cognitive linguists argue that linguistic structures emerge from the cognitive processes involved in language use, and constructions are seen as learned, entrenched pairings of form and meaning (Tomasello 2005).

A pattern has non-compositional meaning, that is, the meaning of the whole cannot be derived from the meaning of constituent parts. Speakers of a language typically do not process constructions in a word-by-word manner. Furthermore, linguistic redundancy is often avoided, signifying that what can be calculated does not necessitate memorization (Hilpert 2014). If a construction is stored in the mental lexicon, containing information on its semantic and pragmatic use, as well as the constituent parts permissible within it, speakers do not need to memorize every manifestation of the construction. Instead, these instances are automatically recognized and comprehended.

Within the framework, phrasal verbs exhibit inherent constructional meanings that surpass the compositional interpretations of their individual components. The meanings associated with phrasal verbs are not arbitrary; rather, they are systematically derived through the combination of the elements (Fillmore 1982, Jackendoff 2002). Stefanowitsch and Gries (2003) present phrasal verbs as instances of abstract constructions with fixed elements, akin to compounds and idioms.

Goldberg’s work (1995) on “constructional idioms” further delves into how constructions like phrasal verbs are stored and processed in the mental lexicon, emphasizing their entrenched nature in language usage. Following this framework, “fool around,” as a constructional idiom, showcases the idiosyncratic and non-compositional nature of its meaning, relying on its established usage patterns within the language. Compositional meaning arises from the literal combination of individual parts, where “fool” suggests playful behavior and “around” implies lack of direction. Construction grammar delves deeper, emphasizing the constructional meaning that surpasses the literal interpretation. In the case of “fool around,” constructional meaning suggests aimless, playful actions, extending beyond the literal definitions of its constituents. This distinction highlights how phrasal verbs, like “fool around,” convey nuanced idiomatic meanings beyond their individual parts.

Moreover, the notion of “coercion” within Construction grammar, as discussed by Booij (2010) and Hilpert (2014), becomes pertinent in understanding how the verb and particle in phrasal verbs are coerced to combine and convey a specific idiomatic sense. Coercion elucidates the phenomenon where the constructional meaning overrides the literal interpretation of the individual elements, fostering a unified and idiomatic meaning. It illustrates how the verb and particle in phrasal verbs are compelled to co-occur within a construction, resulting in a meaning that extends beyond their literal definitions. For coercion, both parts should have literal, metaphorical or implied meanings that can be attributed to the same theme. In the case of “fool around,” coercion operates by coercing the individual meanings of “fool” and “around” to create the constructional meaning of engaging in aimless or playful behavior. This highlights the inherent idiomatic nature of phrasal verbs as constructions, where the unified sense arises from the combination of elements rather than the sum of their literal meanings.

Building on this understanding of constructional meaning, Cappelle (2005) delves into the extensive usage of phrasal verbs in English, emphasizing that these combinations exhibit systematic regularities beyond mere lexical analysis. Cappelle (2005) refers to these combinations as grammatical patterns, referencing both the Construction

grammar sense and the consistent relationships between constructions highlighted in his work.

The notion of a grammatical pattern, as suggested by Cappelle (2005), encompasses both structure and recurring semantic and pragmatic features, as well as the capacity to be understood as a whole with regularly occurring relationship between them. Since this study follows Cappelle's (2005) ways to formalize grammatical patterns, I will continue using the term, although the distinction with constructions in cognitive linguistics is not evident. In addition, the limitations of this study do not allow to explain the motivation or the process of acquisition of grammatical patterns. The purpose of the study is to illustrate viability of this approach to groups of synonymous phrasal verbs that share the same structure.

## **2.5 Summary**

Extensive research on phrasal verbs has sought to understand their composite meanings. Despite dedicated research, no single paradigm fully elucidates their lexical diversity, grammatical features, and semantics. Research explores polysemy, revealing multiple meanings derived from metaphorical source domains, challenging the idea of unmotivated combinations. Conceptual Metaphor Theory highlights that many phrasal verbs are metaphorical expressions, combining metaphorical extensions of both verbs and particles. However, there remains a gap in studies addressing the interrelationship between the verbal component and the particle and how they can be comprehensively accounted for. In addition, there is a lack of research that would focus on groups of semantically similar phrasal verbs.

Particles play a crucial role in phrasal verbs, contributing to meaning in systematic, often metaphorical or metonymic ways. The complexity of phrasal verbs arises from the interplay between verbal and particle components. Construction grammar provides a perspective, treating phrasal verbs as constructions with specific syntactic and semantic properties. Studies acknowledge that phrasal verbs, as combinations of verbs and particles, do not straightforwardly derive their meaning from the sum of their parts. Instead, these expressions possess inherent constructional meanings that are not always compositionally derived, challenging the traditional compositional interpretation. Grammatical patterns are suggested as a means to understand the regularities and structures inherent in these linguistic constructions.

## **3. Research Statement**

### **3.1 Problem Statement**

A distinct group of phrasal verbs with particles “around” and “about,” sharing the same meaning of silly or meaningless repeated action, was observed. This group encompasses verbal components that belong to various lexical categories, including neutral, vulgar, and a smaller subset associated with a limited range of animalistic expressions. To the best of my knowledge, this specific group of phrasal verbs has not been thoroughly examined in terms of their synonymy or attempts to elucidate the patterns within the group.

There is some research into expressions “horse/monkey around/about” which explores them as instantiations of animal metaphors (Deignan 2010, Đurović 2010, Goatly 2011, Haslam et al. 2011, Panther 2014). These studies propose a perspective that certain phrasal verbs are motivated by animal metaphors and carry a negative evaluation of the target domain. Panther (2014), for instance, analyzes “monkey around” within a folk model where monkeys are perceived as somewhat akin to humans yet distinct, aligning with the Great Chain of Being metaphor that

places animals as inferior to humans (Kövecses 2010). In this matter, such expression can be considered a derogation since referring to a person’s actions as if to an action of an animal is seen as derogative (Deignan 2010, Im 2008, López 2009, Muhammad and Rashid 2014, Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez 2002).

Similarly, Đurović (2010) demonstrates how negative connotations arise from animal metaphors, particularly through the conceptual metaphors HUMAN BEHAVIOR IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOR and PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS, where animal behavior is deemed undesirable for humans. Đurović (2010, p. 335) further discusses the motivation behind expressions like “horse around” and “monkey around,” stating that “the image of horsing or monkeying around (about) implies a repetitive character of the whole activity, arising from metaphorical meanings of these two particles.” The author suggests that the extended meanings of the particles in these phrasal verbs are that of lack of control, erratic movement, and deviation from linear movement. However, she does not extend the discussion into the interrelation of the verbal and particle and other synonymous phrasal verbs.

While the previously presented rationales behind expressions involving animal metaphors such as “monkey around” or “horse around” are not being contested, this paper aims to extend its scope beyond animal metaphors to encompass other expressions sharing the same particles and meanings. Furthermore, prior research has primarily attributed the meaning of these expressions to the ANIMAL source domain, neglecting the focus on the particles. However, given the multitude of other phrasal verbs employing the same particles and conveying similar meanings, there is a need for a more comprehensive examination of these expressions.

For example, “fool around” and “mess about” in (1) and (2) convey the idea of engaging in playful or unserious behavior. In the first example, “fool around” describes someone as childish and playing games, suggesting a lack of seriousness. In the second example, “mess about” is used in contrast to a serious and urgent situation, emphasizing that there is no time for casual or playful actions. There are also metaphorical expressions with other animalistic verbs and particle “around” but with a completely different meaning of the phrasal verb. In the example shown in (3), “fished around” means that the person searched or reached into his shirt pocket in a somewhat exploratory or groping manner to find his phone, which is different from the meanings in (1) and (2). Previous research does not account for what distinguishes phrasal verbs with a certain synonymous meaning from other verb and particle combinations. Although Đurović (2010) discusses the metaphorical meaning of the particles “around/about,” she does not provide analyses why expressions as “fish around” in (3) do not have a meaning similar to “horse around.”

- (1) You’re just too childish sometimes, why don’t you understand that I’m through playing games with you... You annoying, loud-mouthed brat, who does nothing but fool around, you pure and cheerful being... stay away from me. (COCA WEB 2012)
- (2) But if someone comes in screaming and broken from a fire or car crash, then the surgeons don’t mess about, they just dig right in and crack the guy open, there’s no time for finesse. (COCA BLOG 2012)
- (3) Before he got to the truck, his phone rang. He fished around in his shirt pocket, found the phone, and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger. (COCA FIC 2015)

Taking the aforementioned into account, this research aims to investigate a specific category of phrasal verbs

featuring the particles “around” and “about,” denoting aimless or frivolous actions, as a recurring linguistic pattern. Unlike prior studies concentrating solely on animal metaphors, which represent a minor subset of the identified phrasal verbs, this study adopts a more expansive approach. At the same time, this approach allows to distinguish these phrasal verbs from other combinations of verbs and particles “around” and “about.” Instead of concentrating on the polysemy of phrasal verbs, this research explores their synonymity and structural resemblances within distinct clusters. The goal is to identify, formalize and explore underlying regularities within the group, transcending superficial analyses of individual phrasal verbs and attempting to establish consistent patterns.

### **3.2 Research Proposal**

To explain the motivation behind synonymity and the pragmatic aspects within the group of phrasal verbs under consideration and to propose a comprehensive formal representation, this study suggests regarding them as manifestations of a grammatical pattern.

A grammatical pattern denotes a recurring arrangement of words, phrases, or grammatical elements that consistently adhere to a specific structure within a language. This concept proves useful in capturing both regular and irregular language alterations. It is particularly applicable in the context of the analogous combinations addressed in this paper. For instance, with phrasal verbs, as well as metaphors and idioms, there is no explicit linguistic cue that compels a listener or reader to interpret it nonliterally and as a combination rather than a sum of its individual parts. Native and fluent English speakers instinctively recognize that it should be understood metaphorically and as a unified entity. This awareness forms an intrinsic component of the speaker’s inner grammar and mental lexicon. In such cases, the constructional meaning takes precedence over the compositional meaning.

Moreover, grammatical patterns are easily distinguishable by native speakers from other combinations that may include the same words. For example, “turn around” shares similar words but conveys a different meaning. Even so, language competence enables speakers to discern that “go around” and “hang around” hold distinct non-compositional meanings. As mentioned previously, not every combination of a verb and particle “around” or “about” is a phrasal verb. Moreover, not every phrasal verb with the particles “around” or “about” has a meaning similar to that of interest of this study. However, within the combinations of words with the meaning in question, there is a certain level of creativity that a speaker has.

The particles “around” and “about” through metaphorical extension have the fixed meaning of “repeated and useless.” The verbal position in this grammatical pattern can only be occupied by the verbs that also have this required semantic meaning in them. That is, somewhere in the target domain, there is an available meaning of silliness or uselessness, whether literal or metaphorical. This match in meaning themes is a requirement for coercion that allows constructional meaning over compositional. In the case of the phrasal verbs under investigation, both the verb and the particle should have an available meaning of aimlessness, which can be acquired through metaphoric or metonymic extension or a combination of the two.

It will be shown with corpus data, that the choice of the specific verb is further influenced by contextual and pragmatic factors. The speaker has a range of expressions with similar meanings. Selection is based on pragmatic considerations such as the speaker’s communicative intent, the composition of the audience, the situational context, and related factors. For instance, in a relatively neutral context, a speaker might opt to use the phrase “play around.” Conversely, in a highly informal setting, the speaker may employ the more expressive term “mess around,” which is suitable given the context and the relationship between the interlocutors. Additional examples and the specific



contextual factors influencing each use are elaborated upon in the subsequent section. Consequently, a variety of verbs can be integrated into this grammatical pattern. Even when the speaker coins a novel expression, provided the verb aligns with the requisite semantic content, the audience can readily discern the intended meaning. This is especially pertinent when considering taboo vocabulary. For instance, one could employ “piss around” or “ass around” interchangeably, each conveying the same underlying signification. Even though the combination “ass around” is not found in COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), the grammatical pattern allows creating this expression, and it is understandable in an appropriate context. Viewing these combinations as grammatical patterns accommodates these diverse interpretations, including those stemming from irregular, exceedingly rare, or creatively coined manifestations, as long as they adhere to the stipulated semantic and pragmatic criteria. It is also crucial to note that all expressions within this pattern consistently retain an informal register, as will be seen in the corpus data.

To a certain extent, the grammatical pattern described above can be formalized in accordance with Cappelletti’s (2005) formalism. The pattern may be represented as follows:

- (4) [VP<sub>intr</sub> V [Prt around/about] infml]  
'V aimless, silly', 'Prt aimless, repeated'

In this pattern, two elements are invariable: the particle and the semantic aspect of the verb. Verbs that diverge from the stipulated semantic requirements of this pattern, whether in a literal or metaphorical sense, cannot be accommodated within the verb slot. While certain verbs may be more frequently encountered within this pattern, its applicability extends beyond such limited instances, permitting linguistic creativity. Verbs suitable for this pattern should inherently encompass qualities such as “silly,” “useless,” or “pointless” within their semantic scope. Within this pattern, the verb functions as a schematic element, its selection contingent upon pragmatic considerations, while the particle remains specific and fixed, maintaining the required meaning or repeated of aimless action. The particle can be either “around” or “about,” provided that neither of them forms other combinations with the verb in its spatial sense. This is reflected in the exclusively intransitive use of the pattern.

### 3.3 Scope of Study

To illustrate how the grammatical pattern in (4) manifest in real language use and to explore its applicability, extensive searches were conducted within the COCA up to December 2023. The meanings of the identified combinations were verified by cross-referencing them with the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. The searches targeted combinations of verbs and particles “around,” “about,” and “up.”

The study recognizes potential variations in the use and prevalence of phrasal verbs containing particles like “about” and “around.” Phrasal verbs using “about” tend to be slightly more common in British English, while those with “around” are more prevalent in American English. Given that the search focuses on the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), it may explain the relatively lower frequencies of verbs with “about,” which are though present in the data. However, as raw frequencies are not the primary focus of this investigation, these regional disparities were not factored into the analysis.

## 4. Phrasal Verbs as Grammatical Patterns

Let us turn to the discussion of the particular type of grammatical pattern that the verbs such as “mess around” or “play about” represent. The formal representation for the pattern was suggested in (4). The existence of the pattern suggests that not all of the combinations of a verb and particles “around” and “about” can be deemed as the construction. The following examples from COCA will illustrate the scope, semantics and pragmatics of the phrasal verbs that are instances of the grammatical pattern, what defines them from other combinations, and which criteria the elements fit in order to be applicable for the pattern.

#### 4.1 Phrasal Verbs with “Around”

A search in COCA for constructions involving a verb plus the particle “around” revealed numerous instances of literal uses of movement verbs with the particle “around,” based on its central spatial schema, such as “turn around” or “go around,” as shown in (5) and (6). In “turn around,” the spatial schema implies a physical rotation or change in direction, as if the person is facing the opposite way. The action of turning around is associated with a reversal of position. In “go around,” the spatial schema suggests movement in a circular or surrounding path. The person or object is not moving directly but rather navigating around a particular point or area. In both cases, the spatial schemas contribute to the overall meanings of these phrasal verbs, where “turn around” signifies a change in orientation, and “go around” implies circumnavigation or movement in a circular path. These meanings significantly differ from the intended silliness and aimlessness inherent in the discussed grammatical pattern, as both elements are used literally rather than with the required semantic context.

(5) If you voted for Obama, please turn around and leave! You have proven you are not responsible enough to own a firearm! (COCA BLOG 2012)

(6) What a wonderful teacher! My 5th grade teacher told us that the Sun went around the Earth, but she didn’t really seem to have a very good grasp of what that meant. (COCA BLOG 2012)

Additionally, several expressions with metaphorical usage were identified, although their meanings differed from the one under investigation. Examples include “get around” or “come around” as in (7) and (8). In (7), “get around” means to find a way to overcome or bypass obstacles, prohibitions, or rules. In this case, it’s about creatively addressing or avoiding the challenges posed by the rules. “Come around” in (8) means to change one’s opinion, perspective, or attitude. It implies a shift in thinking or a change of heart over time. Both examples in (7) and (8) are grounded in metaphorical extensions of the particle “around,” and they possess meanings distinct from each other and from the concept of “aimless action.” The verbal parts in these phrasal verbs are inherently verbs of motion and cannot be metaphorically extended to the meaning of aimlessness. This illustrates that not every phrasal verb belongs to the group of interest because some of them do not meet the criteria of the grammatical pattern.

(7) There are even ways around such prohibitions. In Texas, rules of procedure require that lawyers remain seated. It can make anchoring tough, but we can get around it by using graphics and other demonstrative evidence. (COCA ACAD 2001)

- (8) Religion is an attempt to understand the world. The same desire eventually turns into science. A lot of people just haven’t woken up and smelt the science yet, so they still have religion. They’ll come around one day. Meanwhile, I’d prefer not to have my time wasted with stupid questions like this article’s headline. (COCA BLOG 2012)

From among the various possible verb and “around” combinations, those that conveyed the meaning of “spending time aimlessly” were selected. Their meanings were cross-referenced and confirmed using the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Table 1 summarizes the phrasal verbs of interest found in COCA. For convenience, all lemmas of the same verb were grouped together. The frequencies of the verbs do not hold particular significance in this study. The primary objective of this research is to explain the motivation behind various synonymous expressions. The frequencies presented in Table 1 and subsequent tables are provided solely to demonstrate the presence and usage of these expressions in the language.

**Table 1. Phrasal Verbs with “Around”**

<i>No</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Frequency count</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Frequency count</i>
1	sit	7305	13	goof	331
2	hang	6280	14	lounge	247
3	play	2182	15	horse	244
4	fool	1905	16	muck	196
5	mess	1871	17	clown	174
6	lie	1340	18	fiddle	164
7	joke	812	19	dick	159
8	screw	774	20	monkey	65
9	kick	763	21	potter	21
10	roam	563	22	putter	3
11	fuck	552	23	dally	1
12	kid	409			

It is worth noting that while the lemma “sit around” appeared frequently, many of these instances might involve literal uses, such as “sit around the fire.” However, “sit around” can also function as a phrasal verb that conveys the intended meaning, as exemplified in (9). As stated above, the precise frequency of a particular phrasal verb is not critical for the purposes of this study. Rather, the corpus search serves to showcase all possible instances of phrasal verbs with a certain meaning. The same principle applies to some other combinations, such as “play around” or “roam around.” In all the examples of the pattern presented in this section, the pattern is exclusively used intransitively, never with a direct object. This crucial distinction separates it from other combinations of similar verbs and the particle “around,” which are used transitively. Such expressions rely on the primary spatial meaning of the particle “around,” as seen in phrases like “sit around the table.” The lack of an object for the particle allows for its extended meaning and encourages the interpretation of an expression as a construction alongside the verb. The meaning of the particle “around” is discussed later in this section.

- (9) So, if you're more keen for intersectional feminism than you are for bullshit feminism, it's time to stop sitting around waiting for trans feminists to make everything better. It's time to engage yourself, and here are some pretty simple, easily-applicable starting points. (COCA BLOG 2012)

The identified phrasal verbs in the corpus can be classified into three groups according to their verbal components. Across all these groups, the notion of silliness or aimlessness is present in the verbal parts through metonymic or metaphoric extensions, or a combination of both. This characteristic renders these verbs suitable for the pattern and sets them apart from other combinations. The subsequent discussion delves into the metonymic and metaphoric extensions employed for particular verbs. The role of the particle is discussed later in the section.

- (10) a. Phrasal verbs with neutral connotations, conveying the notion of aimless or unproductive time spending (for example, "play around," "kid around," "clown around").  
 b. Phrasal verbs featuring animal-related terms with derogatory connotations (for example, "monkey around" and "horse around").  
 c. Profanity-laden phrasal verbs (for example, "fart around," "dick around," "fuck around").

Using one of these verbs in combination with "around" allows giving an evaluation to the concept being described with the lexis appropriate for the context (Deignan 2010). This phenomenon is common in many metaphors, as demonstrated by Goatly (2011), in which metaphors involve an evaluative target domain alongside a neutral source domain. The verbs from the first group are more neutral in style and evaluation of the context that they provide, as compared to the animal-related verbs and especially their profane counterparts, which accounts for their prevalence in the written corpus. This disparity also explains why expressions such as "monkey around" or "horse around" appear less frequently in the corpus than more neutral alternatives such as "hang around." Animal-related expressions fall between basic lexicon and offensive language on the neutrality spectrum, even though the connection to the source domain may be almost lost semantically. Consequently, there is a range of phrasal verbs conveying similar meanings but differing in the intensity of their evaluation of the target domain. It appears that speakers can select a pragmatically appropriate expression from a repertoire based on their intention, context, and communicative objectives. Thus, the verbal component contributes to the pragmatics of a situation rather than to the inherent meaning of an expression. A speaker may opt to say "hang around" in a neutral situation as opposed to "fuck around" for the highly informal situation or for the case of intended profanity or verbal abuse while referring to the same situation or events. This leads to the question of where the overall meaning of these phrasal verbs originates.

Let us have a closer look at the verbal parts of the phrasal verbs that are instances of the grammatical pattern of interest. In some cases, the verbal element is derived from a noun through metonymies. In (11) the verb "mess" is a denominal verb that is achieved through metonymy RESULT FOR ACTION. The phrasal verb "mess around" in this context means engaging in frivolous or casual romantic or sexual activities, often without serious intent or commitment. In the given example, the speaker is expressing regret or apology for engaging in such activities with someone while they were in a state of inebriation the previous night. The term "mess around" implies a lack of seriousness or commitment in the actions, suggesting that the speaker may not have intended any deeper emotional involvement. The example in (12) also present a denominal verb "clown." The verb in this case was made through metonymy AGENT FOR ACTION. The phrasal verb "clown around" in this context means engaging in playful, silly, or mischievous behavior, often for the purpose of amusement or entertainment. The phrase implies a lack of

seriousness and suggests that the speaker may have been acting in a humorous or light-hearted way, akin to the behavior of a clown.

(11) I was tipsy last night, and I didn't really mean none of that. I'm sorry I messed around with her.  
(COCA MOV 2019)

(12) And it was one of those occasions, you know, in high school, I was a pretty good football player, a jack, whatever you want to call it. In class, and I was just clowning around and the teacher told me he was going to call my mom. (COCA SPOK 2014)

Conversely, certain combinations feature original verbs as their verbal components, such as "play around" and "hang around," as in (13) and (14). These phrasal verbs maintain a neutral tone and do not carry an offensive connotation. The verbal components in these expressions inherently convey some form of aimless or futile action, whether in the literal sense (for example, "play," "lounging," "roam"). In (13), "playing around" means engaging in activities without seriousness or commitment. The speaker is emphasizing that they are not joking or taking things lightly; they are serious and focused on fighting. In (14), "hung around" implies spending time idly or lingering without a specific purpose. It suggests a more relaxed and unstructured approach to free time. These phrasal verbs convey a sense of casual or leisurely behavior, but the specific nuances depend on the context in which they are used. These verbs comply with the pattern because of the meaning of aimlessness that is immediately available in them. This also contributes to the fact that they provide a rather neutral evaluation of the situation being described as they do not carry connotations from metaphorical source domains.

(13) I've been the nice guy, I've got in the position to be the mandatory, to get ready for the top guns in the weight class, and through being quiet, it never got me the fight. So now it's time to open up and speak out and speak my mind, and let everybody know that I'm here to fight and I ain't playing around. (COCA BLOG 2012)

(14) There was a time when children came home from school and just played randomly with their friends. Or hung around and got bored, and eventually that would lead you on to something. Kids don't get to do that now. Busy parents book them into things constantly - violin lessons, ballet lessons, swimming teams. (COCA WEB 2012)

Within the set, there are several combinations that may be considered as profanity or vulgar words (for example, "fuck," "screw," "dick"). The examples of these phrasal verbs are shown in (15) - (17). In (15), "fucking around" is an intensifier that emphasizes the speaker's seriousness. The speaker wants to convey that they are not joking or being insincere; they are genuinely serious. "Screw around" in (16) means to engage in playful or teasing behavior. The speaker is describing a situation where they and another person playfully tease or joke with each other. "Dick around" in (17) is a colloquial expression meaning to waste time or engage in unproductive activities. The speaker is expressing urgency and the need for efficiency, suggesting that there's no time for unnecessary delays or inefficiency. In all these examples, "around" is used in combination with verbs to convey different nuances,

ranging from seriousness to playfulness and a sense of urgency.

(15) No. Ben. I’m not fucking around here. I’m serious. (COCA MOV 2019)

(16) You are beautiful. You really undersold her saying she was “average-looking”. He’s just joking. We screw around with each other a lot. (COCA TV 2014)

(17) I called NYPD gang unit, and they’re trying to get a current address. Okay, lean on’em. We don’t have time for them to dick around. (COCA TV 2011)

Such swear words are commonplace in everyday speech, as they serve important roles in managing emotions and have specific social functions (Goddard 2015). Various factors influence speakers’ use of swear words, including the avoidance of taboo topics, the social and physical context of speech, the relationship between the speaker and listener, and gender dynamics, as detailed in Jay and Janschewitz (2008). Beers-Fägersten (2007) illustrates that the choice of a profanity also depends on the social background of both the speaker and listener. Most individuals instinctively comprehend the appropriateness of swearing, and its use is highly context-sensitive (Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Given that swearing serves pragmatic functions, the specific word chosen from the array of situation-appropriate terms is less important than the act of swearing itself. Consequently, many profanities carry deictic meanings and are employed based on contextual appropriateness, rather than their precise definitions. Employing profanity allows speakers give evaluation to the topic of the utterance or communicational situation.

Finally, the smallest and least frequently occurring group consists of animal-related expressions for example, “monkey” and “horse”, as shown in (18) and (19). In (18), “monkey around” conveys the idea of engaging in deceitful or manipulative behavior with the legal system. The speaker is expressing disapproval of actions that involve dishonesty or manipulation. “Horse around” in (19) refers to engaging in playful or recreational activities. The speaker is admitting to being in the vicinity of the caves and engaging in playful behavior, but they deny any wrongdoing or malicious intent.

(18) And that’s according to Susan Crawford who’s, who, as I said, was actually allied with Cheney. So if you’re, if you’re going to play games with the legal system and monkey around with it and start making up new rules, you’re going to wind up with a lot of problems. (COCA SPOK 2010)

(19) Just that, you told Mrs. Dubois only yesterday that you really didn’t know the Nessler boy, not personally. And I didn’t. Did I play near those caves? Horse around there? Sure. Everyone did. Is it possible that I dropped or lost my medal? Sure. Where are you going with this? Not going anywhere. (COCA TV 2007)

These animal-related expressions constitute only a minor portion of the broader category of expressions conveying a similar meaning. Therefore, the influence of the animal source domain may be less significant than

suggested in Panther (2014) and Đurović (2010). In this context, characterizing a person’s actions as resembling those of an animal can be perceived as derogatory, a viewpoint shared by numerous researchers (Deignan 2010, Im 2008, López 2009, Muhammad and Rashid 2014, Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez 2002). However, the connection to HORSES and MONKEY are less salient as compared to ANIMALS in general. Instead of using “horse” or “monkey,” one could create another animal-related phrasal verb with the same meaning, as long as the intended meaning aligns with the evaluation provided by the ANIMAL domain and the specific animal word used in the expression conveys a sense of silliness. These manifestations of animal metaphors are achieved through the metonymy AGENT FOR ACTION, just as in the case with, for example, “clown around.”

Animal-related verbs are possible in the grammatical pattern but they are no special from any other source domain that allows an interpretation of silliness of aimlessness through a metonymy, for instance, “kid,” “fool,” and so on. Consistent with prior research, my findings affirm that animal metaphors within this grammatical structure facilitate an evaluation of the target domain. Yet, they share similarities in this aspect with, for instance, curse words. This underscores the need to not exclusively attribute the evaluation to the source domain in these expressions, as it also hinges on the specific particle used. The meaning and the evaluation of such phrasal verbs is not compositional and relies on the totality of the whole grammatical pattern. This observation on animal-related phrasal verbs might prompt a re-examination of other instances of animal metaphors within a broader perspective of synonymy. However, exploring such aspects falls beyond the scope of this study.

The verbal parts observed so far exhibit variations in expressing the meanings of silliness and aimlessness. There have been identified denominal verbs derived from nouns with these meanings through metonymies (“clown,” “fool,” and so on), through metaphors (“screw,” “roam,” and so on), and through a combination of metonymy and metaphor (“horse,” “mess,” and so on). However, many of these verbs can stand alone outside of a phrasal verb context, as can be seen in (20). For instance, the verb “mess” can mean handling something unwisely, in a manner that may not be appropriate or could lead to negative consequences. Consider also the use of the verb “joke” in (21). In this case, the verb “joke” is neither a part of a phrasal verb nor used metaphorically. Since “joke” literally means doing something silly, the question arises: What is the rationale for combining it with the particle “around” into a phrasal verb? In other words, what meaning does the particle “around” contribute to the grammatical pattern and what distinguishes the pattern from bare verbs?

(20) People respond to social proof, so adding images like press logos and testimonials from people who adore you can go a long way in increasing response rates of your visitors. Just be sure not to mess with your existing photos too much, since this might already have been indexed. (COCA BLOG 2012)

(21) Hayes comes across as both a dedicated scientist and a regular person, willing to work hard in pursuit of his scientific work yet quick to laugh and joke with his family and the graduate students he mentors. (COCA WEB 2012)

The verbal parts in the grammatical pattern may have a meaning of action by themselves or through metonymic extensions, as was mentioned previously. They may be used outside of the pattern with a slightly different meaning. However, none of them mean motion. Thus, the particle “around” does not have a spatial meaning, as it has, for example, in a combination like “turn around.” As shown in Taylor (1993), “(a)round” is a multiplex particle. The space it construes consists of multiple points that are occupied simultaneously by the trajector. Through a metaphorical extension of this spatial schema provided by the particle “around,” it acquires the meaning of

repetitive or continuous action devoid of discernible purpose, since the ultimate goal remains elusive. The same semantic extension of the particle “around” can be observed in other expressions with different meanings, such as “stick around” or “sit around.” For instance, consider the following examples in (22) and (23). “Stick around” means to remain present or involved, especially in the lives of their children. “Sit around” means to be inactive or idle, often accompanied by complaining.

(22) My state government already runs many such campaigns aimed at kids and their parents, featuring topics such as Don’t smoke, breastfeed for 1 year, fathers ought to stick around (this one uses biblical quotes), use car seats... (COCA BLOG 2012)

(23) They worked hard. They didn’t just sit around and whine about not having tyrannical power to dictate to us how we should run our lives. (COCA BLOG 2012)

Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) examines the particle “around” in a similar manner. She posits that it has an extended meaning of pathways extending in all directions. Consequently, it metaphorically signifies continuous or repetitive activity without a specific target or purpose. This meaning of “around” is combined with the literal or metaphorical meaning of the verbal part and allows to construe the grammatical pattern that has a meaning distinct from the cases where the same verbs might be used without the particle, such as “mess,” as seen in (20).

The particle and the verbal part overlap in meaning, a crucial aspect for coercion, enabling their combination into a grammatical pattern. Any verb that aligns with the particle’s extended semantics can fill the verbal slot, contingent upon the speaker’s intention and the context. The verbal component assists in choosing a specific expression based on the situational pragmatics. However, as demonstrated by the contrast between expressions like “mess” and “mess around,” the pattern is distinguished by its constructional rather than compositional meaning. For the pattern to hold, both the particle and the verb should convey literal or metaphorical meanings of aimlessness or silliness. In addition, the particle is not used in its primary spatial meaning, making the whole pattern intransitive. The data presented in this section show that the formalization of the grammatical pattern outlined in (4) enables the capture all of these nuances.

#### 4.2 Phrasal Verbs with “About”

Another search in COCA was conducted to examine the instances of the grammatical pattern the particle “about” that have the meaning of “spend time aimlessly or in a silly manner.” Table 2 displays the lemmas of the phrasal verbs with the meaning of interest for this study found in COCA. Although the frequency does not impact the results of this research, it is presented in the table for reference. Another point to mention is that the expression “kid about” and other lexemes of “kid” were not included in the table. In numerous cases of such combinations in COCA, “about” is used with its primary non-spatial meaning as a part of a prepositional phrase, not the grammatical pattern. The verb “kid” has the meaning of joking or being silly, but there were no instances of it being used as the pattern with “about.” An example of the verb “kid” used with a prepositional phrase is shown in (24). The instances of “kid about” are contrasted to “kid around” later in the section.

**Table 2. Phrasal Verbs with “About”**



No	Verb	Frequency count	No	Verb	Frequency count
1	hang	333	8	putter	28
2	play	287	9	fuck	19
3	piss	223	10	fiddle	15
4	sit	168	11	screw	6
5	mess	101	12	goof	2
6	laze	34	13	horse	1
7	fool	28	14		

(24) He was lighthearted, brilliant, funny, and honest about his memoir and the feelings it generated for others. He even kidded about having chemotherapy in a Jewish hospital, in a room sponsored by mafia figures, with an Indian doctor. He said he did not fear death in a tone of one telling a merry story. (COCA ACAD 2004)

Although the diversity of verb components employed in “about” phrasal verbs is more constrained than that of their “around” counterparts, they can, nevertheless, be classified into the same semantic categories as outlined in (10). These categories encompass a spectrum of verbal components, including those of a neutral nature signifying frivolity (for example, “play,” “hang,” “fool,” among others), as well as lexemes with explicit profanity (for example, “piss,” “fuck,” “screw”). The lesser frequency of the pattern with the particle “about” could be due to its regional localization. While American English leans towards using “around,” British English favors “about.” Nonetheless, despite these regional preferences, there are instances of the pattern’s usage in COCA, which have been included in the discussion as examples representing this pattern. Regional disparities fall beyond the scope of this research; however, these differences could be explored by contrasting corpus data from COCA and the British National Corpus (BNC).

In the examples in (25) - (27), the verbal parts belong to neutral lexis. In (25), “hung about” means loitered or lingered in the vicinity, without any particular occupation, thus spending time aimlessly. In (26), “playing about” refers to children engaging in playful or carefree activities, again, without any goal. The examples in (25) and (26) with “hang about” and “play about” are similar in their semantics and composition to “hang around” and “play around” in (13) and (14). These verbs do not require a metonymic word class change in order to fit the pattern, as, for example, in the case of “fool around.” The only difference among the pairs “hang around – hang about” and “play around – play about” is the particle. The same holds true for some other combinations shown below. An additional difference in particle use is also discussed later.

In (27), “fooling about” means engaging in playful or not serious behavior. The speaker is emphasizing that the current situation is serious or urgent, and it is not the appropriate time for playful or frivolous actions. The motivation for this phrasal verb is similar to “clown around” shown in (12), that is, through metonymy AGENT FOR ACTION. This phrasal verb also makes a pair with “fool around.”

The examples in (28) - (29) employ profanity. “Fucking about” is a colloquial expression that means engaging in activities without a specific purpose or taking things casually. It often implies having fun or not being overly serious about a task or situation. The phrasal verb makes a pair with “fuck around.” In (29), “pissing about” is a way of saying someone was not taking things seriously, or generally being unproductive. It implies a lack of focus or commitment to the task at hand, often in a light-hearted or carefree manner. Similar to the profanity-laden combinations with “around” the verbal parts in this category can be used interchangeably without altering the

meaning and pragmatics of the pattern.

Only one phrasal verb within this set invokes an animal as a source domain, namely “horse,” as shown in example (30). It aligns with its counterpart “horse around” presented in (19). This analysis substantiates the previous observation regarding the deictic nature of these phrasal verbs and their alignment with pragmatic motivations.

- (25) Even in this weather, a few idlers hung about, hoping for a glimpse of something interesting or to earn or beg a copper. A constable kept them at a distance. (COCA FIC 2015)
- (26) The other afternoon at the lake, when papa was lying his length along beneath the trees, Una and Julian were playing about, and presently Una said, “Take care, Julian; do not run upon papa’s head. His is a real head, for it is full of thought.” (COCA WEB 2012)
- (27) We’ll see each other again soon. That’s a promise. This is no time to be fooling about. Get yourselves to wherever you’re supposed to be. (COCA TV 1993)
- (28) You’ve been saying that for years. When’s kickoff? Shouldn’t you be out there? Yeah, I’m just fucking about. I had to interview some people outside for you. (COCA MOV 2005)
- (29) You didn’t get on with anything at school. - You were just pissing about. (COCA TV 2011)
- (30) The snipers left, we rolled the half decomposed body into a carpet and carefully, so as not to lose a limb, we took it to the back of the block. There, in the land of Before, mothers with babies had sat at the sandpit and we had horsed about with friends on the lawn. (COCA FIC 2015)

Up to this point, it has been shown that within the corpus, a range of verbal elements can interchangeably fit into the grammatical pattern, as long as they align with the semantics of one of the particles that correspond to the pattern’s slot. Let us turn to the pairs of phrasal verbs with the same meaning and verbal parts but different particles. Both “about” and “around” share a common denotation of omnidirectional motion in their spatial meaning. According to Rudzka-Ostyn (2003), “about” signifies location or motion in proximity without specifying a particular direction. The author says that when used metaphorically, particles “around” and “about” can be used interchangeably, which is confirmed with the corpus examples in this study. Đurović (2010, p. 335) analyzes the two particles in the expressions “monkey around” and “horse about” and comes to the conclusion that both particles connote a lack of control, erratic movement, or deviation from linear motion. The author says: “The range of horseback or monkeying around (about) implies a repetitive character of the whole activity, arising from the metaphorical meaning of these two particles.”

The two particles, “around” and “about,” share similar literal spatial image schemas and extend to denote repetitive activity. This meaning is further extended in both particles to denote aimlessness or uselessness in a situation. This shared meaning in many cases allows for the interchangeability of the two particles in the pattern. However, limitations are evident, as seen in “kid about.” Here, “about” does not relate to spatial use but refers to

a subject or topic, diverging from the uselessness connotation. This meaning is not applicable to “around,” explaining its exclusion in “kid about” and limiting the phrasal verb use to “kid around.” When “about” refers to a topic without indicating uselessness, it is a part of a prepositional phrase alongside the verb, not adhering to the specific characteristics of the grammatical pattern. This distinction highlights the pattern’s unique traits: intransitivity, the absence of prepositional phrases, and its interpretative constructional nature over a compositional one.

In this section, I showed that the representation of the grammatical pattern in (4) is applicable to the distinct group of phrasal verbs with the particle “about” and that they function as a construction in corpus. In the upcoming section, I will explore the applicability of the concept of grammatical patterns to a group of phrasal verbs with a different meaning and another particle. Specifically, I will focus on verbs paired with the particle “up,” denoting actions related to careless mistakes or destruction. It will be demonstrated that approaching phrasal verbs as grammatical patterns allows to explain their synonymity and the regularities observed in the selection of verbal components.

### 4.3 Phrasal Verbs with Particle “Up”

A search in COCA reveals a range of phrasal verbs with particle “up,” for example, “set up,” “show up,” “keep up,” “open up,” and so on. Within this array, a distinct subset of phrasal verbs emerges, sharing the common connotation of spoiling or making a mistake, as in “mess up.” This study does not delve into the frequencies of these verbs; rather, its focus is on their existence and simply acknowledges that some verbal parts are used more often. A list of these verbs is presented in Table 3 and some examples are shown in (31) - (34).

**Table 3. Phrasal Verbs with “Up”**

No	Verb	Frequency count	No	Verb	Frequency count
1	screw	7767	9	goof	76
2	mess	7522	10	muddle	36
3	fuck	5645	11	botch	28
4	slip	706	12	louse	21
5	trip	453	13	bugger	17
6	foul	233	14	flub	8
7	muck	106	15	bungle	4
8	jumble	91	16	bollix	2

(31) To acknowledge you’ve screwed up is to show weakness. And in the shark tank known as politics, weakness gets you politically killed. (COCA BLOG 2012)

(32) This isn’t some one-on-one crime scene class. Just saying. You sure there’s nothing missing from the crime scene? Done plenty of news stories on cops fucking up. (COCA MOV 2018)

(33) Victim needs rescuing; constantly messes up and needs someone to fix things; Hates that his wife

has to “save” him; resents her for rescuing him. (COCA WEB 2012)

- (34) He says what he thinks. He does it. I mean he’s made a lot of money and done a lot things for - with nothing. He could fix what’s goofed up right now, maybe — hopefully. (COCA SPOK 1992)

The verb “screw up” in (31) refers to making a mistake or error, especially in a way that could be detrimental or embarrassing. In (32), “fucking up” is a colloquial expression indicating making a serious mistake or error, often used informally to emphasize the gravity of the situation. In (33), “messes up” indicates frequent mistakes, requiring assistance. Lastly, “goofed up” in (34) means making a mistake or error, and the term “fix what’s goofed up” implies correcting or addressing the mistake. All of these verbs inherently carry the meaning of a mistake on their own. Yet, they are consistently paired with the particle “up,” allowing to suppose that the meaning of the verb on its own is distinct from the instance when it is used with the particle “up.”

For instance, the examples in (35) and (36) show that the verbs “screw” and “mess” can be used without the particle. In (35), “screwing” refers to taking advantage of or exploiting someone, especially in the context of the middle class being negatively affected. “Messing” in (36) refers to causing confusion, disruption, or emotional turmoil. Both verbs convey a sense of negative consequences or disruption.

- (35) The bottom line is the American dream was stolen by the wealthiest 4% who took over the government and started creating laws to benefit them while simultaneously screwing the middle class. (COCA BLOG 2012)

- (36) It is easy to get into a relationship, but hard to maintain when we start obsessing over things that are not your partner. It messes with a woman’s head and many women are addicted to this feeling needing to be obsessed over constantly since they lack self confidence. (COCA WEB 2012)

In order to set apart the meaning of the grammatical pattern, let us consider the meaning of the particle and how it contributes to the compositional meaning of it. Tyler and Evans (2003, p. 136) expound upon the central meaning of “up” as “the TR [trajector] being directed towards the top of an oriented LM [landmark].” Đurović (2010), in her analysis of the particle “up,” emphasizes its embodiment connection, specifically the notion of an upright position. Additionally, Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) identifies two primary meanings of the particle “up,” encompassing the idea of covering an area completely and reaching the highest limit. Mahpeykar and Tyler (2015) further distinguish the central meaning of the particle “up” as that of upward position or direction. They also delineate several extended meanings, including the metaphorical concept that MORE IS UP (as exemplified in “turn up the volume”) and the notion of completion, wherein an increase in quantity may culminate in reaching the highest limit, implying a state of finality (as exemplified in “you have used up the battery”).

In the examples shown in (31) to (34), the particle “up” combines with the verbal part to intensify the construction’s meaning, allowing it to be interpreted as a complete, utter mistake or destruction. Coercion is possible because both the particle and the verb refer to the same domain of mistake or destruction, emphasizing the process at its most intense and detrimental level. The coercion between verbs and the particle “up” is facilitated by their shared reference to processes or events characterized by a sense of completion and seriousness. Here, the particle further amplifies the gravity or seriousness of the mistake. The use of this grammatical structure eliminates

the spatial meaning associated with the particle “up,” setting it apart from instances where the same verbs might be employed with a prepositional phrase denoting a landmark. The pattern can be used transitively but it cannot be used with a prepositional phrase in a spatial meaning.

The results of the search show a variety of phrasal verbs that have a meaning of destroying or ruining something by making a mistake in a careless way. Much like the previous examples of “play around” and “mess around,” the degree of offensiveness in these phrasal verbs varies, ranging from the relatively neutral “mess up” to the more offensive “fuck up.” All of these expressions maintain an informal stylistic register. The consistent element among them is the particle “up,” which imparts a sense of completeness to their meaning. All of these phrasal verbs are used intransitively. Thus, it is reasonable to categorize the phrasal verbs listed in Table 3 as constituting a grammatical pattern. A formal representation of this pattern is provided as follows:

- (37) [VP V [Prt up] infml]  
'V mistake, ruin, careless', 'Prt complete'

In this grammatical structure, the verb position requires a verb that implies a sense of careless mistake or destruction. The particle in this pattern remains fixed and metaphorically contributes to the concept of totality or completion. This particular grammatical arrangement is commonly used in informal conversational contexts. The selection of a specific verb is intricately tied to pragmatic considerations.

To illustrate that the particle in this pattern is fixed, let us explore the possibility of replacing it with another particle. The particle closest in meaning and kind of metaphorical extension would be “out.” According to Rudzka-Ostyn (2003), the particle “out” can be metaphorically extended from the spatial image schema to signify the trajector increasing the maximal boundaries. Thus, “out” enables a metaphorical sense of completeness and excess. It could be theorized that there might be phrasal verbs meaning a mistake with this particle and some of the verbs from table 3. However, corpus search does not confirm this supposition. In fact, in all of the combinations of verbs from table 3 and the particle “out,” the particle is not used in the sense of completeness or reaching the highest limit but in its spatial sense. Some examples are shown in (38) and (39).

- (38) Hastily, therefore, receiving money from Marr, with a basket in her hand, but unbonneted, Mary tripped out of the shop. (COCA WEB 2012)

- (39) Don't you see me fucking coming? Fuck out of the way. (COCA MOV 2017)

This confirms the accuracy of the grammatical pattern representation in (37) for the phrasal verbs with “up” and the meaning of carelessness. Unlike the pattern discussed for verbs similar to “hand around/about,” the particle “up” is fixed in the pattern and cannot be replaced.

#### 4.4 Summary

This section explored how the grammatical pattern encompassing synonymous phrasal verbs utilizing “around” and “about” with the meaning of “repeated and useless” is presented in corpus, how it is different from other combinations of verbs and same particles and the mechanisms of achieving the particular distinct meaning. Examples showcase the pattern's flexibility, allowing speakers to select various verbs that fit the needed criteria.

The choice of a specific verb is influenced by contextual, pragmatic factors, and speaker intentions. Only verbs sharing this semantic aspect can occupy the verbal position within this pattern, strictly intransitively. The proposed representation of this pattern underscores the unchanging aspects of the particle and the semantic facet of the verb and the way they combine in constructional meaning. It accommodates linguistic creativity and embraces verbs inherently embodying the requisite qualities within their semantic scope, extending the expression's meaning beyond literal definitions.

A similar pattern, involving the particle “up” and the meaning of a mistake, was suggested and tested, showcasing its adaptable lexical and pragmatic choices. Applying the concept of grammatical patterns to synonymous phrasal verbs unveils their intricate complexities, capturing diverse interpretations, including irregular, rare, or creatively coined expressions while adhering to specified semantic and pragmatic criteria.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined a specific group of phrasal verbs utilizing the particles “around” and “about,” which share the meaning of aimless action. Despite displaying synonymy, these phrasal verbs exhibit pragmatic variations across contexts, reflecting subtle nuances in meaning and contrasting with other verb combinations with the same particles. The study proposed considering these instances as a grammatical pattern, aiming to provide systematic explanations within the broad field of phrasal verb research, which typically focuses on polysemy, particle meanings, and metaphorical motivations.

Specific groups of phrasal verbs incorporating “around” or “about” consistently exhibit semantic and pragmatic features that qualify them as grammatical patterns. In this pattern both the verb and the particle share the same theme of meaninglessness that allows coercion of their meanings. It was demonstrated that the constructional meaning takes precedence over the compositional one. The pattern was illustrated through a formal representation elucidating how it may operate in mental lexicon processing.

Several corpus searches were conducted to explore the diverse verbal components associated with “around” and “about.” These identified verbs were categorized into three groups: neutral lexis, animal-related lexis, and profanity. Examples for each lexical group were examined in an attempt to explain how the verbal part contributes to the meaning of the construction. It was concluded that the choice of the verb is largely defined by the intention of the speaker and the pragmatics of the situation. The investigation into the meanings of the particles “around” and “about” in connection with the aligned verbs revealed that this grammatical pattern primarily emphasizes the particles in terms of semantics. It was also shown that the grammatical pattern is distinguished from other combinations of verbs and particles “around” and “about” mainly by its intransitive use that does not allow spatial interpretation.

In an effort to test the applicability of the grammatical pattern concept, the study extended its analysis to another group of phrasal verbs using the particle “up,” indicating mistakes or damage. This group exemplified a distinct grammatical pattern characterized by the semantic interplay between the verb and the particle “up,” which conveys notions of completeness and carelessness. A formal representation effectively showcased its ability to capture semantic and pragmatic nuances.

Unlike many existing studies that delve into the polysemous nature of phrasal verbs or focus on nuanced meanings of individual components, this research concentrates on synonymous groups within phrasal verbs, aiming to identify patterns and similarities, advocating for their treatment as constructions. By identifying these groups and their consistent patterns, the study underscores that these phrasal verbs are not merely coincidental

linguistic pairings or memorized lexical items but rather form constructions that exhibit specific meanings and usage tendencies.

Moreover, the study illustrates an approach for viewing the interplay between verb semantics and particle meanings within a constructional context, rather than a strictly compositional one. The significance of this approach lies in its ability to capture the essence of these idiomatic expressions, where the whole construction is greater than the sum of its parts. By focusing on inherent patterns and regularities, this study sheds light on how language users utilize these constructions, enriching our comprehension of language use and constructional meanings.

In English education, the identified grammatical patterns for phrasal verbs, as highlighted in this research, provide a practical framework for teaching and comprehension. By categorizing specific groups of phrasal verbs, educators can offer systematic explanations, moving beyond traditional lexical analyses. In the classroom, this concept can be applied by guiding students to recognize and analyze phrasal verbs with shared semantic and pragmatic features. Practical exercises, involving authentic texts, speeches, or dialogues, can deepen students' understanding of contextual variations. This approach enhances students' language proficiency by fostering a constructional perspective, encouraging a nuanced understanding of language use in real-life communication. Incorporating grammatical patterns into English education thus becomes a valuable tool for promoting deeper comprehension and application of phrasal verbs.

While not asserting that all phrasal verbs fit into grammatical patterns, the study presents a perspective on understanding and categorizing English phrasal verbs. It emphasizes the importance of examining synonymy and identifying grammatical patterns, deviating from traditional lexical analyses. These patterns offer valuable insights into discourse language use, unraveling the dynamic interplay between verb semantics, particle meanings, and pragmatic considerations.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: All