

LANGUAGE INVESTIGATIONS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

Turn on the light or turn the light on?



This is a language investigation about **language variation**, focusing on **phrasal verbs** in English. These are verbs with a particle like *on*, *up* or *off* that helps to form their meaning.

Which sounds more natural to you?

(1) *she turned on the light* or (2) *she turned the light on*;

(3) *he cut open the melon* or (4) *he cut the melon open*.

Often people don't even notice that you can vary the position of the particle that's part of a phrasal verb. But researchers* have recently been surprised to find a difference between British (and Irish) and North American English: people from the UK and Ireland are more likely to find (2) and (4) more natural, whereas people from North America prefer (1) and (3). It turns out that British and Irish speakers also **say** *turn the light on* more often than American speakers, while Americans are more likely to say *turn on the light*.

How widespread are these differences though? You could investigate this aspect of **language variation**, either by exploring people's **attitudes** to sentences like these, or by examining how people **use** sentences like these.



How to investigate attitudes

You'll need to think up about 10 sentences, half with phrases where the particle comes immediately after the verb (like *turn on the light*) and half where it comes later (like *turn the light on*). You could use the 4 sentences above, and add these:

(5) *Grandpa couldn't hear the TV so he turned up the volume*

(6) *Whenever rock music comes on the TV we turn the volume up*

(7) *It's so hot today that I took off my shirt*

(8) *Her feet are always sore so when she gets home she takes off her shoes*

(9) *When it's your turn she'll call out your name*

(10) *The teacher is taking the register so she's calling our names out*

Or you could make up your own sentences. Just check that it's possible to have sentences like *turn X on* as well as *turn on X*, or *put out X* as well as *put X out*.



TIP: don't use *it* as the object of the phrasal verb. This is because people almost always say *turn it on*, *take it off* and so on, not *turn on it*, *take off it* etc. So there would be no variation for you to investigate!

Add in a few random sentences, to distract your 'judges' so that they don't think too much about where to put the particles *on*, *out*, *off* etc. And make sure you don't put two similar sentences next to each other.



TIP: try out your sentences on a friend first, to make sure that they understand what you're asking them to do.

Type out the sentences (type the sentences out?!) and print one sheet for each person whose judgments you want to investigate. Try to find at least 5 judges - the more the better. Ask each person to write down a score between 1 and 5 next to each sentence to show how 'good' or 'bad' they think it sounds. Tell them that 1 = 'very good' and 5 = 'very bad'. If they can't decide, tell them to give a score of 3.



Who to ask? If you can find people from America and also people from the UK or Ireland, you could compare their scores. If not, just see whether the judgments your participants give confirm the linguists' research: for example, if your judges are British, do they prefer the *turn SOMETHING on* type of sentence?

You could also ask people of different ages: for example, 2 teenagers and 2 people over 50. Haddican and Johnson think that English speakers

have been gradually moving towards the use of discontinuous structures like *turn the light on*: if they are right, younger people would be more likely to prefer the sentences where the particle comes later in the sentence, not right after the verb.

If you can ask people from another English-speaking country, like Australia or India, that would be interesting. Or you could ask people who are learning English as a foreign language. This type of variation hasn't been investigated very much, so it will be interesting to see what **your** judges think.

If your judges are all from the UK, your **hypothesis** could be that they will give higher scores to the sentences that have the particle further away from the verb (so, they might give a score of 4 or 5 to *turn the light on* but only 3 or 2 to *turn on the light*). This is in line with Haddican and Johnson's research.

If you are going to ask language learners, or people from, say, Australia, you will have no idea what to expect, as they haven't been investigated before. In this case you won't have a hypothesis but will be **exploring the question** "do they prefer one type of pattern over another?"

Analyse your findings

Ignore your random sentences - just count up the scores your judges give to the test questions.

For example, suppose your participant is British, and gives a score of 5 to *turn on the light* and also a score of 5 to *turn the light on*. If this person does this for all the test sentences, you have no evidence that they prefer one pattern to another, and your hypothesis has not been proved. But if their overall scores for all the sentences with a word between the verb and the particle are higher than for the sentences where the particle comes straight after the verb, you have evidence to confirm your hypothesis.



How to investigate language use

You need to find a way of seeing what people do when they are speaking naturally: do they say *on*, *out*, *off* etc. right after the

verb (e.g. *take off her shoes*) or do they say it later in the sentence, after the object (*take her shoes off*)?



You could just **listen** to what people say, and write down the examples you hear in a notebook.

Or you could watch an American TV show and a British one, note down any examples you hear and then compare them.



But it could take a long time to hear enough examples, so you may do better to **elicit** them. You could do this by typing out two sentences like

When Grandpa can't hear the TV, what does he do? He VOLUME

Ask people to complete the second sentence and to include the word in capitals in their sentence. Be ready with a pen and paper to note down their replies. With this example you'll want to find out whether they say *He turns up the volume* OR *he turns the volume up*

You'll need another 4 or 5 sentences like this. You can make up your own, or use our examples.

Examples of sentences to elicit phrasal verbs

(1) *When it gets dark, we turn LIGHT*

(expected answer: *we turn on the light* OR *we turn the light on*)

(2) *Suppose you're fully dressed and you're going to have a shower. What do you do? I CLOTHES*

(expected answer: *I take off my clothes* OR *I take my clothes off*)

(3) *If there's a hook on the wall you can HANG*

(expected answer: *you can hang up your jacket/hat etc* OR *you can hang your jacket/hat etc up*)

(4) *When the teacher takes the register she CALLS*

(expected answer: *she calls out your name* OR *she calls your name out*)

(5) *The house is burning! Call 999 to get the firemen to PUT*
(expected answer: *to get the firemen to put out the fire OR to get the firemen to put the fire out*)

Be sure to mix in some random sentences, so that people don't get into a pattern of always putting the particle in the same place. If you have time, you could avoid this problem by giving people one sentence one day and then waiting until later that day or even the next day to give them the next sentence.

Examples of random sentences

(6) She wanted to earn some money so she JOB
(expected answer: *she got a job, she found a job etc*)

(7) She was feeling unhappy and she started CRY
(expected answer: *she started to cry/ she started crying etc*)

(8) He had a bad cold and he NOSE a lot
(expected answer: *he blew his nose a lot*)



TIP: try out your sentences on a friend first, to make sure that you get the kind of answers you expect. If not, ask your friend what went wrong, and then make suitable changes to the sentences.

Analyse your findings

- Count up how many sentences your participants produce where the particle comes immediately after the verb, and how many sentences they produce with the particle later in the sentence.
- Does everyone have the same pattern?
- Which type of sentences have the higher score overall?

- If you have been able to compare British and American people, or even older and younger people, are there any differences in their scores?

In conclusion

Have you found any evidence for people preferring one type of structure to the other?

Do your findings confirm what Haddican and Johnson say about British English or American English?

Reading

*Haddican, Bill and Johnson, Daniel Ezra Johnson (2012) Effects on the Particle Verb Alternation across English Dialects. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics* 18 (2): 31-40. You can read a summary of this paper [here](#)