How Cognitive Linguistic Motivations Influence the Learning of PVs
Nora Condon. In F. Boers & S. Lindstromberg (Eds.), *Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to Teaching Vocabulary and Phraseology*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. Pp. 133-157.

Phrasal verbs (PVs) are notoriously difficult for English language learners. In recent years, cognitive linguists have developed systems demonstrating that the prepositional particles within PVs are not arbitrary assigned, but rule-governed according to underlying metaphorical motivations. Condon's large-scale quasi-experimental study tests whether learners would benefit from a pedagogical application of a cognitive linguistic (CL) approach in the classroom. On the surface, Condon's positive findings appear to be a laudable breakthrough for CL theory, particularly due to the study's extensive nature; it boasts both a pilot and main study, 160 participants, a pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test, a well as over two years of data collection. Unfortunately, the study's ambitious nature is also its downfall, as a number of crux points are ambiguously explicated, and extraneous factors confound the variables.

First, it is unclear whether the test necessarily or sufficiently measures a student's ability to comprehend PVs; no operational definition is provided for this crucial concept. It is presumed that the test measures the students' ability, but there is no discussion of how the test does this, nor an inclusion of the test or even sample questions as an appendix for reference. To accurately gauge whether or not a learner has grasped these abstract metaphorical concepts, one might ideally employ a more nuanced measurement, such as stimulated recalls or think-alouds.

To compound the problem, the two frameworks being contrasted – the traditional approach (control) and the CL approach (treatment) are also insufficiently characterized, making this study impossible to replicate, or even to extend its validity to other classrooms. As there is no "standard" way to define CL, as Condon hints at in her overly brief literature review, she applies a framework borrowed from Rudzka-Ostyn (2003). Only four of Rudzka-Ostyn's 17

particles are taught in Condon's study – *up, out, in* and *down* - which is limiting; one of the advantages of CL is that it encourages learners to get a well-rounded glimpse of the many types of meaningful relations that can be established with CL through contrastive analysis. The framework inadequately handles the distinction between *figurative* PVs (e.g. *drown out*) and *literal* PVs (e.g. *sit down*). Condon admits that the experimental instruction was watered-down and did not fully explore the figurative senses of particles, providing "filtered and simplified versions of the CL theory" (p. 151) such that instructors resorted to brief generalizations in which they would "omit key information about the location of the LM [landmark] and about the experiential link with visual perception" (p. 153). While these concepts may be initially difficult for learners to grasp, they are precisely what makes CL an invaluable asset.

As the framework is obscure, so too is its implementation; much is left to the discretion of individual instructors. Condon adds only a brief description of the treatment and control and one example of how the phrase *wear out* would be taught (p. 154). Thus, it is impossible to separate teaching quality from treatment effects– the variables are confounded. To make matters worse, one teacher taught both experimental groups and another taught both control groups, so there is no way to control the effects of teaching statistically. As the researcher was one of the teachers, it is possible that she subconsciously steered her groups toward the desired result.

The research questions, while clear and thoughtful, are answered using data that does not fully support the findings. In both the pilot study and main study, one of the two experimental groups (Group A) outperformed the control groups. Yet the *other* experimental group performed equally well with the control group in the pilot study, and then performed worse in the main study. Condon dismisses Group B's results, providing two explanations. First, Group A had their "lab hour" (in which they were explained the underlying CL principles and how they apply to PVs) *before* their "experimental hour" (in which they were introduced to the same PVs, but

without explicit instruction), which Condon claims lead to their relative success; because they were able to apply their knowledge from the lab hour to the experimental hour, they benefited most from the instruction. However, this does it explain why experimental Group B actually performed worse than the control, nor does it bode well for CL theory. That is, if the heart of the instruction occurred in the lab hour, why should it matter whether it occurred before or after the experimental hour? The order should matter less than whether or not this crucial instruction occurred at all; we should expect to see *some* gain in experimental Group B's results, simply because the students were privy to the key information needed to decipher the meaning of the PVs. Her second rationale is that the experimental Group B's lab hour was at the end of the day, and the students were tired. If this were the case, why did Condon include the same scheduling error on her main study after it occurred once in the pilot study? On a more basic level, why break down the study into a "lab hour" and an "interactive hour" at all? By dismissing Group B's results and then claiming that CL still works because of the results of Group A, Condon is not fairly interpreting her data when she comes to the conclusion that CL "can indeed enhance the learning of PVs" (p. 148).

Despite these drawbacks, Condon's study is fruitful that it points to the potential benefits of introducing learners to abstract, metaphorically-grounded theory. She does note that it should not be perceived as a "miracle cure" (p. 153), and her suggestions for further research raise questions about how PVs should be presented, opening the door for researchers to experiment with various applications of CL theory pedagogically. Finally, in her delineation between the PVs taught in the classroom and *encountered* PVs – ones which learners have not yet been exposed to – one sees the potential for a well-formed CL pedagogy in which learners may be able to apply classroom-taught CL knowledge to accurately interpret encountered PVs.

REFERENCE

Rudzka-Ostyn, B. (2003). *Word Power PVs and Compounds: A Cognitive Approach.* Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter.

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