REGISTER AND PHRASAL VERBS

Introduction: are phrasal verbs 'informal'?

Phrasal verbs can cause anxiety for learners and teachers alike. Apart from resolving the problems of *meaning* and *grammar*, there is the difficult question of when it is *appropriate* to use them. Many articles written as guides for using phrasal verbs claim that they should be used mainly in speaking rather than writing, and in informal rather than formal situations and texts. It is often said that, in formal contexts, single-word equivalents are more appropriate than phrasal verbs. This advice may sometimes be useful but it is an oversimplification, and if it is followed too closely, it can sometimes lead to unnatural or over-formal language.

In fact, there are many situations – even in quite formal texts – when a phrasal verb is the most natural-sounding way of expressing a particular idea, so learners should be encouraged to use phrasal verbs as and when they are most appropriate.

Phrasal verbs can be found in all types of text. Take the example below:

1a   *Issues **brought up** by the President of the College and by the Board of Regents shall be addressed by the Faculty Senate and, if necessary, by the Association as . . .* (from a college constitution document)

1b   *Answering the big questions **raised** by the war.* (from an online book review)

Sentence 1a is an extract from a very formal written text. The writers of this document could have chosen to use **raised** in place of **brought up**, but clearly the phrasal verb is natural and acceptable in this context. On the other hand, sentence 1b is from an online book review – a much less formal register – and in this case the writer chose to use **raise** rather than **bring up**. This is probably because the combination 'raise+question' is a strong collocation, whereas 'bring up+question' is a rather rare combination. Phrasal verbs are used across all types of text, even where the writer or speaker has the option of choosing a single-word alternative. Although phrasal verbs tend to enter the language through casual speech, in most cases they progressively become accepted across a wider range of texts, until they reach even the most technical or conservative of text types.

Some corpus-based statistics

In order to illustrate this point, consider the following statistics (based on the evidence of a large language corpus) showing the frequency of the phrasal verb **give up** across different text types; the figures show the approximate number of times this verb is used per million words of text:

text type	per million words
academic prose	10
fiction	30
newspapers	30
conversation	25

So although **give up** is clearly less common in academic writing, it is by no means always avoided. Learners should appreciate that it is possible to use phrasal verbs in formal contexts, and that they limit themselves unnaturally by accepting the idea that they should use phrasal verbs in informal chat, for example, but not in academic writing or in a presentation to business colleagues. Most of the verbs in this dictionary (apart from those that are marked as *informal*, *very informal*, *impolite*, or *offensive*) can be found in *all* types of text, and their use in English is widespread and prevalent. Writers of legal documents and scientific papers may still opt for **tolerate** in preference to **put up with**, or **decelerate** rather than **slow down**, but even these extremely formal texts will contain some phrasal verbs.

A similar search in the corpus shows that the single-word verb **tolerate** is