

A SHORT GRAMMAR OF THE TWO-WORD VERBS IN ENGLISH

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It seems that there has been a great deal of confusion in defining the two-word verb, that is, in knowing exactly when the “little word” that follows a verb is merely a preposition (1) and when it is an adverbial particle (2), thus giving a two-word verb. The purpose of this short generative-transformational grammar is to attempt to clear up this confusion by showing when the word that follows a verb is an adverbial particle and when it is not.

In transformational grammar the first base rule has usually been:

(1) $S \rightarrow NP + VP$

or

(2) $S \rightarrow NP + Aux + VP$

However, there has recently been a totally new formulation suggested by Fillmore (3), which I will try to summarize. His first rule is:

(3) $S \rightarrow M + P$

Here, *M* stands for Modality and *P* for Proposition. The first “will include such modalities on the sentence-as-a-whole as negation, tense, mood, and aspect” and the latter represents “a tenseless set of relationships involving verbs and nouns.” (4) We shall only concentrate on the Proposition constituent for the purpose of this paper

Let us take the following example:

(4) Peter killed the boy with a gun.

In the above sentence, *Peter* is the agent of the action, which is represented by the *agentive* case (abbreviated *A*); *the boy* is the person affected by the action of the verb, represented by the *dative* (*D*) and *with a gun* is the instrument involved in the action, the *instrumental case* (*I*) *r*. So, we could come up with a frame feature for the verb *kill* which would be something like (5)

(5) + [————— D (I/A)]

The linked brackets notation indicates that at least one of the linked elements must be chosen. If we choose *I* we get (6) and if we choose *A* to become the subject we get (7)

(6) The gun killed the boy

(7) Peter killed the boy

As can be seen, the surface subject is merely a matter of choice.

In (8) we have examples of two other cases

(8) Peter sees the boy at the door.

Peter represents the *dative*, the person affected by the action of the verb (5), *the boy*, the *objective* (O) and *at the door*, the *locative* (L)

The Proposition then includes a Verb and a series of NPs, each one of them representing a different case in the deep structure. The expansion of *P* would then read

(9) $P \rightarrow V + C_1 + \quad + \quad + C_n$

where *C* stands for case category. The formula should be read as indicating that the Verb is followed by at least one case category and that no case category may appear more than once in the Proposition. Item (10) will give us the cases (6):

$$(10) \ C \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{c} A \\ I \\ D \\ L \\ O \end{array} \right\}$$

Each one of these cases is rewritten as a preposition (*K*) and a NP:

$$(11) \left\{ \begin{array}{c} A \\ I \\ D \\ L \\ O \end{array} \right\} \rightarrow K + NP$$

The element *K* is rewritten depending on the case which dominates it:

$$(12) K \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{by} \\ \{ \text{to, on ...} \} \\ \text{with} \\ \{ \text{on, in,} \\ \{ \text{at, up, ...} \} \\ \emptyset \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} [\text{NP}]^A \\ [\text{NP}]^D \\ [\text{NP}]^I \\ [\text{NP}]^L \\ [\text{NP}]^O \end{array} \right]$$

The rewrite rule for V (Verb) will include a single verb (Vb) or a verb followed by a particle ($part$), not to be confused with the preposition (K) which precedes the NP: :

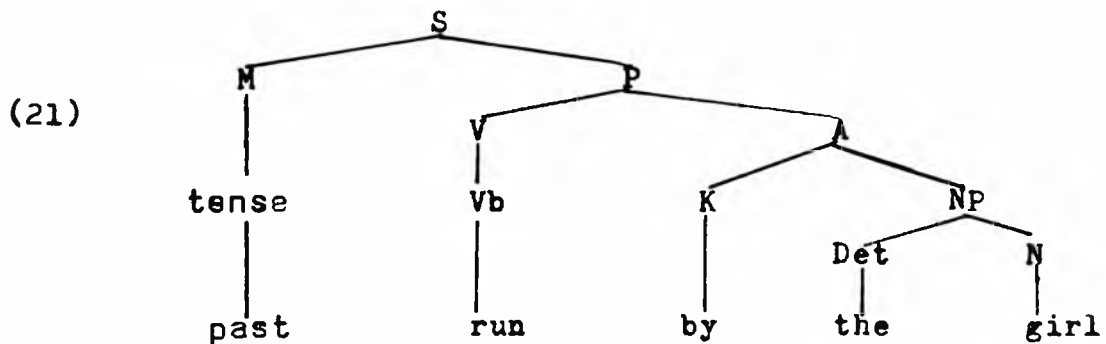
$$(13) V \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} Vb \\ Vb + part \end{array} \right\}$$

The remaining rules for a lexically restricted grammar of the two-word verbs in English would be:

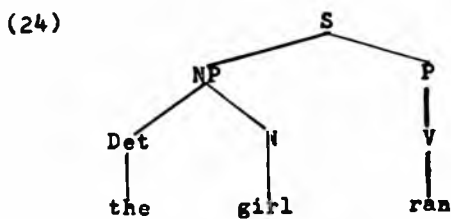
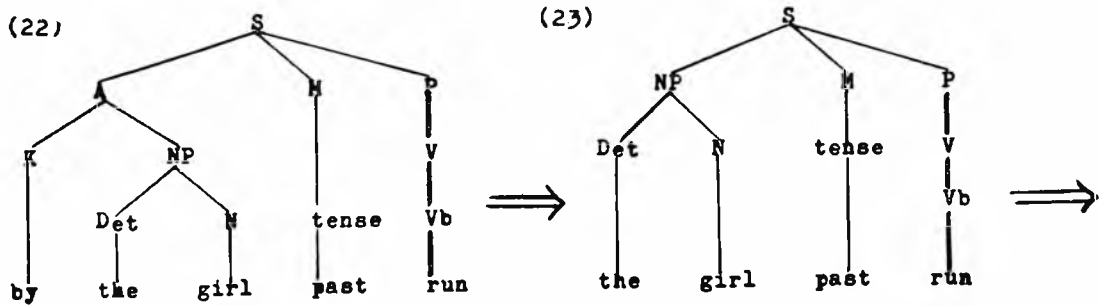
- (14) $NP \rightarrow Det + N$
- (15) $Vb \rightarrow \text{give, check, depend, run}$
- (16) $part \rightarrow \text{up}$
- (17) $Det \rightarrow \text{the}$
- (18) $N \rightarrow \text{girl, team, street}$

The first point we have to make is that when V is a two-word verb $part$ obligatorily follows Vb . Compare the trees for

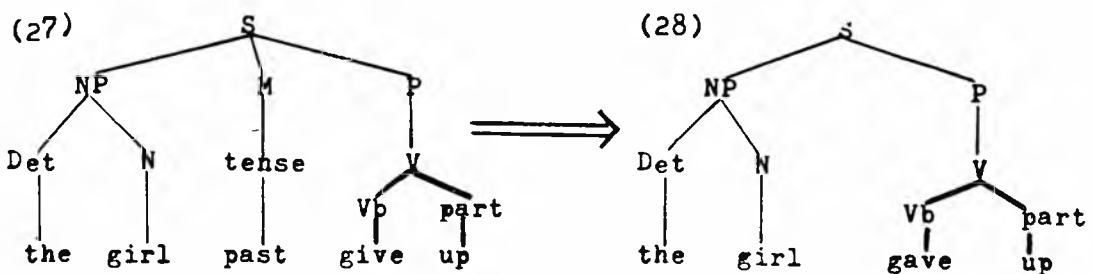
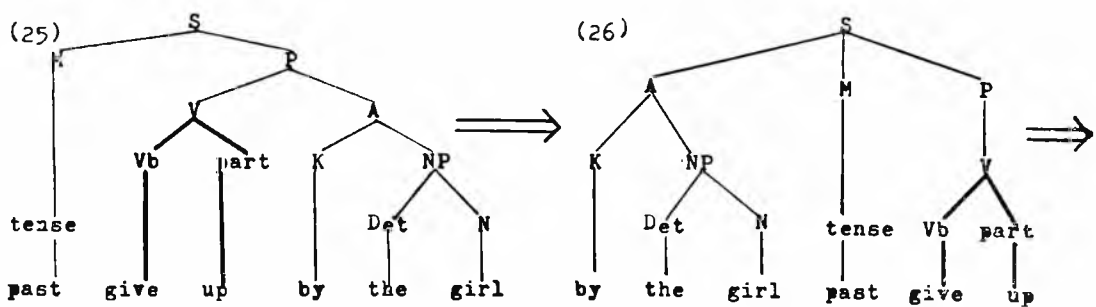
- (19) The girl ran.
- (20) The girl gave up.



Performing the subject-fronting transformation we arrive at (22). The form shown in (23) results from the subject-preposition deletion and consequent deletion of case label. Item (24) shows the final surface form resulting from incorporation of the tense into the verb.



The derivation for (20) follows the same transformational steps as for the previous example, subject-fronting (26), subject-preposition deletion and deletion of case label (27) and tense incorporation (28).



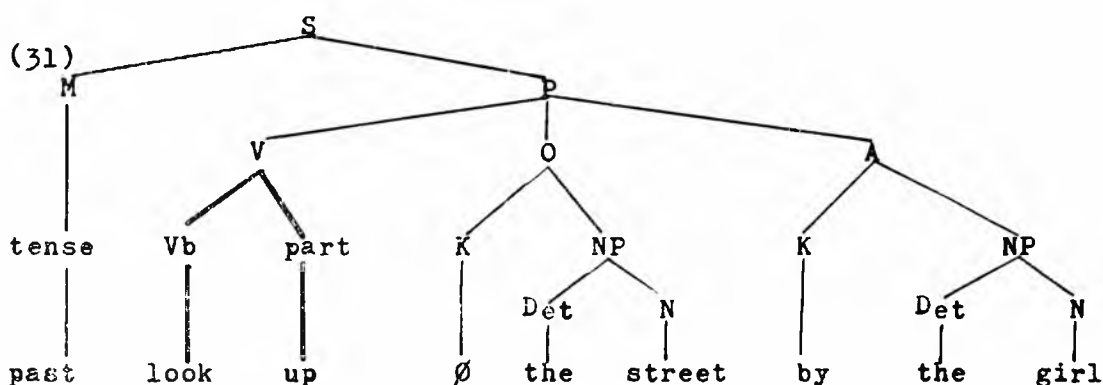
As can be noticed, only in (20) do we have an instance of a two-word verb.

Both in (19) *The girl ran* and (20) *The girl gave up*, the verbs were intransitive. Let us now compare two sentences which “look” very much alike. To distinguish between them in writing, a context is given in parentheses; in oral speech this is shown by means of the prosodic pattern.

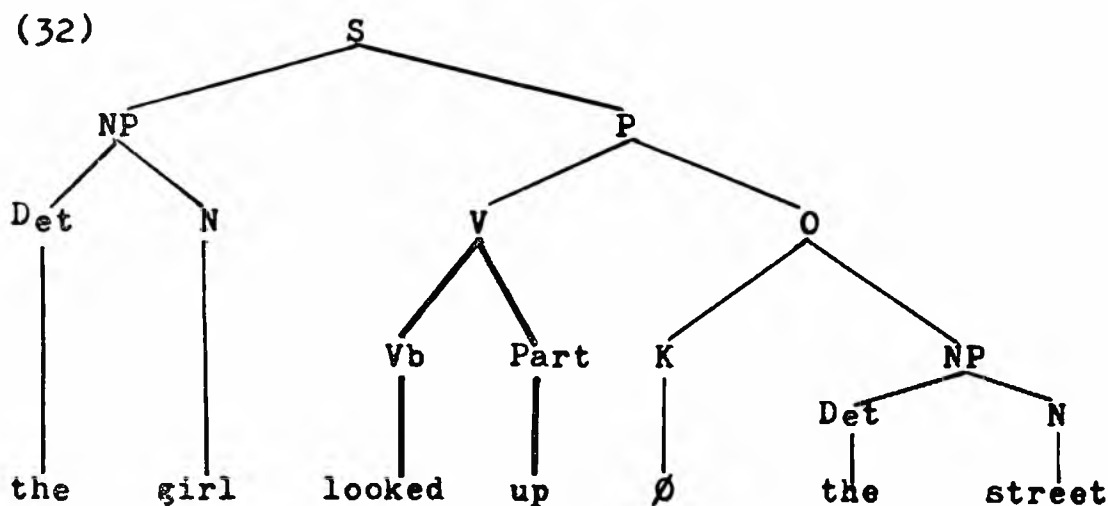
(29) The girl looked up the street (in the directory)

(30) The girl looked up the street (not down the street)

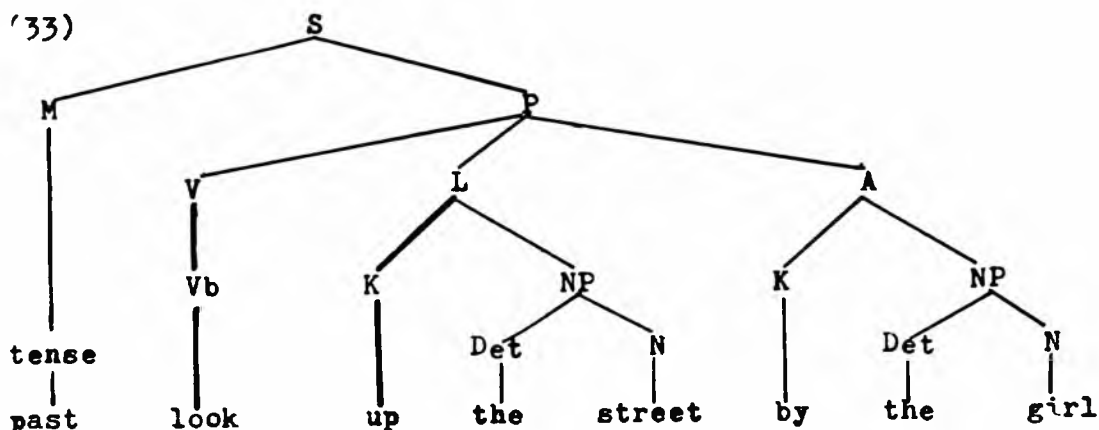
The derivational trees for (29) will show that *up* is a particle, so that *look up* in that sentence is a two-word verb. These are the trees for (29):



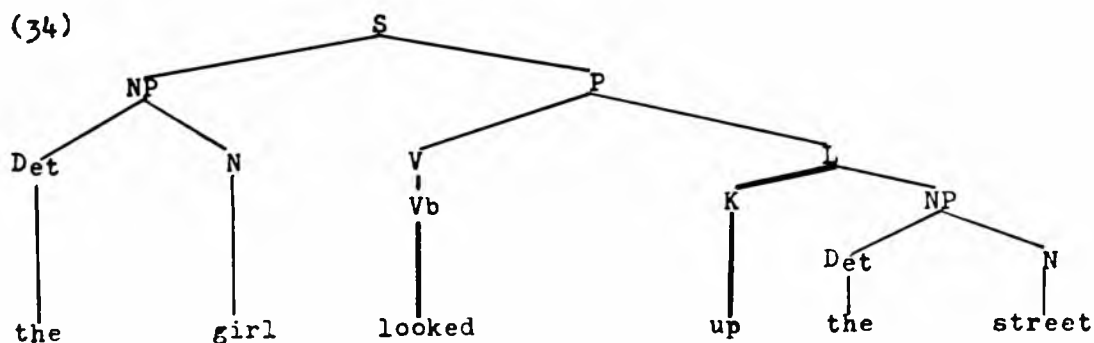
Performing the subject-fronting transformation, the subject-preposition deletion and the deletion of the case label and finally the incorporation of tense into the verb we get the final surface structure shown in (32)



On the other hand, the phrase-structure marker for (30) will demonstrate that *up* is a preposition, namely the *K* preceding the *NP* dominated by the *locative* case.



Performing the required transformations we get the final surface form:



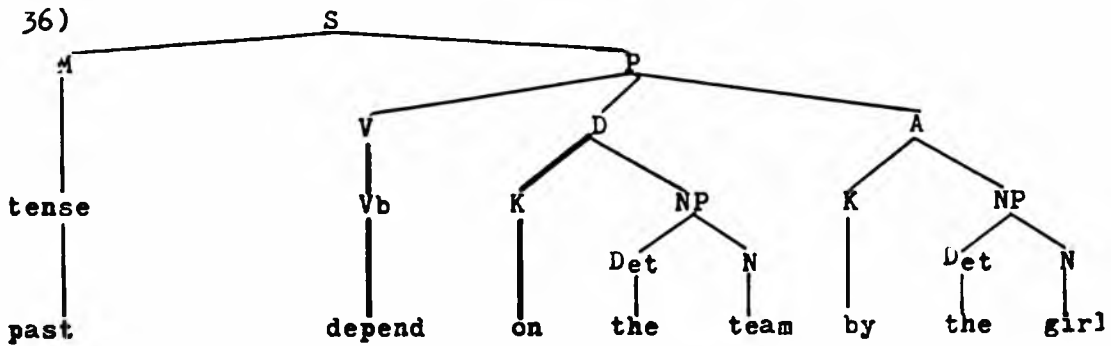
It is obvious, then, that in (30) we have just a single verb followed by a *locative* case. However, through deletion of the *NP* dominated by the *locative* we may get

(34) a) The girl looked up,

in which *up*, for some authors (7), “becomes” an adverb as it is not followed by a *NP* anymore. But I believe that from the tree above it becomes clear that *up* remains a *K*, that is, a preposition, so that we may say that, in this case, adverb is merely a surface structure category. The verb actually does *not* become a two-word verb through deletion of that *NP*

There are verbs that require a specific preposition after them and because of that there is a tendency to learn these verbs *with* their respective prepositions, for example *depend on*. It is needless to emphasize again that they do not fit the category of two-word verbs, as can be seen quite clearly from the tree for the deep structure of

(35) The girl depended on the team.



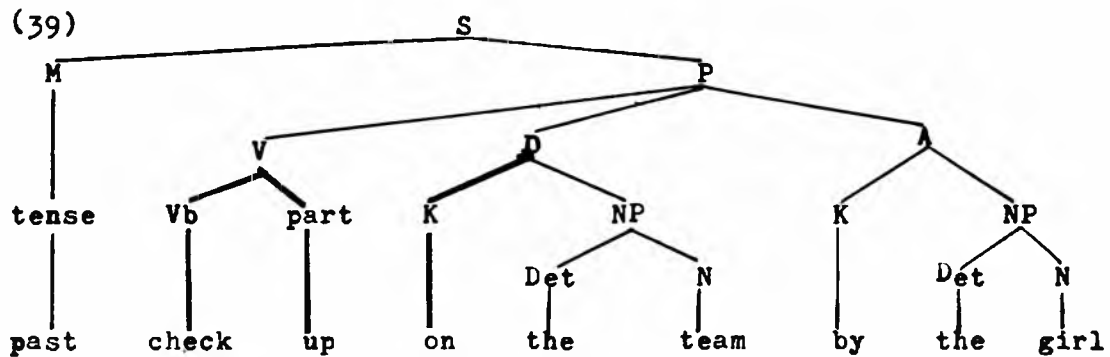
Sentences (20) *The girl gave up* and (29) *The girl looked up the street* are examples of two-word verbs used intransitively and transitively, respectively.

It has been claimed that there is such a class of verbs called three-word verbs (8), that is, two-word verbs which become three-word verbs when used transitively:

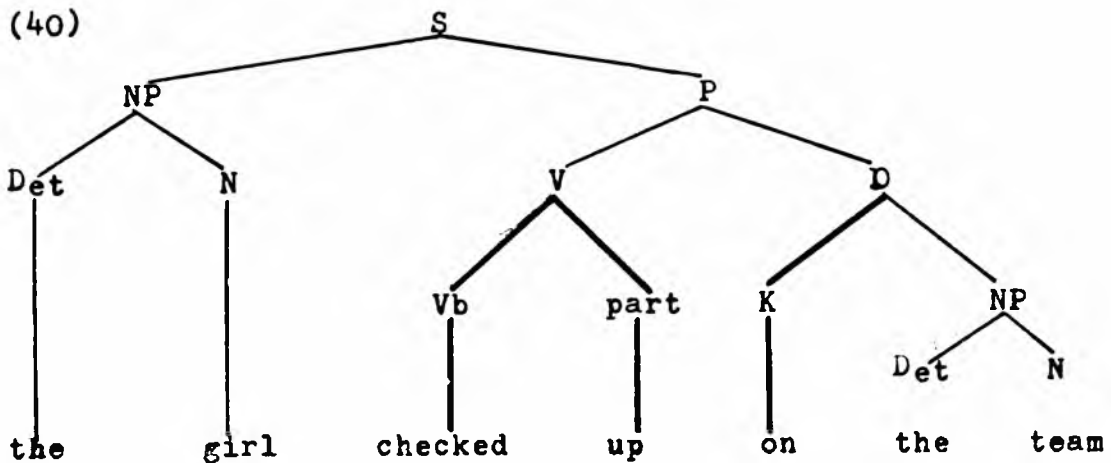
(37) The girl checked up.

(38) The girl checked up on the team.

It will be very easy to observe that the *third word* actually belongs to the object (not to be confused with the *objective!*) and not to the V. Here is the derivational tree for (38):



The transformations leading to the surface structure will yield:



So far we have only dealt with P.S. rules, but there are two important transformation rules affecting two-word verbs concerning their word order. The first one (41) is obligatory:

(41) Vb + part + Pron \Rightarrow Vb + Pron + part

If we go back to our sentence (20) and substitute *it* for *the street* we will get

(42) *The girl looked up it.

Rule (41) applies obligatorily to this string and the result will be

(43) The girl looked it up.

The second transformational rule is optional (9):

(44) Vb + part + NP \Rightarrow Vb + NP + part

Applying this rule to sentence (29) we will arrive at

(45) The girl looked the street up.

It is quite obvious that these transformational rules do not apply to verbs followed by prepositions. Notice:

(46) *The girl depended the team on. (applying rule (44))

(47) *The girl depended it on. (applying rule (41) after substituting a pronoun for *the team*)

I expect that the grammar suggested above has clearly pointed out the difference between two-word verbs (verbs followed by an adverbial particle) and verbs followed by a preposition.

(1) — “A preposition is a word which shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and another word in the sentence. Prepositions are usually (but not always) placed before the noun or pronoun which they govern”, *apud* J.B. Heaton, *Prepositions and Adverbial Particles*, London, Longmans, 1969, p. 1.

(2) — As opposed to prepositions, adverbial particles are particles which “are linked to verbs and not to nouns.” *Idem, ibidem.*

(3) — Charles Fillmore — “The Case for Case”, in: *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, ed. Bach & Harms, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968, pp.1-88.

(4) — *Idem, ibidem*, p. 23.

(5) — It must be kept in mind that *see* is an involuntary action verb.

(6) — I have only selected the cases which will be pertinent to the analysis of two word verbs in English.

(7) — J. B. Heaton, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

(8) — *Two Word Verbs*, the Key to English Series, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1972, p. 57 ff.

(9) — Although this rule has always been claimed to be optional, Dwight Bolinger in his book *The phrasal verb in English* (see Bibliography) has dealt in detail with restrictions to the application of this rule and with the fact that in many instances it is not as optional as previously thought.

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GLOSSARY

S:	sentence	O:	objective
NP:	noun phrase	L:	locative
VP:	verb phrase	V:	verb
Aux:	auxiliary	C:	case category
M:	modality	K:	preposition of the case category
P:	proposition	part:	adverbial particle
A:	agentive	Det:	determiner
D:	dative	Pron:	pronoun
I:	instrumental		