Figuring it *out*

A corpus-based comparison of
the verb–particle construction in argumentative writing
by Swedish advanced learners and
native speakers of English

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Doctoral dissertation to be publicly defended
in Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten, University of Gothenburg,
on September 12, 2008, at 2 p.m.,
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

In this study, I have compared the use of verb–particle combinations (VPCs), e.g. *figure out*, in Swedish advanced learners' argumentative writing and native student data. The material used was the Swedish International Corpus of Learner English (SWICLE) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). The aim was to compare the use of VPCs in order to find differences which give a non-native impression, in the form of overuse, underuse or misuse, in the learner data.

The results showed that the learners rely on fewer types of VPCs to form a similar number of tokens as the native speakers. The VPCs overused in SWICLE are typically informal combinations with a cross-linguistic link to Swedish, e.g. *sit down* and *cut down*. The VPCs underused are typically less frequent, polysemous and idiomatic VPCs with a specialized meaning without such a link. However, in most cases, topic is the most important explanation for overuse or underuse.

Misuse was shown to be common. Learners often use particles for emphasis in inappropriate contexts, e.g. **end up* instead of *end*. In addition, they have problems with collocational restrictions, as in **rub out thoughts* instead of *rub out pencil marks*. Transfer from Swedish may explain some errors. Other errors may have come about e.g. in analogy with other English VPCs. For example, **sketch down thoughts* may have been formed in analogy with *write down*.

A native-speaker informant test was used to categorize unclear cases. The test showed that there was typically disagreement about whether the examples constituted errors or not. The majority of unclear cases are *middle-ground-performance errors*, i.e. examples primarily given the rating in between *fully natural* and *wholly unnatural*. The target verbs proposed are usually more formal Latinate single items, e.g. *integrate* instead of **fit in* representing a vocabulary more characteristic of academic writing.

The study also showed that transitive VPCs are underused by the learners and intransitive VPCs overused. Intransitive VPCs are more common in informal language. In transitive VPCs, the verb–particle–object word order was used more often than by native speakers. As a result, the learners' texts may come across as too emphatic. Transfer from Swedish may explain the overuse and the fact that the verb–particle–object order is more frequent in English. Moreover, the learners are not aware of how a number of factors, e.g. degree of idiomaticity and information structure, interact to determine the word order of English transitive VPCs.

This study has important pedagogical implications since it showed that learners use VPCs differently from native speakers even if they do not make very many serious errors. We can conclude from the results that we need to talk more about phenomena such as style, collocations, degree of idiomaticity and information structure in the classroom.