

THE ROLE OF SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC CRITERIA IN CLASSIFYING VERBS FOR THE PURPOSES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH, WITH A FOCUS ON THE VERB *ASK*

Slavka Grancharova
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

The article revisits the well-researched topic of verb classifications and the basis on which they are proposed. The purpose of such classifications is to provide a systematic presentation for understanding, teaching and learning the verbs included in them, which is important for effective communication. Neither semantic nor syntactic criteria alone are complete in themselves for discussing linguistic phenomena. Thus, the article supports the view that the interdependence between meaning and structure is crucial for understanding linguistic patterns and their functions in communication. The analysis is based on authentic examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American.

Key words: lexical verb classes, syntactic verb classes, FLT

1. Introduction

When teaching and learning things, we organize the subject matter in order to structure our knowledge and make it easily accessible. This also gives us more confidence that we understand what we are learning and can accordingly put it into practice. Teaching grammar as part of teaching a foreign language best illustrates the need for structured knowledge because grammar is mostly about structure; thus, in the teaching process grammatical structures must be introduced, explained, understood, and practiced. While a native speaker of the Target Language (TL) has a linguistic intuition about the usage of certain structures, the students of the same language have to learn them consciously and acquire knowledge of them, which serves for building and developing their skills and competences in the TL.

Therefore, foreign language teaching/learning involves structuring, organizing and classifying meaning – the meaning of linguistic and communicative units and structures like phonemes, morphemes, words, phrases, sentences, utterances, paragraphs, and texts. Since the sentence

functions both as a unit of grammar and as a unit of communication, it is important to teach the learners how to produce grammatically well-formed sentences and how to use them in order to communicate adequately in the relevant situational contexts.

2. Classifying verbs

The verb is often referred to as the “organizer” of the sentence; hence by classifying verbs we “organize the organizer” in order to gain deeper understanding of language, language acquisition, teaching and learning a language. Chafe (1970) maintains that an account of the sentence structure for natural languages must be centered around the verb, which determines the organization of the sentence. Verb classifications are useful in devising methods for teaching verbs and sentence structure, facilitating automatic natural language processing (NLP), improving communication, etc.

How do we classify objects and concepts?

- By observation and testing we arrive at, and devise sets of distinctive features; then we
- decide which features are relevant,
- devise multiple sets of features,
- arrange things/concepts sharing the same features in groups, and
- label the groups.

The science of classification is known as taxonomy and the groups of similar items are often referred to as taxonomies. The word “verb” itself is a label in the taxonomy of the Parts of Speech. Its forms, meanings and functions comprise sets of features on the basis of which various classifications have been proposed. There are, for example, different *semantic* classifications based on lexical semantics, compositional semantics, conceptual semantics, semantic and thematic roles, etc. There are also grammatical classifications which combine morphological and syntactic criteria. Thus, we differentiate between full (lexical) verbs and auxiliary verbs, regular and irregular, stative and dynamic, intensive (link) and extensive verbs (intransitive, mono-transitive, ditransitive, complex-transitive), unaccusative and ergative verbs, etc. Some classifications combine grammatical and semantic criteria as in the distinction between terminative and durative verbs. Also, lexically encoded aspect is contained in the meaning of the verb and is connected to the so-called event structure of the verb; thus, we speak of perfective-imperfective, telic-atelic verbs, etc.

The largest group of all types of verbs is that of the full, lexical verbs, either stative or dynamic, but mostly extensive. They are organized in taxonomies of lexical classes within different theoretical frameworks,

based on their lexical meaning, compositional features of meaning, conceptual structure, meaning of the event structure of the verb and the event structure of the construction, etc. The traditional semantic classifications are based on intuitively outlined meanings of the verbs, which often leads to cross-listing the same verb in two different groups. The traditional syntactic classifications are based on the complementation of the verbs. Within more recent theoretical frameworks there are syntactic classifications based on the subcategorizational and selectional restrictions of the verb, on the so-called diathesis alternations, on the possibility to form different constructions and structures.

In contemporary linguistic theories there is a tendency to accept the basic principle that difference in syntactic behaviour is accompanied by difference in meaning, both in the meaning of the verb and in the meaning of the sentence or the construction. According to Hale and Keyser (1987) what enables a speaker to determine the behaviour of the verb is its meaning. Lexical classes of verbs defined on similar meaning components and similar morpho-syntactic behaviour are discussed by Pinker (1991) based on conceptual structure and alternations. Levin (1993) proposes an extensive classification of verbs based on meaning and diathesis alternations. Interesting among many others is also Jackendoff's (1990) lexical conceptual model.

Lexical verb classes can be helpful in supporting a few (multilingual) tasks, such as computational lexicography, language generation, machine translation, word sense disambiguation, acquisition of subcategorization frames, labelling of semantic roles, etc. They have predictive power as to what their possible complementation is regarding a specific meaning. Pinker (1991) discusses how the syntax of predicates and arguments is related to their semantics, what is a possible word meaning, how children acquire a language, and whether languages force their speakers to construe the world in a certain way.

In language teaching lexical and grammatical verb classes can be treated as "lexical sets". On the site for teaching English supported by the British Council and the BBC, we find the following definition: "A lexical set is a group of words with the same topic, **function**¹ or form." Bearing in mind the above-mentioned arguments, we can conclude that teaching/learning a foreign language involves understanding the behaviour of verbs in the respective grammatical and semantic structures and developing skills for their appropriate usage, because as Pinker (1991)

¹Bold in the original

claims, “verbs are choosy” and cannot be used randomly in one and the same sentence pattern; he illustrates this with the following examples:

John fell.	*John fell the door.
John dined.	*John dined the pizza.
John devoured the pizza.	*John devoured.
John ate.	*John devoured.
John put something somewhere.	
*John put something.	
*John put somewhere.	
*John put.	

3. Semantic and syntactic behaviour of *ask*

Many verbs of high frequency display such selective behaviour, switching between structures and meanings. Very varied is, for example, the behaviour of the verb “ask”. It is frequently used and has different meanings in the various structures and complements. The COCA yields the following frequencies of its forms:

(to) ask – 247677
asks – 36195
asked – 304867
asking – 90414

This raises the question of the need for its classification for the purposes of teaching. In Levin’s classification (1993: 46, 202) “ask” is listed as a verb of “communication” and “transfer of message” in one group with verbs which form structures displaying the Dative Alternation. It is an alternation between

the Prepositional Object frame:

*They asked questions **to** him.*

ask [NP₁ V_(communicate) NP₂ **to** NP₃]

and the Double Object frame²:

They asked him questions.

ask [NP₁ V_(communicate) NP₂ NP₃]

The following example is from the Corpus of Contemporary American (henceforth COCA):

*Now if you try and ask a question **to** somebody, and you trail off, ...*
(COCA)

However, the Double Object frame of the verb “ask” contains two direct objects; there is no dative object. This becomes clear if we drop the second object and ascertain that the sentence is still grammatical. Therefore, the first object (NP₂) is not a dative (indirect) object but an accusative (direct) object because a sentence which has an indirect object must also have a direct object:

They asked him questions.

ask [NP₁ V_(communicate) NP₂ (Acc) NP₃ (Acc)]

They asked him.

Ask [NP₁ V_(communicate) NP₂ (Acc)]

Based on its meanings, “ask” can also be classified as a non-implicative periphrastic causative or a verb of volition (desire). The search in the corpus (COCA) illustrates that verbs like *ask, want, desire, arrange, mean, prefer, wish, hope, wait, motion, call, gesture, pray*, etc. can take an infinitival complement clause with its own subject, introduced by a preposition (or a conjunction) “for”, which is often unexpressed.

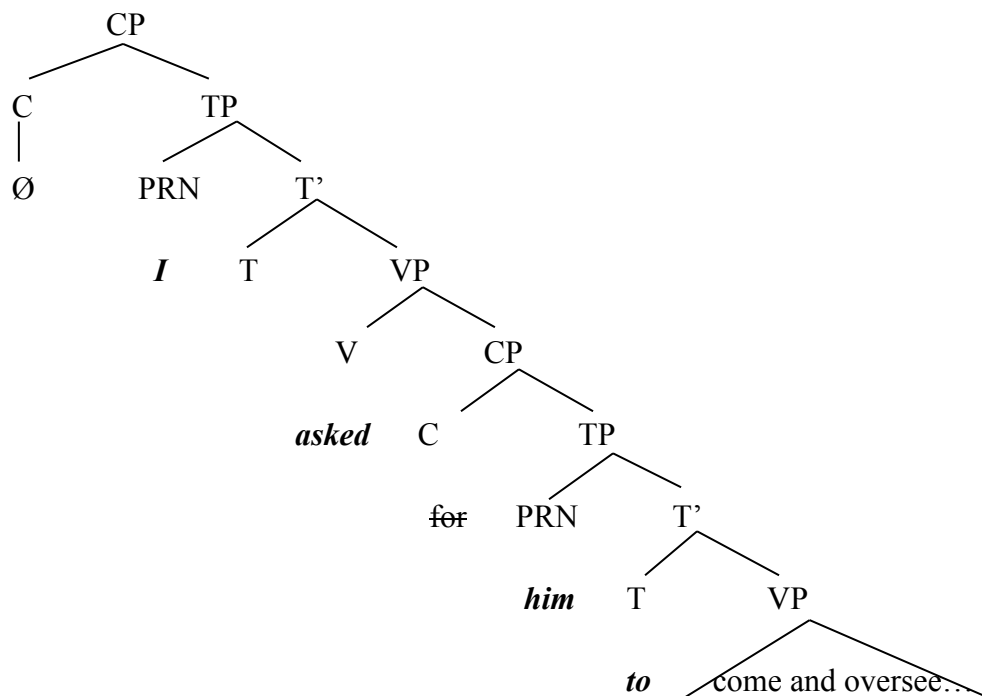
Quirk et al. (1994: 1193) comment that the use with the prepositional complementizer “for” is mainly American, and it marks the accusative (pro)noun as subject of the infinitive clause, rather than as object of the main verb. This observation points in the direction of a mono-transitive analysis of such verbs.

Similarly, in recent generative syntax theory like the Minimalist Program, “ask” patterns with the above-mentioned verbs of desire and volition, which take as a complement a complementizer phrase (CP),

²I accept the view that the Double Object frame contains an indirect and a direct object or two direct objects, and that the Prepositional Object is neither direct nor indirect but is a morphological type of object like the complex object.

which is headed by the transitive prepositional non-finite complementizer “for”, which sometimes remains unexpressed. E.g.:

I asked (for) him to come and oversee the menu for our Nriln luncheon. (COCA)



However, it seems that there is a difference in the meanings of the sentences used with, and without, the complementizer “for” when the infinitive complement is in the passive, which is due to the fact that the passive reverts the subject-agent reference. Let us compare the syntactic status of the verbs “ask” and “want” with passive infinitival complements. In the first sentence the subject of the main clause “I” is also the understood subject of the infinitive “to be allowed” and “them” is the object of the verb “ask”, whereas in the second sentence “them” is the subject of the infinitive clause and not the object of “ask”:

ask [NP₁ V_(request/volition) NP₂ [NP₁ to be allowed to stay]]

1. *I asked them to be allowed to stay.* (request/volition)

The above example differs from:

ask [NP₁ V_(volition/cause) for [NP₂ to be allowed to stay]]

2. *I asked for them to be allowed to stay.* (volition or non-implicative causative)

The verb “want” does not display such difference in meaning and reference between the two uses – in both sentences “them” is understood as the subject of the infinitive clause:

want [NP₁ V_(volition) [NP₂ to be allowed to stay]]

I wanted them to be allowed to stay. – (volition)

want [NP₁ V_(volition) **for** [NP₂ to be allowed to stay]]

*I wanted **for** them to be allowed to stay.* – (volition)

Interestingly, one and the same pattern can display the different meanings of the verb *ask*:

ask [NP₁ V_(communicate) NP₂ **of** NP₃]

*And as a White House correspondent, you want to be able to ask a question **of** the president...* (COCA) – (communicate)

ask [NP₁ V_(request, volition) NP₂ **of** NP₃]

*How can I ask something **of** my son that I myself didn't do?* (COCA) – (request, volition)

*... that is, of Festus; they asked a favour **of** him, and desired it as such, as what would be gratefully accepted...* (COCA)

The difficulties in classifying this verb arise from the many different types of complements, syntactic frames, and meanings. How should we determine the meaning of “ask” in the following examples – verb of communication, of volition, or is it a non-implicative causative? It seems that the verb meaning switches between *communication*, *causation*, and *volition* with the different complement types. Here is a possible distinction:

They asked him for an answer. (communication)

They asked him to give an answer. (non-implicative causative)

They asked for him to give an answer. (volition)

In the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the verb *ask* is entered both as a transitive and intransitive verb with different meanings. Students could be referred to the dictionary to study the uses of the verb and discuss the possible correlations between the meanings and the patterns illustrated

by actual sentences in the COCA. As a transitive verb the dictionary gives five separate meanings for *ask*:

1) to call on for an answer (enquire), to put a question about, to speak to utter

– She asked him about his trip; asking her opinion, ask a question

2) to make a request of somebody for something; from somebody

– She asked her teacher for help.; She asked help from her teacher.

3) to call for (require)

– A challenge that will ask much of us...

4) to set as a price

– He asked \$3000 for the car.

5) to invite somebody to something

– She asked a few friends to the party.

As an intransitive verb *ask* displays two uses according to the same dictionary:

1) to seek information

– ask for her address

2) to make a request

– ask for food

The latter two examples above illustrate an intransitive verb followed by a prepositional object. The link between the verb and the preposition is strong and essential for conveying the respective meanings.

The different complements range from noun phrases and prepositional phrases to non-finite clauses (with and without their own subjects) and finite clauses:

They asked (people, students, respondents, participants, a question) ... (for, about, of) ... (to do, that, what/who/where, if, whether)

When NP₂ represents an animate entity or an institution, the meaning of the verb is mainly that of a non-implicative causative and the occurrences in the corpus are rare:

ask [NP₁ V_(cause) NP₂ NP₃ / PP / INF-clause]

They asked Congress ... for, to do

An exceedingly rare complement type of “ask” is a finite *that*-clause:

ask [NP₁ V_(request, volition) NP₂ [*that*-clause]]

This was amazing, folks, but during the break I asked Rosemary that I would like to communicate with my mother. (COCA) – (request, volition)

Then the president asked Congress that we use any surplus to “Save Social Security First”! (COCA) – (request, volition)

Another rare complement type is the subjectless infinitive object clause in which the subject of the main clause is understood as the subject of the infinitive, too:

ask [NP V_(request, volition) INF clause]

He asked to leave the country with us. (COCA) – (request, volition)

Thus, we can outline the basic structural patterns found in different examples in the COCA³:

They asked a question. (communication)

They asked him. (communication)

They asked him a question. (communication)

They asked a question to him. (communication)

They asked a question of him. (communication)

They asked a favour of him. (request/volition)

They asked to come to the party. (request/volition)

³ These are only simplified patterns of the actual examples found in the corpus, discussed previously in the article.

They asked him to come to the party. (request/causation)

They asked him that he (should, would) use ... (request/volition)

They asked for him to come to the party. (volition)

They asked for my phone number. (request/volition, communication)

They asked for help. (request/causation)

They asked about/for the price. (communication)

They asked when/if we could meet. (communication)

4. Conclusion

Ask is a verb with a high frequency of usage on the one hand, and on the other it is a polysemantic verb displaying a range of various structural patterns. This poses a challenge for both the teacher and the learner. Apart from the different methodological approaches for teaching grammar and new vocabulary, this verb could be introduced in the foreign language classroom in a structured way in two directions:

1) Introducing a pattern and discussing/illustrating its various meanings, for example:

ask [NP₁ V **for** [NP₂]] – request, communication – They asked for help/ for the price/for my phone number.

2) Introducing a meaning and discussing the various patterns, for example:

request – ask [NP₁ V **for** [NP₂]] – They asked for help.

ask [NP₁ V NP₂ [to be allowed to go]] – They asked him to be allowed to go.

It is obvious that the differences in the meanings of the verb and the patterns in which it participates are very subtle and they often overlap. The task of the teacher is to decide how to introduce and practice these patterns in the foreign language classroom; but what is more important is the need for the students to be aware of this overwhelming diversity of patterns and meanings, their frequency of occurrence, the correlations between meanings and patterns, and also to learn how to use them appropriately in different situational contexts.

REFERENCES

- Chafe 1970:** Chafe, W. *Meaning and the Structure of Language*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Hale and Keyser 1987:** Hale, K.L. and S. J. Keyser. *A View from the Middle // Lexicon Project Working Papers №10*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Center for Cognitive Science, MIT Press, 1987.
- Jackendoff 1990:** Jackendoff, R. S. *Semantic Structures*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990.
- Levin 1993:** Levin, B. *English Verb Classes and Alternations*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ask>> (12.02.2020)
- Pinker 1991:** Pinker, S. *Learnability and Cognition: The Acquisition of Argument Structure*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991.
- Quirk et al. 1994:** Quirk, R. et al. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994.
- Teaching English /British Council/ BBC** <<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/lexical-set>> (12.02.2020)