A Metaoperational Analysis of Away and Off

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Abstract: The particles away and off are used to form phrasal verbs which are said to be highly elusive due to the abstractness they display. Traditionally, the explanations of these grammatical items have been associated with their relation to the extralinguistic world, which usually ends up in a stalemate. As a result, one unit may be used to account for how the other one functions without showing clear-cut distinction between them. It follows then that all grammatical items have to express something tangible or else they may not be understood by learners. Very often, such extralinguistic-based explanations turn out to be a lot more confusing as they may refer to the same reference indistinctively. This paper, first, takes a completely different stand by analyzing away and off in the light of their systemic invariant values as distance, separation and other semantic realizations seem to be of little help when it comes to telling them apart. Then, it argues that classifying them as synonyms or using one to explain another leads to nothing less than journeying around in circles. Finally, it shows that away gives an assertive status to the verb while off ascribes a non-assertive status to the verb.

Keywords: Invariant Value, Meanings, Operations, Phrasal Verbs

1. Introduction

In a video posted on the Internet on 3 September 2016, in a teaching programme called “Learn English with Papa Teach Me”, the teacher (a native speaker) asserted that when you want to leave an unpleasant person, you should say I walked off but it is also fine to say I walked away. His purpose was to teach his followers (1.5 million) how to better use off in English. Does it mean that the particles off and away are equal in meaning and interchangeable as well? To him, off expresses the idea of separation but the verb indicates how that separation is carried out. It is now obvious that teaching phrasal verbs has always been a difficult task for teachers as their meanings do not derive from the association of the verbs and the particles. The combination of particles with verbs will very often generate a completely different meaning from the node (connection between particle and verb). That is why S. Lindstromberg (2010) is of the opinion that the main feature of phrasal verbs is that the whole combination of words should function as a lexical unit that has its own meaning. He also warned of the use of meaning to account for the difference between similar prepositions. In addition, if translators can look up the meanings of phrasal verbs in dictionaries and try to understand the message of the writer, it must be admitted that they pose real challenge to interpreters who have to guess the meaning at the time of speaking as they render. Many studies and linguistic theories have been conducted in order to decipher how phrasal verbs work and ‘tame’ their fugitive meanings. This paper, first, will not focus on their meanings but take a completely different stand by analysing away and off in the light of their systemic invariant values as distance, separation and other semantic realisations seem to be of no help when it comes to telling them apart. Then, it argues that classifying them as synonyms or using one to explain another leads to nothing less than journeying around in circles. It will provide the structural orientation in which lies the difference between these two grammatical items. Finally, it shows that away gives an assertive status to the verb while off ascribes a non-assertive status to the verb.

2. Lexical Study of Away and Off

Dictionaries gather virtually all the words of a given language. They are highly important to every learner. Lexical studies involve words classification based on their nature, functions and meanings. We shall look into the use of away and off in English language in order to determine how far dictionaries have been
helpful to English learners and heightened their awareness of word choices. One dictionary will be used as sample because almost all dictionaries display quite the same presentation. Here is how *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* presents its findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Away</th>
<th>Adverb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. to or at a distance from sb/sth</td>
<td>1. <em>Away</em> from a place; at a distance in space and time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. to a different place or in a different direction</td>
<td>2. used to say that something has been removed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Not present</td>
<td>3. starting a race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. to say that something is done continuously or with a lot of energy</td>
<td>4. cancelled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. until disappearing completely</td>
<td>5. not connected or functioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Down or away</em> from a place or at a distance in space or time</td>
<td>1. Down or <em>away</em> from a place or at a distance in space or time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. leading <em>away</em> from sth</td>
<td>2. Leading <em>away</em> from sth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Away</em> from work or duty</td>
<td>3. <em>Away</em> from work or duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Away</em> from a price</td>
<td>4. <em>Away</em> from a price</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The importance of lexicological studies of grammatical units is well established, but it is clear from the tables above that placing side by side meanings deriving from the context of use can hardly help learners distinguish the particular grammatical value each unit carries. In this respect, *away* seems to refer to concrete realities in the extra-linguistic world since lexicologists find no difficulties listing down its meanings. In contrast, *off* seems to be a lot more elusive as *away* has frequently been used to account for the meaning of *off*. The underlying idea is that these two units are synonymous. If they are truly synonym it will also imply that they can be interchanged without short-circuiting the meaning. One thing is however quite clear; all the meanings displayed in the tables above are not discriminative enough to tell these two units apart in terms of functioning. Also, using distance as discriminative feature between such units seems to be of very little help when it comes to teaching. Furthermore, their categorisation as adverbs, preposition, adjective or whatever is not capable of exposing the reasons why a speaker of English would choose *away* in lieu of *off*. Besides, teaching these particles based on a dictionary as the only material would definitely results in an absolute confusion as at the end of the day the learner will not see any distinction. In the subsequent lines, we shall see what grammar books propose for teaching and explaining the working of these two units.

3. Previous Grammatical Study of Particles *Away* and *Off*

According to N. Chomsky (2022), the goal of any grammatical study is to make known the nature of language. Grammar, therefore, appears to be the subject that looks into the constituent elements of a given language as regards its components and functioning. That is why this paper will examine how *away* and *off* are dealt with in some grammar books with a view of grasping their working and differences, for in language it is all about differences according to F. de Saussure (1916). First, we shall refer to one of the most prominent Grammar book of all time by R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik (1985). The table below was cut off from a larger one which includes the analysis of *out of, to, at, on and into* and such features as destination and position.
According to the above-mentioned grammarians, “‘destination’ generally accompanies a verb of dynamic ‘motional’ meaning, such as go, move, fly, etc.” while “‘position’ can accompany most verbs, although this meaning is particularly associated with verbs of stative meaning such as be, stand, live” (R. Quirk et al.1985, p.674). Based on what this table presents, only the literal meanings of the operators are taken into account while it is an open secret that the particles away and off are endowed with both literal and idiomatic meanings. Furthermore, these particles are analysed on the grounds of their experience in the world. The table shows that the distinctive feature used by the authors is distance. If, indeed, distance can help, then what is the difference between the distance expressed by away and the distance displayed by off? Can this table aid in knowing the distinction between for example he drive away and he drove off?

Additionally, the lengthy book of Serge B. Delepine (2000) which made a comprehensive study of English grammar did not conduct a thorough study on the operators away and off. It only asserts that away is used before an object if that object is a personal pronoun or a deictic. For example

1. He gave away all the money he had won

while off is used before an object if it is a noun as in:

2. He took off his hat

Besides, particles are believed to narrow down the broad meanings of verbs in order to turn them into a more concise meaning to be used in a specific context. Eventually, this book recommends learning the meanings of such tricky words along with the verbs they are attached to as they are frequently used in the English language. The grammarian explains the functioning of particles based on how often they are used which he confirmed in this statement “Ces expressions idiomatiques, qu’il faut apprendre avec soin, sont plus courantes encore dans la langue parlée que dans la prose soignée”1 (B. Delepine, 2000, p 92).

This grammar book lays much emphasis on grammatical categories without attempting to explain why a speaker of English would choose away to express distance instead of its close counterpart which is off. The common point between virtually all the grammar books is that they never analyse both units contrastingly. We shall therefore see how Cognitive Linguistics and Lexicon-Grammar Approach analyse these two units in the English language.

4. Away and Off from the Standpoint of Linguistic Approaches

Two linguistic approaches that have analysed particle-verbs away and off will be called upon in this section; Cognitive Linguistics approach and Lexicon-Grammar Approach. As far as Cognitive Linguistics

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1 These idiomatic expressions, which have to be learned diligently, are more common in spoken language than in carefully crafted language written in prose (My translation)
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https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.7.35.003
It is therefore obvious that *away* and *off* are regarded as operators because they help construct the phrasal verbs, but once the phrasal verb is built, they perform another operation on the verbs they are attached to. In addition, they display a metalinguistic value as they allow the speaker to make comment on the relation between the particle and the verb by stating whether the relation is new or already introduced. That principle was further explicated as follows: “Quand les mots parlent de la texture du linéaire, de l’agencement des autres mots, on dit qu’ils ont une fonction métalinguistique (naturelle). « Meta » veut dire « à côté », « après », il s’agit donc de mots qui se trouvent à côté d’autres mots pour mieux les commenter.” (C. Delmas et al. 1993 p.6). The metalinguistic value of a given element enables the speaker to comment on the relation between the operator and the rest of the utterance.

The methodology in Metaoperational Grammar consists mainly in collecting utterances from natural context of communication and analyse them by going beyond the observable surface. When analysing these units, they are often commutated, permuted and sometimes deleted in order to gauge the systemic invariant value that guide the choice of such elements. It is worth noting that the choice of a given operator is informed by the type of structuration it permits to build.

### 6. Invariant Values of *Away* and *Off*

Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), the forerunner of modern linguistics, discovered long ago that linguistic units are organized systemically in “langue” (as opposed to “parole”). If language is actually organised that way, then one should be overtly interested to know how *away* and *off*, close in meaning and sharing the same paradigmatic axis, are structured in the system of the English language. In addition, when elements are arranged systematically that supposes that each element has a particular value that makes it different from its counterparts in the language. It is that value that is called *invariant value* (H. Adamczewski, 1982) or *fundamental value* (Gustave Guillaume, 1971). It does not change depending on the context. The concept of invariant value is one of the most prominent tenets developed by Adamczewski and LES AMIS DU CRELINGUA as part of that discourse analysis theory. He analysed the particle *UP* and present its contextual values (speech effects) as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operator</th>
<th>Speech Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>UP</strong></td>
<td>Perfectivity, Completeness, Resultativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One operator may have a lot of contextual values or speech effects because such are derived from their context of use and they are as limitless as the contexts. Particles have plenty meanings but they only allow the speaker to perform only one particular function on the verb. The particle *UP* makes a comment by granting the verb to which it has been attached a particular status. He came to the following conclusion on the invariant value of *UP*:

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2 *Operator* in so far as it is not just a word but rather a tool that makes the work of meaning structuration possible (to operate here means linchpin, etc) and *metaoperator* in the sense that it allows not only to construct meaning, but also make inquiries about the structure at stake. (my translation)

3 When words refer to the linear structure, combine with other words, they are said to have a metalinguistic function (natural). ‘‘meta’’ means ‘‘next to’’, ‘‘after’’ it is therefore about words that are next to other words to be able to comment on them. (my translation)
This paper focuses only on two particles with the goal of bringing out their invariant value in the system of the English language. It will not come up with another meaning; rather it would help decipher the function each operator performs on the verbs they come in contact with. We shall look into this utterance:

3a. Christmas is around the corner and everybody needs more money, I have decided to give away N10,000 cash each per question you answer correctly. (Zara Onyinye, 21/12/2022, facebook)

In utterance (3), away grants an assertive status to the verb give as it does not change its semic content. That is to say, away bears on the meaning of the verb give without ascribing metaphorical or abstract meaning to it. Besides, the amount of money the writer is talking about is a piece of information to all her followers on facebook. If we commutate the particle away with off, it will not correspond to the message Zara wants to convey which is to hand over money to someone. Here is what off would have suggested:

3b. Christmas is around the corner and everybody needs more money, I have decided to give off (?) N10,000 cash each per question you answer correctly.

The use of off in this utterance depicts a completely different meaning and it is not genuine English simply because off does not bear on the meaning of the verb it is attached to, it rather comments on the structural process. A speaker uses off when his message is tinged with his own view. That is why off is equally required when it comes to giving instructions tinged with subtitle warnings from the writer or speaker. Let’s look into this example:

4a. Keep off the grass

One could ask why off has been used in this warning message. If we commutate off with the operator away, it will not work simply because the idea of warning the message wants to convey will be cut off. Plus, off appears in a context when everything is known or presupposed, that is the segment “the grass” having the article “the” signifies that “grass” is not new both to the writer and the person concerned whereas away would have simply been awkward as in:

4b. Keep away the grass (??)

This utterance is not genuine English sentence because the context where this message will appear should be predetermined. For away to work in this utterance it requires “from” as in keep away from the grass but with a different context and a new meaning. It would have implied that people should refrain from coming near the place without the speaker intruding on his message. The operators away and off are used with the verb drive as well with different structuration for speakers choose units based on their structural arrangement not on the meaning. C. Delmas (1987)

5. Mari drove away from the interview feeling defeated and nauseated, the smell of blood in her nostrils and the image of a German shepherd trotting across the ranch yard with discarded. (Tami Hoag, P 274)

6. They stood and waved as we drove off (dictionary online)

Distance has always been used to account for the difference between drive away and drive off (a car) but as to when to use one instead of the other still remains unanswered. In (5), the speaker signals that Mari just took her leave from the place where she was by means of a car while in (6), though they also departed by car, the speaker makes a metalinguistic comment on the departure. It could be that they will never come back again or with speed. In (6) it not just about a car leaving a place, but rather people who are
close get separated. The operator off allows the speaker to intrude in the message and say something that away wouldn’t have been able to signify. Such value of off is also present in the following usages:

7. From January to early December 2022, his business brought in roughly $190,000 in sales. From that, Carvajal lives off a $ 25,000 salary (CNBC, 20/12/2022)

8. I knew everything that needed to be done in order to get the business off the ground. ( Lubarskyon on the CNBC)

9. She could not tear he eyes away from the bay stallion, his front legs up on Whinney’s back ( Jean M. Auel, 1982 p 302)

The utterance (7) is highly significant insofar as away would have been utterly awkward and semantically unacceptable as shown below.

(7) From January to early December 2022, his business brought in roughly $190,000 in sales. From that, Carvajal lives away a $ 25,000 salary. (??)

What is apparent in this sentence is that the semantic content of the verb live is put on the back burner to the benefit of the speaker’s own comment. Off changes the status of the verb live to which it is attached. The verb live is not regarded as the opposite of die. By joining both terms, speakers secure a new entity that became the basis for them to express their own view on the structure. The context before set the scene as it says that there was an increase but Carvajal relied only on $25,000.

In (8) again, off is used as a metalinguistic tool because “get the business off the ground” sounds like a start but not just a mere start but the one that will take the business higher. That is the message off is conveying; to help the speaker say something on the combination made up of verb and particle. In this utterance, the speaker is making comment on the type of start his business is about to achieve. Once again, away and off are not equal and thus cannot be interchanged in all instances. Away would be ungrammatical and a semantic here. Let’s swap off for away

(8) I knew everything that needed to be done in order to get the business away (??) the ground

In most cases, away needs to be aided by from in order to start constructing the idea of separation. Get away does not refer to the idea of beginning with a greater ambition. In (9), the speaker chose away because he is making a description of what is going on before his eye without tinging it with his own view. On the contrary the utterance below points to the non-assertive status of off compared to away which indicates an assistive status.

10. For when she looked at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off. ( Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, p.15)

This utterance (10) shows that off belongs to a presupposed segment in that the use of -ing in “they were getting so far” turns it into a compact and unified grammatical entity. Right from 1976, H. Adamczewski demonstrated that all the utterances with -ing have a non-assertive status, that is to say they are used to comment on the structural process. In like manner, the choice of off instead of away in the utterance (10) enables the speaker to comment on the distance expressed by far. Off is just not expressing distance, it is rather being used to talk about the distance, because when the speaker says “they seem to be out of sight”, it is not only the distance that is at stake. He is saying that he is not seeing them anymore, they are already gone. Such a distance or separation is subjective. If he had chosen away, he would have stated just a distance or separation without any other message in the background. The values provided so far are the invariant values of away and off in the English Language. That is why two similar units expressing almost the same meaning will always stand because one would be at the disposal of the speaker to express his own and subjective view. These values govern also the difference between small and little, large and big etc.in English grammar.
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7. Structural Orientation of Away and Off

Language does not describe only the extralinguistic world, that is to say, linguistic units’ role is not always to refer to tangible things, though it seems to be the primary role of language to do that. It is good to admit that language is an autonomous entity able to describe its own internal functioning by indicating the status of its constituent elements. There are units in language whose role is to refer to tangible realities. In Metaoperational Grammar, such units are given assertive status as they bear on the dynamism of the elements making up the sentence. They are therefore first in the structuration process. The opposite elements are given non-assertive status because they are around to signal discourse construction operations. In the English language, for example the article a/an and the are not orientated in the same direction as a/an introduces here and now the noun whereas the makes a metalinguistic comment on the noun by saying that the noun on which it bears is not new, thus known by both parties involved in the communication.

The analysis conducted above shows quite clearly that away and off work exactly according the principle laid down by Metaoperational Grammar as shown again by these examples.

11. But “When I picked up a product and saw that, ‘hey, I can buy this for $10 and can sell it on Amazon for $20 and make 20 bucks in the process, and it’s selling five[or] six times a day’ that’s when the light bulb went off for me. (Lubarskyon on the CNBC)

12. How I paid off my $400,000 mortgage in 7.5 years, Before I was 32 (makingsenseofcents.com)

13. Should I walk away from the person I love if they no longer respond to my texts? It has been weeks and heart is breaking.

In utterance (11), the choice of be+ing speaks volume. In fact, when the speaker say ‘it’s selling five[or] six times a day’, that means the following segment will be presupposed because ing does not bear on the verb sell alone but the whole object is involved. Moreover, the verb go here loses its literal meaning through its combination with off. In this context, it is off that makes comment on the verb go and definitely give rise to the idea of “having a great idea”. So, off is orientated towards the left-hand. That is why away cannot work in this sentence though they both display the meaning of distance and separation. It would have orientated the sentence to the right hand and won’t be able to comment on the structuration process. Off plays the same role on the verb in utterance (12).

However, in (13), the choice of away is explained by the fact that the speaker wants to perform an action in real life. It is about a concrete fact without emotions involved. The difference between walk away and walk off is explained naturally at this level of the explanation. Walk off is the opposite of walk away in that, the first is making comment on the way of going. The translation could be “se barrer”. It goes along with the speaker’s sentiments and views.

We shall now draw the structural orientation of both units. But these orientations are not extralinguistic, they rather pertain to what goes on at the time of structuring the utterance. Away indicates a primary structuration process that which takes into account the dynamism of the verb it combines with. Off is, on the contrary, orientated to the right hand, geared towards what has already been introduced in the context as follows:

![Diagram]

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https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.7.35.003
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One more example that show that *away* is first compared to *off* is this:

14. Far *away* in a far *off* land lives a child who loves to sing (Amy F. Berson)

If we permutate *off* with *away* the sentence will not be semantically acceptable simply because of the structural orientation displayed by these two operators. Let’s interchange their position as follows:

(14) Far *off* in a far *away* land lives a child who loves to sing (Amy F. Berson)

*Away* performs a grammatical role on *far* by just initiating or introducing the adjective “*far*” without any personal comment by the speaker or writer as it is in the sentence above. When the speaker wants to retake the adjective “*far*” for other purposes, then he will move up a peg in terms of structural operations. At this level, *away* is not qualified to help the speaker build a second operations upon the first one for H Adamczewski (1982) once observed that “la cause des échecs des tentatives dont il a été rendu compte plus haut réside dans la meconnaissnce du fait fondamental que la grammaire d’une langue est affaire d’opérations et d’opérations sur des operations”(p.121). In this regard, the speaker will resort to *off* to comment on the distance since if *away* had been able to provide all the message he wanted to convey, the speaker wouldn’t have needed *off*. Again, the way in which *away* and *off* are used here shows that they do not perform the same grammatical function on the adjective *far*. Therefore, failure to understand that *away* and *off* perform completely different functions will result in using one to explain another by making the teaching of these units a very big deal. Teaching students to understand how these operators function based on their invariant values is more advantageous than feeding them with contextual meanings which, very often, do not reflect the genuine working of linguistic units.

Conclusion

This paper suggests a new approach to the analysis of phrasal verbs by placing the speaker or learner at the centre of the analysis, for every linguistic unit is chosen based on the message the utterer wants to get across. It does not suggest a total reliance on meaning nor synonymy. A speaker would choose *away* to indicate an open paradigmatic choice, that is to say, the verb to which it is attached is introduced here and now. In this regard, the combination of *away* with the verb does not lend itself to metalinguistic interpretation. The result of the combination stays close to the extralinguistic world. That justifies the reason why when someone wishes to announce the death of a prominent person they will use *pass away* in order to look polite but politeness is just the result of the psychological distance between the deceased and the speaker. In such circumstances, the speaker is solely concerned with passing on an information. However, the operator *off* performs a completely different function as it is chosen to indicate a closed paradigmatic choice, that is, the context has already determined the combination of both units. In this case, the speaker uses the phrasal verb as a platform for conveying his own view and stating that *off* confers a non-assertive status to the verb. *Off*, therefore, allows the speaker to make metalinguistic comments which results in expressing subjective meanings. These conclusions can prevent learners from making mistakes when it comes to choosing *away* or *off* by heightening awareness of the structural processes at stake since meaning is unstable and can be misleading.

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4 The reason why the previous attempts failed is because of the ignorance of the fundamental truth that the grammar of any language is a matter of operations built upon operations (My translation)
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