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The syntax of English prepositional verbs: How
much do L1 Spanish-L2 English learners know
about it?

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Abstract

English prepositional verbs are usually taught to L2 English learners under the ‘phrasal verb’ category, not acknowledging the differences between both types of verbs. For this reason, this dissertation is aimed at examining how much L1 Spanish-L2 English learners know about the syntactic dimension of prepositional verbs, and if said knowledge is influenced by their L1 or their English proficiency level. To do this, two groups of L1 Spanish-L2 English learners with different proficiency levels completed an acceptability judgement task, where they judged different syntactic possibilities of prepositional verbs as opposed to phrasal verbs. The results showed that the different syntactic properties of these verbs were not entirely distinguished by the L2 English participants, and that in some cases this was due to their different proficiency level and not so much to their L1.

Keywords: Prepositional verbs, phrasal verbs, particle verbs, Spanish, English, syntactic properties.

Resumen

Los verbos preposicionales ingleses se enseñan comúnmente dentro de la categoría de ‘verbos frasales’, sin contemplar las diferencias entre ambos tipos de verbos. Por esta razón este trabajo analiza el conocimiento que los estudiantes L1 español-L2 inglés tienen de la dimensión sintáctica de los verbos preposicionales ingleses, y si este se ve influido por su L1 o por su nivel de inglés. Para ello, dos grupos de estudiantes L1 español-L2 inglés de diferentes niveles completaron una prueba de juicios de aceptabilidad que exploraba diferentes propiedades sintácticas de los verbos preposicionales en oposición a los frasales. Los resultados muestran que los participantes no diferenciaban en su totalidad las propiedades sintácticas de estos verbos, y que esto se debió a veces a su nivel de inglés y no tanto a su L1.

Palabras clave: Verbos preposicionales, verbos frasales, verbos con partícula, español, inglés, propiedades sintácticas.

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1. Introduction

Prepositional and phrasal verbs are known to be two of the most problematic structures L2 English learners face when studying English. Phrasal verbs have been widely studied and analysed to explore how they are known and understood, and to look for ways to teach them more efficiently and effectively (Garnier and Schmitt (2016); Siyanova and Schmitt (2007)). However, prepositional verbs have not only been overlooked in academic studies but have also been included in the wider ‘phrasal verb’ category in textbooks.

Grammarians like Quirk et al. (1985) or Huddleston and Pullum (2002) have studied the syntactic differences between these two types of verbs, and the acknowledgment of such differences leads to questioning if there is a necessity for differentiation between them in academic environments, too. Still, there seems to be a lack of agreement in terms of the classifications and nomenclature used by grammarians, which leads to confusion among learners, educators and readers, generating problems when it comes to knowing exactly what structures we are learning.

In the present study, the first aim is to analyse and compare these different grammars to look for the clearest classificatory alternative, and the ultimate aim is to explore the different syntactic properties of both types of verbs, prepositional and phrasal, but focusing on the former, asking ourselves if L1 Spanish L2 English learners know how prepositional verbs differ from phrasal verbs in terms of their syntactic behavior.

This dissertation is organized in different sections: section 2 provides a theoretical background on four main aspects: prepositional verbs’ terminology in different grammar books, prepositional verbs and their syntactic properties, previous research on these verbs and, finally, prepositional verbs in Spanish grammar. In section 3, we introduce the different research questions derived from the previous theoretical background. Next, section 4 offers the methodology used to carry out the empirical study. Section 5 includes the results obtained, and their consequent analysis. Section 6 completes the dissertation by presenting the different conclusions reached after the analysis of section 5. Lastly, section 7 is a list of the works cited in the study, followed by an appendix with a list of the abbreviations used in the dissertation, and an Excel database with the results from our study.

2. Background

2.1. *Unfixed terminology concerning English prepositional verbs*

To describe what English prepositional verbs are, in order to teach them, proves to be a difficult task initially since they are not usually distinguished from other types of verbs like phrasal or phrasal-prepositional verbs, or even from verb + preposition constructions that do not form a single unit in any way. Authors like McCarthy and O'Dell (2007) include, in their manuals for L2 English learners, prepositional verbs such as *come across* in example (1) within the wider phrasal verb category, instead of belonging to their own class with their particular characteristics.

(1) She **came across** the letter

This incorporation of prepositional verbs into wider categories occurs likewise in some other studies, like Gardner and Davies' (2018) where, even when they acknowledge the disagreement existent among authors on nomenclature towards these verbs, and the confusion this may bring to students and teachers, they prefer to include this type of verbs under the term 'phrasal verb' referring to those verbs that have "a lexical verb and an adverbial particle where the verb and particle are separated by one, two, or three intervening words" (198). The purpose of adopting this term to refer also to prepositional verbs is to avoid confusion among their readers, but somehow, they delve more into confusion, seeing that prepositional verbs and phrasal verbs are evidently not the same type of verbs. The differences between these verbal types are undoubted and that is the reason why scholars like Quirk et al. (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), or Dekeyser et al. (2011) have studied and classified these verbs in their grammar books, exploring their different properties. The main problem is that their classifications remain unmatched and they are, at times, complicated to understand.

This non-distinctive treatment to prepositional verbs versus phrasal or other types of complex verbs in many L2 English manuals, or even their unmatched classifications in English grammar books, constitutes a relevant and complicated issue for the present study, and it will be discussed under the following subsections.

2.1.1. Dekeyser et al.'s (2011) classification of complex verbs

According to Dekeyser et al. (2011) complex verbs can be divided into particle verbs or compounds (e.g. ‘*take over*’ is a particle verb, while ‘*overtake*’ is a compound verb). They assert that particle verbs are combinations of a verb + an adverbial particle, and that they can be either transitive, as in example (2) where ‘*two separate forms*’ is the direct object of *fill* (verb) *in* (particle) or intransitive, as in example (3) where *dropped* (verb) *out* (particle) is followed by an optional adjunct.

- (2) All applicants have to **fill in** two separate forms
 (3) Sarah **dropped out** after the first tryout yesterday

Particle verbs of the transitive type, like that in (2), are separable depending on the syntactic heaviness of the object; they are separable if the object is light, i.e. the object is a simple NP¹ (i.e. the radio), as in (4a) and (4b), where the movement of the NP is optional; or a pronoun (i.e. it), as in (4c), where the pronoun must obligatorily be placed between the verb and the particle. However, they are not separable if the object is heavy, as in (4d), where the complex NP (i.e. all the suggestions you made at the party last night) is obligatorily placed after the particle, thus, the NP movement not being allowed, as shown in (4e).

(4) PARTICLE VERBS

- (4a) She **turned down** the radio
 (4b) She **turned** the radio **down**
 (4c) She **turned it down**
 (4d) She **turned down** all the suggestions you made at the party last night
 (4e) *She **turned** all the suggestions you made at the party last night **down**

Despite their first classification of verbs being only either particle verbs or compounds, Dekeyser et al. acknowledge the fact that verb constructions such as the examples in (5) differ from particle verbs in (4), even though they appear to be similarly formed by a verb and a particle. In fact, Dekeyser et al. name examples like those in

¹ Since all the authors referred to in the present dissertation use NP instead of DP, we will adopt the former term for consistency.

(5) differently, using the term ‘prepositional verbs’ and upholding that they are formed by a verb followed by a preposition, instead of by an adverb. According to these authors, these phrases would always consist of the fixed structure VP² + PREP + NP, like that in (5a) (VP= *came*; PREP = *across*; NP = *the letter*). This prepositional verb structure would entail no option for an NP to precede the preposition, as in (5b), unlike cases of particle verbs like (4a) and (4b) where such possibility existed.

(5) PREPOSITIONAL VERBS

(5a) She **came across** the letter

(5b) *She **came** the letter **across**

The third verbal category in Dekeyser et al.’s classification is a combination of the previous two. and they refer to it as ‘multi-word verbs’ like those in (6).

(6) MULTI-WORD VERBS

(6a) We are **looking forward to** your visit

(6b) They will have to **put up with** us

These verbs differ from particle verbs and prepositional verbs in that they are made up of three items instead of two: a verb (*looking* and *put* in (6a) and (6b) respectively) a particle (*forward*, *up*) and a preposition (*to*, *with*). Dekeyser et al. also mention that syntactically they behave exactly like prepositional verbs.

Their classification’s main criterion for differentiating what they call prepositional (i.e. examples in (5) from particle verbs (i.e. examples in (4)) is the NP placement previously mentioned. Yet, they propose a different syntactic criterion to distinguish them, i.e. the placement of an adjunct, such as an adverb, between the verb and the particle, which is possible in the case of prepositional verbs (as in (7a)), but ungrammatical in particle verbs (as in (7b)).

(7a) I **went quickly through** your letter

(7b) *Please, do not **call early up** these people

² VP in the case of Dekeyser et al (2011) is understood as the main verb only.

The problematic aspect of Dekeyser et al.'s adjunct placement criterion is that this cannot always be applied, since some prepositional verbs, like that in (8), do not allow the use of an adjunct between the verb and the preposition.

(8) *I had **come** *suddenly* **across** the matter

To sum up, it seems that Dekeyser et al.'s (2011) classification of complex verbs highlights the syntactic particularities of particle verbs only when compared with prepositional verbs (a separate verbal category), which leads to an imprecise syntactic characterization of prepositional verbs.

2.1.2 Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification of "verb + preposition" combinations

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) define prepositional verbs as "those which select a P(repositional) P(hrase) complement containing a specified preposition together with its own complement" (274). It is important to clarify that they employ the term 'prepositional verb' to refer exclusively to the verb, and not to the verb + preposition sequence (i.e. in *refer to* the prepositional verb is only *refer*).

While Dekeyser et al. (2011) do not explain their preference for the term 'particle verb' instead of 'phrasal verb', Huddleston and Pullum (2002) refer explicitly to the fact that prepositional verbs are different from phrasal verbs because the former do not form a syntactic constituent; for them, the syntactic constituent is actually the preposition + the following NP (274), which explains why some syntactic movements of prepositional verbs are possible (i.e. an adverb between the verb and the preposition, already mentioned in section 1.1.). This is also the reason why they only give the name 'prepositional verb' to the verb itself, and not to the verb + preposition combination, as mentioned before.

On the other hand, the traditional 'phrasal verbs' according to Huddleston and Pullum are verbs followed by a particle, and they differ from prepositional verbs in that these are followed by a transitive preposition that demands an object, as in (9a) (V- [Preposition + NP]), while phrasal verbs are constructions where the particle is most times a preposition, but intransitive as in (9b) (V- Particle- NP).

(9a) She [**asked**]_V [**for** the address]_{Prep+NP}

(9b) She [**took**]_V [**off**]_{Particle} [the label]_{NP}

Although this distinction is debatable, the most remarkable part of their classification, however, is their proposal of the existence of two different kinds of prepositions in prepositional verbs according to the properties of the prepositions that combine with them. More specifically their proposal refines the imprecise syntactic properties of prepositional verbs proposed by Dekeyser et al. (2011) (see section 1.1.) distinguishing between i) mobile prepositions as the one in (10a) where an adverb can be inserted between the verb and the preposition and ii) fixed prepositions as that in (10b), where there is no possibility for the preposition to be separated from its initial position. This distinction helps to clarify why the adjunct insertion mentioned by Dekeyser et al (2011) (see section 1.1) is not possible with verbs like (10b), i.e. these prepositional verbs carry a fixed preposition that does not allow adjunct insertion, among other syntactic movements explained below in section 2,³ this, however, does not make them phrasal verbs.

(10a) I **referred** *recently* **to** her book

(10b) *I **came** *recently* **across** some old letters

From this perspective, then Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification seems to focus more on the properties of prepositional verbs by themselves and not in relation with phrasal verbs, which is a convenient approach for the present study.

2.1.3. *Quirk et al's (1985) classification of multi-word verbs*

Adding more confusion to this diverse verbal typology and non-consensual terminology, Quirk et al. in *A comprehensive grammar of the English language* (1985) use the term 'multi-word verbs' to refer to the verb + [any] particle combinations (here, the term 'particle' is used for both prepositions and adverbs) that behave as a single unit, thus, a wider category that comprehends phrasal verbs (i.e. Dekeyser et al.'s (2011)

³ The properties explained in subsections 2.2.2 to 2.2.4 will apply only to what Huddleston and Pullum (2002) call PVs with a mobile preposition (i.e. the one that allows to be preceded by an adverb, to be fronted and to be coordinated, see sections 2.2.2-2.2.4)

‘particle verbs’), prepositional verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs (i.e. Dekeyser et al.’s (2011) ‘multi-word verbs’).

‘Prepositional verbs’ is the only term that is used in the three grammar references mentioned thus far, which shows how Quirk et al.’s (1985) proposal of classification has improved over time in the case of the phrasal verbs category (referring more recent proposals not to adverbs but to *particles* that have a complex syntactic behaviour), but remaining apparently intact in the case of prepositional verbs. However, there was also a step forward in the approach to prepositional verbs: although Quirk et al. conceived them as verbs associated both semantically and syntactically with a preposition, Huddleston and Pullum proposed many years later that the relation between the verb and the preposition was not as close as Quirk et al. suggested.⁴

2.1.4. McCarthy and O’Dell (2007)’s classification of phrasal verbs.

The lack of a common terminology in grammar references is also reflected in the case of English learning material or textbooks. Essentially, while authors like Dekeyser et al. (2011), Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Quirk et al. (1985) consider prepositional verbs to be a separate verbal category, for scholars such as McCarthy and O’Dell (2007) the classification at use is different: they distinguish only two categories, i.e. (i): phrasal verbs, formed by a verb + a particle that could be either a preposition or an adverb (thus, including in this category both prepositional and particle/phrasal verbs) and (ii) phrasal-prepositional verbs. In McCarthy and O’Dell (2007) they acknowledge briefly prepositional verbs stating that: “Some verbs (sometimes called prepositional verbs) must have the object after the particle [...] a good dictionary will tell you if this is so” (8) when explaining the position of the objects in phrasal verbs, but do not specify which of the verbs in the textbook are prepositional verbs, thus, causing confusion in the learners, leaving them to consult a dictionary for every verb they encounter. Consequently, learners may not acknowledge the existence of prepositional verbs as verbs with its own identity and characteristics, and they may not know how their syntactic behaviour differs from that of particle/phrasal verbs.

⁴ Quirk et al. (1985) also propose the term *transitive prepositional verbs* to refer to those verbs where the preposition and the verb are separated by a direct object as in *They accused him of murder*, but this type of prepositional verbs falls out of the scope of this study.

Summing up, the classification and terminology regarding complex verbs is not unified. None of the authors mentioned in this section offer the same classification. For the present study, taking into consideration the verbal typologies proposed by the different grammarians, Dekeyser et al.'s (2011) nomenclature is the one we will adopt, the main reason being that they employ the term 'particle verb' to designate the traditionally called phrasal verbs; thus, closer to Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) classification where they also stated that phrasal verbs were formed by a verb and a particle. The term 'Particle Verb' offers a better explanation in terms of syntactic and semantic properties of the structure. Therefore, from now on, we will use the terms Particle Verbs (PaVs) and Prepositional Verbs (PVs) to refer to these two structures.

Since the main aim of the present study is to examine if L1 Spanish L2 English learners can distinguish these verbs from other types of verbs like particle,⁵ further information about prepositional verbs' syntactic behaviour and properties will be described in the following section.

2.2 Main syntactic properties of prepositional verbs

After exploring the different classifications proposed by authors like McCarthy and O'Dell (2007), Dekeyser et al (2011), Huddleston and Pullum (2002) or Quirk et al. (1985) the conclusions reached are that, even when they include both particle verbs (PaVs) and prepositional verbs (PVs) into the same category (as in McCarthy and O'Dell (2007)) the latter are syntactically different from the former. Some of these authors agreed on various syntactic movements or specific syntactic characteristics that PVs have, and this will be explained (in contrast with those in PaVs) under the following sections.

2.2.1. NP and pronoun placement

Dekeyser et al. (2011), Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) argue that the object of the preposition (NP) can only come after the preposition, as examples (11a) show, whereas examples in (11b) would result in ungrammatical structures, being the preposition positioned after its object.

⁵ Phrasal-prepositional verbs will not be a part of the present study.

(11a) They are **looking into** the mystery

They **went over** the details

(11b) *They are **looking** the mystery **into**

*They **went** the details **over**

This lack of movement, possible in the case of direct objects in PaVs, is also related to the possibility of having an unstressed personal pronoun following a transitive preposition in PVs (following Huddleston and Pullum's (2002) terminology) as in (12), which is not possible in PaVs constructions as (13) shows.

(12) She **referred to** it

(13) *She **took off** it

2.2.2. *Adjunct insertion*

Another distinctive property of PVs is that they allow an adjunct to be inserted between the verb and the preposition, as in (14a), which proves to be ungrammatical in PaVs, as example (14b) illustrates.

(14a) I **went quickly through** your letter

(14b) *She **put reluctantly up** all the undergraduates of Jesus college

2.2.3. *Fronting in relative clauses and wh-questions*

Quirk et al. (1985) Dekeyser et al. (2011) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) observe as well that the preposition of a prepositional verb can precede a relative pronoun (i.e. *whom*) before a relative clause as in (15a), and precede an interrogative NP (i.e. *which man*) at the beginning of a wh-question as in (15b). In contrast, neither of these possibilities would be allowed in the case of PaVs, as examples in (15c) show.

(15a) The man **on whom** they **called**

(15b) **On which man** did they **call**?

(15c) *The man **up whom** they **called** / ***Up which man** did they **call**?

2.2.4. Coordination

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) mention one more construction that PVs can undergo opposite to PaVs, and this is the PP coordination. as in (16a) where *to her book* and *to several others* can appear in coordination, while in (16b) the same coordination in PaVs is not possible:

(16a) I **referred to** her book and **to** several others

(16b) *She **takes off** the red label from the t-shirt and **off** the yellow one

Nonetheless, although our study is focused on the syntactic dimension of PVs, when observing the research carried out on these verbs in the L2 English learning field, their semantic dimension gains prominence, as will be illustrated in the following section.

2.3. Previous research on the difficulties for L2 English learners learning prepositional verbs

Several studies on L2 learning deal with the difficulties L2 English students face when learning prepositional and particle verbs. Some of these studies examine these difficulties and different possible methods of teaching them, like Armstrong's (2004), Zareva's (2015), or an even more recent one, Gardner and Davies' (2018), among others. However, all these references focus more on PaVs than on PVs. Works like those of Garnier and Schmitt (2015, 2016) group PVs and PaVs under the 'phrasal verb' tag and treat both indistinctly in the tasks and investigations carried on. Besides, these studies also give more importance to the semantic complexity of the prepositional and phrasal verbs than to their syntactic characteristics.

The fact that, to the best of our knowledge, there are no empirical studies dealing exclusively with the syntactic aspects of prepositional verbs, leads us to think that this field is still greatly unexplored, resulting in difficulties to do some empirical background investigation about it. Due to the lack of previous resources for the type of investigation the present study intends, the purpose of this section is to identify some arguments extracted from some experimental studies on the semantic complexity of

multi-word verbs (i.e. particle, prepositional) that could apply to the syntactic properties of PVs too.

In Siyanova and Schmitt's (2007) study, they explore the production of multi-word verbs in L1 English speakers and L2 English learners, including PVs and PaVs together (without distinguishing them) in their tests. They suggest that L1 English speakers prefer to use multi word verbs (i.e. including prepositional verbs like *run into*) rather than single word equivalents like *meet*, while L2 English speakers prefer to use the single-word equivalent *meet*, except those learners with more exposure to English who, like natives, prefer to use multi-word verbs. Their hypothesis is that the unparalleled preference may be explained by the wider use of PaVs and PVs in colloquial contexts. L1 speakers and L2 English learners with more exposure to English use these verbs more on a daily basis and may feel more comfortable with their use. On the contrary, L2 learners with less exposure usually learn them through more academic approaches, that usually rely exclusively on memory and rarely involve any context or practice, and their use may be rarer and more complicated for them than using the single-word equivalent. In their study, Gardner and Davies (2018) support a claim similar to this one, and recognize that learning the different meanings of multi-word verbs as a decontextualized list may result problematic for L2 learners, so frequency of use could be a determinant factor.

Earlier in time Garnier and Schmitt (2016), proposed that for L2 learners it may be more difficult to rightly produce these verbs (i.e. "phrasal verbs" referring to both PaVs and PVs) in languages where structures of the like do not exist. From our viewpoint, this is an example of why it is important to differentiate between both types of verbs: in languages like Spanish, there are PVs, but not PaVs. Following Garnier and Schmitt's (2016) reasoning, it may result easier for Spanish speakers to understand and produce PVs (also existing in Spanish) than PaVs. From this perspective it is not only advisable to differentiate PVs and PaVs in English textbooks (a clearer distinction also necessary in grammar references as well, as we have discussed in section 2), but also to take into consideration when learning both types of verbs if both structures exist in the L1 of the English learners or not. Since the participants of our study have Spanish as their L1, we have considered convenient to show in the following section if Spanish PVs have any structural (or semantic) parallelism with those in English.

2.4. Prepositional verbs in Spanish grammar

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) propose that in English PVs it is not the verb + preposition combination that forms a syntactic unit, but rather the preposition + NP combination. A similar approach is to be found in traditional Spanish grammar: according to Real Academia Española de la Lengua (2009). ‘Prepositional verbs’ in Spanish are those verbs which require a “Complemento de Régimen Preposicional” to follow the verb, as in (17), where the verb *depende* is followed by the complement *de los jugadores* introduced by the preposition *de*.

(17) La victoria **depende de** los jugadores

According to *Diccionario Panhispánico de Dudas* (RAE 2005) these verbs are obligatorily followed by a complement headed by a specific preposition. If this complement is omitted, the sentence becomes ungrammatical or acquires a new meaning. As explained in *Nueva gramática de la lengua española* (RAE 2009), both this complement and the preposition are specifically selected by the verb, and in the majority of cases it cannot be exchanged for any other preposition, excluding few exceptions in which the meaning of both prepositions is very similar, as in (18); in a way, it seems that the prepositions are imposed by the verb.

(18) Venir **de** París/ **desde** París

Moreover, this complement tends to be positioned just after the verb, but it can undergo similar syntactic movements to those possible for English prepositional verbs, as examples (19) to (21) show.

a. Fronting at the beginning of an interrogative sentence:

(19) ¿**Con** ir a pescar te **conformas**?

b. Fronting at the beginning of a relative clause:

(20) **Con** lo que me **conformo** es con ir a pescar

c. Coordination:

(21) Me conformo **con** ir a comer y **con** ir a pescar

The existence of these syntactic structures related to PVs in Spanish could prove to be important while teaching English PVs to L1 Spanish speakers, seeing that the similarities could facilitate their learning, which may not be so in the case of PaVs, which do not exist in Spanish. The present study will consider this parallelism with PVs and lack of it in the case of PaVs as key factors that may affect differently the learning of both types of English verbs in Spanish L1 students.

3. Research questions

As mentioned in sections 2.3 and 2.4 it seems that L1 English speakers and L2 English learners with more exposure produced better and more frequently PVs and PaVs, while L2 learners with lower exposure produced them less efficiently (Siyanova and Schmitt 2007). This result leads us to believe that a similar situation could occur with the learning of syntactic properties of these verbs, wondering if L1 Spanish-L2 English students who have more exposure to English should have a better performance when dealing with the syntactic movements of PVs and PaVs than L2 English beginners. Moreover, as concluded in Gardner and Davies (2018), if having a similar structure in the L1 language helps L2 English learners to learn PVs and PaVs more accurately we would like to find out if having similar structure to PVs in their L1 (Spanish) will help them to acquire a better understanding of how the syntactic dimension of PVs works. Considering this reasoning we intend to analyse empirical data collected from Spanish university students of English as their L2 to try to answer the following research questions:

1. Will the L2 English L1 Spanish students be able to distinguish prepositional from particle verbs paying attention to how they differ syntactically?
2. Will their performance be affected by their level of English proficiency, thus, will the input received have an impact on their learning of PVs and PaVs?
3. If the previous answer in research question number 2 turned to be negative, and all of them had a similar performance despite their proficiency, and moreover their performance was better with PVs than with PaVs, will their L1 be a facilitating factor to learn them?

The main purpose is to find interesting results in the study and to be able to answer the questions, since we believe that it could even open a door for future empirical research in terms of prepositional verbs and their syntactic aspects, which is, still, a field that is greatly unexplored. In the next section, the participants chosen for the study and the procedure followed will be explained.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants' profile

The participants are 70 L1 Spanish speakers that have an official certification (Cambridge, TOEFL, etc.) that accounts for their level of English. They were asked to select their level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (B1, B2, C1 or C2). For the present study, in the analysis the participants will be divided into intermediate or B-level (B1 and B2) and advanced or C-level (C1 and C2). There were a total of 35 B-level participants, 35 C-level participants, and 25 American English natives who were used as a control group. 95 participants in total.

Table 1. Participants.

LEVEL	TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
<i>B</i>	35
<i>C</i>	35
<i>CONTROL</i>	25

Proficiency level will, therefore, be taken as a possible variable for the results obtained. The aim of the control group is to compare their results with those of the L2 English learners, giving us a way of knowing if the movements tested are commonly accepted/used by natives or not, and if this may have affected the results of the L2 learners.

4.2. Process of elicitation of the data

In order to elicit our data, the experiment designed consisted of an acceptability judgement task (AJT), distributed through a link and created using Google Forms. The participants were asked to evaluate some sentences on a scale from 1 to 4 (being 1 (very good), 2 (good), 3 (bad) and 4 (very bad)) judging if they sounded good or bad in terms of their syntax.

This task includes a total of 48 sentences, 24 of them (50%) are the sentences we aim to test, while the other 50% are distractors. The target structures consist of 24 sentences that comprehend the different syntactic movements explained in section 2, i.e. position of the NP, position of the pronoun, adjunct insertion, fronting in relative questions, fronting in wh-questions and PP coordination. All these structures are illustrated in table 2, where the different allowed and non-allowed (marked with an asterisk) movement in each of the two target verbal structures are exemplified.

Table 2. Target Verbal Structures

	PVs	PaVs
i. Position of NP		
(1) V-Particle/Preposition-NP	(1a) You can always rely on Joe	(1b) It's hot, you should take off your coat
(2) V-NP-Particle/Preposition	(2a) *Now I'll deal your problem with	(2b) Check the new collection out now
ii. Position of Pronoun		
(3) V-Pronoun-Particle/Preposition	(3a) *He spent hours looking it at	(3b) You're clever, you will work it out
(4) V- Particle/Preposition-Pronoun	(4a) This is not the place to talk about it	(4b) * I saw it when he pointed out it
iii. Adjunct insertion		
(5) Adjunct before the verb	(5a) I strongly believe in karma	(5b) They quickly set up the meeting
(6) Adjunct mid-verb	(6a) I am looking desperately for a job	(6b) * He brings constantly up his problems
iv. Fronting in relative clauses		
(7) No fronting	(7a) This is what I was thinking about	(7b) My bedroom is what I cleaned up
(8) Fronted	(8a) A new bike is for what I was hoping	(8b) * The dictionary is up what I looked
v. Fronting in WH-questions		
(9) No fronting	(9a) What percentage do they account for ?	(9b) Which problem did you figure out ?
(10) Fronted	(10a) For whom was she asking ?	(10b) * Up which opportunity did you give ?
vi. PP coordination		
(11) PP coordination	(11a) I referred to her book and to several others	(11b) *I will pick up Monica and up James
(12) NP coordination	(12a) I was depending on Peter and John	(12b) Bring in the food and the guests

According to the information illustrated in Table 1, the different movements we aim to test and analyse entail that the number of grammatical (17 examples) and ungrammatical (7 examples) sentences will be uneven, since some of the movements are possible in the case of particle verbs (as shown in example (2b)), but not in the case of prepositional verbs (as shown in example (2a)), and vice versa (example (6b) as opposed to (6a)). Due to the not so strict syntactic nature of prepositional verbs, there are only 2 ungrammatical examples of them included in the test (16,6 % of the total of the target structures), while there are, of particle verbs, 5 ungrammatical examples of PaVs (41% of the total of PaVs). The total of ungrammatical cases considering PVs and PaVs are 7 (29,1% of the overall total).

The prepositional and particle verbs selected for the test were taken from the COCA corpus (Davis 2008), but for PVs using only the verbs that Huddleston and Pullum (2002) called ‘verbs with a mobile preposition’ since they were the ones that could undergo all the movements. We took into consideration only those PVs and PaVs with the highest ranks of frequency, as tables 3 and 4 show, so that the verbs used were commonly used in the English language.

Table 3. Frequencies of PVs

Verb	Frequency
Look at	331.623
Talk about	287.338
Think about	143.729
Look for	135.446
Hope for	135.408
Deal with	115.614
Refer to	73.806
Ask for	53.347
Believe in	52.103
Depend on	41.490
Rely on	36.069
Account for	31.345

Table 4. Frequencies of PaVs

Verb	Frequency
Give up	86.328
Point out	61.905
Set up	56.437
Pick up	56.324
Figure out	55.235
Look up	38.175
Work out	37.095
Take off	29.228
Check out	29.192
Bring in	25.498
Bring up	19.216
Clean up	16.729

Moreover, as tables 3 and 4 show as well, PVs had higher frequencies on average than PaVs, so they appear to be more commonly used: the range went from frequencies up to 331.623 to 31.345 (for PVs) and from 86.328 to 16.729 (for PaVs). As for PaVs, we only chose the transitive ones (and comparable with the PVs) and all the sentences were adapted from examples taken from the corpus, to make them clearer and shorter.

The distractors have been made following the same percentage of grammatical (70,9%) and ungrammatical (29,1%) sentences that the testable sentences had. The ungrammatical distractors include 4 sentences where the subject has been omitted (i.e. **Am in Majorca, a beautiful place*) and 3 sentences where the object has been misplaced (i.e. **They the most healthy eaters are*). In total, following the same pattern as that in target structures, there were 7 ungrammatical and 17 grammatical sentences within the distractors' category, which were taken and adapted from a B2 level textbook (*Real Writing 3*, Cambridge). The results obtained from this acceptability judgement task will be presented and analysed in the following section, as to answer the different research questions from section 3.

5. Results and analysis

In this section, the results obtained from the acceptability judgement task described in the previous part of the study are presented and analysed by dividing them into six different groups, one per structure analysed (see Table 2). We compared the results obtained from the different groups of participants: B-level group, C-level group and control group, taking into consideration different aspects that are necessary to answer to the three different research questions from section 3.

If the participants answered “1” or “2” it will be understood that they judged the sentence as “correct”, if they answered “3” or “4” it will be understood that they judged the sentence as “incorrect”. The level of accuracy in the answers of the participants will be illustrated through tables derived from an Excel database (see Excel file attached to this dissertation, each one of the testable sentences is numbered, both in the tables and in the graphs, following the numbering given to them in Table 2).

5.1. Structure 1: position of the NP

As explained in the previous section, four different sentences were tested regarding the NP position to see if the L2 English learners knew the differences between PVs and PaVs. Sentence **(1a)** was a PV with a *V-preposition-NP* structure (grammatical), **(1b)** was a PaV with a similar *V-particle-NP* structure (also grammatical). Neither of these structures proved to be problematic for the participants, as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Position of the NP ⁶

	PVs		PaVs	
	Grammatical	Ungrammatical	Grammatical	Grammatical
	(1a) <i>V-preposition- NP</i>	(2a) <i>V-NP- Preposition</i>	(1b) <i>V-particle-NP</i>	(2b) <i>V-NP- Particle</i>
B-LEVEL	91.4%	85.7%	97.1%	71.4%
C-LEVEL	97.1%	100%	100%	62.8%
CONTROL	100%	100%	92%	60%

Sentence **(2a)** had a PV with a *V-NP-Preposition* structure (ungrammatical) and the results derived from it were fairly accurate: 85.7% of the B-level and a 100% of both C-level and control group participants considered it incorrect. Sentence **(2b)** had a PaV with a *V-NP-Particle* structure (grammatical) and the acceptability; the results from this structure were surprising, only 71.4 % of the B-level participants and even a fewer number of the C-level and control participants (62.8%) and (60%), respectively, considered it correct. Therefore, for this structure it was found that one of the possible movements in PaVs (i.e. the NP between the verb and the particle) resulted less acceptable in the three groups, especially in the case of the control participants.

5.2. Structure 2: position of the pronoun

The sentences under this category aimed to test if the participants knew the different positions of a pronoun in a sentence with a PV or PaV. Sentence **(3a)** had a PV with a *V-pronoun-preposition* structure (ungrammatical) that, as illustrated in table 6, was judged as incorrect by 97.1% of the B-level participants, 91.4% of the C-level participants, and a surprisingly low 68% of the control-group participants. Sentence **(3b)**

⁶ These percentages show the level of accuracy of the participants' answers. For grammatical sentences, it represents those who chose 1-2 values, for ungrammatical sentences it represents those who chose 3-4 values. This applies to all the tables of the analysis, from 5 to 10.

had a PaV with the structure *V-pronoun-particle* (grammatical), and the results were fairly accurate and more or less similar in the three groups: 100% of the B-level participants and 97.1 % of the C-level participants considered it correct, but a lower percentage (84%) of the control-group. Therefore, it seems that especially with grammatical PV structures where the NP is placed between the verb and the Prep, control groups do not accept them so strongly as the non-native groups.

Table 6. Position of the pronoun

	PVs		PaVs	
	Ungrammatical	Grammatical	Grammatical	Ungrammatical
	(3a) <i>V-pronoun- preposition</i>	(4a) <i>V- preposition- pronoun</i>	(3b) <i>V-pronoun- particle</i>	(4b) <i>V-particle- pronoun</i>
B-LEVEL	97.1%	100%	100%	74.2%
C-LEVEL	91.4%	97.1%	97.1%	94.2%
CONTROL	68%	96%	84%	76%

Sentence (4a) had a PV with a *V-preposition-pronoun* structure (grammatical) that was not problematic for any group as the high percentages of acceptability show (96%-100%). Sentence (4b) had a PaV structure, *V-particle-pronoun* (ungrammatical); which, unexpectedly, most C-level participants rejected as correct (94.2%) but which only a fewer amount of the B-level (74.2%) and of the control-group participants (76%) judged as completely unacceptable.

Regarding the position of the pronoun then, PVs were not problematic for L2 English learners although they were for some natives (they did not reject the ungrammatical PV structure so readily as L2 learners). As for the PaVs, all the groups accepted the placement of the pronoun between the verb and the particle, but a lower percentage of B-level L2 learners and English natives showed their dislike for the ungrammatical structure.

5.3. Structure 3: adjunct insertion

The following sentences aimed to test if the participants knew that the possible positions of an adjunct (in this case an adverb) were different for PVs and PaVs. Sentence (5a) had a PV with an *adjunct-V-preposition* structure (grammatical) that was not problematic for the L2 English learners as Table 7 shows, although the accuracy of the control group was lower (88%). Sentence (5b) had a PaV with an *adjunct-V-particle* structure (grammatical) and was judged as correct by 85.7% of the B-level participants, 82.8% of the C-level participants and 96% of the control group participants, leading us to believe that PaVs were more problematic.

Table 7. Adjunct insertion.

	PVs		PaVs	
	Grammatical	Grammatical	Grammatical	Ungrammatical
	(5a) <i>adjunct-V-preposition</i>	(6a) <i>V-adjunct-preposition</i>	(5b) <i>adjunct-V-particle</i>	(6b) <i>V-adjunct-particle</i>
B-LEVEL	91.4%	71.4%	85.7%	51.4%
C-LEVEL	91.4%	62.8%	82.8%	88.5%
CONTROL	88%	80%	96%	100%

The results from the judgement of sentence (6a), a PV with a *V-adjunct-preposition* structure (grammatical), were relevant because only 71.4% of the B-level participants and 62.8% of the C-level judged it accurately as correct. Sentence (6b) had a PaV with a *V-adjunct-particle* structure (ungrammatical) and the overall accuracy difference between groups was remarkable: only 51.4% of the B-level participants considered it incorrect, while the other two groups considered it incorrect as well but in high percentages (88,5% the B-level learners, 100% the control group).

Therefore, it seems that the insertion of an adverb between the verb and the preposition (in PVs) or the particle (in PaVs) is not readily accepted by L2 learners (especially B-levels) regardless of the grammaticality status of the structure.

5.4. Structure 4: fronting in relative clauses

In the case of sentence **(7a)**, a PV *without the fronting* of the preposition (grammatical), the performance of the L2 learners showed high percentages of acceptance, as can be seen in Table 8. In the case of sentence **(7b)**, a PaV in a relative clause *without the fronting* of the particle (grammatical), it was surprising to observe that only 68.5% of B-level participants judged it as correct, and even fewer participants judged it as correct in the C-level (54.2%) and the control group (28%).

Table 8. Fronting in relative clauses

	PVs		PaVs	
	Grammatical	Grammatical	Grammatical	Ungrammatical
	(7a) <i>no fronting</i>	(8a) <i>fronting</i>	(7b) <i>no fronting</i>	(8b) <i>fronting</i>
B-LEVEL	97.1%	14.2%	68.5%	91.4%
C-LEVEL	91.4%	17.1%	54.2%	91.4%
CONTROL	88%	20%	28%	100%

Sentence **(8a)** had a PV *with fronting* (grammatical) and only 14.2% of the B-level participants, 17.1% of the C-level participants and 20% of the control group participants judged it as correct. In sentence **(8b)**, a PaV *with fronting* (ungrammatical), the results of the three groups were very similar, since most of them did not accept it. Regarding the fronting in relative clauses, then, both PVs and PaVs were problematic for the L2 learners, and natives but for different reasons: all of them do not favour the fronting in PVs but they show contradictions in the case of PaVs since they all agree that fronting is ungrammatical in this case but they do not favour no fronting either.

5.5. Structure 5: fronting in wh-questions

The next four sentences aimed to test the knowledge of the participants in the fronting of prepositions and particles in wh-questions. As can be seen in Table 9, these structures were mostly unproblematic (all the percentages of acceptability were high, ranging from 82,8% to 100%), except for **(10a)**, a PV *with fronting* (grammatical), which was judged as correct by low percentages in both groups of L2 learners (by 60% of B-levels; by 68,5% by C-levels)

Table 9. Fronting in wh-questions

	PVs		PaVs	
	Grammatical	Grammatical	Grammatical	Ungrammatical
	(9a) <i>no fronting</i>	(10a) <i>fronting</i>	(9b) <i>no fronting</i>	(10b) <i>fronting</i>
B-LEVEL	82.8%	60%	97.1%	97.1%
C-LEVEL	88.5%	68.5%	94.2%	100%
CONTROL	88%	96%	96%	100%

These results show that L2 learners do not have problems to accept the fronting of particles in wh-questions in the case of PaVs but they reject the fronting of the preposition in the case of PVs regardless of the grammaticality status of the wh-question.

5.6. Structure 6: PP coordination

The last syntactic property we aimed to analyse was PP coordination, which is possible in PVs but not in PaVs - the aim was to test if the L2 English learners knew this property. As shown in table 10, in the case of sentence **(11a)**, a PV with *PP coordination* (grammatical), the performance varied: 62.8% of the B-level participants, and 74.2% of the C-level participants judged it as correct, showing lower percentages than that of the

control group. However, sentence **(11b)**, a PaV with *PP coordination* (ungrammatical), was judged as unacceptable by the three groups.

Table 10. PP and NP coordination.

	PVs		PaVs	
	Grammatical	Grammatical	Ungrammatical	Grammatical
	(11a) <i>PP</i> <i>coordination</i>	(12a) <i>NP</i> <i>coordination</i>	(11b) <i>PP</i> <i>coordination</i>	(12b) <i>NP</i> <i>coordination</i>
B-LEVEL	62.8%	85.7%	97.1%	40%
C-LEVEL	74.2%	77.1%	100%	74.2%
CONTROL	84%	92%	96%	76%

Sentence **(12a)** had a PV with *NP coordination* (grammatical) while sentence **(12b)** had a PaV with *NP coordination* (grammatical). Surprisingly, both of these structures caused problems, especially **(12b)**: while, compared to the other two groups, C-level learners (77,1%) had some problems identifying the NP coordination of PVs as completely acceptable, B-level learners had more difficulties when accepting this same coordination in PaVs (only 40% accepted it as correct). According to these results, the PP coordination in PVs was problematic for both groups of L2 learners, and to a more or less extent, all the three groups, especially the B-levels, showed their resistance to accept the NP coordination in PaVs.

5.7. General discussion: answers to the research questions

After presenting them, the results need to be discussed in relation with the research questions posed in section 3. In our **first research question** we asked if the L2 English learners would know the differences between PVs and PaVs paying attention to their syntactic differences. For that reason, the sentences of the test covered the different syntactic movements and structures that were grammatical or ungrammatical for each type of verb. The performance of the participants was better in some of the syntactic

properties that in others: the four sentences dealing with the *NP position* and the four sentences dealing with the *pronoun position* were accurately judged by most of the L2 English participants, except for the structure PaV (*V-NP-Particle*), which, although grammatically acceptable, seems not to be favoured by English natives either, who prefer the structure where the NP do not separate the verb from the particle. L2 learners are usually taught that both structures are possible (i.e. a simple NP preceding or following the particle in PaV), which is shown in our results, but it seems that our results also point out the preference for one of the possibilities by native speakers.

However, the other four syntactic properties tested were problematic to some extent, especially when the sentences had PVs: in the case of the *adjunct insertion* the L2 English learners, especially those of the B-level, did not accept it in neither type of verbs, which could show some rejection by this type of speakers to find intervening elements in the syntax of verbs followed by a preposition or a particle. *Fronting of the preposition/particle* in relative clauses was also problematic for both L2 learners groups and for natives as well, specially the fronting of the preposition of PVs. The rejection to the lack of fronting in PaVs by all the three groups could be related to the collocation of the components of the specific example selected (i.e. *My bedroom is what I cleaned up*) rather than to the syntax of it. To a lesser extent, in the case of the fronting of the preposition in *wh-questions* with PVs L2 groups seemed not to favour the fronting of prepositions in PVs, regardless the grammaticality status of the sentences, which could be interpreted as the preference for L2 speakers to keep the preposition close to the verb. For the last structure, the *PP coordination*, in PVs was slightly more accepted than the *NP coordination* by all the 3 groups, which seemed to prefer the repetition of the preposition in this type of structures. Consequently, we can infer from all the previous results that some of the structures that are possible for PVs (but not for PaVs) are not entirely known by the L2 English learners, leading us to think that they may not be altogether familiar with them.

The results mentioned above serve also to find an answer for the **second research question** on the key role of the proficiency level of the participants. We meant to find out if their proficiency level had helped them to have a better performance in the task. While it is true that in some of the structures tested (i.e. *V-particle-pronoun* and *V-adjunct-particle* in PaVs) their ungrammaticality was detected in higher percentages by the C-level group by the B-level group than that of the C-level group, the general trend was that the L2 English participants with a higher competence level had only a slightly better

performance than those with a lower level, except in the case of the adjunct insertion in both types of verbs.

The **third research question** considered the L1 language of the participants (Spanish) as a possible factor of influence in the participants' degree of knowledge of both types of verbs. What we have observed is that only in the case of the preposition fronting in *wh*-questions (as in the example (10a), *For whom you are asking*) the L2 learners acceptability differ greatly from the control group (28-32 percentage points). This lower acceptance by the L2 learners cannot be interpreted as an influence of Spanish since the same structure can be found in this language (i.e. *¿Por quién preguntas?*). Therefore, our results do not show a possible influence on the acceptability judgements of the L2 participants

A global interpretation of such results then is that, either in American English some of these structures are not commonly used (and therefore English native speakers had trouble judging them accurately) or that maybe the separable prepositional verbs we used (i.e. those proposed by Huddleston and Pullum (2002) which could undergo *adjunct insertion, fronting in wh-questions and relative clauses, and PP coordination*) are in real language not so separable after all, and therefore some of these movements are not so common (or not so generally accepted).

6. Conclusion

The present dissertation has aimed to study the understanding of PVs and their syntax in L1 Spanish L2 English learners, exploring if they would be able to discern the different syntactic possibilities and movements that each one of the structures abides according to some grammar references. For this, we created an AJT and compared the results of 70 L1 Spanish-L2 English learners (35 of them with a B-level in English, other 35 with a C-level, and 25 native speakers as a control group) who completed it.

Six different structures were tested and after going through the detailed results of the acceptability judgement task, different possible answers to the research questions stated in section 3 were discussed. It was found that some structures resulted more problematic than others, especially those that were possible only with separable prepositional verbs. Some of these caused problems even for the control group, leading us to think that either these structures may be uncommon or that these verbs were not used separately after all; the L1 of the Spanish participants did not seem to help them to judge the different

structures more accurately; and although the level of proficiency of the L2 English learners in general affected slightly the accuracy of their answers, it was inferred that prepositional verbs and their syntax still need to be separately taught to achieve an optimum level of performance, since many structures were considerably problematic for both levels.

Some possibilities for research in the future need be presented: Firstly, the data collected is not representative enough, and some ideas for further research of the syntactic properties of prepositional verbs involve performing more empirical studies with different types of task, e.g. not only judgement, but production of these types of structures. Moreover, it would be necessary to test a larger number of participants, as to determine if these results persist, or to test participants with a different L1, where a structure similar to PVs does not exist, to contrast our results.

Another interesting approach would be to study which prepositional verbs behave similarly in the syntactic contexts presented in this dissertation, thus, which prepositional verbs are indeed 'separable' as Huddleston and Pullum propose. This would also be helpful for the teaching and understanding of prepositional verbs in textbooks (in contrast with particle verbs), which has been part of the purpose of the present dissertation.

7. Works cited

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Appendix 1: List of abbreviations

AJT: Acceptability Judgement Task

B1: Intermediate Level

B2: Upper Intermediate Level

C1: Advanced Level

C2: Mastery or Proficiency Level

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

COCA: The Corpus of Contemporary American English

DP: Determiner Phrase

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

NP: Noun Phrase

PaV: Particle Verb

PP: Prepositional Phrase

Prep: Preposition

PV: Prepositional Verb

RAE: Real Academia Española de la Lengua

V: Verb

VP: Verb Phrase

Appendix 2: Excel database

<https://1drv.ms/x/s!AghKFhWQQZY6be7oTKn9ACoPtVA?e=AlOx1v>