

METAPHOR AND PHRASAL VERBS

The meanings of phrasal verbs are often difficult to remember, because they seem to have no connection with the words that they consist of (the verb and the particle). In fact many phrasal verbs are metaphorical, and if you understand the metaphors they use, it will be easier to understand and remember their meanings. These pages look at ways in which different phrasal verbs share similar metaphors.

What is a metaphor?

Look at these pairs of sentences: the phrasal verbs are shown in bold type.

- *The dog **dug up** an old bone. ♦ We **dug up** some interesting facts.*
- *Two planes were **shot down**. ♦ Each proposal was **shot down**.*
- *Burglars had **broken into** their house while they were away. ♦ She **broke into** his conversation.*

In each pair, the first phrasal verb has a literal meaning and refers to a physical action, while the second is metaphorical and describes an action that is similar in some way to the first. For example, when someone *digs up* information, they discover it, and the process seems similar to the way in which dogs find bones that have been buried in the ground.

Some phrasal verbs only have metaphorical meanings. For example, *to breeze in* means to enter a place confidently, without seeming to care what other people think: perhaps the attitude and action reminds us of the movement of a breeze (= a light wind). Similarly, *to rope someone in* means to persuade someone to do something that they do not really want to do: perhaps it reminds us of the way in which people use ropes to catch animals or to collect them together.

Adverbs, prepositions, and metaphor

A phrasal verb consists of a verb (like

dig, shoot, or break) and a particle (an adverb like **down** or **up**, or a preposition like **into**). When the *verb* part of a phrasal verb is used in a metaphorical way, this is usually quite obvious. But the *particles* may be used metaphorically too. This is less easy to recognize, but in fact there is often a clear connection between the literal meanings of the particle and its metaphorical uses. The sections below explain some of these connections.

In English, like many other languages, the basic, *literal* meanings of adverbs and prepositions refer to direction, position in space, distance, or extent.

- **up** literally describes movement towards a higher position
- **down** literally describes movement towards a lower position
- **ahead** literally describes a position in front of you (*the house is directly ahead*).

The *metaphorical* uses of these particles develop from these literal ones:

- **up** has metaphorical meanings to do with increases in size, number, or strength (*prices went up*)
- **down** has metaphorical meanings to do with decreases in size, number, or strength (*the children quietened down*)
- **ahead** metaphorically describes a point in the future (*many problems lies ahead of us*).

This dictionary has special pages on common particles (see Contents on page iii) that explain the meanings they have in phrasal verbs, including their metaphorical meanings.

Conceptual metaphors

Very often, the same metaphorical idea occurs in many different words and phrases, not just in phrasal verbs. For example, the idea of moving upwards or of being in a high position is found in many words that metaphorically describe increases in quantity (**go up, rise, climb, soar, peak** etc), and