

PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AND IDIOMS, EAST AND WEST AND WHERE DO WE STAND

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Abstract. Phraseology has come a long way since the beginning of its studies. While many issues have been resolved, others expanded, the essence of the basic units – phraseologism idiom are still contested. The variety of approaches to the concept of the phraseological unit (PU), its categorical features and scope as well as various classifications create a never ending controversy. This paper attempts to draw together the main viewpoints of Eastern and Western schools as well as determine the basic features of the PU without an attempt to create a rigid framework. It views the PU as a stable unit with a fully or partially figurative meaning. The author considers that attempts at establishing a universal classification are doomed to failure as all features of PUs are relative, scalar and flexible.

Keywords: phraseology, idiom, figurativeness, phraseological unit, definition, classification

There has been a steady growth of scholarly interest in phraseology in Europe over the last decades. Phraseology was long regarded as a peripheral issue, but it is now taking the centre stage in many domains of linguistics. The beginnings of phraseology, both practical (Knappe, 2004: 4) and theoretical (Charles Bally's *Locutions phraséologiques* (Bally, 1950)), can be traced back earlier, as a branch of linguistics in the 20th century, it was mostly developed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Häusermann, 1977). This is where the concept of *phraseological unit* (PU) was defined and elaborated. Germanic studies usually operate with the term phraseologism (Burger, 1998a, 2007) which is broadly equivalent to a PU. Anglophone studies have tended to use the term 'idiom' and 'fixed expression'. The issue of the scope and domain of phraseology and the precise meaning of the terms 'phraseological unit' and 'phraseologism' are the central questions of phraseology, still not fully resolved to this day. As Cowie points out (2001: 210), 'phraseology is bedevilled by proliferation of terms', and, 'categorization is notoriously difficult in phraseology because of the bristling array of variables – syntactic, pragmatic, stylistic, semantic'. Although solving this issue is not our task, a brief consideration is required by this study.

History reveals two approaches to fixed collocations. The first mainly addresses word-like combinations (collocations and composites (Cowie, 1981; Steyer, 2008, Bergenholtz, 2008; Konecny, 2010); as opposed to sentence-like (Finkbeiner, 2008) phraseological combinations and expressions (Chernisheva, 1964; Schindler, 1993; Lueger, 1999), propositions (Glaeser, 1986), phraseological

expressions, pragmatic phrasemes (Mel'čuk, 1988), functional expressions (Cowie, 1988; Howarth, 1996), communicative formulas ('kommunikative, Formeln') (Fleischer, 1997: 125). Both these categories are generally viewed as subcategories of the larger concept of PUs, alias phraseologisms, set phrases, or set or stable word combinations.

The second approach focuses mainly at **motivation** aspects (Vietri, 1990; Dobrovol'skij, 2001; Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, 2010) and figurativeness, and was pioneered by Vinogradov (1947). A combination of the two approaches has historically led to three different understandings of the concept of PU. However, the degree of motivation is not clear-cut but somewhat subjective, depending on the linguistic competence and cultural experience of the user (as well as the linguist).

The first concept within this approach was based on a narrow understanding of a PU as an opaque, invariable unit (Amosova, 1963) related to the word and its syntactic function (Babkin, 1970; Larin, 1977; Molotkov, 1977) in the Russian school, often referred to as 'idiom' in Anglo-Saxon linguistics (Horn, 2003) or occasionally as phraseme in German (Palm, 1997). Yet one must agree with Čermak (2001) who talks of 'perennial problems' with the substance of idioms, and Moon (1998: 3) who considers idiom as 'an ambiguous term used in conflicting ways'. It generally tends to mean a fully idiomatic unit, a 'fossilized collocation' (Saeed, 2002: 60), but also occasionally refers to any fixed phrases and sometimes includes even simple or complex words or any metaphorical expression (Oxford, 1992: 495-496). Moreover, the term 'idiom' is polysemantic in English and can refer to specific usages or vocabulary characteristic of a group of people or an individual, style, manner of speech, etc. As these meanings also refer to the sphere of linguistics, the term is rather unwelcome in research. This is one of the reasons we find the concept inconvenient. The second, broader argument against it is that the concept of a PU as an idiom (when we do manage to define it) is too narrow as it omits the majority of stable units with low or medium degrees of idiomaticity. Aristova (1979) believes that phraseology should cover language facts, united by the title 'the science of the phrase'. This can retrospectively be seen in the attempt of Anglophone linguists to define the domain of phraseology as consisting of idioms and fixed phrases and later accepting the term phraseologism or PU (Cowie, 1981, 1998). In addition, the boundary between a fully idiomatic phrase and a partially idiomatic phrase is vague as the phraseological stock normally consists of a varied set of expressions, starting with idioms and then gradually decreasing in idiomaticity to stable, non-idiomatic combinations on the periphery of idiomatic microsystems. Idiomaticity is scalar, ranging from strong to weak idiomatic constructions (Gibbon, 1981: 22). The gradation and transition of units with varying degrees of idiomaticity represents a universal feature of phraseology (Makkai, 1978: 415), and it seems wrong to restrict some of the range artificially. Besides, some studies and linguists argue that there is much more regularity underlying most

idioms, which we are normally not aware of when focusing on the arbitrariness of idiom semantics (Cassadei, 1996).

The particular vector of this study also argues against separating full idioms from partially figurative phrases. This is because borrowing takes place across the entire range of PUs, and the borrowing process is the same for all units, regardless of idiomaticity. Further, considering the evolution of phraseology, i.e. taking a diachronic perspective, we notice that PUs are often the developmental result of stable collocations; besides, many PUs lose their motivation when borrowed, and some lose it in the course of assimilation. However, there is no denying that there are differences between idioms and the rest of the PUs. Idioms have their own characteristics, but ‘no artificial restriction of a phraseological research with a category of stable verbal varieties, even if it is central and the most specific, can be justified in terms of functional value of different types of language signs in social communication’ (Chernisheva 1977: 42).

According to the second understanding, developed by Kunin (1970: 210), a PU is a stable word combination with a fully or partially figurative meaning. It thus differs from the other stable word combinations (collocations) of non-phraseological character in being at least partially transformed semantically. It can semantically relate to both a word and a sentence, and has at least minimum stability. This is the general and most widely accepted definition of the PU (Orlovskaya 1968, Chernisheva, 1977; Raihstein, 1980; Gläser, 1986; Veisbergs, 1986, 1989a, b, 1996, 1999, 2012; Naciscione, 2001, 2010 and others). Since we adhere to this concept, it will be discussed further in detail. Of late there have been attempts to introduce another term – phraseme – to substitute phraseologism or PU, having the same meaning (Burger, 2007: 11).

The third and broadest understanding defines a PU as a word combination, collocation or fixed phrase with or without any semantic transformation, having separate nomination powers (Arkhangelsky, 1964; Shansky, 1969; Benson, 1989; Moon, 2001; Hausmann, 2004; Philip, 2008). This concept actually comprises all complex stable items of nomination: fixed phrases, including terms, extended time fillers, pragmatic phrases, etc. The concept is not usually described in terms of phraseological units, e.g. in Italian it is called complex lexemes (*lessemicomplexi*) (De Mauro, 1996), in English occasionally multiword units (Coffey, 2001), set phrases or phrasemes (Mel’čuk, 1995) but presumes the inclusion of PUs. From our point of view, such a concept is too broad, because it lacks a number of a PU’s categorical features and overemphasizes the feature of stability. On the other hand, it may for some specific purposes (lexicographic analysis, corpus linguistics) make sense to view all fixed expressions as one stock, where idiomaticity (always somewhat subjective) is a less appealing feature than measurable criteria, like frequency or co-occurrence. This aspect can be seen in the following definition by Gries (2008: 6): ‘a phraseologism is defined as the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one

semantic unit in a clause or sentence and whose frequency of co-occurrence is larger than expected on the basis of chance'. Yet, as with idiom, producing a non-controversial definition of collocation seems to be impossible (Fontenelle, 2001: 191). The modern corpora studies have shown frequency distributions and variation (Sinclair, 1991; Moon, 2001; Stubbs, 2002; Fellbaum, 2004, 2006; Huebner, 2006; Hanks, 2006) which reveal a different picture from the simple enumeration of PUs in various languages. Attempts have also been made to limit corpus investigations to idiomatic multiword units which invariably produce the traditional problem of delimitation of idiomaticity which is scalar (Grant, 2003). When contrasting stocks of phraseology in various languages, one cannot help but notice that similarities are more pronounced in colourful, metaphoric expressions of all types, but hardly in idiosyncratic (Benson, 1989) frozen collocations – functional expressions which dominate the scene of collocations in the language statistically (Moon, 2001). Functional expressions are very much source-language system related.

In our opinion, the second approach, defining a phraseological unit and phraseologism as a relatively stable combination of words with a completely or partially figurative meaning, is both theoretically and practically most appropriate. According to this definition there are three main features of a PU:

- 1) it consists of at least two components (separability);
- 2) it is (relatively) stable;
- 3) at least one component is used figuratively.

What are these main and secondary features characteristic of a PU?

Figurativeness, or semantic transfer, is the main feature of a PU. Figurative meaning consists in deviation from the literal meaning of the word combination or the components of a PU as a result of a semantic shift (Kunin, 1972: 72). The figurative meaning of a PU can be determined by comparing it with an identical literal counterpart (the non-figurative phrase, collocation or sentence) or, in the absence of a counterpart, by comparing the meaning of the PU with the literal meaning of its components.

Figurativeness as a feature of PU was first mentioned by Larin (1977), although he saw it only in idioms, i.e. in the narrow sense. The term 'idiomaticity' is similarly treated as a feature characteristic of idioms (Zhukov, 1986), i.e. of one group of PUs. Figurativeness is a broader concept than idiomaticity (Fernando, 1981, 1996; Gill, 2011) which is usually interpreted as a statement that the meaning of the whole cannot be derived from the meaning of the parts. There are authors who use other terms, e.g. metaphoricity (Degut, 1973, Vakurov, 1981) which is by and large identical to figurativeness. Towards the end of the 20th century, when the metaphor studies took a turn for conceptual and cognitive approach (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987), these were also partially transferred into idiom study (Dobrovolskij, 1997, 2004; Omazić, 2008). Yet other researchers have pointed out that not all idioms

are metaphoric (Burger, 1998b) and not all metaphorical idioms can be traced back to general conceptual metaphors. Thus, figurativeness seems to us the preferable term. This approach to figurativeness resolves the issue of the range of phraseology.

Creating specific subtypes of PUs on the basis of their figurative meaning (which is scalar and not clear-cut) seems to be inexpedient, although the term 'idiom' is used to designate fully figurative PUs in this paper. Figurativeness may be complete or partial depending on whether it affects the entire phrase or a part of it. Figurativeness is a categorial property of PUs that distinguishes them from stable non-phraseological phrases (Naciscione, 2010). Most other features of PUs ultimately derive from this basic feature (Rey, 1973: 98).

Multicomponentiality. The general understanding of a PU implies the exclusion of simple complex word combinations (compounds) from the stock of phraseology. Nevertheless, this can be an issue in many concrete cases as there is a pronounced tendency in various languages for idiomatic compounds to turn into a phrase. Some PUs also fluctuate diachronically and synchronically between the form of a compound and the PU, English occasionally admits hyphenation: *fare-thee-well*, *jack-of-all-trades*; *up-to-date*; and hyphenation is rife in attributive use: *blue collar*: *blue-collar*. In some languages, like German and Latvian, the structural principle of clear juxtaposition of a multiple word unit versus compound resolves the issue; in other languages, such as English, the borderline might be less distinct. The upper boundary of a PU is a complex sentence, i.e. proverbs, sayings and winged words, if they are figurative in nature. The relation between the concept of PUs and proverbs is far from resolved. Many linguists include proverbs in phraseology (Shansky, 1969; Chernisheva, 1970; Kunin, 1970; Teliya, 1996; Burger, 1998a, b, 2007: 11), while others separate these concepts (Babkin, 1970; Kopylenko, 1973; Zhukov, 1986; Palm, 1997). It is, however, problematic to deny a concrete proverb its phraseological character solely because of its length. Besides, many extended PUs have quantitative variants and elliptical expressions; and denying the status of a PU to the full form while recognizing it for an elliptical one does not seem to make sense, e.g.

*(it is easier for a camel) (to go through) **the eye of a needle** (than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven);*

*(to draw/pull) **a red herring** (across sb's path / track)*

Stability of PU. By stability or fixedness of a PU, we mean reproducibility of the phrase as a finished product which is based on the integrity of the nomination of the word combination and which predominates over separability in the mind of the user (reader or listener). Another term occasionally used is non-compositionality; yet, as Svensson shows, it seems to envelop several elements: non-motivation, opacity, unanalysability and figurativeness (Svensson, 2008: 82), which in our opinion makes it too cumbersome and broad. Stability or fixedness (Álvarez, 2008) is a measure of the resistance of a PU to its prototype free word combination. Stability is one of the main features distinguishing PUs from

free phrases. Kunin (1970: 88) treats PU stability as ‘the amount of invariance of various aspects of the phraseological level’ and distinguishes between the structurally-semantic, semantic, lexical and syntactic stability of use. However, it would be incorrect to treat stability as a static feature. PUs, like any living manifestation of language, are characterized by both stability and instability. These properties closely interact and ensure the functioning and dynamics of phraseological stock (Mokienko, 1980: 39). A PU is flexible, despite its stability, and this flexibility can be both language-based or linguistic and occasional or nonce. Phraseological instability as a language phenomenon (in Saussurian terms) is well expressed in the diachronic aspect as well in synchronic variants of the PU. Studies show that about 20% of Latvian PUs have variants (Orlovska, 1973: 27). Taking into account that many of these units have numerous variants, the total rate of variety is much higher. The speech or textual instability can be seen in the occasional, nonce or instantial (Naciscione, 2001, 2010) use of PUs – both on diachronic and synchronic level. In addition, modern corpus studies (Fellbaum, 2007; Huemmer, 2009) show a great variability in PUs in many languages. Thus, stability and variability are relative properties, although stability is a categorical feature of PUs (Rey, 1973).

Apart from these categorical properties, most PUs possess other properties.

Separability (a term proposed by Smirnitsky in 1956) broadly designates the presence of at least two words within the unit. Although the components of a PU actually are represented with words, though specifically used, this is only a superficial understanding of separability. As Arnold (1973: 166) points out, the separability of a PU does not only mean its multicomponent nature, but also presumes the syntactic relations that remain within the PU and can be activated by the use of PU in speech. Syntactic relations between the components may be interrupted if the user so wishes. Components are partially mobile (less so in idioms). Separation of words and deformation or transformation of units are possible. We cannot agree with a relatively widespread and old view (Molotkov, 1965: 78, 79) that words within a PU lose their features, their lexical meaning, grammatical category, syntactic function, links and relationships, and connections between elements (or components) of a PU stop being connections between words. According to Molotkov, the constituent parts of a PU should not be identified with a word. One could ask what a PU does consist of, being separable? How are transformations possible? We believe that, although the words in a PU lose some of their nature, a PU consists of words. To some extent, some idioms and pragmatic expressions might correspond to Molotkov’s concept, but they form only a small part of the stock of phraseological language and even idioms are transformable: their components can often be changed and substituted.

Semantic integrity in a way runs counter to its separability. Yet, this is only a potential contradiction, although it may become real under transformations. Separability exists on the level of formation and structure, but integrity and

inseparability on the level of semantics. Semantic integrity is sometimes designated as solidity, cohesion (Naciscione, 2001: 20), idiomaticity, or the integrity of the nomination. Semantic integrity presumes inner semantic unity of a PU, its holophrastic nature (fully evident in idioms proper). Semantic integrity is a relative feature of a PU as some PUs possess it to a greater extent than others, for example, idioms.

Figurativeness and the metaphorical nature of a PU are often associated with PU properties of secondary relevance, such as expressiveness and emotionality. Many PUs are expressive, which helps to emphasize the colouring of concepts. However, attribution of expressiveness to the main features of a PU (Mokienko, 1980: 4) is not substantiated. 'Expressiveness is a characteristic categorical feature of a phraseologism' (Vakurov, 1981: 58) seems erroneous to us because, despite the fact that expressiveness, emotionality, and evaluation of a PU are generated by the metaphorical (figurative) nature of a PU, not all PUs have preserved these features, and some PUs are emotional. Prolonged use of a PU, although it does not remove its metaphorical nature, can frequently erase its expressiveness (as evidenced by many clichés).

This brings us to the issue of a PU versus terminological unit. Linguistic and professional terminology studies often clearly separate these notions, as terms allegedly should be transparent, unambiguous, precise, and monosemantic (ISO, 1999), which as it were rules out the possibility of terms also being PUs. Yet in reality we see a different picture: many complex terms are closely related to PUs, carrying all the traits of the latter, e.g. *blind gut* (in medicine), *saltomortale* (in aviation), *false friends* or *faux ami* (in linguistics) have originated through metaphorisation of free word combinations. One of the methods of term creation is the use of figurative meaning (a metaphor, metonymy); therefore, they become idiomatic, e.g. *clover leaf*. If terminological units and complex terms (Cabre, 1998: 91) correspond to the definition of a PU, then the terminological character should not artificially exclude an expression from the category of phraseology (Veisbergs, 1989a). Terms are close to PUs in their semantic autonomy, collocational restriction (Ikere, 2011: 52) and independence from context. A compound term does not differ from a PU fundamentally when used figuratively. It should also be noted that some PUs of terminological character have no precise lexical counterpart in the language – they are the sole units that can denote phenomena and notions of reality. For example: *still life*, *lame duck*, *seed money*. This means that these PUs fill the gaps in nomination – a 'nominative vacuum' (Gering, 1983: 13) or lacuna (Schroeder, 1995: 10). Phraseology is rife in specialized texts (Glaeser, 2007).

Another group of terminological phrases consists of phrases that are not PUs when used in a 'native' terminological sphere because they lack figurativeness there, but which nevertheless develop a lasting tendency towards metaphoric use as a result of frequent use and popularity. This creates a stylistic effect: a compound term thus 'lights up' in a new context. In this way numerous idioms

have originated from professional terminology domains, e.g. *road map*, *trump card*. Whole layers of non-figurative cricket and baseball terms are frequently used in idiomatic sense today, e.g. *to play softball*, *to play hardball*. When used frequently, terminological phrases tend to migrate to a different language domain (journalese, colloquial, standard language). They may undergo a semantic change in the different domain, or function in both domains. Generally, the transition of terminological phrases into a PU undergoes the following stages:

- 1) 'transfer' of a terminological phrase in non-terminological context;
- 2) use of the terminological phrase in a figurative meaning;
- 3) adoption of the figurative meaning by regular use in standard language.

As a rule, when the functional range of a PU increases, the figurative meaning intensifies its abstract character. The above processes mainly refer to the source language. When borrowed, PUs of a terminological character are usually transferred both in their terminological and figurative meaning, sometimes in the figurative sense alone. Thus, for example, the English PU *dark horse* which meant *a horse with unknown racing abilities in equestrian sport*, undergoing the second metaphorisation, gained political semantics (an unknown candidate for the presidential election), and it is used to characterise an unknown candidate in any sphere. This is attested by the path within a century from specialised jargon through colloquial speech to standard language.

Finally, some remarks on the usefulness of classifications of the PUs. The phraseological stock of a language comprises many PUs of various types: this has prompted researchers to create numerous and different classifications trying to introduce some order in the seemingly chaotic collection of heterogeneous units. This was started by Vinogradov's concept based on grading the motivation of the components of PUs. Yet motivation, in our opinion, is an extremely ambiguous issue and category. Firstly, diachronically: many units that were motivated have now become unmotivated (archaization of lexical components, etc.). Secondly, it depends on the knowledge of the individual, e.g. many antique idioms are relatively transparent for a person with a classical education, but may seem unmotivated to someone lacking it. Later attempts were made to improve this classification, but in our opinion these were unsuccessful as they usually involved adding other criteria, but retaining motivation. The abundance of classifications, in our opinion, is caused by the wide range of studies, approaches, goals and definitions, etc. since, in all probability, no classification can meet all objectives, and there is always room for some subjectivity (Laua, 1992: 6).

Thus, though there are numerous possibilities of classifying PUs (e.g. thematic, by origin, stylistic register, functionality, frequency, etc.) these classifications are of limited use in the narrow spheres of study. Yet, it sometimes makes sense to refer to the units as verb collocations, noun collocations, adverb collocations and preposition collocation. This simple grammatical classification dates back to Palmer (1933: 18). Also Kunin's (1972) structural and semantic

classification can help make some generalizations about the prevalence of a particular type of a PU in phraseological stock. This classification gives four types of PUs:

- 1) nominative, i.e. identifying the objects, events, etc.: *love triangle*;
- 2) nominative-communicative: *to be in the same boat*;
- 3) exclamatory and modal, i.e. expressing emotions, intentions: *et tu Brute?, you too, Brutus?, fuck off!*;
- 4) communicative, i.e. a PU with a structure of simple and complex sentences; this class includes proverbs and sayings: *my home is my castle*.

However, a canonical classification based on the categorical features seems to be impossible as it is likely to be extremely subjective and not universal. The features of the PU are too flexible and even the categorical characteristics are sometimes relative diachronically and in speech use. This is another reason why it seems reasonable not to try to subdivide the extremely versatile phraseological stocks into controversial domains based on subjective objectives or targets. Phraseology constitutes a varied system of overlapping, flexible sets of units which are in a continuous flux diachronically and synchronically, reflecting the current needs of their users.

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