

WORDS IN COMBINATIONS AND THEIR USE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

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Abstract

The paper deals with different approaches to phraseological units that consist of more than two elements having one meaning. Phrasemes or idioms are a specific type of words in combinations characterised by expressiveness and figurativeness. The elements of these idioms are fully or partially desemanticised. Our research is based on an analysis of the words in combinations extracted from contemporary English literary texts and sorted into different categories based on their salient features. The goal of this study is to verify current trends in the use of words in combination in both the language of a narrator and the speech of main characters.

Key words: multi-word lexical items, idioms, multi-word verbs

1. INTRODUCTION

From the theoretical point of view, it is very important to define the term ‘words in combinations’ from different perspectives. The classical approach to linguistics views these words in combinations as basic units of the phraseological system of any language possessing their specific characteristics such as fixed or partially fixed forms distinguished from other lexical items by expressiveness and figurativeness whose elements have been totally or partially de-semantised. According to Čermák (2007), this viewpoint accepts two terms: phrasemes and idioms, which differ from the distinction between the form aspects (phrasemes) and semantic aspects (idioms). Another concept based on vocabulary connections introduces the term ‘multi-word items’, focusing on the significance and the intricacy of the links between words such as their strong clustering tendencies (Moon, 2011, p. 40). This concept includes collocations, prefabs, fixed phrases and compounds alongside with phrasal verbs and idioms.

1.1. Phraseological units

The concept of phraseological units can be completed by various classifications. If the classification is based upon motivation of the unit (the relationship between the meaning of the unit as a whole and the meanings of its individual components, then phraseological units can be divided into several groups: phraseological fusions, phraseological unities and phraseological combinations (Vinogradov, 1977). The first ones represent those units whose meaning is never influenced by the meanings of its constituents (a hot potato – a problem, situation that is difficult to deal with and causes a lot of disagreement) and are sometimes called idioms under which linguists understand a complete loss of the inner form. To explain the meaning of idioms is a complicated etymological problem (*in dribs and drabs* means in small amounts, but no one can explain the meaning of single words *drib* and *drab*). Phraseological unities comprise semantically indivisible phraseological units the whole meanings of which are motivated by the meanings of its components (to fall into a rage – to get angry) and these words in combinations may be used as free in the direct meaning and as phraseological in the figurative meaning. The third category includes collocations in which every word has absolutely clear independent meaning while one of the components has a bound meaning (to make an attempt – try). The degree of motivation is correlated with the rigidity, indivisibility and semantic unity of the expression. Some linguists who stick to the general understanding of phraseology and refer to its communicational units (sentences) and winged words, define the fourth type of phraseological units. Multi-word expressions such as proverbs, sayings or quotes of famous people are concise sentences, expressing some truth. They are often metaphoric in character and include elements of implicit information well understood without being formally present in the discourse (When in Rome, do as the Romans do, To err is human, Rome wasn’t built in a day). Some linguists call the phraseological units as word-groups (Ginzburg et al., 1997) or words in combinations (Kvetko, 2009).

1.2. Words in combinations and their figurative meaning

The goal of this paper is to focus on multi-word lexical items in which the sequence of words semantically and syntactically forms a meaningful and inseparable unit. Multi-word items are the result of lexical (and semantic) processes of fossilisation and word-formation, rather than the results of the operation of grammatical rules. The three criteria which help distinguish holistic multi-word items are as follows:

- **institutionalisation** that concerns the degree to which a multi-word item is conventionalised in the language and is sometimes defined as **lexicalization**
- **fixedness** that refers the degree to which a multi-word item is frozen as a sequence of words, for example, *on the other hand*, *on another hand* and *on a different hand*
- **non-compositionality** that is related to the degree to which a multi-word item cannot be interpreted on a word-by-word basis, but has a specialised unitary meaning.

These three important criteria enable the linguists to distinguish different types of multi-word lexical items as they could have different degree of fixedness and opacity, for example, *to make a mistake* or *heavy rain* versus *white elephant* or *red tape*.

Corpus analyses that are very popular and frequently used in language analysis broaden the traditional approach of lexicologists and phraseologists, focusing on idiomatic fixed expressions and their occurrence in speech and writing (O'Keeffe, McCarthy, Carter, 2010, p. 63). These traditional idioms are considered the semantically opaque multi-word expressions such as *pull somebody's leg* or *fly off the handle* that are informal but relatively rare in occurrence in everyday conversation. On the other hand, there are more free or open combinations that are a high-frequent phenomenon in everyday talk such as *heavy rain*, *to be good at sth* or *I see*.

Taking this approach into consideration, our research is based on presenting a framework that focuses on multi-word lexical units with their specialised unitary meaning based on partial or full figurativeness. From this perspective, the article deals with multi-word verbs, idioms, idiomatic multi-word expressions, similes and compounds having figurative meaning.

2. STUDY BASED ON FIGURATIVENESS OF MULTI-WORD LEXICAL ITEMS

As the CEFR (2001) states, it is at a C level when the user of a target language is expected to have a good command of idiomatic expressions. Idioms are expressions that are fixed and used in a non-literal (metaphorical) way. They are whole expressions that cannot usually change (Wright, 2002:7). The CEFR (2001) introduces examples of idiomatic expressions as follows:

- semantically opaque, frozen metaphors, e.g.: *He kicked the bucket* (i.e. he died), *It's a long shot* (= unlikely to succeed), *He drove hell for leather* (i.e. very fast)
- phrasal verbs, e.g. *to put up with*, *to make do (with)*
- expressions of folk wisdom, e.g. proverbs (*a stitch in time saves nine*), familiar quotations, cliché (*It takes all sorts to make a world*)
- relict archaisms, e.g. *Be off with you!*
- phrases the use of which is often contextually and stylistically restricted, e.g. *as white as snow* (= 'pure'), as against *as white as a sheet* (= 'pallid').

These fixed expressions incorporate and reinforce common attitudes, are commonly used and a knowledge of them is a significant component of the linguistic aspect of sociocultural competence. There are many resources that might provide a sufficient amount of examples, but contemporary literary prose seems to be justifiable as it includes both the language of a narrator and that of characters. For purposes of this study we decided to use books read in 2016 and 2017 that were analysed from the above-mentioned perspective. A list of the books is part of the References.

2.1. Multi-word verbs

According to Quirk et al. (1995), multiword verbs are distinguished into three categories: phrasal verbs (*switch on*), prepositional verbs (*look on*) and phrasal-prepositional verbs (*get on with*). Prepositional verbs can have partially-figurative meaning – *to look at* (turn sb's eyes in a particular direction towards sb/sth, examine sth closely) or fully-figurative meaning – *to look for* (try to find sb/sth). Phrasal verbs have predominantly figurative meaning and sometimes are called idiomatic verbs + particle combinations as it is difficult to guess the meaning in the context from the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the particle, for example, *to fall through* (to fail to be completed; to not happen). Some phrasal verbs can have both literal (*bring sth/sb up* – to move sb/sth to a higher place, e.g. up the stairs) and figurative (*bring sb up* – educate, raise, rear) meanings. Phrasal verbs have usually their equivalents expressed in single-word verbs, however, they are more formal than the phrasal verbs, or used in slightly different contexts. Phrasal-prepositional verbs have often figurative/idiomatic meaning, for example, *put up with somebody* (accept somebody who is annoying without complaining) or *look forward to* (feel excited about something that is going to happen because you expect to enjoy it).

The example of authentic material – *He had to hold on to that thought, because this evening he was going to have to return to It and the half-life, the lie-life, that allowed the real Him to walk and breathe in secret* (Galbraith, 2016, p. 46) – is based on the expression *hold on to sth* that means *to hold sth tightly, to not let go sth*.

The verb *to cut sth out* can be used in its literal meaning – to make something by cutting. In our example *He isn't cut out for this* (Patterson, 2016, p. 462) the phrasal verb is used in its figurative meaning *to find sb or to be suitable for something*.

Multi-word verbs in each analysed text were used the most frequently used lexical units we focused on. On the contrary with our goal, the majority of them were used in their literal meaning. We could not find any difference between their use in the speech of a narrator or that of characters.

2.2. Idioms

Many idioms are metaphorical expressions which are in common use, for example, *to be on track* (to complete a planned course of action), *to tighten somebody's belt* (to reduce sb's spending) or *to take somebody at face value* (to accept someone how they appear at first, without thinking they could be somebody else). As many words in English are used in a metaphorical way, many English native-speakers no longer notice that they are metaphors, for example, *to cast light on*, *to launch an advertising campaign*, *keep cool*, etc.

An example of authentic language *Convincing me to do a better film so you could move up the ladder and get back with your movie star girlfriend?* (Horowitz, 2016, p. 101) includes the expression *to move up the ladder* that means to get further qualification that can help people move up their career ladder or to get a more important job in a company or organisation.

From the semantic point of view, idioms can be classified as pure, partially motivated and semi-idioms. Pure idioms (demotivated, opaque) are idioms in which there is no connection between the meanings of individual words and the meaning of the whole idiom, for example, *to kick the bucket* (to die) or *to spill the beans* (to tell sb sth that should be kept secret or private). As far as the expression *to kick the bucket* is concerned, a very similar meaning is expressed by another idiom *to bite the dust* in one of the examples of authentic language *Another one bites the dust* (Patterson, 2016, p. 430).

In the example of authentic language *But most people just seem to remember that last part – that I've brought shame on the department, that I crossed the thin blue line* (Patterson, 2016, p. 216) the idiom *to cross the thin blue line* is used by the media in the meaning that the thin blue line exists to hide illegal activities or unethical behaviour and those officers that come forward to report them are commonly referred to as crossing the thin blue line. The *thin blue line* is a term for the police (wearing blue uniforms), suggesting that they stand between an ordered society and potential chaos.

Analysing two expressions with the verb *hit*, it was possible to conclude that *hit the road* seems to be more figurative than *hit a wall* in the following examples. *I shrug. 'Hit the road, Matty,' I say. 'Or I'll hit you again, a lot harder'* (Patterson, 2016, p. 192) seems to be less predictable than *'Your career's hit a wall?'* (Patterson, 2016, p. 61). While the first means *to set off*, the second is used to express *to encounter an obstacle*.

Partially motivated idioms consists of elements of the meaning in which one part is motivated while another is not, for example, *a golden handshake* (a large sum of money that is given to somebody when they leave their job) or *a white lie* (harmless or small lie, especially that you tell to avoid hurting sb), in which words like *handshake* and *lie* are not motivated while their modifiers (golden and white) are motivated.

Idioms are sometimes classified according to different criteria. The main feature that differentiates between the different kinds of idioms is the degree of idiomacity that an idiom carries. Idioms are categorised in a continuum from transparent to opaque called the spectrum of idiomacity. Due to this classification, four categories of idioms are defined:

a) transparent-opaque idioms that have a very close meaning to that of the literal meaning of both components that in combination acquires a figurative sense, e.g. *to see the light* (understand)

The expression *fall flat* in the sentence *He smiles, then realizes that the comment fell flat* (Patterson, 2016, p. 454) is used in the meaning that something failed, was unsuccessful or did not work properly. The meaning of willing to try anything to improve a difficult or unsatisfactory situation, even if it has little chance of success expressed through the idiom *to grasp at straws* was used in the sentence *'Look, I'm grasping at straws. I'm looking for anything I can,' she says* (Patterson, 2016, p. 337).

The expression *a good egg* in the example of authentic material *You've always been a good egg* (Patterson, 2016, p. 465) refers to somebody who is considered a nice person. The expression originally came from its antonym – *bad egg* – that was used in British public school slang from the 1800's for somebody who was not considered nice. Later, the expression *a good egg* started to be used in the meaning of a good chap or a decent fellow.

b) semi-transparent idioms that usually carry metaphorical senses as the meaning of its parts do not enable to understand the entire meaning, e.g. *break the ice* (relieve the tension)

If someone is missing, unable to be found, then the idiomatic expression *to be in the wind* is used, for example, *Which also means that, if Aiden has a single functioning brain cell in his head, he's in the wind now* (Patterson, 2016, pp. 371-372). The expression *to be in the wind* is used in two meanings depending whether the subject of the sentence is animate or inanimate. If *something is in the wind* then, the expression is used when people are talking about something that may happen, but nobody is sure about it.

c) semi-opaque idioms in which figurative meaning is not joined to that of the constituent words of the idiom, as a part with a literal meaning, and another part with a figurative sense, e.g. *to know the ropes* (to know how a particular job should be done)

The expression *play gooseberry* in the sentence *She lost count of the times that she played gooseberry to Emira's endless conquests with guys* (James, 2015.p. 74) was used in the meaning that a third person tags along with two people who are in a romantic relationship when they would rather be alone. The American English equivalent third wheel is closer to the Slovak equivalent, and therefore more comprehensible.

d) opaque idioms whose actual meaning is impossible to infer from the meanings of its components due to the presence of items having cultural references. These culture-specific items have a great influence on the comprehensibility of idiomatic expressions, e.g. *to burn one's boat* = to make retreat impossible.

'He's going to let this be water under the bridge' (Patterson, 2016, p. 311) is an idiom whose meaning is difficult to infer from two main words in the fixed expression: *water* and *bridge*. It is used in the meaning that something is forgotten, something that refers to the past.

The idiom *put all your eggs in one basket* in the meaning that a person doesn't concentrate all his/her prospects or resources in one thing or place as he/she could lose everything was used in literary prose as *She never kept all her eggs in the same basket; although Walt appeared vastly wealthy she'd always had a plan B, and that was to get rid of him as quickly as possible* (James, 2016, p. 54).

These idioms were represented in our authentic materials in a limited number. Frankly speaking, a number of English idiomatic expressions were not easy to be distinguished into the above-mentioned categories as some features were more typical for one category and other features seemed to fit other categories.

The idiom *out of the blue* in the sentence *'Two days later, totally out of the blue, three cops are suddenly claiming that I skimmed off the top of a drug raid before I went undercover* (Patterson, 2016, p. 342) is used in the meaning that 'something happened unexpectedly and suddenly', and can be found in English with the verbs such as appear or come.

The idiom *to be at one's wits' end* in the sentence *I've been waiting all afternoon for some news, I'm at my wits' end* (James, 2016, p. 23) was used in the meaning 'to be so worried, confused, or annoyed that a person does not know what to do next' and has some equivalents in Slovak that are more or less figurative.

2.3. Compounds

Compounds belong to multi-word expressions as they differ from single words by being written as two or more orthographic words that cannot be properly separated out altogether, since variable hyphenation conventions blur the distinction between compound multi-word items and polymorphemic single words, for example, *car park*, *carpark* and *car-park*. Hyphenation or fusion of words is a technique by which a string is designated as a unit and therefore lexicalised. It is common that one-word spelling is predominant in American English, however, American English is known for long hyphenated adjectives that can comprise a number of words. In British English, compound verbs are usually hyphenated, e.g. *freeze-dry* as well as compound adjectives, e.g. *long-haired*, *brown-eyed* consisting of an adjective and participle. Many open and two-word compounds are nouns, e.g. *Prime Minister* and *crystal ball*. Compounds are generally fixed but their institutionalisation can vary as widely as any other lexical items. The degree to which they are compositional varies too.

In our study, the focus is based on those compounds whose meaning is not literal, but figurative. These metaphorical compounds usually consist of two or more words that are used in the figurative sense, for example, *a hot potato* – a problem, a situation that is difficult and unpleasant to deal with, *a king's ransom* – a very large amount of money, *a lone wolf* – a person who prefers to be alone, *a couch potato* – a person who spends a lot of time sitting and watching television.

Analysing our examples of authentic language, we could find out that in English dictionaries these expressions were classified as idioms. In the classification of phraseological units, these idioms are opaque idioms as their actual meaning is impossible to infer from the meanings of its components.

In the following example – *'I'm a dead-ender,' I tell her* (Patterson, 2016, p. 261) – the expression *dead-ender* is used in the meaning of a person who has no prospects for the future and consists of an adjective *dead* and a noun *ender*. This expression can be substituted by words with a similar meaning, for example, *loser* or *dropout*. From the compositional viewpoint, the expression *dropout* is a compound that was formed from the multi-word verb *to drop out*.

2.4. Idiomatic multi-word expressions

The English lexicon comprises full sentences, long fixed phrases and other combinations of words that can be considered one lexical unit as they have their meaning as a whole. Many of these proverbs and/or sayings are the traditional maxims of biblical and classical tradition and have their counterparts in other languages, for example, *A bird in hand is worth two in the bush*. Some of these idiomatic multiple-word expressions are so common that they are used in everyday language without being recognised by their users either native-speakers or non-native speakers who share similar traditions

and cultures. We could find some of them in all the books we analysed, for example, *'You may have won this battle, but you won't win the war'* (Patterson, 2016, p. 451).

Some definitions used in linguistics distinguish between a proverb and saying. Proverbs are simple and short sayings, widely known, often metaphorical, which express a basic truth or practical precept, based on common sense or cultural experience, for example, *Honesty is the best policy*. Sayings are usually classified as short well-known expressions comprising a pithy remark of wisdom and truth or a general advice, for example, *The road to hell is paved with good intentions*. Saw is an old familiar saying that is commonplace, longstanding and occasionally trite (sometimes through repetition), for example, *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*.

Apart from traditional proverbs – *A cat has nine lives*, there are some proverbs that originate from the 20th century but have their equivalent in the Bible, for example, *Laughter is the best medicine* – *A merry heart doeth good like medicine*.

Many English proverbs have similar equivalents all over the world, for example, the saying from the early 19th century *The way to a man's heart is through his stomach* has its equivalents in other languages, for example, in French – *Le chemin vers le coeur de quequon passe par son estomac*, Spanish – *la forma de corazón de un hombre es a través de su estómago*, German – *Liebe geht durch den Magen* or Slovak – *Láska ide cez žalúdok*. While French and Spanish equivalents are close to each other, both German and Slovak equivalents are worded in the same way as well.

The books we have read for the purpose of finding examples of these phraseological units comprised proverbs, sayings or saws rarely, for example:

- a) *'Never drink water'*, he said. *'Cos fish screw in it'* (James, 2016, p. 284) can be heard in spoken English in which a bad word beginning with the letter f... is used more frequently.
- b) *Haven't you ever heard 'A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down?'* (Horowitz, 2016, p. 29) in the meaning that something good makes something bad more tolerable.
- c) *'How about, 'You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?'* (Horowitz, 2016, p. 29) in the meaning that it is easier to get what you want by flattering people and being polite to them than by making demands.
- d) *Revenge is a dish best served cold* (James, 2015, p. 437) in the meaning that vengeance is more satisfying when exacted in cold blood.

Proverbs and sayings can become popular due to its use either in books or films. For example, *'A Spoonful of sugar'* was a song in Walt Disney's 1964 film and the musical versions of *Mary Poppins*, composed by Robert B. Sherman and Richard M. Sherman.

According to the CEFR (2001), fixed formulae, which both incorporate and reinforce common attitudes, make a significant contribution to popular culture are called expressions of folk wisdom. A knowledge of these expressions is a significant component of the linguistic aspect of sociocultural competence. Apart from the above-mentioned idioms and proverbs/sayings, familiar quotations such as *to err is human* are used without recognising who is the original author of this quote. In this case it is Alexander Pope. Then there are other quotations used less frequently and they reveal about their users that they are educated and well-read, for example, *'Churchill said that success is stumbling from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm, 'Nicola said* (Horowitz, 2016, p. 105).

2.5. Similes

Other combinations of words that belong to this category are similes defined as words based on the comparison of one thing with another, and sometimes are called comparative idioms: *as poor as a church mouse*, *as cool as a cucumber*, *as old as the hills*. The following example – *'By the time they found her on an East Hampton beach, she was white as a bedsheet'* (Patterson, 2016, p. 262) – includes the simile *white as a bedsheet* which has its counterpart *as white as snow*. The latter also works as a pair of its antonym *as black as night*.

There were not many examples of both constructions typical for similes (as.....as or like.....) in contemporary literary prose but some of them occurred in the mentioned books, for example, *He doesn't look a thing like her* (Patterson, 2016, p. 374) or *He felt a bit like a fish out of water here in this grand school, as if he was in a different world – almost a different universe – to the one he was familiar with* (James, 2015, p. 395) in the meaning to feel awkward because you are in a situation that you have not experienced before or because you are very different from the people around you. The combinations with like.... were more frequently used, for example, *Staring at Pewe's moist, serpentine lips, Grace felt, for some moments, like a mouse that had been dropped through the lid of a cage containing a hungry snake* (James, 2015, p. 375).

3. CONCLUSION

Having a good command of idiomatic expressions is expected at the C level of the CEFR. The user of a target language should be aware of connotative levels of meaning which means to broaden lexical repertoire and developing awareness of words beyond their denotative meanings, including their multiple meanings and figurativeness.

Lexical items usually develop and gradually extend their meanings, departing from their literal meaning either in the same stylistic layer or a different one. Metaphorical meanings usually develop rather late from the date when the word started to be used in its literal meaning. Analysing some words from our selected samples, it is possible to provide some evidence. One of the examples of authentic language was *to have a needle stuck in his eye*. Using the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, Volume X, we could find the word *needle*. The first written record of this expression is from 725 in the meaning that a needle is an instrument used in sewing, usually a small and slender piece of polished steel having a fine point at one end and at the other a hole or eye through which the thread is passed (1991, p. 290) and only in 1874 there is the written record in the meaning of a fit of irritation or nervousness, which was the figurative meaning used in the selected example.

Different dictionaries provide different classifications. We tried to clearly distinguish compounds with figurative meaning from idioms despite the fact that many samples of both are informal and used in spoken English, but their structure and combination of single elements is different.

It is possible to conclude that while phrasal verbs have usually more than one meaning, proverbs, sayings and saws have usually one figurative meaning. However, we could find some differences either in different variants of English or in the dictionaries. Idioms are classified according to their figurativeness and expressiveness. On the other hand, the categories of idioms include some proverbs and sayings and there are not clearly stated borders between these two categories in many dictionaries.

Despite the fact that we did not provide any statistics, it is possible to conclude from our excerpts that the categories of phraseological units we focused on in our theoretical input were represented approximately in every chapter of any book, more or less frequently. The intention to compare tendencies in British and American English towards idiomaticity was replaced by a sharper focus on the phraseological units and their classifications in both variants as we could reveal that the frequency of using idioms is definitely influenced by the writer and his/her style independently of their language variant origin.

Typical phraseological units are fundamentally anomalous, either by their structure, combinatory of their segments, semantics and their use. The unexpectedness of its meaning is based on the metaphorical shift, expressiveness and significant figurativeness. They are usually very sensitive to the context. Learning phraseological units in target language is very demanding and requires from learners systematic approaches to analysing authentic language used by native-speaking users of a particular language.

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