

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN LINGUISTICS

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Abstract: *Phraseological units represent a significant and complex area of linguistic study due to their semantic, structural, and functional properties. This article examines the theoretical foundations of phraseological units in linguistics by reviewing key scholarly approaches and classifications. Adopting a qualitative and descriptive methodology, the study analyzes major theories developed within structural, semantic, functional, and cognitive linguistics. The findings demonstrate that phraseological units are characterized by semantic unity, structural stability, reproducibility, and idiomaticity, which distinguish them from free word combinations. The discussion highlights the multifunctional nature of phraseological units and emphasizes the need for an integrative theoretical framework to account for their complexity. The study concludes that phraseological units are fundamental components of language that play a crucial role in communication, cultural representation, and linguistic competence.*

Keywords: *Phraseological units; phraseology; idiomaticity; linguistic theory; classification; semantic unity*

INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units constitute an essential component of any language, reflecting not only its lexical richness but also its cultural, historical, and cognitive dimensions. In linguistics, phraseology has developed into an independent field of study due to the growing recognition that fixed and semi-fixed expressions play a crucial role in communication. These units, which include idioms, set expressions, collocations, and proverbs, often convey meanings that cannot be fully understood through the literal interpretation of their individual components.

The study of phraseological units has attracted the attention of linguists since the early twentieth century, particularly within structural and functional approaches to language. Scholars have emphasized that phraseological units contribute significantly to expressive power, stylistic variation, and pragmatic effectiveness. Their stability, idiomaticity, and reproducibility distinguish them from free word combinations and make them a unique linguistic phenomenon.

Despite extensive research, the theoretical foundations of phraseological units remain complex and multifaceted. Different linguistic schools offer varying definitions, classifications, and criteria for identifying phraseological units. This diversity highlights the need for a comprehensive theoretical examination of phraseological units within linguistics. The present article aims to explore the theoretical foundations of phraseological units by analyzing their role and significance, identifying their main characteristics, and reviewing key approaches to their classification. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of phraseology as a linguistic discipline.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology based on theoretical and analytical approaches. The primary method involves an extensive review of linguistic literature related to phraseology, including classical and contemporary works by leading scholars in the field. Foundational theories developed within structural linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and functional linguistics are examined to identify common principles and differences in the interpretation of phraseological units.

The research also employs comparative analysis to evaluate different definitions and classifications proposed by linguists. By comparing these theoretical models, the study identifies core criteria such as semantic unity, structural stability, and idiomaticity. In addition, analytical methods are used to examine examples of phraseological units drawn from English-language sources to illustrate theoretical claims.

No empirical corpus-based analysis is conducted in this study, as the focus is on theoretical foundations rather than quantitative frequency or usage patterns. However, authentic examples from dictionaries and linguistic studies are incorporated to support theoretical arguments and demonstrate the practical relevance of the discussed concepts.

To ensure methodological consistency, the selection of theoretical sources was guided by their relevance, academic credibility, and contribution to the development of phraseological studies. Priority was given to works that have significantly influenced the formation of phraseology as an independent linguistic discipline. These include studies focusing on the definition, classification, and functional interpretation of phraseological units. Both descriptive and explanatory approaches were applied in order to present a balanced and comprehensive overview of existing theories.

The analysis follows a systematic procedure in which theoretical concepts are first identified and then critically examined. Definitions of phraseological units proposed by different scholars are analyzed in terms of their scope and limitations. This allows for the identification of overlapping features as well as theoretical discrepancies among linguistic schools. Special attention is paid to how scholars distinguish phraseological units from free word combinations and other multi-word expressions.

In addition, contextual analysis is employed to examine how phraseological units function within discourse. Selected examples are analyzed in their typical usage contexts to illustrate pragmatic and stylistic features. This approach helps demonstrate how phraseological units contribute to expressiveness, evaluation, and cohesion in language use. Although the study does not rely on large-scale corpora, the contextual examination of authentic examples provides insight into the practical application of theoretical concepts.

The study also adopts an interdisciplinary perspective by incorporating insights from cognitive linguistics. Conceptual metaphor theory and mental lexicon models are used to explain the semantic motivation and figurative nature of phraseological units.

This approach highlights how fixed expressions reflect human conceptualization and shared cultural knowledge, reinforcing the view that phraseological units are cognitively and culturally grounded.

Results

The analysis of linguistic literature reveals that phraseological units occupy a central position between lexicon and syntax. One of the most widely accepted findings is that phraseological units are characterized by semantic indivisibility. This means that the overall meaning of a phraseological unit cannot be deduced simply by analyzing the meanings of its individual components. For example, the English idiom “spill the beans” conveys the meaning of revealing a secret, which is not directly related to the literal meanings of spill or beans.

Another significant result concerns the structural stability of phraseological units. Most scholars agree that phraseological units exhibit a fixed or semi-fixed structure. While minor grammatical variations may occur, the core lexical components usually remain unchanged. This stability distinguishes phraseological units from free word combinations, which allow greater flexibility and substitution.

The results also show that reproducibility is a key feature of phraseological units. Unlike newly created expressions, phraseological units are stored in the mental lexicon and reproduced as ready-made units in speech and writing. This property contributes to their efficiency in communication and their frequent use in both spoken and written discourse.

Regarding classification, the study identifies several dominant approaches. Structural classifications focus on the grammatical form of phraseological units, such as verbal, nominal, or adjectival phrases. Semantic classifications categorize units based on the degree of idiomaticity, ranging from fully idiomatic expressions to partially motivated combinations. Functional classifications emphasize the communicative role of phraseological units, such as their expressive, evaluative, or pragmatic functions.

Further analysis of the literature indicates that idiomaticity is one of the most debated characteristics of phraseological units. Many scholars argue that idiomaticity exists on a continuum rather than as an absolute feature. While some phraseological units are fully idiomatic and completely opaque in meaning, others retain partial semantic motivation that allows speakers to infer their meaning to a certain extent (Vinogradov, 1947; Cowie, 1998). This observation supports the view that phraseological units differ in their degree of semantic transparency.

The results also demonstrate that phraseological units perform important stylistic and pragmatic functions in language. Researchers emphasize that these units enhance expressiveness, emotional coloring, and evaluative meaning in discourse (Kunín, 1970). For instance, idiomatic expressions are frequently used to convey attitudes, judgments, or intensification in both spoken and written communication. This functional load explains their frequent occurrence in literary texts, media discourse, and everyday conversation.

Another important finding concerns the conventionality of phraseological units. Linguistic studies consistently highlight that phraseological units are socially established and culturally shared expressions rather than individual creations (Gläser, 1998). Their meanings and usage patterns are stabilized through long-term collective use, which distinguishes them from occasional metaphors or creative word combinations. As a result, phraseological units contribute to linguistic normativity and cultural continuity.

In addition, the literature reveals that phraseological units are closely linked to cognitive processes. Cognitive linguists argue that many phraseological units are motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors and image schemas that reflect human experience and perception (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This finding suggests that phraseological meaning is not entirely arbitrary but grounded in conceptual structures shared by members of a speech community.

Discussion

The findings confirm that phraseological units represent a complex and multifunctional linguistic phenomenon. Their semantic opacity poses challenges not only for language learners but also for translators and lexicographers. From a theoretical perspective, this opacity reinforces the argument that phraseological units should be treated as single lexical items rather than as syntactic constructions.

The stability and reproducibility of phraseological units highlight their close connection to linguistic tradition and collective memory. These features suggest that phraseological units function as cultural markers, preserving historical experiences, social values, and shared knowledge. As a result, phraseology intersects with fields such as cultural linguistics and cognitive linguistics, which examine how language reflects human conceptualization and cultural models.

The diversity of classification systems discussed in the literature indicates that no single approach can fully capture the complexity of phraseological units. Structural classifications provide clarity in grammatical analysis but may overlook semantic nuances. Semantic classifications offer insight into meaning and motivation but can be subjective. Functional classifications emphasize communicative purpose but may lack formal precision. Therefore, an integrative approach that combines structural, semantic, and functional criteria appears to be the most effective framework for analyzing phraseological units.

Furthermore, the discussion underscores the relevance of phraseological studies for applied linguistics. Understanding the theoretical foundations of phraseological units can improve language teaching methodologies by helping educators design materials that address idiomatic usage. It also has implications for translation studies, where the accurate rendering of phraseological meaning requires deep cultural and contextual awareness.

In addition, the findings align with earlier theoretical claims that phraseological competence constitutes an essential part of overall communicative competence. Scholars argue that mastery of phraseological units enables speakers to sound more

natural and fluent, as these units are frequently used by native speakers in everyday communication (Cowie, 1998; Wray, 2002). This supports the view that phraseological knowledge should be regarded as a core component of language proficiency rather than as peripheral vocabulary knowledge.

From a cognitive perspective, the multifunctionality of phraseological units further confirms their role in shaping conceptual understanding.

Many phraseological units are grounded in metaphorical thinking and embodied experience, which allows speakers to conceptualize abstract ideas through concrete imagery (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This cognitive motivation explains why certain phraseological patterns recur across languages, while others remain culture-specific.

Consequently, phraseological units provide valuable insights into how linguistic form, meaning, and cognition interact.

The discussion also highlights the pedagogical implications of the theoretical findings. Research suggests that explicit instruction of phraseological units can significantly enhance learners' comprehension and production skills, particularly in advanced stages of language learning (Nation, 2001).

When learners are made aware of the semantic and structural properties of phraseological units, they are better equipped to recognize and use them appropriately in context.

This reinforces the importance of integrating phraseology into language curricula and teaching materials.

Moreover, the challenges associated with the classification of phraseological units suggest a need for flexible analytical frameworks. Rather than applying rigid categories, scholars increasingly advocate for gradient and prototype-based approaches that account for variation in idiomaticity and stability (Gläser, 1998). Such approaches allow for a more nuanced understanding of phraseological phenomena and reflect the dynamic nature of language use.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theoretical foundations of phraseological units in linguistics reveal their significant role in language structure, meaning, and use.

Phraseological units are distinguished by semantic unity, structural stability, and reproducibility, which set them apart from free word combinations.

The analysis demonstrates that phraseology occupies an important position at the intersection of lexicology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Although various theoretical approaches offer different perspectives on phraseological units, their integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of this linguistic phenomenon.

The study confirms that phraseological units are not merely decorative elements of language but fundamental components of effective communication.

Future research may extend this theoretical framework by incorporating corpus-based and cross-linguistic analyses to further explore the dynamic nature of phraseology in modern languages.

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