

# Deviation of Phraseological Unit Semantic Stability as a Means of Phraseological Transformation

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**Abstract:** The article is devoted to discussing transformed phraseological units based on the American government blog materials. The theoretic part of the work touches upon the question of terminology. The authors study the existing approaches to fixedness (stability, irregularity, occasional use, modifications) of phraseological units. We seek to analyze the modified variants of phraseological units, describe mechanisms of transformations, and provide their translations. Special attention is devoted to deviations of semantic stability within the structure of phraseological units and modifications that appear when deviations occur. The analysis of the examples will provide a better understanding of the process which is being discussed. Among the mechanisms that trigger transformations, we distinguish between metonymy, polysemy, and context, making modifications within the principle of semantic fixedness, among them reconsideration of phraseological unit meaning and literalization of meaning. Finally, in terms of semantic fixedness, we will define two possible variants of phraseological units' transformations.

**Keywords:** Phraseology, Phraseological Unit, Semantic Stability Reconsideration, Meaning Literalization.

## INTRODUCTION

Modifications of phraseological <sup>1</sup>units (P.U.) is an open issue, though phraseological units are thoroughly studied from the viewpoint of pragmatics stylistics, psycholinguistics. In linguistics, phraseology is the study of set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and other types of multi-word lexical units (often collectively referred to as phrasemes), in which the component parts of the expression take on a meaning more specific than or otherwise not predictable from the sum of their meanings when used independently. For example, 'Dutch auction' is composed of the words Dutch 'of or pertaining to the Netherlands' and auction 'a public sale in which goods are sold to the highest bidder', but its meaning is not 'a sale in the Netherlands where goods are sold to the

highest bidder'. Instead, the phrase has a conventionalized meaning referring to any auction where, instead of rising, the prices fall (Anscombe & Mejri, 2011; Kroeger, 2019).

This idea is supported by A.N. Baranov and V.O. Dobrovol' skij: they believe phraseology represents a science merging between lexicology and grammar (syntax, mainly speaking). The tendency of fixedness is explained by the principle of the economy (Baranov & Dobrovol'skij, 2008). Besides, phraseology is considered to be of particular importance as thanks to it "the originality and uniqueness of the language are shown" (Davletbaeva *et al.*, 2013) as well as "the national uniqueness and the uniqueness of the language is most clearly reflected" (Varlamova *et al.*, 2017; Shchypachova, 2018).

The definition of a phraseological unit suggested by A.V. Kunin is accepted by most of the scientists. According to his definition "a phraseological unit is a fixed combination of lexemes with fully or partially transferred meaning", however, as the scientists' state opinions on the question of fixedness differ, and the most widely accepted definition of fixedness among scientists is the ability to apply a "ready-made" phraseological unit (Kunin, 1972).

There are several types of phraseological units, as follows. In phraseological concretions the literal and figurative meanings are totally unrelated, as in *tochtit' liasy* ("to whittle a piece of linden wood"; figuratively, "to chatter") or *sobaku s'est'* ("to know inside out"; literally,

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<sup>1</sup>Phraseological studies contribute to relevance of this paper not only in a linguistic aspect, but also in a gnoseological one, as they obviously demonstrate the interrelation between the language and the society. "But if we want to characterize the semantic usage properly which is accepted in any speech community and belongs to the described language, we should not only describe it. We can achieve the result only by applying collective estimations which are adopted in the community so we must take into consideration the public opinion. One and the same thing may have different descriptions in different civilizations. Such semantic definitions must have substantial consequences for the formal analysis of linguistic units." An idea of interrelation between linguistic and extra linguistic meanings in the language and in particular in word semantics is not new. This issue was raised in very general terms in papers of classical linguists and philosophers and keeps attracting attention of modern scientists (Zerkina, *et al.*, 2015).

“to eat a dog”). Other phraseological units have a meaning that is derived from the meaning of the component parts, as in *plyt' po techeniu* (“to flow with the current”). Phraseological collocations include a word or words with a meaning that is both literal and figurative, as in *glubokaia tishina* (“profound silence”). Another type of phraseological unit is the idiomatic expression, a word group whose structure and meaning are fixed. Other classifications of phraseological units according to type exist as well. They include classifications based on the restrictions in the selection of variable structural elements, those based on the fixed or variable composition of the word components, and those based on the degree to which the phraseological unit's structure and components are fixed. The aggregate of phraseological units differing in terms of meaning and structure constitutes a language's stock of idioms. The basic units of analysis in phraseology are often referred to as phrasemes or phraseological units. Phraseological units are stable word-groups with partially or fully transferred meanings (“to kick the bucket”, “Greek gift”, “drink till all's blue”, “drunk as a fiddler. According to Rosemarie Gläser (1998), a phraseological unit is a lexicalized, reproducible billexemic or polylexemic word group in common use, which has relative syntactic and semantic stability, may be idiomatized, may carry connotations, and may have an emphatic or intensifying function in a text (Gläser, 1998).

We have mentioned fixedness since any transformation of a phraseological unit contradicts any classical definition of a phraseologism. On the one hand, to transform a phraseological unit one has to break its fixedness of structure, the context of application, morphology<sup>2</sup>, semantics, or even the combination of two or more aspects. On the other hand, language creativity being a peculiar feature of phraseological units helps to transform them in a creative way (Smirnova *et al.*, 2014). Most of the transformations which modify phraseological units stylistically may make changes in their meaning (Askarzadeh, 2019). In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that studies meaning. Semantics can address meaning at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, or

larger units of discourse. One of the crucial questions which unites different approaches to linguistic semantics is that of the relationship between form and meaning (Paul, 2019: 4-6). The term Discourse (L. *discursus*, “running to and fro”) identifies and describes written and spoken communications. In semantics and discourse analysis, a discourse is a conceptual generalization of conversation. In a field of enquiry and social practice, the discourse is the vocabulary (codified language) for investigation of the subject, e.g. legal discourse, medical discourse, religious discourse, et cetera. In the works of the philosopher Michel Foucault, a discourse is “an entity of sequences, of signs, in that they are enunciations” (

Foucault, 1969). The fixedness on the level of remembering and repetitive application of phraseological units is considered by N.G. Bragina who believes the fixedness to be a motivated category of language, and the types of discourse (mythological, literary, philosophic, politic, etc.) to be its motivational background, meanwhile phraseological units forming a field of collective linguo-cultural memory of a nation (Bragina, 1999). This approach to discourse, mythology and ideology is concerned with how meanings function and the purpose that they serve rather than proposing fixed ideals of truth versus lies or non-ideological versus ideological. But at the same time, this does not prohibit the analyst from being critical or exploitative power relations that operate through discourse and mythology (Kelsey 2015).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wide range of research and scientific resources to study the subject of this article. Salieva (2016) says: The mechanism for lexical transformation is in its inner form. For instance, collocations are exposed to all types of lexical transformations, especially to attributive expansion both in English and Russian. It is possible due to weak idiomacity of collocations. As for semantic transformation, imagery of inner form of a phraseologism is a mechanism for transformation which allows speaker or writer play with words. The structure of a proverb or saying presupposes deviations from structural-semantic stability and the structure becomes a model for witty utterances creation. There are also deviations from structural-semantic stability among phraseological units having non-sentential structure, in such cases the mechanism is also the structure (rhyme or rhythm). Zerkina, *et al.*, (2015) believe that Phraseological units absorb values of the ages in which it lives. The problem

<sup>2</sup>In linguistics, morphology is the study of words, how they are formed, and their relationship to other words in the same language. It analyzes the structure of words and parts of words, such as stems, root words, prefixes, and suffixes. Morphology also looks at parts of speech, intonation and stress, and the ways context can change a word's pronunciation and meaning. Morphology differs from morphological typology, which is the classification of languages based on their use of words and lexicology, which is the study of words and how they make up a language's vocabulary (Dunstan, 2012).

of understanding the meaning of a phraseological unit is linked with a possibility of increasing our knowledge about the world diachronically. The authors underline the importance of phraseological studies as it demonstrates the interrelation between the language and the society. The role of phraseological units as specific structures in forming vocabulary and linguacultural competence of students is very significant because they encapsulate a national, country's cultural outlook. Usage-based theories of language learning suggest that phraseology must be studied as a part of vocabulary. Teaching phraseology is a part of cultural approach in foreign teaching methodology and arranging vocabulary studying though structure of component meaning is linguistic approach. Alekseevna, *et al.*, (2020) believe Phraseology in Ray Bradbury's works is of great interest for researchers. There are many phraseological units (PU) in his works, and these PU belong to different thematic spheres and are based on vivid and figurative metaphors. The image of the author is a centerpiece of all his works. The whole system of verbal means that is aimed at creating a subjective image of the percept is referred to as verbal imagery. According to Liu and Song (2015), Functional stylistics could be understood in broad sense as covering the Prague School functional approach to linguistic study, Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and Bakhtin's theories of speech genre and style. In its narrow sense, functional stylistics refers exclusively to the studies taking systemic functional grammar as the theoretical framework. In this sense, functional stylistics can be called "systemic functional stylistics". The present paper uses the term "functional stylistics" in its narrow sense. Functional stylistics has two major theoretical foundations: the social semiotic view of language and systemic function grammar (Halliday, 1985).

## METHODS

Functionalist stylistics is concerned with the relationship between the forms of language as a system and the context or situation of its production, as well as the social, cultural and political (what we may collectively call ideological) factors that impact upon its construction and reception (Canning, 2013). Study of functional stylistics takes this underlying meaning of literary works as the symbolic articulation of specific aspect of human being's spiritual world, of human society, and of the interpersonal relationship among individuals, in the art form of literary fictions. As one of the greatest representative scholars in functional stylistics, Hasan (1985/2012, p. 7, 97) used the term

"theme". Among all the meanings of it, she used it in two different senses: theme in clause and theme in literature. Theme in clause refers to the element of the clause that represents the speaker's point of departure of information, and it is usually associated with clause-initial position, and it functions largely as a textual indicator (Han-bing, 2018: 1080). The social semiotic view of language is the guiding principle of all the studies in the academic trend of systemic functional linguistics. The genre of literary works could be regarded as a special variation of language in general. The social semiotic view is significant for stylistic study in two ways. The first is to remind the researcher that meanings in literary works are always meanings related to specific situational and cultural context, thus the interpretation and evaluation of literary works should be inseparable from the story plot and social background in which the literary works creates. The second is to point out that meanings of literary works are multi-layered, with the story theme the deepest layer of meaning being realized by various grammatical and syntactic patterns. As Halliday argued that language in general is meaning potential, and texts are instance of this meaning potential. Literary text actually project the meanings at a higher level of semiotic. This higher level semiotic system is faceted and layered in much the same way as the linguistic system itself (Han-bing, 2018: 1086).

Accomplishing our goals in the comparative study of phraseological units on the linguistic and functional-stylistic level in American governmental blog, the following methods were implied:

- continuous sampling method (samples are taken from governmental blogs of America: (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog>) and Russia (<http://government.ru/news/>);
- definitional analysis method (theoretical ground for this research works on general linguistics and lexicology by A.N. Baranov, D.O. Dobrovol' skij, V.V. Vinogradov, and works on phraseology by A. Naciscione, A.V. Kunin, V.N. Telija, B. Frazer, V.I. Maksimov, E.F. Arsenteva, R.A. Ayupova, L.K. Bairamova).

A.V. Kunin considered the issue of fixedness in combination with possible invariants and distinguished between:

- "fixedness of application" underlines belonging of a phraseological unit to a people, however

- individual utterances are able to become widespread and with the time being fixed;
- "structural-semantic fixedness" predetermines a phraseological unit to be compiled of two or more words/components, and according to the principle of structural-semantic fixedness a phraseological unit structure cannot be a model to creating other equivalent phraseological units;
  - "semantic fixedness" presupposes the stability of meaning reconsideration, and the existence of the identical meaning and a lexical invariant, existence of phraseological variants and semantic invariants;
  - "lexical fixedness" is a principle of non-replaceability of the components of a phraseological unit or the possibility to replace them within phraseological variability or structural synonymy, keeping semantic and lexical invariants;
  - "syntactic fixedness" makes the order of the components of a phraseological unit stable, within the phraseological variability, the word order can be changed in phraseological units (Kunin, 1972) (Zeng, & Wen, 2018).

A.V. Kunin was one of the Russian scientists who studied occasional usage of proverbs and sayings alongside with the principle of fixedness, cases of syntactic reconsideration which cause changes in the meaning of a phraseological unit in particular (Kunin, 1972). The work of A.N. Baranov and D.O. Dobrovol'skij mention the category of irregularity alongside with the category of fixedness. They define irregularity as a process, and a result of the application of a less common rule to the forming of a language expression ignoring a more common rule, and a less common rule may become unique (Baranov & Dobrovol'skij, 2008). L.K. Bairamova considers individual transformations of phraseological units in V.I. Lenin's works and distinguishes between inversion, substitution, insertions, contamination, ellipsis, and allusion. Analysis of the lexical-stylistic features of the American engineering journals and web sites show that the materials contained in them are characterized by significant lexical-stylistic differences. They reveal significant quantitative and qualitative variations in the use of connotative means. In the texts there is a combination of lexical elements of different styles, which indicates the penetration into the technical text of

linguistic elements characteristic of other styles of speech. The results of the study allow us to conclude that scientific and technical texts are characterized by a certain lexical-stylistic heterogeneity, even within the limits of an edition of one type (Shchypachova, 2018).

Different types of P.U. Transformations are also studied in various types of texts. It is stated that phraseological units "feature a huge potential in terms of stylistic transformations as means forming specific rhetoric of an advertising message" (Soboleva *et al.*, 2015).

N.M. Shanskii studies cliché-typed sentential constructions and their variants. He defines cliché-typed sentential constructions as predicative phraseological units components of which are indivisible. He analyses lexical variability of such units which may be represented not only in substitution but also in the insertion of components and complication of the structure of a unit (Shanskij, 1963).

A. Naciscione's works clarify the terminology of phraseological studies. She introduces the term «the pattern of stylistic use», which explains the essence of transformations in general and her approach to the mentioned language issue. This term may be defined as models of stylistic use. According to A. Naciscione, such models are extended metaphors, pun, allusion, and all possible types of repetitions. It is peculiar of her to consider all these models implementation in connection with the cognitive processes, so this is not only a question of a language (Naciscione, 2010).

B. Frazer (1970), considers idioms within transformational grammar. Into the notion, 'idiom' he includes not only phraseological units, one (or more) components of which have its lexical meaning lost but phrasal verbs, lexical idioms, phrasal idioms thus defining an idiom in broad sense. In his work "Idioms within a transformational grammar" he highlights two major questions within the transformational grammar, appearing while transforming phrasal idioms: first, how to represent the meaning of an idiom in the deep structure representation of a sentence, second, how to account for the recalcitrance of idioms to undergo particular syntactic transformations. As an example, the author compares four idioms: blow off some steam (1), put on some weight (2), make up one's mind (3) and lay down the law (4). His comparison sounds as follows: we observe identical structures in all four expressions; however, the first is entirely frozen, the second is less frozen in comparison with the first one,

the third is less stable and fixed than the second one, and the fourth is relatively amenable to transformational operations. Thus he introduces the notion of 'frozenness' into his works (Frazer, 1970).

## DISCUSSION

Deviations on the level of semantic fixedness are mostly reconsideration of the meaning of a phraseological unit and literalization. Reconsideration presupposes keeping idiomaticity of an expression, literalization reveals the literal meanings of units of a phraseologism, and as a result of the whole expression.

Meaning reconsiderations take place when a phraseological unit changes the context of its implementation:

«Zeros & Ones» (a group of budding computer scientists) ...» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) («Нули и Единицы» (группа многообещающих компьютерных ученых)) – in the sentence нули и единицы denotes not a binary coding system, but refers to a group of scientists-programmers. We observe metonymy in this case, a group of people is titled with the term applied in their professional field.

One more instance of reconsideration:

«In later years, as I became interested in photojournalism, it was the photographs that **brought that awful day to life for me...**» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (В последние годы, с тех пор как я начал интересоваться фотожурнализмом, это были те самые фотографии, которые **оживили ужасные картины прошлого** для меня...), here bring to life is used not in the meaning 'привести в чувство'. This phraseological unit refers to the feelings of the person, for him, photos became a means of studying history. The phraseological unit brings to life refers to a photo, which described terrific happenings taking place in the picture.

*To gives smb. a leg-up* with the meaning 'подсадить кого-л., помочь кому-л. взобраться (на лошадь, высокую стену)' may be reconsidered in the context describing the economy. Thus the phraseological units gain the meaning 'оказывать стартовую финансовую помощь' as you may see in the following examples:

«Take a look at Marilu's and Kendra's stories to see exactly what happens when you **give** hardworking

Americans **the leg up** they deserve» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Просто взгляните на истории жизни Марлу и Кендры, чтобы удостовериться в том, что происходит, когда **предоставляешь** трудолюбивым американцам **стартовую финансовую помощь**).

«Working Americans who are out there struggling every day, doing the right thing, supporting their families and trying to **get a leg up** in this new economy» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Рабочие американцы, каждый день борющиеся ради поддержки своих семей **за финансовую помощь**, поступают правильно).

In the abovementioned example, the verb *give* is replacing by *get*, so meanings of expressions in the examples differ, in the first one – 'оказать помощь', in the second – 'получить помощь'.

Also 'стартовая помощь', but in the different sphere is mentioned in the next instance. Probably, the replacement of *start-up* by *leg up* takes place:

«...any American worker looking to invest time and money in training can go online and see which programs have the best chance at giving them **a leg up...**» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Каждый рабочий американец, собирающийся вложить время и деньги в такого рода программы, может онлайн выбрать наиболее подходящие для себя, при участии в которых есть шансы на получение **финансовой поддержки**).

Reconsideration of meaning takes place in the following example where the meaning 'обратить внимание на кого-либо / что-либо, остановить свой взгляд на ком-либо / чем-либо' of the phraseological unit *to set eyes on smb / smth* is replaced by the meaning 'запланировать, очень хотеть осуществить что-либо', which can be known from the context:

«So she **set her eyes on** becoming a cardiac sonographer ...» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Итак она **решила посвятить себя** кардиосонографии).

Literalization of the meaning is one of the transformations, breaking semantic fixedness. The implementation of a phraseological unit *on the final leg* can serve an example of a literal usage in the meaning 'в конце марша, к концу митинга', literally 'вместе с последней ногой, присоединившейся к шествию'. As a phraseological unit, this expression refers to the

sphere of civil aviation and means 'выполнить четвертый разворот', if to consider it out of a certain sphere of implementation it means 'на заключительном этапе'. In the following example, it has a literal meaning:

«Thousands of people joined along the way to Montgomery, with roughly 25,000 people entering the capital **on the final leg** of the march» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Тысячи присоединились на пути к Монтомери, **к концу марша** составив около 25 000 человек).

*Take a backseat* in the next context loses its meaning 'держаться в тени' and gains a new one 'ставить на задний план' speaking about citizen's problems, which are discussed in the article:

«The President **takes a backseat** to no one when it comes to strengthening consumer protections» (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) (Когда дело касается защиты прав потребителей, президент старается **уделить равное внимание всем**).

## CONCLUSION

One of the aims of linguistic theory (e.g., Grice 1975) has been the formulation of distinguishing criteria for idiomatic as compared to literal multiword expressions. The most important of these are semantic fixedness and syntactic anomaly. Semantic fixedness specifies that the figurative meaning does not allow the replacement of any of the constituents while syntactic fixedness indicates that the figurative meaning restricts the syntactic transformations that an idiomatic expression may undergo. Linguistic and psycholinguistic researchers are thus baffled by the question of how idiomatic meaning is processed and stored in lexical memory (Burger 2003; Cacciari & Glucksberg 1994; Gibbs, and Raymond (1980); Swinney & Cutler (1979); for a review see Titone & Connine (1999); Titone & Libben (2014). In particular, it remains an unresolved question whether the meaning of an idiom is represented separately from the meaning of its parts, and how the figurative meaning is assembled. Seminal studies argued for a non-compositional representation in which the whole figurative meaning of an idiomatic phrase is stored as a distinct entry, the idiom word in the mental lexicon similar to the representation of a complex word like Finanzmarktaufsichtsbehörde ('financial market supervisory authority'). Idiomatic processing, the process by which figurative meaning is retrieved is thus

assumed to be independent from the process by which literal meaning is computed (Bobrow & Bell 1973; Swinney & Cutler 1979).

On the level of semantic fixedness, we so far defined two possible variants of transformations of phraseological units. And there are reconsideration and literalization.

Reconsideration is possible to apply when metonymy is available when the context differs from the usual sphere of implementation of a phraseological unit. Polysemy<sup>3</sup> is the capacity for a word or phrase to have multiple meanings, usually related by contiguity of meaning within a semantic field. Polysemy is thus distinct from homonymy which is an accidental similarity between two words; while homonymy is often a mere linguistic coincidence, polysemy is not. In deciding between polysemy or homonymy, it might be necessary to look at the history of the word to see if the two meanings are historically related. Dictionary writers list polysemes under the same entry; homonyms are defined separately (Anu, 2005). Polysemy is also one of the mechanisms, which may trigger the reconsideration of meaning. Literalization of a phraseological unit is a process of its implementation in its direct meaning but is a complex phenomenon for comprehension. In some of the instances, you have to read an article up to the end to understand the phrase has been used in its literal meaning.

There is much room for study left when it concerns the identification and comprehension of a phraseological unit which is transformed.

Deviations on the level of semantic fixedness are based on the imagery of inner form of a phraseologism which serves a mechanism for transformation. Detailed analysis of deviations on the semantic level let us make few essential conclusions. On the level of semantic fixedness, we distinguish between 1) reconsideration of meaning, the mechanism to it is an imagery inner form or polysemy of one or several of the components a phraseological unit. Reconsideration of meaning is

<sup>3</sup>A polyseme is a word or phrase with different, but related senses. Since the test for polysemy is the vague concept of the relatedness, judgments of polysemy can be difficult to make. Because applying pre-existing words to new situations is a natural process of language change, looking at words' etymology is helpful in determining polysemy but not the only solution; as words become lost in etymology, what once was a useful distinction of meaning may no longer be so. Some apparently unrelated words share a common historical origin, however, so etymology is not an infallible test for polysemy, and dictionary writers also often defer to speakers' intuitions to judge polysemy in cases where it contradicts etymology (Rodd, et al., 2002).

stylistically marked and is used as expressive means only in a context. Some cases may not follow expressive aims as in examples with terms used in narrowly-specialized areas and now appeared to be in wide usage; 2) literalization of meaning is possible due to polysemy of one or several of the components of a phraseological unit.

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