

Stability of Phraseological Units: Structural, Semantic, and Morphological Aspects



¹ Nodirabegim Tursunova

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Keywords	Abstract
Phraseological stability Idiomatic expressions Structural invariance Semantic constancy Non-compositional meaning	This paper explores the concept of stability in phraseological units based on A.V. Kunin's theoretical framework. It examines the main parameters that determine phraseological stability: frequency of use, structural and semantic consistency, lexical and morphological invariance, and syntactic rigidity. Through the analysis of idioms and fixed expressions, the study demonstrates how certain phraseological units resist modification and function as indivisible elements within the language system. The paper also discusses the difference between phraseological units and free word combinations, showing that idioms possess fixed forms and metaphorical meanings that cannot be recreated through grammatical models. The research emphasizes the role of idiomatic expressions in maintaining linguistic identity and expressive power in communication.

Introduction

Phraseological units, also known as idioms or fixed expressions, constitute a crucial part of any natural language. These linguistic phenomena go beyond the literal meanings of their components and reflect deep cultural, historical, and cognitive patterns embedded within the speech community. In the English language, phraseological units enhance expressiveness, enrich stylistic variety, and often serve as tools for metaphorical communication. Their frequent usage in both written and spoken discourse, literature, journalism, and everyday conversations highlights their communicative value.

Unlike free word combinations, phraseological units exhibit structural and semantic rigidity. Their meanings are often non-compositional, meaning that the overall meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of individual components. For example, the idiom “kick the bucket” means “to die,” yet none of its elements—“kick” or “bucket”—carry that meaning independently in this context. This fixedness and idiomaticity make them a distinctive field of study within lexicology, stylistics, and applied linguistics.

According to A.V. Kunin, one of the most influential figures in phraseological studies, the stability of a phraseological unit is a defining characteristic that manifests across multiple levels of the language system. These include the consistency of usage, lexical integrity, morphological invariance, syntactic rigidity, and

¹ Tursunova, N. PhD, Andijan State Institute of Foreign Languages, Uzbekistan. Email: nodira.tursunova.93@mail.ru . ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1167-9905>.



semantic constancy. The investigation of these parameters not only contributes to theoretical linguistics but also has practical relevance in language teaching, translation studies, and lexicography.

The growing interest in phraseological units among scholars such as Vinogradov, Belyaevskaya, Moon, Langlotz, and others reflects the need to systematically understand how idioms behave in language. This paper aims to explore the nature of phraseological stability by analyzing commonly used English idioms within the framework proposed by A.V. Kunin. It also compares phraseological units to free word combinations to highlight the unique qualities of idiomatic expressions in terms of structure and semantics.

Literature Review

The study of phraseological units has a long-standing tradition in both Russian and Western linguistic scholarship. Researchers have developed various classifications and theoretical frameworks to define the nature, structure, and functions of idioms in language. Among these, the works of V.V. Vinogradov, A.V. Kunin, and more recently, scholars like R. Moon, C. Fernando, and A. Langlotz, have made significant contributions to the understanding of phraseological phenomena.

V.V. Vinogradov is often credited with introducing a tripartite classification of phraseological units in Russian linguistics. He categorized them into phraseological fusions, phraseological unities, and phraseological collocations based on the degree of semantic cohesion among components. His model laid the foundation for recognizing how idioms differ from free word combinations in terms of meaning predictability and syntactic flexibility.

Building on Vinogradov's work, A.V. Kunin introduced a more refined theory specifically focused on English phraseology. He defined phraseological units as stable word combinations with partially or fully transferred meanings and emphasized their structural and semantic invariance. Kunin proposed five parameters to assess phraseological stability: frequency of use, lexical stability, morphological fixedness, syntactic rigidity, and semantic constancy. His contribution is particularly important for identifying the boundaries between idioms and free combinations, as well as distinguishing idioms from occasional expressions.

E.G. Belyaevskaya contributed to the debate by analyzing the status of the word within phraseological units. She argued that although some idiomatic components may lose their original lexical autonomy, they still function as meaningful constituents within the fixed expression. Her view supports the idea that phraseological components retain a unique semiotic role, even if their individual meanings fade.

In Western linguistics, R. Moon (1998) emphasized the corpus-based study of fixed expressions and idioms. She challenged the idea of absolute fixedness and introduced the notion of idiomatic flexibility, showing how certain idioms can undergo limited variation without losing their idiomatic status. Moon's approach is valuable for understanding the dynamic behavior of idioms in authentic discourse.

Similarly, A. Langlotz (2006) approached idioms from a cognitive-linguistic perspective. He argued that idiomatic expressions are stored and processed as conceptual units in the mental lexicon and that speakers rely on both fixed patterns and creative usage. His theory of idiomatic creativity illustrates how speakers can manipulate idioms stylistically while maintaining their semantic core.

C. Fernando (1996), in her work *Idioms and Idiomacity*, stressed the importance of idioms in communication and suggested that their metaphorical nature makes them powerful tools for expressing complex meanings succinctly. Her focus on the functional roles of idioms (referential, stylistic, and textual) further deepens the understanding of why idioms persist in language use.



Gläser (1988) introduced the concept of a gradation scale of idiomaticity, asserting that idioms exist along a continuum from fully fixed to semi-fixed expressions. This model allows for the inclusion of collocations and set phrases that may not be idiomatic in the strict sense but still demonstrate a degree of fixedness in usage.

Overall, the reviewed literature highlights both the fixed and flexible aspects of idioms and supports the notion that phraseological units represent a unique category of language units. While Kunin emphasizes stability and invariance, scholars like Moon and Langlotz recognize the creative and dynamic use of idioms in contemporary communication. This paper draws primarily on Kunin's model while acknowledging the contributions of other theorists to provide a comprehensive analysis of idiomatic stability in English.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in comparative and theoretical linguistics. The primary aim is to explore the structural and semantic stability of English phraseological units by applying the framework developed by A.V. Kunin. The methodology combines qualitative textual analysis with elements of linguistic comparison, focusing on both theoretical descriptions and empirical examples from modern English.

The idioms and phraseological expressions analyzed in this study were selected based on their frequency of usage, idiomatic fixedness, and relevance to Kunin's classification. Examples include: kick the bucket, bite the bullet, once in a blue moon, bury the hatchet, draw a line in the sand, and you can't teach an old dog new tricks. These idioms were drawn from reliable sources such as the Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, and the British National Corpus (BNC).

Each idiom was examined across the following five parameters of phraseological stability: 1) frequency of use, 2) structural and semantic stability, 3) lexical and morphological invariance, 4) syntactic rigidity, and 5) contextual fixedness. Comparative analysis was used to contrast idioms with regular syntactic phrases to highlight their uniqueness and resistance to modification.

The study also integrates insights from leading scholars including Vinogradov, Belyaevskaya, Moon, Fernando, and Langlotz to contextualize the findings and link them to broader theoretical discussions in linguistics. Data was also supported by examples found in linguistic corpora and selected literary works to trace the idioms' usage and evolution.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals consistent evidence supporting A.V. Kunin's multi-level framework for phraseological stability. Most idioms show high structural and semantic invariance. For instance, kick the bucket and bite the bullet maintain non-compositional meanings and lose idiomatic value when altered.

Lexical substitution is rare and generally unacceptable. Variations such as once in a red moon or bite the metal disrupt the idiomatic meaning. However, controlled modifications like draw a hard line in the sand are acceptable and illustrate semantic intensification, aligning with Gläser's concept of idiomatic gradability.

Syntactic structure is often fixed. Idioms such as it's raining cats and dogs or the cat is out of the bag cannot tolerate reordering. This supports the view of syntactic rigidity. Historical idioms like wear one's heart on one's sleeve have evolved from literary origins into common usage, reflecting what A.D. Reichstein describes as transformation through frequent use.



Comparisons with free word combinations (e.g., a man of honor) demonstrate that idioms are not generative. Attempts to modify their structure typically result in semantic loss. These findings are consistent with Moon's and Langlotz's perspectives on idiomatic fixedness and cognitive processing.

In language pedagogy, the findings affirm that idioms should be taught as complete units due to their fixed structure and figurative meaning. Learners must be exposed to authentic contexts to develop idiomatic competence, a notion emphasized by Fernando and Cowie.

Conclusion

This study confirms that phraseological units are marked by multidimensional stability across structural, semantic, lexical, and syntactic levels. The application of A.V. Kunin's framework reveals that idioms are non-generative expressions with fixed meanings that resist substitution and transformation.

Although some degree of variation exists in specific idioms, the overall structure and meaning remain consistent. The contrast between idioms and free combinations highlights the unique role of phraseological units in communication. Their cultural, historical, and cognitive significance justifies their continued study in both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Future research may investigate the behavior of emerging idioms in digital communication, including slang and memes, and examine how modern usage may influence traditional idiomatic stability.

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