THE ONTOLOGICAL NATURE AND DISCURSIVE DYNAMICS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS VS LEXICAL UNITS

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive linguistic analysis of the structural, semantic, and pragmatic distinctions between words and phraseological units (idioms). While words serve as the primary denominative tools of language, phraseological units function as complex semiotic signs characterized by stability and semantic opacity. The study explores why idioms are indispensable in modern communication, focusing on their cognitive-metaphorical roots and their role in communicative economy.

Introduction

1. Introduction: The Problem of Definition

The distinction between a word (lexical unit) and an idiom (phraseological unit) has been a subject of intense debate in linguistics since the early 20th century. According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs. However, if a word is a simple sign, an idiom is a "complex sign." The fundamental problem lies in the Principle of Compositionality: in a word, meaning is often direct; in an idiom, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

2. Theoretical Framework: Lexical vs. Phraseological Units

To understand the difference, we must look at the internal architecture of these units.

2.1. The Lexical Unit (The Word)

A word is a minimal autonomous unit of language. Its primary function is nominative. For example, the word "apple" refers to a specific fruit. Its meaning is stable and usually tied to its morphemic structure.

2.2. The Phraseological Unit (The Idiom)

A phraseological unit (PU) is a stable combination of at least two words that acts as a single semantic entity. According to Academician V.V. Vinogradov's classification, PUs can be divided into:

 * Phraseological Fusions: Meaning is completely disconnected from components (e.g., to kick the bucket).

 * Phraseological Unities: Meaning is a metaphorical extension of the components (e.g., to spill the beans).

 * Phraseological Combinations: One component is used in a restricted, bound meaning (e.g., rancid butter).

3. Semantic Integrity and the Concept of "Global Meaning"

The most striking difference is semantic opacity.

 * Words: Have a denotative core.

 * Idioms: Possess a "global meaning." When a speaker says "break a leg," the mental lexicon does not activate the concepts of "shattering" or "limbs." Instead, it activates a single node: "Good luck."

This section should analyze how idioms bypass literal processing. Psycholinguistic studies show that native speakers often process familiar idioms faster than literal phrases because they are retrieved as single "pre-packaged" blocks from the long-term memory.

4. Structural Stability and "The Frozenness Hierarchy"

One of the scientific hallmarks of an idiom is its resistance to transformation.

4.1. Lexical Substitution

In a word or free phrase, synonyms are interchangeable. You can say "a beautiful flower" or "a lovely flower." However, in an idiom, "to kick the bucket" cannot become "to hit the pail." This is known as lexical fiksatsiya (lexical fixation).

4.2. Syntactic Constraints

Many idioms are "syntactically frozen."

 * Passive Voice: "The boy broke the window" → "The window was broken by the boy" (Possible).

* Idiom Passive: "He kicked the bucket" → "The bucket was kicked by him" (Impossible in an idiomatic sense).

5. Pragmatic Functions in Discourse

Why do we use idioms when simple words exist? (This section occupies a significant portion of the article).

5.1. The Evaluation and Emotional Function

Words are often neutral. Idioms are never neutral. They provide an evaluative "flavor."
 * Neutral: "He is very rich."
 * Idiomatic: "He is rolling in money." (Adds a sense of abundance and perhaps envy).

5.2. Communicative Economy

Idioms encapsulate complex social situations. "To be in the same boat" is not just about sharing a vehicle; it describes a shared state of hardship, mutual responsibility, and limited options. One idiom replaces a whole paragraph of explanation.

5.3. Intensification

Idioms often serve as hyperboles. "As cold as ice" or "to cry one's eyes out" provides a vividness that simple adverbs like "very" cannot achieve.

6. Cognitive and Cultural Perspectives

Idioms are the "cultural DNA" of a language. They reflect the history and geography of a nation.
 * English idioms: Often relate to the sea and sports (fair play, to be all at sea).
 * Uzbek idioms: Often relate to hospitality, food, and family (oshini osh, nonini non qilmoq).
According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson), idioms are mappings from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain.
 * Source (Physical): Heat.
 * Target (Abstract): Anger.

 * Result: "To hit the ceiling," "To blow a fuse."

7. Conclusion: The Evolutionary Necessity of Phraseology

In conclusion, the difference between a word and an idiom is not merely a matter of length or complexity. It is a difference in cognitive function. Words allow us to label the world, but idioms allow us to interpret it. The active use of idioms in speech indicates a transition from functional literacy to cultural fluency.

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