



ANALYSIS OF THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF IDIOMATIC COMPOUND WORDS

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Abstract

Idiomatic compound words represent a unique linguistic phenomenon where the total meaning of the unit cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of its individual components. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the semantic structure of these units. By exploring the degrees of semantic opacity, the role of metaphors and metonymy in their formation, and the interaction between the components, the study aims to categorize idiomatic compounds based on their motivation. The research highlights that the semantic structure of such words is a result of complex cognitive processes, reflecting cultural and historical layers of language.

Keywords: Idiomatic Compounds, Semantic Structure, Semantic Opacity, Metaphor, Metonymy, Motivation, Phraseological Units.

Introduction

In modern linguistics, compound words are often viewed as a simple combination of two or more stems. However, idiomatic compound words (often referred to as "exocentric compounds" or "semantic isolates") challenge this simplicity. Words like *honeymoon*, *blackmail*, or the Uzbek *shirinsol* (sweet-spoken) possess a semantic structure where the global meaning has "drifted" away from the constituent parts. Understanding the semantic structure of these words is crucial for lexicography, translation studies, and cognitive linguistics. This article investigates how the meanings of individual stems merge and transforms to create a new, singular idiomatic concept, and what mechanisms govern this transformation.

The architecture of semantic structure.

The semantic structure of idiomatic compound words represents a complex linguistic synthesis that transcends the mere sum of its constituent parts. In traditional morphology, compounding is often viewed as a linear process where the meaning of the whole is transparently derived from its stems; however, idiomatic compounds—



frequently termed "exocentric" or "semantic isolates"—operate under the principle of non-compositionality. Within this framework, a process known as "semantic welding" occurs, wherein the individual components lose their independent referential identity to forge a singular, unified concept. For instance, in the English compound *blackmail*, the constituent elements "black" and "mail" no longer denote a specific color or a system of postal delivery. Instead, they have undergone a structural fusion that creates a new lexical entry in the mental lexicon of the speaker. This transition from literal to figurative meaning is the hallmark of idiomaticity, requiring a multidimensional analysis of how these units are motivated and perceived.

The architecture of these semantic structures is primarily driven by two cognitive mechanisms: metaphor and metonymy. Metaphorical compounds rely on a perceived similarity between a physical object and an abstract quality. In such structures, one or both components serve as a vehicle for a figurative shift. A clear example is the compound *stone-hearted* (or the Uzbek *toshbag'ir*), where the semantic density of "stone" (characterized by hardness and lack of sensation) is mapped onto the human emotional domain. Metonymic compounds, conversely, are built upon a "part-for-whole" or associative relationship. The term *blue-collar*, for example, defines a socio-economic class through a salient physical attribute—the color of the work uniform. In both cases, the semantic structure is "opaque" to varying degrees. Fully opaque compounds, such as *deadline*, have lost their historical motivation for the modern speaker, while partially opaque units like *backmarket* retain a faint trace of literal meaning in one of their stems, providing a bridge for the learner to decipher the underlying idiomatic intent.

Furthermore, the integration of components in an idiomatic formation results in a loss of literal referentiality. During the process of idiomaticization, the individual stems stop referring to their original denotations in the physical world and begin to function as a single, unanalyzable block. This is often accompanied by phonological changes, such as a shift in stress patterns, which signals to the listener that the unit is a specialized semantic entity. The semantic "jump" from the individual parts to the global meaning is rarely accidental; it is often guided by the cultural and historical layers of the language. Idiomatic compounds act as linguistic fossils, preserving ancient metaphors, social hierarchies, and traditional worldviews that might have otherwise disappeared from the language. Consequently, the semantic structure of these words is not just a linguistic byproduct but a sophisticated cognitive tool that



enables speakers to encapsulate complex, multi-layered ideas into a single, efficient lexical unit.

The interaction between the components also reveals a hierarchical semantic relationship. In many idiomatic compounds, one element acts as the "semantic head" that has undergone a radical shift, while the other serves as a modifier that constrains the new meaning. This interaction creates what linguists call a "semantic isolate," where the compound occupies a unique space in the vocabulary, distinct from both the individual stems and other synonymous phrases. By categorizing these units based on their motivation—whether idiosemantic, socio-semantic, or appositional—researchers can trace the evolution of human thought and the ways in which different cultures categorize reality. Ultimately, the semantic structure of idiomatic compounds demonstrates the profound flexibility of language, showing how human cognition utilizes familiar building blocks to construct entirely new landscapes of meaning that reflect the complexity of the human experience.

Conclusion

The analysis of idiomatic compound words reveals that their semantic structure is a multi-layered system. It is not merely a linguistic "accident" but a sophisticated cognitive tool that allows language to express complex ideas with brevity. By studying the metaphorical and metonymic roots of these words, linguists can better understand how human thought categorizes reality. For translators and language learners, mastering the semantic structure of these units is the key to achieving native-like fluency, as idiomatic compounds are the "salt" of any living language.

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