

## SEMANTIC AND STRUCTURAL APPROACH TOWARDS CLASSIFYING PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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În acest articol, autorul efectuează o amplă cercetare a abordării structural-semantice a unităților frazeologice sugerând mai multe tipuri de clasificări, pe care încearcă să le introducă în scheme originale, ingenioase și transparente. Autorul prezintă divergențele dintre cele două mari școli teoretice ruse, apărute în tratarea problemei clasificării unităților frazeologice engleze, argumentând atât punctele forte, cât și cele slabe ale teoriilor acestor școli. Unitățile frazeologice atribuie farmec și originalitate prin pitorescul lor oricărei limbi și această sistematizare va duce la o percepere și orientare mai bună a lor pe tărâmul lingvistic din partea studentului.

Phraseological units perform a very important and specific function. They enable one to express one's thoughts concisely and vividly, and give one's utterance a semantic depth which would be difficult if not impossible to achieve by other means. They provide the speaker with *ready-made* expressions of wisdom, irony, jocularity, etc. which rarely become threadbare with wear. The phraseological units, like no other units of the vocabulary, bear a clear national stamp, providing information about a country's history, cultural background and character of its people.

Phraseological expressions are united under the terms: *set-phrases*, *idioms*, *word-groups* and *phraseological units*. Even today they are treated differently by different linguists. The complexity of the problem is to a great extent caused by the fact that the borderline between free word-groups and phraseological units is not clearly defined. The so-called free groups are only relatively free while phraseological units are but comparatively stable and inseparable. Many set expressions originated as free phrases and only gradually became stereotyped.

From the semantic point of view of the phraseological units there are some peculiarities to be pointed out:

a) A phraseological unit is semantically non-motivated, that is the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of its components, here the information does not exist, until we get the whole. **E.g.:** *At sixes and sevens* = in confusion; *the nuts and bolts* = the practical considerations.

b) A phraseological unit has unique meanings, that is the meanings of elements which it has only in a concrete given combination. For example the word *salt* in the phraseological unit "*an old salt*" has a unique meaning: "an experienced sailor"; "*a walking bomb*" = someone in a dangerous state of mind.

Phraseological units undergo important characteristics from the structural point of view:

1) The verb-type equivalents are used in the imperative mood. **E.g.:** *keep your hair on* = keep your temper, *shut your head* = be silent.

2) The use of the second type of verb-equivalents only in the active voice. **E.g.:** *give a hand* = to help, *give ear to* = to listen to.

3) The use of the third type of verb-equivalents only in the negative form. **E.g.:** *not to stir a finger* = to make no effort, give no help.

4) The use of the fourth type of verb-equivalents only with the verb "can". **E.g.:** *cannot make head or tail of* = a nu putea să înțeleagă nimic.

5) The use of the fifth type of verb-equivalents in parenthetical and introductory phrases. **E.g.:** *in my book* = după părerea mea, *to make it short* = mai pe scurt.

A semantic classification of phraseological units has been given by Smith L.P. and W. Ball, explaining etymologically and arranging them according to different spheres of human activity. It is very easy for a learner of English, having at his/her disposal such a classification, to find immediately the necessary variant of the phraseological unit and use it properly in communication.

Numerous phraseological units are linked with:

a) Sea life: *ships in the night/ ship that pass in the night* = casual acquaintances and friendships that last only a very short time.

- b) Colours: *to be green* = to be inexperienced or untried.  
 c) Time: *to have a rough time* = to be treated severely, to have a run of bad luck.  
 d) Weather: *to weather the storm* = to overcome a crisis, often financial.  
 e) Months, days of the week, periods of the day: *not to have all day* = not to have any more time to spare for somebody.  
 f) Life of trees, plants, animals: *to be in clover* = to be in a comfortable situation.  
 g) Life and Death: *like an angel* = with the utmost innocence and purity.  
 h) Birds and Insects: *like a bird in a cage* = imprisoned, trapped.  
 i) Body and Mind: *to have body* = to have weight or substance.  
 j) Relations: *marriage lines* = a marriage certificate.  
 k) Town and House: *kitchen talk* = uneducated talk.  
 l) Furniture and Clothes: *table talk* = light conversation.  
 m) Food: *to be as different as chalk and cheese* = to be completely different.  
 n) War and Peace: *to win a battle* = to be successful in a struggle.  
 o) Weapon and Arms: *to gun for someone* = to plot revenge on someone.  
 p) Numbers: *in round numbers* = in approximate number.  
 q) School and Education: *a different school of thought* = a different body of opinion.  
 r) Work and Occupations: *the oldest profession* = prostitution.  
 s) Money and Valuables: *smart money* = money invested wisely.  
 t) Games and Sports: *to raise one's game* = to better one's performance.  
 u) Music and Theatre: *behind the scenes* = out of the public view.

In his works “Notes on Stylistics” and “French Stylistics” Charles Bally defined four groups of word combinations:

1. Free word combinations (lack fixedness);
2. Usual combinations (relatively free used together);
3. Phraseological sets or series (two notions or one idea);
4. Phraseological unities (loss of meaning of elements).

Here, as we can observe, a definite role plays the degree of stability. In our opinion, a drawback of this classification is lack of concrete description. Later, the same linguist distinguishes two groups out of the previous four:

1. Free combinations;
2. Phraseological unities (words based on his theory of equivalency between phraseological units and words).

Taking into account mainly the degree of idiomaticity, Vinogradov V.V. divides phraseological units into:

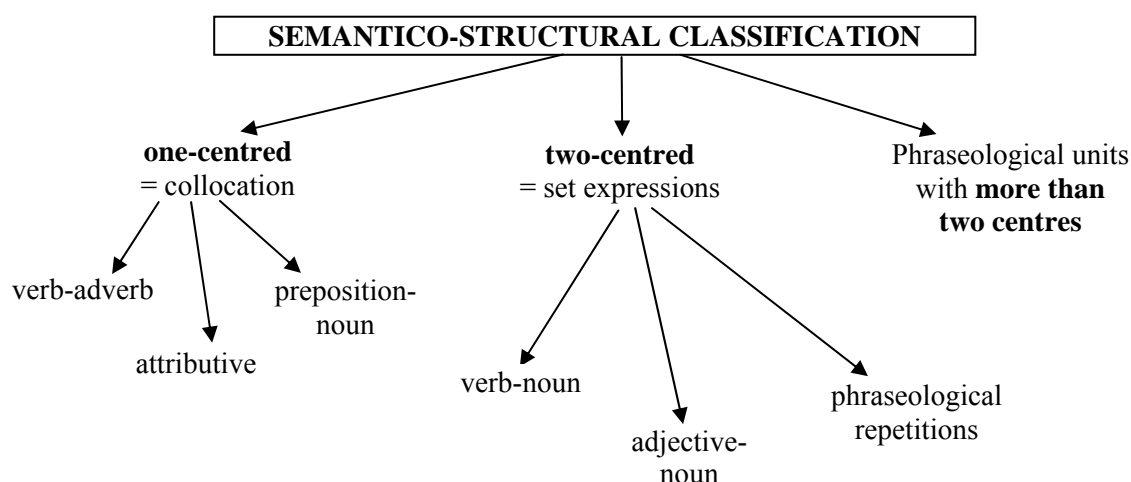
- 1) Phraseological fusions: completely non-motivated word-groups. **E.g.:** *to kick the bucket* = to die.
- 2) Phraseological unities: partially non-motivated, the meaning can be perceived through the metaphoric meaning of the whole phraseological unit. **E.g.:** *to show one's teeth* = to show an intention to injure.
- 3) Phraseological collocations: motivated, but they are made up of words possessing specific lexical valence, which accounts for a certain degree of stability in such word-groups. For instance, *bear a grudge* may be changed into *bear malice*, but not into *bear a fancy* or *liking*.

In his book on modern lexicology A.I. Smirnitsky suggests a classification of phraseological units based on an underlying semantic principle combined with structural peculiarities, dividing phraseological units into three groups:

- a) one-member (or one-centre) collocation (combination which consists of several elements but only one element carries the lexical meaning): **e.g.** *to make up*;
- b) two-member (or two-centre) collocation (having no central word which focuses the semantic and grammatical properties on the whole, = set expressions): **e.g.** *for good or ill*;
- c) poly-member (poly-centre) collocation: **e.g.** *to burn the candle on both ends*.

Schematically it may be represented in the following way:

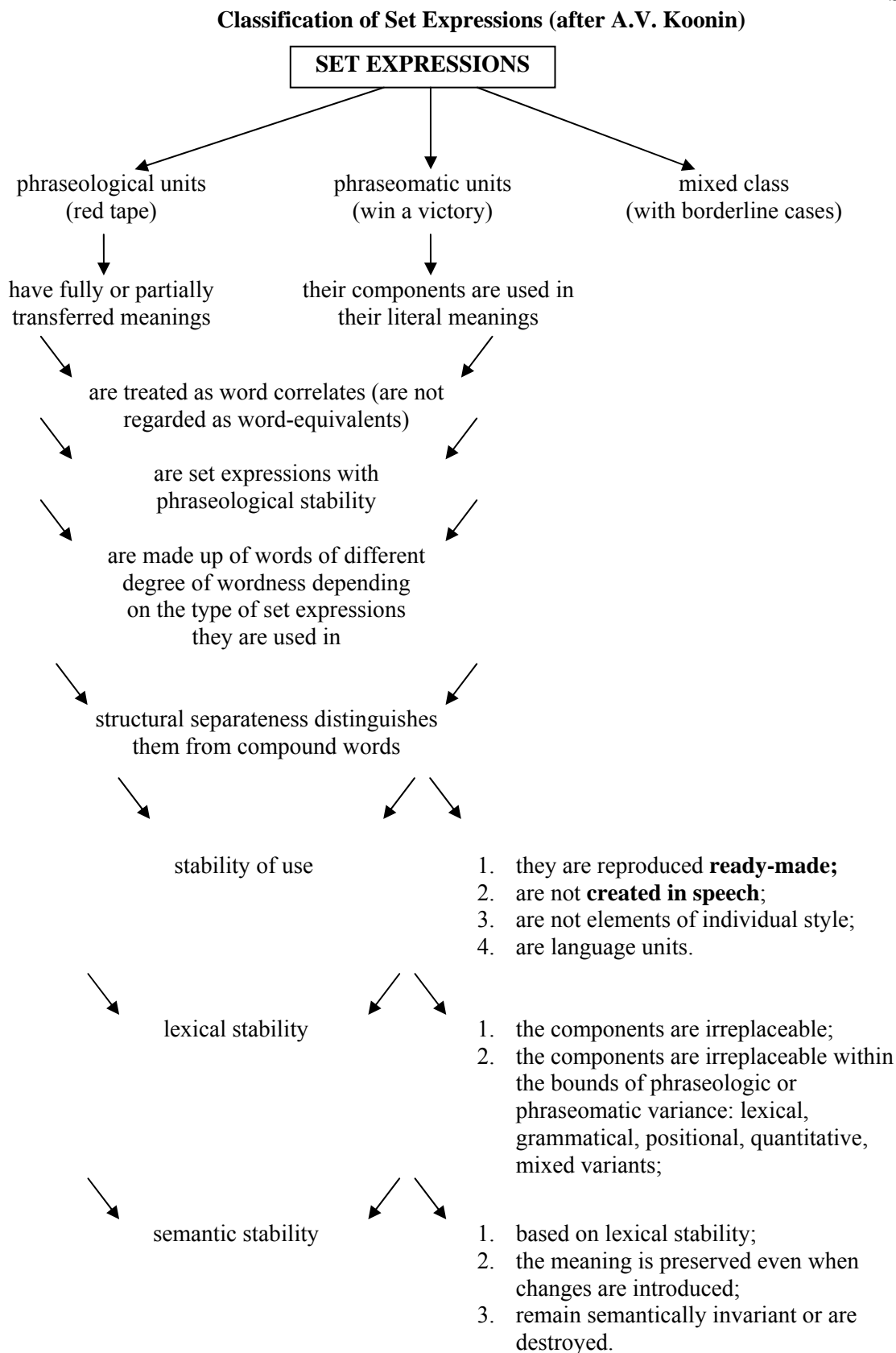
Scheme 1



According to A.V. Koonin's approach to the problem of phraseology:

- 1) Phraseology deals with a phraseological subsystem of language and not with isolated phraseological units.
  - 2) Phraseology is concerned with all types of set expressions.
  - 3) Set expressions are divided into three classes:
    - a) Phraseological units (*red tape, mare's nest*)
    - b) Phraseomatic units (*win a victory, launch a campaign*)
    - c) Borderline cases belonging to the mixed class.
  - 4) Phraseological and phraseomatic units are not regarded as word-equivalents but some of them are treated as word correlates.
  - 5) Phraseological and phraseomatic units are set expressions and their phraseological stability distinguishes them from free phrases and compound words.
  - 6) Phraseological and phraseomatic units are made up of words of different degree of wordness depending on the type of set expressions they are used in. Their structural separateness, an important factor of their stability, distinguishes them from compound words (*e.g. blackbird and black market*). Other aspects of their stability are: stability of use, lexical stability and semantic stability.
  - 7) Stability of use means that set expressions are reproduced ready-made and not created in speech. They are not elements of individual style of speech but language units.
  - 8) Lexical stability means that the components of set expressions are either irreplaceable or partially replaceable within the bounds of phraseological and phraseomatic variance:
    - Lexical (*e.g.: skeleton in the cupboard = a skeleton in the closet*);
    - Grammatical (*e.g.: to be in deep water = to be in deep waters*);
    - Positional (*e.g.: head over ears = over head and ears*);
    - Quantitative (*e.g.: to lead somebody a dance = to lead somebody a pretty dance*);
    - Mixed variants (*e.g.: raise (stir up) a hornet's nest about one's ears = arouse (stir up) the nest of hornets*).
- Semantic stability is based on the lexical stability of set expressions. Even when occasional changes are introduced the meaning of set expressions is preserved. In spite of all occasional changes phraseological and phraseomatic units remain semantically invariant or are destroyed [13, p.175-181]. We think we can represent all these ideas, concerning classification, in the following scheme:

Scheme 2

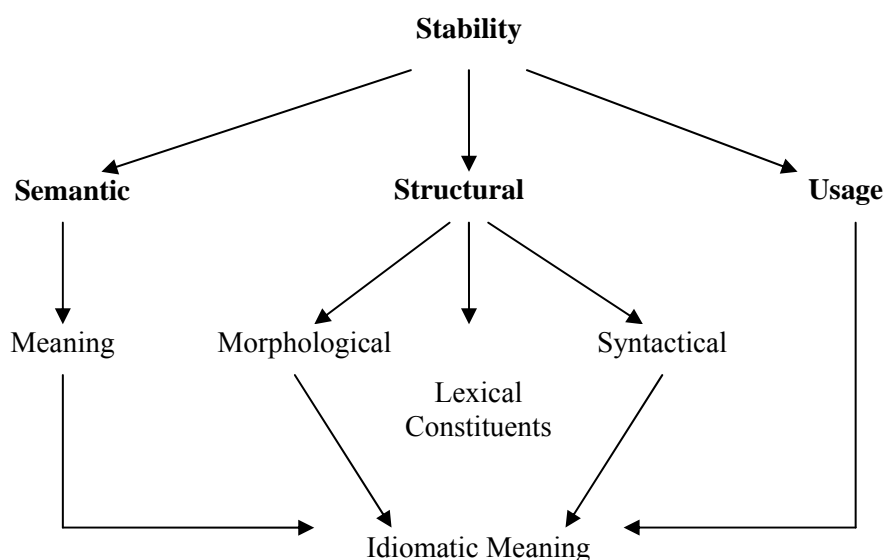


There are two main theoretical Russian schools treating the problems of the English phraseology classification- that of N.N. Amosova and A.V. Koonin. In the next that follows we shall try to give some guiding principles of each of the authors.

According to the theory of N.N. Amosova, a phraseological unit is a unit of constant context. It is a stable combination of words in which either one of the components has a phraseologically bound meaning (a phraseme: *white lie*= an innocent lie), or the meaning of each component is weakened, or entirely lost (an idiom: *red tape*; *mare's nest* = nonsense).

The theory of A.V. Koonin is based on the concept of specific stability at the phraseological level; phraseological units are characterized by a certain minimum of phraseological stability. As we can see, A.V. Koonin distinguishes stability of usage, structural and semantic stability, stability of meaning and lexical constituents, morphological stability and syntactical stability. The degree of stability may vary so that there are several "limits" of stability. But whatever the degree of stability might be, it is the idiomatic meaning that makes the characteristic feature of a phraseological unit. We may represent Koonin's theory schematically in the following way:

Scheme 3



To come back to the classification suggested by Amosova N.N. we have also to mention that this linguist divided phraseological combinations into:

1) Phrasemes (a unit of constant context, always binary, one element has a phraseologically bound meaning, the other determines the context);

*e.g.*: *serious money* = a vogue phraseme of the 1980s, a decade in which money was considered even more important than it usually is. It has survived into the present decade and means money in considerable quantities, as "You would get a stake in that company only if you had serious money to invest, and there is serious money to invest, and there is serious money to be made in the antiques trade".

2) Idioms (are structures in which a new meaning is created by the whole). *e.g.*: *to go by the board* = to manage without, often used in the sense of sacrificing everything to one purpose.

We consider that a minus of this theory is that fixed units of integral predicative structure are not included in phraseology (proverbs and sayings). And as to the classification concerning the integrity of meaning promoted by Koonin A.V. we may distinguish three different classes:

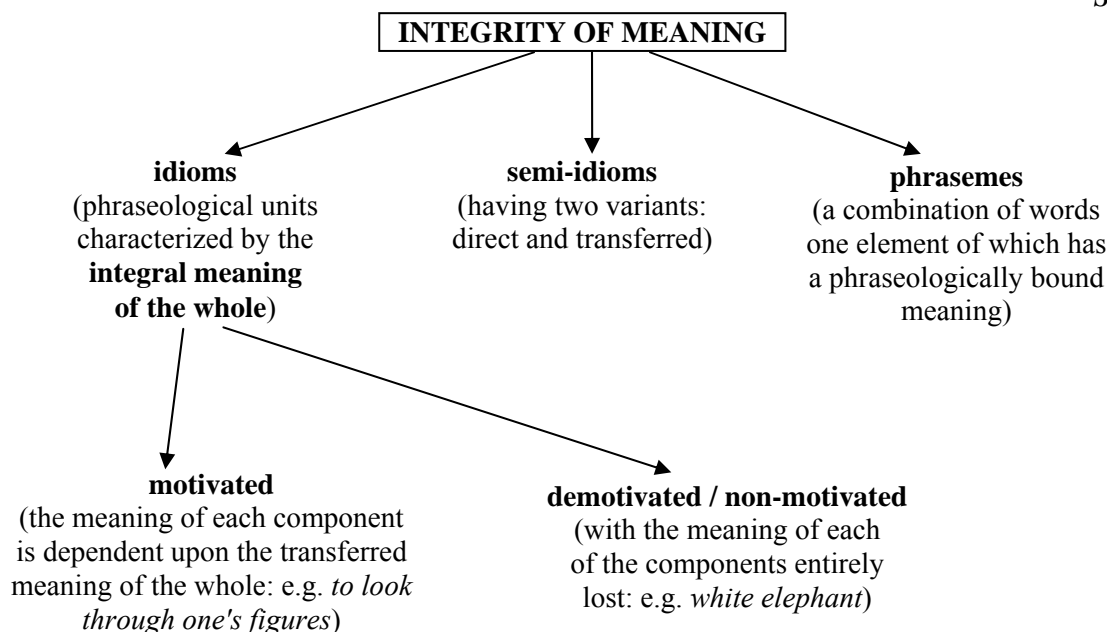
1) Idioms (phraseological units proper or idioms, *e.g.* fixed collocations of lexemes motivated and non-motivated);

2) Semi-idioms (idiom-phrasemes), (set expressions having two variants – direct and transferred/indirect);

3) Phrasemes (phraseomatic units of non-idiomatic character, with complex meaning): *e.g.*: *to go to sleep* = to sleep.

Schematically it can be represented in the following way:

Scheme 4



We have mentioned A.I. Smirnitkiy's classification and finally we are to add that it is divided into two elements:

a) Phraseological units (stylistically neutral expressions deprived of their metaphoricity or that lost it): *e.g. to get up, to fall in love;*

b) Idioms (transfer of meaning, based on a metaphor): *e.g. to burn the candle on both ends, to take the bull by the horns, etc.*

As a conclusion we can underline the fact that the term *phraseology* has come to be used for the whole ensemble of expressions where the meaning of one element is dependent on the other, irrespective of the structure and properties of the unit (V.V. Vinogradov); with other authors it denotes only such set expressions which, as distinguished from idioms, do not possess expressiveness or emotional colouring (A.I. Smirnitkiy), and also vice versa: only those that are imaginative, expressive and emotional (I.V. Arnold).

A.V. Koonin lays stress on the structural separateness of the elements in a phraseological unit, on the change of meaning in the whole as compared with its elements taken separately and on a certain minimum stability.

Phraseological units give colour to any language and it is useful to know them better for understanding and using them correctly and maybe because there is so much idiomaticity in every language, English especially.

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