

PRIMARY FUNCTION OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN THE SENTENCE

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Abstract

This article examines the primary function of phraseological units in the sentence, focusing on their semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and communicative roles. Drawing upon classical and modern linguistic theories, including those of V.V. Vinogradov, A.V. Kunin, I.V. Arnold, A.P. Cowie, and Fernando & Flavell, the article provides a comprehensive overview of how phraseological units operate as integral, indivisible components of sentence structure. The study argues that the core function of phraseological units is their ability to act as a single semantic whole while fulfilling a specific syntactic slot, regardless of their internal lexical complexity. Additional functions—expressive, evocative, pragmatic, and cultural—are also analyzed as secondary but pedagogically significant. The paper concludes that phraseological units contribute to sentence meaning not only through lexical stability but also through enriched expressiveness and cultural information.

Keywords: Phraseological units, idioms, primary function, semantic unity, syntactic function, expressiveness, linguistics, Vinogradov, Kunin, idiomatic meaning, fixed expressions.

Introduction

Phraseological units—such as idioms, fixed expressions, set phrases, and collocations—constitute a crucial component of any language's lexical system. They represent ready-made, stable combinations of words whose meaning is often figurative and cannot be inferred from the meanings of their individual components. Linguists have long emphasized the important role phraseological units play in enriching language expressiveness, cultural imagery, and linguistic identity (Arnold, 1986; Kunin, 1996; Cowie, 1998).

Despite their wide use and importance, one of the fundamental questions in phraseology concerns their primary function within the sentence. Early Russian linguists, including V.V. Vinogradov (1946), established the idea that phraseological units function in speech as semantic wholes—a concept still supported by contemporary scholars. According to Arnold (1986), this semantic integrity is what fundamentally differentiates phraseological units from free word combinations.

The primary function of phraseological units in the sentence is to act as a single, indivisible semantic and syntactic unit, fulfilling a grammatical role equivalent to a single lexical item. All other secondary functions—expressive, emotional, pragmatic, and cultural—stem from this main property. Before analyzing their functions, it is necessary to define phraseological units clearly.



According to A.V. Kunin, one of the founders of modern phraseological theory, phraseological units are “stable combinations of words with a fully or partially transferred meaning” (Kunin, 1996, p. 42). Vinogradov (1946) identifies stability and idiomaticity as the main properties of phraseologisms.

I.V. Arnold (1986) outlines the following characteristics:

1. **Semantic integrity**
2. **Structural stability**
3. **Reproducibility in speech**
4. **Non-predictability of meaning**

These features determine how phraseological units behave within the sentence: as **fixed lexicalized wholes** rather than freely generated constructions.

The following article explores this essential function in depth, drawing upon classical and modern linguistic theories.

According to Vinogradov (1946), the principal feature of a phraseological unit is semantic indivisibility. When used in a sentence, the meaning of the phrase cannot be decoded by analyzing individual components.

For example:

to kick the bucket → “to die”

a piece of cake → “something easy”

under the weather → “feeling ill”

As Kunin (1996) states, in such expressions, “the lexical meaning of the whole is not equal to the sum of its parts.” Fernando and Flavell (1981) also emphasize that idioms are “semantically opaque,” and this opacity constitutes their functional uniqueness.

Thus, the primary function is semantic condensation: expressing a complex meaning in a compact, fixed form.

Semantic unity allows phraseological units to:

communicate figurative or culturally embedded meaning,
enrich the stylistic coloring of the sentence,
standardize communication through predictable, conventional forms.

This semantic unity is what allows phraseological units to be treated as “single lexemes functioning at the phrase level” (Cowie, 1998, p. 12).

Although phraseological units consist of multiple words, syntactically they behave as one lexical unit. According to Arnold (1986), a phraseological unit “occupies one syntactic position in the sentence, functioning as if it were a single word.”

Phraseologisms can perform various syntactic roles:

Verb phrase: *take advantage of, blow the whistle on*

Noun phrase: *a blessing in disguise, the last straw*

Adjective phrase: *as fit as a fiddle*

Adverbial phrase: *at the drop of a hat, in the blink of an eye*

Interjection: *Good heavens!, My word!*

Although not the primary function, phraseological units significantly enhance expressiveness.

As noted by Fernando (1996), idioms often introduce:



humor (*pull someone's leg*)

emphasis (*hit the nail on the head*)

intensity (*scared to death*)

dramatic effect (*break someone's heart*)

These elements enrich the stylistic dynamism of the sentence.

Cowie (1998) states that idioms serve as carriers of cultural knowledge:

Achilles' heel → Greek mythology

skeleton in the closet → Victorian culture

apple of discord → classical tradition

Thus, phraseological units introduce socio-cultural information into the sentence.

Beyond semantic and syntactic roles, phraseological units contribute to communicative efficiency.

As Kunin (1996) notes, idioms simplify communication by providing ready-made expressions:

the tip of the iceberg → the visible part of a bigger problem

throw in the towel → give up

silver lining → hopeful aspect

This makes speech more natural and fluent.

Native speakers commonly use idioms, so employing them helps learners:

achieve native-like fluency,

develop pragmatic competence,

understand conversational norms.

Fernando and Flavell (1981) emphasize that idioms are essential for natural discourse, particularly in informal communication.

The analysis of scientific theories and linguistic evidence reveals that the primary function of phraseological units in the sentence is to operate as a single semantic and syntactic whole, despite consisting of multiple lexical components. This is supported by leading phraseologists such as Vinogradov, Kunin, Arnold, Cowie, and Fernando.

This primary function encompasses:

semantic unity (core function)

syntactic indivisibility

secondary expressive, cultural, pragmatic, and cognitive functions

Phraseological units enrich the sentence by providing compact, vivid, culturally rich expressions that enhance communication, fluency, and stylistic nuance.

Understanding this primary function is essential for linguistic analysis, teaching, translation, and effective communication.

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