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COGNITIVE MECHANISMS OF MEANING TRANSFORMATION IN PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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Abstract
Phraseological units represent a significant component of linguistic systems, reflecting not only the structural and semantic peculiarities of language but also the cognitive processes through which speakers conceptualize and interpret reality. Their meanings are not always fixed or entirely predictable from the meanings of their individual components. Instead, phraseological units may undergo semantic transformation as a result of various cognitive mechanisms, including conceptual metaphor, metonymy, conceptual blending, and contextual reinterpretation. This article examines the cognitive foundations of meaning transformation in phraseological units, focusing on the processes that contribute to the development of secondary meanings and semantic extensions. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between linguistic structure, conceptual knowledge, cultural experience, and discourse context.

Keywords: Phraseological units, cognitive linguistics, semantic transformation, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, conceptual blending, semantic extension, idiomatic meaning.

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Introduction

Phraseological units occupy a distinctive position in the lexical and semantic systems of languages. As relatively stable combinations of words characterized by conventionalized meanings, they serve as important means of expressing complex concepts, emotions, evaluations, and culturally significant experiences. Unlike freely constructed word combinations, phraseological units often possess meanings that cannot be directly inferred from the literal meanings of their constituent elements. Their semantic structure is therefore closely connected with the cognitive processes through which speakers interpret linguistic expressions and relate them to their knowledge of the world.

Traditional approaches to phraseology have primarily focused on the structural, semantic, and functional characteristics of idiomatic expressions. Within these approaches, phraseological units have frequently been described in terms of stability, reproducibility, idiomaticity, and the degree of semantic indivisibility. Although these characteristics remain essential for understanding phraseological phenomena, they do not fully explain how idiomatic meanings emerge, develop, and change in different communicative situations.

Cognitive linguistics offers a broader perspective by considering language as a reflection of human conceptualization. From this viewpoint, phraseological meaning is not simply a fixed semantic property assigned to a particular combination of words. It is associated with conceptual structures, embodied experience, cultural knowledge, and mechanisms of interpretation. Consequently, the transformation of phraseological meaning can be examined

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as a cognitive process involving the reinterpretation of images, the transfer of conceptual features, and the establishment of new associations.

The relevance of this issue is determined by the need to investigate phraseological units not only as stable linguistic formations but also as dynamic semantic structures capable of developing additional meanings. Particular importance should be attached to the cognitive mechanisms that establish connections between literal imagery and figurative interpretation.

The aim of this article is to identify and describe the major cognitive mechanisms underlying the transformation of meanings in phraseological units. The study focuses on conceptual metaphor, metonymy, conceptual blending, and contextual reinterpretation as processes that contribute to semantic extension and the formation of secondary interpretations.

The research employs descriptive, cognitive-semantic, contextual, and interpretative methods. These methods make it possible to examine the relationship between the internal structure of phraseological expressions, their figurative motivation, and their meanings in particular communicative contexts.

The meaning of a phraseological unit is generally understood as a conventionalized semantic whole associated with a relatively stable combination of lexical components. However, the relationship between the literal and figurative meanings of such expressions is not always straightforward. In many cases, the figurative meaning is motivated by an underlying image or conceptual association that remains cognitively accessible to speakers.

For example, the English expression *break the ice* refers to the process of overcoming initial social tension and making communication easier. Its literal image involves the breaking of ice, while its figurative interpretation is associated with removing an obstacle that prevents interaction. The transition from the physical domain to the social domain is motivated by the conceptual similarity between an obstacle in a physical environment and a barrier in interpersonal communication.

This example demonstrates that phraseological meaning is based not merely on arbitrary semantic assignment but also on conceptual associations. The literal image provides a cognitive foundation for interpreting the figurative meaning. Nevertheless, the degree of transparency varies considerably across phraseological units. Some expressions preserve a recognizable connection with their original imagery, whereas others have become highly conventionalized and are interpreted primarily through established linguistic knowledge.

From a cognitive perspective, phraseological units can be viewed as complex conceptual structures in which linguistic form activates knowledge, experience, and culturally established associations. Their meanings may therefore be influenced by several interconnected factors:

– the literal meanings of constituent components;
– the conceptual image underlying the expression;
– conventional cultural associations;
– the speaker's background knowledge;
– the communicative context;
– the pragmatic intention of the speaker.

The interaction of these factors explains why phraseological expressions may acquire additional semantic nuances without losing their conventional meanings.

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It is also important to distinguish between conventional semantic extension and occasional contextual modification. Conventional semantic extension involves the development of a relatively stable additional meaning that becomes recognizable within a speech community. Contextual modification, by contrast, may represent an individual or temporary reinterpretation created for a particular communicative purpose. These phenomena are related, but they should not be treated as identical.

Conceptual metaphor is one of the most significant mechanisms involved in the formation and transformation of phraseological meanings. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of human thought through which abstract concepts are understood in terms of more concrete experiences.

In phraseology, metaphorical mapping enables speakers to transfer features from one conceptual domain to another. Physical movement, spatial orientation, temperature, light, and bodily experience frequently serve as source domains for conceptualizing abstract phenomena such as emotions, relationships, social interaction, and intellectual activity.

Consider the expression *lose one's head*. Literally, it evokes the image of losing a physical body part. Figuratively, it describes a situation in which a person loses self-control or the ability to think rationally. The semantic transformation is based on the conceptual association between the head and rational consciousness. The physical image becomes a means of representing the loss of emotional or intellectual control.

A similar mechanism can be observed in the expression *fall into despair*. The verb *fall* primarily denotes downward physical movement. However, in this phraseological construction, it represents a transition into a negative emotional state. The metaphorical relationship can be described through the conceptual pattern NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL STATES ARE DOWNWARD MOVEMENT OR LOCATIONS.

Another example is *be in hot water*, which means to be in trouble or in a difficult situation. The physical experience of being surrounded by hot water is mapped onto the abstract experience of facing difficulties or consequences. The expression demonstrates how bodily sensations and environmental experiences can structure the conceptualization of social situations.

Metaphorical transformation may also contribute to the emergence of different interpretations of the same phraseological expression. Depending on the conceptual features activated in a particular context, an expression may emphasize emotional intensity, social difficulty, personal failure, or psychological pressure.

Kövecses (2010) emphasizes that metaphorical conceptualization is influenced by both universal bodily experiences and culturally specific patterns of thought. This observation is particularly relevant to phraseology because idiomatic expressions frequently combine embodied imagery with culturally established interpretations.

Thus, conceptual metaphor functions as an important cognitive mechanism that connects literal imagery with abstract meanings and provides a basis for the semantic development of phraseological units.

Another important cognitive mechanism involved in phraseological transformation is conceptual metonymy. Unlike metaphor, which generally establishes a relationship between

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different conceptual domains, metonymy involves a connection between elements within the same conceptual domain or conceptual frame.

Metonymic relationships are frequently based on associations such as part and whole, body and function, object and user, or place and institution. In phraseological expressions, these relationships allow one conceptual element to represent a broader experience or situation.

For instance, the expression *lend a hand* means to provide assistance. The noun *hand* refers to a body part that is conventionally associated with physical activity and practical work. Through the metonymic relationship PART FOR ACTION or BODY PART FOR ASSISTANCE, the physical organ becomes a representation of help and participation.

The expression *keep an eye on someone* provides another example. The noun *eye* is associated with the act of seeing, while the entire expression means to watch or monitor someone or something. The relationship between the organ and its function allows the expression to acquire an extended meaning related to attention and supervision.

A further example is *give someone a hand*, which may refer to helping someone or, in certain contexts, applauding a performer. The underlying image of the hand remains recognizable, but the intended interpretation depends on the conventional meaning activated by the surrounding discourse.

These examples demonstrate that metonymy plays an important role in the semantic organization of phraseological units. It enables speakers to use a concrete element of experience to represent a more complex action, state, or communicative intention.

Metaphor and metonymy may also interact. In some phraseological expressions, a metonymic association provides the basis for a broader metaphorical interpretation. Such interaction makes the semantic structure of idioms particularly complex and illustrates the importance of examining them as cognitive formations rather than isolated lexical combinations.

Conceptual blending represents another mechanism that can contribute to the interpretation and semantic transformation of phraseological units. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) describe conceptual blending as a cognitive process in which elements from different mental spaces are selectively combined to produce a new conceptual structure.

In phraseology, this mechanism is particularly relevant when the meaning of an expression cannot be explained through a single metaphorical or metonymic correspondence. Instead, interpretation may involve the integration of several conceptual elements, including literal imagery, conventional idiomatic meaning, and contextual information.

For example, the expression *a storm in a teacup* describes a situation in which a relatively insignificant problem causes excessive excitement or conflict. Its interpretation involves the integration of two contrasting conceptual scenarios: a powerful natural storm and a small domestic object. The contrast between the scale of the storm and the limited dimensions of the teacup produces the meaning of disproportionate reaction.

The expression *carry the weight of the world on one's shoulders* provides another illustration. Its interpretation combines the physical experience of carrying a heavy object with the abstract experience of responsibility, anxiety, or emotional pressure. The resulting meaning is not limited to physical burden; it represents an extensive psychological and social responsibility.

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Conceptual blending is therefore useful for explaining how phraseological units integrate different aspects of experience into a unified interpretation. It also helps explain why some expressions possess rich semantic potential and can be reinterpreted in new communicative situations.

However, not every phraseological expression necessarily requires a blending analysis. In many cases, conventional metaphorical or metonymic explanations are sufficient. Conceptual blending is particularly useful when the interpretation depends on the interaction of several mental spaces or on the emergence of meaning through conceptual contrast.

The meaning of a phraseological unit is closely connected with the context in which it is used. Although many idioms possess relatively stable conventional meanings, their interpretation may be modified by the communicative situation, the speaker's intention, and the linguistic environment.

Contextual reinterpretation occurs when an established phraseological expression acquires additional semantic nuances or becomes associated with a particular situation in a new way. This process does not necessarily result in the formation of a new dictionary meaning. In many cases, it produces a temporary contextual effect.

For example, the expression *break the ice* conventionally refers to overcoming social awkwardness or initiating communication. In a particular discourse, however, it may be used to describe the beginning of cooperation between previously competing organizations. The basic idiomatic meaning remains recognizable, but its application is extended from interpersonal communication to institutional relations.

Similarly, *open a can of worms* means to introduce a complicated or problematic issue that may lead to further difficulties. Depending on the context, the expression may refer to a political decision, an academic debate, a family conflict, or an organizational problem. The general meaning remains stable, while the specific interpretation is shaped by the situation.

Contextual reinterpretation may also involve deliberate modification of an idiom. Speakers can replace, add, omit, or rearrange its components to create humorous, ironic, evaluative, or persuasive effects. Such transformations are particularly common in media discourse, advertising, political communication, and informal online interaction.

It is necessary to distinguish between two related processes:

1. Conventional semantic extension – the development of an additional meaning that becomes relatively stable and socially recognizable.

2. Contextual semantic modification – an individual reinterpretation of an established expression within a particular communicative situation.

The distinction is important because not every creative use of an idiom represents a permanent change in its semantic structure. Some modifications remain restricted to a specific context, whereas others may gradually become conventionalized through repeated use.

Consequently, discourse should be considered an important environment in which the semantic potential of phraseological units is activated, modified, and sometimes expanded.

The mechanisms discussed above rarely function in complete isolation. In many cases, phraseological meaning emerges through the interaction of metaphorical, metonymic, and contextual processes.

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For example, the expression *lose one's head* involves a metonymic association between the head and rational thought, while its figurative interpretation may also be understood metaphorically as the loss of control. The physical image activates knowledge about the function of the head, which is then mapped onto an abstract psychological state.

Likewise, *lend a hand* is primarily motivated by metonymy, since the hand represents assistance through its association with physical action. However, in a broader context, the expression may participate in metaphorical conceptualizations of cooperation as shared physical activity.

The following table summarizes the principal cognitive mechanisms involved in the transformation and interpretation of phraseological meanings.

The examples demonstrate that phraseological meaning is structured through different cognitive operations. The same expression may activate several associations simultaneously, and its interpretation may depend on the interaction between conventional knowledge and contextual information.

This interaction also explains why phraseological units should not be regarded as semantically isolated formations. Their meanings are connected with broader conceptual systems, including bodily experience, spatial orientation, emotional states, social relations, and cultural knowledge.

The cognitive approach makes it possible to reconsider the relationship between semantic stability and semantic variability in phraseology. Although phraseological units are characterized by conventionality and relative stability, their meanings are not necessarily static. The development of secondary meanings may occur through repeated metaphorical reinterpretation, metonymic associations, contextual adaptation, and the conventionalization of innovative uses. Over time, a contextually motivated interpretation may become sufficiently frequent and recognizable to acquire the status of an additional conventional meaning.

This process can be described as a gradual movement from individual interpretation to collective linguistic convention. Initially, a speaker may employ an existing expression in a new context, activating a previously less prominent conceptual feature. If similar uses are repeated and accepted by other speakers, the new interpretation may become established within the speech community.

Nevertheless, semantic change does not always follow a linear or predictable direction. Different interpretations may coexist, and the relationship between them may be influenced by cultural, historical, and pragmatic factors.

From this perspective, phraseological units can be considered dynamic cognitive structures that preserve conventional meanings while simultaneously allowing new interpretations. Their semantic organization reflects the interaction of linguistic convention, conceptual knowledge, and communicative practice.

This understanding is particularly important for comparative phraseological research. Similar cognitive mechanisms may operate across different languages, but the conceptual images and cultural associations through which these mechanisms are realized may differ. Therefore, the investigation of phraseological transformation can reveal both universal features of human conceptualization and language-specific patterns of semantic organization.

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Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the transformation of meanings in phraseological units is closely connected with fundamental cognitive mechanisms through which speakers conceptualize and interpret reality. Conceptual metaphor, metonymy, conceptual blending, and contextual reinterpretation contribute to the formation of figurative meanings, the development of secondary interpretations, and the expansion of the semantic potential of idiomatic expressions. Conceptual metaphor enables the transfer of features from concrete experiential domains to abstract concepts, while metonymy establishes semantic connections between related elements within a conceptual frame. Conceptual blending explains the integration of different mental spaces into a unified interpretation, whereas contextual reinterpretation demonstrates how conventional meanings can be modified and extended in discourse.

The interaction of these mechanisms indicates that phraseological meaning cannot be adequately explained exclusively through the structural characteristics of idiomatic expressions. It should also be examined in relation to human cognition, embodied experience, cultural knowledge, and communicative context.

The study supports the view that phraseological units represent dynamic semantic structures characterized by both conventional stability and interpretative flexibility. Their ability to develop additional meanings reflects the creative nature of human conceptualization and the continuous interaction between language and experience.

Further research may focus on corpus-based investigations of semantic transformation in phraseological units across different languages. A comparative English-Russian-Uzbek perspective would be particularly valuable for identifying universal cognitive mechanisms and culture-specific patterns involved in the development of phraseological meanings.

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