

**IDIOMS, COLLOCATIONS, METAPHORS, AND PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS:
DEFINITIONS, CLASSIFICATIONS, AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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Abstract

This article examines the linguistic distinctions and interrelationships among idioms, collocations, metaphors, and phraseological units in English. Drawing on contemporary phraseological and cognitive linguistic theories, it analyzes their semantic, structural, and functional characteristics. The study also discusses pedagogical implications for higher education, emphasizing the role of phraseological competence in developing fluency, pragmatic awareness, and culturally appropriate language use.

Keywords

phraseology, idioms, collocations, metaphors, phraseological units, semantic opacity, compositionality, fixed expressions, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, lexical competence, pedagogical linguistics, cross-linguistic analysis,

Phraseological units - a term encompassing fixed or semi-fixed word combinations - play a central role in English. Phraseology, a subfield of linguistics, concerns these lexicalized patterns that function as single semantic units. Such units include idioms, phrasal verbs, collocations, and fixed expressions. They are pervasive in everyday discourse and literature, carrying stylistic, pragmatic, and cultural functions. Modern scholarship treats these phenomena as points along a continuum of lexicalization and compositionality. This article surveys current linguistic theory on these categories - their definitions, classification schemes, and interrelationships - and highlights implications for teaching English, with attention to cross-linguistic insights.

Idioms are conventionally defined as fixed expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of their individual components. For example, burn the midnight oil ("to work late into the night") and spill the beans ("to reveal a secret") have meanings that are not directly derivable from the literal senses of their parts. Idioms are typically characterized by semantic opacity, syntactic fixedness, and strong cultural embeddedness. Cognitive linguistic research emphasizes that many idioms are motivated by underlying conceptual metaphors rooted in embodied and cultural experience.

Collocations, in contrast, are combinations of words that co-occur frequently and naturally in a language. They are generally semantically transparent, meaning that their overall meaning is compositional, yet they are restricted by convention rather than grammar. Expressions such as make a decision, strong tea, or commit a crime illustrate this phenomenon. Although learners may understand each individual word, non-native combinations often sound unnatural, highlighting the importance of collocational competence in advanced proficiency.

Metaphors represent a broader cognitive and rhetorical phenomenon. Traditionally described as a figure of speech in which one concept is understood in terms of another, metaphor

is now viewed in cognitive linguistics as a fundamental mechanism of thought. Conceptual metaphors such as TIME IS MONEY or ARGUMENT IS WAR structure large portions of everyday language. Metaphors can appear in novel, creative expressions as well as in conventionalized idioms and collocations.

Phraseological unit serves as an umbrella term encompassing idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, proverbs, clichés, and other fixed or semi-fixed expressions. What unites these units is their tendency to function as single semantic entities and their resistance to free grammatical variation.

Classification of phraseological units

One influential classification is associated with the Russian phraseological tradition, particularly the work of V. V. Vinogradov, who distinguished phraseological fusions, unities, and collocations based on semantic motivation. Phraseological fusions are completely non-motivated and opaque, unities retain some metaphorical motivation, and collocations remain largely transparent but lexically restricted.

Later models, including Mel'cuk's Meaning-text theory, proposed classifications based on compositionality and lexical constraint. In this framework, idioms are non-compositional phrasemes, collocations are compositional but lexically constrained, and clichés are fully compositional expressions tied to specific pragmatic contexts. This approach emphasizes the continuum between free word combinations and fully fixed idiomatic expressions.



Interrelationships

Although idioms, collocations, and metaphors are distinct analytical categories, they are closely interconnected. Many idioms originate from metaphorical extensions of literal expressions that have become conventionalized over time. For example, *break the ice originally* referred to physically breaking ice to allow passage but later acquired a social meaning related to initiating interaction.

Collocations may also involve metaphorical elements, as in *heavy rain* or *economic growth*, yet their meanings remain interpretable through conceptual mapping. Unlike idioms, collocations allow learners to infer meaning but require exposure to acquire native-like usage.

Metaphors differ from idioms primarily in their productivity. While metaphors can be created creatively and interpreted contextually, idioms are stored as fixed units in the mental lexicon. Nevertheless, cognitive linguistics demonstrates that idioms are often metaphorically motivated rather than arbitrary.

Cross-Linguistic Perspectives.

Comparative studies between English and Uzbek reveal both universal and culture-specific aspects of phraseology. Many conceptual metaphors, such as those relating to physical experience, emotion, and social relations, are shared across languages. However, idiomatic expressions frequently lack direct equivalents, requiring translation strategies such as substitution, paraphrase, or explanation.

Uzbek phraseological units often reflect historical, religious, and cultural influences distinct from those found in English. This divergence poses challenges for translation and language teaching but also provides valuable opportunities for contrastive analysis and intercultural awareness.

Pedagogical Implications.

For university-level English instruction, phraseological competence is essential to achieving advanced proficiency. Research consistently shows that mastery of idioms and collocations correlates strongly with fluency, naturalness, and pragmatic appropriateness.

Effective pedagogy requires differentiated strategies. Collocations benefit from corpus-based approaches and repeated exposure in authentic contexts. Semi-transparent idioms can be taught through metaphor awareness and contextualized practice, while opaque idioms require explicit instruction and memorization techniques.

Incorporating cross-linguistic comparison, especially for learners with a shared first language, can enhance understanding and retention. Teachers should also emphasize register, fixedness, and syntactic limitations to prevent misuse.

Conclusion

Idioms, collocations, metaphors, and other phraseological units constitute a fundamental component of English lexical competence. Linguistic theory demonstrates that these elements form a continuum ranging from free combinations to fully fixed idioms, shaped by cognitive, cultural, and usage-based factors.

A systematic understanding of phraseology provides both theoretical insight and practical value for higher education and advanced language instruction. Integrating linguistic theory with pedagogical application enables instructors to guide learners toward more natural, expressive, and culturally informed use of English.

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