

Some lexical, grammatical and functional features of phraseological units in English and Albanian

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Abstract:

The task of defining what an idiomatic expression is remains still a rather difficult one. The border between literal and idiomatic expressions is still controversial. The difficulty in defining phraseological units is due to several factors. Current treatment of phraseology in specialised registers acknowledges the need for corpus-based studies of the prototypical lexico-grammatical patternings and discourse functions of lexical phrases across disciplines. Thus, the aim of this paper is to deal with some lexical, grammatical and functional features of phraseological units in order to understand their nature and to deal with idiomatization as a process. More precisely, this research study intends to explore prototypical lexico-grammatical features and patterns of phraseological units in English and Albanian. This analysis is based entirely on corpus evidence, since all collocational patterns discussed are extracted mainly from literary texts in both languages, specifically compiled for the current research study.

Keywords: *phraseological unit, idiom, lexical, grammatical, function*

Literary Review

The most widely agreed-upon definition of an idiom is that which specifies that the meaning of the whole is not determinable given the meanings of its parts. This means that an idiom cannot be interpreted literally. Patricia G. Adkins (1968) defines idioms as “modes of expression or phrases which are peculiar to a given language”. She continues to point out that idioms “are the basis for understanding the language, since they constitute a large part of it. They are rarely translated literally and often the dictionary is of little aid in the determination of the meaning of a particular expression”. As a matter of fact, an idiom is an independent expression unit; it should be treated like every individual word in a dictionary, and thus the unit

should be picked up as a whole. An attempt to change the components of an idiom may sometimes result in confusing an audience. If someone says: “*I’ve seen a lot of greedy people, but this person takes the cake*”, we understand what the sentence means. However if he substitutes the idiom “*take the cake*” with “*take the pie*”, the sentence certainly will be confusing to us.

In modern linguistics, there is considerable confusion about the terminology associated with these word-groups. Most Russian scholars use the term “phraseological unit” which was first introduced by Victor Vladimirovich Vinogradov. In Albanian there are not many studies on phraseology. The most well known scholar is Jani Thomai, who uses the term “phraseological unit” to describe what ‘idioms’ are in English. The term “idiom” is mostly applied to phraseological units with completely transferred meanings, that is, to the ones in which the meaning of the whole unit does not correspond to the current meanings of the components. There are many scholars who regard idioms as the essence of phraseology and the major focus of interest in phraseology research.

The Albanian linguist, Jani Thomai, in his study “Çështje të frazeologjisë së gjuhës shqipe”, provides his definition “a phraseological unit is a linguistic unit with a meaning of its own, made stable historically and used as an inseparable unit for a long time”. He gives these facts to back up his opinion:

- From the viewpoint of parts of speech they are very much like collocations; for example:

e kishte marrë ferra uratën
e merr nëpër këmbë

- The formation, their blending is a result of a long juxtaposition, an outcome of historical development.
- The meaning is derived from the whole statement, not from the sum of its constituents.
- The components have, to a certain degree, lost their semantic dependence.
- More than often the constituents are rigid in a certain form.

m’u errën sytë
s’ka sy e faqe
e mori në sysh

where the noun “sy” (eye) does not sustain any change whatsoever.

- They are endowed with figurative and stylistic shade, as in:
- fut hundët*
ka gisht

- phraseological units can or cannot be motivated as it happens in the verbal phraseological unit - *bëj pallë* (= have a gay, lovely time). In the Albanian phraseological unit, ‘*vë re*’ – the noun component “*re*” - means ‘*attention*’. Naim Frashëri used it in “Histori e Skënderbeut” “*Ajo me re e shikojt*”.

Phraseological units, or idioms represent what can probably be described as the most picturesque, colourful and expressive part of the language's vocabulary. Generally, phraseological units are defined as units made up of at least two words, as unique combinations of words not created according to a certain pattern and no other combinations can be created accordingly. Combinatory abilities of phraseological units are different from the combinatory abilities of regular language. Such an expression which has been used over time so frequently that it loses its special features with which many speakers are familiar with is considered an idiomatic expression. The basic criteria for defining idioms in general as seen by both Albanian and English researchers are:

- a) conventionality
- b) paradigmatic fixity, i.e. the inability of the elements of phraseological units to be substitutable in the same place in a particular context.
- c) Syntagmatic fixity, or the ability of elements of idiomatic units to combine only with particular elements
- d) Idiomaticity, or a various degree of formal, semantic and functional anomaly which is reflected in the number and restriction of transformations
- e) The ability to undergo various types of transformations of their base structure which he characterized as ‘a unit of phraseology semantically and formally irreducible’, the transformations being structural and grammatical.
- f) Idioms are transformationally anomalous, i.e. they are unique combinations of words not created according to a certain pattern, and no other combinations can be created accordingly. From the formal point of view, this means that the combinatory abilities of idioms are not identical with the combinatory abilities of regular language. From the semantic point of view, the semantics of individual idiom components have no compositional function, i.e. the overall meaning of an idiom cannot be predicted from the meanings of its constituent parts.

There have been diverse definitions of phraseological units and for that matter, scholars often approach the issue from their unique perspectives based on different research purposes. However, we have considered few of their features below:

Non-compositionality of idioms

This means that the meaning of the whole is not a sum of the meaning of the parts. For example, knowledge of the meaning of the words 'to spill' and 'beans' will not provide any clue at all to the idiomatic meaning of 'to spill the beans' (to tell a secret). The meaning of an idiom is comparable to the meaning of a single lexical item, and must be learned as a whole in the same way the meaning of any other lexical item is learned.

Wasow, Sag and Nunberg (1995) point out that the parts of an idiom do have identifiable meanings which although non-literal, are derived from the literal meanings; these non-literal meanings combine to produce the whole idiom. In addition, idioms maintain their internal syntactic structure, which may be transformed and modified to varying degrees. These modifications affect the unitary meaning of the idiom.

-transparency of idioms

In order to understand why the meanings of some idioms are more transparent than others, it is necessary to first distinguish idioms from metaphors. Although idioms and metaphors are frequently grouped together, idioms should not be included in the category of figurative speech. Idioms have conventionalized meanings, agreed upon by the speakers of the language, which actually can be figured out if they are not known. The meaning of a metaphor, is not fixed, and novel metaphors must be figured out. Thus, unfamiliar idioms will not be understood, except perhaps by guessing at the meaning from the context in which they are used.

Translatability of idioms

Students of foreign languages have often come to see idioms as strings of words which cannot be translated literally into the other language. This has led some people to believe that no idioms can be translated literally. There are however, many idioms which have direct word for word translations in other languages without losing their idiomatic meanings.

Roos (1976) classifies idioms which can be translated as either congruent or equivalent. Congruent idioms have the same lexical form and meaning in both languages. For example, 'to break the ice' is translated 'theyj akullin' in Albanian. They have exactly the same lexical form, and both mean 'to overcome initial difficulty in starting a conversation. Equivalent idioms use different lexical material to convey the same meaning. For example, 'to have a screw loose' and the Albanian counterpart 'të kesh një dërrasë mangut' have different lexical forms, but both mean that 'someone is a little crazy'. Equivalent idioms may be completely different or rather similar. Often there is no idiom in another language which conveys the same meaning. In this case, the idiom may be rendered in the other language by a single word, a fixed non-idiomatic formula or a free paraphrase.

Closely related languages may have many idioms which are entirely different, due to their origins in different historical and geographical accidents. They may also have many idioms which are identical. Flavell (1973) gives reasons why the same idiom may be found in different languages: (a) different languages spontaneously generate similar idioms from the same source, because many idioms are based on ordinary, concrete objects; (b) similar languages may share a common culture; (c) idioms are frequently borrowed between languages.

How do idioms appear in our language system?

According to Adam Makkai, "the most probable reason for the appearance of idioms is that as we develop new concepts, we need new expressions for them, but instead of creating a brand new word from the sounds of the language, we use some already existent words and put them together in a new sense. This appears to be true of all known languages. There are, in fact, no known languages that do not have some idioms" (1978, p. 83). The English and Albanian languages are especially rich in idioms. Almost all idioms are composed of simple words from everyday speech, with a great majority of them being monosyllabic words:

Get on, get off, get over, get away with, get through
Rain cats and dogs, kick the bucket, spill the beans, take the cake

Why do we use idioms?

Research has shown that, like non-idiomatic linguistic items (lexical, phrasal, or clausal), idioms, or phraseological units, are used for a variety

of functions (Liu, 2008.) There are reasons why native speakers of English or Albanian like to employ idioms in their speech. First, since idioms are composed mostly of familiar monosyllabic words of everyday speech, naturally people will find it easy to use idioms instead of using the longer or unfamiliar vocabulary. For example, it would be easier to say “She takes after her mother” than “she resembles her mother”. The second reason why native speakers like to use idioms in their speech may have to do with idiomaticization: the way idioms are created. The elements of many idioms are either alliterated, rhymed, contrasted, synonymised or a combination of any of the above.

by hook or by crook (synonym & rhyme)
take the cake (rhyme)
move heaven and earth (contrast)

The third reason for their popularity is the figurative nature of idioms. All idioms are figurative and because they are figurative, they add colour and fun to the language. People enjoy using idioms because by so doing they feel that they can play with the words. A sentence like “you will not get anything done if you have too many irons in the fire” is more colourful and interesting than “You will not accomplish anything if you try to do too many things at one time”. The final reason may have to do with the semantic leakage. The reason that semantic leakage adds to the popularity of idioms is that it creates a double image, a figurative one accompanied by a literal one. The effect of this double image makes our speech interesting and sometimes witty, as in the following play on a pun cited by Chafe: “Just now he’s sitting on a cloud, but it may not support him very long” (Chafe, 1971).

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