

Cohesion in Phraseology

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Abstract

This paper explores cohesion as one of the basic theoretical concepts in phraseology alongside with stability and figurativeness. Cohesion of the base form derives from phraseological meaning and the organization of the unit. When used in discourse, the intrinsic properties of the phraseological unit contribute to text formation. Cohesion is not only a semantic means. Cohesion is also a stylistic relation. Phraseological cohesion is an essential feature of the progressive development of text, as it secures continuity of phraseological ties in discourse. Sustained stylistic use of a phraseological unit enhances the perception of the text as a cohesive and coherent entity.

1 Introduction

Cohesion is one of the basic theoretical concepts in phraseology at all levels, whether it refers to the base form of the phraseological unit (PU) or the ways of its use in discourse.

It is a challenge to write a short article on phraseology, as it is an area, which has a confusing range of terminology and different approaches. I fully agree with Cowie that the lack of a standardized terminology persists [1981: 225]. Twenty years have passed and the situation is not much better. Terminological uncertainty makes the work of lexicographers more demanding, while linguists find it difficult to communicate their message without the fear of being misunderstood. The reading of a piece of research on phraseology starts with an attempt to establish the use of terminology and the basic definitions. Sometimes they differ in the works of the same researcher. What is worse, “phraseology is a field bedevilled by the proliferation of terms and by conflicting uses of the same term” [Cowie 1998b: 210]. First and foremost, this refers to the term “idiom”. It is polysemous and has several meanings in its semantic structure even in learners’ dictionaries [see, for instance, Cobuild Advanced 1987]. Apart from that, it has many theoretical interpretations. As Moon points out, “idiom” is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways both in general English and as a specialist term¹ [Moon 1986: 108; Moon 1998: 3-6]. I recognize that “the terminological situation cannot be easily resolved except by avoiding the term *idiom* altogether” [Moon 1998: 4].

I would argue for the term *phraseological unit*, and here I would like to make it clear that I do not consider that idioms are a subset of phraseological units. According to Kunin a phraseological unit is a stable combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning [Kunin 1970: 210]. This definition is best suited for purposes of both analysis and practical identification². Kunin was an outstanding lexicographer and he followed his theoretical principles in his lexicographical work. His *English-Russian Phraseological*

Dictionary (about 25000 units) has won high acclaim [Kunin 1967]. Cowie writes that it is “a meticulous work of scholarship and a model of theory-driven lexicography” [Cowie 1998b : 220]. Kunin’s definition includes two inherent properties of PUs: stability and figurative meaning, which differentiate these units from free word combinations and also from set expressions which are stable but which have no figurative meaning. PUs is one of the modes of reflecting figurative thought³. However, I believe that the PU has a third categorial feature, that of cohesion, which derives from phraseological meaning and the organization of the unit. Hence, I would reword Kunin’s definition as follows, “The phraseological unit is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning”. Cohesion is central to both the understanding of the base form of the PU and its use in discourse.

2 Cohesion of the Base Form

I propose to introduce the term *base form*⁴ in the English language to indicate the form of the PU to which other forms of the PU can be related and with which they can be compared. The base form is the dictionary form and meaning, recorded as the head form. In its base form the PU is a static out-of-context formation which does not depend on discourse. The base form is an archetypal conception, an abstraction, which has all the most important characteristics of the PU, e.g. *a white feather, to fall into the trap, to rock the boat, to foot the bill, a running battle*. In text it may be used with or without additional stylistic changes depending on discourse needs.

The base form of the PU is cohesive in its own right. Cohesion and stability⁵ are not the same thing. Cohesion is a semantic relation [Halliday 1976: 6], it is part of the meaning of the base form. The cohesive relations within a PU are manifold. They are present not only in the meaning of the PU, but also realized through grammatical, lexical and stylistic ties. Cohesion also proceeds from the intricate semantic structure of the PU. The cohesion of the PU depends on all the types of these interrelations. It secures and explains stability. It has already been noticed in the very early phraseological investigations in the 50’s that one component of a PU cannot be explained without the other(s) or, to put it in different terms, the meaning of the PU cannot be directly derived from its constituent parts. The 80’s and the 90’s have produced profound analysis of the meaning of PUs. Melerovich argues that the semantic structure of PUs includes their inner form, motivation of phraseological meaning and phraseological abstraction [Melerovich 1982]. The image component of phraseological meaning has been further researched from the point of view of cognitive linguistics [see Dobrovolskij 1996; Dobrovolskij 1998].

At the same time semantic cohesion does not contradict the possibilities of variation. Moon presents an extensive analysis of variants of the base form and their main types [see Moon 1996; Moon 1998: Ch. 6; see also Gläser 1998: 129-30].

As a base form the PU is a decontextualized language unit. It is generic to all manifestations of a particular PU in discourse or a totality of discourses. The base form is a cohesive entity *per se*, which provides for the existence, development and sustainability of the PU in use, that is, the base form secures the operation of the PU in discourse, including both core use and innumerable stylistic instantiations. PUs are stored in base forms in long-term memory

as part of stored language information and are recalled as part of the cognitive process of identification: perception, recognition, comprehension and interpretation. It is possible to retrieve them because they are stable, cohesive and figurative chunks of information. Cohesion is one of the categorial features of the meaning of PUs alongside with stability and figurativeness.

3 Cohesion in Discourse

When used in discourse, the intrinsic cohesive properties of the PU contribute to text formation. The flexibility of PUs is determined by the key properties of the base form which provide for their involvement in the web of semantic and stylistic relationships, and associative links.

3.1 Cohesion in Core Use

In text phraseological units often appear in their standard form and meaning. I introduce the term *core use*⁶ to denote the basic, most common, essential form and meaning which is the invariable of the PU available to a language user. In many ways core use resembles the base form. Core use constitutes the “perfect” example, e.g.

the white feather⁷

The earlier attacks (on Britain) from the air were noticeable enough for a naval officer to be heard saying playfully to another. ‘What! Going to sea, are you? So you’re showing the white feather!’

Oxford Idioms [1993: 588]

Core use realises the cohesive relations inherent in the base form. The contextual changes are insignificant (if any). They serve to comply with the requirements of the sentence. The base form remains largely intact and there is no act of creation in the case of core use **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.**

To my knowledge Moon is the first to discuss cohesion issues in core use. She makes an exhaustive study of various types of cohesive effects, which are grouped into grammatical cohesion (provided in text through reference, substitution), lexical cohesion (repetition, synonymy) and semantic cohesion. Moon points out that the cohesiveness of fixed expressions and idioms (FEIs) is always partly lexical, since they are a lexically determined subset of the lexicon, while all cohesive ties are semantic, since they make texts meaningful [Moon 1998: 278-86]. That is why it is important to treat fixed expressions not as isolated units but as integral parts of higher level units, making significant contributions to a discourse in terms of structure and interpersonal involvement [Moon 1992].

Core use realises and brings out the stylistic potential of the base form⁸. This capacity operates as a means of cohesion **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.** and helps to understand and explain the stability **Fejl! Henvisningskilde ikke fundet.** of phraseological form and meaning.

Thus, core use is the use of the PU in its most common form and meaning. It does not acquire any additional stylistic features in discourse and does not exceed the boundaries of one sentence, the same as the base form.

3.2 Cohesion in Instantial Stylistic Use

The stylistic use of PUs has received much attention for more than three decades. *Phraseological stylistics* is first singled out by Kunin [1969: 71-5] as a separate area which studies the stylistic properties of PUs and their use. Gläser[1984] voices a plea for phraseo-stylistics as a subject of stylistic description in its own right to study the communicative function of phraseological units. Whether it is a separate area is another issue. However, it is clear that in discourse PUs may acquire significant stylistic changes, many of which go beyond sentence boundaries. This use differs from core use and needs to be addressed separately. Interestingly, this is an area that can boast the greatest variety of terminology. I would like to introduce the term *instantialstylistic use*⁹ to denote a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a PU in discourse which results in significant changes in its form and meaning determined by the context. Instantial stylistic use reflects thought and experience beyond the possibilities of core use, e.g.

the white feather

David had asked about the apparent paradox of the old man's pacifism in 1916 and his serving as medical orderly with the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War.

'White feather, dear boy. Quite literal, you know. Had a collection of the damn' things. Didn't care, all a joke.

J.Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*

Instantial stylistic use of PUs plays a special cohesive role in the creation of text, drawing upon the cohesive ties of the base form of the PU, in this case punning on the literal meaning and providing cohesion across sentence boundaries. Hence, cohesion is not only a semantic means, providing ties in between and across sentences and linking sentences into larger units. Cohesion is also a stylistic relation. Sustained stylistic use of a PU contributes to the perception of the text as a cohesive and coherent entity. There exist various patterns of instantial stylistic use which illustrate the role of cohesion in the sustainability of a phraseological image in discourse¹⁰.

Moon views cohesion as one of the functions of FEIs in text, which are common to the lexicon in general alongside with informational, evaluative, situational, modalizing, organizational, interpersonal and other functions [Moon 1998: 217-9, Ch.10]. She speaks about cross-functioning of FEIs, underlining their textual significance and the behaviour of individual FEIs in individual contexts [Moon 1998: 241-3; 294-308].

Thus, phraseological cohesion secures continuity of phraseological ties in discourse, which is achieved by semantically and stylistically related items that are part of one instantiation of a PU in successive parts of a sentence or sentences. It is a great achievement of Cobuild Idioms [1995] (based on the Bank of English) that it also registers stylistic use of PUs,

including stylistic instances, which work across sentence boundaries¹¹. These instances illustrate the sustainability of a phraseological image over a stretch of text.

4 Conclusion

Cohesion is one of the key concepts in phraseology. It is crucial not only to the understanding of PUs as decontextualized units in their base form, but also the involvement of PUs in the web of discourse and the semantic and stylistic ties as a manifestation of the inherent cohesion of the base form. Cohesion is an essential feature of the progressive development of text, as it secures continuity of phraseological ties in discourse. Cohesion in phraseology merits further studies. It needs to be recognized both in theoretical and applied research, and the practical applications. Cohesion has become one of the elements deemed to be central to discourse analysis, applied linguistics and language teaching. Failure to understand cohesion, rather than lack of lexical knowledge, is the most common cause of misreading [McRae 1996: 35]. A profound understanding of cohesive ties is crucial for the comprehension of language in use, including phraseological units.

Endnotes

¹ It is not my aim to give a survey of the terminology used in phraseology. For the most common terms used see Moon [1998: 2-5]. See also Cowie [1998a: 4-7].

² I know it from my own experience as it has helped me through the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (MiE, Skeat's edition) [Naciscione 1976].

³ On the cognitive aspects of figurative thought and language see Gibbs [1994].

⁴ There is no established term for this form in English, as it is not singled out as a separate entity in contrast to forms used in discourse. The usual term used in Russian is *ishodnaya forma*, meaning "the initial form". It was introduced by Kunin [see Kunin 1970].

⁵ For the stability of PUs as one of the fundamental issues in the theory of phraseology see Kunin [1964]; Kunin [1970: Ch.4].

⁶ I have borrowed the term *core use* from Information Technology. The term *prescriptive use*, which was suggested by Kunin in English, does not seem to meet the needs, as in traditional grammar the aim of prescription is to describe a language not as it is used, but as it is thought the language ought to be used. The term introduced by Kunin in Russian is *uzual'noye upotrebleniye* ("usual use").

⁷ I have indicated the forms of PUs for emphasis: base forms are marked bold and underlined; instantial elements are spaced and underlined.

⁸ For stylistic properties of PUs as part of their stylistic potential see Moon [1998: Ch. 7]; Gläser [1998: 125-9] and others.

⁹ I think that the term *instancial stylistic use* conveys some essential features of the phenomenon. Cf.: instancial premise (in logic) - a premise concerned with or arising from a particular case. Out of all the terms used to denote significant stylistic changes of PUs in use the oldest is *occasional changes* which was introduced by Kunin [1969]. The term is a loan translation from the Russian *okkazional'niye izmeneniya*. It lays emphasis on the random occurrence of these changes, therefore it fails to satisfy the theoretical requirements. However, it is still used today. The term *transformations* has unwelcome associations with transformational grammar.

¹⁰ For a detailed study of cohesion in instancial stylistic use see Naciscione [2001: 69-230].

¹¹ Cobuild Idioms [1995] is the only one of the corpus-based dictionaries which records stylistic use in its entries. Compare with Chambers Idioms [1996] (based on the British National Corpus) and Cambridge Idioms [1998] (based on the Cambridge International Corpus) which reveal a conspicuous absence of stylistic use in their examples, which are clear-cut. They perfectly fit the

headphrase of the entry. This approach represents the view of PUs as petrified or frozen language units. See the analysis of the treatment of stylistic use in the three dictionaries in Naciscione [2001: 10-15].

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