

Ways of idiom transformation and modification

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Abstract

The present research focuses on phraseological derivation as an important key source of phraseological language system development and broadening. The study of contemporary British literature for teens and the analyses of the idioms used in literal works of selected and nominated authors let us come to certain conclusions which will be given in the present session. The aim of the present research is to reveal the contemporary ways of phraseological derivation and their speech realization in modern literal texts for teens. The object of the present research is a phraseological way of development in the contemporary phraseological English language system. The subject of the research is the communicative value and characteristics of phraseological derivatives. The results and data which were received will be useful for language instructors and teachers, as well as for further linguistic analyses in this field.

Key words: lexicology, phraseology, idioms, contemporary British literature for teens.

1. Introduction

Idioms have received considerable attention from linguists over the past several decades (Kunin 1955, Kurilovich 1962, Shanskij 1963, Fraser 1970, Chernysheva 1970, Makkai 1972, Denisenko 1972, Ozhegov 1974, Gvozdarev 1977, Savickij 1979, Kerimzade 1984, Ruwet 1991, Cacciari and Tabossi 1993, Nunberg et al. 1994, Melerovich 1995, Fedulenkova 1996, Turkina 2002, Ryzhkina 2003, Dzhagraeva 2005, Borisova 2008, Radchenko 2010, Tret'jakova 2011, and many others whose research has been distinguished in the field of phraseology.

The subject of our research is the contemporary phraseological language system presented in modern British literary texts for teens. The object of the present work is to view and analyze the ways of idiom transformation and modification. Our aim is to briefly describe the present syntactic manipulations of idioms and their derivative types which we found so far in British literary texts for teens.

Linguists have different views on the idiom definition. Chomsky (1981) suggested that idioms are lexical verbs, inserting at a VO head; his notion of the lexicon does not permit phrases, leading to the representation replicated in the following example: Kick the bucket: V: VP: 1) V – kick; 2) NP: 2.1) Det – the; 2.2) N – bucket. Swinley (1979) (the Lexical Representation Hypothesis) treated idioms as morphologically complex words (Maher, 2013). Kunin defines a phraseological unit as fixed word expression with figurative or semi-figurative meaning (Kunin, 1972).

In the present research (following the definition of an idiom by Kunin) we define idioms as fixed set expressions with figurative or semi-figurative meaning consisting of minimum two words.

However, being a major part of lexicon and being regarded as fixed word expressions, idioms may undergo some internal word transformation and modification such as:

- Insertion of an adjective: “Of course everyone learns a valuable lesson before the inevitable happy ending, and for about the hundredth time this summer I mourn my life’s failure to follow the plot of a perky teenage movie.”[3] – the idiom to learn one’s lesson adjusts an optional adjective valuable which serves to extension of the meaning and so gains additional characteristics.

- Insertion of a noun: “He is a good-for-nothing bastard.”(Williamson, 2015)– the idiomatic meaning of the idiom good-for-nothing is a lazy person is being enriched by the usage of a noun bastard and so, it results in achievement of more precise meaning of the whole utterance.

- Insertion of a word: “All green and lush with tree-lined streets and little cafes selling organic-this and homemade-that.” (Williamson, 2015)– the idiom this and that is being embellished by adding more than one adjective (organic, homemade) which helps the speaker describe the atmosphere of the place.

- Word substitution: “Olsen alert!” (Williamson, 2015)– (Olsen is the boy’s surname) – The idiom on the alert (= be watchful and attentive for someone) undergoes the substitution of a preposition on by the surname of a character.

Idioms differ in regard with substituting their component parts. However, there are idioms that are semantically opaque, and they allow little or no variation in the choice of lexical items. Here are some examples of idiom usage in sentences (keeping and letting out a secret):

“Best you keep that key to yourself.” (Gardner, 2015) – the idiom keep something to yourself has a meaning of having something as a secret. The only lexical variation here can be done by replacing the object of a secret “a key or other objects”, otherwise the idiomatic meaning will be lost.

“What are you up to?” (Gardner, 2015)– the idiom be up to something has a meaning of doing something secretly. Any lexical variation is not suitable here without a loss of idiomatic meaning.

“Your secret is safe with me.”(Williamson, 2015)– the idiom (meaning: I will not tell your secret to anyone) is presented in the form of a sentence. It is fixed and no lexical variation is possible.

In the following examples the idiom give the game away is used in different contexts and it allows no variation in lexical choice as well as modification:

“Won’t it give the game away?” (Gardner, 2015)

“It’s her eyes that give the game away – dead and tired, like life’s sucked all the sparkle right out of them.” (Williamson, 2015)

“It’s a sort of grin that would give me away in seconds.” (Williamson, 2015)

Further research of Nunberg et al. (1994) of verbal phrasal idioms (VP) led to the conclusion that a wide variety of syntactic modification is possible for VP idioms:

- passivization: “AJ found himself thrown in the deep end of the legal soup.” (Gardner, 2015)– the idiom throw somebody in the deep end has the meaning make someone do something difficult. The passive form of the verb throw is being used.

-clefting: “For the first time in ages maths actually made some kind of sense.” (Williamson, 2015)– the idiom make sense has lexical expansion some kind of.

-quantification: “Spike and Tia laugh like drains the whole time.” (Williamson, 2015)– the idiom laugh like a drain has a meaning laugh very loud. It is used in the plural form.

-topicalization: “I am fourteen and time is running out.” (Williamson, 2015)– – the idiom run out of time has a meaning of having no time left. The denotative component time is placed at the beginning for additional expressive reasons.

It is important to point out that all the above VP transformations are mainly done to flexible idioms and they do not affect the idiomatic meaning. Inflexible idioms generally lose their idiomatic meaning due to such modification.

“I have told Amber I’m tutoring David on the nights I see Alicia so I don’t have to spill the beans.” [3, p. 166] The idiom spill the beans is inflexible and its idiomatic meaning to tell people secret information will be lost at any attempt of transformation or modification.

Ellipsis takes a major part in idiom transformation. Idiomatic ellipsis is viewed as occasional transformations of phraseological units, based on a quantitative change of the components in the direction of decrease (reduction). Ellipsis - a phenomenon that is widely represented in phraseology. Most researchers identify two ellipsis varieties: customary and occasional. Customary ellipsis usually results in new language forms.

“Time here had not stood still; rather it had fallen backwards.” (Gardner, 2015)– the idiom stand the test of time omits its components and gets the form of time stands still, the idiomatic meaning of having no changes is being kept.

Occasional ellipsis is mostly regarded as a speech phenomenon with omission of one or more components. This component reduction has a certain aim and is being possible due to the particular semantic structure of an idiom – the solidity of idiomatic meaning and form. The missing component is being mentally verbalized and activated.

“Come across any old skeletons?” (Gardner, 2015) – the idiom have skeleton(s) in the closet omits the first and the last components, but mentally is being reconstructed while it is used in speech.

Phraseological ellipsis takes place when it is necessary to make speech laconic, to individualize it or to stylize the manner of explication.

“Elsie had often talked about the “pea supers” as she called the notorious London fogs of her youth.” (Gardner, 2015) - the idiom thick as a pea soup is being reduced and modified, but it keeps the idiomatic meaning of thickness.

Idioms play an important role in the productive language system. However, they challenge our traditional understanding of composition, since they do not seem to be so compositionally complex as their literal phrasal counterparts, but they are also more complicated than opaque chunks.

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