THE FUNCTIONS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article examines the principal functions of phraseological units in contemporary English and explains how fixed multiword expressions contribute to meaning construction in communication. Phraseological units are approached not simply as decorative idioms but as conventional linguistic resources that combine semantic stability, figurative motivation, evaluative force and discourse relevance. The study is based on descriptive, semantic, contextual and functional-pragmatic analysis of representative English expressions and on recent research in corpus phraseology, pragmatics and phraseological competence. The analysis shows that English phraseological units perform a complex set of interrelated functions: nominative, communicative, cognitive, evaluative, expressive-stylistic, pragmatic, cumulative-cultural, directive, summarizing and text-building. Their functional value depends on context, register and speaker intention. In discourse, a single expression may name a situation, encode cultural knowledge, evaluate an event and influence the addressee at the same time. Recent corpus-based research also confirms that idiomatic expressions are not restricted to informal conversation; appropriately selected units occur in academic, professional and other institutional registers. The study concludes that phraseological units should be treated as multifunctional language signs whose role is central to lexical richness, discourse organization, cultural representation and communicative competence.

Keywords: phraseological unit, idiom, phraseology, function, pragmatics, discourse, evaluation, expressiveness, communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

Phraseology occupies an important place in the lexical system of English because speakers do not construct every utterance from isolated words. A considerable part of everyday and institutional communication is organized through recurrent combinations such as break the ice, draw the line, on the same page, a double-edged sword, at the end of the day and the tip of the iceberg. Such expressions are relatively stable in form, conventional in use and often possess a meaning that cannot be fully predicted from their separate components. For this reason, phraseological units combine lexical, semantic, pragmatic and cultural properties. Their importance is especially visible when a literal paraphrase is grammatically correct but fails to reproduce the same intensity, attitude, cultural association or communicative effect. Modern studies increasingly analyze phraseology in authentic corpora and concrete discourse types rather than treating idioms as isolated dictionary items. Miller's corpus study of academic English, for example, demonstrates that traditional idioms occur in both academic speech and academic writing, which challenges the assumption that phraseological language belongs only to informal conversation. Kovaliuk's corpus research likewise shows that idiom frequency and variation depend on register and variety of English. These findings make the functional study of phraseological units particularly relevant: the central question is not only what an expression means, but what it does in a specific communicative situation.

A phraseological unit may be defined as a conventional multiword sequence characterized by a certain degree of lexical stability and semantic unity. The category includes fully or partly idiomatic combinations, fixed comparisons, proverbial expressions, routine formulae and other recurrent units,

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although the exact boundaries of phraseology differ across linguistic traditions. For functional analysis, the decisive feature is that the expression is stored and recognized as a conventional whole and therefore carries meaning beyond a freely assembled word combination. The first and most general function is nominative. Phraseological units name objects, states, actions and situations in a compact and culturally recognizable form. The expression red tape names excessive bureaucracy; a turning point names a decisive stage of change; a grey area names a situation lacking clear rules; and a storm in a teacup names an exaggerated conflict over a minor issue. In each case, the phrase performs the same basic naming task as a lexical item, but its semantic structure is more image-based and evaluatively loaded. This nominative capacity expands the expressive resources of English because speakers can categorize complex experience through established metaphorical patterns. The function is especially productive in an analytic language such as English, where multiword lexical units easily enter specialized, journalistic and conversational usage. Abdusamadov's recent discussion of classification and function in English phraseology also emphasizes that phraseological units operate as ready-made lexical resources capable of expressing a unified notion.

The nominative function is closely connected with the cognitive and cumulative-cultural functions. Phraseological meaning is not merely a label; it often preserves a conventional way of conceptualizing experience. Expressions involving body parts, movement, space, weather, games, trade, religion and historical practices organize abstract meanings through familiar images. To keep an eye on something conceptualizes attention as visual control; to be under someone's thumb presents dependence as physical pressure; to reach a dead end conceptualizes failure as blocked movement; and to add fuel to the fire represents conflict intensification through combustion. Such patterns facilitate comprehension because they connect abstract situations with embodied or culturally familiar scenarios. At the same time, phraseological units accumulate collective knowledge and social memory. Proverbs and proverb-like units such as better late than never, actions speak louder than words and where there is a will, there is a way compress a broader judgment about experience into a short reproducible form. Fedulenkova identifies this cumulative property as a regular function of phraseology and links it to linguistic economy: a short expression can activate a larger network of shared assumptions. Uzbek researchers have also stressed the linguocultural dimension of phraseology. Mamatov and Boltayeva's semantic-pragmatic approach and Berdiev's work on phraseologisms and translation show that stable expressions cannot be separated from cultural knowledge, conceptual imagery and communicative convention. Thus, the cognitive function explains how phraseological units structure conceptualization, while the cumulative-cultural function explains how they preserve and transmit socially shared interpretations.

The communicative and pragmatic functions become visible when phraseological units are examined in actual interaction. A phraseological unit can package a speaker's intention more efficiently than a neutral literal statement. If a manager says We need to get the ball rolling, the sentence does more than describe the beginning of an activity: it initiates action and creates an expectation of movement. If a participant says Let us not beat around the bush, the expression signals a transition toward directness. If a speaker says You are barking up the wrong tree, the phrase performs correction while simultaneously expressing a negative judgment about the addressee's assumption. This multifunctionality explains why pragmatic research treats phraseological units as resources for influence, politeness, indirectness, emphasis, humor and interpersonal positioning. Fedulenkova's functional study identifies directive, evaluative, summarizing and text-building roles alongside stylistic functions, while Alimova's study of modern English phraseology also stresses the pragmatic potential of fixed expressions in context. Sharifova similarly focuses on linguopragmatic functions and underlines the relation between

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conventional phraseological meaning and communicative intention. The directive function is especially clear in proverbial or imperative units such as strike while the iron is hot, let bygones be bygones or do not put all your eggs in one basket, because they formulate advice or regulate behavior through a memorable image. Yet direction need not be expressed through an imperative. Saying The ball is in your court assigns responsibility to the interlocutor and indirectly invites a decision. Pragmatic effect therefore emerges from the interaction of lexical convention, context, social relationship and communicative purpose.

A major functional domain of English phraseology is evaluation and expressive-stylistic marking. Idioms rarely function as emotionally neutral substitutes for literal wording. Many contain an inherent positive or negative orientation, while others acquire evaluation from context. On top of the world encodes strongly positive emotional assessment; a breath of fresh air gives positive evaluation to a person or change; a wolf in sheep's clothing and a pain in the neck are strongly negative; and a mixed blessing or a double-edged sword explicitly encode ambivalence. Recent research by Allami, Karlsson and Shahroosvand demonstrates that idioms in English as a lingua franca can carry systematic appraisal meanings and that their distribution differs across academic domains. This evidence supports the view that phraseological units are important interpersonal resources rather than ornamental additions. Their expressive-stylistic function is also connected with imagery and intensity. Compare the neutral sentence He revealed the secret with He let the cat out of the bag: the second version creates a more vivid representation and often carries a conversational or humorous tone. Similarly, very expensive can be replaced by cost an arm and a leg, and very rarely by once in a blue moon, producing an intensified and stylistically marked effect. Register, however, limits appropriateness. Phraseological competence therefore includes knowing not only the denotative meaning of an expression but also whether it is formal, informal, humorous, old-fashioned, technical or strongly evaluative. Estaji and Hashemi's study of IELTS writing shows that broader and more controlled phraseological use is associated with stronger writing performance, whereas mechanical or inappropriate use may reduce effectiveness. The educational implication is clear: phraseological units should be learned through contextualized function and register, not as decontextualized equivalence lists.

Table 1. Major functions of phraseological units in English

Function	Communicative contribution	Illustrative examples
Nominative	Names a complex object, state, action or situation in a compact conventional form.	red tape; a turning point; a grey area
Cognitive / cultural	Activates conceptual imagery and stores shared cultural or experiential knowledge.	reach a dead end; keep an eye on; actions speak louder than words
Evaluative	Expresses positive, negative or mixed appraisal of people, events and situations.	a breath of fresh air; a wolf in sheep's clothing; a mixed blessing
Expressive-stylistic	Adds imagery, emotional intensity, memorability and register-specific coloring.	cost an arm and a leg; once in a blue moon; let the cat out of the bag
Pragmatic / directive	Influences the addressee, frames responsibility, gives advice or manages interpersonal relations.	the ball is in your court; strike while the iron is hot; let bygones be bygones
Summarizing /	Condenses prior content, marks conclusions,	in a nutshell; the bottom line;

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text-building	topic boundaries and discourse continuity.	draw a line under something

Phraseological units also contribute to discourse organization through summarizing and text-building functions. A speaker may use in a nutshell, when all is said and done, the bottom line or that is the long and short of it to condense preceding information and indicate that a conclusion is being drawn. Expressions such as on the other hand, by and large and at the same time may be less idiomatic in the narrow sense, yet they belong to the broader phraseological continuum and help establish textual relations. More clearly idiomatic expressions can also create cohesion by repeating an image or by turning an earlier proposition into a compact label. If a discussion introduces a difficult but unavoidable issue and later refers to it as the elephant in the room, the phrase not only names the issue but also links subsequent discourse to a previously established conceptual frame. The text-building function is therefore connected with reference, thematic continuity and rhetorical structuring. Miller's analysis of academic corpora is relevant here because it shows that idioms can perform describing, evaluating, emphasizing, paraphrasing, group-identifying and topic-management roles even in academic contexts. Phraseological units may consequently mark topic shifts, foreground a conclusion or create a sense of shared membership within a discourse community. Their use in professional settings is not random: conventional expressions can signal expertise and shared assumptions when they match disciplinary norms. At the same time, overuse or use of highly colloquial idioms in formal writing can damage precision. Functional adequacy depends on the relationship among meaning, genre, audience and communicative goal.

The functional categories discussed above are analytically useful, but they should not be interpreted as isolated boxes. Phraseological units are typically polyfunctional. In The proposal opened a can of worms, the expression nominates a complicated set of problems, negatively evaluates the consequences, creates vivid imagery and warns the audience about future difficulties. In We are all in the same boat, the phrase conceptualizes a shared situation through a spatial image, strengthens solidarity, reduces social distance and may encourage cooperative behavior. In It is time to draw a line under the issue, the expression indicates closure, directs the interlocutors toward a new stage and organizes the discourse by marking a boundary. This polyfunctionality explains why context-based methods are more informative than purely structural classification when the objective is to understand communicative use. Corpus analysis is especially valuable because it reveals frequency, register, variation and recurring contexts rather than relying exclusively on invented examples. Kovaliuk's comparison of general English corpora demonstrates that idiom use varies across registers and varieties, while Miller identifies substantial idiom use in academic corpora. Contemporary computational work on idiom detection also confirms that context is essential because the same word sequence may have literal and figurative realizations. For linguistic description, translation and language teaching, the practical consequence is that phraseological meaning should be modeled as a combination of semantic content, conventional imagery, evaluative potential, pragmatic force and discourse distribution.

CONCLUSION

Phraseological units are multifunctional elements of the English lexical and discourse system. Their role cannot be reduced to figurative naming or stylistic decoration. They nominate complex situations, structure conceptualization, preserve cultural knowledge, express evaluation, intensify emotion, influence interlocutors, compress information, summarize arguments and contribute to textual cohesion. The analysis also shows that these functions frequently overlap: one phraseological unit can perform nominative, cognitive, evaluative and pragmatic tasks simultaneously. Context and register determine which function becomes dominant in a particular instance. Recent corpus-based and applied studies

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demonstrate that phraseological units are found not only in everyday conversation but also in academic and professional communication when their register and pragmatic force are appropriate.

The functional approach has direct implications for language teaching, lexicography and translation. Learners need to know not only the dictionary meaning of an idiom but also its typical communicative purpose, evaluative orientation, stylistic coloring, frequency and register. Translators must reproduce the function of a phraseological unit rather than mechanically preserve its component words, and lexicographic description should include pragmatic and discourse information alongside definitions. Further research can extend this approach through larger corpora, genre comparison and contrastive analysis of English and Uzbek phraseology. Such work would clarify how universal communicative functions are realized through culturally specific images and how phraseological competence contributes to accurate, natural and context-sensitive communication.

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