

A Structural and Semantic Classification of Phraseological Units in English

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Abstract:

This article presents a structural-semantic classification of phraseological units in English, exploring how syntactic patterns and degrees of idiomaticity intersect to form a comprehensive typology. Through detailed analysis of structures such as verb-object combinations, adjective-noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and sentential units, the study maps these forms against semantic transparency—from literal collocations to opaque idioms. Functional aspects such as register, discourse role, and pragmatic value are also discussed, with emphasis on pedagogical implications. The proposed classification aids in teaching, linguistic analysis, and understanding the cognitive and cultural layers of phraseological competence.

Keywords

phraseological units, idiomaticity, semantic transparency, syntactic patterns, language teaching

1. Introduction to Phraseology

Phraseology, as a subfield of linguistics, concerns itself with fixed or semi-fixed combinations of words that function as single semantic units. These combinations—commonly known as phraseological units—include idioms (*spill the beans*), phrasal verbs (*give up*), collocations (*make a decision*), and fixed expressions (*by and large*). In English, such expressions are deeply embedded in everyday communication and literary language alike, serving not only stylistic and expressive purposes but also fulfilling essential pragmatic and cultural functions.

The study of phraseological units in English has a rich intellectual history. Early explorations were primarily lexicographic, concerned with idiom dictionaries and their literal vs. figurative meanings. Over time, particularly in the 20th century, phraseology evolved into a distinct area of scholarly inquiry, informed by developments in structural linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics (Masimova, 2018; Abdusamadov, 2021). More recent scholarship has turned its focus to structural-semantic relationships, cross-linguistic comparison, sociocultural

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symbolism, and the cognitive dimensions of fixed expressions (Savelyeva et al., 2019; Sadigova, 2024; Hasanova, 2025).

In contemporary linguistics, classification plays a central role in understanding the nature and functions of phraseological units. Without clear typological categories, these expressions can appear disorganized and opaque to learners and researchers alike. Structural classification enables the grouping of units according to syntactic form (e.g., noun phrases, verb phrases, complete clauses), while semantic classification considers the degree of idiomaticity, metaphorical meaning, and transparency (Alisoy, 2024; Tursunova, 2025). A well-established classification system also benefits applied domains, such as language teaching, where phraseological units can otherwise pose considerable challenges due to their non-literal meanings and cultural specificity (Mehdi, 2024).

In language pedagogy, especially within foreign language learning contexts, mastering phraseological units is often considered a marker of fluency and linguistic maturity. As Huseynova (2025) notes, even in digital and informal environments like social media, the appropriate use of idiomatic language reflects a speaker's communicative competence and cultural integration. Educators and curriculum designers increasingly recognize the importance of systematic phraseological instruction, not only for enriching vocabulary but also for improving stylistic variation and pragmatic awareness.

Therefore, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing research by providing a comprehensive structural and semantic classification of English phraseological units. Drawing upon both classical and modern sources, it aims to offer a taxonomy that can be applied in linguistic theory, language description, and classroom practice alike.

2. Definitional Framework

The study of phraseology necessitates a precise understanding of what constitutes a phraseological unit and how it differs from other multi-word expressions. While the term "phraseological unit" is widely used in both theoretical linguistics and applied language studies, its definition varies depending on the tradition—Slavic, Western European, or cognitive-linguistic approaches.

A **phraseological unit**, in its broadest sense, refers to any stable, recurrent word combination that exhibits a degree of **semantic unity** and is stored and retrieved from memory as a whole rather than generated freely. Tursunova (2025) describes phraseological units as “linguistic constructions characterized by structural stability and idiomatic meaning,” which resist literal interpretation and often convey culturally embedded concepts.

Within this general category, various subtypes can be identified, each with specific features:

- **Idioms** are expressions whose meanings are not deducible from the literal meanings of their components (e.g., *kick the bucket*, *spill the beans*). They are often metaphorical and culturally rooted, exhibiting a high degree of **opacity** and **idiomaticity** (Sadigova, 2024).
- **Fixed Expressions** (e.g., *at long last*, *to tell the truth*, *as a matter of fact*) are formulaic phrases used in predictable contexts. While they are usually semantically transparent, they are marked by **fixedness**—a rigid syntactic form that resists alteration.
- **Collocations** refer to words that co-occur more frequently than would be expected by chance, such as *commit a crime*, *strong tea*, or *make a decision*. Although collocations are

semantically more transparent, they are bound by **lexical selectional preferences** and habitual usage (Alisoy, 2024).

- **Phrasal Verbs** are verb-particle constructions where the particle alters or intensifies the verb's meaning (e.g., *give up*, *look after*, *run into*). These expressions often pose difficulties for learners because the meaning of the whole is not always predictable from its parts.

These categories, while analytically distinct, are interconnected in real usage and often overlap. The key parameters that help distinguish them include:

- **Fixedness**: the extent to which the expression resists grammatical or lexical variation (Tursunova, 2025). For example, *kick the bucket* cannot be changed to *kicked a bucket* without losing its idiomatic meaning.
- **Idiomaticity**: the degree to which the meaning of the phrase differs from the meanings of its components. High idiomaticity is typical of idioms; collocations usually display low idiomaticity.
- **Opacity**: the transparency or obscurity of meaning. Some idioms are partially transparent (e.g., *break the ice*), while others are fully opaque (e.g., *once in a blue moon*).

Masimova (2018) emphasizes that phraseological units cannot be understood purely through syntax or semantics in isolation; rather, their classification relies on a **multidimensional analysis** combining structural, functional, and semantic parameters.

Understanding these boundaries is essential not only for theoretical modeling but also for practical application in teaching, lexicography, and translation. As Mehdi (2024) and Abdusamadov (2021) argue, differentiating between types of phraseological units helps educators design targeted learning strategies, enabling learners to grasp both literal and figurative dimensions of English.

3. Structural Classification of Phraseological Units

Phraseological units in English exhibit considerable variety in their syntactic structure. Understanding this structure is central to their classification and analysis, particularly in distinguishing how different forms behave grammatically and contribute to communicative meaning. Structural classification offers a framework for grouping phraseological units based on the arrangement of their internal components and their syntactic behavior in context.

Syntactic Patterns in Phraseological Units

1. Verb + Object Structures

These are among the most common forms of phraseological units. The verb governs an object, but the meaning of the whole expression is often idiomatic.

- *Examples*:
 - *spill the beans* (to reveal a secret)
 - *catch someone red-handed* (to catch someone in the act of wrongdoing)These units tend to resist variation in word choice and order, although tense changes are sometimes acceptable (e.g., *spilled the beans*).

2. Adjective + Noun Structures

These are nominal expressions where the adjective is often metaphorical or symbolic.

- *Examples:*

- *blind alley* (a situation with no escape or solution)

- *cold war* (a conflict without direct military action)

These units are typically fixed and used as compound nouns or metaphorical references.

3. Prepositional Phrases

Phraseological units can also occur in the form of fixed prepositional constructions.

- *Examples:*

- *in a nutshell* (briefly or concisely)

- *under the weather* (feeling ill)

Such phrases often function as adverbials and are highly formulaic in use, with limited syntactic flexibility.

4. Sentential Units / Proverbs

These are full clauses or complete sentences that convey a general truth, moral lesson, or idiomatic observation.

- *Examples:*

- *The early bird catches the worm*

- *A stitch in time saves nine*

These expressions are syntactically complete and often exhibit strong cultural resonance. Their fixedness is nearly absolute, with minimal tolerance for modification.

Syntactic Flexibility vs. Rigidity

Phraseological units differ significantly in their degree of **syntactic flexibility**. While some collocations allow for inflection or modification (*make an important decision*), idioms like *spill the beans* tend to resist alteration. A phraseological unit's position on the flexibility-rigidity spectrum often correlates with its idiomaticity—the more idiomatic the meaning, the less grammatically flexible the expression tends to be (Tursunova, 2025).

Transformational Tests for Structural Identification

Linguists often apply **transformational tests** to evaluate the structural behavior of phraseological units:

- **Passivization Test:**

- *They spilled the beans* → *The beans were spilled* (grammatically correct, idiomatic meaning preserved).

- However, in some idioms (*kick the bucket*), passivization leads to nonsensical results: *The bucket was kicked* loses idiomatic meaning.
- **Substitution Test:**
 - Replacing parts of the unit with synonyms or similar words usually breaks the idiom:
 - *spill the beans* ≠ *pour the peas*.
- **Ellipsis or Deletion Test:**
 - Attempting to shorten or delete components disrupts meaning or grammaticality:
 - *in a nutshell* → *in a shell* (incorrect and unidiomatic).

These tests help determine whether an expression functions as a single lexical unit or a compositional phrase. Structural rigidity, coupled with semantic opacity, is often a marker of true idiomaticity.

By applying syntactic classification and transformational diagnostics, scholars and teachers can better identify and describe the structural nature of phraseological units—an essential step in both linguistic analysis and pedagogical practice (Masimova, 2018; Abdusamadov, 2021).

4. Semantic Classification of Phraseological Units

While structural classification highlights the syntactic form of phraseological units, **semantic classification** focuses on their degree of **meaning transparency**—how easily the meaning of the whole can be inferred from its parts. This classification is essential for understanding how learners interpret, acquire, and use these expressions in both native and foreign language contexts.

Based on Meaning Transparency

1. Transparent Phraseological Units

These are expressions whose meanings can be easily deduced from the individual words. They are often collocations or lightly fixed expressions that retain a **literal or near-literal meaning**.

- *Example: make a decision*

The meaning is clear: “make” functions in its usual sense, and “decision” retains its literal semantic value.

2. Semi-Transparent Phraseological Units

These expressions contain some metaphorical or symbolic element but are still partly interpretable. The overall meaning is not entirely literal, but context and world knowledge can help decode it.

- *Example: break the ice* (to initiate conversation or reduce tension)

Though not literal, the metaphor of “breaking” and “ice” to create warmth or openness is relatively accessible to learners.

3. **Opaque / Idiomatic Phraseological Units**

These are highly idiomatic and **semantically non-compositional**—the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of the parts.

- *Example: kick the bucket* (to die)
Here, neither “kick” nor “bucket” contribute to the idiomatic meaning. Learners must **memorize the expression as a unit**.

This tripartite classification is widely accepted in modern linguistics and proves particularly helpful in identifying the **cognitive load** each expression places on learners (Tursunova, 2025; Alisoy, 2024).

Literal vs. Figurative Meaning

Phraseological units often function **figuratively**, especially idioms and proverbs. Figurative meaning adds depth, subtlety, and style to language use, but it also introduces challenges in comprehension and translation. The literal-figurative divide helps explain why learners frequently misunderstand idioms—especially when they attempt to interpret them word-for-word (Masimova, 2018; Sadigova, 2024).

In many cases, expressions begin as literal collocations and evolve into figurative phraseologisms through usage and metaphorical shift. For example, *to see the light* might begin as a literal statement and gradually develop into a metaphor for understanding or realization.

The Role of Cultural Context in Semantic Interpretation

Semantic opacity is often **deepened by cultural specificity**. Idioms frequently reflect a society's values, history, and worldview. For instance, *the lion's share* or *Achilles' heel* have origins in classical mythology or literature. Learners unfamiliar with these references are less likely to infer meaning without explicit instruction (Hasanova, 2025; Savelyeva et al., 2019).

Moreover, phraseological units may differ semantically across languages despite surface similarity—a phenomenon known as **false equivalence**. For example, an Azerbaijani expression may appear structurally similar to an English idiom but diverge entirely in meaning or use. These cultural nuances must be addressed both in analysis and pedagogy.

Connotative and Emotive Meaning in Idioms

Phraseological units often carry **connotative meanings**—emotions, attitudes, or social signals beyond their core meaning.

- *Examples:*
 - *pulling someone's leg* (playfully teasing)
 - *a pain in the neck* (someone or something annoying)

Such expressions can signal irony, sarcasm, humor, or informality. Their mastery not only improves stylistic richness but also **social fluency**, helping learners navigate tone and interpersonal dynamics effectively.

Semantic classification thus reveals not only the **linguistic structure** of phraseological units but also their **cognitive, cultural, and emotional dimensions**. A deeper awareness of these features supports learners in moving from surface-level understanding to fluent, nuanced usage.

5. Structural-Semantic Typology

Phraseological units cannot be fully understood when examined solely through either structural or semantic lenses. Rather, a comprehensive typology emerges from the **intersection of syntactic form and degree of idiomaticity**, which together define the linguistic behavior, cognitive load, and pedagogical complexity of a given unit. This **structural-semantic cross-tabulation** helps categorize phraseological units more precisely and provides valuable insight for both linguistic analysis and language teaching.

Cross-Tabulation of Structure and Meaning

Phraseological units can be placed along two axes:

- **Structural Axis:** ranging from simple collocations to sentential forms
- **Semantic Axis:** ranging from transparent to fully opaque meaning

<i>Structure/ Semantics</i>	<i>Transparent</i>	<i>Semi-Transparent</i>	<i>Opaque/ Idiomatic</i>
Verb + Object	make a decision	break the ice	kick the bucket
Adjective + Noun	fast train	blind alley	red herring
Prepositional Phrase	on the table	under pressure	in a pickle
Sentential Unit / Proverb	Practice makes perfect	Don't cry over spilled milk	The cat is out of the bag

This matrix shows that **the same structural form may carry different degrees of semantic transparency**. For example, verb-object combinations may range from literal collocations (*make a list*) to deeply idiomatic expressions (*hit the sack*). Thus, structure alone is not a reliable indicator of idiomaticity—it must be analyzed alongside meaning.

Examples Illustrating Interaction Between Form and Meaning

- *Break the ice* (Verb + Object, Semi-transparent): The metaphor is accessible but still figurative, and the structure is relatively fixed.
- *Blind alley* (Adj + Noun, Semi-transparent): While interpretable in context, the metaphorical sense (dead-end situation) adds complexity.
- *The early bird catches the worm* (Sentential, Transparent to Semi-transparent): Though syntactically complete and literal, its proverb status adds a moralizing or instructive tone, often requiring cultural interpretation.

These examples illustrate how certain structural patterns—especially fixed or fossilized ones—are more likely to carry idiomatic meanings, while more flexible patterns tend toward literal interpretation.

Discussion of Fixedness and Idiomaticity as Overlapping Parameters

Two of the most salient features of phraseological units are **fixedness** (syntactic rigidity) and **idiomaticity** (semantic opacity). These are **interdependent but not identical**:

- A phrase can be **fixed but semantically transparent** (e.g., *by the way*).
- A phrase can be **idiomatic yet structurally flexible** to some degree (e.g., *spill the beans* can appear in passive: *the beans were spilled*).
- High fixedness often correlates with high idiomaticity, but exceptions exist, especially in transitional forms.

Tursunova (2025) and Alisoy (2024) note that idioms tend to show both high fixedness and high opacity, requiring whole-unit memorization. However, collocations may exhibit high fixedness with low idiomaticity (e.g., *make a mistake*), serving as functional language chunks without figurative meaning.

Understanding how structure and meaning interact helps refine phraseological classification, making it possible to design better teaching materials, corpus-based studies, and lexicographic resources that reflect real language use and learner needs.

6. Functional Aspects and Usage in Discourse

Beyond their structural and semantic features, phraseological units play crucial **functional roles** in real communication. They serve not only as lexical items but also as **discourse markers**, **pragmatic signals**, and **socio-cultural indicators**. Understanding how various structural-semantic types are used in different contexts helps reveal the practical significance of phraseological competence in spoken and written interaction.

Function in Real Communication

Phraseological units function at several communicative levels:

- **Lexical enrichment:** They provide lexical diversity and stylistic depth (*face the music, go the extra mile*).
- **Discourse organization:** Many fixed expressions help manage discourse (*on the other hand, as a matter of fact, to cut a long story short*).
- **Social interaction:** Idioms and informal collocations create a sense of belonging, humor, or solidarity in speech (*drop me a line, hit it off*).
- **Emotional tone:** Emotive idioms convey attitude and feelings (*a pain in the neck, over the moon*), strengthening interpersonal communication.

These functions demonstrate that phraseological units are more than decorative elements—they are essential tools for effective expression, especially in nuanced or high-context communication.

Register, Frequency, and Genre Considerations

Phraseological usage is deeply influenced by **register** (level of formality), **frequency**, and **genre**. For instance:

- **Formal Register:**
 - Units like *in conclusion, as a result, to a certain extent* are typical of academic writing and public discourse.

- These tend to be semantically transparent and structurally fixed.
- **Informal Register:**
 - Idioms such as *blow off steam*, *hit the road*, or *under the weather* dominate in spoken and colloquial registers.
 - These are often semantically opaque, metaphorical, and context-dependent.
- **Genre Variation:**
 - **Journalistic writing** frequently uses idioms to attract attention or create rhythm (*back to square one*, *tighten the belt*).
 - **Literary texts** use phraseological units for characterization and narrative voice (*a chip on his shoulder*, *cold feet*).
 - **Academic genres** avoid heavy idiomaticity, favoring more neutral or transparent expressions.

Losieva et al. (2023) have demonstrated that English newspaper articles on cultural topics often rely on semi-transparent idioms and collocations to balance accessibility with expressiveness, reflecting genre-specific expectations and reader familiarity.

Phraseological Units in Formal vs. Informal Language

The distinction between **formal and informal phraseological usage** is central to pragmatic competence:

- In **formal contexts**, fixed expressions and low-opacity units are preferred due to their clarity and predictability (*on the basis of*, *it is widely believed that*).
- In **informal or interpersonal discourse**, idioms and phrasal verbs are more common, offering flexibility, tone, and personality (*call it a day*, *freak out*, *get the ball rolling*).

Learners often struggle to adjust their phraseological use according to context, leading to either underuse (resulting in mechanical speech) or overuse (leading to inappropriateness). Therefore, phraseological competence involves not just knowing the expressions but understanding when, where, and how to use them effectively.

As Huseynova (2025) notes in the context of social media, learners who master phraseological variety adapt better to different communicative situations, whether online, academic, or professional.

7. Implications for Language Teaching

The structural-semantic typology of phraseological units has clear pedagogical relevance, especially in the context of English as a foreign or second language instruction. Phraseological competence is closely tied to learners' fluency, pragmatic awareness, and ability to communicate with stylistic and cultural appropriateness. To help learners internalize and effectively use such units, language instruction must incorporate targeted strategies that reflect both the form and meaning of these expressions.

Teaching Strategies for Different Structural-Semantic Types

Given the diversity of phraseological units, teaching methods must vary depending on their structure and semantic transparency:

- **For Transparent Units (e.g., *make a decision, strong coffee*):**
 - Focus on **collocation awareness** through lexical patterning.
 - Use **corpus-based activities** and **lexical notebooks** to promote retention.
- **For Semi-Transparent Units (e.g., *break the ice, blind alley*):**
 - Employ **contextual guessing**, visual aids, and guided discussions.
 - Integrate these expressions into role-plays or situational dialogues.
- **For Opaque/Idiomatic Units (e.g., *kick the bucket, spill the beans*):**
 - Use **storytelling, dramatization, and idiom games** to engage learners.
 - Present idioms in **themes or metaphorical clusters** to support conceptual connections.

Additionally, teaching should highlight **fixedness** and **syntactic behavior**, helping students avoid incorrect transformations or literal misinterpretations.

Learner Difficulties and Pedagogical Recommendations

Students often face specific challenges when acquiring phraseological units:

1. **Semantic Opacity:** Learners may attempt to interpret idioms literally, leading to misunderstanding or misuse.
 - *Recommendation:* Provide **paraphrases, examples, and contextual cues**.
2. **Structural Rigidity:** Learners tend to overgeneralize syntactic rules, modifying idioms inappropriately.
 - *Recommendation:* Introduce **transformational tests** in class (e.g., “Can this idiom be passivized?”).
3. **Register Awareness:** Learners may use informal idioms in academic writing or formal contexts.
 - *Recommendation:* Include **register-based practice**, such as comparing formal and informal phrases in dialogues.
4. **Cultural Context:** Students unfamiliar with English-speaking cultures may not understand the imagery or reference within idioms.
 - *Recommendation:* Incorporate **cross-cultural comparison activities** and teach etymology where helpful (Sadigova, 2024; Hasanova, 2025).

As Tursunova (2025) and Mehdi (2024) highlight, repeated exposure in meaningful contexts and active usage are key to long-term retention.

Relevance for Syllabus Design and Vocabulary Acquisition

The inclusion of phraseological units in curriculum design enriches **vocabulary instruction**, shifting it from individual word focus to multi-word expressions and **lexical chunks**. Syllabi should:

- Allocate space for **graded phraseological input**, progressing from transparent to opaque forms.
- Use **frequency lists** and **corpus-based tools** to prioritize commonly used expressions (Alisoy, 2024).
- Incorporate phraseology into **productive skills tasks**, encouraging students to use these expressions in writing and speaking.

Integrating phraseological units into vocabulary learning also fosters **noticing**, an essential process in second language acquisition. When students learn not only what words mean but how they occur together in meaningful ways, their fluency, coherence, and confidence increase significantly.

In sum, structural-semantic awareness of phraseological units is not merely academic—it offers practical solutions to teaching challenges and enhances learners' ability to use English naturally, accurately, and expressively.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined phraseological units in English through a **structural-semantic lens**, offering a detailed classification based on syntactic form and degree of meaning transparency. By organizing these expressions into structural categories—such as *verb + object*, *adjective + noun*, *prepositional phrases*, and *sentential units*—and mapping them onto a semantic continuum from transparent to idiomatic, a more nuanced and functional typology emerges. This dual-layered approach captures the complexity of phraseological language and reveals how form and meaning interact to shape communicative functions.

The classification demonstrates that phraseological units are not uniform; they differ in syntactic flexibility, semantic opacity, and usage across registers and genres. Recognizing these differences is essential not only for linguistic description but also for effective language pedagogy. Transparent collocations require different instructional strategies than culturally loaded idioms, and learners benefit from being made aware of the pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural dimensions of these expressions.

Viewing phraseological units through a structural-semantic framework also underscores their importance in language fluency, stylistic variation, and discourse management. As discourse elements, they contribute to expressiveness and coherence; as cognitive units, they are stored and retrieved holistically, influencing processing speed and naturalness in language use.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study has focused on the English language, phraseological systems in other languages exhibit similar yet distinct patterns. Future research might explore:

- **Cross-linguistic comparisons** of phraseological structures and meanings, especially between English and typologically or culturally distant languages (e.g., Azerbaijani, Chinese, or Arabic).

- **Diachronic studies** tracing the evolution of certain phraseological patterns and the shifts in their figurative meaning.
- **Corpus-based computational classification**, using machine learning to automatically identify and categorize phraseological units in large datasets.
- **Learner corpus analysis** to understand how phraseological competence develops over time and across proficiency levels.

Ultimately, phraseology remains a rich field of inquiry—interdisciplinary, culturally embedded, and highly relevant to both theoretical linguistics and applied language studies. By advancing structural-semantic typology, we contribute to a clearer understanding of how language is stored, structured, and used in real-life communication.

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