

SEMANTIC DERIVATION AND COMMUNICATIVE-PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF OCCASIONAL PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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Abstract: The article examines the phenomenon of semantic derivation in occasional phraseological units and analyzes their communicative and pragmatic characteristics. Occasional phraseological units are understood as context-dependent modifications of conventional idioms that retain semantic recognizability while introducing new shades of meaning. The study aims to identify the mechanisms of semantic transformation and determine their functional role in discourse. The findings demonstrate that semantic derivation does not destroy the idiomatic core but reinterprets it through contextual reorientation, metaphorical extension, evaluative shift, or pragmatic reframing. Occasional phraseological units function as expressive, evaluative, persuasive, and discourse-organizing tools. The study contributes to phraseological theory by conceptualizing semantic derivation as a productive mechanism of discourse-level creativity.

Keywords: phraseology, semantic derivation, occasionalism, idiom modification, pragmatics, discourse, expressiveness

Introduction. Phraseological units have traditionally been regarded as stable and reproducible elements of the lexical system. They are characterized by semantic cohesion, structural fixedness, and idiomatic meaning. However, real discourse demonstrates that phraseological stability is not absolute. Speakers frequently modify conventional idioms to adapt them to specific communicative contexts.

Such modifications give rise to occasional phraseological units - contextually motivated transformations that preserve the recognizable semantic core of the idiom while generating new interpretative nuances. Unlike structural variation, which primarily affects syntactic configuration, semantic derivation operates at the level of meaning. It reorients, intensifies, narrows, or recontextualizes the original idiomatic meaning.

Despite growing interest in idiom variation, semantic derivation as a discourse-driven mechanism remains insufficiently systematized. This study aims to explore

how occasional phraseological units undergo semantic transformation and how these transformations function within communicative interaction.

Theoretical Framework. Phraseological units are defined as multi-word constructions whose global meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of their individual components (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005). Idiomaticity therefore constitutes the central criterion distinguishing phraseological units from free word combinations.

Recent cognitive linguistic approaches consider idioms to be mental constructions stored as schematic models in the speaker's conceptual system (Langlotz, 2006). Because these models are cognitively accessible, speakers are able to manipulate them without destroying recognizability. The listener interprets the modified form by correlating it with the canonical idiom.

Semantic derivation differs from structural variation in that the syntactic form of the expression may remain intact while its interpretative focus changes. The speaker activates specific semantic components, introduces contextual associations, or shifts evaluative orientation (Naciscione, 2010).

Occasional phraseological units therefore exist at the intersection of language and speech. They are not part of the fixed lexical inventory, yet they remain understandable because they rely on shared linguistic knowledge. Semantic derivation can thus be described as a pragmatic reinterpretation of a conventional idiom within discourse.

Types of semantic derivation. The analysis of contemporary journalistic and public discourse shows that semantic modification of phraseological units follows regular patterns rather than accidental variation. The recipient interprets modified expressions by activating the canonical idiom stored in long-term memory and mapping it onto the contextual situation (Langlotz, 2006). Consequently, the idiom retains recognizability while acquiring new semantic or evaluative features. Several recurrent mechanisms of semantic derivation can be distinguished.

Contextual specification. One of the most frequent mechanisms is contextual specification, in which the idiom's reference becomes restricted to a particular social or institutional sphere. Example

to hold the reins → *to hold the financial reins of the organization*

The idiom *to hold the reins* conventionally means to control or direct an activity. The addition of *financial* narrows the semantic scope and specifies the type of control. The metaphorical image of steering a horse is preserved, but it is mapped onto institutional management. Such transformations illustrate how idioms adapt to discourse without losing their figurative base (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 2005).

Metaphorical activation. In some cases semantic derivation strengthens the metaphorical imagery of the idiom by activating an additional conceptual domain.

Example

to plant the seeds → *to plant the seeds of digital distrust*

The idiom *to plant the seeds* typically refers to initiating a process that will develop later. The addition of *digital distrust* introduces a technological-social frame and intensifies the negative connotation of the action. The modification enhances cognitive imagery and increases rhetorical impact (Burger, 2010).

Evaluative reorientation. Semantic derivation often functions as an indirect means of evaluation. The speaker uses the idiom to communicate stance rather than merely describe an event. Example

to cross a line → *to cross a constitutional line*

The original idiom indicates inappropriate behavior. By adding *constitutional*, the speaker frames the action as legally and ethically unacceptable. The idiom therefore performs an argumentative rather than descriptive function. Idioms frequently encode speaker attitude implicitly, which makes evaluation less confrontational but more persuasive (Moon, 1998).

Ironical Reinterpretation. Another mechanism is ironical reinterpretation, in which the idiom is used in a context that contrasts with its conventional expectations.

Example

to wear a crown → *to wear the crown of transparency while hiding the data*

Here the expression is not literal but ironic. The metaphorical “crown” symbolizes authority or virtue, while the following clause undermines it. The listener recognizes the discrepancy and interprets the statement as criticism. Ironical modification relies on shared cultural knowledge of idiomatic imagery (Naciscione, 2010).

Semantic blending. Semantic blending occurs when an idiom merges with another conceptual metaphor, producing a hybrid meaning. Example

standing at a crossroads of energy policy

The idiom *at a crossroads* refers to a critical decision point. The addition of *energy policy* introduces a political-economic conceptual frame. The result is a blended metaphor describing strategic uncertainty in governance. Such constructions function as cognitive blends integrating two conceptual domains (Fellbaum, 2017).

Interim Observation. Across all types, the key condition for interpretation is semantic recognizability. The recipient does not interpret the expression literally but through reference to the prototype idiom. Thus, semantic derivation does not destroy idiomaticity; rather, it recontextualizes it within discourse.

Communicative and Pragmatic Functions of Occasional Phraseological Units. Semantic derivation is not limited to lexical creativity. Its primary role emerges at the level of communication. Speakers modify idioms when neutral language cannot fully

convey their communicative intention. The transformation therefore represents a pragmatic choice rather than stylistic ornamentation.

Modified idioms combine familiarity and novelty. The audience recognizes the conventional phraseological model and, at the same time, processes the contextual modification as new information. This dual processing enhances communicative efficiency (Granger & Paquot, 2008). Several major discourse functions can be distinguished.

Expressive Function. The most immediate effect of occasional phraseological units is increased expressiveness. Figurative language activates mental imagery and emotional perception, making the utterance more vivid and memorable (Burger, 2010). Example

Literal statement:

The project encountered administrative resistance.

Modified idiomatic statement:

The project ran into a wall of paperwork.

The idiom *run into a wall* metaphorically conveys obstruction. By specifying *paperwork*, the speaker intensifies the image and makes the situation more concrete. The figurative formulation produces a stronger emotional response than literal wording. Thus, semantic derivation foregrounds the message and increases stylistic salience.

Evaluative function. Occasional idioms frequently function as indirect evaluation. Instead of explicitly stating approval or criticism, the speaker encodes attitude within the idiomatic structure (Moon, 1998). Example

The proposal created complications. → *The proposal opened a maze of regulations.*

The metaphor *maze* suggests confusion and inefficiency. The evaluation is not expressed through adjectives but through conceptual imagery. Because the judgment is implicit, it appears more objective and rhetorically effective. Therefore, semantic derivation allows speakers to express stance while avoiding direct confrontation.

Persuasive function. Modified idioms also serve persuasive purposes, particularly in media and political communication. Familiar figurative models are processed rapidly by the audience and therefore influence interpretation (Naciscione, 2010). Example

The economic reform failed. → *The economic reform collapsed under its own weight.*

The idiomatic metaphor suggests inevitability and internal weakness. The audience is guided toward a specific interpretation without explicit argumentation. The persuasive force arises because the listener infers the conclusion independently rather than being directly instructed.

Cohesive (Text-Organizing) function. Occasional phraseological units may structure discourse by creating conceptual cohesion across different parts of a text.

Writers often repeat one idiomatic metaphor in varied forms, forming a conceptual thread throughout the discourse. Example within one analytical article

the bridge to cooperation rebuilding the bridge of dialogue
burning the last bridge of negotiation

All expressions activate the same conceptual metaphor (*bridge* as connection). The repeated imagery links separate sections of the text and organizes interpretation. Recurrent metaphorical variation functions as a cohesion-building mechanism (Granger & Paquot, 2008).

Functional Summary. The analysis shows that semantic derivation fulfills multiple communicative roles simultaneously: intensifies expression, conveys evaluation, strengthens persuasion, organizes discourse.

Therefore, occasional phraseological units should be interpreted not as decorative stylistic devices but as pragmatic instruments of communication.

Discussion. The findings indicate that semantic derivation of phraseological units should not be treated as deviation from linguistic norm. Instead, it represents a regular communicative strategy grounded in shared cognitive knowledge. Speakers rely on conventional idioms as recognizable mental models and adapt them to specific discourse situations (Langlotz, 2006).

The crucial condition for interpretation is semantic recognizability. The listener interprets the modified expression by correlating it with the prototype idiom stored in memory. When this connection disappears, the expression ceases to function as a phraseological unit and becomes a simple metaphorical description. Unlike lexical innovation, which creates entirely new linguistic forms, occasional semantic derivation operates through reinterpretation of existing structures. The speaker activates a familiar idiom and introduces contextual meaning through specification, evaluation, or irony. This mechanism allows language users to balance stability and creativity. The analysis also demonstrates that phraseology is a dynamic subsystem of language. Although idioms are traditionally associated with fixedness, their functioning in discourse reveals considerable flexibility. Phraseological units operate not only as stored lexical expressions but also as productive cognitive patterns capable of generating context-dependent meanings (Fellbaum, 2017).

Occasional phraseological units occupy an intermediate position between the language system and speech activity. They arise in discourse but remain interpretable because they are linked to conventional idioms (Naciscione, 2010).

Conclusion. The present study has shown that occasional phraseological units emerge through semantic derivation of conventional idioms in discourse. Their formation is motivated by communicative necessity rather than violation of linguistic

norms. Speakers modify familiar phraseological models to achieve precision, express evaluation, and enhance rhetorical impact.

Several mechanisms of semantic derivation were identified: contextual specification, metaphorical activation, evaluative reorientation, ironical reinterpretation, and semantic blending. In all cases the idiomatic core remains recognizable, which ensures successful interpretation.

The analysis demonstrates that occasional phraseological units perform multiple communicative-pragmatic functions. They increase expressiveness, convey speaker attitude, influence audience interpretation, and contribute to discourse cohesion. Phraseological units should be viewed not only as fixed lexical items but also as flexible discourse tools capable of producing new meanings in context. Semantic derivation enhances communicative efficiency by combining familiarity with innovation.

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