

An introduction to phraseological units: idioms and collocations

Autor: Vicente Martínez, Sonia (Graduada en Estudios Ingleses).

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Abstract

Phraseology is a relatively young area of research that became a discipline in its own right during the last century. Its objects of study are called phraseological units and these are mainly referred to as idioms and collocations. However, there has been a big indeterminacy regarding these objects of research and there is little agreement around the notion of what constitutes a phraseological unit. The goal of this study is to offer a useful introduction to the concept of idiom and collocation as well as to the controversy that embraces this discipline.

Keywords: phraseological unit, idiom, collocation, indeterminacy, definitions

Título: Introducción a las unidades fraseológicas: modismos y colocaciones.

Resumen

La fraseología es un área de investigación relativamente joven, convertida en una disciplina propiamente establecida durante el siglo pasado. El objeto de estudio de esta disciplina son las llamadas unidades fraseológicas y éstas hacen referencia sobre todo a los modismos y colocaciones. Sin embargo, ha habido una gran indeterminación respecto a estos objetos de estudio y existe poco acuerdo en cuanto a la noción de lo que constituye una unidad fraseológica. El objetivo de este estudio es ofrecer una introducción útil al concepto de modismo y de colocación así como a la polémica que existe en esta disciplina.

Palabras clave: unidad fraseológica, modismo, colocación, indeterminación, definiciones.

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INTRODUCTION

There is very little agreement among experts as to what constitutes a phraseological unit and there are broader and narrower definitions of this concept. Corpas Pastor (1997) applies a broad perspective. She includes in this field any phrase formed by at least two orthographic words (it can also form a complex sentence) and that is bearer of some special features. Wotjak (1998) makes use of slightly different criteria. For him, phraseological units are expressions consisting of two or more words that appear together frequently functioning as a prefabricated element of discourse.

Mel'čuk (1998) incorporates a different criterion in his definition. In his opinion, a phraseological unit (*phraseme* or *set phrase*, in his own terminology) is characterized by a specific type of restriction. According to Mel'čuk, a phraseological unit is not free, in the sense that it lacks freedom of *selection* and freedom of *combination*. These two characteristics of free combinations are not found in phraseological units. It is indeed a frequent strategy to define phraseological units by comparing them with what they are not, that is, by identifying the features of free combinations that they lack.

Another common strategy to define the domain of phraseology is to use the prototypical category of a phraseological unit as a reference. In general, an *idiom* is deemed to be the prototype of a phraseological expression. That is, idioms are considered to have all the characteristics that are typical of phraseological expressions as opposed to free (syntactic) combinations. This strategy has often led to the application of a *centre-periphery* theoretical model, inspired by the School of Prague, whereby idioms occupy the central position in the domain of phraseology, and other phraseological units are located in one or other area of the domain depending on how many features they share with idioms and how many features they share with free combinations.

The distinction between idioms and collocations is a well-known product of this classification model. Collocations are classified as *peripheral phraseological units* (Wotjak, 1994) because they share some of the characteristic features of idioms, but not all of them. This implies that collocations are located in an intermediate position between phraseology and syntax, while idioms are located in the centre of the domain of phraseology.

THE CONCEPT OF IDIOM

Like the definitions of phraseology, the definitions of the concept of idiom in the literature are multifarious. The definitions range from very concise ones to more generic or even vague ones. Some of them are centred on a single aspect. For example, for Davies (1982-1983, p., 68) an idiom is simply “an obstacle to word-by-word translation”. This is arguably a simplistic definition of the phenomenon of idioms. Other authors like Healey propose longer definitions which include a large number of specifications:

An idiom might be more carefully defined as a group of two or more morphemes and an equal or greater number of tagmemes whose meaning as a whole is not deducible from the meanings of its component morphemes and tagmemes or any subgrouping thereof (Healey, 1968, p. 73).

As can be observed, different authors focus their attention on different aspects of idioms in their definitions. The definition offered by D. Crystal in his *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* is useful because, in a sense, it is eclectic and combines two of the most pervasive features of idioms, namely, their status as units and their subjection to restrictions. In this dictionary, an idiom is defined as “a term used in Grammar and Lexicology to refer to a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted so that they function as a single unit” (Crystal, 2003). What is more difficult to understand, however, is why Crystal attributes the term to the fields of grammar and lexicology instead of phraseology.

COLLOCATION: A BORDERLINE CATEGORY

Arguably, one of the reasons why idioms themselves are not clearly defined is that one of their neighbouring categories –in fact, the most important neighbouring category– also lacks an accurate, consensual definition. As Corpas Pastor (2001) observes, collocation is an ill-defined concept. In his seminal 1998 paper on collocations and *lexical functions*, Mel’čuk remarked that there was at the time “no universally accepted formal definition of collocations nor a proposal for their uniform and systematic treatment” (Mel’čuk, 1998, p. 23). Regrettably, more than one decade later this remark still retains its validity.

As Martin (2008) contemplates, the agreement among different scholars on what constitutes a collocation is reduced to two points: its bipartite structure and its nature as a borderline phenomenon between the realms of syntax and phraseology:

First, it is generally agreed that collocations consist of two parts (...). Second, it is usually agreed that these two elements show a degree of binding/fixation or restriction to each other, thus forming a unit that fits somewhere in between idioms and free combinations (Martin, 2008, p. 56)

In a similar vein, Wotjak (1998) states that collocations are neither idioms nor free combinations. Rather, they are in-between: restricted enough not to be regarded as free, transparent enough not to be considered idiomatic. For similar reasons, Mel’čuk (1998) categorizes collocations as *semi-phraseemes*, which share some properties with phraseemes, on the one hand, and with free combinations, on the other.

For many authors, the essential difference between idioms and collocations lies in the directionality of the relation. On this view, the restriction observed between the parts of a collocation establishes a unidirectional relationship, where the *base* (the dominant element of the relation) acts as a selector and the *collocator* (the dependent element in the relation) is the *selectee* (Alonso Ramos, 2006). In Meaning-Text Theory, this type of restriction is purely lexical, not semantic or grammatical (Alonso Ramos, 2001, 2006; Mel’čuk, 1998). For instance, if we want to express the meaning ‘inception’ in relation to the noun *riot*, we are more likely to select the verb *break out* rather than the verb *commence*. Crucially, the combination *the riots commenced* is not ungrammatical; it is only less probable than *the riots broke out*. The restriction that a base imposes on its collocators is best described as a matter of lexical preferences.

This is why Meaning-Text Theory uses *lexical functions* as a mechanism for generating collocations, and this is also the reason why collocations are related to what Makkai (1972) described as *idioms of encoding*, while *idioms* in the strict sense of the term are related to what Makkai (1972) described as *idioms of decoding*. This concept of collocation also dovetails with the definition proposed by Cowie. He defines collocation as “the linguistic phenomenon whereby a given vocabulary item prefers the company of another item rather than its ‘synonyms’ because of constraints which are not on the level of syntax or conceptual meaning but on that of usage” (Cowie, 1998, p. 147). The definition highlights the fact that the relation is unidirectional (oriented from one item to the other, but not conversely) and that the type of relation established affects only lexical preferences. There is no grammatical rule to determine which kinds of collocators are

allowed to be combined with the base; the selection is shaped by usage, by the conventions in the community of speakers. The kind of restriction observed in idioms is different: the constituent elements are reciprocally chosen; they exhibit a bidirectional relationship (Penadés, 2012).

Although there is an almost absolute agreement that collocations cannot be treated as typical phraseological units (i.e. they cannot form part of the central area of phraseology), there is some disagreement over the question of whether, or not, they can be classified as phraseological expressions at all. Bosque (2001) argues strongly against the treatment of collocations as phraseological expressions. In his opinion, collocations do not belong to the periphery of phraseology; they belong to the interface of lexis and grammar. Thus, he rejects the idea that syntax is hopeless to account for collocations. On the contrary, collocations in Bosque's opinion can be derived from syntactical rules.

CONCLUSION

The rationale for the topic of this dissertation has been the observation that the growth of the domain of phraseology in the last three decades has come at the price of an increasing level of indeterminacy in the delimitation of its research object. This indeterminacy affects several aspects of phraseological research being the use of terminology and the definition of key concepts one of the most important ones. By contrasting the relation between prototypical elements and peripheral ones, that is, between idioms and collocations, we have found out that the borderline that lies behind their delimitation is unclear. Rather, we should think of them as part of a *continuum* for which there is no deep-rooted reason to state at which point idioms do start and collocations really finish.

The growth of phraseology has also brought about confusion giving way to an object of research that has become more and more indeterminate. There is an alarming lack of resolution over what constitutes a phraseological unit, where phraseology begins and where it ends, or what lies within its remit and what lies beyond it. These questions have received multiple answers. Indeed, with the expansion of the domain of phraseology, it has become more difficult to answer these questions. Inevitably, the growth of phraseology must come at the price of indeterminacy and the most sensible solution is gradation.

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