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Book Review / Рецензия

**Review of Mel'čuk, Igor. 2023. *General Phraseology Theory and Practice*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia:  
John Benjamins**

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A new book titled *General phraseology theory and practice* by the world-famous linguist Igor Mel'čuk has just been released. Igor Mel'čuk's name needs no introduction to the readers who are interested in modern linguistics throughout his prolific academic career spanning over six decades. He has published over 400 works in Russian, English, French and a couple of other–languages and developed the *Meaning-text theory* (Mel'čuk 1974, 1989, 2016, Mel'čuk

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& Milicevic 2020 among many others)<sup>1</sup> formalizing the algebraic approach to describing language models. A student of the renowned Soviet linguist Reformatskiy, he has also been at the forefront of mathematical linguistics and participated in the development of the first machine translation system in the USSR back in the 1950s. He has carried the interest for this multidisciplinary field over to the twenty-first century.

The ideas regarding the necessity to research and classify linguistic phenomena in a precise and rigorous manner had emerged in the late nineteenth century, with interest in collocations expressed by such famous Russian scholars as Potebnya, Sreznevsky, Fortunatov, and Shakhmatov as well as such foreign linguists as Bally and Sweet. In the 1950s and 1960s, phraseology was developed within the structuralist paradigm, while the languages of the ethnic groups of the USSR as well as Germanic and Romance languages were studied within the structural-semantic paradigm. At that time questions of idiomaticity were raised, which led to the creation of criteria for distinguishing units of phraseology.

*General Phraseology: Theory and Practice* [GTP] is not his first step in establishing a general model of phraseology – the author made a significant contribution to the development of this branch of linguistics, starting in 1960 and has since then continued working in that area, publishing some milestone works, such as *Phrasemes in Language and Phraseology in Linguistics* (1995), *Clichés, an Understudied Subclass of Phrasemes* (2015) and *Clichés and Pragmatemes* (2020).

The decision to focus on phraseology, which, as Mel'čuk points out, is one of his favourite fields, came after his successful attempts to create the conceptual apparatus for linguistic morphology in 1982 and 2000 as well as the conceptual apparatus for semantics and syntax published in 2015 and 2021, respectively. In his interviews he emphasized the ever-present need to move forward, and never be idle: back in 2019 he said that the GTP book had already been in the making and he was waiting for the publishing house to greenlight it. The monograph under review consists of 11 chapters, each of which, in terms of its scope, can be treated as a standalone and complete monographic study.

The relevance and significance of the monograph are explained by the author who emphasizes that there have been many studies dedicated to phraseology, both theoretical and descriptive; however, its originality lies in being aimed at introducing a system of formal concepts necessary for describing phrasemes. According to Mel'čuk's definition, a phraseme is a multi-word expression that carries a specific meaning and cannot be constructed from individual words according to the general language rules.

Making generalizations regarding phraseology is a daunting task, taking into consideration the sheer number of tokens, which greatly exceeds any other previously described levels and subsystems by orders of magnitude. According to

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<sup>1</sup> See also the Special Issue of the *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 2022 (4), Ivanova & Larina (2022) among others.

the author's estimates, the total number of phrasemes in a widely spoken language amounts to more than 5 million. The author remarks that "there are tons and tons and tons of texts on phraseology – theoretical and descriptive, which have discussed and continue discussing whatever one can imagine about phrasemes". Yet, he believes that "no work sets out to introduce a system of formal notions needed for a description of phrasemes» (p. 8).

According to the author's theory, the most important criteria for phraseological units are stability, reproducibility, integrity, and idiomaticity, with stability being a measure of combinability limitation. He argues against the ideas of Chomsky's generative grammar, saying that speakers of a language do not generate sentences when they speak, "generate" used in its mathematical sense, but merely produce them for a given meaning that they want to express. While at first glance Mel'čuk's ideas may seem highly philosophical, he, according to his own words, has never been interested in philosophy for the sake of philosophy, pointing out its impracticality. Focussing purely on the language, he also makes a distinction between philology and linguistics, stating that the former is primarily interested in texts. He also believes that phrasemes should be considered exclusively from a synthetic perspective, i.e., from meaning to text.

The book in question presents a multifaceted research, the scale and fundamentality of which are evident. This is demonstrated by the broad spectrum of the issues discussed, the development and application of various methodological approaches in the study of phraseology. The sizable work (280 pages) includes an Introduction, 11 chapters, the author's afterword, a comprehensive bibliography, and appendices. The book is captivating and can be read almost "in one breath." Behind the apparent stylistic ease, however, lie complex theoretical issues that the author systematically and methodically discusses using verbal illustrations, excellently structured and designed figures, formulas, diagrams, contemporary materials, classic quotations, and author's notes related to contemporary names and realities.

Before we proceed to the overview of the content and structure of the book per se, it is necessary to note a remarkable detail: Mel'čuk's students emphasize the memorability of the knowledge he transmitted to them as well as his bright and approachable personality and his great sense of humour, which allows him to talk about complex matters in an accessible way. These traits of the author's character are evident to the reader from the very beginning.

Speaking of the narrative, the author focuses on the practical aspects and engages the reader with his discourse right away, breaking the structural conventions and remarking that prefaces are rarely read, which has led him to naming the first part *Introduction* instead, outlining the terminology and providing bright and vivid examples.

The author's style is thorough and detailed as well as highly analytical. In his own words, rationalism has always been his inherent trait. Therefore, he allocates his linguistic resources in an efficient way with his text containing a high density

of significant information. He also defines the scope of the research, noting that his goal is to establish a formal description of phrasemes from a synchronic perspective, excluding any diachronic consideration, which aligns with his view of the role of linguistics in the modern scientific paradigm.

The emphasis on the formal properties of phrasemes and the proposal of a consistent template for their description demonstrate a systematic and methodological approach of the author. Being a polyglot, the author mainly relies on the languages that he has mastered to the level of highest proficiency, i.e., Russian, which is his mother tongue, as well as English and French. However, he does not limit himself to those languages and also cites examples in Spanish, which he studied at Moscow State University, Italian, Greek, Polish and other languages. Furthermore, he does not stop at the Indo-European language family, using such languages as Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, which serves to prove the universal character and applicability of his theory.

Having outlined the concept and importance of phraseology, in Chapter 1 “Phraseology as a linguistic discipline”, the author proceeds to explain the primary task of phraseology, which is “to systematically describe and exhaustively register in a lexicon the phrasemes of a given language”. He advocates for a strictly deductive approach to the construction of definitions, focusing on prototypical cases.

The object of Mel’čuk’s research per se determines its interdisciplinary character, which leads to the need of using terms from such areas as lexicology, syntax, semantics, etc. Mel’čuk divides phrasemes into two categories – non-compositional phrasemes such as idioms and *nominemes*, which are treated as lexical units and thus have their own entries, and compositional phrasemes such as collocations and clichés, which are not treated as lexical units, being instead described in the lexical entries of their bases and lexical anchors.

Chapter 2 “The notion of phraseme” continues the exploration of the notion of phraseme, focusing on the central concepts of constrained selection and compositionality. It is also worth noting that the long-term character of the author’s research prompted him to update his terminology, e.g., replacing the term *restricted* with *constrained*. By illustrating the difference between free selection and constrained selection, the author establishes a clear definition of phrasemes as phrases in which the selection of lexical units is not independent, but interdependent or constrained. The choice of such vivid and emotion-evoking examples as *I am pulling [your] leg* or *Greasy Corner* (a town in Arkansas), serves to clearly demonstrate these concepts to the reader. The author erroneously describes the latter as a town in Arizona on page 41: *To produce a multilexemic geographical name, such as New Mexico, Candy Kitchen (a village in the USA, New Mexico) or Greasy Corner (a town in the USA, Arizona)*, but in no way does that have any impact on the experience of the reader and the overall accuracy of the research.

Further, the focus is divided among the three families of phrasemes – morphemic, lexemic, and syntactic phrasemes; for example, the word *forget* is

composed of *for-* and *-get'*, but its meaning doesn't derive directly from these components. Similarly, the examples *Chicagoan* and *New-Yorker* show how different morphemic structures can be used to denote a person living in a particular city. The German circumfixes *ge-...-t* and *ge-...-en*, used to form past participles, also fall under this category (p. 53).

The second category, lexemic phrasemes, includes what is traditionally defined as idioms, and is more familiar to language learners with such examples as *kick the bucket* or *the mountain gave birth to a mouse*. Through the exploration of these categories, the author aims to achieve a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed in languages, acknowledging that this process can occur at various levels and does not necessarily adhere to a simple compositional logic.

Chapter 3 “Lexemic phrasemes and their typology” (p. 56) delves deeper into the classification and understanding of lexemic phrasemes, defined by the author as complex linguistic signs with all their components being lexemes. He further details a typology of lexemic phrasemes, distinguishing between semantic-lexemic and conceptual-lexemic phrasemes and examining how free and constrained transitions between conceptual and semantic representations yield different types of phrasemes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of degenerate lexemes, a subset of lexemic phrasemes. The author develops an intricate typology for these, including quasi-lexemes, deviant lexemes, unilexemes, and quasi-unilexemes.

The artistic deformation of idioms is an intriguing linguistic phenomenon often employed in literary texts and informal conversation. By manipulating well-known idioms, speakers can generate novel expressions, enriching their speech with humour, irony, or emphasis. For example, the idiom *cast pearls before swine* could be creatively modified to *cast pearls before students*, changing the meaning to suggest that students are unable to appreciate valuable information or wisdom (p. 86).

The chapter explains that syntactic transformations such as passivization or relativization depend heavily on the meaning embedded within an idiom or a collocation. For instance, in such idioms as *'kick the bucket'*, the speaker's starting semantic choice precludes the possibility of such operations – it is not possible to try to passivize or relativize *'bucket'* in this idiom as it lacks an independent semantic value.

Chapters 4 “Idioms-1 – The theory” and 5 “Idioms-2 – Lexicographic description of three Russian idioms” discuss the application of the proposed theoretical model to the description of specific idioms, offering practical insights into the nature of idiomatic expressions. Mel'čuk chooses three Russian idioms – *užas kakoj* [X (Σ)], *čto za* [X], and *anjutiny glazki* as examples, explaining their complexity and provides an in-depth analysis of their structure, meaning, and usage.

The detailed exploration of the Russian idiom *užas kakoj* with the meaning of ‘extremely’, is particularly insightful. Mel'čuk identifies it as a non-compositional lexemic phraseme, emphasizing its function in intensifying both positive and negative connotations. The author also distinguishes the idiom from other related

expressions, providing a clearer understanding of the unique syntactic and semantic properties of each of them.

In Chapter 6 “Collocations” (p. 128), the author examines the notion of collocation, one of the key concepts in phraseology. He starts by defining a collocation and its components, setting the ground for further discussions. The chapter then progresses to elaborate on the properties of a collocation, covering its compositionality, complex lexemic components, the concept of degenerate lexemes, and the feature of syntactically discontinuous collocations. It also deals with the lexicographic description of collocations, presenting a detailed method for documenting and describing both semantically and syntactically motivated collocations.

Chapter 7 “Nominemes” (p. 152) explores the conceptual world of nominemes, a term defined as a non-compositional conceptual-lexemic phraseme, a multilexemic proper name, or a label identifying a unique individual referent without contributing any additional meaning. He emphasizes this point with such examples as *Leo Tolstoy*, the *Rolling Stones*, and the *Blue Nile*, which do not tell us anything about the entities they refer to other than their names. Mel’čuk highlights the distinct quality of nominemes due to which they can often include meaningful lexemes or are composed of them. However, he emphasizes that this does not give the nomineme a meaning. For instance, the nomineme “Big River” does not provide any information about the river other than its name. Any perceived meaning is, according to his words, a result of “inner form” or “semantic etymology.” (p. 153).

In Chapter 8 “Clichés” (p. 157), the author examines various types of clichés, introducing such terms as ‘termeme’, ‘formuleme’ and ‘sentenceme’. Focusing on the latter, it is worth noting that sentencemes often express general observations, advice, or wisdom, and as such, they may be frequently used in both spoken and written discourse. However, they are not just well-established sentences; rather, they represent a generic situation or a class of situations, serving as a kind of template that can be filled with specific content in actual use.

Further, in Chapter 9 “Pragmatemes” (p. 175), Mel’čuk examines pragmatemes, which include not only complex signs but also single lexemes in a given communicative situation. Unlike lexemic phrasemes, the lexemic expression of a pragmateme is determined by the context or the situation of its use. For instance, a ‘no parking’ sign is a compositional phraseme. which is constrained by the situation of its use making it a pragmateme, which can be signalative, clausative and have unique prosodic features.

Chapter 10 “Morphemic phrasemes” (p. 182) presents a comprehensive exploration of the concept of ‘morphemic phraseme’, exploring these phrasemes from various perspectives and classifying them into two major categories – semantic-morphemic phrasemes and conceptual-morphemic phrasemes. The former category is further divided into morphemic idioms and morphemic collocations.

Chapter 11 “Syntactic phrasemes” (p. 200) focuses on syntactic idioms. The author proceeds to draw distinctions between syntactic idioms and collocations, syntactic idioms and clichés, as well as syntactic idioms and proverbs.

To conclude the review, it should be noted that one of the merits of the monograph under review is its brilliant language and style of presentation as well as the accuracy and clarity of formulations presented by the author. While establishing thoroughly described intricate systems and following a strict logic, he manages to guide the readers through a clearly-structured text. Without any doubt, the *General Phraseology: Theory and Practice* presents a substantial and fundamental research of language in general and phraseology in particular. While there is no doubt the book will be valuable for academics, the author also managed to convey his ideas in a well-structured way that will make it accessible to the general public interested in linguistics. Academia should undoubtedly be congratulated on the publication of the remarkable and fundamental book by a prominent modern linguist Igor Mel’čuk.

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