

STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN LITERARY WORKS

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Zokirjonova Gulruh Elyorjon kizi

Fourth-year student of Fergana State University

+998911151890

gulruxzokirjonova@gmail.com

Uktamova Mokhigul Khamidullo kizi

Senior teacher of English philology department, FSU

uktamovamoxigul@gmail.com

Annotation

This article illustrates a structural and functional analysis of phraseological units in English literary texts. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Vinogradov, Kunin and Amosova, the study examines three principal categories of phraseological units. The analysis demonstrates that phraseological units are not ornamental features of literary language but functional constituents that simultaneously perform evaluative, characterizing, expressive, and discourse-organizing roles

Keywords

phraseological units, idioms, literary discourse, structural analysis, functional analysis, stylistics.

Аннотация

В данной статье представлен структурно-функциональный анализ фразеологических единиц в английских литературных текстах. Опираясь на теоретические концепции Виноградова, Кунина и Амосовой, исследование рассматривает три основные категории фразеологических единиц. Анализ показывает, что фразеологические единицы являются не украшением литературного языка, а функциональными составляющими, которые одновременно выполняют оценочную, характеризующую, экспрессивную и дискурсообразующую роли.

Ключевые слова

фразеологические единицы, идиомы, литературный дискурс, структурный анализ, функциональный анализ, стилистика.

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada ingliz adabiy matnlarida frazeologik birliklarning strukturaviy va funksional tahlili yoritilgan. Vinogradov, Kunin va Amosova nazariy konsepsiyalariga tayanib, tadqiqot frazeologik birliklarning uch asosiy toifasini o'rganadi. Tahlil shuni ko'rsatadiki, frazeologik birliklar adabiy tilning bezak elementi emas, balki bir vaqtning o'zida baholovchi, tavsiflash, ifodali va diskursni tashkil etish vazifalarini bajaruvchi funksional tarkibiy qismlardir.

Kalit so'zlar

frazeologik birliklar, idiomalar, adabiy diskurs, strukturaviy tahlil, funksional tahlil, stilistika.

INTRODUCTION

Language in literary texts operates at a level of semantic density that exceeds ordinary communicative exchange. Among the many resources writers deploy to achieve this density, stable phraseological units, multi-word expressions whose meanings cannot be derived compositionally from their parts occupy a position of particular importance. Their dual nature, simultaneously fixed in form yet rich in figurative meaning makes them ideal instruments for conveying layers of significance that literal language alone cannot sustain. Despite decades of scholarly attention, the study of phraseological units in literary contexts remains unevenly developed. Theoretical phraseology, as codified by the Russian and Soviet linguistic traditions (Vinogradov 1947, Kunin 1970, Amosova 1963) and later extended by Western scholars (Cowie 1998, Moon 1998), has produced sophisticated classification models, yet their systematic application to literary analysis has lagged behind. Studies often either catalogue phraseological units without examining their discourse-level functions or discuss function without rigorous structural grounding. This article addresses that gap. The central argument advanced here is that the structural category of a phraseological unit whether nominal, verbal or adverbial is not incidental but is itself a functional resource. The grammatical position a phraseological unit occupies in a sentence shapes and is shaped by, the communicative work it performs. Examining structure and function together, rather than in isolation, yields a richer account of how idiomatic language contributes to literary meaning. The foundational definition of phraseological units centers on three properties: semantic non-compositionality, structural stability, and reproducibility (Vinogradov, 1947). These properties together distinguish phraseological units from both single lexical items and free word combinations. As Kunin (1970, p. 43) observes, phraseological units "are not freely made up in speech but are reproduced as ready-made units," a formulation that captures their cognitive status as stored patterns rather than generated

combinations. Vinogradov's (1947) tripartite semantic classification remains the most widely cited point of departure. He distinguishes phraseological fusions (wholly non-motivated, e.g., *to kick the bucket*), phraseological unities (partially motivated through metaphor, e.g., *to show one's teeth*) and phraseological collocations (transparent but with restricted combinability, e.g., *to make a decision*).

This scale of idiomaticity has proven durable, though subsequent scholars have questioned its adequacy as a complete classification framework. Amosova (1963) reframed the problem through a contextual lens, introducing the distinction between phrasemes, where one element retains its literal meaning and the other is bound and idioms, where all elements are used figuratively. This distinction proves especially productive in literary analysis, where partial motivation creates interpretative ambiguity that authors may deliberately exploit. Kunin (1970) extended classification to incorporate functional criteria, distinguishing nominative, communicative, and interjectional phraseological units. The communicative category, encompassing proverbs and sayings that express complete propositions, is particularly relevant to literary analysis, where such units may serve as thematic condensations of the text's central concerns. Western contributions have emphasised the scalar and dynamic character of phraseological stability. Cowie (1998) and Moon (1998) both argue for a continuum model in which fixed expressions shade into semi-fixed and free combinations and in which individual units may occupy different positions depending on context. This view accommodates the phenomenon of phraseological transformation the deliberate modification of fixed expressions for stylistic effect which is especially common in literary language. The literary-stylistic functions of phraseological units have been addressed from several perspectives. Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005) examine the role of figurative idioms in constructing conceptual metaphors that underlie literary themes. Alexander (1978) analyses phraseological creativity in literary prose, documenting the range of structural transformations authors employ and arguing that such transformations are a primary source of stylistic individuality. Fernando (1996) offers a functional typology that distinguishes the referential, interpersonal, and textual dimensions of idiomatic language, a framework that maps productively onto literary analysis. Despite these contributions, systematic corpus-based studies that connect structural type to functional role within literary texts remain scarce. Most analyses focus on a single author or a single structural category, limiting the generalisability of their conclusions. The present article addresses this by examining three structural categories across a range of canonical literary texts, enabling comparative observations about the relationship between structure and function.

METHODS

The analytical corpus comprises phraseological units drawn from twelve canonical works of English literature spanning the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, including Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The selection was guided by three criteria: canonical status (ensuring wide scholarly familiarity), generic diversity (spanning tragedy, realist novel, social satire, and political allegory), and phraseological density (preference for texts in which idiomatic language is a conspicuous feature of style). A total of sixty phraseological units were identified for analysis: twenty noun-equivalent, twenty verbal-equivalent, and twenty adverbial. This equal distribution across categories was deliberate, enabling balanced cross-category comparison. Units were selected to represent the full range of Vinogradov's idiomaticity scale within each structural category, ensuring that conclusions are not artifacts of selecting only maximally opaque expressions. Each phraseological unit was analyzed along two dimensions. Structural analysis identified the unit's grammatical category (noun phrase, verb phrase, or adverbial expression), its internal syntactic pattern, its degree of lexical and grammatical stability, and its position within the host sentence. Functional analysis, drawing on Fernando's (1996) tripartite framework and Kunin's (1970) functional typology, identified the primary communicative role performed by each unit in its literary context: evaluative, characterizing, expressive/emotive, narrative-progressive, or discourse-organizing. The relationship between structural category and functional load was then examined by coding each unit for its dominant function and mapping these codes against structural categories. Chi-square testing was applied to assess whether the observed distribution of functions across structural categories differed significantly from a null distribution of equal functional spread.

RESULTS

Of the twenty noun-equivalent units analyzed, fourteen (70%) were found to perform a predominantly evaluative or symbolic function. This result is consistent with the structural logic of nominal phrases, which characteristically predicate properties of persons, situations, or states rather than describing processes or circumstances. The evaluative function is well illustrated by *a white elephant* (Orwell, *Animal Farm*), which encodes negative evaluation the quality of costly uselessness in a compact nominal form deployable as subject, object, or complement without syntactic adjustment. Similarly, *a bitter truth* operates as an evaluative noun phrase that assigns an affective quality to propositional content,

compressing what would otherwise require an evaluative clause ("the truth, which is bitter") into a single nominal head. Both units belong to Vinogradov's phraseological unity category: their meanings are accessible through metaphorical inference but not through literal reading. Symbolic function is most evident in expressions that participate in the thematic architecture of a text. *A sea of troubles*, drawn from Hamlet's third soliloquy (III.i.59), functions not merely as a hyperbolic description of adversity but as a symbolic condensation of the play's central preoccupation with the relationship between thought and action. The unit's structural form head noun plus prepositional phrase conveying vast, undifferentiated quantity maps onto the theme of paralysis: as the sea cannot be individually confronted wave by wave, so Hamlet's troubles resist systematic resolution. Here the noun phrase's capacity to represent an abstract totality as a concrete, visual entity is precisely what the thematic symbolism requires. Characterizing functions, while secondary in this category, appeared in eight units (40% with overlap, as several units served both evaluative and characterizing purposes simultaneously). *A man of his word* (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*) and *a black sheep* (Dickens, *Oliver Twist*) both assign stable identity-defining properties to individuals, functioning as efficient characterological shorthand that carries social and ethical weight beyond mere description. The possessive construction in the former (*of his word*) grammatically enacts the alignment between person and promise that the expression semantically encodes.

Verbal-equivalent phraseological units showed the broadest functional distribution of the three structural categories. However, two functional clusters dominated: narrative-progressive functions (units that advance or redirect the plot by marking transitions in information flow or agent behavior) accounted for eleven units (55%), while interpersonal functions (units that define relationships, hierarchies, or emotional states between characters) accounted for fourteen (70%), with substantial overlap between the two clusters. The narrative-progressive function is exemplified by *to let the cat out of the bag* and *to spill the beans*, both of which encode the disclosure of concealed information. In detective and suspense narratives such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, *Jane Eyre* such moments are structurally pivotal: they reorganize the reader's epistemic position relative to the text's characters and often precipitate consequential action. The verbal form of these units is functionally motivated: the narrative moment they mark is a process, an event with before and after, and the verb phrase grammatically captures this eventive structure in a way that a nominal equivalent could not. The interpersonal function is clearly operative in *to break the ice* (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*), where the expression does not merely describe a social action but encodes the relational

shift that action accomplishes the reduction of formality and the opening of communicative space. Characters who perform this act are marked as socially confident, and the use of the phraseological unit rather than a literal equivalent ("to begin a conversation") imports into the text a culturally specific evaluation of social initiative. This illustrates Fernando's (1996) observation that interpersonal idioms carry attitudinal meaning that is inseparable from their ideational content. Expressive-emotive functions were concentrated in units involving extreme states: *to lose one's head* (Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*), *to bite the bullet* (Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*), and *to throw in the towel* (Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*). In each case, the verb phrase encodes not merely an action but a psychophysical state like panic, endurance, surrender in which the body and the emotion are rendered simultaneously through a single figurative image. This somatic dimension of verbal phraseological units gives them a vividness that purely mental vocabulary lacks.

Adverbial phraseological units displayed the most specialized functional profile of the three categories. Sixteen of twenty units (80%) performed a primarily discourse-organizing function, either regulating temporal relations within the narrative (e.g., *in the long run*, *in the meantime*, *from time to time*) or managing the epistemological and attitudinal stance of the narrator or character (e.g., *by and large*, *as a matter of fact*, *in a way*). This concentration reflects the inherent grammatical function of adverbs as modifiers of propositions rather than contributors to propositional content. The temporal subgroup is particularly important for literary analysis because narrative time, the sequencing of events, the management of retrospect and anticipation is a primary dimension of literary form. Expressions such as *in the long run* (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*) and *for the time being* (Austen, *Emma*) do not merely locate events on a timeline; they encode a relationship between present action and future consequence that is itself thematically loaded. The use of *in the long run* in reflective narrative passages marks the narrator's retrospective authority, the capacity to evaluate past events from a position of temporal distance, which is a defining feature of the Austenian narrative voice. Attitudinal adverbials function differently: rather than structuring narrative time, they modulate the certainty, completeness, or generality of a claim. *By and large* and *on the whole* introduce qualified generalizations, softening assertions in ways consistent with Austen's ironic narrative register, where confident generality is often undermined by subsequent particulars. *As a matter of fact* and *in fact*, conversely, intensify claims, performing what discourse analysts call an "assertive move" that challenges a prior or assumed position. In dialogic contexts, such units are important markers of epistemic authority and interpersonal negotiation. Notably, expressions conveying suddenness such as *all of a sudden*, *in the blink of an*

eye, at once clustered in texts with fast-paced or dramatic narratives (Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). These units perform a pacing function, accelerating narrative tempo by linguistically enacting the speed of events. Their idiomatic character intensifies this effect: the figurative vividness of *in the blink of an eye* creates a stronger sense of suddenness than its literal equivalent "very quickly" would achieve. These patterns suggest that structural category is not merely a grammatical fact about phraseological units but is itself a functional resource. Writers select the structural type of phraseological unit that best fits the communicative work they need to accomplish at a given point in the text. This represents a more sophisticated view of phraseological choice than models that treat idioms as interchangeable ornaments or simple intensifiers.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented above have several implications for phraseological theory and literary stylistics. First, they provide empirical support for the argument that structural and functional analysis of phraseological units should be conducted jointly rather than sequentially. The systematic correlation between structural category and functional load suggests that these dimensions are not independent variables but co-constitutive aspects of phraseological meaning. A classification system based on semantic criteria alone (as in Vinogradov's framework) or functional criteria alone (as in Kunin's communicative typology) necessarily captures only part of the picture. Moreover the findings complicate the common characterization of phraseological units as merely "expressive" or "emphatic" features of literary language. The analysis reveals that phraseological units perform a much wider range of functions: they construct character, manage reader information, regulate narrative tempo, encode cultural values, and organize the epistemological stance of narrators. This breadth of function should elevate their status in literary analysis from peripheral ornament to central mechanism of literary meaning-making. The results raise important questions about phraseological transformation in literary texts. Several of the units examined appeared in modified forms in their source texts with inserted modifiers, altered components, or inverted structures suggesting that authors do not simply deploy phraseological units as fixed givens but actively manipulate them to create specific effects. This creative dimension of phraseological use deserves more systematic attention than it has received, particularly in the context of authorial style and idiolect. There are limitations to the present analysis that should be acknowledged. The corpus, while carefully selected, is restricted to canonical Anglophone texts and cannot support claims about phraseological function in other literary traditions or languages. The functional coding scheme, though grounded in established

frameworks, involves interpretative judgements that a single analyst necessarily makes with some degree of subjectivity. Future research should address both limitations through expanded corpora and multi-rater methodologies.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the structural and functional characteristics of phraseological units across three grammatical categories in English literary discourse. The central finding that structural category systematically correlates with functional load represents a contribution to both phraseological theory and literary stylistics. Noun-equivalent units predominantly serve evaluative and symbolic functions; verbal units drive narrative and interpersonal dynamics; adverbial units regulate temporal relations and attitudinal stance. More broadly, the analysis demonstrates that phraseological units are not peripheral features of literary language but integral to its architecture. Their structural stability enables reliable communicative effects; their figurative richness enables those effects to resonate beyond the immediate communicative context; and their cultural embeddedness links individual literary texts to the broader tradition of shared linguistic and cultural knowledge from which they draw. Two directions for future research emerge most clearly from the present findings. The first is a comparative analysis of phraseological function across literary genres examining, for example, whether dystopian fiction and social realism deploy adverbial phraseological units differently, and what this reveals about their respective temporal and attitudinal registers. The second is a corpus study of phraseological transformation in literary prose, examining the types, frequencies, and functional motivations of authors' departures from canonical phraseological forms. Together, these inquiries would substantially advance the integration of phraseological analysis into mainstream literary stylistics.

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