# The Linguistic Status of Phrases

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Together with etymology, phraseology is the most interesting and attractive of all linguistic branches. As yet, it remains a not-enough-studied domain of language, or even more, neglected, even if some preoccupations for the study of the idiomatic corpus of languages has been present even beginning with the 18th century, when first phrasal dictionaries are printed and phraseology is considered to be part and parcel of the lexicon because of the overlapping between a phrase and a word. If initially there was interest for phraseology especially in lexicography, later the scientific research focused on the study of the language of certain writers, hence analyzing the so-called "deviations" from the usual constructions, and it is only much later that papers and theoretical studies regarding phraseology, phraseological units, the form, the structure and formation mechanisms of phrases appear.

Presently, a bunch of researchers consider that the phraseological units constitute specific elements that cannot be identified with a lexeme, since, within language, the phraseological units constitute a level in its own, with self-organization and function rules. As a consequence, phraseology as a research domain of phraseological units should be considered a full subject and not only a chapter of lexicology.

The large number of phrase in a language, their partial recollection in scientific papers, their diversity as well as the terminology in use (as a result of divergent viewpoints from which they can be approached), they all record the phraseological problem to always be one of modern concern.

In the scientific literature, many researchers that have dealt with phraseology have confined themselves to the following criteria: the stable and unitary sense of meaning, which does not gush forth from the sum of the meanings of the words contained in the phrase; their possibility/impossibility to translate in other languages; the presence of metaphors or images and nuances emotionally expressive in the phrases; the appeal to symbols and myths etc.

The phrase is a unit that is so glued together that the constitutive elements generally lose their self meaning, thus reaching to a figurative reading of the entire phrase: *a se duce pe copcă, a-şi pierde capul, a-i ajunge cuțitul la os, a-i veni apa*

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*la moară, a nu-i fi toți boii acasă, a avea orbul găinilor* etc. The common element of the phraseological units consists in the fact that they are combinations of two or more words that are perfectly linked together in their elements. They usually evoke one single concept, they express a sole notion and from this perspective they come closer to words, being felt as potential equivalents of words.

Phrases are very frequently used in everyday speech, they are "entitled by frequency", even if, semantically speaking, the are atypical compared to the common practice of lexical combination, and their translation in a different language is difficult and sometimes even impossible: *a da cu ocaua lui Cuza, a prinde cu ocaua mică; a-şi da arama pe față, anteriul lui moş Arvinte, cuiul lui Pepelea, a umbla ca Vodă prin lobodă* etc.

Many of the phrase have originally been free matching words but, due to frequent and long lasting use, they have come to freeze, thus becoming phrases: *a avea un dinte împotriva cuiva, a da apă la moară, a (se) da de gol, a da năvală, a da tonul, a bate apa în piuă, a bate la ochi, a-şi aprinde paie în cap, a i-o lua gura pe dinainte, a-şi lua inima-n dinți, a căra apa cu ciurul, a strica orzul pe gâşte, a umbla după potcoave de cai morți* etc.

The old corpus of phrases belongs to the folk language and the language that possesses a wide range of lexical and phraseological treasure possesses also various means of communication as well as additional expressive resources that convey to that language an identity of its own.

There has been much ink written about phrases and phraseological units lately, especially in foreign linguistics but there is no unitary framework yet, not even regarding the phraseological terminology. Within the Russian phraseology, for instance, where this domain is very well studied, for the term *phrase* there are no less than 18 entries mentioned only in O.S. Ahmanova (Ahmanova 1966: 503).

The very first study dedicated to phraseology appears in 1909 and belongs to Charles Bally: *Traité de stylistique française*. Charles Bally makes a distinction between the free matching of words and deals with the so-called *phrasal phrase* where he includes the complex sintagmatic matchings, that he further subdivides according to the cohesion degree into *phraseological series* (with relative cohesion degree, where the matching of words is relatively free) and *phraseological units* (with absolute cohesion degree, where the matching of words is perfect). When defining the *phraseological series,* an intermediate type between the mobile and fix matching, Charles Bally considers three criteria: the autonomy of the elements, the closeness that puts these elements together, the impression of already known – an intuitive criterion. *The phraseological unit* is defined strictly semantically. In order to recognize it we get help from the following external factors: the composition of the group from more separate words in writing; the settled word order; the lack of word separation by means of other words. But the tru elements that can help in recognizing the phraseological groups have an internal nature: the equivalence with a simple word: *a trage cu coada ochiului = a urmări/ a spiona, a se împăca cu gândul = a se consola, a da în mintea copiilor = a se prosti, a da ortul popii = a muri; a o lua la sănătoasa = a fugi, a trage pe sfoară = a păcăli, a-şi dezlega băierile inimii = a se destăinui, a bate câmpii = a divaga, a-şi băga minţile în cap = a se cumineți*; the loss of motivation or, as Ch. Bally put it, "the oversee of the



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meanings of elements": *a-şi pune lacăt la gură, a spune verzi şi uscate, a se supăra ca văcarul pe sat*; archaisms that appear in some of these phraseological units and that cannot be understood separately: *a da în vileag, a schimba calimera, a fi la cheremul cuiva, a da iama, a da sfară în țară, a nu avea habar, a lua cu anasâna***,** *a nu şti o iotă, a da în brânci, a veni cuiva de hac, a umbla cu fofârlica, a lăsa pe cineva la aman, a-i trage cuiva un ibrişin pe la nas*, *a băga zâzanii*. In *Dictionnaire de linguistique* of J. Dubois, Paris, 1973, phraseology is defined in the following way: "a Construction typical for an individual, group of people or language". The definition is incomplete and ambiguous, questioning the use of other terms like the *idiolect,* the linguistic phenomenon typical for an individual and the *linguistic cliché*, stylistic deviation trivialized due to repetition and depreciated due to its excessive use. Yet, phraseology is to be defined not by the deviation from the standard, but instead by the stable character of the combination it represents.

The defining difficulties of phraseology are partially due to the heterogeneity of the index of phrases (verbal phrases, noun phrases, adjectival phrases etc), metaphors, prefabricated sentences, proverbs, on the other hand, also due to the existent terminology: phrases, sintagms, idiomatisms, set-phrases, stable phrases, crystallized phrases, phrasemes or paralexemes, bound track, phraseological clichés etc.

Some authors (Babkin 1964: 232) speak about "somatic phrases", that is those phrases that have amongst their components parts of the human body (head, mouth, heart, hand, leg etc.) and represent an important source of generation of phraseological units: *a avea capul pe umeri, a nu avea nici cap, nici coadă, a bate la cap, a se bate cap în cap, a se da cu capul de pereți/ de toți pereții, a nu-l duce capul, a-şi face de cap, a măsura din cap până-n picioare, a-şi pierde capul, a trăi cu capul în nori, a i se urca cuiva la cap; a fi gură spartă, a fi slobod la gură, a intra în gura lumii, a închide cuiva gura, a-i lăsa gura apă, a lăsa pe cineva cu gura căscată, a-l lua (pe cineva) gura pe dinainte, a se pune în gură cu cineva, a-şi ține gura; a avea ceva pe inimă, a băga inimă în cineva, a-şi călca pe inimă, a-şi deschide inima, a-şi face inimă rea, a-i veni inima la loc, a pune la inimă, i-a căzut inima în călcâi; a ajunge pe mâini bune, a avea mână liberă, a fi mâna dreaptă a cuiva, a-i fi/ a-i veni peste mână, a pune mână de la mână, a se spăla pe mâni de ceva/cineva, a sta cu mâinile în sân; a cădea în picioare (ca pisica), a fi cu (amândouă) picioarele pe pământ, a lua pe cineva peste picior, a pune pe picioare, a pune piciorul în prag, a trăi pe picior mare* etc.; others consider that phraseological units and compound words are equivalents.

Ferdinand de Saussure, even if he did not purposefully dedicated his efforts to phraseology, suggests (Saussure 1998: 135) the term *sintagm*, meaning by that any type of matching consecutive elements, be it free or stable. Even if the sintagm is not a saussurean discovery and even if the great Genevean linguist did not create a theory relying on sintagm, his credit is that of having described the main characteristics of sintagms, their variety according to dimension and degree of cohesion of components, so opening the way to some detailed studies.

When these elements are studied by comparison with the system of other languages, that are targets for translation, the term *idiotism* is used for "that phrase or word that cannot be translated into other language word for word" (DEX 1996: 471). Iorgu Iordan (Iordan 1975: 292) calls the idiomatic phrases "isolations",



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because their constitutive elements isolate themselves from the rest of the linguistic material namely that they benefit from a special treatment. Idiotisms are considered to have a figurative meaning that cannot be retrieved from the contents of the components, and that is why their literal translation in to other languages is impossible most of the times: *a-şi aprinde paie în cap, a-şi tăia craca de sub picioare, a-i lipsi o doagă, a spăla putina, a-şi lua inima în dinți*, for example. Attempt of dissociation of such phrases and their "ad literam" translation could generate ridiculous variants or regrettable confusion. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of linguists idiotisms are equivalents of phrases just like the phraseological expression can be idiomatic expression. They can also be defined as a deviation from the rules of construction of discourse and as a language specific in a certain communication situation and, at a certain level of the language, these constructions still have an expressive component, wiped away or removed because of repeated, stereotypical use. Idiomatic or phraseological expressions are valuable not only because of their expressivity but also because in some of them one can still find a number of words that can only be found in those phrases. Take them separately and they mean nothing for the modern speaker. Few would understand, for instance, the meaning of: *calimeră, cherem, iamă, fofârlică, habar, hac, sfară, şoşele* etc., if the expressions were not in use: *a schimba calimera, a fi/ a ajunge la cheremul cuiva, a da iama, a prinde/ a umbla cu fofârlica, a (nu) avea habar, a veni cuiva de hac, a da sfară în țară, cu şoşele, cu momele*.

There can be relations of synonymy between some of them, as well as antonimy and homonymy, just like in the case of ordinary lexicon. We shall briefly refer to phraseological synonymy, as it is of particular interest both for Romanian and foreign researchers.

Generally, phraseological synonymy means a sintagm, a group of words, that is in a relation of synonymy with a simple word: *a da bir cu fugiții – a fugi, a-şi da obştescul sfârşit – a muri, a da poruncă – a porunci, a da zor – a se grăbi, a face abstracție – a igonra* sau față de altă expresie frazeologică: *a arde gazul degeaba – a tăia frunză la câini; a o lua la sănătoasa – a spăla putina; cum e turcul şi pistolul – cum e sacul şi petecul; la dracu-n praznic – unde şi-a înțărcat mutul iapa, a nu fi în apele sale – a nu-i fi toți boii acasă, (a fi) trecut prin ciur şi prin dârmon – a fi uns cu toate alifiile* etc. So by phraseological synonymy one should understand the relation of semantic equivalence that can be settled between two or more phraseological units, usually made up of the same lexical categories, the only difference being made by nuances, style refinement or expressive load. The phrases that are synonymous can be divided into more degrees. The highest degree of synonymy is held by those phraseological matchings that coincide in meaning and they can be replaced one for the other at any moment. Still, as reality shows us, the possibility of identical matching is very rare both in the lexical and phraseological synonymy. By analogy with the lexical synonymy series of the type: *a muri, a răposa, a deceda, a crăpa, a o mierli* one can consider also the phraseological synonymy series. Such a typical example is given by phrases and expressions: *a-şi da duhul, a-şi da obştescul sfârşit, a da ortul popii, a da în primire, a i se împlini cuiva sorocul, a pleca spre cele veşnice, a se duce pe lumea cealaltă.*



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Some specialists speak of the so-called *unitary (global) synonymy* namely of semantic equivalence that can be settled between two or more phraseological units. It targets the global meaning of the matching, according to which two phraseological matchings like *a da înapoi ca racul* and *a-i spori ca la rac***,** even if they have partially different structures, can be considered synonyms because of the selection of the same seme. The other form of synonymy is the *component (partial) synonymy* which refers to the synonymy of a part of two or more matchings. Foe example, the noun *cale* in the construction *aceasta e calea cea mai scurtă* can be replaced with the noun *drum (this is the shortest route),* thus obtaining a new sentence, partially synonymous with the first. Due to the fact that in the case of a fixed matching, the components lose not only their autonomy, but also their ordinary meaning; their replacement with synonyms cannot be performed. Consequently we can say, *a pune ceva la cale*, but we cannot say *a pune ceva la drum*; *a se aşterne drumului***,** but not *a se aşterne căii*. Sometimes synonymy can be produced by the replacement of only one term in the phraseological unit: *a-i sări cuiva muştarul – a-i sări cuiva ţandăra, a păşi cu stângul – a păşi strâmb, a pica la ţanc – a pica la fix, a-şi face cheful – a-şi face damblaua – a-şi face mendrele*.

Replacement of one phraseological synonym with another depends on a series of factors like: the degree of semantic closeness of the phrases; the structural organization of the phrases that are involved in synonymic relations; the capacity of the phrases of having the same lexical context and use in common constructions; the coexistence in phrases of one and the same lexical category; the stylistic characteristic of the phrase and their emotional nuance. The phrases that are subject to a synonymy relation can have an obvious expressive load or they can either be mere close lexical matchings. In both situations, the phraseological synonymy represents a source of expressivity in a language and must be treated accordingly.

The diversity of theoretical opinions regarding the linguistic status of phrases, the lack of a system of concepts, their non-unitary definition and clarification and the very diverse terminology preferred by linguists represent evidence of a not-enough-studied-yet research of phraseology. Recent researches specifically target issues related to the definition of the nature and characteristics of the phraseological units in relation with other elements of the language, as well as the classification of the phraseological units according to the degree of unity of the compounding elements according to their functional valence, the theoretical fundamentation of the principles of lexicographic presentation of idiomatism, the comparative research of the phraseological units in different languages aiming at the translation possibilities from one language into another and the role of phraseology in teaching foreign languages.

Romanian phraseology research has not yet constituted itself in a self-centered domain and the linguistic status of the phrases seen as specific units of the language is still poorly defined. The name and place of study of the idiomatic material in Romanian differ from one author to the other. Most frequently, though, the idiomatic expressions are included in the stylistic research domain.



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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the semantic and social importance of the idioms, their role in building up meaning and communication. The idioms are viewed both synthetically and analytically within a general but also specific historical framework. I have tried to demonstrate that idioms are part and parcel of our everyday life, can hardly be translated or paraphrased, work as a global unity and must be studied thoroughly to reach a satisfying level of understanding in the speakers of Romanian. The research of Romanian phraseology is still in its childhood period and it has not yet defined itself as a stable domain of linguistics. This paper urges the scientific community to give it the importance it deserves.



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