A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TERM PHRASEOLOGICAL UNIT

Tatiana Bushnaq, Assist. Prof., PhD, Al Asmarya Islamic University, Zliten, Libya

Abstract: Phraseological units represent the most colorful and expressive part of the language, yet, what constitutes a phraseological unit is a chief question for those interested in phraseology. It is assumed that within the umbrella term of phraseological tendency there are a number of terminological problems. The present article aims at crystalizing the term "phraseological unit" through a retrospective analysis as the specialized literature unveils that the terminology afferent to the domain under discussion – phraseology – is not thoroughly clarified.

Keywords: phraseological units, idiomatic expressions, word combinations, collocations, proverbs.

The study of English phraseology has grown considerably during the last two decades especially after the foundation of the European society of Phraseology (EUROPHRAS) which later became the Centre of Research in the filled of Phraseology by developing world wide meetings, periodical conferences and activities for training the trainer. Its main objective is the organization of conferences on phraseology at least every three years, the publication of an annual bulletin providing information on European research in the field of phraseology; exchange of information concerning conferences on phraseology, advancement of young scholars and support of research projects in the field of phraseology; encouragement of worldwide international cooperation among scholars working in the field of phraseology. Later we witnessed the appearance of some works with an undisputable value for the domain of the English phraseology: *Phraseology: an interdisciplinary perspective* and *Phraseology in foreign language learning and teaching* by Grangre S., Meunier F., 2008, 2009. , etc.

What constitutes a phraseological unit, is a chief question for those interested in phraseology (Cornell A., 1999; Chitra F., 1996; Grant L. & Bauer F., 2004; Liu D., 2003; Moon R., 1998; Tabossi P.& Zardon F., 1993, Wood M, 19856 etc.) [cited in 4]. Alatis J., (1991) advances the idea that in the evolution of the concept *phraseological unit*, initially, the linguists have acknowledged the existence of *stable word combinations* with a unique meaning and later on, lots of terms have been used to name them. The author affirms that the term was first used by Bally Ch. (1905), considered a pioneer in the field of phraseology. According to Wikipedia, Phraseology is a scholarly approach to language which was developed in the twentieth century. It took its start when Charles Bally's notion of *locutions phraseologiques* entered Russian lexicology and lexicography in the 1930s and 1940s and was subsequently developed in the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. From the late 1960s on it established

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

itself in (East) German linguistics but was also sporadically approached in English linguistics. The earliest English adaptations of phraseology were made by Weinreich (1969) within the approach of transformational grammar. In Great Britain as well as other Western European countries, phraseology has steadily been developed over the last twenty years. The activities of the European Society of Phraseology (EUROPHRAS) and the European Association for Lexicography (EURALEX) with their regular conventions and publications attest to the prolific European interest in phraseology [21].

The analysis of the specialized literature unveils that the terminology afferent to the domain under discussion – phraseology- is not thoroughly clarified. Thus, Wendy J. Anderson believes that within the umbrella term of the phraseological tendency there are a number of terminological problems. The multiplicity of terms has been seen as a proof of inconsistency. The author makes reference to Howarth, who says, "the main reason for this lack of consistency lies in the way in which most of those with interest in prefabricated language have focused on only a part of the whole spectrum of such expressions [11, p. 6]. Thus, while the notion of *phraseology* is very widespread, just as other linguistic concepts, various authors have defined it divergently, sometimes not providing a clear-cut definition, or conflating several terms that many scholars prefer to distinguish [8, p. 4]. A case in point is, according to Garnger S. and Meunier F. [8, p. 4], Stubbs (2001). According to the index, the term phraseology and the cross-referenced *extended lexical unit* are first mentioned on p. 59 and p. 31f respectively. However, no explicit definition of phraseology is provided on these pages nor on the page where phraseology is first mentioned [p. 240]. Another example is Hunston (2002:127f.), who first discusses "some examples" she categorizes as "collocations', "phrases and variation", tendency of certain verbs to occur in the passive rather than the active, or in the negative rather that the positive" (i.e., what usually referred to as collocation), and the occurrence of complementation patterns", but then merely states that "these and other consequences of sequence preference together might be called "*phraseology*" [8, p.4].

In the light of the above, it is necessary to make reference to Bally Ch. (1905) who uses two terms for defining phraseologisms: *phraseological series* and *phraseological units.* Philippide Al. (1897) and Iordan I. (1975) use for this notion the term "*isolation*". Coltun Gh. (2000) predominantly calls them *phraseologisms*, and in Avram M (1986), Dimitrescu F. (1958), Iordan I. Robu V. (1978) researches these word combinations are called *collocations*. In the works of Evseev I (1974) phraseologisms are called *idioms* or *idiomatic expressions.* Mitsis N. (2004) uses the term *idiomatic expression*, Anastasiadi-Symeonidis A., and Efthymiou A (2006) capitalize the notion of *fixed expression*, Symeonidis Ch. (2000) approaches the term *phraseologism*, while Makaki A., (1972), Hockett Ch., (1958), Lipka L. (2002), McCarthy M. (1998)., Weinreich U (1969) propose the term *idiom* or *idiomatic expression* [cited in 4]. It is worthy to notice in this context, Armin P. F, Kittel H., Greiner N, stance that, up to the present time, there does not exist a univocal excepted definition for the term *phraseological unit* or *idiomatic expression.* [3, p. 253], an affirmation which is still convincing. Although, according to Granger S. & Meunier F. (2008) in most of the cases, the English phraseological units are

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

called *phraseologisms* or *multi word expressions* [8, p. 342], which semantically are the equivalents of the lexemes as for example: *turning into ridicule = to fleer; to beat around the bush, to talk widely; to travel out of the record = to dawdle; having a long tongue , having a well-oiled tongue = babbly; to keep hands in pocket, to sit idle, to be helping uncle Antony to kill dead mice, to bum around = to idle, to drone* . etc. However, in the specialized literature, there is also another term to name *pharseological units*, and namely *periphrases*, a term used by Dimitriu C. (1979). The author considers that the term *periphrases* is the most appropriate as it is suggestive (= group of words) and for avoiding the complex terms as collocation, expression, etc. [7, p. 50].

Taking into consideration the approach of the term *collocation*, it is necessary to clarify that while some renowned linguists (Avram M., Dumitrescu F., Robu V., etc) consider the term *collocation* to be synonymous with the term *praseologism*, Coltun Gh. differentiates between these two terms defining: (a) *collocation* as a group of words (at least two words) from among which one is notional, and the others are not notional (for the adjectival and adverbial collocations); (b) phraseologism as a fixed group of words made of at least two notional words [5, p. 24]. On the other hand, Makkai A. includes the collocations in the framework of idiomatic expressions. In fact, the difference between collocations and phraseologisms is one of the biggest problems discussed in linguistics, states Dimitrescu F. [cited in 16].

The same problem surfaces in the case of *proverbs*. Coltun Gh. proposes the idea to exclude the proverbs form the category of phraseologisms as in most of the cases, the proverbs have a figurative meaning, but their meaning can be deducted from the sum of their constituent elements whilst the meaning of the phraseologism cannot be deduced from the meaning of its constituent components [5, p. 28]. According to Franziska Hill (2007) idioms differ in relation to proverbs mainly in semiotic-semantic parameters. Proverbs have a discursive autonomy and are quoted as 'texts', idioms instead are reproduced as lexical units [10]. This idea contradicts A. Makkai' affirmation that a great number of proverbs, which have a metaphorical meaning, form a subclass of idiomatic expressions. The usage of the terms related to word combinations presents the A. Cowie's scientific interest and is reflected in the table 1 [6, p. 5].

Table 1. Terms used for "sentence-like" and "word-like" combinations

Author	General category	Sentence –like (or pragmatic) unit	Word-like (or semantic) unit
Chernuisheva (1964)	Phraseological unit Set Combination	Phraseological expression	_
Zgusta (1971)	Phraseme, or	Set group	_
Mel'cuk (1988b)	Set phrase Phraseological unit	Pragmatic phraseme, or Pragmateme	Semantic Phraseme Nomination
Glaser (1988a)	Word-combination Word-combination	Proposition	Composite

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

Cowie (1988) Howarth (1996)		Functional expression Functional expression	Composite unit

The above table demonstrates the use of multiple concepts to define *phraseological units* and proves the existence of scientific contradictions in this domain. Howarth P. states that "the main cause of the lack of solidarity results from the way those interested in the phraseological language have concentrated only over one aspect of phraseology leaving in shadow a wide spectra of the phenomena generated by these expressions [11, p. 6]. This confusion might be also the consequence of the translation of the term from one language into another. Hristea Th (1984) allege that the term was taken over by Vinogradov V., and other soviet linguists from Bally Ch., thus translating it into "*frazeologigeceskaia edinita*" (phraseological unit) and later on he adhered to the term phraseologism. The new term has the same meaning, but has the advantage that is shorter. It was then borrowed from the Russian language by several European languages [12, p. 138].

The representative researches bring to light the fact that the term *phraseologism* haspivoted, generally, on the appearance of the fixed expressions, especially in the lexicological researches from Russia and East Europe.

Phraseology is pervasive in all languages field and yet despite this fact – or perhaps precisely because of it – it has only recently become established as a discipline in its own right although it is usually presented as a subfield of lexicology dealing with the study of word combinations rather that single words. [8, p. x]. As a subfield of lexicology, phraseology studies phraseological units. This term consists of two Greece words: *phrasis* which means *expression*, *parlance* and *logos* which mean *word* or *notion*. Phraseology, as a linguistic discipline does not have a clear position in the filed because of its complexity [21].

Next we will discuss the terms used to refer to the popular phrases *read between the lines* and *it'sraining cats and dogs* to submit evidence for the confusion of the terminology afferent to the field of phraseology.

Read between the lines	
Idiom	English-Albanian Dictionary of Idioms, p. 387
Collocation	Graeme Kennedy, An Introduction to Corpus Linguistics, p. 117.

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

Phraseological unit	Alexander Gelbukh , Félix Castro Espinoza , Sofía N. Galicia-Haro, 2014 , p. 192
Idiomatic expression	John Holleman, American English Idiomatic Expressions in 52 Weeks: An Easy Way to understand English Expressions and Improve Speaking, Chinese university of Hong Kong, p. 303
Phrase	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_read_between_the_lines
Set phrase	http://www.eudict.com/?lang=engchi&word=meaning%20beyond%20the%20words;%20unspoken%20implication,%20reading%20between%20the%20lines,%20what%20is%20actually%20intended
Locution	http://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/read_between_the_lines
Cliché	http://clichesite.com/content.asp?which=tip+2142 http://literarydevices.net/cliche/

It's raining cats and dogs	
Idiom	http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/raining+cats+and+dogs
Phraseological unit	Alexander Gelbukh et al., Human-Inspired Computing and its Applications: 13th Mexican Conference on Artificial Intelligence, Part 1, 2012.
Collocation	Stephan Gramley, Michael Pátzold , A Survey of Modern English, 2nd edition, Rutledge, London, 2004.
Fixed expression	Peter Jordens et. al. Investigating Second Language Acquisition, Walter de Gruyter & Co, Berlin, 1996.

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

Lexical item	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lexical_item

In view of the fact that it is sometimes very difficult to differentiate between these terms, it is necessary to take a stance at the following definitions:
Phraseology is the study of set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and other types of multi-word lexical units (often collectively referred to as *phrasemes*), in which the component parts of the expression take on a meaning more specific than or otherwise not predictable from the sum of their meanings when used independently [21].

Phraseologism – a phraseological units, a word combination with a constant meaning created inside a language [22]. It is defined as the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one semantic unit in a clause or sentence and whose frequency or co=occurrence is larger than expected on the basis of chance. [8, p. 6] According to Wray (2002) *phraseologisms* can be simple phrasal verbs (e.g to pick up) or variable units of meaning (e.g to eke out a living /an existence). A subgroup of phraseologisms is the *formulaic expression* (e.g to run amok). An expression is formulaic when it is "predictable in form, idiomatic, and seems to be stored in fixed, or semi-fixed chunks [cited in 9, p. 7].

Praseological units represent stable word combinations which consists of two or more words having a unique meaning [12, p. 139]. It is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning. [15, p. 8.]
Locution . The word locution is similar to catchphrase, being defined as "A particular word, phrase, or expression, especially one that is used by a particular person or group," and "style of speaking; phraseology." It is also seen as "a peculiarity of phrasing; especially a word or expression characteristic of a region, group, or cultural level. [21]
A *fixed expression* in English is a standard form of expression that has taken on a more specific meaning than the expression itself [21].
Catch phrases - a vogue expression, often media-inspired and usually short-lived [20].
Cliché refers to an expression that has been overused to the extent that it loses its original meaning or novelty (*lost track of time; every cloud has a silver lining; Read between the lines*) [19].
Lexical items (or lexical unit, lexical entry) is a single word, a part of a word, or a chain of words (= catena) that forms the basic elements of a language's lexicon (≈ vocabulary). (*cat, traffic light, take care of, by the way, and it's raining cats and dogs*) [21].
An idiom is typically a phrase, although single words with two or more meaningful parts (e.g *throughout)* can be idioms as well. A useful distinction can be made between encoding idioms and decoding idioms (Makkai 1972). An encoding idiom like *Could you answer the door*? is easy to understand when you hear it. On the other hand, it would be nearly impossible for a language leaner to guess that this is what people customarily say in order to mean "*Could you go*

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

and see who is ringing the doorbell? Doors do not after all ask questions. A decoding idiom is an expression whose different constituents do not enable a learner to guess the idiom's overall meaning. For example, knowing the meaning of *at and once* does not make it easy to guess that *at once* means "*immediately*" Decoding idioms are bound to be encoding idioms but not vice versa [13, p. 269].

It's worth to mention in this context Adam Makkai (1972), as most of his terminology on idiomaticity represent a significant contribution to the investigated field. Let us notice, for example, his distinguishing of *lexemic idioms* and *sememic idioms*, which are said to be placed in two separate idiomaticity areas (i.e. strata, layers). Very briefly, an idiom is made up of more than one minimal free form, and then we have two different characteristics: (1) each lexon (i.e. component) can occur in other environments as the realization of a monolexonic lexeme – hence so-called lexemic idioms, e.g., White House, Blackbird, and (2) the aggregate literal meaning as derived from the respective constituent lexemes works additionally as the realization of a sememic network which is unpredictable – hence so-called sememic idioms, e.g. *chew the fat*. Another terminological invention is the distinction between the act of encoding and the act of decoding. Actually, Makkai prefers to speak of phraseological peculiarities here rather than of idioms. Genuine idioms are based on the act of decoding, and in his truly precise taxonomy these are of various types, such as lexical clusters, e.g. red herring; tournures, e.g., fly off the handle, etc. We could very well add that all idioms of decoding are simultaneously idioms of encoding, but not necessarily vice versa [14, p. 25]. Thus hot potato, for instance, in the sense 'embarrassing issue' is idiomatic from the semantic point of view (in terms of so-called sememic idioms), and it is also idiomatic as a peculiar phrase since we do not say *burning potato / hot chestnut. On the other way around, it holds that not every act of encoding is idiomatic. According to Makkai, in every natural language there is a sort of middle style, that is to say neutral, devoid of either type of idiom (which, as is known, non-native English speakers are very fond of using).

Thus, it is important to mention that the terms *phraseologism* (or phrseme), *phraseological expression* or *phraseological unit*, *idiomatic expression* or *idiom* are general concepts that name the English expression, the meaning of which cannot be understood from its constituent parts. Therefore, the parameters necessary for defining and classifying English phraseological units are identified: the nature of its constituent elements; the number of their constituent elements; the degree of lexical and semantic flexibility; semantic value.

Accordingly, phraseological units are relatively stable combinations of two or more words, with a structural variability and a semantic transparency; with a meaning that can be lexicalized being part of the language culture. Phraseological units are characterized by:

1. The impossibility of word for word translation as their meaning doesn't result from its constituent parts;
2. The figurative character;
3. The fixed, stable character of the position of its constituent elements although variability is also possible.

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

The following table presents the intense preoccupations of representative researchers in the field of *Phraseology*, for terminological clarification of the concept *phraseological unit*. It reflects the variety of opinions regarding the concept under discussion, creating a generalized vision and a clear view of the term.

Terminological diversity in defining the concept of *phraseological unit* [4]

Concept	**Author, Year**
Phrazeologism	Hunston S. (2003), Howarth P. (1998), Symeonidis Ch. (2000), Colţun Gh. (2000), Stănciulescu-Cuza M. (1975), Grange S. & Meunier F. (2008).
Phraseological unit	Constantinescu-Dobridor Gh. (1980), Bally Ch. (1905), Cowie A. (2001), Hristea Th. (1984), Gläser G. (1984), Kunin A.(1972), Weinreich U. (1969), Naciscione A. (2010), Антрушина Г. В., Морозова Н. Н.(2001), Cernea M. (2001).
Word combination	Granger S. & Meunier F. (2008).
Periphrases	Dumitriu C. (1982), Poalelungi A. (1963).
Idiom	Makkai A. (1972), Hockett Ch. (1958) McCarthy M. (1998), Антрушина Г. В., Морозова Н. Н. (2001)
Idiomatic expression	Mitsis N. (2004), Moon R. (1998), Makkai A. (1972), Iordan et al. (1974), Evseev I. (1974).
Fixed expression	Amosova N. (1963), Anastasiadi-Symeonidi A. şi Efthymiou A. (2006); Carter R. (1998).
Locution	Avram M. (1997), Dumitrescu F. (1958), Iordan I. RobuV. (1954).
Lexical phrases	Lindstromberg S. (2000), Porto M. (1998).
Isolation	Philippide Al. (1897).

The multitude of opinions on the terms used to refer to *phraseological units* represents, in our view, a challenge for further research. In spite of these differences in perceiving the term *phraseological unit*, most researchers define phraseological units based on the semantic and syntactic criterion and most of them (Makkai A. (1972), French PA, Howard KW (2001), A. Cowie (2001), Colţun Gh. (2000), R. Carter (1998), Rojo A. (2009) S. Granger, Meunier F. (2008), Camenev Z., Pascari O., Bushnaq T. (2010) etc.) agree that a phraseological unit is an expression that cannot be translated literally [4], which means that its meaning does not depend on its component parts, and, in most of the cases, the phraseological unit is rigid and it is not subject to variability. In the light of the above, in order to avoid this ambiguity, the researchers in the field of Phraseology should concentrate on the whole spectrum of phraseological expressions

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

providing clean-cut definitions and unambiguous differences between all the terms that fall under the umbrella of Phraseology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Alatis J. E. Linguistics and Language Pedagogy: the State of the Art. Georgetown: University Press, 1991.

Anderson W. J. The Phraseology of Administrative French: a Corpus-Based Study. Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2006.

Armin P. F., Kittel H., Norbert G. Übersetzung: ein internationales Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung, Part 1, Volume 1, Walter de Gruyter, 2004.

Bushnaq T. Communicative Technologies of Teaching English Phraseological Units in Higher Education Institutions. Theoretical course. Monograph. Chisinau 2012.

Colţun Gh. Frazeologia limbii române. Chişinău: Arc, 2000.

Cowie A. P. Phraseology: Theory, Analysis, and Applications, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Dimitriu C. Gramatica limbii române explicată. Iaşi: Junimea, 1979.

Granger S., Meunier F. Phraseology: an Interdisciplinary Perspective. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008.

Halbe D. English in Business Meetings: A Corpus Study of Directives and Lexis, Dissertation, 2013.

Hill F. Storage, typology and semantics of idioms, seminar paper, Rostock University, 2007.https://books.google.com.ly/books?id=q6y8GaQfa1EC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Idioms+Franziska+Hill&hl=en&sa=X&ei=72hHVZ3mMYjnarDngZgK&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Idioms%20Franziska%20Hill&f=false

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)

Howarth P. The Phraseology of Learners' Academic Writing. In: Cowie A. P. (ed.) Phraseology: Theory, Analysis, and Applications. Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 161-186.

Hristea Th. Introducere în studiul frazeologiei. În: Sinteze de limbă română. Bucureşti: Albatros, 1984, p. 134-159.

Lindstromberg S. English Prepositions Explained: Revised edition, John Benjamin Publishing, Company, USA, 2010.

Makkai A. Idiom Structure in English. London: Mouton, 1972.

Naciscione A. Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

Popa Gh. Locuţiunile în sistemul unităţilor nominative ale limbi române, teză de doctor habilitat în filologie, Chişinău, 2006.

http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Phraseological+Unit

http://www.europhras.org/Site/english/index.html

http://literarydevices.net/cliche/

http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/catchphraseterm.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki

BDD-V1591 © 2015 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:55:27 UTC)