Phraseology: A critical reassessment

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Overview

- The problem
- The standard solution
- Problems with the standard solution
- Another way of conceptualizing phraseology
- Phraseology and idiomaticity
The problem

- ‘Phraseology’ is a very slippery term!
The problem

- Ebeling and Hasselgård (2015)
The problem

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  “That language to a large extent relies on ‘combinations of words that customarily occur’ (Kjellmer 1991: 112) is now a generally accepted view in linguistics. Such combinations are said to constitute the phraseology, or phrasicon, of a language. Phraseology also refers to ‘the study of the structure, meaning and use of word combinations’ (Cowie 1994: 3168). A central assumption is that linguistic knowledge encompasses ‘memorised sentences’, ‘lexicalized sentence stems’ and ‘phraseological expressions each of which is something less than a completely specified clause’ (Pawley and Syder 1983: 205). Like Pawley and Syder, many linguists have subsequently observed that ‘phraseology is one of the aspects that unmistakably distinguishes native speakers of a language from L2 learners’ (Granger and Bestgen 2014 …).

  Despite having been on the linguistic scene for quite a long time, phraseology has only in recent years become acknowledged as an academic discipline in its own right (see Cowie 2006; Granger and Paquot 2008). Granger and Paquot (2008: 27) link this late scientific recognition to the field’s unruly terminology and its vast and apparently unlimited scope.”
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= ‘structural property of language’
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= ‘sub-field of linguistics’
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  - “‘Phraseology’ is a very general term used to describe the tendency of words, and groups of words, to occur more frequently in some environments than in others.
  
  = ‘characteristic feature or property of language’
The problem

- Hunston (2011: 93):
  - “The phrase on the assumption that is particularly frequent: of the 63 instances of the assumption that in the corpus in question, 26 (41 per cent) are preceded by on. Most frequently (in all but six cases), the on is itself part of a verb + preposition combination such as is based on, rest on and relies on. We may conclude that ‘assumptions’ are most often construed as the foundation of other ideas. This is corroborated by other relatively frequent phraseologies, such as START/SET off with the assumption that (three instances), and arises starts from the assumption that (two instances). Although no other phraseology is anywhere near as frequent, other noticeable phraseologies include MAKE the assumption that (five instances) and a set of instances that indicate a negative evaluation of the assumption.”
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= ‘multi-word unit(s)’
The problem

  - “Phraseology has been interpreted in this book to mean:
    - the identification of sequences of words i.e. MWUs that play a role in the evaluative act
    - differentials in wordform frequency that can be used to establish likelihood of a kind of evaluation occurring
    - consistency in how particular kinds of textual item are evaluated within a specialised corpus.”
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The standard solution

- Distinguish two broad ‘approaches’ to phraseology:
  - “the phraseological approach” vs “the frequency-based approach” (Granger and Paquot 2008)
  - = “the taxonomic approach” vs “the probabilistic approach”
The taxonomic approach

- ‘Phraseology’ = subfield of linguistics (cf. biology, geology, theology, archaeology …)
- ‘Taxonomic’ because main interest is in developing and working with formal taxonomies of phraseological units.
The taxonomic approach

The taxonomic approach

The taxonomic approach


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<thead>
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Problems with the taxonomic approach

1. Categorization

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probably late on Friday. This blew a fuse which put a backup charger out of
at it for half an hour when I blew a fuse at which point I set down my heat
2000 </dt> HAROLD Wilson blew a fuse in 1969 when he discovered his
such that the player famously blew a fuse and was sent off in St Etienne. <p>
missus Anna's bedroom - and blew a fuse when he realised the electrical
now coach at Reading, almost blew a fuse as he celebrated <p> with the Royals
bogey at the Road Hole, then blew a fuse. <p> Monty was on for a sizzling 60
at the Road Hole - and then blew a fuse. <p> At one stage Monty was on for a
40 seconds when his Toyota blew a fuse. mcrae said: 'It was a shame there
heard yesterday. Singer Liam blew a fuse when Jim Hunter's lorry got stuck in
Strathclyde Uni's student bar blew a fuse when they saw the cans being given
off but John Gardiner just blew a fuse. The fact is that sleeping
I can't understand why Chic blew a fuse again. I thought he'd sorted himself
him in a race and I nearly blew a fuse. I told him there was no way anybody
as millionaire Keane, 27, blew a fuse and kicked her kung fu-style in the
as someone's personal stereo blew a fuse and started blasting out a bit of
1999 </dt> FED-UP Colin mcrae blew a fuse after he was forced out of the New
with the sound levels and he blew a fuse. He was obviously continuing from
at half-time. Boss Colin Lee blew a fuse after Iffy Onuora's 28th-minute
at the table, my computer blew a fuse. <p> I've been thinking about it
all stitched up and Tony Blair blew a fuse when he realised it was not," added
crossed, short-circuited and blew a fuse." <p> We sort out our hurt feelings,
<hd> DAY MR COOL BLEW A FUSE </hd> Confronted by filmmaker John
how hot she is. Caloundra fans blew a fuse. The next night she sashayed into
computer and printer today we blew a fuse. It was a couple of hours before the
during the morning, but it blew a fuse. Then I was stuck in traffic for an
by it all and that is why I blew a fuse." Cipollini's team tried to lighten
occurred. Labour circuitry blew a fuse and the system failed. For all who
excepted, of course) nearly blew a fuse trying to decide between the
Problems with the taxonomic approach

whether the machine would blow a fuse or go into a sulk, the way it is
do? I'm not saying I will not blow a fuse one day. But, frankly, I prefer
We dare not lose or Incey will blow a fuse; Interview; Gary</i> Neville;
never lose is his ability to blow a fuse at the referee. He had a series of
digital telly will make them blow a fuse. People who watch Sky or Ondigital
trick in the book to make me blow a fuse. Roy Keane and Nicky Butt are also
any moment Sir Charles would blow a fuse and scotch any possibility of
frustration. It is as if we "blow a fuse" after exerting ourselves, and
where we might otherwise "blow a fuse". It is occasionally seen in other
was so overloaded, he'd surely blow a fuse if he didn't lighten up soon. What
Warren. The Colonel's going to blow a fuse when he finds out, especially if
in to Jacques. He's going to blow a fuse when he finds out about Miller." Can
like most geniuses, he'll blow a fuse and do something stupid.the pressure
off and letting your toddler blow a fuse without giving in or getting angry,
trying to adopt Siouxsie. I blow a fuse when I'm informed that the time has
fam.) old peter les plombs to blow a fuse, explode with anger une raclee a
the embarrassment. Daring to blow a fuse may be a prerequisite for making
Even simple things made us "blow a fuse". <p> Frequent surges of stress
into that suppressor or else I blow a fuse and out goes the power in my office.
If she doesn't, she would blow a fuse. Escondido Principal Julie Ryan is
outright she's a 40. She'll blow a fuse. I shall take in this 38d; of
The Christmas lights will not blow a fuse. Sister will love sister, brother
most languid of individuals blow a fuse. A Sunday newspaper critic wrote
to cause trades unions to blow a fuse over public sector reform and
ESB awards next year -- and blow a fuse. Let me now turn briefly to the two
t say a word she's going to blow a fuse. So he says to <ZGY> me Ooh is it
Problems with the taxonomic approach

must have been in danger of blowing a fuse. Spurs boss George Graham was `away could have been excused for blowing a fuse after his team squandered the chance its big launch -- after blowing a fuse. Bemused listeners could only hear for attitude problems, and blowing a fuse. He sounds as tense and hung-up as steadily, with Mrs Thatcher blowing a fuse, bring on a high-profile chap who an apology for "almost blowing a fuse" on an enthusiastic He shoots! He the human equivalent of blowing a fuse. <p> Taking the first steps to The old Monty would have blown a fuse. But the new calmer, more controlled doesn't matter -- should have blown a fuse somewhere. It didn't. Somewhere or then he said, `I've nearly blown a fuse in my computer trying to think of a wondered if the computer had blown a fuse. `Do you speak or write any foreign to make - bank manager's blown a fuse. So we wish fair winds to all our he said. `But I seem to have blown a fuse." <p> His laboratories have a number interpretations. He's blown a fuse several times when his insistence runs out and someone really blows a fuse." Sickened supporters chanted `Sack him snip at £4m. <hl> Lawrie blows a fuse; Football; Match report </hl> <dt> and SNP meet after Blair `blows a fuse" 432) </subh> <bl> By PETER smack by a parent who simply blows a fuse will not harm a child, but he says. `the dodgy electricity supply blows a fuse. Say is astonished when LV, who has and Kev's quiet, but if he blows a fuse, watch out" - the prospects for
Problems with the taxonomic approach

- **BLOW a fuse**: most instances are ‘idioms’, not ‘restricted collocations’
- But which kind of ‘idiom’- ‘figurative’ or ‘pure’?
- Nesselhauf (2005): collapses into a single category of ‘idioms’:

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Problems with the taxonomic approach

1. Categorization
   - How ‘fixed’ are idiomatic expressions?
   - *KICK the bucket*
   - Iordanskaja & Mel’čuk (2009: 161):
     - “… in the notorious idiom *kick the bucket* the DirO *bucket cannot* be promoted to Subject – which is one of the defining properties of DirOs (*The bucket was kicked*, although the verb KICK has the passive).”
Problems with the typological approach

1. Reliance on human judgements; 'you can/cannot say x'.

https://forum.overclock3d.net/showthread.php?t=20123&page=5
Problems with the taxonomic approach

1. Categorization
   - Is there really any such thing as a ‘free combination’?
   - E.g. WANT + NP
Problems with the taxonomic approach

- Nesselhauf (2003: 225):
  - “… want can be combined with a great number of nouns (want toys, a child, a drink, a car, truth etc.) and there are no arbitrary constraints on its combinability …”
Problems with the taxonomic approach

- Frath and Gledhill (2005):
  - “It is true that the verb want takes many thousands of different types of complements. But Nesselhauf suggests there are no ‘arbitrary constraints’ on its complementation. Do we imply from this that want does not collocate with anything, or collocates with everything?”
Problems with the taxonomic approach

Frath and Gledhill (2005):

“… In fact, three main types of nominal complement for want are listed in the Cobuild dictionary … Starting with the most frequent usage, these include Noun Group complements expressing bald demands to a second person (I want you, I want an explanation from you Jeremy, What do you want?), resultatives expressing a goal (I want my boy alive, I want my car this colour, They began to want their father to be the same as other daddies) and very specifically a wish to have children (I want this baby very much). These are clearly very different but consistent collocational clusters. It would be unwise therefore to categorise the complements of such a frequently used verb as ‘free combinations’, and we are led to the conclusion that most other verbs, even high frequency ones, can display a similarly restricted set.”
Problems with the taxonomic approach

1. Categorization
   - How valid/helpful is the notion of ‘free combination’ for contrastive analysis?
   - E.g. *HAVE + NP*
Problems with the taxonomic approach

- Coffee
  - English: *have a coffee*
  - French: *prendre un café*; Italian: *prendere un caffè*; Spanish: *tomar un café*
  - German: *Kaffee trinken*
- Dreams
  - English: *have a dream*
  - Japanese: 夢を見る [*yume o mimasu*; see a dream]
Problems with the taxonomic approach

1. Categorization is inherently problematic
2. Acceptability judgements (‘you can/cannot say x’) 
   – are unreliable.
   – reflect a static view of language; cannot account for change (e.g. “I’m so not going to do that”)
3. Assumption that it is possible to distinguish between phraseological and non-phraseological word combinations.
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- non-phraseological combinations
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Problems with the taxonomic approach

- Assumption that it is possible to distinguish between phraseological and non-phraseological word combinations.
  - Not a problem if you are a generativist (grammatical rules generate language).
  - If you are a usage-based linguist (i.e. grammatical ‘rules’ are generalizations about what language users do), then maybe need to look elsewhere.
The probabilistic approach

- Defines phraseology as “the tendency of words to occur, not randomly, or even in accordance with grammatical rules only, but in preferred sequences” (Hunston 2002: 137)
The probabilistic approach

- “In grammar we look at the patterns of language as if they could be described by a large number of separate choices, each choice being from a small list of possibilities. In each case, the possibilities can be itemized in full, and we can talk of choosing one item rather than another. The choice between Active and Passive Voice in the verbal group in English offers a typical example of a grammatical system. Every verbal group is either one or the other, and there are only two possible choices” (Sinclair 1966: 410-11).
The probabilistic approach

“… But running parallel to grammar is lexis, which describes the tendencies of items to collocate with each other. A study of these tendencies ought to tell us facts about languages that cannot be got by grammatical analysis, since such tendencies cannot be expressed in terms of small sets of choices. One lexical item is not chosen \textit{rather than} another, lexical items do not contrast with each other in the same sense as grammatical classes contrast. There are virtually no impossible collocations, but some are much more likely than others” (Sinclair 1966: 410-11).
The probabilistic approach

“Unlike proponents of the classical [i.e. typological] approach to phraseology, Sinclair and his followers are much less preoccupied with distinguishing between different linguistic categories and subcategories of word combinations or more generally setting clear boundaries to phraseology. In Sinclair’s model of language, phraseology is central: phraseological items, whatever their nature, take precedence over single words” (Granger and Paquot 2008).
The probabilistic approach

- Much wider range of features included (Hunston 2002):
  - Collocations:
    - *strong tea, powerful car, strong/powerful argument*
  - Semi-fixed phrases/‘units of meaning’:
    - *where there’s smoke there’s fire*
    - *no smoke without fire*
    - *sometimes there is smoke without fire*
  - Grammatical preferences:
    - *Manchester is hemmed in by industrial areas*
  - Complementation patterns:
    - *allow vs. prevent*
- **Semantic non-compositionality not a criterion.**
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The probabilistic approach


“[The open-choice principle] is a way of seeing language text as the result of a very large number of complex choices. At each point where a unit is completed (a word, phrase, or clause), a large range of choice opens up and the only restraint is grammaticalness”.
The probabilistic approach

  - “The principle of idiom is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments.”
The probabilistic approach

  - “The model of a highly generalized formal syntax, with slots into which fall neat lists of words, is suitable only in rare uses and specialized texts. By far the majority of text is made of the occurrence of common words in common patterns, or in slight variants of those common patterns. Most everyday words do not have an independent meaning, or meanings, but are components of a rich repertoire of multi-word patterns that make up text.”
The probabilistic approach

  - “The idiom principle and the open choice principle together provide a theoretical account for two observations; that phraseology is extremely pervasive in English, and that phraseology alone cannot account for how sentences or utterances are made up.”
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A problem for the probabilistic approach

- Criticizes ‘traditional’ slot-and-filler model of grammar but does not entirely reject it.
  - “[I]n order to explain the way in which meaning arises from language text, we have to advance two different principles of interpretation. One is not enough. No single principle has been advanced which accounts for the evidence in a satisfactory way.”
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

- Hilpert (2014: 22): “Construction Grammar is a theory that takes a radically different perspective: knowledge of language is to be modelled as knowledge of constructions, and nothing else in addition.”
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

  - “the line between the mental lexicon, containing knowledge of words, and the mental grammar, containing knowledge of rules, becomes increasingly blurry; so much so that Construction Grammarians propose to abandon it altogether. Instead, knowledge of language is seen as a large inventory of constructions, a construct-i-con.”
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

- Construction Grammar is fully compatible with (indeed, is a version of) usage-based theories of language.

- Abolishes the distinction between the phraseological and the non-phraseological.

- So would seem an ideal choice for phraseological research

- BUT: if *everything* is phraseological, then doesn’t ‘phraseology’ as a meaningful concept cease to exist?
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

- As a lexicogrammatical concept, yes: Construction Grammarians do not use the term ‘phraseology’ – they have no need for it.
- So, is this the end for phraseology?
- No! It just needs to move to another level of description.
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

- Phraseology is “… the preferred way of saying things in a particular discourse” (Gledhill 2000: 1).

- Essentially the same as the ‘everyday’, non-technical meaning of the term.
  - **phraseology** |ˌfrezɪˈɒlədʒi| noun (plural **phraseologies**) a particular mode of expression, especially one characteristic of a particular speaker or subject area: *legal phraseology*
Another way of conceptualizing phraseology

- Both taxonomic and probabilistic views of phraseology are fundamentally linguistic;
- Gledhill/everyday definition is fundamentally sociological or sociolinguistic, (i.e. what discourse communities do), although the empirical focus is still on linguistic features.
- So can be combined with CxG approach (or any other probabilistic/usage-based method)
Example: analysis of academic disciplinary discourses

- Disciplinary discourses are both preferred ways of knowing and preferred ways of saying; form and meaning are (as always) inseparable.

- Gee (1989): “Being ‘trained’ as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist, and to recognise others when they do so.”

- In other words, we learn the phraseology of linguistics/biology/history/law ...
Example: analysis of academic disciplinary discourses

- *the way(s) in which + cl*
  - There was criticism of the way in which the crisis was handled by the state government. (BNC)
  - One of the main ways in which PtdOH is generated in the cell is by the activation of PLD, which hydrolyzes PC to produce PtdOH and choline. (Cell Biology)
  - Eagleton traces the ways in which Heathcliff figures both a form of protest against the bourgeois capitalist forces of Thrushcross Grange and also the purest embodiment of those forces. (English Literature)
the way(s) in which + cl:
distribution across disciplines

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<td>Nuclear Physics</td>
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<td>Cell Biology</td>
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<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
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Terminology, Phraseology, Idiomaticity

- Terminology: technical lexis associated with a particular discourse community (e.g. *stanza, polypeptides, opportunity cost*);
- Phraseology: preferred ways of meaning and making meaning in a particular discourse community (e.g. *the way(s) in which*);
- Idiomaticity: ‘naturalness’ (nativelike usage) in a general language variety
Conclusion

- ‘My’ conceptualization of phraseology works for me, but it might not work for you.
- All approaches to ‘phraseology’ have their merits and demerits.
- The important thing is to be clear about how you are using the term, and to work with a definition that is consistent with what you fundamentally believe about language.
Thank you!
References


