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Modifications of phraseological units in the light of contemporary French research: An outline of the problem

Abstract

Modifications of phraseological units are the effect of deliberate violation by the sender of the established formal and semantic structure of the unit. The transformation operations used in phraseological units have a significant cognitive value, because they show the possibility of transforming units with varying degrees of fixation in the text. Even in the case of a literal understanding of the idiom or its structural decomposition idiomatic meaning remains in the background and it is identified by the recipient thanks to the social stability of the language unit.

Keywords

Phraseology, variability of phraseological units, modification of the language units

1. Introduction

The description of the manipulations to which phraseological units are subjected in various types of discourse (such as literary and journalistic discourse) or in typical communication situations is closely related to the problems of variability and stability of fixed language structures both on the level of form and content. In a broader perspective, it can be a starting point for more general reflections on language, its functioning and the role of linguistic stereotypes (M. Gross, 1982;

G. Gross, 1988, 1996; G. Gréciano, 1983; P. Fiala and B. Habert, 1989; R. Galisson, 1994; R. Martin, 1997; F. Rastier, 1997; M. Martins-Baltar, 1997; Ch. Schapira, 1999; S. Mejri, 1997, 2013; X. Blanco, 2012; S. Jaki, 2015; S. Ralić, 2016).

It is worth mentioning that French stylisticians also draw attention to the possibility of modifying proverbs, sayings, aphorisms, and phraseological units. According to them, the purpose of various operations on phraseological units is to refresh the internal form of established structures, which leads to enhancing the power of expression (M. Cressot, 1947: 88—92). These include, for example, separating elements of a phraseological unit treated as a whole; highlighting one of the components of the unit (*Le cœur gros de soupirs qu'il n'a point écoutés...*), or synonymous exchanges of the nominal or verbal element (*gagner une bataille / un combat*).

It should be pointed out that modifications are a result of introducing changes into the stabilised structure of multi-word phrases. They may be of an innovative, individual character or result from regular transformations of phraseological units. The multiformity of this type of structures, however, causes great difficulty in establishing the canonical form of the phraseological unit, hence the subject matter is also of interest to lexicographers (M. Rat, 1957; A. Rey, 1997; Ch. Bernet, 1992).

Another significant aspect of research on modifications of phraseological units is the use of the methodology of corpus linguistics for their analysis (the so-called inductive approach).¹ The hypothesis that is universally accepted nowadays, claiming that the stability of the formal and semantic structure of this type of units is of a relative nature, allowed to redefine the status of the term of a phraseological unit in French phraseology, and also contributed to significantly broadening the field of observation of phraseology. This discipline, traditionally concerned with the description of codified expressions and phrases whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of their constituent elements, today includes within its scope constructions which are consolidated to varying degrees, such as: idioms, collocations, open-form compounds, as well as reproduced (“ready-made”) word-blocks, discursive sequences, conversational formulas, paroemias, and even fixed syntactic patterns.²

¹ See: O. Kraif (2016); O. Kraif, I. Novakova, J. Sorba (2016).

² Cf. D. Legallois, A. Tutin (2013).

2. Intentional and unintentional modifications

Among the modifications used, we can distinguish intentional ones, that is, those that are introduced for a specific purpose within a given type of discourse. They appear in a special context, violating the language norm. In addition, they constitute a singular, original act of linguistic creativity. Unintentional modifications, on the other hand, are usually the result of an error, insufficient linguistic competency, that is, unfamiliarity with the construction and global meaning of a given phraseological unit.

The terms used in French linguistics to name various operations on phraseological units and proverbs show particular approaches from different perspectives. And so, the term *modification* is associated with the concept of change,³ while *manipulation* is the name of an activity that requires dexterity and skill.⁴

In turn, in the works by A. Grésillon, D. Maingueneau (1984), and Ch. Schapira (1999), the term *détournement* appears, whose etymological meaning refers to the activities of reversing, changing direction. The first two scholars treat *détournement* as a discursive phenomenon, consisting in the creation of a language structure which has the properties of a proverb, but does not belong to the set of codified, fixed paroemias. The effect of this operation is the generation of new structures. In this approach, the described phenomenon is a creative act. It performs a ludic function or is a manifestation of an attitude of engagement. In other words, it has a polemic function — it is an expression of a critical attitude, it serves to ridicule something (parody); it signals a distance to reality. It can take the form of pastiche, giving an effect of absurdity, as in the created language structure (*Il faut battre sa mère pendant qu'elle est jeune*).

In Schapira's work (1999), the term *détournement* refers to a broader concept. The researcher focuses her attention on the sense-making function of *détournement*, as she uses this term to describe the operation used to build new meanings in the text. According to Schapira, this operation is always accompanied by dephraseologisation. The linguist distinguishes between two basic types of manipulation of phraseological units: modifications of lexical content (*détournement lexical*) and contextual refreshing of the literal meaning of a given unit (*détournement sémantique*).

Palimpseste is a term introduced by R. Galisson (1994), referring to an ancient or medieval manuscript written on parchment from which the original text was erased. It stands for the multi-level nature of sense-reading. This term also evokes the cultural context, which, according to Galisson, needs to be known

³ <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/modification>, accessed: 3.04.2019.

⁴ <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/manipulation>; <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/manipuler>, accessed: 3.04.2019.

so that innovative uses of phraseological units can be interpreted. In this Galisson's approach, a palimpsest is a complex semantic structure (the so-called *sur-énoncé*) which is created when the lexicalised meaning coexists with the structural meaning, resulting from the deconstruction of the base unit (the so-called *sous-énoncé de base*).

In turn, the terms dephraseologisation (*défigement*, F. Rastier, 1997) and delexicalisation (*délexicalisation*, R. Galisson, 1994) stand for the process opposite to the process of consolidation of language forms. Only petrified phraseological units are subject to dephraseologisation. From this perspective, the discussed phenomenon is treated as a determinant of the consolidation of a multi-component unit (A. Lecler, 2006).⁵

Other terms used to describe modifications of phraseological units are *déformation* (M. Rat, 1957); *renouvellement* (M. Cressot, 1947); *innovation phraseologique* (C. Gledhill, 2005).

3. Dephraseologisation (*défigement*) as a result of manipulation

Problems related to the phenomenon of dephraseologisation revolve around two basic issues. First of all, it is about determining the degree to which the stability of the fixed structure has been affected as a result of the applied modifications. Secondly, researchers try to answer the question concerning the limits of acceptable transformations.

The phenomenon of dephraseologisation is viewed as a process or the effect of this process (in the latter case, we deal with a specific modified unit: *le défigement est une séquence figée*, Ch. Schapira, 1999). The term *refigement* was also introduced to describe the phraseologisation of the modified unit, such as *commerce inéquitable*, created as a result of the formal (word-formative) innovation of *commerce équitable*.⁶ According to R. Galisson (1994) as well as P. Charadeau and D. Maingueneau (2002), dephraseologisation consists in transforming a set phrase into a loosely connected phrase.

In turn, A. Rey (1997) draws attention to the fact that both processes, phraseologisation and dephraseologisation, are correlated and that the description of these phenomena should take into account the differing degree of consolidation of phraseological units.

⁵ This term is used by, for example, P. Fiala, B. Habert (1989), G. Gross (1996), A. Rey (1997), F. Rastier (1997), S. Mejri (1997, 2009), A. Lecler (2005), T. Ben Amor (2008).

⁶ An example taken from an article by Ch. Cusimano (2011: 159–160) used in reference to African countries to define sustainable trade, characterised by transparency, dialogue and mutual respect for partners.

Phraseologisation (*figement*) is understood in a wider perspective as the consolidation of various linguistic forms in a specific shape, while in a narrow sense this phenomenon can be equated with lexicalisation (complex linguistic signs losing their formal and semantic motivation). R. Martin (1997) believes that prototypical phraseological units are characterised by restrictions of collocation that prevent the exchange of components of the unit (*taureau* in *prendre le taureau par les cornes* is not exchanged for *boeuf*, *vache*, *bouc*, or *chèvre*). Sometimes, however, with a lesser degree of consolidation, some exchanges are possible (*se mettre q.ch. dans la tête / dans le crâne / dans l'esprit / en mémoire...*). These limitations are systemic or normative in nature; they result from certain customary preferences in the selection of such and not other words; the choice is arbitrary within a particular range of possibilities.

The second property characterising prototypical phraseological units is the fact that their meaning is not the sum of the meanings of their particular components. Understanding the meaning of the words which make up a given phraseological unit is not enough to understand the global meaning of the unit, for example, *tire le diable par la queue* (to live in poverty, not to be able to make ends meet). This irregularity usually results from the metaphorical nature of these units or is associated with the process of the demotivation of their global significance. In addition, phraseological units are characterised by the fact that they are referred to as a single whole. As a consequence, among others, some transformations are blocked, a nominal element cannot be modified with a relative clause, or the article becomes phraseologised.

Martin also draws attention to the relative character of these properties. In the case of less prototypical units, they allow for synonymous exchanges of elements and often have a transparent motivation (*jeter l'argent par la fenêtre*). Their structure can also be modified; for example, they can undergo some transformations.

Since phraseological units are characterised by different degrees of consolidation, there are those which only comply with some of the above-mentioned parameters. Others are located on the borderline between syntax and phraseology (traditional collocations are considered as such). From the perspective of what has been said, overstepping these limitations leads to dephraseologisation of phraseological units; in other words, *defigement* is a consequence of not respecting these restrictions and leads to making idiomatic relationships literal.

According to S. Mejri (2009), dephraseologisation is any violation of the stabilised form of a unit — whether structural or semantic. The analysis of this phenomenon is related to the problems of linguistic correctness (linguistic norm, language error). However, this researcher focuses his attention mainly on the description of the semantic and structural language mechanisms that underlie various operations which phraseological units are subject to. He treats dephraseologisation as a textual phenomenon, in contrast to variance that results from the

properties of the language system. He presents a typology of modifications that result from formal and semantic innovations. Modifications of the first type assume the form of phonological and word formation variants; they may concern the replacement of components which are similar in form, or result from violation of the rules of collocation of components. They can also be based on the adaptation of a phraseological unit to the verbal environment (for example, they are the implementation of the valence schema of the main component of the expression or result from the requirements of text composition). Modifications of the second type result from the fact that a given phraseological unit functions in a multidimensional semantic space, for example, the potential ambiguity of the components is updated or the analytical meaning of fixed phrases is activated, while the real meaning coexists with it, enriching the semantic structure of phraseological units. Semantic modifications are also based on the remotivation of the literal meaning of one of the unit's components.

The phenomenon of dephraseologisation is connected with a kind of a language game with a ludic, persuasive, expressive, and aesthetic function. In this approach, decoding the game requires some intellectual effort on the part of the recipient, as well as specific linguistic and cultural competence (Ch. Schapira, 1999; Th. Ben Amor, 2008; S. Mejri, 2009; A. Rabatel, 2016).

As it has already been mentioned, in R. Galisson (1994), the decoding of the palimpsest depends on the linguistic and cultural competence of the recipient (the so-called *mémoire collective*, *connaissances partagées*, or the knowledge shared by the members of a given community, a commonly accepted system of values). According to Galisson, the delexicalisation of a palimpsest consists in the decomposition and/or reinterpretation of its meaning. He distinguishes between two stages of decoding a palimpsest:

- apparent desemantisation,
- “over-semantisation” (*sursémantisation*), when the structural meaning is activated and the two meanings “penetrate” each other.

It seems that apart from the two stages of decoding a palimpsest, a third one should be added, that is, interaction of the palimpsest with the context. An important element worth emphasising is also the fact that the new modified meaning often generates the process of derivation.

4. Dephraseologisation in the press discourse

In their article entitled “La langue de bois en éclat: les défigements dans les titres de presse quotidienne française,” P. Fiala and B. Habert (1989) treat dephraseologisation as a stylistic (rhetorical) device which has a ludic function.

It is usually found in journalistic texts and advertising, and is one of the manifestations of a play on words. The authors observe, however, that it can also characterise colloquial language (*le parler ordinaire*), not performing a ludic or polemic function. Dephraseologisation is associated with some properties of the language, most of all with lexical ambiguity (*ambiguïté*). According to scholars, dephraseologisation leads to the remotivation of phraseological units or consists in modifying their structure.

According to French researchers, such measures are a manifestation of a critical attitude towards language and an attempt to overcome the stereotypical way of speaking.

The premise of dephraseologisation lies in the assumption that an important property of natural languages is the tendency of various linguistic forms to become consolidated in a specific form.

5. Mechanisms of dephraseologisation in the press discourse

Operations performed on phraseological units have a significant cognitive value, because they reveal the possibility of transforming phraseological units of various degrees of consolidation within texts. They also allow to look at phraseological resources as a dynamic set of units, adapting to the communication needs of a given language community. It should be borne in mind that phraseological units constitute a special type of language units; they are composed of a number of elements, expressive, have a hidden potential concerning their content that is updated in the appropriate context and communication situation. Because of these properties, the discussed units often appear in French press texts, where they are subject to various transformations. One of such operations characteristic of the French language is the dislocation of the nominal component of the expression, which is accompanied by the pronominalisation of this element:

Autre bureau, autre ambiance à l'Est de la circonscription: Jean lui est un militant de la première heure. Il soutient [...] Louis Bayeurt e, "un type bien dit-il, qui mériterait de siéger à l'assemblée parce qu'il est resté proche des gens". Une vieille dame ne semble pas tout à fait du même avis. « **Des couleuvres avec les cocos, on en a assez avalées** ».⁷ (France Soir, № 15429, 2 juin 1997, p. 5)

⁷ Another polling station, a different atmosphere in the eastern electoral district: John is a long-time activist. He supports the candidate L o u i s B a y e u r t e, "a good guy who," he says, "deserves to sit in the National Assembly because he has always been close to people." An elderly lady does not seem to be of the same opinion: *Insults, slurs, and wrongs, we have suffered enough of them*; literally: "Of grass snakes with coconuts (communists), we have swallowed enough" [Trans. A.K.].

On the formal plane of the text, the phraseological unit was deconstructed as a result of dislocation — the nominal component was separated from the structure of the phraseological unit and placed on the left (the so-called *dislocation gauche*). This element put forward at the beginning of the sentence, enriched here with the descriptor in the form of the word group “avec les cocos,” is an anaphoric predecessor of the pronoun form “en.”⁸ From the point of view of the semantics of the text, the applied operation of dislocation, that is, the transfer of the nominal phrase of the phraseological unit to the initial position, results in a change of the thematic-rhematic structure of the sentence. The dislocated nominal component in the function of the theme of the sentence refers to what was mentioned earlier. The speaker disagrees with the opinion of her interlocutor and does not support the candidacy of a communist activist to the parliament. As a counter-argument, she uses a transformed expression, thus manifesting her disapproval: *Insults, slurs, and wrongs, we have suffered enough of them*. The carrier of negative evaluation is also the added element *les cocos*, which in colloquial French is a pejorative term for a supporter of communism. The mechanism of the described phenomenon also has an emphatic value — it enhances the expressiveness of the phrase. The idiom *avalier des couleuvres* (in its canonical form) describes a situation in which someone experiences negative feelings, being unable to complain. Linguistic competence and knowledge of the socio-cultural context determine the correct reinterpretation of the modified phraseological unit.

Conclusion

The considerations presented here have shown that the stability of the formal and semantic structure of phraseological units is relative. It is also worth emphasising that operations performed on phraseological units have a significant cognitive value, because they reveal the possibility of transforming phraseological units of various degrees of consolidation within texts. The description of different transformations that these structures undergo in various types of texts or communication situations is the starting point for more general reflections on language, its functioning and the role of linguistic stereotypes.

Dephraseologisation is a complex textual phenomenon whose interpretation is possible in a multidimensional semantic space. The analytical meaning of set phrases is activated in context, while the real meaning coexists with it, enriching the semantic structure of phraseological units. The potential ambiguity of the

⁸ Le Goffic (1993: 325) argues that the anaphoric pronoun “en” is felt here as the “direct” representative of a plural GN; hence the tendency to agreement.

components of a given unit is often updated. Even in the case of making a set phrase literal or of its structural decomposition, the idiomatic meaning remains in the background, identified by the recipient due to the fact that this phrase has become entrenched within a given community.

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