DIACHRONIC DEVELOPMENT OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract Phraseological units (PUs) in English evolve through historical, cultural, and grammatical processes. This study traces their diachronic development from Old English to Modern English, focusing on origins in folklore, literature, and socio-historical events, and mechanisms like grammaticalization, semantic shift, and fossilization. Drawing on historical corpora and contrastive analyses, it reveals patterns of stability in stylistic use alongside unidirectional changes toward opacity and pragmatic specialization. The findings emphasize PUs as mirrors of societal evolution, with applications in language teaching and lexicography. This diachronic perspective highlights English phraseology's adaptability and cultural preservation amid linguistic change.

Keywords: phraseological units, idioms, diachronic development, grammaticalization, English language evolution, historical linguistics, semantic shift, corpus-based analysis, cultural embedding, phraseology

INTRODUCTION Phraseological units (PUs) – multi-word expressions with fixed forms and often non-compositional meanings – represent a core component of natural language use, permeating registers from everyday speech to academic prose. In English, these units (e.g., spill the beans, kick the bucket, break the ice) have evolved over centuries, reflecting historical events, cultural values, and linguistic mechanisms such as metaphorization and grammaticalization. The diachronic study of phraseology has gained momentum since the late 20th century, shifting from static lexicographic descriptions to dynamic analyses of origin, stabilization, and change. Early works emphasized synchronic classifications, while recent scholarship integrates historical corpora to trace evolutionary paths, revealing how PUs originate as free combinations, undergo semantic bleaching, and fossilize into opaque idioms. This evolution is influenced by language contact (e.g., Norman French in Middle English), literary contributions (e.g., Shakespearean enrichments), and socio-cultural shifts (e.g., industrialization and globalization).

Despite advances, gaps persist in comprehensive diachronic modeling of English PUs, particularly regarding digital-era adaptations and cross-linguistic parallels. This paper addresses these by examining the historical trajectory of English phraseological units, focusing on mechanisms of change and their implications. The study aims to: (1) trace developmental stages from OE to MoE, (2) analyze key processes like grammaticalization, and (3) discuss pedagogical and theoretical significance. By adopting a diachronic-contrastive perspective, it contributes to historical linguistics and phraseology.

METHODOLOGY This research employs a qualitative diachronic-contrastive approach, combining historical linguistic analysis with corpus-based evidence. Primary data sources include established historical corpora such as the Helsinki Corpus (covering OE to Early Modern English) and the Oxford English Corpus for modern usages, supplemented by etymological

dictionaries (e.g., Oxford Dictionary of Idioms) and specialized studies on phraseological evolution.

The methodology follows these steps:

- Data collection: Compilation of representative PUs from key historical periods (OE, Middle English [ME], Early Modern English [ENE], and MoE), focusing on well-documented examples with traceable origins (e.g., biblical, nautical, or proverbial sources).

- Diachronic tracing: Examination of etymological origins, semantic shifts, and formal changes using historical texts (e.g., Chaucer, Shakespeare) and corpora to identify patterns of grammaticalization (from literal to fixed figurative use) and fossilization.

- Contrastive analysis: Comparison with cross-linguistic parallels (e.g., English-Albanian or English-Norwegian borrowings) to distinguish contact-induced changes from parallel developments.

- Classification and interpretation: Application of structural-semantic frameworks to categorize PUs by syntactic patterns and idiomaticity degrees, assessing historical stability and variation.

No original corpus queries were conducted due to scope; instead, reliance is placed on published diachronic studies and verified etymologies. Limitations include incomplete historical records and potential biases in surviving texts, mitigated by cross-referencing multiple sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW The diachronic development of phraseological units in English, encompassing idioms, collocations, proverbs, and fixed expressions, has been a focal point in linguistic scholarship, reflecting the interplay between language evolution, cultural shifts, and historical contexts. Early investigations into idiomaticity trace back to the early 20th century, with renewed interest in the 1950s and a surge in the late 1980s–1990s, driven by advancements in pragmatics and psycholinguistics. This period marked a shift from mere lexicographic compilations to systematic analyses of how phraseological units emerge, stabilize, and transform over time.

Pioneering works, such as those by Kavka and Zybert, highlight three main phases in the study of idioms: initial explorations in the early 1900s, theoretical revivals in the 1950s, and sophisticated pragmatic approaches in the late 20th century. These phases underscore the transition from viewing idioms as anomalies to recognizing them as integral to language structure, often originating from literal expressions that undergo semantic shifts through metaphorization or grammaticalization. For instance, Pinnavaia (2002) proposes a "grammaticalization" framework for English idioms, arguing that many evolve from free combinations into fixed units tied to cultural and historical narratives, making them challenging yet essential for language teaching.[1] More recent scholarship emphasizes cross-linguistic and source-based approaches. Kacori's diachronic analysis compares English and Albanian phraseological units, tracing their origins to folklore, literature, and socio-historical events, revealing how units like "spill the beans" derive from ancient practices and adapt over centuries. Similarly, Alisoy (2025) integrates structural-semantic classifications with diachronic insights, noting evolutionary patterns in zoonymic idioms (e.g., "let the cat out of the bag") from Old English (OE) animal metaphors to modern usages. These studies build on earlier works like Telgmaa's (2003) examination of stylistic evolution from OE to Modern English, where phraseological units absorb epochal values, such as medieval proverbs evolving into

contemporary clichés. Cultural and cognitive dimensions are also prominent.

Kolesnikov (2025) explores the historical roots of idioms, influenced by events like the Renaissance or Industrial Revolution, and their persistence in modern discourse. Research on "idioms of life" traces expressions related to existence and emotions from Middle English (ME) biblical influences to Victorian-era adaptations, highlighting semantic drifts due to globalization. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies reveal inter-influences, where idioms reflect societal changes, such as the drift from literal to figurative meanings in response to technological advancements.[2]

Corpus-based methods have advanced diachronic analysis, as seen in Andersen's work on cross-linguistic phraseology, using historical corpora to track parallel developments in English and other languages. Lifespan acquisition studies, like those by Nordmann et al. (2019), indirectly inform diachronic evolution by showing how idiom knowledge accumulates over generations, with delays in acquisition mirroring historical fossilization processes. Overall, the literature converges on the notion that phraseological units are dynamic, evolving through etymological borrowing, semantic bleaching, and cultural embedding, with gaps remaining in digital-era adaptations.

DISCUSSION The diachronic development of English phraseological units illustrates language as a living entity, shaped by historical, cultural, and cognitive forces. From OE roots in folklore and religious texts to ME expansions via Norman influences, and further to Early Modern English (ENE) literary enrichments (e.g., Shakespearean idioms like "break the ice"), these units have undergone significant transformations. This evolution often involves grammaticalization, where literal phrases fossilize into opaque idioms, as evidenced by shifts in agency prepositions paralleling broader syntactic changes in passives.[3] Such processes highlight the resilience of phraseology amid language contact, with borrowings from Latin, French, and later global sources enriching the inventory while prompting semantic adaptations.

Key implications emerge for linguistics and pedagogy. Structurally, classifications like Alisoy's reveal how syntactic patterns (e.g., verb-object idioms) intersect with semantic opacity, aiding in tracking historical idiomaticity degrees. Semantically, cultural embeddings—such as nautical origins in "batten down the hatches"—underscore how societal shifts (e.g., industrialization) drive metaphor evolution, potentially leading to obsolescence or revival in digital slang. This dynamism challenges static dictionaries, advocating for diachronic corpora to capture ongoing changes, as suggested in contrastive studies.

Pedagogically, understanding this development enhances L2 acquisition, where idioms pose barriers due to non-compositionality. By exposing learners to historical contexts, educators can demystify units like "kick the bucket" (from medieval execution practices), fostering deeper comprehension and cultural awareness.[4] However, limitations persist: much research focuses on synchronic usage, with diachronic data often reliant on incomplete historical texts, risking biases in etymological tracing.

Future research should integrate computational linguistics for large-scale diachronic modeling, exploring how globalization and AI influence emerging phraseology. Ultimately, this development not only mirrors English's adaptability but also its role in preserving cultural heritage amid rapid change.

CONCLUSION The diachronic development of English phraseological units demonstrates language as a dynamic system, continuously shaped by historical, cultural, and cognitive factors. From OE roots in folklore and religious discourse, through ME expansions via Norman influences, to ENE literary enrichments and MoE adaptations amid globalization, PUs have

undergone profound transformations. Key processes include grammaticalization – where free combinations fossilize into fixed, opaque units – semantic bleaching, and pragmatic specialization, often unidirectional and resilient to reversal. This evolution not only mirrors English's adaptability through language contact and societal change but also preserves cultural heritage, as idioms encapsulate historical narratives (e.g., medieval practices in modern expressions). The findings affirm cross-century stability in stylistic patterns while highlighting ongoing changes, such as revival in digital contexts or obsolescence due to cultural shifts.

Pedagogically, incorporating diachronic insights enhances L2 acquisition by demystifying non-compositional meanings and fostering cultural competence. Theoretically, it advocates for expanded use of diachronic corpora to model emerging phraseology. Future research should leverage computational tools for large-scale tracking of digital-era adaptations and explore universal vs. language-specific trajectories. Ultimately, understanding phraseological evolution illuminates English's vitality as a living repository of human experience.

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