

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS**A.J. Ibaev**

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Abstract

This conference paper examines the differential features of phraseological units. The analysis is organized into three blocks: (1) theoretical criteria - semantic unity, fixedness, reproducibility, institutionalization, and structural integrity; (2) psycholinguistic evidence - the speed and accuracy of idiom processing and the role of context; and (3) pedagogical practice - etymological explanation, gamification, CALL, glossing, and video-based idiom instruction.

Keywords

phraseological unit, differential feature, semantic unity, fixedness, reproducibility, institutionalization, idiom, phraseodidactics

Distinguishing phraseological units from other multi-word units is one of the most important methodological issues in linguistics, because the way this boundary is drawn directly affects lexicography, corpus annotation, translation, and teaching methodology. Over the past twenty years, one of the most frequently repeated questions in the literature has been whether a phraseological unit can be identified by a single defining criterion or whether a combination of several features is required.

A comparison of German and English linguistic traditions shows that this question has not received a uniform answer. In Burger's classification (2015), fixedness and semantic integrity occupy a central place, whereas Wray (2012) argues that, within the broader phenomenon of formulaicity, frequency, storage, and communicative function do not always converge in the same way. For this reason, modern approaches increasingly understand a differential feature not as a single 'absolute test,' but as a cluster of criteria that helps distinguish a phraseological unit from other multi-word constructions.

This point becomes especially clear in a comparison of British and Central European research traditions. Hsu (2020) describes non-compositionality as the most widely accepted criterion, yet also shows that, without fixedness and institutionalization, the category of idioms becomes excessively broad. Thus, the current scholarly consensus favors a multi-feature model rather than a one-feature model.

Semantic unity, or non-compositionality, is the criterion most frequently used to distinguish a phraseological unit from a free word combination. This feature means that the overall meaning of the unit does not arise, or arises only partially, from the simple sum of the meanings of its components.

A comparison of German and Iranian corpus-based studies confirms the central role of the semantic criterion, although the methods of evaluation differ. Burger (2015) uses it as a classificatory criterion, whereas Rafatbakhsh and colleagues (2019) identify it as one of the three major themes in definitions of idioms. This difference leads to an important theoretical conclusion: semantic unity may be necessary, but it is difficult to use it as the only quantitative marker because partially motivated idioms are very common.

Boers, Eyckmans, and Stengers (2007) demonstrate that this partial motivation can be



pedagogically productive. In several higher education experiments, knowledge of the origin of idioms helped students understand and retain figurative meanings more successfully. In the ERIC annotation, these effects are described as positive at the levels of comprehension and recall. This finding weakens the view that semantic unity necessarily requires purely blind memorization.

A comparison of studies from Belgium and Saudi Arabia reveals an important difference. Whereas Boers and colleagues (2007) show that etymological motivation can facilitate meaning, Rahmtallah (2024) reports that, although 85 university students demonstrated sufficient knowledge of idioms, some still experienced persistent difficulty. This suggests that semantic opacity should be treated not as a simple know/do-not-know dichotomy, but as a graded phenomenon.

Soto-Sierra and Ferreira (2024), working with 53 Chilean learners of English as an L2, asked participants to assess 99 English idioms in terms of familiarity and transparency. Their results showed that cross-language similarity and transparency predicted idiom knowledge. For the present discussion, the significance of this finding is that semantic unity is indeed a differential feature, but in practice it manifests itself on a gradient: some units are completely opaque to learners, whereas others are only partially opaque.

Fixedness, or frozenness, is the second major feature of a phraseological unit. It is reflected in the limited substitutability of components, the relative restrictions on word order, and the tendency of the form to be preserved within a recognizable pattern. Hsu (2020) identifies this feature as one of the three key criteria for idiomaticity, alongside non-compositionality and institutionalization.

A comparison of Iranian and German sources shows that interpretations of fixedness differ slightly. Rafatbakhsh and colleagues (2019) describe fixedness as a matter of degree, whereas Burger (2015), within the classical phraseological tradition, consistently treats formal constraint as a classificatory criterion. In this respect, modern theory has moved away from a rigid oppositional model and toward a scalar one.

Experimental evidence also shows that formal fixedness is not absolute. Haeuser, Baum, and Titone (2021), using eye-tracking data from canonical and non-canonical idiom forms, show that the idiom processing advantage does not remain equally strong in all cases. Modification and age reduce this advantage. This suggests that fixedness should be understood not as complete immutability, but as a boundary of allowable variation.

A comparison of Canadian and British findings illustrates this clearly. On the one hand, many formulaic units are processed more rapidly (Conklin & Schmitt, 2012); on the other hand, when they are presented in non-canonical form, that advantage decreases or is delayed (Haeuser et al., 2021). Fixedness, therefore, is not only a structural criterion, but also a cognitively sensitive one.

This scalar character of fixedness creates practical difficulties in the automatic identification of phraseological units and in lexicographic inclusion. If a unit is sufficiently fixed, it is recognized as phraseological; when variation increases, however, it enters a borderline zone shared with collocations, constructions, and stylistic modification. Across the period 2006-2025, no universal criterion was found that defines this boundary in strict percentage terms; no generally accepted numerical threshold is available.

Reproducibility refers to the reuse of a phraseological unit in discourse as a ready-made form. Institutionalization, in turn, refers to the recognition of the unit by the speech community, its entrenchment in lexical memory, and its functioning not as an individual creative product but as an element of collective linguistic experience.

A comparison of corpus linguistics and psycholinguistics shows why this feature is especially important. Rafatbakhsh and colleagues (2019) identify institutionalization as a recurrent criterion in idiom definitions, while Conklin and Schmitt (2012) relate the faster



processing of formulaic language precisely to prior familiarity and repeated exposure. Reproducibility is therefore not merely a descriptive property, but a feature tied to real processing mechanisms.

In Carrol and Conklin's (2014) experiment, 19 native speakers of English and, ultimately, 17 Chinese-speaking L2 participants remained in the final analysis; 2% erroneous responses and outliers above 3000 ms were excluded. Mean reaction times were 576 ms for native speakers and 701 ms for non-native speakers. The most important result, however, was that even in an L2 environment, signs of rapid processing associated with L1 idioms were still observed. This indicates that reproducibility is closely connected with cross-linguistic transfer.

A comparison of British and Spanish experimental evidence shows that reproducibility is not uniform. Carrol and Conklin (2014) showed that familiar L1 idioms provide a speed advantage in L2 processing, whereas Valero Fernandez and colleagues (2025), in an eye-tracking study involving 77 participants, found that the idiom superiority effect was clear in the L1 group but uneven in heritage and L2 groups. Heritage speakers, in particular, processed opaque idioms more slowly.

An important implication is that reproducibility does not exist independently of grammatical or semantic analysis. If a unit is institutionalized, it is often stored in memory as a whole block; if it is not institutionalized, it may still be figurative, yet not fully qualify as a phraseological unit. For this reason, Wray (2012) emphasizes that the features of formulaicity do not always cluster together, even though storage and retrieval as a ready-made unit remain central.

One of the strongest arguments for treating phraseological units as distinct linguistic entities comes from psycholinguistic experiments. If a unit is stored in memory as a ready-made block, it should generally be processed faster or with lower cognitive cost than a free word combination.

A comparison of British and German eye-tracking results shows precisely this difference. Siyanova-Chanturia, Conklin, and Schmitt (2011) investigated idioms with native and non-native readers, while Valero Fernandez and colleagues (2025) compared L1, L2, and heritage speakers. In the 2025 study, which involved 77 participants, a clear processing advantage for idioms was found in the L1 group.

In Carrol and Conklin's (2014) study, the familiarity score for English idioms among native English speakers was 6.4/7, while the familiarity score for Chinese idioms among Chinese native speakers was 6.5/7; in the opposite groups, the score fell to 2.8/7. These figures reveal another aspect of the differential feature: the more familiar and institutionalized a unit is, the more rapidly it is processed.

A comparison of British and Canadian research nevertheless calls for caution. Conklin and Schmitt (2012) show that formulaic units are often processed more rapidly, but Haeuser and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that age and non-canonical presentation reduce this advantage. Psycholinguistic evidence therefore supports the existence of differential features, but does not justify treating them as absolute.

At this point, an important contradiction between sources becomes visible. One group of studies interprets idiom advantage as a relatively stable phenomenon (Conklin & Schmitt, 2012; Carrol & Conklin, 2014), whereas another group shows that this advantage is sensitive to context, transparency, age, modification, and language experience (Haeuser et al., 2021; Valero Fernandez et al., 2025). This contradiction directly affects the issue of differential features: the cognitive marker of phraseologicality exists, but it too is scalar and conditioned.



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