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Faramazov Azer Suratulla oghly
ORCID: 0000-0002-7601-9985
Lankaran State University

ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS INVOLVING TEMPORAL MEASUREMENTS

Phraseology constitutes a vital area of linguistic inquiry concerned with the study of fixed and semi-fixed multi-word expressions that exhibit varying degrees of structural stability, semantic cohesion, and idiomaticity. These phraseological units play a significant role in the lexical and grammatical organization of language. Their ubiquity in both spoken and written discourse, as well as their idiomatic and often culturally embedded meanings, render them essential to linguistic competence and fluency. Among the diverse categories of phraseological units, a distinct and conceptually rich subgroup comprises those that incorporate lexical items denoting temporal measurement – such as units of time including hour, day, week, month, and year. These expressions often function as idioms in which the temporal lexemes are metaphorically reinterpreted to convey meanings that extend beyond literal chronology.

The study of phraseology extends beyond purely lexical considerations, encompassing cognitive, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic dimensions. Contemporary research in this domain, informed by corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and computational modelling, has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how these expressions function in language use and language learning. In particular, the increasing interest in phraseological patterns within second language acquisition, natural language processing, and genre analysis underscores the relevance of phraseology as a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study.

Scholars across various linguistic traditions have proposed different definitions of phraseological units, reflecting diverse theoretical orientations and methodological approaches. One of the widely cited definitions comes from A. Cowie, who defines phraseological units as “a group of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, and which functions as a single unit at some level of sentence structure” [8, p. 14]. This definition emphasizes both the formal and semantic cohesion of such expressions and acknowledges their idiomatic potential, distinguishing them from freely formed word combinations. Another influential definition is offered by R. Gläser, who views phraseological units as “idiomatic and semi-idiomatic multi-word lexical items that are reproducible in speech, carry a specific stylistic value, and often occur in specific registers or genres” [5, p. 128]. R. Gläser’s interpretation highlights the stylistic and functional dimensions of phraseology, pointing to its relevance not only for lexicon formation but also for discourse analysis. This view supports the idea that phraseological units are culturally marked and contextually dependent, playing a significant role in genre-specific communication.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, A. Langlotz defines idiomatic expressions as “conventionalized multi-word expressions whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of their parts and which are entrenched in the minds of language users” [6, p. 39]. This definition introduces the notion of entrenchment, linking phraseological competence to mental representations and cognitive processing. It also places emphasis on non-compositionality as a defining feature of many phraseological units, particularly idioms.

Recent European scholarship defines phraseology more broadly. In the field of second language acquisition, S. Vetchinnikova introduces the idea of ‘meaningshift units’ – phraseological patterns whose meaning shifts as they are used in L2, shaped by exposure, individual processing and usage, thus blending usage-based and cognitive perspectives [9, p. 41]. In computational linguistics, L. Espinosa-Anke et al. propose a graph-aware transformer architecture to extract and categorize lexical collocations across English, Spanish and French, recognizing varying degrees of idiomatic ‘frozenness’ in collocations, and showing that multilingual transformer models perform better by incorporating syntactic dependency information [7, p. 92].

Similarly, Tahirov I.M. describes phraseological units as stable combinations with complex semantics that do not conform to general structural-semantic models of free word groups [3, p. 28]. Yu. Holovatska emphasizes their holistic meaning, stability, recurrence in discourse, and indivisible semantics, which distinguish them from ordinary phrases [1, p. 60]. Together, these definitions highlight the core features of phraseological units in Azerbaijan linguistics: semantic cohesion, structural stability, fixed reproduction, and idiomatic meaning.

One significant group of phraseological units in the English language is formed by expressions that incorporate units of time such as hours, days, weeks, months, and years. These time-related idioms do not simply denote temporal intervals; they carry figurative meanings that reflect cultural attitudes toward time, human activity, urgency, and consequence. Their structure often combines a temporal noun with other lexical elements to create a fixed or semi-fixed expression with a meaning that extends beyond the literal sum of its parts. Analyzing these phraseological units requires attention not only to their semantic content but also to their syntactic composition, collocational patterns, and pragmatic function.

The first subgroup includes idioms that express the notion of long duration or an extended period of time through exaggeration. The phrase a month of Sundays exemplifies this category. Structurally, it consists of a quantifier a month combined with the plural noun Sundays, a specific day of the week culturally associated with rest or leisure in many Western societies. This collocation produces an ironic effect: although a month normally comprises about four weeks, pairing it with Sundays – which occur only once a week – creates a semantic tension that exaggerates the length of time, implying an extremely long or seemingly endless period. Similarly, week of Sundays follows the same compositional pattern but with a shorter nominal quantifier, reinforcing the idiomatic meaning of prolonged duration but to a lesser degree. These expressions resist literal interpretation; they cannot be paraphrased by simply summing the individual units of time, as their meaning is culturally constructed and conventionalized.

Moving from notions of long duration to daily activity, another subgroup comprises idioms that metaphorically relate time to human effort, routine, and emotional experience. The idiom call it a day syntactically combines a verb phrase with the temporal noun day, functioning as an object. Its meaning – “to stop working or conclude an activity” [4] – derives from conceptualizing a “day” as a unit of labor or endeavor. The fixed nature of the phrase means it cannot be altered freely without losing idiomatic meaning (e.g., call it a night might be understood literally but lacks the idiomatic weight).

Another example, make someone’s day, is structurally a causative verb phrase with a possessive noun phrase acting as the object. It conveys the figurative meaning of causing someone to experience great pleasure or satisfaction, metaphorically attributing affective significance to the span of a day. Idioms like day late and a dollar short introduce a more complex structural and semantic pattern. This phrase is a compound idiom that juxtaposes temporal delay (day late) with economic insufficiency (dollar short), functioning as a metaphor for missed opportunities or inadequate preparation. Each component contributes an evaluative dimension: day late emphasizes temporal tardiness, while dollar short emphasizes quantitative insufficiency. Together, they form a single unit that conveys a sense of failure or disadvantage in timing and resources. Besides, day in, day out is a repetitive adverbial phrase composed of the temporal noun day combined with the prepositions in and out, linked by coordination. This structure emphasizes habituality and continuity, describing actions or states that occur every single day without interruption. The phrase’s fixed order and rhythm contribute to its idiomaticity.

Lastly, day of reckoning represents a phraseological unit that combines the temporal noun day with a noun of abstract meaning, reckoning, denoting judgment or settling of accounts. This compound noun phrase carries a strong connotation of inevitability and moral or practical consequence. It often appears in discourses about justice, accountability, or future consequences. The phrase’s idiomatic meaning depends on the conventional pairing of the two nouns, and replacing either component typically results in loss of idiomaticity.

A third subgroup of phraseological units centers on expressions that evoke urgency, crisis, or momentous judgment, often associated with a critical point in time. The eleventh hour is a noun phrase where eleventh functions as an ordinal numeral modifying the temporal noun hour. This idiom signifies the last possible moment to act before a deadline or irreversible event, drawing on metaphorical conceptualization of time as a ticking clock. Its fixed form is essential; altering the numeral or temporal noun usually destroys the idiomatic meaning.

Finally, the phrase witching hour also forms a noun phrase, where witching (a present participle functioning as an adjective) modifies hour. Traditionally, this term refers to midnight or a specific time associated with supernatural occurrences, symbolizing mystery, danger, or heightened intensity. Its figurative meaning is deeply embedded in cultural beliefs and literary usage.

In summary, phraseological units containing time measurements reveal rich interactions between lexical semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. Their meanings often transcend literal temporal references, functioning metaphorically to communicate human experiences of duration, effort, satisfaction, failure, urgency, and accountability. Structurally, these idioms display varying degrees of fixedness, with specific syntactic patterns such as noun phrases, verb phrases, and coordinated adverbials that are conventionally bound. Understanding these units requires analyzing both their form and function within language use, highlighting how language creatively harnesses temporal concepts to articulate complex social and cognitive realities.

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