Lexical Variants of Verbal Phraseological Units in English and Albanian

Abstract

When defining idioms some researchers show that “their structure is frozen, allowing no productive transformation”. In this article we aim to show that despite this characteristic feature of phraseological units there do exist lexical variants in their structure, mainly synonymous variants. Synonymous variants of components that constitute a verbal phraseological unit such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs or other functional words are shown via a close corpus analysis in English and Albanian language.

Key words: phraseological unit, verb, variant, lexical, synonym, synonymous, noun, adjective, adverb.

Introduction

One important defining feature of phraseological units, or idioms, is their invariance or restricted variance. Yet, some studies have shown that many idioms do show some variations. Variations in phraseological units are numerous but the most noticeable type is lexical variation. Later in this paper we are going to focus solely on verbal phraseological units and lexical variations that exist in their structure. The parts of speech substituted are verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and even functional words. Sometimes even combined variants are possible. Besides substitution of components there are also some creative variations that individuals resort to for achieving stylistic effects in communication.

Substituted parts of speech in verbal phraseological units

We can obtain more than one lexical variants of verbal phraseological units in English and Albanian by just substituting one part of speech with another of its kind. Following are the groups that clearly show the kinds of substitutions and their shades in meaning.

I. Verbs reciprocally substituted

a) The first group is occupied by the verbs which are substituted with their synonymous counterparts. In the following examples, ‘tread’ and ‘walk’ are synonyms:

- tread on air/walk on air
We know that there exist differences in meaning even among the synonyms. For example, in “close one’s eyes to something/shut one’s eyes to something” the verb ‘close’ differs from ‘shut’ because the later denotes a higher degree of closing. Likewise there are differences in:

- cry/snob/weep one’s heart out
- poke/stick one’s nose to into somebody’s affairs

The number of the synonymous variants can amount even to six words all substituting one another:

- to bother, harass, nag, plague, worry the life out of somebody

In Albanian the number of synonymous variants is up to three.

- tund derën - luaj derën
- mos e ndyj gojën - mos e prish gojën

All these verbs which are interchangeable are quite close in meaning to one another.

**b)** Reciprocal substitution with verbs that are not synonymous. It should be stressed here that the effect or the image produced is equitable among all the verbal phraseological units:

- hang in the balance - tremble in the balance
- cut a figure - make a figure

The synonymous combinations are greater in number than these which are not synonymous as in: cool one’s heels - kick one’s heels. Both variants are used in the imperative:

- Cool your heels and wait for me!
- Go and kick your heels for an hour!

There are cases when one finds five different variants which substitute one another. The different variants are used for various stylistic purposes:

- find (get, have, know, take) the length of somebody’s foot
The same holds good for the Albanian language:

- vari buzët - rrudhi buzët
- e hodhi në dorë - e shtiu në dorë

c) Reciprocal substitution with synonymous and non-synonymous verbs:

- not to lift (raise, turn, stir) a finger
- ngacmoi/lëndoi/preku/hapi plagën

The first two may be synonyms, yet even the last two do the job to perfection.

II. Nouns which are reciprocally substituted

a) The first group is occupied by the synonymous nouns:

- to draw a red herring across the trail = to draw a red herring across the track

This verbal phraseological unit has endangered from the hunting practice in which hounds are trained not to lose the scent or the track of the prey.

Generally speaking this group includes few examples for the very fact that there are few nouns which are synonymous. The Albanian language is very rich in this aspect. Many examples may illustrate this fact.

- i ktheu shpinën - i ktheu kurrizin
- i dha udhë - i dha dum - i dha rrugë

b) In some verbal phraseological units substitution is accompanied by nouns which are not synonymous:

- go the way of all earth - go the way of all flesh
- cap the climax - cap the globe
Regardless of the fact that these nouns are not synonymous, the meaning they convey, the image they produce in the listener’s or reader’s mind is the same. Just see them in the following contexts:

“At tea-time he came down to the drawing room and found them talking, as he expressed it nineteen to the dozen, a thing which would soon cap the climax.”

“They talk of suicide here but that caps the globe.”

Nouns reciprocally substituted in English are smaller in number than verbs. We can provide some examples in Albanian:

- \( u\, bë\, gartdh = u\, bë\, prak \)
- \( u\, bë\, tapë = u\, bë\, karroqe \)

Though not synonymous, some nouns have got the points of resemblance to each other.

- \( kryqëzoi\, duart = kryqëzoi\, krahët \)
- \( i\, hedh\, hi = i\, hedh\, pluhur \)

c) The components reciprocally substituted may be synonymous or not synonymous nouns

- \( go\, to\, blazes = go\, to\, hell = go\, to\, the\, devil \)

“Harry, tell him to go to blazes: the office is closed.”

“I swear to you; you and I can be happy. We can tell other people to go to the devil.”

In this example only “hell” and “blazes” are synonymous while “devil” is of course closely related to them semantically. As for Albanian we may mention this example:

- \( i\, ka\, hyrë\, krimbi = i\, ka\, hyrë\, levreku \)
III. Reciprocal substitution of the adjectives

In comparison to verbs and nouns the number of adjectives substituting one another in a verbal phraseological unit is smaller; we say:

- **come to a fine (handsome, nice, pretty) pass.**

“Things **have come to a fine pass** when one sister invited the other to her house on purpose to quarrel with her and abuse her.”

“Things **have come to a handsome pass** when men sworn and elected to perform given services turn on their backers and betray them in the way.”

We find such examples in Albanian, as in:

- **u bë i shtruar = u bë i urtë**

But we notice a peculiar feature of some of the Albanian verbal phraseological units. The second component which is an adjective in one unit may have as its counterpart either a noun or a noun plus the comparative conjunction ‘si’.

- **u bë trim = u bë burrë**
- **u bë i fryer = u bë kaçek = u bë si kaçek**

IV. Adverbs reciprocally substituted

This group is quite small both in English and the Albanian language. The adverbs which substitute are synonymous with those substituted:

- **sail close to the wind = sail near to the wind**

“He realized that he **was sailing rather close to the wind** financially.”

‘**He is sailing near the wind** with those large contracts he is making.”

In Albanian we say:

- **e solli rrotull = e solli vër dallë**
- **e mori prapa = e mori pas**

Even **the formal and semiformal words** can be substituted. The article sometimes plays an important role in the meaning of the phraseological unit but in the following example in English there seems to be no difference between the two expressions:
draw a line = draw the line

There is a difference, a semantic one in the examples in Albanian. It is the presence or the absence of the definite article ‘the’ which decides the meaning of the whole verbal phraseological unit.

‘më jep dorë’ and ‘më jep dorën’

The article plays a determining role on the second expression thus changing completely its meaning from the first one. Më jep dorën has the meaning of ‘më ndihmon’ while më jep dorë means ‘është në favorin tim’. An analogous example in English is:

- **Cover ground** (cover the distance in a running race):

  “We have **covered a great ground** today.

- **Cover the ground** (make investigations):

  “The expedition **covered the ground** mostly south of the village”.

It is the only article “the” which makes the meanings of the two units be quite different from each other. There are cases when there may occur many substitutions of different parts of speech at one and the same time.

- **bear** (have, lead, live) a charmed life (existence)
- **betray** (display, show) the cloven foot (hoof)

There are cases when formal words and even pronouns are replaced by their equivalents.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion we can say that, idioms, so well known for their invariance as an inherent feature existing in many of them undergo substitution of elements with synonymous and non-synonymous counterparts. Besides substitution of components there are also some creative variations that individuals resort to for achieving stylistic effects in communication. Such variations usually involve the manipulation of the lexis as well as the semantics of idioms such as alteration or replacement of a word or words in the idiom. Examples of variations like ‘burn the candle at five ends’ or ‘burn the candle at two ends’ instead of the most recognised form ‘burn the candle at both ends’ are numerous. Such creative variations are often used to produce humour or to achieve discourse cohesiveness.
Bibliography


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