

Phraseological units: Their instantial use and interpretation

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Non seulement nous regardons les choses par d'autres côtés: mais avec d'autres yeux.
Pascal, *Pensées*, No 114

What the book says

On the one hand, it is well known and commonly assumed in linguistics and the philosophy of language that speakers don't use words in isolation, but that they use words inside the frame (or "in the web" in Anita Naciscione's own words) of discourse, and that words vary their meanings according to the different collocations they have in discourse at that very moment¹ when they are used. On the other hand, when lexicalized, these collocations of words in discourse become phraseological units, which have a particular meaning in a given natural language. So phraseological units have a figurative meaning, which differs from the literal meaning that words usually (and considered in isolation) have. For that reason the study, knowledge, and command of the actual use of phraseological units is an exciting field of study for linguists, particularly for those whose main job is to teach a foreign language. In this context Anita Naciscione's book provides fresh and exciting insights about the meaning of phraseological units—meanings that are sometimes difficult to grasp not only for foreigners, but also for native speakers.

As her book has both theoretical and practical interests, Anita Naciscione divides it into two main parts, as suggested in the title of her book: *Phraseological Units in Discourse: Towards applied stylistics*. The First (theoretical) Part, "Phraseological Units in Discourse," examines and explains the technical terms and the main problems of phraseology. This first part covers five chapters. Chapter 1, "Phraseology and Discourse Stylistics" (pp. 3-17), consists of a general presentation of the topic studied, its problems, and interests. Chapter 2, "Identification of Phraseological Units in Discourse" (pp. 19-47), deals with the central terminology and concepts in phraseology, such as "base form," "core use," "instancial stylistic use," and "identification procedure" of phraseological units. Chapter 3, "Key Concepts of Instancial Stylistic Use in Discourse" (pp. 47-67), deals with the topics of phraseological cohesion, patterns of instancial use, and the

discourse characteristics of instantaneous use. Chapter 4, "The Most Common Patterns of Instantaneous Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse" (pp. 69-109), deals with the topics of extended metaphors, phraseological puns, cleft use, and phraseological allusions. And Chapter 5, "Phraseological Units in the Web of Discourse" (pp. 111-168), deals with topics such as the instancial aspects of phraseological reiterations, the potential of the diminutive in phraseology, concurrent instancial use, instancial phraseological saturation in discourse, and understanding of comprehensive instancial use. The Second Part, "Towards Applied Stylistics," consists of a single chapter. In Chapter 6, "Applied Stylistics and Instancial Stylistics Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse" (pp. 173-230), the author deals with some practical problems concerning phraseological units such as teaching and learning, translation, lexicography, sociocultural aspects of phraseology, and its use in advertising and marketing.

But the book also contains six smaller (but neither less interesting nor less fruitful) parts, namely, a List of Abbreviations (p. 231), a Glossary (pp. 232-239), an Appendix (pp. 241-259), a Bibliography (pp. 260-278), and an Index (pp. 279-283). We would stress the relevance of two of these parts: the Glossary and the Appendix. The Glossary is particularly useful because it clearly defines the central terms in the study of phraseological units. The Appendix too is very useful, as it provides eleven authentic examples from advertising, jokes, and literary texts.

Anita Naciscione's book can be read linearly as an up-to-date study and account of the theory and practice of phraseological units in the English language, but it can also be read tangentially. From this second point of view the book can be regarded as being built around several dichotomies, which are sometimes opposed, sometimes complementary, and which are also sometimes intermingled because of the nature of the topic itself:

1. *Core use vs. instancial (stylistic) use*. Core use is the most common form and meaning of a given phraseological unit according to its base form, which is (relatively) stable in a given natural language. By contrast, instancial stylistic use is a particular instance of a unique stylistic application characterized by a significant change in its form and meaning.
2. *Synchrony vs. diachrony*. Phraseological units usually have a synchronic meaning, but they can also be studied diachronically, tracing the different meanings of these

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units in the past. To know about these different meanings and the process of change that has brought about the present meaning of the phraseological unit is crucial when we want to understand older texts, particularly when phraseological units are only alluded to or only partially quoted.

3. *Theory vs. practice.* Since phraseological units are usually alluded to or used according to their instantial use and not according to their core form, theoretical studies can fail if they are not built on case studies of actual and practical uses, mainly in literary texts.
4. *Literary use vs. common use.* As has been pointed out already, research into the uses of phraseological units in literary texts is essential. Only then can they be contrasted with their utilization in common language.
5. *English vs. other languages.* Phraseological units change diachronically and instantaneously within a single language, but they also change when they are transferred between languages.² Knowing about these changes and about the different forms that phraseological units can take is especially important when trying to translate between languages (see pp. 199-211).
6. *Literal meaning(s) vs. figurative meaning(s).* Phraseological units are typical cases of sentences having both a literal and a figurative meaning, where the figurative meaning is its salient and first order meaning. Nevertheless, since the original literal meaning motivates the common figurative meaning(s) and speakers might be aware of this original literal meaning, instantial uses and changes can achieve certain cognitive effects, word plays, and allusions. This phenomenon is commonly exploited in advertising, marketing, and jokes (Nerlich & Chamizo Domínguez, 1999; Nerlich & Clarke, 2001),* as Anita Naciscione stresses in several places and by means of various examples, where the cognitive and communicative effect is achieved because hearers “read” both the literal and the figurative meaning.

What the book suggests

Anita Naciscione’s book is interesting and useful not only because of what it explicitly says, teaches, and shows, but also because it is also suggestive of new ideas. We will therefore follow some of the leads suggested by this book.

We previously alluded to the fact that Anita Naciscione always documents the actual use of phraseological units in an English literary texts, quoting examples from Chaucer (and sometimes before) to Tolkien (p. 86), showing how writers exploit phraseological units which they find in use in ordinary language. So when Shakespeare alludes to “a cat having nine lives,”³ it is clear that the proverb was already in use at the time of Shakespeare, but it can be found in other writers who wrote before Shakespeare. All these writers instantially exploit phraseological units they find in common

language. But a writer can also create a phraseological unit, sometimes despite him/herself, which then enters common language use.

But the literary tradition of a language and culture goes beyond “literature” strictly speaking. We mean that a literary tradition also includes philosophical texts, scientific texts, etc., and current phraseological units can also originate in these types of text. Take the following two examples of phraseological units which, when used, have certain philosophical implicatures. The first one, [1] “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée” (Descartes, 1973: 1),⁴ derives from previous philosophical tradition. By contrast, the second one, [2] “Homo homini lupus” (Hobbes), derives from literary tradition but has conventional philosophical implicatures when it is instantially used.

[1] is the well-known opening phrase of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, and has become a well-known phraseological unit widely quoted or alluded to, at least among philosophers.⁵ In fact, Descartes’ sentence is commonly regarded as the manifesto of rationalism and the “Magna Carta” for the freedom of thought.⁶ Now, Descartes’ sentence is itself an allusion to an instantial use of another sentence from Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais*: [3] “On dit communément que le plus juste partage que nature nous aye fait de ses graces, c’est celui du sens” (Montaigne, 1962: 641).⁷ Descartes alludes to Montaigne to stress that, although both share the same starting point for their philosophising, he (Descartes) strongly disagrees with the rest of Montaigne’s philosophy, as one can see when reading the subsequent pages of the *Discourse on Method*.⁸

[2] is a clear case of a philosophical sentence, which has its origin in a literary work, and which has been instantially changed in order to put forward a general thesis about the nature of the human race. It is commonly assumed and believed that Thomas Hobbes minted [2] in order to summarize his thoughts about human nature, and this is (partially) true. Certainly, that sentence was created by Hobbes in the sense and meaning with which it is usually quoted,⁹ but it is also true that [2] is an instantial use of a sentence that can be found in Plautus (1976: 112): [4] “Lupus est homo homini, non homo, quom qualis sit non novit.” Now, what Plautus said about a restricted, particular case was generalized by Hobbes in order to refer to the whole of the human race. Subsequently Plautus’s use of this phrase was forgotten and Hobbes’ use of the phrase and its meaning became established as a proverb and as a résumé of a philosophical theory about the human race.

In the previous paragraph we alluded to phraseological units which have been instantially and consciously changed. However, it is also interesting to reflect on cases in which phraseological units have been unconsciously (or erroneously) changed, but which have entered common use in spite of this error (or perhaps thanks to this erroneous quotation). To give one example: the well-known Spanish phraseological unit [5] “Estar en el candelero” (to be at the top, to be popular; literally “To be on top of the candlestick”) is usually and jocularly quoted as [6] “Estar en el candelabro” (literally “to be on top of the candelabrum”) since a famous Spanish ac-

* Bibliographical references are given in parentheses; the numbers that appear in square brackets refer to specific examples of text.

tress and model erroneously quoted it according to the second form. As a result of this frequent jocular quote, perhaps [6] could become the standard form for this phraseological unit in the future, as might also be the case for the following two examples. The first has its origin in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act II, Sc. I, l. 249), where Shakespeare writes [7] "I know a banke where the wilde thyme blowes." Now, [7] is commonly misquoted as [8] "I know a bank where the wild time grows," because of some errors originated in the reading of "time" instead of "thyme" and "grows" instead of "blows." So when Ogden & Richards (1972: 294) alluded to this phraseological unit (consciously, we assume) they used the "reformed" phraseological unit and not the original one: [9] "The Bank wherein the wild Time grew and grew and grew."¹⁰

A similar case is the well-known Spanish phraseological unit [10] "Con la Iglesia hemos topado" (we are really up against it; literally "we have butted/bumped against/into the Church"), which is based on a misquotation from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (II, XLIII) [11] "Con la iglesia hemos dado, Sancho," and which has become a common Spanish phraseological unit for alluding to any powerful or fearsome person or entity, such as the government, a bank, the army, and so on. In the folk version of this saying the original verb used by Cervantes, *dar* (to give/meet/find) has been replaced by *topar* (to butt/bump against /run/bump into) in order to achieve a conventional implicature which is impossible in the original version (see Chamizo Domínguez, 1998: 97-101). For that reason we think that Anita Naciscione is absolutely right when she writes: "it is vital to present a dynamic view of phraseology, bringing out the role PUs play in the web of discourse. It is crucial to establish their form and meaning in discourse and the instantial changes they undergo with an eye to the discursal role of PUs and the messages conveyed" (pp. 179-180). To summarize, errors and misquotations are also very productive in the creation of phraseological units.

Finally, we shall elaborate a topic which is only briefly mentioned by Anita Naciscione (pp. 219-224) and which merits further developments: the relationship between phraseological units, culture, and the ways other people are typically seen and conceptualized according to the phraseological units used in a given language. It is generally true that when speakers refer to people belonging to a different culture, nationality, religion, etc., they usually refer to them by using nouns in a pejorative way. In other words, nationality nouns are usually used (by speakers of a different nationality, obviously) as "ethnic slurs" (see Burgen, 1997: 149-162). So in English [12] "Dutch courage" (p. 220) should be understood ironically to mean "Dutch cowardice." But, when [12] is lexicalized, it acquires a conventional implicature that allows us to use [12] to refer to any person of any other nationality, British people included. By contrast, there is a Spanish phraseological unit, [13] "Poner una pica en Flandes" (to do something very difficult; literally "To put a pike in Flanders"), that conceptualizes Flemish/Dutch people in a different way. So Dutch people are typically conceptualized as "cowards" by English speakers, while they are conceptualized as "courageous people" by Spanish speakers.

Perhaps because the British Empire was built on the decline of Dutch Empire,¹¹ whereas the decline of Spanish Empire (at least in Europe) started precisely in Flanders and Holland! Be this as it may, this type of idiom causes a lot of difficulties in translation.

It is generally the case that vices are predicated of other nationalities and people, while virtues are predicated of our own nationality and countrymen.¹² For this reason the Dutch seem to attract a lot of negative proverbial publicity in English, as one can see when looking through the *OED*, where one can find: "Dutch courage" (cowardice), "Dutch cap" (a kind of contraceptive device), "Dutch widow" (prostitute), and "Dutch wife/husband" (life-sized machines or devices used in masturbation),¹³ though surprisingly there are no idioms in Dutch in which the word *engels* (English) is used pejoratively.¹⁴ And since vices are always those of the "others," a "condom" is called in English a "French letter" (*OED*), while it is called a *capote anglaise* in French. Similarly "syphilis" is euphemistically referred to in French as *maladie anglaise*, while it is called "French disease" in English (*OED*). And if we take note of the *OED*, French people are the paradigm of sexual vices for English speakers: "to French" (to practice fellatio or cunnilingus), "excuse/pardon my French" (bad language), "French" (oral sex), "French kiss" (a kiss with mouths open using the tongue), "French knickers" (loose-fitting and usually lace-trimmed ladies' knickers), "French postcards/prints" (erotic or pornographic pictures), "French safe" (condom), or "French tickler" (a condom equipped with ridges or large protuberances designed to increase vaginal stimulation).

In short, Anita Naciscione's book is interesting and useful not only because of what it says explicitly, but also because of the multitude of suggestions and questions it raises.

Notes

1. See, for instance, the following quote from the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1983: 55): "El sentido real de una palabra no es el que tiene en el *Diccionario*, sino el que tiene en el instante. ¡Tras veinticinco siglos de adiestrarnos la mente para contemplar la realidad *sub specie aeternitatis*, tenemos que comenzar de nuevo y forjarnos una técnica intelectual que nos permita verla *sub specie instantis*!"
2. Sometimes these changes are rooted in a matter of nuance. For instance, the Spanish equivalent for the English proverb "To put the cart before the horse," "Poner el carro/la carreta delante de los bueyes" (To put the cart before the oxen) has the same usual meaning, if we are aware of this nuance, and we may translate the one into the other maintaining the same register. By contrast, the same idea can be expressed in Spanish by means of another proverb, "Empezar/comenzar la casa por el tejado" (To start [to build] the house from the roof), but, when using this second proverb we allude to a different metaphor, which is borrowed from the language of building, and obviously we achieve a different register because we allude to a different metaphorical frame.
3. By the way, Spanish cats "have" only seven lives. For that reason cats "lose" two lives when this Shakespearean text is

translated into Spanish: “Rey de los gatos, sólo quiero una de tus siete vidas y luego aporrearte a palos las otras seis.” (Shakespeare, 1967: 637.)

4. Descartes’ text appears in the following context: “Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée: car chacun pense en être si bien pourvû, que ceux mesme qui sont les plus difficiles à contenter en toute autre chose, n’ont point costume d’en desirer plus qu’ils ont.”
5. See, for instance, the following text from Hobbes (1950: 101-102): “And as to the faculties of the mind [...], I find yet a greater equality amongst men [...]. For there is not ordinarily a greater signe of the equall distribution of any thing, than that every man is contented with his share.”
6. We disregard the other alternative interpretations of Descartes’ text, particularly the one that “reads” a Cartesian irony in this text.
7. Montaigne’s text appears in the following context: “On dit communément que le plus juste partage que nature nous aye fait de ses graces, c’est celui du sens: car il n’est aucun qui ne se contente de ce qu’elle lui a distribué.”
8. For a further analysis of this topic, see Chamizo Domínguez (1988: 63-65).
9. Classic literature and philosophy provide lots of examples of phraseological units, that have entered modern languages and that are widely used in an instantial sense. For instance: “Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,” “Varium et mutabile semper femina,” or “Fides punica.”
10. The context of the quote is the following: “‘Realize thyself, Amœba dear’, said Will: and Amœba realized herself, and there was no Small Change but many Checks on the Bank wherein the wild Time grew and grew and grew.” It has been translated into Spanish as “‘Imagínate a ti misma, querida Ameba’, dijo Will: y la Ameba se imaginó a sí misma, y no hubo ningún Pequeño Cambio sino muchos Cheques sobre el Banco donde el Tiempo salvaje crecía y crecía y crecía.” (Ogden & Richards, 1964: 310). For a fuller analysis of this text and its problems in Spanish translation, see Chamizo Domínguez (1999: 39-42).
11. This hypothesis is backed by the OED. Dutch 4: “Characteristic of or attributed to the Dutch; often with an opprobrious or derisive application, largely due to the rivalry and enmity between the English and Dutch in the 17th c.”
12. This kind of derogatory ethnic slur can be found anywhere and in any language. For instance, French “Parler français comme une vache espagnole,” means “to speak bad French.” And, curiously enough, this current phraseological unit derives from an erroneous quote of “Parler français comme une Basque espagnole.”
13. The word “Dutch” is widely used in English in a derogatory way. The OED also lists: “Dutch party/supper/lunch/treat” (“one at which each person contributes his or her own share”); “double Dutch” (“a language that one does not understand”); “in Dutch” (“in disfavor, in disgrace, or trouble”); “to do a/the Dutch (act)” (“to desert, escape, run away; also, to commit suicide”); and many more.
14. According to a personal communication from Gerald Steen (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam), “The Dutch adjective for ‘English’

(Engels) is neutrally descriptive of a particular class of items, which apparently all seem to come from England. I have not found a derogative [sic] use.” Jos Hallebeek (Universiteit van Nijmegen) also backs this opinion. By contrast, Jos Hallebeek provided us with examples of some derogatory uses of the word Frans (French): “Daar is geen woord Frans bij” (it is as clear as crystal/daylight); “iets met de Franse slag doen” (to do/make something in a slapdash way); “op de Franse tour gaan” (to paint the town red); or “Franse complimenten” (verbiage). Our gratitude to both for their reports about the Dutch language.

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