



PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF OCCASIONAL MODIFICATIONS IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper investigates the pragmatic aspects of occasional modifications in English phraseology, focusing on how speakers creatively adapt conventional phraseological units to meet communicative and contextual needs. The study explores the role of intention, context, and discourse function in shaping occasional variants of idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions. By analyzing examples from modern media, literature, and everyday speech, the research demonstrates that pragmatic modification serves expressive, evaluative, humorous, and persuasive purposes, enriching the dynamic nature of phraseological usage in English discourse.

Keywords: Phraseology, pragmatics, occasional modification, idiom variation, communicative intention, discourse function, creativity.

1. Introduction

Phraseology, as an essential component of linguistic expression, represents the system of stable, reproducible combinations of words that carry figurative, idiomatic, or culturally bound meanings. These combinations, including idioms, proverbs, collocations, and phrasal expressions, form a vital part of the linguistic picture of the world. They not only serve as communicative tools but also reflect the historical, cultural, and cognitive experience of a speech community. In modern English, phraseological units (PUs) are a highly dynamic layer of the lexicon, frequently subjected to reinterpretation and modification according to the communicative needs of speakers.

One of the most interesting and creative linguistic phenomena within this field is the **occasional modification of phraseological units**. These are temporary,



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context-dependent alterations of fixed expressions that appear spontaneously in speech or writing. They are not permanently fixed in the language system, but arise from a speaker's individual creative act. Through such modifications, speakers intentionally deviate from the conventional form of idioms to achieve particular pragmatic effects such as humour, irony, evaluation, expressiveness, or stylistic novelty. For instance, the idiom "to kill two birds with one stone" may be humorously transformed into "to feed two birds with one seed" to express a more positive or environmentally conscious attitude.

From a **pragmatic perspective**, occasional phraseological modifications reveal the speaker's communicative intentions, emotional stance, and relationship with the interlocutor. Pragmatics, according to Grice (1975) and Levinson (1983), focuses on how meaning is shaped by context, inference, and intention. In this sense, the modification of a phraseological unit can be viewed as a pragmatic strategy a deliberate act of breaking or reshaping linguistic conventions to create a new meaning or highlight a specific attitude. Such modifications are not random; they are guided by the speaker's awareness of shared cultural knowledge, expectations, and discourse norms.

The phenomenon of occasional modification also demonstrates the **interaction between linguistic stability and creative variability**. While phraseological units are traditionally regarded as fixed expressions, modern usage shows that they possess a remarkable degree of flexibility. This flexibility reflects the dynamic and evolving character of language, where users continually adapt conventional expressions to new social realities, technological progress, and communicative situations. The balance between reproducibility and innovation is what gives phraseology its vitality and relevance in contemporary discourse.

The pragmatic approach to occasional modifications emphasizes their **discourse function**. Modified idioms often serve as markers of speaker identity, social evaluation, or stylistic playfulness. In media texts and advertisements, for example, they perform persuasive and attention-drawing functions, while in everyday conversation they express irony, humour, or solidarity among interlocutors. Thus, their significance goes beyond lexical innovation — they become tools for managing meaning, interpersonal relations, and communicative impact.



The study of occasional modifications contributes to understanding how speakers exploit linguistic creativity within the framework of shared phraseological norms. It highlights how pragmatic factors such as context, intention, and audience shape the form and meaning of phraseological units in discourse. The **aim** of the present research is to analyze the **pragmatic aspects** of occasional modifications in English phraseology and to identify their communicative and functional roles across different contexts. The study seeks to answer the following key questions.

1. What types of pragmatic transformations occur in English phraseological units?
2. What communicative intentions motivate speakers to create occasional modifications?
3. How do these modified expressions function in various types of discourse (literary, journalistic, and conversational)?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to contribute to the broader field of phraseological studies, offering insights into how pragmatic mechanisms influence the evolution and expressive richness of English phraseology.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a **qualitative descriptive research design** aimed at identifying and interpreting the pragmatic aspects of occasional modifications in English phraseology. The qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomenon under investigation context-bound modifications of phraseological units is inherently interpretative and cannot be adequately quantified. The analysis focuses on meaning, intention, and contextual function rather than frequency or statistical distribution.

The study is grounded in the principles of **functional-pragmatic linguistics**, which emphasize the relationship between linguistic form and communicative function. This framework enables the exploration of how speakers intentionally alter conventional phraseological units to achieve specific pragmatic effects. The research integrates elements of **speech act theory** (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and **contextual analysis**, thereby allowing for an in-depth examination of speaker intention, communicative purpose, and the illocutionary force conveyed through modified idioms.



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The data for analysis were drawn from a wide range of **contemporary English discourse sources** to ensure representativeness and authenticity. The corpus included: **Print and online newspapers** (e.g., The Guardian, The New York Times), **Digital media platforms and blogs**, **Advertising slogans and public campaigns**, **Literary and journalistic texts** featuring creative language use. These sources were selected because they provide rich examples of spontaneous linguistic creativity, where speakers and writers often modify established idioms for rhetorical or stylistic purposes. The study examined approximately 150 instances of phraseological variation identified during the corpus compilation process.

Analytical procedure each example was subjected to **contextual-pragmatic analysis** according to the following criteria. **Type of modification**, identification of the structural nature of change lexical, grammatical, or syntactic (e.g., substitution, addition, omission, or inversion). **Context of use**, examination of the situational environment, communicative setting, and discourse type in which the modified expression occurred. **Pragmatic function**, determination of the communicative purpose served by the modification, such as expressive, evaluative, humorous, ironic, or persuasive effects.

This multi-layered analysis made it possible to interpret how speakers exploit phraseological creativity as a pragmatic strategy in meaning construction. The contextual component focused on co-textual clues, genre conventions, and social implications, while the pragmatic component examined speaker intention, audience reaction, and the function of modification within the discourse act.

The interpretation of data was informed by **Grice's Cooperative Principle** (1975) and the theory of **conversational implicature**, which explain how deviations from linguistic norms can generate implied meanings such as irony or humour. Additionally, **Leech's (1983) principles of politeness and interpersonal pragmatics** were considered to analyze evaluative and persuasive uses of modified phraseological units. This theoretical integration provided a comprehensive basis for explaining how pragmatic mechanisms operate within creative phraseological transformations.

To enhance **validity**, examples were cross-checked through multiple authentic sources, ensuring that each modification was naturally occurring rather than



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artificially constructed. Interpretations were supported by contextual evidence and, where possible, compared to similar examples in previous studies on phraseological variation (e.g., Naciscione, 2010; Moon, 1998). Although the study does not rely on numerical data, **analytical consistency** was maintained by applying the same set of pragmatic criteria to all examples throughout the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that **occasional modifications** represent a creative process through which speakers or writers intentionally alter the stable structure of a phraseological unit to achieve specific contextual or stylistic effects. Although idioms and proverbs are typically characterized by fixedness and reproducibility, their adaptability in real discourse illustrates that language users possess an inherent tendency toward innovation. Occasional modifications may occur through several types of structural or lexical transformations.

One of the most frequent forms is **lexical substitution**, where a key component of the idiom is replaced by another semantically or pragmatically relevant word. For example, the modified version “to feed two birds with one seed” derives from the canonical idiom “to kill two birds with one stone”, conveying an environmentally friendly or non-violent attitude. This kind of substitution reflects a shift in the speaker’s worldview and intention, transforming a traditionally utilitarian expression into one that aligns with modern ethical and ecological sensibilities.

Another common type is **grammatical modification**, in which tense, number, or grammatical form is altered for humorous or stylistic effect. For instance, the variant “He bit more than he can download” humorously updates the idiom “He bit off more than he can chew” by introducing technological vocabulary, thereby generating irony and situational relevance. Similarly, **structural ellipsis or expansion** can modify phraseological units to emphasize a particular stylistic or communicative goal, as seen in the altered proverb “All that glitters is not Google”. Such structural creativity allows the speaker to connect idiomatic tradition with contemporary cultural references, producing both familiarity and novelty. In all these cases, the modified expressions preserve the recognizable



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semantic frame of the original idiom, which enables the audience to understand the reference while simultaneously perceiving the creative deviation. This balance between **conventionality and innovation** underlines the pragmatic flexibility of phraseological units and their capacity to adapt to evolving communicative contexts.

The analysis demonstrates that occasional modifications perform several distinct **pragmatic functions** in discourse, depending on the speaker's intention, the communicative situation, and the audience's interpretive competence. The most salient among these are expressive, humorous, persuasive, and cultural functions. The **expressive and evaluative function** allows speakers to convey personal emotions, attitudes, and assessments through idiomatic variation. For example, the modified form "Don't count your chickens before they hatch especially if they're on social media" not only retains the original warning about premature optimism but also introduces an ironic commentary on modern digital culture. The addition creates evaluative meaning and situates the expression in a socially recognizable context. In this sense, occasional modification becomes a pragmatic tool for expressing subjectivity and stance.

The **humorous and ironical function** emerges when the speaker intentionally contrasts the audience's expectation of the traditional idiom with a creative twist. For instance, "Curiosity saved the cat" reverses the well-known proverb "Curiosity killed the cat," producing a witty and optimistic reinterpretation. The humor arises from the interplay between the familiar and the unexpected, which relies on shared cultural knowledge for full comprehension. Such recontextualizations demonstrate how pragmatic creativity contributes to irony, wordplay, and stylistic liveliness in discourse.

The **persuasive and attention-drawing function** is particularly common in advertising, journalism, and political communication. Modified idioms capture attention and enhance memorability by deviating from predictable linguistic patterns. For example, the advertising slogan "Think outside the planet" a variation of "Think outside the box" employs hyperbole and cosmic imagery to appeal to imagination, innovation, and ecological awareness. Pragmatically, this function aligns with the speaker's intention to influence the audience's perception and promote engagement through novelty and emotional resonance.



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The **contextual and cultural function** highlights the dependence of phraseological creativity on cultural background and social experience. In contemporary English, technological progress and digital communication have introduced new idiomatic imagery, as illustrated by “He’s not the sharpest pixel in the screen.” Here, the phrase merges the structure of the proverb “He’s not the sharpest tool in the shed” with the vocabulary of the digital age. This adaptation not only produces humor but also reflects the cultural realities of the information era. Such instances confirm that phraseological modification operates as a linguistic reflection of current social and technological trends, demonstrating the adaptability of idiomatic expression to new cultural domains.

From a **pragmatic standpoint**, occasional phraseological units can be viewed as intentional communicative acts through which speakers convey attitudes, evaluations, and interpersonal meanings beyond literal interpretation. Each modified idiom carries an **illocutionary force** that may express irony, approval, criticism, or amusement, depending on contextual factors. In many cases, speakers deliberately **flout Grice’s maxims** of quality or manner (Grice, 1975) to create conversational implicatures such as sarcasm, exaggeration, or humorous incongruity. For example, replacing words within an idiom can subtly signal a violation of expectation, thereby inviting the listener to infer an alternative, often humorous, meaning.

The pragmatic value of these modifications lies in their **contextual interpretability** and their ability to evoke shared knowledge between speaker and listener. The success of such expressions depends on the audience’s ability to recognize both the original phraseological pattern and the deliberate deviation. This intertextual awareness enables speakers to perform complex pragmatic actions such as reinforcing solidarity, mitigating criticism, or introducing irony through minimal linguistic alteration.

The results demonstrate that phraseological modification operates as a **productive mechanism of pragmatic meaning-making**. It allows speakers to manipulate established linguistic forms for expressive and rhetorical purposes while maintaining communicative efficiency. The interdependence of linguistic structure, discourse context, and communicative intention confirms that occasional modifications are not random deviations but rather contextually



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motivated strategies of pragmatic creativity. Thus, they represent an essential component of modern English discourse, illustrating the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation in phraseological usage.

Conclusion

The results of the conducted study allow us to draw several significant conclusions regarding the **pragmatic aspects of occasional modifications in English phraseology**. The research has shown that occasional modifications, despite arising as temporary and context-dependent deviations from the canonical forms of phraseological units, occupy an important place in the functional system of modern English. They serve as clear evidence of the creative potential of language and of the speaker's pragmatic competence in adapting conventional linguistic material to new communicative conditions.

From the standpoint of **pragmatic linguistics**, occasional modifications reveal the speaker's intentions, emotional attitudes, and evaluative orientations. They perform a range of communicative functions, including **expressive, humorous, evaluative, and persuasive** ones. The analysis indicates that through deliberate alteration of form and meaning, speakers use such modified phraseological units to achieve rhetorical impact, to increase the expressiveness of discourse, and to ensure the effectiveness of interpersonal communication. These pragmatic mechanisms demonstrate that even stable idiomatic structures are not static; rather, they are open systems capable of responding flexibly to social and cultural change.

The findings confirm that phraseological modification operates as a **mechanism of discourse innovation**, allowing the speaker to preserve the semantic integrity of the idiom while expanding its pragmatic potential. The successful realization of these modifications depends on shared cultural knowledge and the interlocutor's interpretative competence, which ensure mutual understanding and communicative relevance. Thus, the phenomenon of occasional modification illustrates the intricate interaction between **linguistic form, contextual environment, and communicative intention**, which together shape pragmatic meaning.



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The obtained results also highlight the importance of viewing phraseological creativity not merely as a stylistic device but as an essential component of communicative behaviour. In this regard, occasional modifications function as a **strategic linguistic resource** for expressing individuality, establishing rapport, or introducing irony and humour into discourse. Their study enriches our understanding of how pragmatic and cognitive factors interact in the dynamic process of language use.

It should be emphasized that the present research is limited to English linguistic material; therefore, future investigations may focus on a **comparative and cross-linguistic perspective**, examining how similar pragmatic mechanisms manifest themselves in other languages, such as Uzbek, Russian, or German. Such a comparative approach would contribute to identifying universal and culture-specific tendencies in phraseological pragmatics and would broaden the theoretical basis for understanding the role of idiomatic creativity in intercultural communication.

Occasional modifications in English phraseology represent a vivid demonstration of the continual interaction between linguistic convention and innovation. They reaffirm the idea that language is not a closed system but a dynamic and adaptive phenomenon, capable of reflecting new realities and communicative intentions. The pragmatic versatility of these modifications ensures the expressive richness and vitality of modern English discourse, confirming that phraseology remains one of the most productive and evolving domains of linguistic creativity.

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