

Ana Ćavar

University of Zagreb

Croatia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3147-2698>

Ivana Vidović Bolt

University of Zagreb

Croatia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8054-247X>

Phraseological Competence and Stability of Structure in Phraseological Units

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the correlation between linguistic communicative competence of Croatian native speakers and the comprehension of phraseological units (PUs) with established form and fixed structure. The fixed structure is considered to be a relative feature in studies on PUs, mainly because of variations in different characters. However, it is obvious that modifications (or deviations from the form) in which PUs are most often found in writing are still subject to additional considerations and examinations. In order to examine this issue, a research was carried out in the seventh grade of elementary school and the second grade of high school. The purpose of the research materials was to examine to what extent Croatian native speakers consider PUs as linguistic units with a fixed structure, i.e. whether they find acceptable even the PUs with internal substitution of components.

Key words: *communicative competence, modification of PU structure, internal substitution of PU components.*

1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years the term “phraseological competence” has become fairly standard in applied linguistics. The term covers the ability to identify, understand and appropriately use phraseological units (PUs) – conventionalized and to some degree fixed multi-word units whose meaning cannot be (fully) derived from the meanings of their individual lexical constituents. At the same time, the term generally subsumes the ability to understand and appropriately use figurative expressions – metaphorical expressions, phraseological units, proverbs and some collocations. The ap-

pearance of the term was triggered by the proliferation of the term “communicative competence” in applied linguistics scholarship since the 1980s. The most prominent model of communicative competence in language teaching today is the model of communicative language competence described in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*¹ (2005). In this document, communicative language competence is defined as “the competence of using language appropriately in concrete communicative situations, which is further divided into three components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Linguistic competence is further divided into lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence” (ibidem: 111–112). Both in this and in other models of communicative competence found in the applied linguistics literature², phraseological competence is not awarded the status of a discrete competence; rather, it is commonly considered as a component of lexical competence or, more recently, as a so-called transversal competence which is based on various aspects of language competence: morphosyntactic, semantic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic (Alessandro 2011: 2015). Since this paper focuses on proficiency in PUs, the development of phraseological competence will be viewed from this aspect. In this respect, we will be interested in the ability to identify, understand and use phraseological units as multi-word units with fairly stable structure, whose meaning can generally not be derived from the primary meanings of their lexical components (Menac 1970/1971; Fink 1993; 2002 etc.). Based on this definition and such description of PUs, a highly developed phraseological competence (Szerszunowicz 2007: 93–94) relates to the ability to associate PU with appropriate written and spoken genres, the ability to assess when it is necessary to replace PUs with their non-figurative meaning equivalents, as well as the ability to understand modified PUs, i.e. those in which the usual ordering of components is disrupted or those that are the product of combining two figurative expressions. Apart from the aforementioned, a well-developed phraseological competence entails the ability to “comprehend the cultural allusions contained in the units, especially those of idiomatic character” (Szerszunowicz 2007: 91).

¹ In Croatian – *Zajednički europski referentni okvir za jezike* (2005).

² The most comprehensive overview of the models of communicative competence in the linguistics literature in Croatian can be found in Bagarić Medve (2012).

2. The development of phraseological competence

The acquisition of knowledge of phraseology is a gradual and lengthy process in the course of which we acquire PUs by means of exposure to language and normally through multiple encounters with such units (Nippold, Taylor 1995). The acquisition of PUs is described as a process involving several degrees³, starting from literal meanings of their constituents through partial understanding to full understanding of the figurative meaning (Kuvač Kraljević, Lenček 2012). The ability to understand PUs is predicated on the speaker's chronological age and a sufficiently developed metalinguistic consciousness, as well as the ability to make functional use of contextual information (Levorato, Cacciari 2002). The initial stage in the development of phraseological competence is generally placed at the age of five or six, when children also begin to understand the figurative meanings of linguistic units to a greater degree (Nippold, Rudzinski 1993). A marked stage in the development of phraseological competence, accompanied by enrichment and rising complexity of the phraseological repertory, occurs between the ages of six and ten (Vulchanova et al. 2011). The differences in the understanding of PUs between children and adults gradually diminish up to the age of eleven (*ibid.*) or fifteen according to some authors (Kempler et al. 1999), at which point the differences in understanding between children and adults cease to be prominent. Although children after the age of eleven start to resemble adult speakers in their ability to understand figurative expressions, differences in the phraseological competence between children and adults are still rather marked. Apart from differences between ten-year-olds and adults, significant quantitative as well as qualitative differences have also been observed between adult speakers and adolescents (Nippold 2005; Vulchanova 2011). It has been shown that adult speakers and adolescents differ in their assessment of the semantic transparency of PUs, whereby adult speakers frequently assess these units as less transparent. That is ascribed to adult speakers' better mastery of the phraseological repertory, which entails a greater focus on the figurative meaning and a lower sensitivity to the semantic analysis of the literal and figurative meanings of PUs (Ackerman 1982, as cited in Nippold, Rudzinski 1993). In other words, a higher presence of semantic analysis in the understanding of PUs is to be expected in speakers whose knowledge of phraseology is not yet fully consolidated.

³ A more concise description of the stages in the acquisition of figurative competence can be found in Levorato, Cacciari (2002).

Although the acquisition of figurative competence in the mother tongue has been studied in various languages, for example in English, Italian, Bulgarian and Croatian (Nippold, Taylor 1995; Levorato, Cacciari 2002; Vulchanova et al. 2011; Kuvač Kraljević, Lenček 2012), the results of these experiments have had a fairly insignificant impact on the teaching of phraseological content in the first language. This is also confirmed by the findings of published work aimed primarily at investigating and assessing the ways of teaching phraseological content in the foreign language (Kržišnik 1998; Vidović Bolt 2013), while the acquisition of phraseological competence in the context of the native language remains on the margins of interest in this kind of research (Požgaj Hadži 2007). This can be partly accounted for by the way in which the phraseological repertory is acquired in the first language, more specifically by the fact that since the initial stages of understanding figurative meanings, phraseological units in the first language are largely acquired indirectly, through exposure to language. Consequently, as could be expected, a significant connection between the degree of development of a person's reading skills and their phraseological repertory has been confirmed (Levorato, Cacciari 2002). Further, relating to the reproduction of PUs, the process of acquiring phraseological knowledge has long been linked to overlearning, namely, it was considered to be a process of learning PUs by heart. Today, however, it is considered that various processes of acquiring figurative expressions underlie the acquisition of phraseological knowledge. Put differently, the range of a speaker's phraseological repertory is highly dependent on the individual's ability to make inferences about the meaning of the phraseological unit based on the meaning of at least one of its constituents, which also depends on the unit's transparency, the factor that makes it possible to infer the meaning of the PU on the basis of the semantic analysis of components (Gibbs 1987, as cited in Nippold, Taylor 1995), as well as on the informativity of the context in which the unit appears in the discourse. Finally, unlike the stages in the development of lexical knowledge, which are relatively precisely quantified⁴, it may be concluded that the phraseological component of lexical competence is still insufficiently explored, since we do not yet have estimates of what would constitute the phraseological minimum or the phraseological optimum in the first or a foreign language.

⁴ For additional information see Nation (1990) and Nippold (2006).

3. Language use and some aspects of phraseological knowledge

The research we present takes as its starting point the studies of phraseological competence in the first language that have identified a threshold after which differences in the understanding of figurative expressions between adults and children increasingly diminish, while some differences between adolescents and adult speakers persist. With these findings in mind, our research focuses on the possible differences in the use of phraseological units between 13 and 16-year-olds in the Croatian language. We start from uses of phraseological units which were identified to differ from the dictionary form provided in the *Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik* (HFR), a Croatian dictionary of phraseological units by Antica Menac, Željka Fink-Arsovski and Radomir Venturin, in the sense that the fixed components of the PU are internally substituted, for example *kad se sve zbroji i oduzme* (lit. *when everything is added up and subtracted*) > **kad se sve oduzme i zbroji* (*lit. *when everything is subtracted and added up*). The aim was to determine whether these were just occasional examples that reflect phraseological word plays and various modifications of PUs, or whether it was the case of increasingly frequent new forms that might be offered as a dictionary form in the same dictionary entry, as is the case with, for example, the phraseological semi-compound *amo-tamo* (lit. *hither-thither*) or *tamo-amo* (lit. *thither-hither*) (HFR: 21).

4. Research aims and hypotheses

The aim was to investigate to what extent native Croatian speakers conceptualize PUs as conventionalized units of language with considerably fixed structure, the meaning of which does not add up from the sum of their components. More specifically, we wanted to find out whether and to what extent the speakers regard PUs involving specific structural changes as acceptable and, consequently, whether there is a link between the development of language communicative competence and a possible fixing of the structure of individual PUs in the speakers' language use. In other words, the research aimed to find out whether and to what extent adolescents found acceptable the PUs that were recorded in use, namely those in which components that are generally fixed in terms of their position were mutually substituted (e.g. **⟨nema⟩ ni glasa ⟨ni traga⟩ komu, čemu (od koga, od čega)*, (lit. **⟨neither⟩ sound ⟨nor trace⟩ to somebody, to something (of somebody, of something)*), **vika i cika* (*lit. *shouts and shrieks*), which in turn would be evidence of a shift from the frequent definition of PUs, also found in a Croatian language text-

book, according to which PUs are “fixed expressions with unaltering order of constituents and unaltering meaning” (Biščan et al. 2014: 58) and according to which the dictionary form of the PUs is by all means preferred over other forms, e.g. *(nema) ni traga (ni glasa) komu, čemu* (od koga, od čega) (lit. *(neither) trace (nor sound) to somebody, to something* (of somebody, of something)) and *cika i vika* (lit. *shrieks and shouts*) respectively. Starting from this aim, the following hypotheses were formed:

H1 Although PUs are described as language units with a rather fixed structure, adolescent speakers find to some extent acceptable those changes that involve internal substitution of constituents that generally have a fixed position in the structure of the PUs.

H2 The development of phraseological competence can (also) be traced along the lines of the acceptability of the internal change of place between the components of the PUs – secondary school participants in the research rate as less acceptable those forms that differ from the dictionary form and give preference to the forms of PUs that are provided by authors investigating PUs.

H3 The development of phraseological competence (higher sensitivity to PUs transformations, especially changes in the ordering of components with fixed positions) will correlate positively with more developed language communicative competence, which is operationalized in the research by means of the number of books read and the final grade in the Croatian language as a school subject.

5. Participants

A quantitative research study was conducted in three Croatian elementary schools and one secondary school located in Zagreb in November of the academic year 2017/18. Since the aim was to determine possible differences in the use of PUs in the course of the development of this aspect of communicative competence in adolescents, participants were chosen with a view to their expected metaknowledge of PUs, which, according to the curriculum, are introduced as a phenomenon in the final (eighth) grade of primary school, as well as with a view to the expected development of language communicative competence, which was supposed to be predicated on greater exposure to language and the participants’ maturation.

The research therefore included students in the seventh grade of primary school, who were expected not to have theoretical knowledge of PUs, and

students in the second grade of secondary school, who were supposed to be more proficient in the phraseological lexical component of competence. There were altogether 222 participants, 48.2% of whom (N = 107) were students in the seventh grade of primary school, and 51.8% (N = 115) were secondary selective school students. The gender ratio was 87 males and 134 female students. Data on the final grade in the Croatian language for the sixth grade of primary and the first grade of secondary school respectively were collected: 8.2% of participants (N = 17) got D as their final grade⁵, 29.5% (N = 61) got C, 37.7% (N = 78) got B and 24.6% (N = 51) got A.⁶ Methodologically, this would constitute a non-probabilistic deliberate sample of students in the seventh grade of primary and second grade of secondary school, chosen on the basis of the syllabus of the school subject Croatian language.

6. Methodology

The research was conducted by means of a questionnaire given to participants during their regular Croatian language lessons. The questionnaire included altogether 15 PUs the meaning of which the participants were familiar with, which was pretested on participants in the seventh grade of primary school (N = 58).

In the course of the authors' continuous monitoring of PUs in which the substitutions of place between the components with regularly fixed positions were recorded, the most frequent cases were identified in the corpus of utterances belonging to various functional styles. Since the findings from the collected corpus indicated that the substitution most frequently occurred in the PUs containing at least two constituents (nouns, adjectives or verbs) linked with a conjunction, an adverb or a dash (semi-compounds), the choice of the PUs was guided by the criterion of frequency and the 7th-grade participants' familiarity with these PUs, which was determined by pretesting. On the basis of these criteria a survey questionnaire was formed, containing the following PUs: *bez glave i repa je što* (sth has neither head nor tail, sth is without rhyme or reason (HEFR), lit. without head and tail is sth), *biti slika i prilika koga, čega* (the very image of sb (HEFR), lit. to be the image and appearance of sb, of sth), *boriti se rukama i nogama* (fight tooth and claw (nail) (to do sth) (HEFR), lit. to struggle with arms and legs), *cika i vika* (lit. shrieks and shouts), *crno na*

⁵ In the Croatian system D = 2 (dovoljan 'satisfactory'), C = 3 (dobar 'good'), B = 4 (vrlo dobar 'very good') and A = 5 (odličan 'excellent').

⁶ 6.8% of participants did not answer the question about the final grade.

bijelo (in black and white (HEFR), lit. black on white), *⟨i⟩ danju i noću* (day and night (HEFR), lit. ⟨both⟩ in the day and at night), *dok je svijeta i vijeka* (forever and ever (HEFR), lit. as long as there is world and time), *⟨i⟩ gol i bos* (barefooted (HEFR), lit. ⟨both⟩ naked and barefoot), *htjeti i ovce i novce* (want to have it both ways (HEFR), lit. to want both the sheep and money), *kad se sve zbroji i oduzme* (lit. when everything is added up and subtracted), *kao nebo i zemlja* [razlikovati se etc.] (be different as night and day (HEFR), lit. like heaven and earth [to differ etc.]), *⟨nema⟩ ni traga ⟨ni glasa⟩ komu, čemu* (od koga, od čega) (⟨there is⟩ no trace of sb, of sth or ⟨there is⟩ not trace of sb, of sth (HEFR), lit. ⟨neither⟩ trace ⟨nor sound⟩ to sb, to sth (of sb, of sth)), *od vrha do dna* (from top to bottom (HEFR), lit. from the top to the bottom), *plus-minus* (lit. plus-minus) and *pružio se koliko je dug i širok tko* (sb fell full length (HEFR), lit. stretched as long and wide as somebody is). All 15 phraseological units are recorded in the aforementioned dictionary of Croatian phraseological units, but the final form of the PU was chosen by the authors since existing variations were omitted – e.g. variations involving nouns (*cika* (*krika, skrika*) i *vika* (HFR: 59)) (lit. shrieks (screams, squeaks) and shouts) or verbs (*htjeti* (*željeti* i sl.) i *ovce i novce* (HFR: 403)) (lit. to want (wish for etc.) both the sheep and money (HFR: 403)). The decision on the choice involving variant constituents was made on the basis of their frequency in Croatian web corpora (hrWaC⁷ and Riznica⁸); e.g. the phraseological unit *htjeti i ovce i novce* (lit. to want both the sheep and money) was chosen because the verb *htjeti* (to want), which the dictionary lists as the first variety, is also more present in the corpora than its counterpart *željeti* (to wish for) (*htjeti i ovce i novce* (lit. to want both the sheep and money) – hrWaC 32 tokens, *željeti i ovce i novce* (lit. to wish for both the sheep and money) – hrWaC 7 tokens, which is also the case with the noun offered as the first choice in the phraseological unit *cika* (*krika, skrika*) i *vika* (lit. shrieks (screams, squeaks) and shouts) – (*cika i vika* (lit. shrieks and shouts)) – hrWaC 80 tokens, Riznica 4 tokens; *krika i vika* (lit. screams and shouts) – hrWaC 16 tokens, Riznica 8 tokens; *skrika i vika* (lit. squeaks and shouts) – hrWaC 4 tokens, Riznica 0 tokens).

⁷ Croatian web corpus (hrWaC), containing almost 1.9 billion tokens, is the largest digital corpus of the Croatian language. It contains texts from news portals, forums and official web sites, largely texts belonging to the newspaper, colloquial and administrative styles of the standard Croatian language. <http://nlp.ffzg.hr/resources/corpora/hrwac/>

⁸ Croatian Language Repository Riznica – The Croatian Language Corpus is assembled from selected texts in the Croatian language, covering various functional domains and genres. It includes canonical works of Croatian fiction and other written sources spanning the period from the second half of the 19th century (the period of concerted efforts in the standardization of modern Croatian) to the present day, containing published work of different genres and domains (scientific publications, university textbooks, fiction translated by distinguished Croatian translators, online journals and newspapers, etc.). <http://riznica.ihj.hr/index.hr.html>

The chosen PUs were presented to participants in multiple choice tasks. In each task four sentences were listed. One sentence featured the PUs in the form recorded in the referenced dictionary (a), another sentence featured the PU with a change of place between PU constituents with normally fixed position (c), while the remaining two sentences featured different autosemantic or synsemantic words introducing a different form of the idiom, which disrupted the form of the PU (b and d).

For better understanding, the example with the PU *dok je svijeta i vijeka* (lit. *as long as there is world and time*) is provided below:

- a) *To su pravila koja će vrijediti dok je svijeta i vijeka.*
- b) *To se sigurno neće promijeniti dok je svijeta i dok je vijeka.*
- c) *Ta će pravila vrijediti dok je vijeka i svijeta.*
- d) *To se neće promijeniti dok je i svijeta, ali i vijeka⁹.*

The participants were asked to circle all the sentences that they found acceptable. The questionnaire included general information about the participants, their grade, their age, gender, mother tongue, final grade in the Croatian language in the previous grade and the information on the number of books read in the previous year, where the participants chose one of the answers offered on a Likert-type scale: a) none, b) up to five, c) up to ten, d) up to fifteen or more books. The time needed for filling in the questionnaire was determined by pretesting and it was set at about 15 minutes.

7. Results and discussion

In order to test the research hypotheses, the analysis included several statistical tests. The correlation between specific variables was tested by the Pearson correlation coefficient. The differences in the phraseological competence between the seventh-grade primary school and the second-grade secondary school participants were tested by means of the t-test. Part of the results is expressed in percentage and other statistical indicators are also provided.

Within the first hypothesis we wanted to determine whether and to what extent the participants considered acceptable the modifications of PUs that were offered (and not just the forms recorded in dictionaries, with no variations), especially those modifications that included changes in the ordering of components that are normally fixed. The acceptability of the PUs contain-

⁹ Lit. a) *These are rules that will abide as long as there is world and time.* b) *This will certainly not change as long as there is world and as long as there is time.* c) *These rules will abide as long as there is time and world.* d) *This will not change as long as there is both world as well as time.*

ing such changes is presented in the percentage of the answers chosen in the questionnaire. For easier reference the results for each PU are presented in the following way – the first figure refers to the form of the PU taken from a dictionary or other relevant source, this is followed by the figure for the form of the PU where components were mutually substituted, and the final two figures refer to forms in which the structure of the PU is altered by expanding some elements, i.e. by incorporating autosemantic and synsemantic words into the phraseological unit.

As can be observed from the results, the participants significantly prefer the forms of the PUs that are recorded in dictionaries. At the same time, the highest percentage of acceptability is awarded to PU modifications containing internal substitution of components, which indicates that participants, especially younger ones, also find forms that differ from the dictionary form to be acceptable to some extent. The results in all the answers from the questionnaire also show that participants, especially the group in the second grade of secondary school, exhibit a markedly higher degree of preference for the forms of PUs that do not contain modifications. In the secondary school group, for eleven out of fifteen tasks the percentage of acceptability of the dictionary form of the PU ranges from 91.3% (N = 105), for the PU *kad se sve zbroji i oduzme* (lit. *when everything is added up and subtracted*), to 98.3% (N = 115), for the PU *kao nebo i zemlja* [razlikovati se etc.] (lit. *like heaven and earth* [to be different etc.]). The lowest percentage of acceptability, recorded for the PU *cika i vika* (lit. *shreaks and shouts*), was 78.3% (N = 90). What has to be pointed out is that modifications of PUs containing internal substitution of components are the most acceptable kind of modified structure for 16-year-old participants as well, although to a considerably lower degree. In seven out of the total of fifteen answers the percentage of acceptability of the structures involving substituted components goes above 10%, ranging from 18.3% (N = 21), for the PU *kad se sve zbroji i oduzme* (lit. *when everything is added up and subtracted*), to 27.8% (N = 32), for the PU *gol i bos* (lit. *naked and barefoot*¹⁰). The highest percentage of acceptability of the forms with internal substitution of constituents was recorded for the PU *cika i vika* (lit. *shrieks and shouts*), with the modification **vika i cika* (lit. **shouts and shrieks*) – it was a high 45.9% (N = 102) for the entire sample. It is interesting that the form with substituted components is rather frequent in the corpora as well – it has 29 tokens in the hrWaC and 3 tokens in the Croatian Language

¹⁰ It is indicative that the form *barefoot and naked* is recorded together with the dictionary form *naked and barefoot* in the works of some Croatian authors, for example the *Frazeobibliografski rječnik* by Ž. Fink Arsovski, B. Kovačević, A. Hrnjak (2017: 148).

Table 1. The percentage of acceptability of PU and modifications in the primary school group, the secondary school group, and in the total sample

PU	ANSWERS OFFERED	Seventh grade of primary school – the percentage of answers chosen (%)	Second grade of secondary school – the percentage of answers chosen (%)	Acceptable structures altogether (%)
<i>dok je svijeta i vijeka</i> (lit. as long as there is world and time)	a) the form recorded in the dictionary	56.7	80.9	68.5
	b) the form with internal substitution of PU constituents	29.0	22.6	25.7
	c) expansion	19.6	9.6	14.4
	d) expansion	18.7	1.7	9.9
<i>(i) gol i bos</i> (lit. (both) naked and barefoot)	a) the form recorded in the dictionary	58.9	89.6	74.8
	b) the form with internal substitution of PU constituents	45.8	27.8	36.5
	c) expansion	14.0	1.7	7.7
	d) expansion	11.2	1.7	6.3
<i>htjeti i ovce i novce</i> (lit. to want both the sheep and money)	a) the form recorded in the dictionary	67.3	93.0	80.6
	b) the form with internal substitution of PU constituents	35.5	20.9	27.9
	c) expansion	17.8	1.7	9.5
	d) expansion	10.3	4.3	7.2
<i>kad se sve zbroji i oduzme</i> (lit. when everything is added up and subtracted)	a) the form recorded in the dictionary	65.4	91.3	78.8
	b) the form with internal substitution of PU constituents	26.2	18.3	22.1
	c) expansion	21.5	8.7	14.9
	d) expansion	16.8	0.9	8.6
<i>(nema) ni traga (ni glasa)</i> komu, čemu (od koga, od čega) (lit. (neither) trace (nor sound) to somebody, to something (of somebody, of something))	a) the form recorded in the dictionary	64.5	93.9	79.7
	b) the form with internal substitution of PU constituents	32.7	7.8	19.8
	c) expansion	8.4	8.7	8.6
	d) expansion	28.0	8.7	18.8

Source: own research.

Repository Riznica. These results can be accounted for by a higher frequency of the word *shouts* in the Croatian language, but at the same time they indicate that relevant corpus and research data should be taken into account in considering possible additions to dictionary entries. As the results show, altering the structure through expansion is less acceptable to participants, and the percentage of affirmative answers for most examples does not go above 10%. A higher percentage for the examples in which such structures were assessed as acceptable, for example 28.7% (N = 33) for the PU *plus-minus* in the form **plus ili minus*, might be explained by the reasoning that the participants do not perceive a hyphenated PU as a fully fixed unit. Based on the participants' answers concerning the chosen examples of PUs and the acceptability of the modified ordering of their components in table 1, the first hypothesis can be considered to be confirmed.

Within the second hypothesis, we wanted to determine whether the degree of acceptability of modified structures of PUs changes in the seventh grade of primary and the second grade of secondary school, more specifically, whether the acceptability of modified PUs can provide insight into the development of phraseological competence in the observed period. Although the previously presented results speak in favour of the second hypothesis, the differences between the two groups of participants were additionally tested by means of a t-test. The results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. T-test analysis – acceptability of modified structures in PUs in the primary and secondary school group (N = 222)

	N	M	SD	T	P
Seventh grade of primary school	107	6.4	3.48	9.24	000
Second grade of secondary school	115	10.7	3.4		

Source: own research.

The t-test ($t = 9.24, p < 0.001$) statistically confirmed the difference in the acceptability of modified lexical ordering of phraseological units between the two groups of participants, the 7th grade primary school and the 2nd grade secondary school students. In short, modified PUs are more acceptable to thirteen-year-old participants, and the degree of acceptability of such structures significantly decreases up to the age of sixteen. These results attest to a marked development of phraseological competence in the observed period, which is in line with previous findings concerning the development

of phraseological competence, which continues up to the adult age (Nippold, Rudzinski 1993). These results also indicate that the internal substitution of components with fixed position is a relevant indicator of the development of phraseological competence, which in turn confirms the second hypothesis.

Finally, the confirmed differences in phraseological competence can probably be attributed to maturation, that is, a better development of language communicative competence in sixteen-year-olds, which is most significantly predicated on a greater exposure to language. In the experiment the language communicative competence component was operationalized through the variables of the final grade in the Croatian language in the sixth grade of primary and the first grade of secondary school respectively, as well as the Likert-type scale estimate of the number of books read. The results are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Correlation coefficient between the averages of correct answers, the final grades in Croatian and the number of books read in the total sample

The average of correct answers	The final grade in Croatian	The number of books read
0.60	0.15	0.38*

* $p < 0.05$

Source: own research.

As can be observed from the results, the link between a higher final grade in the Croatian language and greater stability of PU structures was not confirmed. These results could possibly be accounted for by the criteria used for choosing the PUs included in the questionnaire. As the research focused on the acceptability of the modifications of phraseological structures, the basic precondition for including PUs in the survey questionnaire was familiarity of the sixth and the second grade participants with the chosen PUs. Looking at the characteristics of the phraseological units included in the questionnaire, we may say that the included examples belong to the general vocabulary of the Croatian language as they largely belong to the colloquial and, in part, newspaper style. This can probably also account for the results concerning the correlation between the number of books read and the lower acceptability of modified PUs. As can be seen, a weak correlation was confirmed between the number of books read and the percentage of correct answers. Taking into account that exposure to reading is the most important factor in the development of reading competence, which has a crucial effect on the entire communicative competence, and not only its lexical compo-

ment¹¹, it was expected that the connection between reading and phraseological competence would be more strongly confirmed, as indicated by previous findings (Levorato, Cacciari 2002). The results can again be accounted for by the choice of examples included in the questionnaire, which the participants in the pretesting identified as PUs that they were familiar with and used to some extent.

Finally, as the experiment was conducted among students in selective secondary schools, in order to test whether the high degree of phraseological competence indicated by the results was predicated on the positive selection of participants, a t-test analysis was conducted to compare the results for primary school participants whose final grade in Croatian was A with the results for secondary school participants. The results are shown in table 4.

Table 4. T-test analysis – comparing the averages of correct answers between 6th grade and secondary school participants who had the final grade A in Croatian

	N	M	SD	T	P
Primary school	28	6.75	3.83	5.40	000
Secondary school	115	10.72	3.4		

Source: own research.

The statistically confirmed difference ($t = 5.40$, $p < 0.001$) between primary and secondary school participants points to differences between these two groups that are the result of a higher cognitive and, consequently, linguistic, development of sixteen-year-old participants. In other words, the results show that the differences found between the phraseological competence of thirteen and sixteen-year-olds are the result of the maturation and better language communicative competence of older participants. Based on this, the third hypothesis can also be considered confirmed.

8. Conclusion

The results of the conducted quantitative research provide insight into some aspects of the participants' phraseological competence, primarily

¹¹ For a more comprehensive account of reading competence within Croatian language as a school subject see Ćavar (2017), and for more on the link between reading and the lexical component see Santrić Marta, Ana Ćavar, Marko Alerić (2019).

the fact that in the observed period, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, phraseological competence undergoes significant development. As one aspect of phraseological knowledge, the acceptability of internal substitution of constituents in PUs with a fixed ordering of components was confirmed, as the research traced the development of phraseological competence through the acceptability of modified structures of PUs. The observed examples, extracted both on the basis of language use and the use of these PUs recorded in electronic corpora, showed that structural modifications of PUs were acceptable to participants to some degree, especially so in the case of modifications involving the mutual substitution of components in PUs with a fixed position of components. It was also shown that a higher degree of language communicative competence involves a higher degree of phraseological competence, which is reflected, among other things, in the stabilization of the structure of PUs. Consequently, sixteen-year-olds found structural modifications of PUs significantly less acceptable and they, without fail, gave preference to the dictionary form of the PU in all the examples offered. However, it should be taken into account that the substitution of PU components with a fixed position (and ordering) does not necessarily attest to insufficient familiarity with the PU, but is also witness to various linguistic tendencies, such as modifications, phraseological wordplay, as well as the frequency and widespread use of individual components of the PU (e.g. in the case of the aforementioned PU *cika i vika* (lit. *shrieks and shouts*) and **vika i cika* (lit. **shouts and shrieks*), the form was assessed as acceptable by a high 45.9% of participants). The observed and described phenomena and the results of this research can be considered as a relevant indicator for similar and future research in the domain of phraseological competence, but also in the field of lexicography, in terms of possible additions to dictionary entries, primarily in new editions of dictionaries of PUs.

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Competencia fraseológica y estabilidad de la estructura en las unidades fraseológicas

Resumen

El presente trabajo indaga sobre el desarrollo de la competencia fraseológica en adolescentes de trece y dieciséis años, si las modificaciones estructurales de unidades fraseológicas (UF) en croata como su lengua materna, las consideran aceptables. Los resultados muestran que los participantes consideran las modificaciones estructurales de las UF aceptables hasta cierto punto, sobre todo las modificaciones que implican la sustitución de componentes normalmente fijos en la unidad fraseológica, y que la aceptabilidad de las estructuras fraseológicas modificadas disminuye con el desarrollo de la competencia fraseológica.