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Types and Degrees of Variation in English and Chinese Phraseological Units

Abstract. The paper examines different classifications of phraseological units (PhUs) in English and Chinese and states that these languages reveal different structural-semantic groups of phraseological units. Universal reasons for variation in phraseological units are presented and their universal results are revealed (lexical, constructional, grammatical and pragmatic types of variation). The author argues that though PhUs allow a considerable amount and diversity of variation in every language, typologically different languages, like English and Chinese, exhibit specific tendencies in types of variation (for example, grammatical variation of PhUs is not characteristic of Chinese), and that variation in PhUs is more characteristic of English than Chinese. The model of potential degrees and levels variation of word combinations, including PhUs, is worked out.

Key words: *phraseological units, contrastive study, types and degrees of phraseological variation*

1. Introduction

It is well known that in contrast to free word combinations, phraseological units (PhUs) tend to be frozen in form and meaning not to allow changes. However, it is almost accepted today that phraseological units as multi-word structures are not as stable and fixed as it was believed earlier: they permit a considerable amount and a continuum of different types of variation, both in language and speech. As John Sinclair said, “fixed phrases” are not in fact fixed (Sinclair 1996: 83). Moreover, recent studies have illustrated that variation can occur even with nondecomposable idioms (Geeraert 2017: 80).

However, structural and typological specific features of different languages may seriously influence phraseological variation, promoting it or preventing from it.

The **aims of the research** are to examine the reasons for phraseological variation in a language, to identify the peculiarities of phraseological units in Chinese in comparison with English and to reveal specific features of PhUs variation in these languages.

These languages are not related genetically – they belong to different families (Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European families accordingly) and to different typological language groups (the isolating and inflected ones), and, in addition, the societies speaking these languages did not have close socio-cultural contacts in the past. That is why these languages are of special interest for linguists. It should also be mentioned that variation of PhUs in English has often been the subject of linguistic investigation but it has not been studied yet, to the best of our knowledge, in Chinese. Neither has it been the object of contrastive study yet.

The **material of the study** are 64 English and 199 Chinese phraseological units with a lexical component *stone* in English and 石 [shí] ‘stone’ in Chinese presented in reliable dictionaries and corpora.

2. Reasons for variation in phraseological units

There are three major reasons for PhU variation:

- **Cognitive reason**

PhUs are typically based on metaphors, and metaphors as mental images are not stable but easily modifiable, which also contributes to the variation of PhUs.

- **Subjective reason**

According to the systemic functional linguist M. Halliday (1994: 37), languages evolve as systems of “meaning potential” or as sets of resources which influence what the speaker can do with language in a particular social context. As meaning potential, a language constantly allows speakers to make choices from a set of options. The selection of a language item, including a phraseological unit, is based primarily on communicative needs. Phraseological units as language tools should also meet the creative and expressive purpose of speakers. Thus, the use of a PhU is largely subjective to the speaker who may use it as a ready-made unit or change the form and meaning of the original linguistic sign according to his/her pragmatic needs, and thus cause a PhU variation in different forms (e.g., lexical substitution or syntactic rearrangement of words).

- **Objective (structural) reason**

All PhUs are not totally opaque – all of them are still perceived to be multi-word structures. That is why they are all open to syntactic and conceptual analysis.

Speakers work with PhUs as they do with any other language material: they adapt them, combine them, change parts of them. Like any components of a language structure, or of any other structure in general, the components of a PhU can be replaced and changed, thus allowing lexical, constructional or grammatical changes.

In different PhUs, these changes may be different and happen to a different degree. Some phraseological units can accommodate interchangeable synonyms (or closely related words with different senses), for instance *at any rate* – *at all rates*; *at any cost* – *at all costs*; *burst into tears* – *burst into crying*. Some PhUs allow structural changes as in *to break the ice* – *the ice is broken*.

3. Phraseological units in English and Chinese

Though the reasons for phraseological changes are universal, their results in different languages may be different due to the language divergences in structure, origin, and cultural heritage. Even the types of phraseological units in English and Chinese are different, and that could also tell on the character of their variation.

3.1. Phraseological units in English

English phraseological units are exclusively varied in origin and nature, and this fact causes problems for classifying them according to a single criterion. Different scholars proposed a number of approaches to their classification (structural, semantic, contextual, functional, etc.) to embrace the diversity.

In the Soviet linguistics on the material of Russian and English, the following classifications of phraseological units were elaborated by Vinogradov, Smirnitkiy, Amosova, Kunin and others:

- 1) **Structurally** phraseological units may be viewed as *word-equivalent* as *to kick the bucket* ‘to die’ or *sentence-equivalent* as *Life is not a bed of roses* ‘something is not always good or easy’.
- 2) **Semantically** they may be:
 - *non-motivated, non-transparent* (such PhUs are usually referred to as idioms) as in the *wet blanket* ‘a bore’;

- *partially motivated* with limited semantic transparency as *to kill two birds with one stone* ‘to solve two problems with one action’, and
 - *fully motivated* if their interpretation does not cause any difficulties as in *hard as a rock* ‘very hard’.
- 3) **Contextually** phraseological units may be divided into:
- *idioms* where the meaning of each word in a PhU is unique and contextually dependent (*red tape* ‘bureaucracy’) and
 - *phrasemes* where some of the words in a PhU may be contextually dependent and some are used in their regular dictionary senses as in *small hours* ‘early hours’.
- 4) **Functionally** phraseological units may be divided into:
- *nominative* (*to kick the bucket* ‘to die’);
 - *communicative* (*Life is not a bed of roses* ‘something is not always good or easy’);
 - *nominative-communicative* (*to break the ice* ‘to begin’ = *The ice is broken*) and
 - *interjectional* PhUs (*Goodness gracious!*)

Though all these phraseological units are varied in meaning, structure, function, and origin some scholars believe that they share the following features: “stability of content and structure, replication in speech, semantic integrity, structure solidity, and visualization”.

3.2. Phraseological units in Chinese

In the Chinese linguistics, the term *phraseology* as the study of, first of all, *fixed* expressions, appeared only in 1950-ies under the influence of the Soviet linguistics. Classification of PhUs in Chinese is, however, different and takes into account peculiarities of this language.

According to Ma Guofan (1985: 78), one of the most well-known linguists in Modern China who contributed much to the development of the Modern Chinese phraseology, PhUs can be classified into the following three groups:

1) **惯用语** [guàn yòng yǔ] ‘locution’ – this type of a PhU, often word-equivalent and usually performing the function of a noun, is based on certain collocations, fixed through their repeated usage by groups of people and usually used as a *figurative* device, for example, **垫脚石** [diàn jiǎo shí] – ‘stepping stone’, lit.: ‘pad foot stone’, i.e., ‘a person or things used to advance one’s career’; **绊脚石** [bàn jiǎo shí] – ‘stumbling stone’, lit.: ‘stumble foot stone’, i.e., ‘obstacles’; **试金石** [shì jīn shí] – ‘touch stone’, lit.: ‘test gold stone’, historically it referred to a kind of black stone which was used to

examine the quality of gold; now it refers to any criterion with the help of which other things can be evaluated.

More obvious differences between English and Chinese PhUs are observed in other groups of Chinese PhUs reflecting peculiarities of the language syntax and culture. They are:

2) **成语** [chéng yǔ] – lit.: ‘ready-made language’. **Chengyu** are four-character Chinese phrases that are highly characteristic of Chinese. They may be both *word-like* and *sentence-like* phraseological units. These phrases or expressions go back into history, are concise, deep, incisive and insightful in meaning, have a fixed structure and orderly syllables. They are usually referred to as *idioms* by European linguists. Usually they are composed of four words, like **坚若金石** [jiān ruò jīn shí] – lit.: ‘hard like gold/metal stone’, i.e., ‘as hard as a stone’; **一石二鸟** [yì shí èr niǎo] – lit.: ‘one stone two birds’, i.e., ‘to kill two birds with one stone’; **匪石匪席** [fěi shí fěi xí] – lit.: ‘not stone, not mat’, i.e., ‘it cannot be turned like a stone, it cannot be rolled up like a mat’ – this phrase is used to show someone’s determination and loyalty, etc.

3) **歇后语** [xiē hòu yǔ], **xiē hòu yǔ**, or **allegorical sayings**, are also characteristic of Chinese. They are two-part allegorical folk sayings performing either nominative or communicative functions. The first part of *xiē hòu yǔ* is like a riddle to be solved and the answer to it lies in the second part of it. When pronounced, there should be a pause between the two parts, like in **茅坑里的石头 – 又臭又硬** – lit.: ‘the stone in a privy – hard and stinking’, i.e., about somebody who is too stubborn and not cooperative; another example is **鸡蛋碰石头 – 坐输** – lit.: ‘just like eggs hurled against stone – an obviously lost game’, i.e., about some unwise choice leading to failure.

There are also 3 types exclusively sentence-like phraseological units:

- **谚语** [yàn yǔ] ‘**proverbs**’ – they sum up the collective wisdom of the community, a popular truth or a moral lesson in a concise and imaginative way, for example, **墙倒众人推** ‘When a wall is about to collapse, everybody gives it a push’, i.e., everybody hits a man who is down. In China they mostly were passed on orally.
- **俗语** [sú yǔ] ‘**sayings**’ – they refer mainly to fixed multiword phrases in the *adjectival* function, **陈谷子烂芝麻** ‘something out of date’, **吹胡子瞪眼睛** ‘very angry or in a rage with somebody’, and the like;
- **引语** [yǐn yǔ] ‘**quotations**’, derive from literature or speeches of celebrities, like Darwin or Confucius.

From a stylistic point of view, *chengyu* and *quotations* are formal and mostly used in written form, while *xiehouyu*, *proverbs* and *locutions* are less formal and are frequently used in oral speech.

4. Types of variation in phraseological units in English and Chinese

As for types of variation observed in PhUs, scholars tend to distinguish four universal types: lexical, constructional, grammatical and pragmatic. They are usually studied as separate phenomena, but in actual utterances they may co-occur.

4.1. Lexical variation

There is a considerable amount of lexical variation within PhUs among nouns, verbs, adverbs and prepositions as their components in English and Chinese. The variation of one or even more lexical synonyms in a PhU usually does not change its semantic integrity, for example:

- (1) (as) *hard as iron/rock* (noun),
- (2) *kill/hit two birds with one stone* (verb),
- (3) *坚若如金石* 'as hard as/like stone' (conjunction),
- (4) *镂琢于(之)金石* 'carve/cut in (of) stone' (verb, preposition).

According to Moor (1998), lexical variation in English is reaching 40% of all phraseological changes. As for Chinese, lexical variation has not been studied yet. However, in our contrastive study, lexical variation of English PhUs with the component *stone* is observed in 25% cases, while in the Chinese PhUs with the component 石 'stone', it took place only in 16% cases.

4.2. Constructional variation

When the syntactic format of an English or Chinese PhU is changed due to passivization or shortening, we deal with its *constructional variation* as in:

- (5) *a rolling stone gathers no moss* (the full version of a PhU) – *a rolling stone* (a shortened version),
- (6) *a stone's throw away* (the full version) – *a stone's throw* (a shortened version),
- (7) *坚若金石* (the full version) 'as hard as stone' – *坚石* (a shortened version) 'hard stone',
- (8) *鸡蛋碰石头—自不量力* (the full version) 'just like eggs hurled against stone – an obviously lost game' – *以卵击石* lit. 'use egg hit stone', i.e., 'just like eggs hurled against stone' – about an unwise choice leading to failure.

In our material, the constructional variation in English is 14% and for Chinese, it is only 1,5%.

4.3. Grammatical variation

English grammar permits changes between the indefinite and the definite form of a noun, its single and plural forms, the active and passive form of a verb that may also be used in the present or past tense. This grammatical variation facilitates the contextual expression of the concrete idea of number, time and state more clearly, for example:

- (9) *a rolling stone – rolling stones*
 (10) *No one wants to break the ice, I guess I will be first. – Finally, the ice was broken, and people started talking.* (However, not all English verbal PhUs permit passivization, e.g., *to kick the bucket – *the bucket is kicked.*)

In Chinese, grammatical variation is not characteristic of PhUs due to the limited number of morphological forms of the grammatical categories there. The concept of number variation in PhUs is usually rendered by lexical means:

- (11) 一石两鸟 – 一石多鸟 ‘to kill two birds with one stone’– ‘to kill many birds with one stone’

So, grammatical variation in our Chinese material is not found, while in English according to Moor (1998), 14% of phraseological units have two or more variants of their main grammatical form.

4.4. Pragmatic variation

Pragmatic variation in PhUs may resemble lexical variation, but it occurs not due to close semantic relations of words in the language system which are called synonyms, but due to the intension of the speaker who substitutes the words belonging to different lexico-semantic groups performing in the course the same pragmatic function as in the following Chinese example:

- (12) 没有过不去的河/坎儿 ‘there is no **river/setbacks** that can’t be crossed’

River and *setbacks* are not synonyms, the words refer to different things but both of them in this context denote something that stops someone from going ahead.

In some cases, it is very difficult to distinguish lexical and pragmatic variation, especially if the words are used in their minor, or derived meanings, as in the example:

(13) *flat broke* – *stone broke*.

Here both the words *flat* and *stone* have the derived meaning ‘absolutely, completely’ and this meaning is registered in the dictionaries. That is why they may be regarded as synonyms and in these phraseological units one may state the presence of lexical variation. However, if we take into account only the main meanings of the words, the type of variation can be considered pragmatic one.

Another example of the similar situation is observed in the variants of the PhU:

(14) *break balls* – *break stones*.

The syntactic format and grammar of these constructions remain unchanged, and the varied components *balls* and *stones* in (14) are not synonyms in their main meanings. Yet, in the context, they are both used in their derived senses and may be interpreted as the case of pragmatic variation.

We have to admit, however, that in our material of phraseological units with the word *stone* or 石 [shí] ‘stone’, no obvious cases of pragmatic variation were determined.

So, in English and in Chinese, we observe lexical and constructional variation in some kinds of PhUs. Grammatical variation in our Chinese material is not found. On the whole, variation in PhUs is more characteristic of English than of Chinese.

5. Degrees and levels of variation of phraseological units in English and Chinese

The issue of degree of variation of PhUs is problematic and unsettled. First of all, the degree of phraseological variation may refer to *the quantitative aspect* of PhUs changes. It may refer to the total number of PhUs in a language undergoing variation in comparison with the number of absolutely frozen PhUs not permitting any changes at all. Such studies need a thorough corpora data analysis of PhUs alterations, and are the subject of future studies.

And then, the quantitative analysis of degree of PhUs variation may also refer to *the number* of the changed components in a certain PhU in comparison with the number of possible alterations there that the language permits and zero variation in absolutely frozen PhUs.

Consider as example a nominative English PhU *a stone’s throw*, which literally means ‘any distance that a person might throw a stone away’, i.e. ‘a very short distance’.

The canonical form of the English PhU *a stone's throw* is composed of three main elements – the deverbal noun *throw* used with the article *a* and the noun *stone's* as the modifier and the pivotal element of the PhU.

The acceptable language variation in this PhU may be:

- **lexical** (synonymic variation of the deverbal noun: *a stone's cast/throw*) (the synonymic change of 1 out of 3 components), and,
- **constructional** (like addition of an adverb after the PhU – 2 possible variations: *a stone's throw away/from*; addition of an intensifier before the PhU – 2 possible variations: *just/only a stone's throw*; addition of a preposition before the PhU or a: *within/at a stone's throw*); in case of addition the number of variations in the PhU grows to four possible alterations,
- in other nominative English PhUs, **morphological** changes may be observed, examples of which were given earlier in 4.2.

Pragmatic variation in speech of this PhU may be various and unpredictable as it depends on the speaker's intention.

In all the given examples of quantitative variations in the PhUs, the changes were not radical as they did not alter the semantics of the PhU and its core components. Such purely quantitative changes may be considered to be of the first, or **primary level**.

The **second, deeper level of variation** concerns *qualitative changes* of a phraseological unit.

The *first degree of qualitative level of variation* of a PhU is related to the alteration of the part-of-speech meaning of the whole PhU as in *a stone's throw* (n) → *stone-throwing* (adj) in the following sentence:

- (15) *The other situation was a large rioting crowd threatening troops at a stone-throwing distance.*

Still, the next, *second degree of qualitative level of variation* of a PhU observed in a nominative phraseological unit refers to the change of lexical meaning of the whole PhU when a new meaning is derived on the basis of the former one. It tends to be connected with paraphrasing involving additional constructional and grammatical changes. Thus, the PhU *to cast/throw the first stone* that has the meaning 'be the first to make an accusation (used to emphasize that a potential critic is not wholly blameless)' and Biblical allusion may have the following use:

- (16) *"No, I don't throw stones though I can't understand it," she said shrugging her shoulders.*

In this context, the construction *to throw stones* means ‘to hurl insults or criticisms (at someone or something)’. This syntactically and semantically changed construction is related to the original Biblical PhU *throw stones at smb*.

So, all in all, the following universal model of hierarchy of levels and degrees of a word-group variation may be postulated:

L0 – zero variation in completely frozen PhU,

L1 – first (quantitative) level of a PhU variation:

- a) *substitution of a word by its synonym* (lexical variation),
- b) *morphological change of a word* (grammatical variation),
- c) *addition or subtraction of a word (words)* (structural variation),

L2 – second (qualitative level) of a PhU variation:

- a) *alteration of a PhU in its part-of-speech meaning,*
- b) *change of the lexical meaning of a PhU that may go along with its paraphrasing involving constructional, lexical and morphological changes,*

L3 – third (almost unrestricted) level of variation in a free word group.

However, in different languages and even in different PhUs of the same language, the realization of this potential PhUs variation model may be different.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the conducted analysis, we may state that English and Chinese reveal different structural-semantic groups of phraseological units but each of them undergo variations. Variations in PhUs may occur due to cognitive (related to the nature of cognition), structural (related to the language structure), and subjective (pragmatic, related to the speaker’s intention) reasons.

Phraseological units in the studied languages demonstrate various types of variation (lexical, grammatical, constructional, and pragmatic), lexical variation being the leading type in both the languages. In Chinese, it is more characteristic of colloquial short phrases – *locutions* and also of *proverbs* and *sayings*. Two-part allegorical sayings with a riddle and an answer inside (*xiē hòu yǔs*) tend to admit in speech only constructional variation by shortening. Yet, when reference is made only to the first part containing a riddle, some lexical components may be added there, too. Phraseological variations are not characteristic of four-character rhythmic *chengyu groups*, going back into long history, and of quotations, where conventionalization is very high. In English, we observe all the 4 types of variation while in Chinese we have

found only 3 of them: due to the lack of morphological forms of words we did not find in our material grammatical changes of PhUs.

The potential PhU variation model is suggested which takes into account different degrees of quantitative and qualitative phraseological changes on different levels from frozen phrases on the top to free phrases on the bottom.

Corpora

corpus.byu.edu. <https://corpus.byu.edu/>

国家语委现代汉语语料库 [Chinese National corpus]. <http://www.cnccorpus.org/>

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Tipos y grados de variación en unidades fraseológicas inglés y chino

Resumen

El análisis realizado nos permite afirmar que el inglés y el chino revelan diferentes grupos semánticos estructurales de unidades fraseológicas, pero cada uno de ellos experimenta variaciones. Las variaciones en las unidades fraseológicas pueden ocurrir debido a razones cognitivas (relacionadas con la naturaleza de la cognición), estructurales (relacionadas con la estructura de la lengua) y subjetivas (pragmáticas, relacionadas con el hablante).

Las unidades fraseológicas en los idiomas en cuestión demuestran varios tipos de variación (léxico, gramatical, constructivo y pragmático), siendo la variación léxica el tipo principal en ambos idiomas. En chino la variación léxica es más característica de cortas frases coloquiales: locuciones y también de proverbios y refranes. Los dichos alegóricos de dos partes que son un acertijo y su solución (*xiē hòu yǔs*) generalmente admiten en el discurso solo una variación constructiva por acortamiento, cuando se hace referencia solo a la primera parte que contiene un acertijo, aunque también se pueden agregar algunos componentes léxicos. Las variaciones fraseológicas no son características de los grupos rítmicos de cuatro caracteres *chengyu*, que se remontan a una larga historia, y de citas, donde la convencionalización es muy alta. En inglés observamos los 4 tipos de variación, mientras que en chino hemos encontrado solo 3 de ellos: debido a la falta de formas morfológicas de palabras no encontramos en nuestro material cambios gramaticales de unidades fraseológicas.

Se sugiere un modelo potencial de variación de unidades fraseológicas que toma en cuenta diferentes grados de cambios cuantitativos y cualitativos en diferentes niveles, desde frases congeladas en la parte superior hasta frases libres en la parte inferior.