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Phraseological metaphor: Dead or alive?

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It is quite a commonplace to say that phraseological units¹ (PUs) are clichés or dead metaphors. This approach can be seen not only in many works of the 1970s and the 1980s, but also the 1990s. The traditional view proceeds from the approach to phraseology as petrified language. For instance, Kirkpatrick's recent dictionary of phraseology is called *Dictionary of Clichés* (1996a). In her ten-page Introduction to the dictionary Kirkpatrick points out that the cliché is "a pejorative term for an expression that has lost its first bloom and thus its potency" (Kirkpatrick 1996b: vi). She brands all familiar PUs as clichés, which are stale, overused and over-abused stereotypes, the old stock which cannot boast of actions or processes, lacking freshness. Kirkpatrick argues that the cliché has been convincingly established as "the bad guy of the English language. Furthermore it is the worst kind of bad guy - the bad guy that used to be a good guy before it suffered a fall from grace", that is, a fall from freshness (Kirkpatrick 1996b: vi).

The old view still persists in the face of achievements in cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics (Ricoeur [1978] 1994; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Sweetser 1990; Gibbs [1994] 1999; Steen 1994; Kövesces 2002 and many others), which reveal that metaphoric meanings are motivated by people's conceptual knowledge, which includes metaphorical and metonymic schemes of thought. Gibbs argues that idioms are not simply frozen phrases but are excellent indicators of how people think metaphorically in their everyday lives. He exposes the myth that idioms are simple dead metaphors and argues against the traditional view that idioms have lost their metaphoricity over time and they now exist in the mental lexicon as frozen semantic units or dead metaphors. He shows that they actually retain a good deal of their metaphoricity and reflect metaphorical schemes of thought, which exist independently as part of our conceptual system (Gibbs [1994] 1999: Ch. 6).

♦ Anita Naciscione, *Latvian Academy of Culture*.

1 The phraseological unit is a stable, cohesive combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning. For my understanding of the basic terms in phraseology see Naciscione 2001.

Phraseological Metaphor in Discourse

It is known that reading involves the interaction of the mind with the text and places certain demands on its readers in terms of inference making (see Emmot [1997] 1999). The cognitive approach to metaphor has contributed greatly to identifying, understanding and appreciating lexical metaphor in language and in discourse processing (see Steen 1994; Steen 2002). The identification of phraseological metaphor, however, presents additional challenges due to theoretical obscurity and increased textual complexity.

The dead-metaphor approach follows from the premise that PUs were fresh at one time but are frozen and dead now. It is true that PUs are stable language units. Indeed, they have a permanent form and meaning at a given period of development. The semantic and stylistic cohesion of the base form² and the abstraction of phraseological meaning predetermine stability and a constant shape. However, stability is not a sign of stagnation or a lack of freshness. Stability means inherent semantic and structural permanency over the period of time while the PU exists. If the unit is not stable, it is not a phraseological unit! If PUs are stable, it does not follow that they are necessarily dead unless they become obsolete. It is the stable, cohesive and figurative structure of phraseological meaning that secures the change and development of the PU in discourse and provides for the creation of novel forms and meanings. The term *cliché* is inappropriate, as it presupposes lack of life, a certain stiffness, inability to change and lack of potential to develop in discourse. It assumes that the unit is no longer alive.

When the creative use of PUs is discussed, it is often labelled by such pejorative terms as *anomaly*, *decomposition*, *defectiveness*, *deficiency*, *deformation*, *departure*, *deviation*, *distortion*, *infringement*, *manipulation*, *violation* and others, which show disapproval and lend a negative aura. This approach implies non-acceptance of stylistic changes of PUs as a fact of discourse. However, these changes are widespread. A cognitive approach helps to disclose the processes of the mind in creative thinking, the role of associations, understand the process of the perception and comprehension of the development of figurative meaning and view it as a natural discourse phenomenon.

In phraseology it is crucial to understand the difference between the base form, core use³ and instantial stylistic use⁴. Let me turn to the base form of a common PU **to slip**

2 The base form is the dictionary form and meaning stored in the long-term memory of the language user. It is retrieved when a discourse situation calls for it.

3 Core use is the use of a PU in its most common form and meaning without any additional stylistic features. It never exceeds the boundaries of one sentence, the same as the base form.

4 Instantial stylistic use is a stylistic realisation in discourse, it is a particular instance of a unique stylistic application of a PU, resulting in significant changes in its form and meaning determined by the context.

on a banana skin/peel⁵. It is based on a conventional phraseological metaphor, one of the “bad guys” of the English language, a favourite of journalists, cartoonists and compilers of comics.

Doesn't it really sound much too common, hackneyed or even banal? Isn't it something so ordinary that it is not at all effective or interesting? Yes, up to a point. It all depends on the context and the message conveyed, as well as the creative skills and the ingenuity of the author. The PU is lifeless if it is encased in a dictionary head form. There is no freshness about it, like any other inventory. It is static, and what is more, it is not supposed to be dynamic in its base form. Indeed, the base form does not offer any freshness, nor does core use:

Most of the nation would enjoy seeing mighty Liverpool **slip on a banana skin** in front of millions. (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* 1995)

The PU *to slip on a banana skin/peel* is based on a metaphor, but it is not a dead metaphor. It is just an informal conventional metaphor that often appears in political contexts, especially in newspapers to underscore a publicly embarrassing situation. In discourse this conventional metaphor is not doomed to remain in the same set form as it is found in a dictionary entry. Only in dictionary entries are PUs ready-made static word combinations. Phraseology is not merely a list of dictionary entries, it comes to life in use. Moreover, core use is not the only way PUs function in discourse, it is not the be-all and end-all of their existence. Hence, in identification it is essential to establish its scope. Is the aim merely to identify the conventional metaphor of the base form of the PU, which is brought out in core use? Or is the aim also to identify the instantial figurative meaning of the PU in discourse?

The figurative meaning of PUs may be further enhanced in discourse: they may acquire special emphasis in a specific stylistic instantiation. Instantial stylistic use draws upon the metaphor, which is inherent in the base form. Instantial forms are stylistic instances of naturally occurring PUs in discourse, they meet the needs of a new discourse environment, contributing to text unity. Instantial use is a life form of PUs in discourse, a way of being.

Extended phraseological metaphor is one of the patterns⁶ of instantial use. From a cognitive point of view it is an instantiation of creative metaphorical thinking. Texts show how seemingly hackneyed PUs acquire freshness and significance in instantial use as the inherent metaphoricality of the base form is enhanced in text:

5 I have indicated the forms of PUs for emphasis: base forms are marked bold and underlined; instantial elements are spaced and underlined; replaced elements are underlined double and spaced; cues are marked with a dotted line.

6 A pattern is a mental stylistic technique characterised by a number of formal and semantic features, which are compulsory for the new instantiations designed on the basis of the pattern. Patterns are part of the mental lexicon, stored in the long-term memory of the language user.

to slip on a banana skin/peel

We are hoping this is a new era for the club, but there have been a few banana skins lying around in the past when people have thought like that. (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* 1995)

The base metaphor of the PU, that is, the metaphor, which is part of the image of the PU in its base form, may find innumerable, often inimitable instantial applications, meeting the needs of the flow of figurative thought:

to slip on a banana skin/peel

This is nothing compared with the criticism the president gets from those major insiders who watch in horrified fascination as he lurches from one banana peel to another. (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* 1995)

I argue that extended phraseological metaphor reflects extended figurative thought. Empirical studies show that metaphor has become the thing to be expected in cognition instead of the thing to be avoided in language (Steen 1994: 4). One of the general characteristics of figurative language is that it is not deviant or ornamental but is pervasive in discourse (Gibbs [1994] 1999: 16).

Thus, the stylistic use of PUs is not a violation, a distortion, an infringement or an anomaly, but a deliberate choice. It is a new perception, a different point of view, a novel vision calling for a change in the standard form. Instantial stylistic use is a natural process, a textual channel for reflecting figurative thought. Frequently it is a way to convey a new experience or intense personal emotions:

to slip on a banana skin/peel

In darkness, bed, that eternal nocturnal re-entry into the womb, he lay for a minute or two staring at the ceiling; then smiled wanly to himself, a kind of metaphysical smile, potential being making peace with actual being. One would survive, being English; knowing to the farthest roots of one's existence that it was all, finally, a comedy, even when one was the butt, and the great step in the dark only from *terra firma*⁷ to **banana skin**.

(J. Fowles 1977)

This phraseological metaphor is instantiated in the author's narrative at a point of emotional tension. It is the final paragraph of a chapter⁸, summarizing the gist in a focussed way: Daniel's conflict of emotions, his feeling of instability and unnerving

⁷ Italicised by Fowles.

⁸ PUs frequently occur when the writer evaluates the events of the narrative (see McCarthy and Carter [1994] 1995: 111). For the use of PUs in summaries and evaluations see Moon 1998: 298-304.

vexation caused by wounded pride and the pique of rejection (see Fowles 1977: 608-9). The metaphorical meaning of a strong foothold is expressed by the formal PU *terra firma* which works as a cue to bring out the contrast. In this text it becomes a contextual antonym of *banana skin*, that is, the absence of a strong foothold. Abstraction is generally one of the features of phraseological meaning, however, the lack of an article before *banana skin* conveys a greater degree of abstraction. This piece of narrative shows that the PU is not dead and it is not “a bad guy” of the English language. The dead-metaphor view fails in the face of language in stylistic use. Instantial use serves as an excellent means and a boundless resource for creative thinking.

Creativity comes in when there is a need to convey a thought, yet the standard form does not meet the needs of the writer or the speaker. That is when the conventional metaphor becomes unconventional and the traditional proverbial wisdom acquires a new shade of meaning:

an apple a day keeps the doctor away

“You are not feeling ill, are you?” he asked, a trifle anxiously, that she might be suffering from one of the few remaining infectious diseases ...
“Anyhow, you ought to go and see the doctor,” said Henry. “A doctor a day keeps the jim-jams away,” he added heartily, driving home his hypnopædic adage with a clap on the shoulder. (A. Huxley)

The base form of this commonplace proverb sounds like a trite piece of medical wisdom how to stay healthy, however, the instantiation offers a new semantic insight. Syntactically the instantial form is identical with the base form, creating a parallel construction, aiding the retrieval of the base form and helping to disambiguate the instantiation.

Interestingly, *an apple a day keeps the doctor away* is not only the most popular medical proverb, but it is also among the 150 frequently used Anglo-American proverbs (Mieder and Holmes 2000: 75). For teaching purposes they are part of the so-called paremiological minimum of the English language, taught to fourth graders in the USA. Mieder gives a detailed and exciting account of this proverb: its origin, history, meaning and use (1993: 162-8). He also gives numerous instances of stylistic use⁹ including many advertisements and cartoons, pointing out that a decontextualised proverb is meaningless for all general purposes and that it is the metaphor of the proverb, which enables us to employ proverbs in so many different contexts (Mieder 1989: 20-1).

9 For stylistic use of *an apple a day keeps the doctor away* see Mieder 1989: 91, 271-2, 274, 296, 299, 305 and Mieder 1993: 162-3.

Figuration provides much of foundation for thought, reason and imagination (Gibbs [1994] 1999: 16). Instantial use is a flexible way to use figurative language units and convey a different cultural experience¹⁰. When depicting Victorian values and attitudes in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* Fowles touches upon a common error of the age: that of equating a high degree of sexual ignorance with a low degree of sexual pleasure. At the same time Fowles points out that "it seems very far from sure that the Victorians did not experience a much keener, because less frequent, sexual pleasure than we do" (Fowles 1969: 213). To express this thought, Fowles uses the proverb *an apple a day keeps the doctor away* in a spectacular way, resulting in the emergence of an imaginative picture. The PU acquires a novel form and meaning in this instantiation, however the bond with the base form persists:

an apple a day keeps the doctor away

We are not so frustrated as Victorians? Perhaps. But if you can only enjoy one apple a day, there's a great deal to be said against living in an orchard of the wretched things; you might even find apples sweeter if you are allowed only one a week. (J.Fowles 1969)

This stretch of text reveals the complexity of the semantic and stylistic extension of phraseological meaning. The metaphoric development is perceived against the background of the conventional base form:

<p><i>The base meaning of the PU</i> <u><i>an apple a day keeps the doctor away</i></u></p>	<p>Good for your health: apples</p>
<p>↓</p>	<p>↓</p>
<p><i>Instantial meaning</i> J. Fowles, <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i>, Ch. "Flights"</p>	<p>Good for your health: an act of sex</p>

This instantiation brings out the striking difference between a dictionary entry (conventional base meaning) and a piece of live text (unconventional instancial meaning). This is a case of phraseological allusion¹¹: only "apple a day" has been preserved from the base form. However, access to the base form of the PU is central to

¹⁰ On metaphoric thought and language as part of the cultural world see Gibbs 1999: 145-66. On metaphors and cultural models see Cienki 1999: 189-203.

¹¹ Phraseological allusion is an implicit reference to the image of a phraseological unit, which is represented in discourse by one or more explicit image-bearing components, hinting at the image. Allusion shows the strength of cohesion inherent in the PU: one or more components are in a position to evoke associations with the whole PU. The explicit image-bearing components of the PU have a metonymic function, they act like a recall cue alluding to the PU and providing a web of associative links.

the perception, identification and interpretation of the semantic and stylistic implications of the allusion. The continuity of figurative thought is secured by cohesive ties: the instantial elements refer back to the few isolated components, which have been preserved, including the image-bearing component *apple*, which evoke associations with the whole PU, supported by the sub-image *orchard* which is born as the thought develops. This PU has never been used in this way before and most likely it will never be used in this instantial form again. Instantial stylistic use is one of the techniques that lends “an individual ‘fingerprint’ or ‘voiceprint’ to a text” (McRae [1987] 1990: 23).

Conclusion

Further development of both the theory of metaphor and the theory of phraseology will generate more awareness, which also involves abilities and skills to perceive, comprehend and infer. One of the reasons why the stylistic use of PUs is not fully understood and appreciated is lack of informed awareness of semantic and stylistic changes in various contexts. In discourse PUs are not harnessed in a strict unchangeable form, nor are they rigidly encased in core use. In text PUs may be shaped to establish new cohesive stylistic ties and create new meanings depending on the discourse environment. Another reason is lack of readiness to accept the new stylistic instantiations as facts of discourse, as a way of being. Discourse offers innumerable instances and a great variety of stylistic use, which call for enhanced understanding and appreciation of figurative language. My conclusion is that extended phraseological metaphor reflects extended figurative thought. As thought develops, phraseological metaphor develops too.

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