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Introduction: the birth and propagation of phraseological units

Damien Villers

- 1 Phraseology¹ – the study of preconstructed expressions also known as *phrasemes*, *set phrases*, *phraseological units*, *multi-word units*, *formulaic language*, *word combinations*, etc. – has been a very productive and major field of research since its “coming of age” in the 1990s (Cowie [1998]). It has generated numerous works on a wide variety of topics. However, the birth and propagation of phraseological units (PU) has been among the least discussed aspects. Several reasons might account for this dearth in specialised literature, such as the passing of time, which makes it tedious and difficult to study the origins of phrasemes, most of which are centuries old and mainly present in the oral tradition. Another reason is the difficulty to differentiate the creator of a phrase from a famous user (Villers & Mieder [2017]), despite gigantic corpora that include billions of words. Finally, as pointed by Burger *et al.* [2007], certain areas of research have come to assume a more “central role” in phraseology, such as the cognitive (Dobrovolski & Piirainen [2005], Gibbs [1995], Wray [2008]), the cultural (Piirainen [2012], Sabban [2007], Szerszunowicz [2009]), the didactic (Fielder [2007], Meunier & Granger [2008]), or lexicographic approaches (Cowie [2012], Mel’cuk [2012], Moon [1998]). This has left very little limelight for phenomena like the birth and propagation of phrasemes. The current issue of *Lexis* aims to fill this gap and expand on existing research.
- 2 Among specialised literature, where subtypes like proverbs and idioms are often the focus of research, it is generally accepted that a substantial portion of phrasemes originates in written works such as the Bible, Latin and Greek classics and the translations of Erasmus’s collections of sayings, or Antique fables (Mieder [2015], Paczolay [1997], Piirainen [2012]). Nowadays, the sources have evolved, making a corpus-based approach slightly easier. Scholars who have focused on modern phrasemes note that they tend to originate in mass media (Lau *et al.* [2004], Mieder [2015]): films (*Run, Forrest, run!* from *Forrest Gump*), TV shows (*Is that your final answer?* from *Who wants to be a millionaire*), advertising slogans (*Because you’re worth it* from L’Oreal), songs (*Eye of the Tiger* by Survivor), viral images on the Internet, i.e. *memes*

(*Haters gonna hate*) and even video games (*The cake is a lie* from *Portal*, Villers [2018]). Unsurprisingly, some of them also stem from social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok.

- 3 The process of phraseological birth and propagation is even more elusive than the identification of the sources and creators. Scholars generally consider that PUs are “linguistic signs that are handed down historically and coined culturally” (Piirainen [2012]). Their creation is traditionally viewed as a particular type of *lexicalisation* (Bauer [1983], Fielder [2007]). This famous and controversial notion may be summarised as a diachronic and progressive process whereby a new element is coined and becomes accepted by a larger community, resulting in semantic or formal modifications that imply a loss of motivation or departure from productive rules (Bauer [1983], Hohenhaus [2005], Lipka [1992]). But the latter modifications do not seem to be compatible with all types of phraseological units, which is why many scholars, including Quirk *et al.* [1985] or Moon [1998], use the term *institutionalization*, which implies a more sociolinguistic approach, while cognitive linguists prefer the notion of *entrenchment* (Langacker [2017]). Other domain-specific hyponyms are sometimes used: *phraseologization* (e.g. Mel’cuk [2021]) or *phraseogenesis* and *phraseme genesis* in Villers [2018, 2022]. The latter draws from Heylighen & Chielens [2009] and adapts their “memetic” approach – a cultural analogue of genetics – to phrasemes, resulting in a model that identifies four main stages in phraseme genesis (stimulus, coinage, exposure, and dissemination cycles, along with optional origin obscuration and formal or semantic modifications) as well as a dozen key factors or *propagation boosters*, which include, among others, novelty, usefulness, simplicity, ornatus, publicity, or prestige.
- 4 Despite a variety of labels and conflicting definitions, all these terms refer to the very same phenomenon, which concerns all neologisms. This is why the two general stages mentioned above – coinage and acceptance – are consistently identified in the descriptions of linguists and folklorists alike (Bauer [1983], Mieder [2015], Taylor [1934]). This still leaves us with many questions, and more research is needed to consolidate this relatively uncharted area. This is why the present volume contains articles on the following topics: the birth and lexicalization of phraseological units, the factors that boost their chances of propagation, and their various media of propagation – including modern ones.
- 5 **Wolfgang Mieder** opens the volume with a case study on the birth of the proverbial pattern “X makes strange bedfellows”. After tracing its origins to the literary quotation “Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows” from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611), he undertakes a lexicographic investigation in numerous works by listing relevant occurrences and analysing how intentional modifications or reductions of the quotation progressively gave rise to a new set of variants (*Misery makes strange bedfellows*, *Politics makes strange bedfellows*, etc.). Over time, some variants thus gained currency by imitation of the pattern and the Shakespearian source was progressively forgotten, meeting the criteria for the proverbial label.
- 6 **Jean-Claude Ansbre** examines several English proverbs and their French or Spanish counterparts in order to identify their origins and the variations they underwent. By making a distinction between several aspects of a proverb, such as its lesson, its image, or its structure, he manages to highlight the role played by great authors (Shakespeare, Cervantes, La Fontaine, etc.) and the influence of Latin texts in the birth of well-known proverbs. Thus, the proverbial lesson is often attributable to

Latin (or prior) sources while the alleged fathers are often responsible only for creating the proverbial structure. Sometimes, authors can only be credited for propagating an already existing formula, as is the case with Shakespeare and *All is well that ends well*.

- 7 **Tamara Janevska** studies the relatively young idiom *It's not rocket science* and applies the genesis model devised by Villers [2018, 2022], and inspired by memetics, to identify the steps in its creation. In a corpus-based approach, she uses online tools like COCA and Google Books to ascertain, despite their limitations, that the idiom gained currency in 1987 and first appeared in a magazine before propagating via several media such as the Internet or television. The author pays great attention to the criteria or “propagation boosters” that helped the formula gain currency and highlights several essential qualities, such as ornatus, utility, or novelty. She concludes with a diagram depicting the steps in the genesis of the idiom.
- 8 **Ramón Martí Solano** focuses on a particular subset of binomials that contain semantic or phonetic repetition, such as *naming and shaming* or *huffing and puffing*. After introductory remarks on terminology and the phenomenon of repetition, he uses three online news corpora to analyse the frequency and usage of numerous binomials, thus establishing the negative axiological value of the *V-ing and V-ing* pattern. He also sheds light on the productivity of the pattern and the creation of new combinations based on established binomials (e.g. *moaning and groaning*, *moaning and whining*) while paying great attention to the reasons for such phraseological births, including the role played by lexical analogy.
- 9 **Julian Schütz** investigates four quotations or “winged words” (such as *To be or not to be*, attributed to Shakespeare) as well as the role of axiological values in their propagation. Drawing from cognitive studies and notions such as intertextuality, he posits that the way we perceive things and the cultural values contained in winged words are propagation boosters. He also stresses the importance of expressivity and communicative functions in the institutionalisation of new winged words. The author then uses online corpora to examine the patterns and frequency in a sample of winged words, revealing a scale of intertextuality and variability.
- 10 **Victoria Fendel** focuses on support-verb constructions such as *to make a suggestion*. Drawing from Mel'cuk's Sens-Texte framework, she presents the various categories of phrasemes in order to depict the various labels that can be ascribed to the heterogenous class under study: *to pay attention* (collocation), *to spill the beans* (idiom), *to take aim* (pragmateme). The author then meticulously traces the origins and evolution of three Greek constructions in documentary and literary corpora, noting important diachronic changes: for instance, some constructions retreated into the higher registers after the classical period while others became more specialised, appearing more frequently in medical texts.
- 11 Finally, **Matej Meterc** explores the humorous phraseological reply “I am serious. And don't call me Shirley”, which originated in the 1980 film *Airplane!*, starring Leslie Nielsen. The author describes the birth of this young phraseme, starting with its precise origins as a joke meant to parody a disaster movie. He then examines the reasons for its propagation and its means of propagation. Despite a rather low frequency in written corpora, the reply's humorous appeal allowed it to be used in various media (books, video games, or TV series like *The Office*), and, more importantly, in Internet memes. This mostly visual medium proved to be a very effective

propagating agent as the reply was adapted into a variety of meme combinations that included popular and modern cultural references.

- 12 In a nutshell, all articles pay particular attention to the birth of phraseological units and therefore adopt a diachronic approach, but some also delve deeper into the factors or media of propagation for PUs by using various angles or fields of expertise. However, all authors give great importance to the notion of variability. There is great diversity in the nature of the phraseological units studied: proverbs, proverbial patterns, quotations, idioms, binomials, support-verb constructions, humorous replies, which are drawn from an equally diverse range of sources: from literary classics to TV series and Internet memes, including news or scientific corpora. This miscellany of perspectives made it possible to shed some light on the very opaque phenomenon of phraseological birth, including its forms and factors.

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NOTES

1. In recent years, several scholars have pleaded for an extension of the notion of phraseology, in order to include syntactic patterns or polylexemic units made of only one word. Famous advocates include Legallois & Tutin [2013] or Mel'čuk [2015].

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