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# Lexical Variation within Phraseological Units

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## Abstract

This paper discusses lexical variation in phraseological units from theoretical and lexicographical perspectives. The starting point is the observation that the existence of lexical variation is sometimes disputed in principle. It has been argued that a change in a single word is sufficient to change the meaning of the whole, thus creating a new expression. Another argument is that after allowing variation in one word one cannot but allow it in multiple words, which quickly turns the original expression unrecognizable. In contrast to these views, this paper argues that lexical variation is not arbitrary but follows certain principles. When all contributing factors are taken into account, the variation in phraseological units is often item-specific, and yet it conforms to general patterns. Towards the end of the paper, Petrova's (2011) multi-level model will be introduced, offering a promising view for theoretical analysis. However, in dictionary work it is reasonable to adhere to generally accepted conventions and not to complicate the structure of the entries too much. An ideal entry gives a sound corpus-based description with representative examples of usage.

**Keywords:** phraseology; lexical variation; usage-based; idiomatic meaning; lexicographical practices

## 1 Introduction

Lexical variation within phraseological units raises theoretical and practical problems. One of the major questions is how phraseological units are learned and recognized if not with the help of the lexical items that constitute them. This paper starts with the question of whether lexical variation is acceptable in the first place (either in lexicography or in theory). Most dictionaries I have consulted allow variation but there are differences in “how much” and “what kind”.

I will show that lexical variation is not radically different from other types of variation, grammatical and structural variation, and that their workings can be described in a common model.

## 2 Two Opposing Views

It is common knowledge today (Moon 1998a: 92; Atkins & Rundell 2008: 168 among others) that there is a considerable amount of variation within multiword expressions, or phraseological units as I call

them in this paper. However, there are two opposing views on how to deal with expressions that are very similar to each other, except for single lexical choices as in, for instance, (1):

(1) rats desert/leave/quit/forsake a (sinking) ship (ODEI)

Some researchers exclude lexical variation from phraseological units in principle: substituting a word for another would automatically mean that the result no longer represents the same item as the original one (Wulff 2008: 76). In contrast, other researchers consider lexical substitutability as one type of variation alongside morphosyntactic variation (e.g. Sköldberg 2004).

The opposite views may be due to differences in theoretical frameworks, but they may also be related to the amount of real life data researchers are familiar with. In my data set, collected from newspapers and the Internet, there is a considerable amount of variation in which two or more (near)synonyms occur in one and the same context without difference in meaning, as in the case *rats desert/leave a sinking ship*. The sheer number of such cases requires attention.

If lexical substitutability is allowed, it leads to a question of how phraseological units are defined – and originally recognized – if not with the help of the words that constitute them. On the other hand, if all expressions that are not lexically identical represent different phraseological units, we are left with plenty of units that highly resemble each other and without any formal means to record this in the lexicon.

### 3 Variation Patterns

In order to get a more detailed idea of what kind of alternation patterns there are in phraseological units, I will briefly consider a few examples from earlier studies on variation. Here I will mostly rely on Moon's systematic work on fixed expressions in English (1998b) and my own studies on Finnish verb phrase idioms (Heinonen 2013, 2007), but I will cite examples from various sources.

#### 3.1 Grammatical, Constructional and Lexical Variation

I will start by dividing the area of variation into three subfields: grammatical, constructional and lexical. These three phenomena are conceptually separable, but they co-occur in actual utterances. For instance, a constructional variant often occurs with specific lexical choices. By grammatical variation I mean variation in morphosyntactic features such as number, definiteness, voice and tense. Typically, the predicate verb inflects, albeit not quite freely (Moon 1998b: 94), but its nominal complements tend to be fixed in specific forms (2). However, in some cases also features in noun phrases may vary, especially if the idiomatic expression is metaphorically analyzable (3).

(2) she *gets* ~ *got* cold feet (! a cold foot)<sup>1</sup>

(3) (Swedish:) *dra sitt strå* (~ *sina strån*) till stacken

literally: drag one's straw (~ straws) to the stack

'contribute one's share to a common purpose' (Sköldbberg 2004: 203, 311-312)

Inflectional restrictions are idiom-specific: for instance, some phraseological units passivize, some do not. Uttermost, the list of restrictions covers almost all the features: Čermák (2001: 15) cites a dictionary entry for the Czech idiom *tahat někoho za nohu* 'to pull someone's leg' which states that the predicate verb does not normally occur in the interrogative, negative, passive, conditional, imperative, future, or in the 1st person. It looks like these restrictions cannot be purely grammatical, but they describe the way the idiom is normally used.

For (2), the idiom dictionaries CCID and ODEI give also constructional variants with different predicate verbs (4a-b). This alternation pattern with verbs 'get', 'have' and 'give' is typical of possessive idioms.

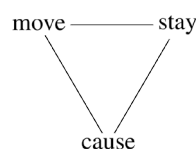
(4a) *get* cold feet or *have* cold feet about something (CCID)

(4b) *get*, (begin to) *have*, or *give* somebody cold feet (ODEI)

The constructional variants also include the alternative expressions of causation, states and processes. An example of causative variant is given in (5). – Moon (1998b: 139ff) lists these and some more patterns under the label "systematic variation".

(5) *go* through the wringer – *put* someone through the wringer (Moon 1998b: 141)

Generally speaking, the variation in the above patterns forms a simple grid with three points: causation, change and state, see figure 1. All these points can have a possessive interpretation as well: one could represent that as parallel to the basic grid. Verbs like *give*, *put* and *throw* are among the verbs that occur in the causative pattern, verbs like *get* and *go* express change or movement, and the verbs *be* and *have* are the primary state verbs.



**Figure 1: A basic constructional grid for causation, change or movement, and state.**

1 ! before the variant means that the idiomatic meaning gets lost.

Constructional and lexical variations also meet in extra modification (6).

(6) a *recent* tempest in a *publishing* teapot (Ernst 1981: 54)

Finally, the main focus of this paper, “pure” lexical variation occurs within a single construction. In examples (7) to (9) two or more near-synonymous or otherwise conceptually related words are in paradigmatic alternation. In (7) and (8), both choices are conventionalized, in (9), the first two.

(7) a *chink* ~ *crack* in one’s armour (ODEI)

(8) *flog* ~ *beat* a dead horse (Moon 1998b: 133)

(9) (Finnish:) kahvihammasta *pahottaa* ~ *kolottaa* ~ *särkee* (and several other verbs meaning ‘ache’)

literally: a coffee tooth is aching

‘someone has a craving for coffee’ (Heinonen 2013: 123-124)

It is important to notice that *not* all lexical variation is like this. In example (10b), the substitute for *family*, “the EU”, is not a semantically related word to *family*, but an expression whose referent can be seen as a kind of family. Here we are not operating inside the lexicon, but with categories or sets defined by common attributes (Philip 2008: 105-106).

(10a) black sheep of the *family*

(10b) black sheep of the *EU* (Philip 2008: 106)

Two or more lexical elements of one phraseological unit may also co-vary. Often they vary basically independently of each other (11), even though some combinations are more typical than others.

(11) shake ~ quake ~ quiver in one’s boots ~ shoes (Moon 1998a: 95, Moon 1998b: 161)

As far as I know, covariance is not widely studied in phraseology. Moon (1998b: 161ff) refers to cases like (11) as “idiom schemas”. The variants are listed and given some cover terms like ‘oscillate in one’s footwear’. In Moon (2008), she studies a similar phenomenon in similes of the structure ‘thin’ + *as* + ‘something which is very narrow in comparison to its length’. Here, it is easy to see that the concrete realizations differ from each other in connotations even though the schema represents the variants in very much the same way as in (11). *Skinny as a rat* sounds less attractive than *thin as a whippet* (id. 9-11). There are also collocational preferences.

In some phraseological units, however, one variant is dependent on the other (12):

(12) (Finnish:) lähtee kuin *hauki rannasta* ~ *talonmies peltikatolta* ~ *faarao sarkofagista* (and many others)

literally: leaves like a pike from a shore ~ a janitor from a tin roof ~ a pharaoh from a sarcophagus  
‘leaves quickly’

In this simile schema, someone or something leaves a place where they either belong or that they are at least strongly associated with. An attempt at explaining the mechanisms behind covariance is made by Stefanowitsch and Gries (2005). Their answer is, unsurprisingly, that the varying elements cohere semantically. More exactly, they divide semantic coherence into (at least) three different kinds: coherence based on frame-semantic knowledge, coherence based on prototypes, and image-schematic coherence. To my understanding, the coherence in similes in (12) would represent “frame-semantic” coherence.

### 3.2 Lexical Variation in Dictionary Entries

The presentation of dictionary entries has traditionally been dense. This also shows in how phraseological variants may be placed side by side, for example, in ODEI and in Duden (13).

(13) einen klaren/kühlen Kopf bewahren/behalten (Duden s.v. *Kopf*).

The practices vary, but generally speaking dictionaries have specific means to indicate if a phraseological unit has more than one lexical choice (a slash in 13, the word *or* and parentheses in 14, a comma in 15). It follows that lexical variation in phrases is usually *de facto* accepted in lexicography. How systematically lexical variation is taken into account depends mostly on the type of the dictionary: phraseological dictionaries such as ODEI and CCID are systematic, general dictionaries, such as KS, are less so.

(14) throw (or pour) cold water on (NODE s.v. *cold*)

(15) (Finnish:) erottaa, seuloa jyvät akanoista (KS s.v. *jyvä*)  
'separate, sift the wheat from the chaff'

Dictionary conventions actually work equally well for bundles of idiomatic expressions that have different, perhaps even opposite meanings, as in (16):

(16) say the right/wrong thing (ODEI)

Seen this way, a dictionary entry could also stand for partly formal idioms, following the terminology by Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor (1988). In their parlance, formal idioms are lexically open syntactic patterns or constructions, while what we have traditionally called idioms are substantive or lexically specified idioms. What I find interesting here is the area between these, ie. partially open idioms. An actual example of a partially open, partially specified (sub)entry is given in (17):

(17) play the ---- card e.g., *he saw an opportunity to play the peace card* (NODE s.v. *card*)

Two or more alternating slots predict multiplied combinations. In the case of (13), two adjectives (*klar, kühl*) and two verbs (*bewahren, behalten*) combine in four different ways. In this case, the generalization is valid: all predicted forms actually occur in texts. However, all combinations are not as common: corpus studies via DWDS reveal differences in frequencies. As far as I know, there are no lexicographic conventions that help the user pick the most idiomatic combination(s) in such situations.

Sometimes the variation is not limited to specific words but the alternation set is lexically open. Many Finnish verb phrase idioms allow plenty of variation in the predicate verb. I searched for verb variants in the idiom *heittää hapuloita rattaisiin* ('throw batons to (the wheels of) a carriage [in order to prevent something from succeeding]') in a newspaper corpus FTC and found about 20 different predicate verbs (some of them listed in 18a-e). Of these, six verbs are rather common (16–30 hits), three occur about five times and the rest are mostly hapaxes. In (18a-e), the attested verbs are divided into meaning groups (based on Heinonen 2007: 155 and Heinonen 2013:156-157), and the main six variants are in boldface.

(18a) 'throw': **heittää, heitellä**, viskoa, viskellä

(18b) 'put': **panna, laittaa**, asettaa, asetella

(18c) 'stick': **pistää**, pistellä, tuikkia

(18d) 'push': työntää, pötkkiä

(18e) 'hit': **lyödä**, iskeä

The general dictionary KS mentions the verbs *heitellä* and *panna* in this idiom, and the phraseological dictionary SSIS lists all the six common ones. (SSIS is based on the same corpus as my search.)

One solution to the problem of long lists is to generalize over the choices as in (18a-e). However, it is not always clear how these sets should be labeled and interpreted. Also, some lexical items are preferred over others with similar meanings. Notice that in (17), the idiom contains an open, unspecified slot, but the explanation given – that it should refer to an “issue or idea” that can be exploited especially for “political advantage” – does not really limit the choice of appropriate fillers, and this is possibly the most we can say, besides giving attested examples. Another problem is that the sets (in whatever way they are defined) tend to leak. There are a few Finnish idioms with a lexical item that refers to a human head. Still, the appropriate sets for a ‘head’ are partly lexically specified: in one idiom you can refer to a head metaphorically as a ‘cabbage’, in another as a ‘pin’, but not the other way round (Heinonen 2013: 197-198). Jezek and Hanks (2010) make the same observation, saying that paradigmatic sets of words do not map neatly onto conceptual categories, and neither are there stable generalizations over different contexts.

## 4 One or More Units

There are two further points that speak for lexical variation in phraseological units: interpretation of regular derivational variants (4.1) and language learning as usage-based process (4.2). Issues of variation vs. modification and canonical forms are dealt with briefly in (4.3).

### 4.1 Difference in Meaning as a Criterion

A difference in meaning has been a crucial factor in separating phraseological units from each other. However, it should be kept in mind that a change in one element usually contributes to the full meaning quite predictably. In Finnish, certain derivative affixes can change the aspect of the verb. Substituting a verb with its derived counterpart expressing frequentative aspect counts as lexical substitution (cf. 19a and 19b); still, the resulting difference in meaning is quite straightforward: it is actually comparable to how inflectional affixes are interpreted (cf. 19b and 19c):

(19a) (Finnish:) *heittää* kapuloita rattaisiin

(literally:) throws batons to (the wheels of ) a carriage

‘places obstacles in order to prevent something from succeeding’

(19b) *heittelee* kapuloita rattaisiin

keeps throwing batons [...]

(19c) *heitti* kapuloita rattaisiin.

threw batons [...]

I would suggest that the predictability of a change in meaning also applies when a word is substituted with an unrelated word. As long as the phraseological unit is recognized, its meaning can be modified according to the contribution the substitute part carries along.

### 4.2 Where are the Limits of One Unit?

At which point does a phraseological unit change into another one? Čermák (2001: 7) raises this question of an idiom’s identity if we allow lexical variation within them. I believe that it is not possible to define from outside how the units are organized in the mental lexicons of speakers. It is likely there is not just one way in which phraseological units and lexical items are connected to each other. The individual lexicons develop hand in hand with language use. When we learn an expression, we also learn, little by little, how it is used: inflection, meaning(s), suitable contexts.

Čermák’s example idiom ‘to pull someone’s leg’ referred to earlier is given a voluminous description in his and his colleagues dictionary (Čermák, Hronek & Machač 1994): not only does it cover the idiom’s valency, inflectional restrictions, meaning, style and appropriate context of use, but also the rela-

ted expressions and even equivalents in various other languages. Lacking knowledge of Czech, I cannot comment on this particular case but, in general, this sounds like a database and network of idioms as independent, lexically static units. Observations on language use may therefore lead to opposite conceptions on what phraseological units are like.

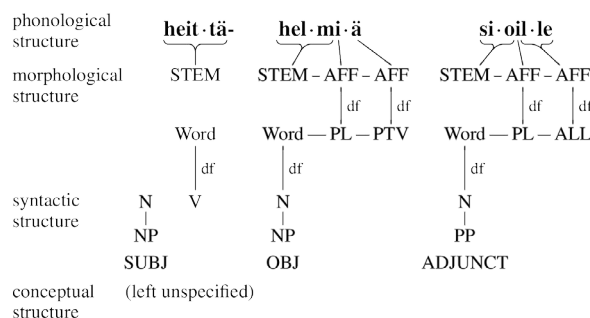
### 4.3 Canonical Forms and Variation

Talk about variation raises the question what the constants are. A canonical form of a phraseological unit appears to be a paradox. Philip (2008: 95, 103) refers to canonical forms as the most typical forms and, at the same time, as something that are generally outnumbered by corresponding non-canonical forms in language corpora. Canonical forms are often identified with dictionary citation forms, as if lexicographers would receive them by some divine announcement.

There is also a lexicographic tradition to keep established variation and temporary modification as separate phenomena (e.g. Burger, Buhofer & Sialm 1982). However, seen through corpora, variation and modification blend. They also derive from the same sources.

### 4.4 A Multi-Level Approach

If we accept lexical substitutability within one phraseological unit, we need to demonstrate how such a phraseological unit can be defined and identified. One applicable idea is the multi-level model by Petrova (2011), which is derived from Jackendoff’s Conceptual Semantics and more directly from Nikanne’s Tier-net model (Nikanne 2005: 191-210; Petrova 2011: 110ff). In Petrova’s model, one unit can vary at several tiers (phonological, morphological, syntactic, conceptual) at the same time (see figure 2). The idea is that the lexical items, as well as some of the inflectional affixes, are chosen by default (this is represented by df-links in the figure), but it is possible to substitute or even leave out one or more of the default items. The predicate verb inflects freely in the example case. The conceptual structure is relevant when substituting lexical items, since any other words following the same syntactic pattern would not do. For instance, *to throw balls to boys* does not represent the same phraseological unit as *to throw pearls to pigs*.



**Figure 2: The structure of the idiom X heittää helmiä siolle ‘X casts pearls before swine’ (literally ‘X throws pearls to pigs’) according to Petrova (2011: 151). The figure is heavily simplified from the original by the present author. PTV (partitive) and ALL (allative) are case markers.**



The model supports the view that lexical variation can be dealt with together with other varying elements and not as a separate issue. Petrova cites a good number of actual uses of the idiom *heittää helmiä sioille*, ‘cast pearls before swine’, which illustrate how the different sources of variation function together (20a-d). One typical pattern is a verbless construction (20a); in fact, it is the most common variant when all default features are taken into account simultaneously (ca. one quarter of all 480 tokens in Petrova’s study) and far more common than a “canonical” citation form (Petrova 2011: 219-220). In quite a few examples the syntactic pattern, inflectional forms or the words are not the default ones (20b-d).

(20a) Ei helmiä sioille, kuten sanonta kuuluu.

‘No pearls to pigs, as the saying goes.’ (Petrova 2011: 278)

(20b) *possulle* heitetty helmi

‘a pearl thrown to a piggy’ (id. 284)

(20c) viisauden helmien *jahamiseen* myös *meille typerämmille yksilöille*

‘distributing pearls of wisdom to us more stupid individuals’ (id. 281)

(20d) *Menikö* taas helmet *sinne kaukaloon* [?]

‘Did pearls go to that trough again [?]’ (id. 279)

The conceptual structure (left unspecified in figure 2 for ease of representation) contains detailed information on verb semantics, argument structure, what sorts of objects nominal complements refer to etc. (id. 137-138). It is straightforward to substitute *pig* for its near-synonym *piggy* (20b), but to connect *a trough* with *pigs* as in (20d) requires a larger situational framework. Since the predicate verb ‘throw’ involves causation, it is predictable that the idiom participates in the causative alternation pattern (20d, cf. figure 1). Petrova points out that the thrown objects, *pearls*, are evaluated by the speaker as good, and the recipients, *pigs*, as inadequate in some way (id. 24, 138). The variant to ‘pigs’ in (20c), ‘more stupid individuals’ reflects this.

It could be argued that this particular idiom is not representative in allowing much more variation than is normally the case. As can be seen, the idiom functions even with just one default lexical choice, *helmi*, ‘pearl’. One could claim accordingly that the noun *helmi* bears a metaphorical meaning that is available in any syntactic context. There are other similar cases of syntactically “free” idiomatic nouns, one often cited example is that of *carrot and stick* (Moon 1998a: 96). This is all true, but in examples (20b-d) the syntax is still pretty regular, and the lexical choices are bound to the default ones. I would claim that all idioms have specific ways of expressing themselves: *heittää helmiä sioille* and *heittää hapuloita rattaisiin* look similar on the front but differ in what options they offer for a language user.

The status of the lexicon in Petrova’s model has probably made the model especially receptive to lexical variation. The lexicon is seen as an interface between phonological, syntactic and conceptual le-

vels. As a drawback, this sometimes complicates discussion, as lexical items are referred to in terms of their phonological structure.

How the model keeps track of encountered usages of phraseological units is not, however, clear to me. All non-default choices are after all not as predictable. Sometimes, it may even be hard to pick the default among many potential ones (cf. 18a-e). Actually, the linking system emerges from usage, and is continually modified usage-based. Instead of one default link, there could be several, stronger or weaker links. In Petrova's model, non-default lexical choices are mostly licensed via conceptual structure (id. 317-344) or referential tier (id. 370-374). For instance, the door to constructional alternation opens through the conceptual structure of the predicate verb, in this case the verb *heittää* expressing caused motion. Cases like *black sheep of the EU* (10b above) fall into the referential tier, the substitution being partly based on extra-linguistic factors.

## 5 Practical Considerations

A phraseological unit is typically limited not only to the core lexical items but to a specific combination of restrictions and preferences with respect to inflectional features, grammatical patterns, contexts etc. All these factors should be taken into account when formulating a dictionary entry. However, the result should illustrate the most common patterns in usage, instead of overwhelming the user with unrelated details. I believe that one of the most successful ways to convey information on usage is to select representative examples (Fox 1987). It is also important to notice that phraseological units are not alike. For instance, the two *heittää* idioms cited in this paper behave differently in some respects even though they are almost identical morphosyntactically. For example, the verb *heittää* is not a clear default choice in the idiom *heittää kapuloita rattaisiin*, but it is in the idiom *heittää helmiä sioille*. The most common lexical variants are given in recent corpus-based phraseological dictionaries (CCID, SSIS).

## 6 Conclusion

Lexical variation within phraseological units raises theoretical and practical problems. The scope of lexical variation is quite wide overall and it is entangled with grammatical and contextual factors. One of the major questions is how phraseological units are learned and recognized in all their varying forms.

The view on phraseology and lexicon taken in this paper is usage-based. As I see it, all items are learned over and over again in contexts, and this leads to memorized items with a collection of information on different aspects, such as pronunciation, style, inflectional forms, conveyed meanings, and situational contexts. The memorized items are not stable, and there are numerous ways in which

they can be modified. However, since these items are usage-based, earlier experiences on their modifiability guides the future variations.

Meanwhile practical considerations guide us on how to write articles in dictionaries. Dictionary users should not be overwhelmed with detailed information on something that does not help them to understand and use the current expression. Besides, language learners are not as dependent on dictionaries as they used to be: it is common practice today to search the net to check if a specific wording is in use or not. Moreover, it is not even possible to list all thinkable options that are available to a language user.

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