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Terminologization Of Phraseological Units in Scientific Discourse

Sheraliyeva Shirin Abdisalomovna
Doctor of Sciences (DSc), Associate Professor (Int.), Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This article examines the terminologization of phraseological units (PUs), the process by which a phraseological unit acquires a specialised meaning within a particular field of knowledge or activity and becomes part of its terminological system. The relevance of the study stems from the growing interaction between general and specialised vocabulary and from the absence of a unified view of terminologization in phraseology. Drawing on Russian terminological theory and on material from A.V. Kunin's English-Russian phraseological dictionary and English specialised texts, the study applies linguistic description, the method of oppositions, transformational analysis and semantic (componential) analysis. A working definition of terminologization is formulated, criteria of the terminological status of a PU are proposed, and three pathways are distinguished: terminologization proper, re-terminologization, and the terminologization of culturally marked PUs. A detailed analysis of stalking horse and lame duck shows that a latent seme preserved during phraseologization motivates the later terminological meaning. The findings clarify the mechanisms of interaction between phraseology and terminology and can be applied in terminography, specialised translation and the teaching of English for specific purposes.

Keywords: Phraseology, phraseological unit, term, terminology, terminologization, re-terminologization, semantics, seme, scientific text, scientific discourse.

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1. Introduction

Phraseology and terminology have traditionally been studied as opposite poles of the lexicon. A term is expected to be monosemous within its system, stylistically neutral and supported by a definition, whereas a phraseological unit is typically figurative, expressive and culturally marked. Specialised discourse, however, shows that the two systems constantly interact. The languages of politics, economics, computing and the social sciences contain units such as stalking horse, lame duck, Trojan horse, brain drain and bottleneck, which originated as idioms or professional expressions and now function as terms with fixed definitions. The study of this interaction is relevant for linguistic theory, since it reveals how a language adapts its expressive resources to the needs of science and professional communication, and for practice, since such units are a recurrent source of difficulty in specialised translation and lexicography.

Interest in the problem has a long history. From the 1960s onwards, the rapid growth of scientific knowledge brought a large number of new terms into the language and drew the attention of linguists to terminology as a whole. As L. M. Alekseeva notes, «such a sharp change in the development of terminology was connected with

the fact that it began to be considered as a special, rapidly developing lexical system, a composition of the national vocabulary existing according to a certain pattern» [1, p. 37-38].

Yet the specific question of how phraseological units become terms has not received a unified answer. Definitions of terminologization differ in what they emphasise, namely semantic change, metaphor or lexicographic fixation, and the boundary between a term-phraseologism and a phraseologism used in a specialised text remains debatable [9; 11]. The mechanisms that allow a figurative unit to acquire terminological precision are also insufficiently described. The present article continues our earlier study of the terminologization of phraseological units [18]; the problem was also examined in our doctoral dissertation devoted to the functional aspect of phraseological units in scientific discourse [21].

The aim of the study is to clarify the phenomenon of terminologization of phraseological units in scientific and specialised discourse. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: (1) to summarise the existing definitions of terminologization and formulate a working definition; (2) to propose criteria for the terminological status of a PU; (3) to identify the main pathways of terminologization; (4) to analyse the semantic mechanisms of the process on English material.

The hypothesis of the study is that the terminological meaning of a PU is not arbitrary but is motivated by semantic components (semes) of its earlier meanings, which may remain latent during phraseologization and be reactivated in a new specialised context.

2. Methods

The theoretical basis of the study is formed by Russian terminological theory. In the 1970s and 1980s, the problems of terminology were studied extensively by V.M. Leychik, K.Ya. Averbukh, I. N. Volkova, A.S. Gerd, A. I. Moiseev, E.F. Skorokhod'ko and other scholars, with four main directions: the linguistic description of the essence of the term; automated methods of terminological analysis; the analysis of terms for the creation of information languages; and the standardisation of scientific and technical terminology [9; 14]. The influence of terminology on the formation of phraseological units was examined in the works of F.P. Filin, F.P. Sorokoletov, V.G. Gak and Yu.S. Sorokin [2; 12; 13; 16]. F. P. Filin emphasised that «a widely used literary language is the most important source of vocabulary expansion» [16, p. 183]. General questions of term theory were addressed by S.V. Grinev, V.I. Danilenko and L.A. Kapanadze [3; 4; 8].

The material consists of English phraseological units recorded in A. V. Kunin's Big English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary [7] that carry specialised meanings or domain labels (hunting, stock exchange, politics), together with units of phraseological origin that function as terms in English political, economic, computing and sociological texts. A unit was included if it (a) was stable and reproducible, (b) had a figurative or idiomatic source meaning, and (c) had acquired a specialised meaning fixed in a dictionary or in regular specialised use. The material is illustrative: it was selected to represent the main pathways of terminologization rather than to measure their frequency.

The following methods were used:

– the method of linguistic description, to characterise phraseological units as objects of terminologization;

– the method of oppositions, to contrast the source (general or phraseological) meaning of a unit with its terminological meaning;

– the transformational method of communicative linguistics, to trace structural and semantic changes of a unit depending on the context and sphere of use;

– semantic (componential) analysis, to identify the semes that are preserved, suppressed or reactivated in the course of terminologization;

– etymological and lexicographic analysis, to establish the sequence of meanings recorded in dictionaries.

The analysis of each unit followed four steps: establishing its source meaning; establishing its specialised meaning and field; comparing the semantic structures of the two meanings; and determining the pathway of terminologization and the degree to which the unit meets the criteria of a term.

3. Results

1. A working definition of terminologization

Several definitions of the process have been proposed in Russian linguistics. E.N. Dimitrieva defines terminologization as «the process of phraseological units acquiring a special terminological meaning within a certain field of knowledge or activity» [5]. Other scholars

describe it as the change of a unit's meaning from abstract to concrete (Danilova, 1980), as a process occurring in the semantic structure of the word (Makeeva, 1990), or as a process manifested in lexicographic fixation in dictionaries and reference works (Shkatova, 1998). M.V. Kosova treats terminologization as a lexico-semantic process [6], and A.Yu. Fetisov emphasises its metaphorical basis, defining it as «the process of gradual change of the state of stability/instability, forming the basis of a metaphorical concept» [15, p. 8]. A.D. Khayutin stresses the systemic aspect: terms are words associated with a certain object of knowledge that «enter into a systematic connection with other similar words and together form a special terminological system» [17, p. 16].

Synthesising these approaches and developing the position set out in our earlier works [18; 21], we propose the following working definition: terminologization of a phraseological unit is the process by which a PU, through the actualisation or reinterpretation of its semantic components, acquires a specialised meaning in a field of knowledge or activity, enters into systemic relations with the terms of that field and is fixed in specialised usage and dictionaries. As a result, the unit breaks its exclusive connection with the phraseological system and becomes a member of a terminological system, while its etymology remains visible in its denotative meaning.

2. Criteria of the terminological status of a phraseological unit

The analysis allowed us to formulate five criteria by which a terminologized PU can be distinguished from a phraseological unit merely used in a specialised text:

1) definitional fixation: the unit has a definition accepted in the field;

2) systemic relations: it forms derivatives and combinations with other terms of the field (lame-duck president, lame-duck session);

3) neutralisation of expressiveness: its evaluative and emotive components are weakened or lost;

4) stable reproducibility in specialised texts of the field;

5) lexicographic fixation, including domain labels in general and specialised dictionaries.

Not all units meet all five criteria. This makes it possible to speak of degrees of terminologization, from professional idioms that retain expressiveness to units that have become full terms.

3. Pathways of terminologization

Three pathways were identified in the material. In terminologization proper, a general phraseological unit acquires a specialised meaning (bottleneck, brain drain, glass ceiling, white elephant). In re-terminologization, a term of one field passes into general phraseology and then becomes a term of another field (stalking horse, lame duck). In the terminologization of culturally marked PUs, a unit rooted in myth or literature becomes a term (Trojan horse). The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Pathways of terminologization of English phraseological units

Unit	Source meaning	Specialised (terminological) meaning	Field	Pathway
stalking horse	a horse behind which a hunter hides (hunting term)	a fictitious candidate; a bidder whose offer sets the floor price for an asset sale	politics; law, finance	re-terminologization
lame duck	a stock-exchange member unable to meet obligations (18th c.)	an official in the final period of office after a successor has been elected	politics	re-terminologization
Trojan horse	the wooden horse of Greek myth; a hidden threat from within	a malicious program disguised as legitimate software	computing	culturally marked PU → term
bottleneck	the narrow neck of a bottle; an obstacle	a stage limiting the capacity of a system; a sharp reduction in population size	management; genetics	terminologization proper
brain drain	a loss of clever people (figurative)	the emigration of highly qualified specialists	economics, migration studies	terminologization proper
glass ceiling	an invisible barrier (figurative)	an unacknowledged barrier to the advancement of women and minorities	sociology, management	terminologization proper

4. Case study: stalking horse

The unit stalking horse demonstrates re-terminologization most clearly. A.V. Kunin's dictionary records three meanings [7, p. 397]:

1) предлог, отговорка (этим. охот. заслонная лошадь) – «a pretext, an excuse» (etymologically, a hunting term: a stalking horse);

2) подставное лицо, ширма – «a front man, a screen»;

3) амер. полит. фиктивная кандидатура; кандидатура, выдвигаемая с целью раскола голосов сторонников другой партии – «a fictitious candidacy put forward to split the votes of another party's supporters».

In hunting terminology the unit denoted a technique in which hunters concealed themselves behind a horse, or a figure of a horse, so as not to frighten the game prematurely. Transferred to non-terminological contexts, it developed the reinterpreted meaning «pretext» or «screen», used of a person or thing that hides true intentions; this meaning has a pronounced anthropocentric character. The process of reinterpretation did not stop there. In American political language the unit acquired the meaning «fictitious candidacy», denoting a politician who challenges a party leader in order to test the strength of the leader's support without intending to win. Its use in the phraseological meaning of «screen» can be seen in the following example:

Democracy has been used as a stalking horse for caucus rule [7, p. 398].

Here the unit is still used figuratively, but its application to a political concept shows the semantic shift that prepares its transition into the category of political terms. The same seme has motivated a further specialised meaning in law and finance: in asset sales, a stalking-horse bidder is the party whose initial bid sets the minimum price against which other offers are made.

Componential analysis shows that the seme «to conceal, to deceive», inherent in the original hunting term, remained latent during phraseologization. When the unit was placed in a political context, this seme became the basis for a new terminological meaning, different from the primary one but genetically related to it. The sequence of meanings can be represented as: hunting term → phraseological unit («screen, pretext») → political term («fictitious candidate») → legal and financial term («initial bidder»).

5. Case study: lame duck

The unit lame duck follows a similar route. In eighteenth-century London stock-exchange slang it denoted a member who could not meet his financial obligations. It then passed into general use as a phraseological unit denoting a person or enterprise in difficulty, and in American political language it became a term for an official who continues in office after a successor has been elected. In this last meaning the unit meets all five criteria of terminological status: it has a fixed definition, it forms a system of related terms (lame-duck president, lame-duck session, lame-duck period), its expressive colouring is largely neutralised, and it is regularly used and recorded in specialised political dictionaries. The preserved seme in this case is «inability to act fully»: the bankrupt broker cannot pay, and the outgoing official cannot govern with full authority.

4. Discussion

The results support the hypothesis that terminological meanings of phraseological units are motivated rather than arbitrary. In both case studies a seme of the earliest meaning survived phraseologization in a latent form and was reactivated in a new specialised context. This agrees with A.Yu. Fetisov's view of terminologization as grounded in a metaphorical concept [15] and with V.G. Gak's understanding of language transformations as regular, rule-governed changes [2].

The material also confirms that the interaction between terminology and general vocabulary is bidirectional. N.N. Melekh showed that the transition of terms into general vocabulary is accompanied by «phonetic, semantic, morphological, graphic, syntactic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic» changes along with the change of meaning of the terminological unit [10, p. 4-5]. Stalking horse and lame duck illustrate both directions within the history of a single unit: determinologization (term → phraseological unit) followed by terminologization in another field. Yu. S. Sorokin's observation that the language of science is not separate from the general laws of literary speech [12, p. 181] and F. P. Filin's view of the literary language as the main source of vocabulary expansion [16, p. 183] are thus supported by phraseological material.

A term does not become an element of the general language until its meaning is widely known. When the meaning it expresses goes beyond the system of special concepts, it enters general vocabulary but still remains a

term within its terminological system. Despite the differences between term and word, both are units of the communicative system of language, and it is no coincidence that definitions of the term start from the word or word combination as the basic conceptual element of language [4; 8; 17].

The question of the status of terminologized PUs remains open. V.M. Leychik developed criteria for distinguishing terms from phraseological combinations and drew attention to the transformation of commonly used phraseological units into terms [9]; E.A. Nikulina described such units as terminologisms, the result of the mutual influence of terminology and phraseology in modern English [11]. The criteria proposed in this study allow these approaches to be combined in a scale of terminologization: the more criteria a unit meets, the closer it is to a full term. This scale also explains why the same unit may be treated as an idiom in a general dictionary and as a term in a specialised one, a point relevant to the lexicographic description of terminology discussed by F.P. Sorokoletov [13] and to the semantic and taxonomic analysis of terms developed by D.N. Shmelev and N.A. Shurygin [19; 20].

The findings have practical implications. In terminography, terminologized PUs require domain labels and definitions in addition to their phraseological meanings. In translation, the translator must recognise whether a unit is used as a term, in which case the established terminological equivalent is required, or as an expressive idiom, in which case a phraseological or descriptive rendering is possible. In teaching English for specific purposes, such units deserve explicit attention because their terminological meaning cannot be deduced from the idiom. The main limitation of the study is its illustrative material; a corpus-based study of English, Uzbek and Russian specialised texts would make it possible to measure the frequency of the pathways and to compare the terminologization of phraseological units across languages.

5. Conclusion

Phraseological units occupy an important place in the language and enrich its expressive possibilities; at the same time, they serve as a significant source of terms. The study leads to the following conclusions. First, terminologization of a phraseological unit can be defined as the process by which a PU acquires a specialised meaning in a field of knowledge or activity, enters into systemic relations with its terms and is fixed in specialised usage. Second, the terminological status of a PU can be established by five criteria: definitional fixation, systemic relations, neutralisation of expressiveness, stable reproducibility and lexicographic fixation; the degree to which a unit meets them determines its place on a scale of terminologization. Third, three pathways of the process are distinguished: terminologization proper, re-terminologization and the terminologization of culturally marked units. Fourth, the analysis of stalking horse and lame duck shows that the new terminological meaning is motivated by a seme that remains latent during phraseologization and is reactivated in a specialised context.

Terminologization of phraseological units is thus a multifaceted process that reflects the ability of language to adapt to the changing needs of science, professional activity and society. Its further study on comparative English, Uzbek and Russian material is a promising direction for phraseology, terminology studies and translation theory.

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