

# Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse

Anita Naciscione



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*To Judy, Reinis, & Kārlis*

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## List of abbreviations

AmE	–	American English
AustrE	–	Australian English
BrE	–	British English
CCDI	–	Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms 1995 (the Bank of English)
DPMD	–	Dorland's Pocket Medical Dictionary
ENE	–	Early New English
Latv.	–	Latvian
MiE	–	Middle English
MoE	–	Modern English
MWCD	–	Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary for Windows 1996
OE	–	Old English
PU	–	a phraseological unit
PUs	–	phraseological units
SL	–	a source language
TL	–	a target language
vs	–	versus

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## Preface

*Actual texts show that phraseology is not a store of old fossils*

Anita Naciscione, Chapter 1

About ten years ago I had the good fortune to encounter Anita Naciscione's ground-breaking study *Phraseological Units in Discourse: Towards Applied Stylistics* (2001), and I remember well my scholarly excitement when I literally devoured page after page of this unique investigation into the stylistic aspects of phraseological units in actual discursal contexts. Of course, much had been written by then about the multifaceted nature of phraseologisms, with the founding of the European Society of Phraseology in 1999. By now there exists a steady stream of publications on phraseology in the form of dissertations, bibliographies, monographs, handbooks, and articles, but it is fair to say that this plethora of studies has not really advanced the intriguing findings by Anita Naciscione in both their theoretical and applied aspects. Scholars and students of phraseology will and should therefore applaud Anita Naciscione's skilfully revised and extensively expanded new edition of her previous book with its new title *Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse* (2011). It surveys and analyses recent scholarship and by adding various new sections and chapters goes far beyond the theoretical scope and the contextualised examples of the original volume. Written in clear, readable, and accessible English, it is thus a most welcome book that will without doubt be of major consequence in the future development of international phraseology. There is little jargon but rather precisely defined theoretical vocabulary, all important points are illustrated by appropriate textual examples, and the entire book is presented in a way that shows a scholar in solid command of her subject matter. It is truly a magisterial accomplishment and in many ways a new publication that should be added to libraries and be part of required reading in any course on phraseology.

There is no doubt that phraseological units of all types are basically "dead" in collections and dictionaries. In fact, most of them do not include any contexts and also ignore diachronic considerations. That is not to say that individual investigations of the contextualised use of proverbs, proverbial expressions, and other phraseologisms do not exist. There certainly are such studies on some of the

major literary authors and historical figures, as for example on Geoffrey Chaucer, Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston S. Churchill. But while they present the various phraseological units in context, they do not go into major detail concerning their actual stylistic use, including the variation, expansion, and augmentation of particular phrases. They could all benefit from the theoretical framework and the discussion of numerous examples that Anita Naciscione's book so appropriately provides. Anybody undertaking a stylistic and interpretive study of phraseological units in the context of literary works or the mass media would do well in making the methodology presented in her book the foundation for their work.

This is not the place to offer detailed definitions or descriptions, but it might be stated that Naciscione's special approach consists of looking at the stylistic discourse-level features of phraseological units from a cognitive perspective. And she is absolutely correct in stating that this presupposes an interdisciplinary analysis, since such fields as linguistics, psychology, folklore, literature, and iconography are necessarily part of it. Her distinction among the base form, core use, and instantial stylistic use serves very well as a theoretical basis in studying the naturally occurring phraseological units in all types of discourse. Above all, she is once and for all breaking with the traditional notion that phraseological units are characterised by fixedness, frozenness, or dead metaphors. Anybody who has studied such phrases in detail has long noticed that they are frequently varied, modified, parodied, or simply stated in a changed way in actual use. They are much more flexible and adaptable than previous scholarship has shown, and it is important to note that the author is adding the extremely important cognitive aspect to her study of the instantial use of phraseologisms. After all, when we are confronted with such texts, matters like access and recall, memory, identification, interpretation, perception, recognition, and comprehension enter into all of this. As a professor of English in Riga, Anita Naciscione is clearly aware of the fact that students of foreign languages are constantly confronted with these issues as they attempt to master the use and understanding of the phraseologisms of the target language. As a professor who is in the same boat with her, I applaud the fact that my friend has included important statements in her book on the applicability of her approach to foreign language teachers and students alike. I also want to emphasise the significant fact that she stresses the importance of historical considerations in the investigation of the stylistic use of phraseological units. After all, the use, function, and meaning of a given phrase might well change over time, as has been shown in comprehensive studies of such proverbs and proverbial expressions as "Big fish eat little fish", "Don't swap horses in the middle of the stream", "A house divided against itself cannot stand", and "To

throw the baby out with the bath water". Again and again, as I read the manuscript of this new edition of Naciscione's book and as I am writing this preface, the thought reappears to me how much all of us can and must learn from her inclusive study.

The longer first part of the book is a highly informed theoretical presentation of what the author means by "instantial stylistic use" of phraseological units that is based on applied and cognitive stylistics dealing with discourse as it appears in literature and the mass media – obviously this approach is perfectly adaptable to the study of radio, film, television, and song, that is, to the oral contextualised use of phraseological units. While I have done some of this without Anita Naciscione's theoretical framework, I must admit that my future studies will now pay much more attention to her paradigm, notably the importance of cognitive matters. After all, psycholinguistics is of extreme importance in the study of the use and comprehension of metaphors, and by including cognitive considerations much can be learned about the psychological interpretation of phraseological units in human communication of all types. A small present-day example might be President Barack Obama's relatively frequent use of proverbial phrases in his books and speeches. As a politician on the national and international scene, he and his speech-writers must very much be aware of what phraseological units he uses, especially when he addresses audiences abroad for whom his English is a foreign language. He cannot and should not automatically expect his audiences to understand such common but culturally specific phrases as "to get to first base", "to play hardball", "to pinch-hit for someone", and "Three strikes and you are out", all of which stem from the game of baseball. Clearly, he would want to employ metaphorical phrases that have a rather international currency, as for example "to fight against windmills", "to be in the same boat", "to build castles in the air", and "All that glitters is not gold". But even then he would need to be careful to make certain that these phrases carry similar meanings abroad, that they are in fact still current and understood, and that they will be appreciated by his audiences as meaningful stylistic devices, especially if he shortens, expands, or merely alludes to them, as he is prone to do. This is especially important for President Obama, since he is in fact quite eager to employ phraseological units in his political rhetoric in the United States and abroad. As such, he is a perfect example for Naciscione's sound claim that phraseologisms in actual use are not dead fossils without any deeper meaning.

Of course, the author shows all of this by numerous contextualised examples ranging from authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence, Lewis Carroll, James Thurber, and many others. This is an impressive spread of literary talents over time by which she is

able to show diachronically that this differentiated stylistic use of phraseological units is actually nothing new! It would be utter nonsense – as has been claimed at times – that phraseologisms in discourse are absolutely fixed. Nothing is further from the truth, as a large percentage of contextualised references show. But as expected, the author goes, of course, far beyond just stating the obvious. Instead she discusses in much detail such matters as phraseological cohesion, patterns of instantial use, extended phraseological metaphor, phraseological puns, phraseological allusion, diminutives in phraseology, phraseological titles, and even phraseological saturation of discourse. These are but a few aspects of particular interest to me that should also whet the reading appetite of others. Regarding the saturation of texts with phraseologisms, let me just mention that I have collected such textual amassments both in English and German. My International Proverb Archives hold dozens of examples from prose literature, poems, and songs that consist of proverbial collages that carry meaningful messages. To be sure, I have been able to show that the sub-genres of proverb poems and proverb songs exist, having found examples throughout history. I simply mention here François Villon's *Ballade des proverbes* from the 15th century and Bob Dylan's song *Like a Rolling Stone* (1965). In fact, there exists a definite tradition of such *tour de force* texts that also include the field of iconography, to wit the entire tradition of proverb illustrations from the late Middle Ages via Pieter Bruegel's famous oil painting *The Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) on to comic strips.

Regarding this last point, the author has also included a completely new chapter on "Visual Representation of Phraseological Image" with which she once again charts a new way of interpreting the ubiquitous appearance of phraseologisms in various types of media. Claiming that "visualisation is part of metaphor recognition", she is especially concerned with the visual aspects that are part of metaphorical thought representation and of course also the creative employment of phraseological metaphors in visual discourse. While she does not comment in detail on the visual representation of phraseological units in woodcuts, misericords, tapestries, emblems, engravings, paintings, gold weights, coffee mugs, flags, cloths, quilts, and yes, T-shirts (a whole tradition by now!), she emphasises the appearance of phraseological illustrations in book illustrations of Mark Twain, James Thurber, Lewis Carroll, and others. Above all, the author zeroes in on how phraseologisms play a definite role in the visual aspects of the mass media, where they appear as texts with innovative and often literal pictoralisations of their metaphors. Once again her methodology could easily be transposed to the iconographic study of proverbs and proverbial expressions that has a considerable tradition among art and cultural historians, folklorists, and philologists. Her discussion of such matters as visual representation and instantial stylistic

use, implicit visual messages, and above all visual literacy as a cognitive skill is absolutely superb, and once again I would add that I wish that I had her theoretical discoveries at my disposal when I have dealt with iconographical and phraseological issues. In any case, in a modern global world where visual emblems in the press and advertising play an ever more important role, it behoves us to include in the study of cultural literacy Anita Naciscione's innovative concept of visual literacy.

One could perhaps argue that this book could have been concluded at this point, but I do commend Anita Naciscione for adding a second part to her unique study by providing a long and extremely important chapter on "Applied Stylistics and Instantial Stylistic Use". Not that she has not done so throughout the first part of her book, she now, perhaps reminiscent of the proverb "The proof of the pudding is in the eating", practices what she preaches by presenting and analysing additional and carefully chosen examples. It is here where the educator in her comes to the forefront, and I am glad that she makes this engaged commitment to the importance of phraseological units for the teaching and learning of (foreign) languages. Again, the idea of stressing phraseologisms in language classes is nothing new, and there exists a considerable amount of international scholarship on the subject matter. But it is, of course, Anita Naciscione's innovative approach based on her insightful theoretical ideas that goes beyond previous work in this area. By way of convincing examples she illustrates new ways of a discourse-based approach to phraseology in teaching, explaining at the same time such matters as improved language skills, learning difficulties, and identification problems regarding phraseological units. And yet, as we all know, it is of utmost importance that our students learn to cope with this rich phraseological communication, that they learn to identify, understand, and interpret the metaphorical phrases in the discursive context, that they know how to approach their translation, and that they are aware of their stylistic importance in advertising in particular but also in the mass media as such. Teachers and professors of foreign languages would do well in giving this particular chapter a careful reading, obviously also checking out the glossary, the comprehensive list of references, the appendix, and the index at the end of the book. All of this well written and clearly presented material is of excellent use, especially since it does include the cutting-edge state of theoretical and applied research in the ever fascinating field of phraseology.

There is an old Latin proverb "*Opus artificem probat*" (The work proves the craftsman) that is known in numerous languages and also in English as "The worker is known by his work". This is a most fitting piece of wisdom to bring this short and thus superficial preface to its conclusion. Anita Naciscione is to be congratulated on her superb scholarly accomplishment that will benefit

generations of scholars and students of phraseology. It is not easy to write a comprehensive and at the same time truly innovative study of an entire research field and yet go far beyond the present state of scholarship. But the book *Stylistic Use of Phraseological Units in Discourse* accomplishes exactly that, and its author Anita Naciscione has every reason to be proud of her scholarly achievement in the service of phraseology.

Wolfgang Mieder  
University of Vermont, 2010



# Introduction

The purpose of this book is to disclose stylistic discourse-level features of phraseological units from a cognitive perspective. A discourse-based view allows me to examine phraseological units in a broader context, not just in single phrases or sentences. This angle of vision is important, as discourse studies tend to overlook stylistic use of phraseological units. For instance, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin et al. [2001] 2004) does not deal with phraseology in discourse at all.

A cognitive approach to stylistic use of phraseological units in discourse is a new research area. It is, of necessity, an interdisciplinary field, since these issues cannot be addressed through the knowledge resources of any single discipline. I rely on the findings of cognitive linguistics on figurative thought and language. Use of figurative language, including phraseological units, has been recognised as part and parcel of human cognition, a revealing cognitive mechanism.

Recent decades have witnessed increasing interest in various aspects of phraseology, especially after the foundation in 1999 of the European Society of Phraseology (EUROPHRAS), which has become a centre of phraseological research, organising regular conferences and other activities. Additionally, an increasing number of publications now exist on various aspects of phraseology. Here I should mention two weighty volumes on theoretical issues of phraseology that will certainly boost further studies in the area: *Phraseology: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Granger and Meunier [2008] 2009) and *Phraseology in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching* (Meunier and Granger [2008] 2009). In turn, research in phraseology has promoted studies in corpus linguistics and in compilation of corpus-based dictionaries.

This book attempts to explore the benefits of a cognitive approach to the stylistic aspects of phraseology both in the system of language and in actual texts. Use of phraseological image in verbal and visual discourse is of stylistic and cognitive interest for studies of both thought and language.