THE COGNITIVE BASIS OF ENGLISH SET PHRASES

Amrullayeva Makhliyo Abdurahmonovna
Master's degree student
Foreign language and literature department
University of Exact and Social sciences

Abstract: This article explores the cognitive foundations underlying English set phrases - fixed expressions such as idioms, collocations, and phrasal verbs. It examines how cognitive linguistics explains their formation, use, and comprehension, emphasizing the role of conceptual metaphor, embodiment, and schema theory. Set phrases are not merely linguistic artifacts but reflect how speakers mentally categorize experiences and perceive the world. Through examples and theoretical insights, this paper shows how these expressions are integral to language processing and cultural cognition.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, set phrases, idioms, conceptual metaphor, embodiment, schema, English language

Set phrases in English, including idioms like "kick the bucket," collocations like "strong tea," and fixed expressions like "by and large," represent a significant portion of everyday language. Traditionally considered opaque or anomalous, these expressions have gained renewed attention through the lens of cognitive linguistics. Unlike traditional structuralist views that treat such phrases as exceptions, cognitive linguistics posits that set phrases are meaningful, motivated, and reflective of human cognition. This paper aims to uncover the cognitive mechanisms that give rise to and sustain the use of set phrases in English.

The Nature of Set Phrases. Set phrases can be broadly classified into:

- **Idioms**: Fixed expressions whose meanings are not deducible from the literal meanings of their components (e.g., "spill the beans").
- **Collocations**: Habitual co-occurrences of words (e.g., "make a decision" rather than "do a decision").
- **Formulaic sequences**: Routinized language chunks like "How do you do?" or "Nice to meet you."

While their forms are fixed or semi-fixed, their cognitive basis is rooted in patterns of thought and usage.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory. One of the central ideas in cognitive linguistics is that metaphor is not just a poetic device but a cognitive tool. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), idioms are often grounded in **conceptual metaphors**, such as:

- **LIFE IS A JOURNEY** → "He's at a crossroads."
- **ANGER IS HEAT** → "She blew her top."

These metaphors organize abstract concepts in terms of concrete experiences, allowing for metaphorical idioms to emerge.

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the **embodied mind**, which means our understanding of language is shaped by physical experiences. Idioms like "grasp

the idea" or "fall into depression" reflect sensorimotor schemas. Our bodily experiences provide a grounding mechanism for understanding and creating set phrases.

Image schemas – recurring structures of bodily experience – also contribute to the formation of set phrases. For example, the CONTAINER schema underlies expressions like "in trouble" or "out of ideas." Mental space theory further helps explain how speakers map different cognitive domains when using metaphorical or idiomatic expressions.

Psycholinguistic studies suggest that set phrases are stored holistically in long-term memory, making them easier to retrieve and faster to process than novel phrases. This efficiency is one reason for their prevalence in natural speech.

Set phrases aid in **cognitive economy** by reducing the processing load. Speakers don't need to compute meanings from scratch; instead, they rely on pre-formed chunks, which facilitates fluency and comprehension.

Set phrases often carry **pragmatic functions**, such as politeness ("Would you mind..."), mitigation ("sort of"), or discourse organization ("first of all"). These pragmatic roles are cognitively encoded through social experience.

Cultural Cognition and Set Phrases. Set phrases encode not only cognitive patterns but also **cultural models**. English idioms often reflect Western cultural narratives, such as individualism ("pull yourself up by your bootstraps") or capitalism ("time is money"). Understanding set phrases therefore requires insight into both cognitive universals and cultural specifics.

Language Acquisition and Set Phrases. The acquisition of set phrases plays a vital role in both first and second language learning. For native speakers, these expressions are often learned implicitly through repeated exposure in context, becoming part of their procedural memory. In contrast, second language learners frequently struggle with set phrases due to their non-literal meanings and cultural specificity. Cognitive approaches to language teaching emphasize the importance of teaching not just the form but the conceptual motivations behind these expressions. Techniques such as using metaphor explanation, image schemas, and real-life scenarios can enhance retention and comprehension. As such, incorporating cognitive insights into language pedagogy can bridge the gap between linguistic competence and native-like fluency.

Conclusion. English set phrases are more than fixed expressions; they are windows into the human mind. Their structure and use are deeply influenced by cognitive mechanisms like metaphor, embodiment, and schema-based understanding. Far from being arbitrary, these expressions offer insights into how language reflects and shapes thought. Cognitive linguistics provides a robust framework for analyzing set phrases, revealing their integral role in communication and cognition.

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