

The Phraseological Unit as an Expression of Experience: The Case of the Words “Baltë” (Mud) and “Bukë” (Bread)



Linguistics

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Teuta Toska

University “A.Xhuvani”, Elbasan, Albania.

Abstract

Phraseological units are syntagmatic unions of elements and also a union of concepts. Investigation in the subsystem of phraseological units is a process that allows the investigation of spiritual structures of a human community. The entirety of phraseological units created with a word creates a cognitive conceptual scheme related to experience and the knowledge system of a society regarding that object/occurrence. It can be said that, in Albanian, phraseological units formed with the word “baltë” build a semantic structure for this object: the phraseological range of the word “baltë”. This manner of observation of the phraseological units is a method that delineates an overview of the collective cognition regarding a certain object or occurrence. Another method is to observe the phraseological units in a system by putting them in relation to one another. This has been done with three phraseological units that denote ethnographic occurrences and are formed with the word “bukë”.

Introduction

Phraseological units are a syntagmatic union of elements, and simultaneously a union of concepts, that describe the different sides of an object or occurrence in the mental reality of a nation. As an element of the lexicon, they are related to the elements of the mental, spiritual and cultural world of a certain lingual community. The linguistic clothing, the selection of linguistic elements denoted for the expressions of the spiritual, mental and cultural life, contains an amount of information and knowledge which, at the same time, represents and conditions the understanding of the members of this community.

Why does the need for such a unit arise in the system? We see the phraseological units as a fruit of the energy that language possesses for the renewal of its lexical system. In this unit, we distinguish not only the psychological-linguistic “tension” to denote a new object appearing in the experience of a social group, but also the tension to reformulate the object, to rename it, to rediscover it and to denote itself in the object (as an individual, but also as a community), through assessments, attitudes, nature of knowing, etc.

Investigation in the system of phraseological units is a process that allows the investigation of one of the spiritual structures of a human community - in our case the language (part of these structures is also spoken literature, religion, etc.). This research comes today as an effort of the modern philosophical thought to understand the “power” of language in the formation of other spiritual structures, not only in one human society, but in the human society in general. In his well-known work “Language and myth”, Ernst Cassirer (Cassirer, 1975) analyses the philosophical relation between language and words from the primitive thought, incarnated in its highest manner in the myths created by a certain culture. The myth, in essence, is the power exercised by language in thought and in all other spheres of the spiritual activity. The myth is a creation sourcing from the interpretation of the linguistic sign, a hint to the truth, starting from what a culture “reads” in the sign denominating the object at the essence of the myth.

Interest in the myth, as the highest form of the spiritual creation of a nation, is encouraged by our point of view that, even if the phraseological unit, as a symbolic form of the reflection of reality, has even scarce similarities to the myth, as the highest form not only of the reflection, but also the interpretation of reality. Both these forms are an inherent and spiritual part, since “Man... produces symbols from his own nature and, through the symbolic activity, builds the entirety of feeling, thus shaping himself and the world surrounding him” (Sh.Rrokaj, 2010). In our opinion, phraseological units are one of the “initial symbolic activities” (Cassirer, 1975), since, according to Cassirer, the symbolic activity includes all activities of humanity and is elementary, because it is related to the subjective denotation of reality.

According to Cassirer, in its process of denotation of realities, it cannot simply reflect the authentic essence of objects, but it must endorse this essence in “concepts”: “and what are concepts if not images and creations of thought, which, exactly because of being such, instead of a pure form of the object, mostly contain in themselves forms of thinking” (Cassirer, 1975). This concept of the content of language (for what it expresses from reality) puts into question the essence of the objects it reflects, the only guarantee to show (or express) truth (through language). The doubt of the truth that can or cannot be expressed by language, as regards reality, is one of the most important principles of postmodern philosophical thinking related to language in this period of the beginning of the new century, a point of view that has penetrated as a scientific principle in the new sectors of the science of

linguistics nowadays. Thus, “It must not be believed, on the other hand, that two speakers exchange the *same* presentations within the same language. Language is utterly ambiguous” (R.Pěrnaska, 2012), exactly because two different users exchange different mental images and creations of reality.

In the work “Cultural Anthropology” (Emily A.Schults and Robert H. Lavenda, 1999), the authors state that “*Perhaps, the most amazing cultural feature of our kind is language: the system of arbitrary sound symbols, with which we encode our experience of the world and of others.*” In reality, language is the most important expression of the human culture. Language, being a cultural symbolic system, like other symbolic systems, participates in our perception of the world in a non-direct manner. They state that human beings are never faced with the material world in a direct manner, but always through a system of markers created by the people themselves. In reality, language serves not only to gather data on our experience of the world, but also to structure the understanding of ourselves and the world.

Thus, phraseological units that mark death in Albanian are many, representing elaborate elements of the spiritual experience of the people of this social group (its quality, relation of qualities, specific concepts to general concepts, cause-effect conceptual relations, etc.) (Z.Orhani, 2005). Events of the spiritual experience that are repeated (like death), events happening periodically, nomocracies directing nature, society and human life seem to be part of the experience composing the whole, “always coming with the same configuration of attributes” (Emily A. Schults and Robert H. Lavenda, 1999). These configurations will be called **schemes**, the authors say.

To this idea responds also the theory of representation through templates, a theory on perceptions, according to which “the human being continually gathers in its mind and memory a series of pictures and **alternatives** to them, a range of thoughts and hypotheses, full of **form variety** [emphasis mine, T.T.] of different things and objects, which are nothing else but highly detailed models for many images and their template models” (Z.Orhani, 2005). Phraseological units are such accumulations of alternative information on one reality, a series of thoughts and attitudes, thus marking a collective mental cultural map of the specific reality being marked.

Thus, in our opinion, the entirety of phraseological units created with a word creates a cognitive conceptual scheme that relates to the experience and knowledge system of a society regarding that thing/object. The entirety of these units constitutes a conceptual and semantic field at the same time, which shows the mental reality of knowledge of the Albanian-speaking community. Adam Schaff states: “The theory of the field is directly related to the discussed problem of the active role of language in the process of knowledge” (A.Schaff, Anthropos). Thus, the semantic field of the main word, which is shown in the entirety of phraseological units created with it, includes collective conceptions of the linguistic community on that word.

We can say that, in Albanian, phraseological units formed with the word *baltë* (mud) (24 phraseological units are formed with this unit [Phraseological Dictionary, 1999]) realise a semantic structure for this object, which we may call the phraseological field of the word “*baltë*”, with the respective seme (marked in bold below), by delineating a collective mental map for this object. The formulation of seme is done beginning with the meaning of the phraseological units. In this way:

- **Substance that forms, composes something:** *baltë e dobët* (weak mud), *ajo baltë për atë mur është* (that mud for that wall is), *s’është baltë për tjegulla* (it’s not mud for tiles), *bën baltën e nuk bën vorba* (makes mud but does not make jars). In all units of this subgroup, the word “*baltë*” is the one carrying pejorative meaning, and the use of the unit in speech has a negative emotional connotation, with the exclusion of the last unit (*bën baltën e nuk bën vorba*), in which the negative connotation does not come from the word “*baltë*”, but from the unit as a whole, describing an action.

- **A not good, sticky substance:** *baltë e ngjitur* (sticky mud), *iu bë baltë pas këpuce* (he became like mud to the shoe). The units are built through a metaphor and the second one, in the syntagma, is formed as a metonymy.

- **A worthless substance, inadequate, element of an unimportant work:** *u bë baltë* (became mud), *bën baltë* (makes mud), *e bën mjaltin baltë* (turns mud into honey), *s’është baltë për tjegulla* (it’s not mud for tiles), *mbuloi balta baltën* (mud covered mud), *trazon baltën me shkop* (stirs mud with a stick). From the point of view of figurative image (metaphor and metonymy), this subgroup contains the greatest number of phraseological units.

- **A substance that is found down in the soil:** *iu bë baltë* (he became like mud to him), *u bë baltë e pluhur* (became mud and dust), *ra në baltë* (fell in the mud), *doli nga balta* (came out of the mud), *hëngri baltë* (ate mud), *e hedh në baltë* (throw him in the mud), *mbuloi balta baltën* (mud covered mud), *e nxori nga balta* (pulled him out of the mud), *e tërhoqi në baltë* (pulled him in the mud). In the units of the above-mentioned subgroup, the word “*baltë*” created a figurative relation to the reality it denoted (metaphor or metonymy), whereas units of this group, which actually constitute the greatest number of units, are related to the objective perception, the identification of the object in the real world.

- **A substance that remains after the processing of materials, dismantled and broken elements:** *e bëri baltë* (turned him into mud), *e bëri baltë e pluhur* (turned him into mud and dust). Here again, “baltë” carries negative emotional intensity, which then characterises the whole unit. Even here, the image shows us the result of a process.

- **A substance with a colour of its own:** *u bë baltë në fytyrë* (his face became like mud). In the experience of Albanian speakers, mud has a colour of its own; it is a referring object regarding colour (mud colour) and it cannot be shown in everyday speech related to the denomination of some special colour (for example, there are no phrases of the kind * *Balta kishte ngjyrë të gjelbër / jeshile / të verdhë / kafe* (The mud was of green / yellow/ brown colour). The Albanian speaker reacts with surprise to the question “What is the colour of mud?”. Thus, mud is not equalled to any colour, but it only serves as a relative denomination for colour. Here the use of the word “baltë” does not carry negative emotional connotation.

- **A substance with which you can hit someone in order to disgrace him:** *i hedh baltë* (throw mud at him). Mud-throwing seems to be a collective action, an ethnographic occurrence that shows a person’s disgrace, his humiliation in front of others. Mud-throwing is, at the same time, discharging on a person everything that mud represents in the Albanian mentality: *lëndë jo e mirë* (not a good substance), *e pavlerë* (unworthy), *që gjendet poshtë në tokë* (that is found down in the soil), *që mbetet në fund* (that is left last), *e prishur* (rotten) (referring to the above-mentioned seme that appear in the phraseological field of the word “baltë”).

- **A substance that enters even the tiniest spaces:** *nuk i la baltë në thua* (he left no mud in his fingernail) (he laid all his dirty secrets bare, he revealed all his flaws and errors), *nuk mban baltë në vesh* (he keeps no mud in his ears) (he is very responsible and honest; he cannot stand futile doubts about himself). These units are not loaded with negative connotation, nay the figurative image of the unit is a cleaning action (cleaning of fingernails, cleaning of ears), but “balta” here is the unit carrying emotional intensity, the figure implicating “dirty secrets, flaws, errors” in the first unit, and “doubt, lie” in the case of the second unit.

- **A subject of bad flavour and smell:** *e kam gojën baltë* (my mouth is like mud). After colour, “balta” appears here in another implied physical quality: flavour. We say implied, because the tasting of flavour is not an essential demand for someone who states “his mouth is like mud”. Its flavour is implied as something disgusting or unpalatable, through the experiences expressed in the above-mentioned seme.

- **A place difficult to walk in, a bad, unpleasant place:** *çan baltën për të tjerët* (breaks mud for others), *e la në baltë* (left him in the mud), *mbeti [ngeci] në baltë* (remained [was stuck] in the mud), *e nxori nga balta* (took him out of the mud), *e tërhoqi në baltë* (pulled him in the mud). In these units, we have a difference in the manner of perception of mud: the substance marks a certain place, thus, in essence, a metonymy. The emotional connotation of units is not always negative.

- **A person of low ethical and human qualities:** *iu bë baltë* (he became like mud to him), *mbuloi balta baltën* (mud covered mud). Here again we have a difference in the reality of perception. Here we have a person being marked, who carries on himself, as character qualities, all the seme denoting the substance, as mentioned above.

This manner of observation of phraseological units is a method that not only delineate an overview of collective cognition for a certain object or occurrence, but can also clarify units which, seen in themselves, do not represent so much semantic and functional clarities. It is very interesting to observe in a system three phraseological units denoting ethnographic occurrences, putting them in relation to one another: *kthej bukë* (turn bread) - go for lunch or dinner to in-laws, after them having visited first; *e ndau bukën* (divided bread) - interrupted relations to someone, broke friendship with him; *përzjeu bukën* (mixed bread) - entered and ate for the first time at an in-laws house. All three are realised with the word “bukë”, an element that can be clothed with distinguishable ethnographic elements. Bread is an important element in the wedding ceremony. In the text “Wedding customs” from the Nikaj-Mërtuj area, we read “n’shpi t’ djalit shtroshin sofrën n’oborr / ni buk n’to e i cop djath.../ mbandaj shkuke burri n’shiljer me thye kulasin ...// atere e granshin teri m’pes kasht me mjalt ose me tamel me sheqer / hangshin me i lug...” (at the groom’s house they set the table in the garden / on it a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese... / then the man went to the sofa to break the loaf... // then they ate it all with honey or with sugared milk cream / they ate with one spoon) (E.Lafe, 1964).

In the three above-mentioned units, bread is related to the establishment of some social relations that are finalised with the wedding.

Bread is a metonymy of the meal eaten and, as a consequence, of the people this meal is eaten with, a metonymy of the family. When the units are observed in relation to one another, we see that the first in the series of the ritual of establishing new relations (of in-laws) is the unit *përzjeu bukën* (mixed bread). This unit implies that bread (which means the meal and further on the family) is an event only for the people of the household, with whom there is consanguinity. When other people are present in this meal, with the purpose of establishing relations steadfast through time, this meal is no longer homogenous, but is “mixed”. Thus,

the image of the in-laws as a “mix” of relations, as an extension of the family, is created. Second in line is the unit *kthej bukë* (return bread), which marks the return of the visit of the in-laws, the one who was the host in the first unit, and the complete establishment of relations, by creating the mutual relation. The unit, though expressed through an archaic syntagma (in today’s daily speech, a noun in the accusative case follows the verb “kthej” (return), with the noun being declarative), placed in relation to the first unit, dismantles its meaning.

In the unit *e ndau bukën* (divided bread), the word “bread” shows another metonymic aspect, which is added to the first chain (bread- meal- family): here bread implies the ritual of making friends. This unit reveals that for Albanians the eating of bread is not only a family meal, but it also sanctions friendship, another steadfast social relation. Whoever enters an Albanian’s house and eats a meal with him, becomes either an in-laws or a friend (mik). In the first case, the relation is forethought as enduring forever: there are found no units denoting the breaking of this relation. The breaking of friendship (miqësi) is a common event: a proof to that is the fact that there is a unit denoting the breaking of friendship and not its establishment (who can imply this from the hypothetical unit **bashkoj bukën* (unite bread), in the meaning of building friendship).

At the conclusion of this work, we can say that phraseology, as a part of the lexical system, contains a denoting act. As such, it essentially contains an act of recognition. The manners of observing the system of recognition/knowledge of the nation are several; one of these is the search of phraseological units by creating different subsystems, based on the root words, and by observing the specific semantic structure that appears in these paradigmatic relations. The manner of reality perception, its recognition, and further on the accumulation of experience generation after generation and its preservation through particular derivations in the language - all these elements can be observed in the semantic and functional universe of phraseological units of all languages.

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