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## Lexical Substitution in Verbal Phraseological Units in English and Albanian

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### Abstract

*In this paper, we provide a linguistic account of variation and lexical substitution in verbal phraseological units in English and Albanian and show how these configurations are activated in actual discourse based on the cognitive-linguistic model. Based on corpora retrieved from actual discourse in literary works as well as dictionaries in both languages we are going to focus on the semantic relationship between the alternating elements and the meaning adaptations that result from the substitutions. Since substitution is a relation between linguistic items such as words or phrases, it affects the relation of components on the lexico-grammatical level, the level of grammar and vocabulary, or linguistic form. Lexical substitutions, or phraseological modifications, are used to trigger the reader's interest. Besides substitution of components there are also some creative variations that individuals resort to for achieving stylistic effects in communication. This article is relevant to scholars and advanced students from a wide range of linguistic areas, such as phraseology, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, and humour research.*

**Keywords:** lexical, substitution, variation, structure, component

### INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units are very complex linguistic configurations that seem to confuse not only newcomers to a language but also have raised many eyebrows in linguistics. Although various attempts have been made, phraseologists still cannot agree on the peculiar features

these curious linguistic phenomena have. The colourful linguistic spectrum of expressions sometimes called “idioms” directly reflects the considerable difficulties linguists face in finding an appropriate definition and classification of these linguistic phenomena and to explain their grammatical behaviour. Traditionally, phraseological units have been described as conventional multi-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed. They often appear as conventional expressions that belong to the grammar of a given language and fulfil specific discourse-communicative functions. For many years researchers have relied on a set of definitory dimensions in describing the linguistic phenomena they discuss. Thus, these idiomatic constructions show semantic peculiarities, structural irregularities and constraints or restrictions on the lexicogrammatical rules of the given language.

Fixedness, or stability, is one of the most essential features that researchers attribute to phraseological units which are considered as psycho-linguistically fixed, activated and produced as a unit, mentally restored in chunks. In comparison to free word combinations of lexemes, idioms allow for considerably fewer alterations. In regard to lexico-semantic restrictions, one element cannot be substituted for any other similar element in a paradigmatic level. This structural stability also leads to morpho-syntactic restrictions, for instance the fact that several grammatical manipulations cannot be conducted, such as a variation of numbers and time or the gradation of adjectives, moreover, there are several syntactic operations that are not usually acceptable. Consequently, all of the following transformations, like number; time; gradation; passivization; relative clause transformation, nominalisation; expansion; pronominalisation; zeugma etc. would lead to incorrect or odd results (Jaki, 2014: 22). Other aspects, like the presence of archaic words, the existence of syntactic anomalies, ellipsis, the absence of inflection in some words in the Albanian language can be highlighted and applied to phraseological units.

More recent phraseological research has shown that many multi-word units are not as fixed as others. The aim of this paper is to show that many verbal phraseological units are definitely not lexically frozen and they appear to allow some form of (syntactically) internal modification and are regularly lexically modified either through substitution or insertion, or both. Syntactic flexibility, lexical

substitution and lexical insertion in phraseological units can be explained if we consider that these units are not simply long words but that their constituents have a meaning of their own. The compositional view of idiom representation regards them as having a 'motivated semantic structure' and states that 'this structure influences their syntactic and lexical flexibility' (Langlotz, 2006:15).

When browsing through common phraseological dictionaries, one notices that phraseological units differ considerably with regard to their structural complexity, their lexical, syntactic, morpho-syntactic and semantic organisation. Given the defining characteristic of idioms as frozen lexical items, the search for lexical and syntactic flexibility in phraseological units seems contradictory. Being partially defined as stable linguistic units they may possess institutionalised variants. Contrasting with the traditional view, researchers have concluded that idioms are often varied in discourse. Moon finds that in her corpus of English phraseological constructions 40 % have "lexical variations or strongly institutionalised transformations, and around 14 % have two or more variations on their canonical forms". Idiom variation thus constitutes a counterweight that works against the phraseological tendency towards stability. Accordingly, the seemingly characteristic stability of idioms must therefore be relativised. (Langlotz, 2005:175).

The characteristics traditionally applied to phraseological units can be questioned if we take into account the inherent variability and instability of these forms and the tension between stability and creativity. "It is often pointed out that so-called 'fixed phrases are not in fact fixed; there are very few invariable phrases in English. Nevertheless, in discussions, descriptions, and the teaching of languages, the myth of fixedness is perpetuated - as if variation was a minor detail that could safely be ignored". Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of relative fixedness as a defining criterion: even though phraseological units are more or less stable in the language system, they tend to undergo changes in their concrete realisation in discourse, where they are either used erroneously, undergo variation or modification. (Jaki, 2014: 203).

Variation is thus intrinsic to any natural language: it is through variation that language change takes place and some forms or uses supersede others diachronically. There are five distinct types of variation in phraseological units, like: lexical substitution, lexical

insertion, truncation, grammatical transformation and transcategorisation. The focus in this paper will be on the most frequent and widespread type of variation, lexical substitution. The latter is usually found in VP + NP, in which either the verbal constituent or the nominal constituent (or both) is replaced by another item of the same word class with which it can bear different kinds of semantic relation. Examples such as shed/weep crocodile tears show how well-established, widespread and straightforward this type of variation is. Alternative lexical realisations do not change the holistic meaning of the unit nor do they modify the mental scenario of the metaphor involved (Solano, 2011: 6).

If variations did not have substantial advantages over canonical forms in some situations, the phenomenon would not be as widespread as it is today. Modifications appear in all domains where language is used creatively (in newspaper headlines, advertisements, any sort of literature, comedians' performances, sitcoms, TV and radio news, private communication etc. The reasons we produce modifications are numerous, like the adaption to a specific context, creation of a humorous effect, highlighting of the producer's intelligence, creation of increased attention, condensation of a complex message, economic triggering of complex associative networks etc. The aim of lexical substitution is to make the meaning of some phraseological units more concrete but what is more common is creating a humorous effect (Jaki, 2014: 43).

## **TYPES OF LEXICAL SUBSTITUTION IN ENGLISH AND ALBANIAN**

The first type of lexical substitution is through *verbs* which are reciprocally substituted. Because of the semantic relation, the lexemes which replace one another are synonymous and usually come from the same semantic field. Findings from psycholinguistics indicate that semantically related words are stored together. Using semantically related lexemes as substituting elements is a potential factor influencing recognisability of the canonical form of the phraseological unit. This type is very common in the literary discourse in English and Albanian. Compare:

- *tread/walk on air*
- *lay/put heads together*

- *close one's eyes to something/shut one's eyes to something*  
*Dikujt i rëndoi kjo heshtje më shumë se të tjerëve dhe **hapi gojën**. -E ke kot, shoqja agronome. S'mbledhin dot këta gishtrinjtë të trashë e gjithë kallo atë pambuk të bardhë e të butë. (Jakov Xoxa, Juga e bardhë, Vëll. II: 103)*

*U çuditën të gjithë se si Arseni **çeli gojën** dhe tha aq fjalë. Urata këto nuk i kuptoi. (Jani Thomai, Fjalor frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe: 342)*

The verbs which are substituted in the phraseological units in Albanian “hap gojën” and “çel gojën” are synonymous. The substitution of the element does not change the semantics of the whole expression, but “çel gojën” is less frequent than the canonical form.

There is also reciprocal substitution with verbs that are not synonymous. One finds five different variants which substitute one another, used for various stylistic purposes. Compare: *find (get, have know, take) the length of somebody's foot (Eng.); mbledh (tharton, rruadh, përdredh, shtrembëron) buzët (Alb.)*

*The prisoner stood before the judge with his life **hanging (trembling) in the balance**. (Richard A. Spears, NTC's American idioms dictionary: 173)*

*Sot kryetari i Pirganit po ja shkelte rrënjët kolektivisht rinisë dhe po kërkonte t'i kthente të gjithë në stërkunguj. Adnani e pikasi këtë, **mbloodhi buzët** dhe diç shënoi në fletoren e vet, diçka që i kishtë shpëtuar gazetarit, i cili nuk e njihte mirë Kiu Korroziun. Pastaj s'ja vuri veshin më. Edhe mendimet e tij, si fjalët e këtij pehlivani, po hidheshin e po priteshin si zogjtë mbi tel. (Jakov Xoxa, Juga e bardhë, Vëll. I: 448)*

*Ndonjërit, po t'i flasësh për fshatin, **rrudh buzët**, kurse unë të them të drejtën, gjej atje diçka që më tërheq. (Jani Thomai, Fjalor frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe:152)*

*Kur në uzinë erdhën dy vajza, disa punëtorë **shtrembëronin buzët** dhe buzëqeshnin me ironi. (Jani Thomai, Fjalor frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe: 152)*

It can be easily noticed that there is no semantic relationship at all between the constituents involved in the process.

Verbs substituted in some phraseological units may be synonymous or not. Thus, there are three variants of the same phraseological unit in Albanian. Compare:

*not to lift (raise, turn, stir) a finger (only “lift” and “raise” are synonymous)*

*They wouldn't even **lift a finger** to save their own grandmother without orders in triplicate. (Ilo Stefanllari, Fjalor frazeologjik anglisht-shqip: 244)*

*Djali i Shaqos nuk u platit.*

*-Pun'e madhe! Ngahera në hije. Grin pare. Një mballomë e ta zhvat lekun. Frëng! Spicer!*

*-Yt, ore zarbo! Mjaft lehe! **Mbyll gojën!** – ja këputi Dani, të cilit i kish ardhur shpirti në majë të hundës. (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 265)*

*Aty unë gjeta rast ta ndizja Nuron dhe e vura përpara. Qysh nga ajo natë ai e **kyçi gojën**. (Jani Thomai, Fjalor frazeologjik i gjuhës shqipe: 346)*

The second type of substitution is through *nouns* which are reciprocally substituted. This type is less common than the reciprocal substitution of verbs because the noun components are frozen. The nouns which replace one another may be synonymous. Compare:

*“throw the **glove** to” / “throw the **gauntlet** to”;*

*I will **throw my glove** to Death itself that there's no maculation in thy heart. (William Shakespeare/James M. Dixon, English idioms: 99)*

*to draw a red herring across the trail / to draw a red herring across the track*

*i ktheu kurrizin/shpinën/krahët*

*Atëhere disa nga trimat e beut i **kthyen kurrizin** Olloman Beut, ju afruan Malush Agait, kokunjur e i thanë: “Na fal, Malush Aga. Ç'bëmë s'do bëjmë. U gënjem”. Beut iu drodh buza, siç i qe dredhur xhufka e festes. E si të mos i dridheshe kur pa se me një fjalë goje, Malush Agai i mori të gjithë ata trima? Malush agai që s'kish në dorë veçse një krrabë e në silahe vetëm një pisqollë... (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 135)*

The synonymous components may be dialectical forms of the noun in the canonical form of the phraseological unit, as in “s'ia var torbën/trastën”.

*Po Zallorët - dymbëdhjetë shpirt ishin kësaj radhe, të gjithë me thikë në dorë – **s'ja varin torbën**: merr e pre, pre e ha. Iku një kosh, po ikte edhe i dyti, megjithëqë Ndoni u lutej e u përlutej: - Kam shtatë*

*cuca, i ziu unë. Pa bukë. Vini dorën në zemër , o kapedanë. Ku të shkoj e ku të mbytem... (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 187-188)*

In some verbal phraseological units, there is substitution of elements which are not synonymous:

*chew the fat / chew the rag*

*go the way of all earth / go the way of all flesh*

*cap the climax / cap the globe*

*He was **chewing the rag** at me the whole afternoon. (James Main Dixon, English idioms: 52)*

*Lively George, as his neighbours call him (and very appropriately too, in spite of his three score and ten years), who comes once in a while to do odd jobs about the garden, is fond of talking in a grandiloquent manner. He speaks of clearing away the “debray” and of people who haven’t much “sentimentology” about them etc. But he **capped the climax** the other morning when he greeted the gentleman of the house, who had just made his appearance on the porch after several days’ confinement to his room by illness, with, “Ah, sir, good-mornin’, sir. Glad to see you are non compos mentis once more, sir.” (St. Andrews Citizen/James M. Dixon, English idioms: 45)*

*Dhe rëndom nuk i martojnë (ata thonë i heqin qafe..) brenda në fshat, në lagje, po larg, në fshatra të tjera, për ‘harka’, për të ‘forcuar rrethin e miqësinë’. **Venë punën në udhë**, lidhin fjalën dhe, kur çatis dita, mblidhen dasmoreshat, i venë çupës këna e mazi, të bardhë e të kuq, bëjnë dasmë, i këndojnë nuses bukurinë ... (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 244)*

*Ta pret mendja se ndër rajenj e ndër harbutë kish edhe kokëndezur, që nuk duronin më tej mateshin t’ja shkrepnin, po Xheladin Beu, që ishte brezi i tretë zot në atë mëngë të mbretërisë së madhe të Baba sulltanit, **e kish vënë punën në vijë** të mos bënte rrëk njeri, kështu që kokëndezurit mbeteshin pa kokë përpara se të ndiznin koka të tjera. (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 140)*

Regardless of the fact that these nouns are not synonymous, the meaning they convey, the image they produce in the listener’s or reader’s mind is the same. Some verbal phraseological units of this type are often used in the imperative:

*“**Keep your hair on!** I’ve no intention of going.”*

*“But at that moment all my pain, anger and temper exploded in a screaming oath: **Keep your shirt on!**”*

**Keep your wool on!** *I am not scared to drive in the dark, if you are.*

The components substituted may be synonymous or not:

*He told the annoying salesman to **go to blazes**.* (Ilo Stefanllari, *Fjalor frazeologjik anglisht-shqip*: 165)

*This old house is just **going to hell**. It's falling apart everywhere.* (Richard A. Spears, *NTC's American idioms dictionary*: 166)

*-Leave me alone! **Go to the devil!***

*-Oh, go to, yourself!* (Richard A. Spears, *NTC's American idioms dictionary*: 166)

The variants “go to blazes”, “go to hell” and “go to the devil” have the same meaning and “blazes” and “hell” are synonymous while “devil” is closely related to them semantically.

*Unë jam paqja, tha i riu. – Nuk e sheh? Po qëroj krimçat, po krasit kalbësirat, po shkurtoj degët shterpa, po selit llastarët e rinj... - Mallkim! Fije filizi të ri arhondësh mos mbiftë mbi trung të lashtë! Dhe ai që e krasit, **thyeftë qafën** andej dhe gërshëra iu ngultë në zemër!* (Jakov Xoxa, *Lulja e kripës së butë*: 260)

*U fshehëm ku mundëm: kush nëpër shelgjishta, kush nëpër kulpra e nëpër shpendra. Zemra na rrihte sepse e dinim se Qamili ishte i krisur nga kondaku. Po nuk largoheshim më tej. Rrinim aty të tulitur, pa zë, e prisnim **të thyente zverkun**.* (Mitrush Kuteli, *Tregime të zgjedhura*: 47)

*-Ç'ka ngjarë, Leksi?... dhe ngriu në vend, me qengjin në duar. – Jo Leksi, jo, o bir, se atë e ruan perëndia atje tek është, po nusja! ... Se ku ka vajtur e nxirosura, që na i nxiu zemrat më keq se moti... -**Ku e theu ruazën?**... shau nëpër dhëmbë i kunati. Pastaj ktheu kokën dhe pa anës, sikur ta kërkonte.* (Jakov Xoxa, *Lumi i vdekur, Vëll. II*: 148)

In comparison to verbs and nouns the number of verbal phraseological units having *adjectives* substituting one another is smaller. Compare:

*come to a fine (handsome, nice, pretty) pass*

*“Things **have come to a fine pass** when one sister invited the other to her house on purpose to quarrel with her and abuse her.”*

*“Things **have come to a handsome pass** when men sworn and elected to perform given services turn on their backers and betray them in the way.”*



*‘It had come to nice pass when the entombed men there in the pit were not yet found’.*

A peculiar feature can be noticed in Albanian. In some of the verbal phraseological units, the second component which is an adjective in one unit may have as its counterpart a noun or a noun plus the comparative conjunction ‘si’ (like). Compare:

*u bë trim / u bë burrë*

*u bë i fryer / u bë kaçek / u bë si kaçek*

*u bë i hollë / u bë petë / u bë si petë*

*u bë i urtë / u bë i shtruar / u bë pulë / si pula*

The number of verbal phraseological units having *adverbs* reciprocally substituted is quite small both in English and the Albanian language. The adverbs which substitute are synonymous with those substituted. Compare:

*sail close to the wind / sail near to the wind*

*‘He realized that he was sailing rather close to the wind financially.’*

*‘He is sailing near the wind with those large contracts he is making.’*

*e solli rrotull / e solli vërdallë*

*e mori prapa / e mori pas*

*bluan imët / bluan hollë*

*vij rrotull / vij vërdallë*

*Kur u shkëputën ishën si të dehur: u vinte rrotull gjithë Mali i Thatë me majat e blerimet e tij, gjithë liqeri i Lyhndës me kaltërsinë e tij. U ulën e ndenjën pranë në lëkurën e ariut, që aty më parë kish qenë shalë kali dhe tani ish bërë shtojcë. (Mitrush Kuteli, Vepra letrare 3:18)*

*Edhe kur të mëdhenjtë shkoqnin misrin e bisedonin për punët e tyre, të fshatit e të gjithë vendit përqark, ne, vegjëlta, që s’ishim një e dy, po një bletë e tërë – sepse barku i atyre të Kulirës ishte i shtuar meqë s’bënin kurbet - **vinim vërdallë** midis të mëdhenjve, mundeshim shok me shok nëpër kapulet me misër e koçenë, qeshnim, qanim, këndonim, gjersa vinin kanistrat me gështenjë avulloshe, arrat, kajkushkat, dardhat. (Mitrush Kuteli, Tregime të zgjedhura: 81)*

*Prepositions can also be reciprocally substituted.*

*‘rap someone on / over the knuckles’,*

*Uncle Jolyon in his later years – indeed, ever since the strange and lamentable affair between his granddaughter June’s lover young Bossiney, and Irene..., - had noticeably **rapped** the family’s **on the knuckles**; and that way of his own... had begun to seem to them a little wayward... (John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Sag*: 217)*

*The fact is someone ought to speak to Bossiney and ascertain what he means. I’m afraid of this myself, for I should certainly **rap him over the knuckles**, but I thought that you, knowing him at the club, might put in a word, and get to ascertain what the fellow is about. (John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*: 169)*

“*nxjerr nga hundët/për hundësh*”

*-Të punojmë, shokë!.. thirri Ylli, prerë. –Këto llafe t’i lemë më mirë kur të kthehet kryetari...*

*-Punojmë e flasim...*

*-Ti Thimi, që kur le kërrabën, më shumë prashit me gjuhë sesa me vegël.*

*-E po **na nxori nga hundët** qumështin e nënës, kjo djall qilizmë! Qilizmë në pranverë, e po mirë; qilizmë në verë, e po hajde, po qilizëm edhe në vjeshtë?!... S’na mbeti kohë as të rrëzojmë krahët...Kulloshtrën e deleve, thuaj, Thimi, kulloshtrën e deleve po na **e nxjerr nga hundët!** (Jakov Xoxa, *Juga e bardhë, Vëll. I*: 220)*

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper dealt with lexical substitutions in phraseological units in English and Albanian language and the connection between the canonical forms and their creative variations specifically in literary discourse. Depending on the stylistic effect they aim to achieve, writers can change the structure of a phraseological unit without losing connection with the content and structure of the whole fixed expression. We can conclude that lexical substitutions and variability show that phraseological units are motivated, analysable and transparent semantically. Creativity in the use of phraseological units ranges from fully systematic alterations to striking conspicuous forms of wordplay. The lexical flexibility can be explained in terms of the speaker’s ability to manipulate the structure of the phraseological unit. It seems that idiomatic creativity reveals intelligent human behaviour and the linguistic competence to manipulate a given

idiomatic set. Idioms are culture-specific, motivated by concepts and beliefs that may be prominent in one culture but not in others.

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