

PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN MODERN ENGLISH

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Abstract: Phraseological units (PUs) – including idioms, proverbs, and other fixed expressions—are not only semantic curiosities but also vital pragmatic tools in modern English. This article examines how PUs function in context to achieve communicative goals beyond their literal meanings. Drawing on contemporary phraseological research and corpus-based examples, we outline key pragmatic functions of PUs such as conveying stylistic nuance, expressing evaluation, intensifying illocutionary force, and shaping discourse structure. The analysis demonstrates that PUs carry connotations and cultural references that speakers use to influence listeners, intensify an utterance's persuasive power, or succinctly summarize complex ideas. We adopt a descriptive methodology, reviewing literature and examples from the British National Corpus to illustrate each function. Findings indicate that evaluative and stylistic uses of phraseological units are most prevalent, while directive and cumulative (knowledge-preserving) uses are less frequent. Ultimately, understanding the pragmatic aspects of phraseological units provides deeper insight into how idiomatic language enriches communication—enhancing expressiveness, clarity, and cultural resonance in English discourse.

Introduction

Phraseological units (PUs), broadly defined as fixed or semi-fixed word combinations with idiomatic meaning, are a pervasive feature of the English language. Common examples range from idioms (e.g., break the ice), to proverbs (e.g., strike while the iron is hot), to familiar collocations and clichés. By definition, a phraseological unit conveys a meaning that cannot be fully deduced from the literal meanings of its components, exhibiting stability of form and usage. Traditional studies of phraseology often emphasize semantic and structural properties of these expressions; however, their pragmatic aspects—how they function in actual communication and discourse—are equally important. In modern English, PUs serve as powerful pragmatic instruments that speakers and writers deploy to achieve specific communicative effects in context.

Understanding the pragmatic roles of PUs is important for several reasons. First, phraseological units often carry connotations, emotional tones, or cultural references that shape how a message is received. For instance, describing a situation as the tip of the iceberg not only summarizes complexity succinctly but also invokes a visual metaphor that guides the listener's interpretation. Second, PUs contribute to the stylistic tone of discourse: an idiom can make language more colorful or informal, thereby establishing rapport or emphasis. Third, many PUs have conversational functions such as managing social relations (politeness or sarcasm) or structuring discourse (introducing or concluding topics). In short, beyond their dictionary meanings, phraseological units are imbued with pragmatic meaning – the meaning-in-context and intended impact on the audience.

Recent research in linguistics has begun to systematically classify these pragmatic functions of phraseological units. Scholars have argued that the primary function of any language sign, idioms included, is fundamentally pragmatic, in that it aims to influence the thoughts or actions of others. Building on speech act theory and discourse analysis, linguists investigate how PUs can intensify an utterance's illocutionary force, convey speaker attitudes, or evoke shared cultural knowledge. In this article, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the pragmatic aspects of phraseological units in modern English. We review key literature on

phraseological functions and analyze examples to illustrate how idioms and related expressions operate within real communicative contexts. The scope of our discussion includes various types of PUs (idioms, proverbs, fixed formulas) and covers both spoken and written discourse in contemporary English.

The article is organized into several sections. The Literature Review summarizes theoretical perspectives and prior findings on the pragmatic functions of phraseological units, including classifications proposed by leading scholars. The Methodology section outlines how examples and data were gathered (drawing on corpora and existing studies). In the Analysis, we discuss specific pragmatic functions in detail – such as stylistic use, evaluative meaning, intensification, summarizing, directive (instructive) use, and text-building (cohesive) function – providing examples for each. Finally, the Conclusion highlights the implications of these pragmatic aspects for our understanding of English phraseology and suggests directions for further research, including applications in language teaching and cross-cultural communication.

Literature Review

Phraseological Units and Pragmatics: Theoretical Background

The study of phraseological units has a rich history in linguistics, with significant contributions from both Western and Eastern European scholars. Classical phraseology research (e.g., by A.V. Kunin and colleagues) laid the groundwork by defining phraseological units and developing methods to identify them in texts. Kunin's theory, for example, emphasized the semantic unity and reproducibility of idioms, and introduced the method of phraseological identification for extracting PUs from language corpora. While early work focused on structural and semantic classification (such as distinguishing fully idiomatic “phraseological fusions” from partially literal collocations), more recent research has shifted towards functional and pragmatic perspectives (Fedulenkova, 2019; Naciscione, 2010).

Pragmatics in linguistics deals with language use in context, including implicatures, speech acts, and the influence of utterances on listeners. Applying a pragmatic lens to phraseology means asking: What does a speaker achieve by using this particular idiom or fixed phrase in this context? According to Fedulenkova (2019), phraseological units inherently possess an “inborn influential value” – that is, they have a built-in capacity to affect the audience beyond their propositional content. Practically, any text or utterance has an underlying pragmatic function (to persuade, to criticize, to amuse, etc.), and the use of particular PUs can significantly amplify that function. For example, choosing a vivid idiom can strengthen the persuasive force of an argument or add humor to a narrative. Thus, modern phraseologists argue that pragmatic functions are not peripheral or occasional uses of PUs, but rather central, “basic” functions that idioms routinely fulfill in discourse.

Classification of Pragmatic Functions of PUs

Researchers have proposed that the diverse pragmatic effects of phraseological units can be categorized into a set of regular functions. In a comprehensive corpus-based study, Fedulenkova (2019) identified six basic pragmatic functions of English phraseological units. These are:

Stylistic Function: Using a PU to achieve a particular stylistic effect or tone. This involves tapping into the idiom's connotative potential to add color, humor, or emphasis beyond a neutral expression. The stylistic function often overlaps with expressiveness, as many idioms carry vivid imagery or emotional charge that enliven communication.

Evaluative Function: Conveying an attitude, judgment or evaluation (positive or negative) through a PU. Many idioms inherently include evaluation; for instance, calling a situation a blessing in disguise imparts a positive spin, whereas a skeleton in the cupboard carries a negative judgment or stigma. PUs used evaluatively allow speakers to implicitly judge people or situations by virtue of the idiom's meaning and tone.

Directive Function: Using a PU (often a proverb or saying) to urge, advise, or instruct someone to do (or not do) something. This pragmatic function is seen in maxims and proverbs that give guidance or warnings (e.g., strike while the iron is hot to encourage swift action, let bygones be bygones to advise forgiveness). In context, uttering such a phrase acts as an indirect speech act of advising or directing the interlocutor's behavior.

Cumulative Function: Expressing collective wisdom or cultural knowledge, thereby "accumulating" and transmitting cultural values. PUs serving a cumulative function (typically proverbs) encapsulate folk wisdom or shared knowledge that has been accumulated over time. For example, you can't have your cake and eat it too cumulatively conveys a general truth about trade-offs, preserving it as a ready-made bit of wisdom used to socialize and educate. This function highlights how phraseological units act as carriers of cultural memory.

Summarizing Function: Using a PU to sum up a situation or preceding discourse in a pithy way. Certain fixed phrases or idioms (e.g., that's that, the coast is clear, the fat is in the fire) succinctly capture the result or essence of prior events or discussions. In conversation or writing, such an idiom can serve as a concluding remark that neatly packages what came before, often providing closure or a takeaway message. This reflects the language's economy: a lengthy explanation can be compressed into a familiar idiomatic formula.

Text-building Function: Deploying a PU as a cohesive device that links parts of a text or conversation, contributing to overall discourse structure. This concept, introduced by Chernysheva (1974) and extended by later scholars, suggests that idioms can bind together different sentences or paragraphs by echoing a theme or image, thereby enhancing textual coherence. For instance, an idiom introduced as a metaphor early in a text may reappear or be alluded to later, creating an "anchor" for the reader. Such usage can reinforce a narrative motif or maintain an extended metaphor throughout a discourse (Naciscione, 2010).

These categories are considered normative pragmatic functions of phraseological units, meaning they occur regularly in actual language use, not just in rare or special cases. Indeed, corpus studies affirm that idioms are most frequently used in evaluative and stylistic capacities, often simultaneously serving both functions. In Fedulenkova's analysis of 3,129 idiom tokens from the British National Corpus, roughly 88% of instances had an evaluative function and 59% a stylistic function (with overlap), whereas directive and cumulative uses were comparatively infrequent. This indicates that English speakers predominantly exploit idioms to color their speech with emotion or judgment and to achieve a certain style or tone, while uses like giving direct advice or encapsulating cultural wisdom, though important, are less common in everyday discourse.

Beyond Fedulenkova's six functions, other scholars have highlighted additional pragmatic facets of phraseological units. For example, phraseological intensifiers form a subtype of idioms that specifically serve to intensify the degree of a property or the force of a statement (Fedoryuk, 2019). PUs like as cold as ice or fast as lightning amplify an adjective's intensity, while expressions such as by any stretch of the imagination boost the force of a claim. Fedoryuk (2019)

notes that such intensifying idioms act as “pragmatic markers of illocutionary force” in discourse, allowing speakers to strengthen their arguments or emotional appeals. In argumentative contexts, using a vivid intensifier (e.g., completely out of the question) can sway the listener by underscoring how strongly the speaker feels or how extreme a situation is. This aligns with the general view that idiomatic language often carries a persuasive emotional resonance that literal language may lack.

Another pragmatic aspect noted in the literature is the role of phraseological units in humor, irony, and creativity. Because idioms have a well-known form and meaning, they can be deliberately manipulated or subverted for comic effect. For instance, a writer might twist an idiom (not the brightest bulb in the chandelier as a creative variant of “not the brightest bulb in the box”) to inject humor. The successful use of such humor depends on the audience’s pragmatic competence to recognize the allusion to the original phrase and appreciate the twist. Similarly, irony can be achieved by using an idiom in a context that undermines its expected meaning, requiring readers to reconcile the literal and intended meanings (a process related to Grice’s implicatures and the contextual interpretation of non-literal language). These observations underscore that PUs are deeply embedded in the pragmatics of discourse: they are tools that can be played with to produce nuanced rhetorical effects, from levity to sarcasm.

In summary, prior research establishes that phraseological units have identifiable pragmatic functions that are integral to their use in modern English. They are not merely ornaments of language, but functional devices that speakers and writers choose strategically. The next sections will describe how we approach the analysis of these functions and then provide concrete examples of each function in action.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive methodology to explore the pragmatic aspects of phraseological units. Rather than conducting a controlled experiment, we draw upon existing linguistic research and real-language examples to illustrate how PUs function in context. The research process involved two main steps:

1. Literature Survey: We reviewed key publications on English phraseology and pragmatics, including journal articles and monographs. In particular, the classifications by Fedulenkova (2019) and colleagues provided a framework for identifying pragmatic functions. We also consulted works focusing on idioms in discourse (e.g., Naciscione, 2010) and studies on phraseological intensifiers (Fedoryuk, 2019) to gather insights on specific subtopics. These sources offered definitions, functional categories, and even quantitative data (from corpora) about PU usage, which we cite where relevant.

2. Corpus Examples: To ground the discussion in actual language use, we examined examples of phraseological units in context. Many examples were drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC) as reported in prior studies. Fedulenkova (2019) in particular provides illustrative sentences from the BNC for each pragmatic function, and we have adapted or cited some of those examples to demonstrate usage. Additional examples and case illustrations were taken from other corpora or texts (e.g., newspaper articles, literary sources) when needed to show a particular pragmatic effect. Where an example from a published source is used, we provide an in-text citation to acknowledge the source.

The analysis is organized by pragmatic function (stylistic, evaluative, etc.). For each function, we explain its nature and significance, then present one or more examples with discussion. In interpreting examples, we consider the context of use: who is speaking or writing, in what setting, and with what intended effect. This contextual analysis is crucial because pragmatic meaning arises from the interaction between the fixed phrase and the situation in which it is uttered. We also note where certain functions overlap or co-occur—since, for instance, an idiom can simultaneously be stylistically colorful and carry an evaluation.

It should be noted that while we use published examples and corpus data to support our points, the discussion is ultimately synthetic and conceptual. The goal is not to produce new statistical findings, but rather to provide a comprehensive overview of pragmatic uses of PUs, enriched by concrete illustrations. All examples and insights are in service of describing how phraseological units operate as pragmatic tools in modern English. This approach is appropriate for capturing the multifaceted nature of idioms in use, an object of study that is inherently qualitative (idioms gain meaning from subtleties of context and culture that numbers alone cannot capture).

By combining insights from existing research with contextual analysis of examples, our methodology ensures that the conclusions drawn are both theoretically informed and grounded in actual language behavior. We now proceed to the analysis of each major pragmatic function of phraseological units, linking theory to practice with representative cases.

Analysis

Stylistic and Expressive Functions

One of the most immediately noticeable contributions of phraseological units to discourse is their stylistic coloring. Idioms and other PUs often have a flavor—whether humorous, informal, literary, or dramatic—that deviates from plain literal language. Using an idiom can make an utterance more engaging or vivid. For example, saying “Our new manager shook things up in the department” has a more dynamic, colloquial tone than the literal “initiated changes.” The idiom shake things up evokes a concrete image and an informal register, contributing a specific tone (energetic and slightly metaphorical) to the statement.

According to Kunin’s definition, the stylistic function of a PU is the “special purposefulness of language means aiming to achieve a stylistic effect alongside the general content of the statement” (as cited in Fedulenkova, 2019). In other words, beyond conveying a base meaning, the speaker purposefully chooses a non-neutral expression to add stylistic effect. Connotation is key here: phraseological units often carry connotative meanings—implied attitudes, emotions, or registers. For instance, calling someone penny-wise and pound-foolish not only means “economical in small matters but wasteful in large ones,” it also conveys a mildly derogatory, traditional tone (with a proverbial flavor). The stylistic impact is distinct from saying “fiscally inconsistent,” which would be neutral and technical.

Many idioms inherently include imagery or figurativeness that can make descriptions more picturesque. If a novelist writes that a character “was on cloud nine” after getting a promotion, the idiom provides a vivid image of extreme happiness, in a way that a literal phrase like “extremely happy” lacks. This imaginative quality is part of the expressive-imagery function of idioms (Gavrin, 1974, as discussed by Fedulenkova). The imagery engages readers’ or listeners’ imagination and emotions. It can also reflect cultural flavor: an idiom like to bite the bullet

(meaning to endure a hardship with courage) has a historical/military connotation that adds a certain grit or bravery nuance to the tone of a sentence.

Another aspect of stylistic use is adjusting the formality or register of discourse. PUs can make language more informal and conversational (e.g., using slangy idioms like shoot the breeze for casual talk) or more formal/aphoristic (e.g., incorporating a Latin proverb or a biblical idiom for a lofty effect). In journalistic and creative writing, authors often use idioms to keep a piece lively and reader-friendly. Even in academic or professional contexts, a well-placed idiom can make a complex point more relatable. The key for the speaker/writer is to ensure the idiom suits the context and audience expectations. When used appropriately, the stylistic function of phraseological units can enhance clarity and engagement – by packaging ideas into catchy phrases, emphasizing important points, or injecting humor. However, inappropriate use (like an overly casual idiom in a formal report) can also pragmatically misfire, signaling the wrong tone.

In sum, the stylistic function serves the expressive needs of communication: idioms help to “awaken the connotative potential” of language. They allow speakers to not just inform, but also to paint, entertain, and emphasize. This often overlaps with other functions – for example, a stylistically chosen idiom might simultaneously convey an evaluation or a bit of humor. The next sections will see these overlaps, but first we turn directly to the evaluative dimension.

Evaluative Function (Attitude and Judgment)

Phraseological units are frequently used as a vehicle for evaluation – that is, expressing a positive or negative attitude toward someone or something. Evaluation can be explicit in the idiom’s meaning, or subtler in its connotation. For example, calling someone’s contribution a drop in the bucket clearly minimizes it (negative evaluation: it’s insignificant), whereas describing a situation as not half bad implies a positive appraisal in a colloquial, understated way.

Fedulenkova (2019) emphasizes that the evaluative function is a prime pragmatic aspect of phraseology, often intertwined with stylistic use. In her corpus findings, evaluative usage was the single most common function, appearing in a majority of idiom instances. This is unsurprising because idioms typically carry strong connotations. Many proverbs and idiomatic comparisons originated as moral or descriptive judgments (e.g., as lazy as a sloth is inherently a negative judgment on someone’s work ethic). When speakers use these expressions, they tap into that ready-made evaluation.

Positive evaluations via PUs often celebrate or praise. Idioms like on top of the world (extremely happy or successful) or fleet of foot (very quick/athletic) convey admiration or positivity. If a colleague says “After the project success, Jenna is on top of the world,” the idiom not only describes Jenna’s mood but also suggests a positive situation worth celebrating. In doing so, it implicitly evaluates the project outcome as very good (since it put someone on cloud nine). Other idioms explicitly encode positive traits: heart of gold (very kind), the best of both worlds (an ideal situation), etc. By using these, a speaker aligns the subject with desirable qualities.

Negative evaluations through idioms are perhaps even more numerous. Consider phrases like a thorn in one’s side (an irritant or problem), out to lunch (crazy or inattentive), or second-rate (inferior quality). These phrases allow a speaker to criticize indirectly but potently. For instance, having a skeleton in the cupboard refers to a shameful secret; mentioning that a public figure “has a few skeletons in his closet” is a way to cast negative judgment on their character without stating specifics. Likewise, idioms can label someone disparagingly: calling a person a wolf in sheep’s clothing evaluates them as dangerous but deceptive, and saying a talkative friend has

verbal diarrhoea humorously but harshly evaluates them as overly talkative. These expressions communicate a stance or attitude efficiently—often with added color or impact compared to literal descriptors.

It is worth noting that evaluative idioms can have degrees and nuances. Some are strongly pejorative (an ugly duckling for an awkward person, albeit with the possibility of later improvement), while others are mild or even affectionate in their negative tone (a bit of a troublemaker could be half-joking). The context and intonation can modulate how the evaluation is taken. Pragmatically, idioms also offer a bit of deniability or softening in criticism: using a fixed phrase to deliver a critique can make it seem like a general truth rather than a direct attack. Telling someone “Well, nobody’s perfect” is gentler than directly listing their flaws, even though the idiom does highlight an imperfection.

Intensification of evaluation is another angle: some idioms amplify how good/bad something is. Not just good, but out of this world intensifies praise, whereas bad might become terrible through an idiom like went over like a lead balloon (i.e., completely failed to impress). Here we see overlap with phraseological intensifiers (discussed later). The idiom’s figurative image carries a weight that strengthens the speaker’s evaluative stance.

In conclusion, the evaluative function of PUs lets speakers embed opinions and attitudes into figurative language. By choosing a particular idiom, one can label an event as success or failure, a person as hero or villain, often in a more vivid and culturally resonant way than literal language. This pragmatic use is pervasive: we constantly frame our perceptions through idiomatic expressions, sometimes even unconsciously. Because idioms often come from collective cultural experience, using them can lend authority to an evaluation (as if “wisdom of the crowd” backs the judgment encoded in a proverb or saying). The next function, directive, is somewhat different in that it directly tries to influence behavior rather than just stance, but it frequently employs the authoritative tone of proverbial wisdom as well.

Directive Function (Influencing and Advising)

The directive function involves using phraseological units to guide or influence someone’s actions. This function is prominently seen in proverbs, maxims, and certain idiomatic imperatives that effectively serve as advice or commands. When a speaker says “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch,” they are issuing a warning or counsel (in this case, advising someone not to be overconfident or assume success too early). The literal content is a metaphor, but pragmatically it functions as a cautionary directive to the listener.

Vereshchagin and Kostomarov (1990) termed this direct influencing aspect of phraseology the “directive” function, describing it as “directly managing, directing, influencing and, in a way, bringing up” the interlocutor (as cited in Fedulenkova, 2019). The presence of imperative grammar in many proverbs (e.g., Never say die; Let bygones be bygones; Don’t make a rod for your own back) is a clue to their directive nature. Even when not in the imperative form, PUs can imply a recommended course of action: strike while the iron is hot (implied: “you should act now while conditions are favorable”).

In contemporary English usage, deploying a proverb or idiomatic advice can have a few pragmatic advantages:

It softens the imposition: Rather than directly commanding someone (“Do this now”), couching advice as a well-known saying can make it feel less personal and more like general wisdom. For

example, telling a procrastinating student “Remember, the early bird catches the worm,” indirectly urges them to start early, but framed as a common truth rather than a direct order.

It draws on authority or tradition: Many such idioms are old and culturally embedded. Using one can invoke the sense that “people have long agreed on this principle.” This can bolster the persuasive force of the advice. For instance, “Honesty is the best policy” as a way to advise truthfulness implies a moral authority behind the advice.

It makes the message memorable: The catchy, metaphorical nature of idiomatic directives can stick in the mind better than plain advice. Saying “Don’t burn your bridges” (don’t ruin relationships you might need later) is more vivid and thus memorable than “Avoid cutting off future options by your current actions.”

Examples of directive phraseological units in context illustrate their use. In a workplace scenario, a mentor might caution a colleague, “I know you’re upset with the client, but don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” Here, the idiom effectively warns: do not retaliate against or insult someone who provides you benefits (it’s advising restraint and pragmatism). The colleague, hearing this, understands the implied directive: maintain a good relationship with the client for your own good.

Another example: “When negotiating your salary, don’t sell yourself short,” a friend might say, using an idiom to advise someone not to undervalue themselves. The phrase sell oneself short is an idiom meaning to accept less than one is worth, so pragmatically the friend is urging confidence in asking for fair pay.

It’s interesting that Fedulenkova’s corpus findings suggest the directive function is relatively infrequent compared to evaluative or stylistic uses. This could mean that in everyday conversation, people use idioms more to comment and express than to directly advise. However, in certain contexts like parental advice, teaching, or editorializing, the directive function is quite salient. We often see it in writing aimed at instructing the public (for example, self-help articles or opinion columns rife with proverbial wisdom). It’s also common in interpersonal talk in cultures or generations that favor proverb usage as guidance.

In summary, when phraseological units are used in a directive capacity, they function as vehicles of advice, admonition, or instruction, often leveraging cultural familiarity to make the advice palatable and authoritative. This shows the pragmatic power of idioms: they can tell people what to do or not do in a way that feels like shared wisdom rather than personal intrusion. Next, we examine the cumulative function, which shares with directive proverbs a connection to cultural knowledge but serves a different purpose.

Cumulative Function (Cultural Wisdom and Knowledge)

The cumulative function of phraseological units refers to their role in encapsulating and transmitting collective knowledge or culture. PUs often preserve historical, moral, or experiential knowledge in a succinct form; thus they act as storage units of culture-bound concepts. This function is most evident in proverbs and sayings, which accumulate the “wisdom of the ages.” For instance, the proverb “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire” conveys a cumulative folk understanding that signs of trouble usually have a real cause. Over generations, such phrases gather authority and are used to apply traditional insights to current situations.

When using a PU with a cumulative function, a speaker is effectively invoking a shared cultural memory. The proverb or idiom might originate from a fable, a historical event, or a longstanding custom. Consider “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” This saying cumulatively carries the idea that great things take time (originating from the historical notion of the vast Roman Empire’s gradual construction). If a teacher consoles a student disappointed by slow progress by saying “Keep working at it—Rome wasn’t built in a day,” she’s tapping into that cultural reservoir to impart patience. The student, recognizing the idiom, understands the broader cultural lesson being applied to his personal context.

Another dimension of the cumulative function is how idioms can serve as carriers of cultural identity and values. PUs often reflect the worldview, humor, or values of the culture from which they come. For example, many English idioms have biblical or literary origins (like “forbidden fruit”, “David and Goliath scenario”) and using them can implicitly invoke those texts or stories. When someone uses the idiom “to cross the Rubicon,” they cumulatively bring in a historical allusion (Julius Caesar’s decisive crossing of the Rubicon River) that symbolizes an irreversible commitment. The utterance not only communicates a current action (making an irrevocable decision) but also connects that action to the weight of historical precedent. The listener who knows the reference is momentarily taken beyond the immediate context to a broader historical/cultural narrative, enriching the message.

Given this, phraseological units can enhance intertextuality, as noted by Rasulova and Uralov (2025). They point out that idioms often have origins in literature, history, or popular culture, and using them in modern discourse establishes a link to those source contexts. This interplay adds layers of meaning. For example, a headline that reads “Tech CEO meets his Waterloo” not only says the CEO suffered a major defeat, but also cumulatively references Napoleon’s famous defeat at Waterloo, inviting readers to draw parallels between the two situations. The pragmatic effect relies on the audience’s ability to recognize and appreciate the stored knowledge within the phrase.

It is observed that the cumulative function is not as frequently activated in casual conversation (people don’t constantly quote proverbs), but when it is, it carries a certain gravitas. Using a proverb can give a proverbial, didactic tone to speech, which might be more common among older generations or in formal rhetoric than in daily small talk. Nonetheless, even in everyday life, we occasionally pepper our speech with these wisdom-bearing expressions, often semi-consciously.

From a pragmatic standpoint, when a phraseological unit performs a cumulative function, it can lend authority or universality to the speaker’s point. Instead of the speaker’s personal opinion, it sounds like a broadly accepted truth. For instance, telling a friend who is fretting over perfection, “Well, nobody’s perfect,” you’re really invoking a communal stance on human fallibility rather than just your own reassurance.

In closing, the cumulative function highlights phraseological units as conservers of meaning across time. They carry echoes of the past into present communication, allowing speakers to leverage the power of shared knowledge and proverbial truth. This is pragmatics at a higher level of social cognition: aligning one’s utterance with collective wisdom to achieve resonance or compliance from others.

Summarizing Function (Conciseness and Conclusion)

The summarizing function of phraseological units is their ability to encapsulate or conclude a preceding context in a succinct, often metaphorical, formulation. Idioms used this way act like punchy end-comments or thesis statements that distill what has been said. It's a bit like providing a moral to a story, or a final word on a matter, using an established phrase.

We see this function clearly when idioms like "that's the way the cookie crumbles" are used after discussing an unfortunate situation – it summarizes all the preceding details by essentially saying "such is life, and this outcome is just how things turned out." Another example: after a lengthy explanation, someone might conclude with "So, the bottom line is we need to increase our outreach," where the bottom line idiom signals a summary of the core point. Similarly, "All's well that ends well," said at the end of a complicated scenario that eventually resolved happily, serves to wrap up the narrative with a positive summary.

In conversational English, small idiomatic phrases frequently serve as summary or closure moves. Phrases like "And that's that," or "Case closed," or "Long story short, ...," are meta-discursive idioms that tell the listener the summary or conclusion is being delivered. By using an idiom, the speaker relies on the listener's familiarity to recognize that this is a concluding remark. For instance, saying "Anyway, it's water under the bridge now," after recounting a past conflict, uses water under the bridge to summarize the outcome (the issue is in the past and no longer a concern) while also signaling that the story is effectively over and should be put behind us.

The summarizing function ties into the concept of semantic compression, which Kunin and others note as a feature of phraseology. A phraseological unit can pack a lot of implied meaning relative to its length. A proverb might condense an entire cautionary tale into one line; an idiom might replace a sentence or two of explanation. For example, instead of explaining "this final minor issue was what caused the whole project to fail on top of all other problems," one might simply remark "It was the last straw." Listeners familiar with the last straw (short for "the last straw that broke the camel's back") will understand that this refers to a final small burden that caused collapse, summarizing the idea of cumulative stress leading to failure. The idiom here spares the need for a long explanation and provides a satisfying conclusion to the narrative of the project's troubles.

In written discourse, journalists and authors sometimes use idioms at the end of paragraphs or articles to leave the reader with a memorable final thought. Because idioms are pre-formulated and often witty or rhythmic, they make for impactful concluding sentences. A news article on a chaotic political negotiation might end with, "Whether a deal will be reached or not, only time will tell, but for now, the ball is in their court," summarizing the state of affairs (the next move is up to them) and ending with a familiar ring. The reader gets both a factual summary and a sense of closure from the idiom.

It's important pragmatically that the idiom chosen as a summary aligns with the content it concludes. Using an irrelevant or mismatched idiom can confuse the listener. For example, one wouldn't end a serious discussion about tragedy with a flippant idiom, as that would create dissonance. But used aptly, the summarizing idiom can also carry a tone—be it resigned, humorous, or hopeful—that the speaker wants to convey about the whole preceding matter.

Overall, the summarizing function shows how PUs can operate at a discourse level, not just within a sentence meaning. They help speakers manage the flow of conversation or narrative by providing ready-made closure devices. In pragmatic terms, they serve as signals like "in summary" or "lesson learned" but with the added color of idiomatic language. They satisfy the communicative goal of efficiently wrapping up a topic while often also imparting a general

lesson or final evaluation of what was discussed. This dual role makes them powerful pragmatic tools in storytelling and explanation.

Text-Building and Cohesive Function

The text-building function (also called the cohesive function) of phraseological units is a more complex pragmatic aspect, involving how idioms help structure discourse and create cohesion throughout a text or conversation. Unlike the summarizing function, which operates at the end of a discussion, text-building can occur throughout, linking different parts of the discourse together.

This concept was introduced by Chernysheva (1974) and further discussed by others like Fedulenkova (2019). The idea is that phraseological units can act as threads or anchors in a text. For example, an author might introduce a figurative expression or idiomatic metaphor early in a story and then refer back to it later, creating an extended metaphor that gives the text unity. Anita Naciscione (2010) has documented many cases of such sustained idiomatic themes in discourse. In one literary example noted by Naciscione, D. H. Lawrence's story "The Ladybird" introduces the idiom to have a bee in one's bonnet (meaning to be obsessed or crazy about something) and later cleverly plays on that idiom with variations (like mentioning a "ladybird in their bonnets"). This punning repetition ties the narrative together and reinforces the thematic point about a family obsession, fulfilling a text-building role.

In non-literary contexts, we see text-building when speakers or writers use an idiom as a reference point that both they and the audience can return to. Consider a business presentation where the speaker opens with, "We were at a crossroads last year," to describe a crucial decision point. In the conclusion, the speaker might circle back: "Had we taken the wrong path at that crossroads, we wouldn't be here today." By using the crossroads metaphor both at the beginning and the end, the speaker has book-ended the presentation with the same idiomatic image, which helps the audience see the speech as a coherent whole and remember the key message (the decision made all the difference).

Another aspect of the cohesive use is the binding of context fragments. Phraseological units can connect sentences by referencing a concept introduced earlier. If an article's title is idiomatic, the body of the article might riff on that idiom in multiple sections. For example, an article titled "Breaking the Ice: Networking Tips for Conferences" might play on the ice metaphor throughout – perhaps ending a paragraph with "once the ice is broken..." and so forth, thereby maintaining a cohesive theme.

It's not only about exact repetition; sometimes a chain of related idioms or metaphors can run through a text, creating a semantic field that binds the text. For instance, an extended sailing metaphor: first paragraph mentions "setting sail on a new venture," middle paragraphs talk about "uncharted waters" and "staying afloat amidst challenges," and the final note is "anchoring our success." Each of these is a separate idiom, but collectively they sustain a maritime theme, giving the text structural and aesthetic cohesion.

From a pragmatic perspective, the text-building function often operates subtly; a reader might not consciously note the idiom reappearances or thematic unity, but it assists their comprehension and retention of the material. It creates resonance – the later mention of an idiom resonates with the earlier one, triggering the memory and reinforcing the message. Additionally, it can be aesthetically pleasing, lending a sense of craftsmanship or wit to the discourse, which in turn can keep the audience more engaged (a pragmatic goal of effective communication).

Finally, phraseological cohesion sometimes interacts with audience expectations. In genres like speeches or stand-up comedy, an early idiom or phrase might be a setup that the audience expects to come “full circle” by the end. Delivering on that expectation with a callback to the idiom can satisfy the audience and give a sense of conclusion or completeness.

In summary, the text-building function showcases the role of phraseological units beyond the sentence level—structuring whole narratives or dialogues. It highlights the fact that idioms are not isolated ornaments but can be woven into the fabric of discourse to guide interpretation, emphasize themes, and connect ideas across a text. This function, along with all the others discussed, underscores the central thesis of this article: phraseological units play multifaceted pragmatic roles in modern English, contributing richly to how meaning is made and communicated.

Additional Pragmatic Observations: Context, Humor, and Sociocultural Nuances

In addition to the main functions outlined above, several broader pragmatic considerations about phraseological units deserve mention:

Context-Dependence: The meaning and effect of a phraseological unit can shift depending on the context. Pragmatically, speakers rely on context to resolve whether an expression is taken literally or idiomatically and to what extent it achieves the intended effect. For instance, “kick the bucket” in a medical drama (with a patient on screen) will almost certainly be understood idiomatically (to die), whereas in a children’s game context, it might be literal. Moreover, the implications of an idiom can vary by context: saying “he’s playing with fire” about a stunt driver (implying risk) is different in tone and consequence from saying it about a politician flirting with extremist rhetoric. In each case, context informs the listener what deeper suggestion or warning is being conveyed. As Rasulova and Uralov (2025) argue, one must consider the situational context, speaker intent, and audience expectations to fully grasp how a phraseological unit functions pragmatically in a given instance.

Humor and Irony: PUs are fertile ground for humor. Jokes and witty wordplay often involve idioms—either by subverting them, misapplying them, or deliberately taking them literally. For example, there’s a classic joke when someone says “When I told my boss I was ill, he said, ‘give me a sick note.’ So I sent him a note saying: ‘Boss, you’re sick!’” – playing on two interpretations of sick note. Understanding such humor requires pragmatic awareness of idioms and their typical usage. Irony can arise when a speaker uses an idiom but clearly means the opposite or highlights a contrast. If a weather presenter looks out at a torrential downpour and says “Well, it’s nice weather for ducks,” they are using that idiom humorously/ironically—the phrase means it’s very wet, but calling it “nice” for ducks underlines that it’s actually bad weather for people. This humorous use relies on the audience recognizing the idiom’s conventional meaning and the situational irony. Thus, idioms enrich the pragmatic landscape by allowing layered meanings—literal vs. idiomatic, expected vs. subverted—giving communicators a toolkit for comedic or ironic effect.

Politeness and Softening: Sometimes an idiom is chosen as a more polite or indirect way to express something. Euphemistic idioms, for example, serve politeness: “pass away” instead of “die”, or “economical with the truth” instead of “lying”. These soften the bluntness of the message (pragmatic politeness strategy). Also, delivering criticism via idiom can be gentler, as mentioned earlier (e.g., “let’s not toot our own horn too much” gently advising someone against bragging, using an idiom to mitigate directness). The shared nature of idioms can make a critique seem less personal—“this is a known concept” rather than “I specifically accuse you.”

Sociolinguistic Signaling: The choice of phraseological units can signal identity or group membership. Certain idioms or slang expressions are strongly associated with particular dialects, generations, or subcultures. For example, a British English speaker might say “fall off the back of a lorry” to imply something was obtained illicitly, whereas an American might say “fell off the back of a truck.” Using one version immediately signals a British or American context. Similarly, older speakers might use proverbs that younger speakers wouldn’t, thereby signaling age or traditional mindset. The pragmatic effect is that idioms can function as in-group markers. When two people share familiarity with a niche idiom or reference (“red pill” in internet slang, for example), its use can create a bonding effect. Conversely, misuse of an idiom (or use of an out-of-place idiom) can signal that someone is not part of a group or not attuned to a context, which is a pragmatic cue to others about that person’s background.

Dynamic Evolution: Language is not static, and phraseological units themselves evolve. New idioms arise (often from pop culture, e.g., “to binge-watch” became idiomatic with the rise of streaming TV), and old ones can fade or change meaning. Pragmatically, this means speakers must be aware of which idioms are current and appropriate. Using an outdated phrase might make communication less effective or even confuse younger listeners. For example, referring to something as “Kodak moment” (a once-popular idiom for a picture-perfect moment) might fall flat today as Kodak’s prominence has waned. On the other hand, new phraseological expressions like “spill the tea” (meaning to gossip) have emerged in recent years. The pragmatic competence involves not just knowing idioms but knowing their contemporary usage, appropriateness, and audience reception. This evolutionary aspect is part of pragmatics because it’s about how meaning-in-context can shift over time.

In highlighting these points, we see that pragmatic aspects of phraseological units are deeply interwoven with context, culture, and usage norms. They require speakers and listeners to have a shared background knowledge and social understanding. When that shared understanding is present, idioms can be a shortcut to rich meaning; when it is absent, idioms can miscommunicate. Thus, both the power and potential pitfall of phraseological units lie in their pragmatics. Effective communication in English—especially at a nuanced, idiomatic level—demands sensitivity to these factors.

Conclusion

Phraseological units in modern English are much more than colorful turns of phrase confined to language trivia or learner’s lists of idioms. As this article has demonstrated, they fulfill critical pragmatic functions that enhance and shape communication. By examining the pragmatic aspects—how and why idioms are used by speakers to achieve certain effects—we gain insight into the dynamic interplay between fixed language expressions and context.

We reviewed key pragmatic functions of PUs identified in the literature: the stylistic function (infusing utterances with expressiveness and tone), the evaluative function (imparting judgment or attitude), the directive function (steering others’ actions via proverbial wisdom or idiomatic advice), the cumulative function (preserving and invoking cultural knowledge), the summarizing function (concluding or encapsulating discourse succinctly), and the text-building function (providing cohesion and thematic unity to discourse). These functions are not mutually exclusive; indeed, we often find them overlapping. For example, an idiom can simultaneously be stylistically colorful, convey a negative evaluation, and serve to wrap up a conversation turn. The rich connotative layers of phraseological meaning enable this multi-functionality.

One consistent theme is the amplification of communication power through idioms. Phraseological units carry “inborn influential value” (Fedulenkova, 2019) that tends to intensify the pragmatic force of an utterance. Whether it is making praise more enthusiastic (“over the moon”), criticism more vivid (“not pull any punches”), or advice more resonant (“look before you leap”), an idiom often says more than the sum of its words. It appeals to shared images, emotions, and cultural touchstones in the audience’s mind, thereby often achieving a stronger impact than literal language might. As Fedoryuk (2019) observed, even in structured arguments, phraseological intensifiers serve to boost illocutionary force, strengthening how convincing or forceful an argument comes across.

We also highlighted how context governs the pragmatic deployment of PUs. Competent language users are adept at choosing idioms that fit the situation—cognizant of factors like formality, audience’s knowledge, and the nuanced message they want to convey. If misused (e.g., a poorly timed idiom that trivializes a serious situation), the pragmatic effect can backfire. Thus, understanding idioms pragmatically is essential not only for linguists but for anyone aiming at proficient, nuanced communication in English: it involves knowing when to use a certain expression and what implication it will likely carry in context.

The findings and discussions here have several implications. In linguistics and discourse analysis, appreciating the pragmatic aspect of phraseology can lead to more accurate interpretations of texts and utterances. For language education, teaching idioms should go beyond memorizing meanings—it should incorporate usage contexts and pragmatic functions, so learners grasp how native speakers employ idioms to achieve communication goals. In translation studies, understanding the pragmatic force of an idiom is crucial to finding an equivalent effect in another language (since a direct literal translation may lose the idiom’s purpose, whether it be humor, politeness, or emphasis).

This article has synthesized insights from recent research up to 2025, but there is always room for further exploration. Future research could quantitatively track changes in idiom usage pragmatics over time (e.g., how internet communication is birthing new idioms or altering old ones’ usage). Cross-cultural pragmatic studies of phraseological units can also be fruitful—comparing, for example, how the same idiom (like “to bite one’s tongue” meaning to hold back speech) might carry different weight or be used differently in American vs. British vs. other Englishes. Additionally, with advances in computational linguistics, one can imagine algorithms detecting pragmatic functions of idioms in large datasets, helping to map out patterns of usage in various genres (news, fiction, social media).

In conclusion, phraseological units are a testament to the expressive richness of language. They encapsulate history, culture, and emotion, allowing speakers to do more with less—conveying meaning not just through what is said, but how it is said and what is evoked. In modern English discourse, idioms and other fixed expressions remain indispensable tools. By understanding their pragmatic aspects, we become better equipped to appreciate the subtleties of communication and to use language with greater precision and artistry. As the idiom goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating—and in the case of phraseology, the “eating” is the real-world use where these expressions continue to prove their value in every exchange, from casual chats to the highest forms of literature and rhetoric.

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