

## THEORETICAL DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the theoretical definition, semantic structure, and typological characteristics of phraseological units, with a particular focus on Japanese idiomatic expressions. While individual lexical units possess inherent meanings, their functional realization emerges primarily within discourse through stable syntagmatic relations. The study demonstrates that certain multi-word expressions develop meanings that cannot be explained through compositional semantics alone, thus necessitating a phraseological approach. Special attention is given to the intermediate stages between free word combinations and fully idiomatized expressions, referred to as semi-fixed collocational forms (rengo keishiki), which play a crucial role in the process of phraseologization. Furthermore, the paper analyzes grammatical constraints, such as obligatory negation and resistance to negative forms, as well as the semantic productivity of body-part metaphors in Japanese phraseology.*

**Keywords:** *Phraseological unit; idiom; collocation; kanyoku; rengo keishiki; semantic non-compositionality; grammatical restriction; Japanese language; Uzbek language; contrastive linguistics.*

**Theoretical Background**

Although individual linguistic units possess inherent lexical meanings, their actual realization and functional value emerge primarily within discourse through interaction with other lexical items. Consequently, words do not operate as fully autonomous linguistic units in isolation; rather, they acquire communicative validity only within phrases, collocations, or sentence structures. In general, the meaning of a phrase or sentence composed of multiple words may be interpreted as the cumulative or sequential sum of the meanings of its constituent elements.

Nevertheless, linguistic evidence demonstrates that this compositional principle does not universally apply. In certain contexts, formally identical word combinations exhibit markedly different semantic interpretations. For instance, the Japanese expression 荷物を棚にあげる (*nimotsu o tana ni ageru*) literally denotes the concrete action "to place luggage on a shelf".

However, in the expression 自分のことは棚にあげる (*jibun no koto wa tana ni ageru*), the same structural unit 棚にあげる conveys an abstract and figurative meaning, namely "to disregard one's own responsibility" or "to avoid addressing a personal issue." In such cases, the overall semantic value cannot be derived from the literal meanings of the individual components, thereby challenging a purely compositional semantic interpretation<sup>1</sup>.

**Definition of Phraseological Units**

<sup>1</sup> Suzuki, T. (1988). *Nihon bunpo jiten* [Dictionary of Japanese grammar]. Yuseido.

Linguistic units formed through the combination of two or more lexical or syntactic elements that express a stable, conventionalized meaning distinct from the simple sum of their components are referred to as phraseological units.

In Japanese linguistics, these units are commonly termed 慣用句 (*kanyoku*). Such expressions originate from concrete literal meanings and subsequently develop abstract, figurative interpretations through metaphorical extension. Due to habitual usage, they become structurally fixed and semantically conventionalized. In academic discourse, they are also designated as 成句 (*seiku*), or "fixed expressions."

#### Intermediate Stages between Free Combinations and Idioms

An important characteristic of Japanese phraseology is the presence of transitional stages between free word combinations and fully idiomatic expressions. Lexical items exhibit varying degrees of combinatorial freedom. In some cases, a word may co-occur with multiple lexical partners, resulting in relatively flexible collocations. In other cases, the range of possible combinations is significantly restricted, with specific lexical items forming stable pairings with particular verbs or adjectives. Between these two extremes lies a continuum of semi-fixed constructions.

For example, the element 気に (*ki ni*) can combine with several verbs, including いる, ならない, さわる, and かかる (*iru, naranai, sawaru, kakaru*). Similarly, the phrase 勝手が (*katte ga*) frequently co-occurs with 違う (*chigau*), though alternative constructions such as 勝手が悪い (*katte ga warui*) are also attested. These examples illustrate how certain lexical items form relatively stable yet not entirely fixed combinations.

A defining feature of such constructions is the presence of a predicative core, typically realized by a verb or adjective. Compared with free combinations, these expressions display a higher degree of structural restriction and tighter semantic cohesion. Expressions such as 罪をかぶる (*tsumi o kaburu*) "to take the blame", 骨を惜しむ (*hone o oshimu*) "to avoid effort", and 耳が早い (*mimi ga hayai*) "to be quick to pick up information" exemplify this category. While their meanings are partially inferable from their components, they are no longer entirely compositional. Accordingly, these constructions constitute an intermediate syntactic-semantic stage between free collocations and fully idiomatized phraseological units.

#### Stabilization into Fully Phraseological Units

Over time, semi-fixed constructions known as 連語形式 (*rengo keishiki*) undergo further stabilization and acquire the prototypical features of phraseological units. At this stage, the individual lexical meanings of the components gradually weaken, and the expression comes to represent a new, unified semantic whole. The overall meaning is no longer recoverable from the lexical meanings of the constituent elements.

For instance, あごで使う (*ago de tsukau*) expresses the notion of "ordering others around arrogantly without engaging in work oneself," while 鎬を削る (*shinogi o kezuru*) denotes "engaging in fierce and intense competition." In both cases, the idiomatic meanings diverge

significantly from the literal interpretations of the individual words, thereby justifying their classification as fully phraseological units.

This category includes expressions such as:

1. 油を売る (*abura o uru*) "to loaf at work",
2. 羽を伸ばす (*hane o nobasu*) "to enjoy freedom",
3. 腹が黒い (*hara ga kuroi*) "to harbor malicious intent",
4. 馬が合う (*uma ga au*) "to get along well" and 肩を持つ (*kata o motsu*) "to support someone"<sup>2</sup>.

### Grammatical Constraints and Typological Features

Within Japanese phraseology, certain expressions are subject to grammatical constraints that give rise to distinct typological groups. One such group consists of expressions predominantly used in negative form, including あがきがとれない (*agaki ga torenai*), うだつがあがらない (*udatsu ga agaranai*), and 間尺に合わない (*mashaku ni awanai*). Although affirmative forms are theoretically possible, actual usage strongly favors the negative, which functions as the normative pattern.

Conversely, some phraseological units resist negation. Expressions such as 頭にくる (*atama ni kuru*) "to become angry" and 首ったけになる (*kubittake ni naru*) "to become completely absorbed" rarely occur in direct negative form. Instead, negation is achieved through more complex syntactic constructions, indicating that the affirmative form is semantically and structurally primary.

Another salient feature of Japanese phraseology is the frequent inclusion of body-part terms. Expressions such as 顔が広い (*kao ga hiroi*) "to be well-connected", 鼻が高い (*hana ga takai*) "to be proud", and 小耳にはさむ (*komimi ni hasamu*) "to overhear" metaphorically encode psychological states, social relations, and internal emotions. This tendency underscores the imagery-rich and semantically dense nature of Japanese phraseological expressions<sup>3</sup>.

### Conclusion

This study has examined the theoretical foundations, semantic properties, and structural characteristics of Japanese phraseological units, with particular emphasis on verbal idioms and their developmental stages. The analysis confirms that phraseological meaning in Japanese cannot be adequately explained through compositional semantics alone, as the semantic value of many multi-word expressions emerges from conventionalized usage rather than from the sum of their lexical components. This non-compositionality constitutes a defining feature of idiomatic expressions and justifies their treatment as an independent object of linguistic inquiry.

A key contribution of this research lies in its detailed examination of intermediate constructions situated between free word combinations and fully idiomatized expressions. These semi-fixed collocational forms (*rengo keishiki*) represent a crucial transitional stage in the process of phraseologization. Although such constructions retain partial transparency in meaning,

<sup>2</sup> Suzuki, T. (1988). *Nihon bunpo jiten* [Dictionary of Japanese grammar]. Yuseido.

<sup>3</sup> Agency for Cultural Affairs. (1975). *Gogen, kanyogo* [Etymology and idiomatic expressions]. Kyoiku Shuppan.



their internal structure is already subject to lexical and grammatical constraints that restrict substitution and modification. Over time, repeated usage leads to semantic bleaching of individual components and the stabilization of a unified idiomatic meaning. This gradual shift highlights the dynamic nature of phraseological formation in Japanese.

The study further demonstrates that grammatical factors play a significant role in shaping the behavior of Japanese phraseological units.

Certain idioms exhibit strong preferences for specific grammatical forms, such as obligatory negation or resistance to direct negative constructions. These constraints are not merely syntactic but are closely tied to the semantic and pragmatic functions of the expressions.

The findings indicate that idiomaticity in Japanese is reinforced not only through semantic fixation but also through grammatical conventionalization.

Another salient feature identified in this research is the prevalence of body-part terminology within Japanese phraseological units. Expressions incorporating lexical items denoting parts of the human body function as highly productive carriers of metaphorical meaning, enabling the concise representation of psychological states, emotional reactions, and social evaluations. The frequent recurrence of such patterns underscores the importance of embodied cognition in Japanese phraseological semantics and reflects a broader tendency toward imagery-based expression.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Japanese phraseology as a structured yet evolving system. By clarifying the internal organization of phraseological units, their stages of stabilization, and the interplay between semantic and grammatical constraints, this research provides a theoretical framework that can support further investigations into idiomatic expression, lexicalization processes, and usage-based language change within Japanese. The results also offer valuable insights for lexicography, language education, and advanced linguistic analysis, where accurate interpretation and classification of phraseological units remain essential.

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