

Semantic Analysis Of Polysemantic Phraseological Units In English

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Abstract: This article investigates the semantic and contextual features of polysemantic phraseological units in English. Phraseological units often extend beyond their meaning and develop additional senses that emerge in specific communicative contexts. By examining phraseological units, the study highlights how phraseological unitatic expressions acquire multiple meanings. The findings demonstrate that phraseological polysemy is shaped not only by internal semantic mechanisms but also by contextual variation, showing how meaning shifts according to discourse, register, and speaker intention. This approach provides a clearer understanding of phraseological units as dynamic units of language whose meanings are negotiated in use.

Keywords: Phraseological unit, polysemy, metaphor, context, semantic mechanism.

Introduction: Phraseological units are an essential component of language, reflecting both cultural traditions and the dynamic nature of meaning in communication. Unlike free word combinations, phraseological units often develop figurative senses that extend beyond their literal interpretation. These additional meanings are not fixed but shift according to context, discourse type, and speaker intention. As a result, phraseological units frequently display polysemy, where a single expression carries multiple related meanings. The study of phraseological unitatic polysemy requires attention to both semantic mechanisms and contextual variation. Semantically, phraseological units may acquire new meanings through processes such as metaphorical extension, where a literal sense is reinterpreted figuratively, or metonymic transfer, where meaning shifts based on associative closeness. Contextually, phraseological units may be used in serious, humorous, ironic, or evaluative ways, which further shapes their interpretation in discourse. This article examines a selection of English phraseological units such as catch on, cover for, nip and tuck, never look back and others illustrate how phraseological units develop and sustain multiple meanings.

The semantic and contextual study of phraseological units has shown that they are not fixed expressions with a single meaning, but rather dynamic phraseological units capable of developing multiple senses. This phenomenon of polysemy is explained by two main semantic mechanisms: metaphorical extension and metonymic transfer. These mechanisms allow phraseological units to expand their semantic potential and adapt to diverse communicative contexts [Jeleznova, 1989: 112; Kunin, 1996: 145]. Metaphorical extension occurs when the literal meaning of an idiom is broadened to describe abstract or figurative situations. For example, the idiom never look back extends from the literal act of turning one's head to figurative meanings such as "not returning to the past" or "progressing without hesitation". Metonymic transfer, by contrast, is based on associative contiguity: in cover for someone, the meaning "to replace" arises from the physical act of covering, while "to conceal" develops through association with protection. As Apresyan (1995: 203) notes, phraseological units reflect "dynamic interaction between semantic potential and contextual realization," which explains their adaptability across registers and discourse types. Within this semantic framework, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) can be employed not as a cognitive

model of thought, but as a descriptive mechanism for semantic richness. CMT demonstrates how phraseological units systematically draw on metaphorical patterns to generate multiple figurative meanings. For instance, phraseological units such as *catch on* illustrate how the metaphor “understanding is grasping” provides a semantic basis for the idiom’s figurative sense of “to comprehend.” [Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 6; Kövecses, 2002: 80; Kövecses, 2024: 103]. By treating metaphor and metonymy as semantic mechanisms, rather than purely cognitive constructs, idiomatic polysemy can be understood as the result of systematic linguistic processes that enrich the expressive capacity of phraseological units. This approach highlights phraseological units as semantically rich and contextually adaptable expressions, whose multiple meanings are negotiated in discourse and shaped by both internal semantic structures and external communicative conditions. By analyzing polysemy of phraseological units in English, we try to classify them into three types which developed by the linguist A.G. Nazaryan [1987: 211]:

1. Phraseological units with multiple metaphorical meanings;
2. Phraseological units with multiple metonymic meanings.
3. Phraseological units with one metonymic and one or more metaphorical meanings.

Each phraseological unit is analyzed in terms of its semantic features and contextual uses, and the findings are organized into three types. By focusing on these types, the study highlights phraseological units as flexible and dynamic units of language whose meanings are negotiated in real communicative practice.

Analysis. 1. Attach to:

1. To connect oneself to something (literal/physical sense): - Please be sure to attach yourself to your luggage at the airport. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 648).
2. To involve oneself with another person or group, often excessively (figurative/social sense): - I hope my little cousins don’t try to come with us – they’re always attaching themselves to me, and it’s so annoying. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 648).

The first meaning emerges through metaphorical extension, where the idea of “fastening” is transferred to human relationships. Just as an object can be physically attached to another, a person can be “attached” to someone else in a social or emotional sense. The reflexive pronoun (*attach oneself to*) is crucial for both meanings, signaling that the subject is actively creating the connection. This idiom illustrates

metaphorical polysemy, where a literal sense develops into a figurative one. The semantic link is transparent: both meanings rely on the core concept of “connection,” but one is physical, the other social/psychological.

2. Baby blues

1. A brief period of sadness, anxiety, or mood swings after childbirth (medical/psychological sense): - When I had the baby blues after having my first child, I would find myself crying without knowing why. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 656).
2. Blue eyes, especially light blue (colloquial/descriptive sense): - I just had to ask for Sean’s number after I got a glimpse of his baby blues – I’d never seen such striking eyes before! (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 656).

The first meaning is metaphorical, where “blue” is associated with sadness or melancholy (as in “feeling blue”). The addition of “baby” specifies the context of postpartum depression. The second meaning is metonymic, where “blues” directly refers to the color of the eyes, and “baby” functions as an intensifier, emphasizing innocence or attractiveness. In medical, psychological, or family-related contexts, baby blues is understood as a temporary emotional state after childbirth. In casual or romantic contexts, it refers to eye color, often with a positive or affectionate connotation. The idiom demonstrates contextual disambiguation: only the surrounding discourse clarifies whether the speaker is describing a health condition or physical appearance. This idiom exemplifies mixed polysemy: one meaning is metaphorical (emotional state), while the other is metonymic (eye color). The two senses are semantically distant but coexist due to the shared lexical element “blue”.

The idiom *catch on* demonstrates polysemy with two distinct but related senses:

- 1 To become popular or widespread: - Judging by my students, that obnoxious song is really starting to catch on. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 1182).
- 2 To understand or grasp something: - Thanks for explaining that concept to me – I think I’m catching on now. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 1182).

Both meanings are linked by the core semantic feature of grasping/holding, extended metaphorically into social domains. The first sense arises through metaphorical extension of the verb *catch*, originally meaning “to seize or grasp physically”. Here, the idea of “grasping” is transferred to the spread of trends or ideas: when something “catches on,” it is “grasped” collectively by society, thus becoming popular. The

second sense also reflects metaphorical extension, but in the cognitive domain: “understanding” is conceptualized as “grasping”. To catch on means to mentally seize or comprehend an idea. In social contexts, the phraseological unit typically refers to popularity, especially of songs, fashions, or ideas. In educational or interpersonal contexts, it refers to comprehension, often implying a gradual process of learning. The phraseological unit can carry evaluative nuances: in the popularity sense, it may be neutral or critical (“that obnoxious song”); in the comprehension sense, it often conveys progress or achievement. If we classify the phraseological unit according to the features of meanings, both meanings are metaphorical, but diverge into different domains: social-semantic domain (popularity, spread) and cognitive-semantic domain (understanding, learning). Despite this divergence, the phraseological unit maintains a shared semantic core of “grasping” or “seizing,” which unites its polysemy. The polysemantic phraseological unit catch on illustrates how a single lexical item can develop multiple metaphorical meanings through semantic extension. Its polysemy reflects the flexibility of idioms to adapt across social and cognitive contexts, with usage determined by discourse environment.

4. cover for (someone or something):

1. To hide one’s wrongdoings from someone else: - Will you cover for me? Just tell mom I went to bed early. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 1361).
2. To do something in place of someone else: - I’m covering for Joanna, who’s on vacation. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 1361).
3. To provide insurance against a problem or scenario: Does our homeowner’s insurance cover the house for flood damage? (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 1361).

First contextual meaning (concealment) is a metaphorical extension of the verb cover, originally meaning “to place something over.” Here, the act of physically covering is mapped onto the act of hiding or concealing wrongdoing. Second meaning (substitution) is a metonymic transfer, where “covering” shifts from physical protection to “taking someone’s place.” The semantic link is based on role-for-person association: one person “covers” the absence of another. Third meaning (insurance) is another metaphorical extension, where “covering” is understood as “providing protection.” The polysemantic phraseological unit is used in legal and financial contexts to denote safeguarding against risk or damage. In informal, interpersonal contexts, the polysemantic phraseological unit usually means “to conceal wrongdoing” (often among friends, siblings, or

peers). In workplace or organizational contexts, it typically means “to substitute” or “to take over responsibilities”. In legal, financial, or contractual contexts, it refers to “insurance coverage” or “protection against risk”. The phraseological unit meaning is thus highly context-dependent, with discourse type (family, workplace, legal) guiding interpretation. This polysemantic phraseological unit illustrates mixed polysemy with one or more metaphorical and one or more metonymical meaning. Together, these meanings form a semantic network centered on the core concept of covering as protection, extended into moral, social, and institutional domains. The polysemantic phraseological unit exemplifies how phraseological polysemy develops through semantic extension and contextual variation. Its three senses are unified by the underlying notion of covering as protection, but diverge into distinct domains depending on discourse. This makes it a strong example of how idioms achieve semantic richness and adaptability in communication.

5. never look back:

1. To show no sign of returning to past circumstances: - I’m leaving this town and never looking back. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 2003).
2. To progress without interruption or impediment: - We just stuck with our dreams and never looked back. (The Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary, P. 2003).

Both contextual meaning are metaphorical extensions of the literal act of turning one’s head backward. In the first meaning, “looking back” is mapped onto returning to the past. To “never look back” means to leave behind previous conditions, relationships, or environments. In the second meaning, “looking back” is mapped onto hesitation or interruption and it means to move forward with determination and continuous progress. In personal or biographical contexts, the idiom often conveys a decisive break with the past, emphasizing independence or transformation. In professional or entrepreneurial contexts, it highlights determination, resilience, and uninterrupted progress. The polysemantic phraseological unit carries a positive evaluative nuance in most uses, suggesting confidence, ambition, or success. This idiom illustrates metaphorical polysemy, with two figurative meanings derived from the same literal source. Both meanings share the semantic core of forward motion versus backward orientation, but they diverge into different discourse applications: one emphasizes irreversibility, the other continuous advancement. The polysemantic phraseological unit never look back demonstrates how a single figurative image can yield multiple related meanings. Its polysemy reflects the phraseological

unit's adaptability across contexts, from personal life decisions to professional achievements, making it a strong example of how idioms achieve semantic richness through metaphorical extension.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of phraseological polysemy presented in this study demonstrates that English polysemantic phraseological units are not static lexical items but dynamic semantic units whose meanings evolve through both internal mechanisms and contextual variation. Phraseological units often sustain multiple related meanings that coexist within a semantic network, unified by a shared conceptual core. Contextual disambiguation plays a decisive role in idiomatic interpretation, Phraseological units achieve semantic richness by combining metaphorical and metonymic mechanisms, as in cover for, which integrates concealment, substitution, and protection into a single phraseological unit.

This study lies in its integrated semantic-contextual approach. While much previous research has emphasized cognitive explanations of idiomatic meaning, this analysis foregrounds idioms as linguistic-semantic phenomena whose polysemy can be systematically described without relying on abstract cognitive models. By treating Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a semantic mechanism rather than a cognitive framework, the study offers a fresh perspective: phraseological units are semantically rich because they exploit recurring metaphorical and metonymic patterns, and they are contextually flexible because discourse activates different facets of this semantic potential. This approach contributes to phraseological studies by providing a clear typology of phraseological polysemy and demonstrating how contextual variation interacts with semantic mechanisms to shape meaning.

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