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STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PHRASEOLOGICAL LACUNAE: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This thesis investigates the structural characteristics of phraseological lacunae as a significant phenomenon in comparative linguistics, phraseology, and intercultural communication. Phraseological lacunae emerge when a phraseological unit in one language lacks a direct phraseological counterpart in another language or when corresponding expressions differ substantially in their grammatical organization, lexical components, imagery, and communicative functions. The study aims to identify the principal structural dimensions of phraseological lacunae, establish criteria for their classification, and explain their implications for cross-linguistic comparison and translation. The research employs descriptive, comparative, structural-semantic, and componential analysis, using English and Uzbek phraseological expressions as illustrative examples. The analysis proposes a framework distinguishing absolute phraseological gaps, syntactic-structural mismatches, componential discrepancies, grammatical-functional differences, and elliptical or context-dependent constructions. The findings suggest that structural lacunarity cannot be determined solely by comparing the number or grammatical arrangement of words; it also requires examining semantic integrity, idiomaticity, conventional usage, and the availability of functional equivalents. The study contributes to a more systematic understanding of phraseological non-equivalence and provides practical implications for translation studies and foreign-language teaching.

Keywords: phraseological lacunae, phraseological units, structural characteristics, syntactic patterns, structural-semantic analysis, idiomaticity, cross-linguistic comparison, English, Uzbek, translation equivalence.

Introduction

Phraseological units constitute an essential part of a language's lexical and grammatical system because they combine relatively stable formal structures with conventionalized meanings that frequently cannot be derived directly from the individual meanings of their components. Their structural organization may involve verbal, nominal, adjectival, adverbial, and other grammatical patterns, while their semantic interpretation depends on idiomaticity, metaphorical motivation, contextual usage, and culturally established associations. The comparative study of phraseology therefore requires attention not only to what expressions mean but also to how they are constructed and how their component elements interact within a fixed linguistic configuration. Recent research on English and Uzbek phraseology demonstrates the importance of examining grammatical models, lexical composition, and semantic functions together rather than treating phraseological units as isolated vocabulary items (Ibotova, 2024, pp. 135–151; Mavlonova & Negmatova, 2024, pp. 141–146).

Within this broader linguistic framework, phraseological lacunae can be understood as gaps or mismatches that arise when a phraseological unit in one language does not have a fully corresponding conventional expression in another. Lacunarity may occur at several levels: a target language may lack an idiomatic expression for a particular meaning, possess an expression with a different syntactic structure, employ different lexical images to conceptualize the same situation, or express the corresponding meaning through an ordinary phrase rather than a fixed idiom. It is important, therefore,

to distinguish the absence of a direct phraseological equivalent from the complete absence of a semantic equivalent. For example, the English idiom spill the beans can be rendered into Uzbek as sirni oshkor qilmoq ("to reveal a secret"), but the explanatory equivalent does not necessarily reproduce the original expression's idiomatic structure and imagery. This represents phraseological non-equivalence rather than an inability to communicate the underlying meaning. The distinction corresponds to the broader understanding of lacunae as linguistic and cultural mismatches that may affect interpretation and translation (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2020, pp. 329–344; Suyunov et al., 2024, pp. 362–365).

Methods

The study employs a qualitative, descriptive-comparative methodology based on the structural-semantic examination of phraseological units and the synthesis of scholarly publications on lacuna theory and English–Uzbek phraseology published after 2017. The principal methods include structural analysis, comparative analysis, componential analysis, semantic interpretation, and contextual examination. Structural analysis identifies the grammatical patterns of phraseological units, including their syntactic arrangement, constituent categories, word order, and degree of formal stability. Comparative analysis establishes whether expressions in the languages under consideration are structurally identical, partially corresponding, or non-equivalent. Componential analysis investigates the lexical elements that construct an expression's figurative meaning, while semantic and contextual analysis determines whether differences in formal organization are accompanied by changes in meaning, connotation, stylistic value, or pragmatic function. The illustrative English–Uzbek examples are used to demonstrate the proposed classification rather than to represent results from a newly collected statistical corpus. This methodological approach is consistent with recent comparative studies that combine grammatical classification with semantic and cultural interpretation (Ibotova, 2024, pp. 135–151; Raximdjanova, 2024, pp. 197–206).

Results

The structural analysis supports a distinction between five analytically useful types of phraseological lacunarity: absolute phraseological gaps, syntactic-structural mismatches, componential discrepancies, grammatical-functional differences, and elliptical or context-dependent mismatches. These categories are proposed as a practical analytical framework rather than as a universally established taxonomy. Absolute phraseological gaps occur when a conventional phraseological unit in the source language lacks an established phraseological equivalent in the target language, although its meaning can still be conveyed by a descriptive expression. The English idiom spill the beans, for instance, has the structural pattern verb + determiner + noun, whereas the Uzbek expression sirni oshkor qilmoq is more transparently organized around an object and a verb. The two expressions can communicate a comparable meaning, but their formal and idiomatic properties do not completely coincide. Syntactic-structural mismatches arise when expressions with comparable meanings follow different grammatical patterns. The English idiom kick the bucket and the Uzbek phraseological expression jon bermoq ("to die," literally "to give up the soul") illustrate a difference in constituent arrangement and figurative representation, even though both are idiomatic expressions referring to death. Such cases demonstrate that phraseological correspondence may exist at the semantic level without producing structural identity.

Componential discrepancies concern differences in the lexical elements through which a phraseological meaning is constructed. An expression in one language may use a body part, animal, natural phenomenon, or culturally familiar object as the basis of its imagery, while its counterpart may employ a different image or a non-figurative construction. These differences influence the degree of transparency, the associations activated by an expression, and the strategies available for translation. Grammatical-functional differences arise when the closest corresponding expressions belong to different grammatical or syntactic categories or perform different functions in discourse. For example,

the English frequency expression once in a blue moon is a prepositional phrase, whereas the Uzbek expression onda-sonda ("occasionally" or "now and then") functions adverbially. Although the meanings overlap, their structural properties and stylistic effects are not identical. Finally, elliptical or context-dependent mismatches involve expressions whose interpretation depends on omitted constituents, conventional fragments, or contextual assumptions that are not organized in the same way in the corresponding language. Research on English and Uzbek phraseology has specifically examined ellipsis as a source of structural, semantic, and pragmatic variation (Raximdjanova, 2024, pp. 197–206).

The analysis also demonstrates that structural lacunarity should be evaluated through the interaction of several criteria rather than through grammatical form alone. These criteria include the number and categories of constituents, their syntactic relations, lexical stability, grammatical variability, semantic unity, figurative motivation, and the existence of conventional equivalents. A phraseological unit consisting of three words in one language may correspond to a two-word idiom in another without constituting an absolute lacuna; conversely, expressions with nearly identical grammatical structures may remain significantly different in their meanings or cultural associations. Recent classifications of phraseological units in English and Uzbek distinguish units according to structural-semantic organization, grammatical category, and degree of idiomaticity, confirming the importance of a multidimensional approach to phraseological comparison (Asatullayeva, 2024, pp. 28–32; Ibotova, 2024, pp. 135–151).

Discussion

The results indicate that the structural characteristics of phraseological lacunae are closely connected with the broader problem of linguistic equivalence. A phraseological expression is not merely a combination of words arranged according to grammatical rules; it is also a conventionalized unit whose overall meaning, degree of fixedness, and communicative function are established through linguistic usage. Consequently, a structural comparison must distinguish between formal similarity and functional correspondence. Two expressions may possess the same basic syntactic pattern but differ in idiomatic meaning, cultural associations, or pragmatic conditions of use. Conversely, expressions with different grammatical structures may function as effective equivalents in a particular communicative context. This distinction is particularly important in English–Uzbek translation, where similarities and differences in grammatical organization, lexical composition, and figurative meaning can influence the selection of translation strategies. The broader lacuna model similarly emphasizes that identifying cross-cultural gaps requires contextual interpretation and appropriate forms of compensation rather than a simple search for word-for-word substitutes (Denisova-Schmidt et al., 2020, pp. 329–344).

From a practical perspective, the proposed classification provides a framework for identifying and resolving phraseological non-equivalence in translation, lexicography, and language education. Translators should first establish the meaning and communicative function of the source expression, then determine whether the target language has a fully equivalent idiom, a partially corresponding phraseological unit, or only a descriptive expression. Structural transformations may be necessary to accommodate differences in word order, grammatical category, constituent selection, or syntactic function. Descriptive translation can preserve denotative meaning when a comparable idiom is unavailable, while functional substitution may preserve the pragmatic effect by using a conventional expression with a similar communicative purpose. In language teaching, awareness of these distinctions enables learners to understand why literal translation frequently produces unnatural or misleading results. Nevertheless, the present study is theoretical and illustrative: it does not establish the frequency of individual lacuna types across the English and Uzbek phraseological systems. Further research using comparable phraseological dictionaries, bilingual corpora, and native-speaker

judgments would be required to quantify the distribution of structural mismatches and assess their effects in authentic discourse.

Conclusion. The structural characteristics of phraseological lacunae reflect the complex relationship between grammatical organization, lexical composition, idiomatic meaning, and conventional language use. The study identifies five analytical dimensions of phraseological lacunarity: absolute phraseological gaps, syntactic-structural mismatches, componential discrepancies, grammatical-functional differences, and elliptical or context-dependent mismatches. These categories help explain why phraseological expressions may convey comparable meanings without possessing identical structures or figurative components. The central conclusion is that structural non-equivalence should not automatically be interpreted as semantic non-equivalence; the absence of a direct idiomatic counterpart does not necessarily prevent successful communication or translation. A systematic analysis of phraseological lacunae should therefore combine formal description with semantic, contextual, and pragmatic interpretation. The proposed framework can support further comparative research into English and Uzbek phraseology and contribute to more accurate translation, more comprehensive lexicographic descriptions, and improved foreign-language teaching.

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