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## О СЕМАНТИЧЕСКОЙ ЦЕЛОСТНОСТИ ИДИОМ И СВОБОДНЫХ СЛОВСОЧЕТАНИЙ

Аннотация

В статье определяется и характеризуется такое важное свойство лингвистических единиц, как семантическая целостность (нечленимость значения). Доказывается, что она присуща не только идиомам (единицам языка), но и некоторым переменным словосочетаниям (единицам речи). Выявляются сходство и различия между устойчивыми и неустойчивыми словосочетаниями, обладающими семантической целостностью. Демонстрируется специфика частичной и полной семантической целостности лингвистических единиц. Устанавливаются категориальные признаки идиомы, из которых формируется ее дефиниция. Словосочетания подразделяются на четыре класса по двум парам дистинктивных признаков: '± языковая устойчивость' и '± семантическая целостность'. Автор показывает, что идиомы как особый класс словосочетаний противопоставляются трем другим классам по разным комплексам дистинктивных признаков. В статье делается вывод о том, что семантически целостные свободные словосочетания не являются идиомами, но они сходны с идиомами по трем категориальным признакам и служат одним из источников пополнения идиоматического фонда языка.

**Ключевые слова:** семантическая целостность, семантическая членимость, языковая устойчивость, идиома, свободное словосочетание.

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## ON SEMANTIC INTEGRITY OF IDIOMS AND FREE WORD GROUPS

Abstract

The article contains a definition and a characterization of such an important quality of linguistic units as their semantic integrity (indivisibility of meaning). Arguments are offered in favour of the view that semantic integrity is characteristic not only of idioms (language units) but also of certain free word groups (speech units). The author reveals similarity and difference between stable and unstable semantically integral word groups, demonstrates the specificity of partial and full semantic integrity of linguistic units, ascertains the substantial features of idioms that constitute its definition. Word groups are divided into four classes by two pairs of distinctive features: '± language stability' and '± semantic integrity'. Idioms as a peculiar class of word groups are opposed to the three other classes by different sets of features. A conclusion is drawn that semantically integral free word groups are not idioms, but they are similar to idioms by three substantial features and are one of the sources of the idiom fund replenishment.

**Keywords:** semantic integrity, semantic divisibility, language stability, idiom, free word group.

**S**emantic integrity (indivisibility) is one of the basic terms used in studies of language idiomaticity. It means that either a part of the meaning or the whole meaning of a word group is not distributed among the constituent words but belongs to the word group as a whole. It cannot be deduced from the lexical meanings of the constituent words and so is a conventional addition to or a substitute for the sum of lexical meanings. It may be called **the integral component** of the word group meaning (in case of partial semantic integrity) or the integral meaning of a word group (in case of full semantic integrity), and such a word group may be called **semantically integral** (partially or fully).

The military term *gun boat* may serve as an illustration of **partial semantic integrity**. It really denotes a boat with a gun; so the semes 'gun' and 'boat' are assigned to the corresponding separate words. Nevertheless, the meaning of the term is not literal. The term actually means not merely '(any) boat with a gun' but only 'a shallow-draft naval watercraft designed for the purpose of carrying one or more guns to bombard coastal targets' (Merriam-Webster, 2003). The semes 'shallow-draft', 'naval', 'coastal targets' are not designated by any of the separate words and thus constitute the integral semantic component of the term *gun boat*. The same is true for *red bird* (not 'any red-plumed bird' but only 'an oriole'), *black snake* ('Jamaican constrictor'), *blue fish* ('skipmackerel'), *big tree* ('American sequoia') and the like.

The set phrase *white elephant* may serve as an example of **full semantic integrity**. It does not, in fact, denote an albino elephant, so its constituent words have no meanings of their own. It means 'a burdensome possession creating more trouble than it is worth'

massacre –  
sweet reminiscences –  
the brutal part of human nature –  
a woman's soul –  
youth –

(Longman, 2002). The meaning is designated by the phrase as a whole. Cf. also *atom bomb* (slang for 'a strong drug'), *red herring* ('something that draws attention away from the matter being discussed or dealt with'), *wild cat* ('a financial scheme that is likely to fail') etc.

Semantically integral set phrases traditionally bear the name of **idioms**. Thus the above-mentioned set phrases may be called idioms (partial or full).

In some cases integrity in the plane of content leads to integrity in the plane of expression: two or more constituent words merge into a compound word and become morphemes, e.g. *black mail* → *blackmail* ('racket, chantage'); *blue stocking* → *bluestocking* ('a woman having scholarly or literary interests'). Since such words retain semantic integrity (i.e. idiomaticity), they might be called lexical (as opposite to phrasal) idioms but for the long-standing tradition confining the use of the term *idiom* to phrases only. The term *idiom* is not usually applied to words, set phrases with a literal meaning, and free word groups.

When revealing the characteristic features of idioms, A.V. Kunin (2005) opposed idioms to free word groups in two ways: 'stable :: unstable' and 'having an integral :: divisible meaning'. He attributed the term *idiom* to set phrases with a partially or fully integral meaning. By contrast, he ascribed instability and semantic divisibility to free word groups. So did many other linguists.

But free word groups can be semantically integral, too. They are regularly coined in speech, especially in fiction. This may be confirmed by the following **metaphorical** titles of literary works:

The Red Harvest (D. Hammett)  
The Dandelion Wine (R. Bradbury)  
The Hairy Ape (E. O'Neill)  
The Glass Menagerie (T. Williams)  
The Garden of Unripe Fruit (H. MacDiarmid)

If Paris was worth a mass, *Laurel House* was worth a dinner jacket.

(G. Vidal. Washington DC)

In this context the phrase *Laurel House* metonymically denotes the social

They have an integral meaning but have no semantic stability, i.e. they are speech units (free word groups) rather than language units (set phrases).

Semantic integrity may also be observed in **metonymical** free word groups:

party to be held in the house. But it is not a set phrase.

**Periphrases** may have an integral semantic component, too. Cf.:

1) Sam ... *lowered his eyes* to see what there was on the ground floor.

(T. Horan. Redwood Nation)

2) He *lowered his eyes* [and said], "I admire you, Jessica". (J. Kaiser. Temptation)

It is only in the second context that the expression *to lower one's eyes* implies a certain state of mind (confusion, embarrassment). In other contexts the expression may imply shame, obedience, chagrin and the like. The corresponding senses do not belong to any of the separate constituent word meanings; they are assigned to the whole word groups and so are their integral semantic components. (For details see Savitsky, 2006.)

The question is whether such word groups may be referred to as idioms.

When looking for an answer we must take into account that their integral semantic components are unstable; as can be seen from the above examples, the components may exist or not, and if they do exist they are variable and context-dependent. The components are to be found in some sign-events rather than in a sign-type. Due to this, we are inclined to believe that it is hardly expedient to give the stability':

	– integral	+ integral
– stable	1) blue dress	3) red harvest ('a massacre')
+ stable	2) grey rat (a species)	4) white crow ('a derelict')

Which of them can be qualified as idioms? In search of an answer we must take the following circumstances into account.

1) Phrases like *blue dress* ('a dress of blue colour') have neither of the two substantial features of idioms – language stability and semantic integrity. They are free word groups with literal meanings; so they cannot be regarded as idioms.

2) The meanings of phrases like *grey rat* are not literal: *grey rat* means more than just 'a rat of grey colour'. It denotes a certain species of rat which has some characteristic features besides being grey. That's why *grey rat* is a set phrase (a zoological term). But these additional features are deduced from the sum of the constituent words' meanings. As mentioned above, the integral semantic component of an idiom cannot be deduced like this. So phrases like *grey rat* have no integral component and therefore are not idioms.

3) In some phrases the constituent words have separate figurative meanings – as, for instance, in *guns instead of butter*, where *guns* stands for 'weapons' and *butter* stands for 'means of

name *idiom* to such word groups (be they metaphorical, metonymical or periphrastic) whose semantic integrity is occasional and changeable.

Word groups of this kind have no stability (the status of language units) characteristic of idioms. But they are similar to idioms in other ways: they consist of two or more words; they have a figurative meaning; and they are semantically integral. This similarity was noticed by Yu.M. Lotman: «Words standing together in a given segment of a work of fiction make a semantically indivisible unit – 'an idiom' ... Any significant text segment ... has one inseparable meaning» (Lotman 1998, p. 112). The term *idiom* is in inverted commas here because the author does not mean a true idiom; he means a free word group resembling an idiom by being a semantically indivisible unit.

Thus defining idioms as semantically integral set phrases distinguishes them,

on the one hand, from semantically divisible set phrases (as *polar bear*) and, on

the other hand, from semantically integral free word groups (as *red harvest*).

Word groups may be divided into four classes by two pairs of distinctive features: '± semantic integrity' and '± language

livelihood'. The set phrase is semantically divisible, it has no semantic integrity and therefore is not an idiom, despite the fact that it has a figurative meaning. Such phrases belong to Class 2 alongside with those consisting of words with literal meanings.

4) Word groups like *red harvest* have no stability and so are not idioms.

5) In some word groups the figurative meaning is not divisible into separate

figurative meanings. E.g. in *white crow* the figurative meaning 'a derelict' belongs to the word group as a whole; therefore it is an idiom.

A conclusion may be drawn that idioms constitute only Class 4. All the rest word groups are not idioms. So idioms are opposed to three classes of word groups rather than Class 1 only (as A.V. Kunin used to oppose them).

Nevertheless, some Class 3 word groups are structurally similar to idioms:

individual tropes	idioms
dead as a pickled walnut (R. Chandler. Goldfish)	<i>dead as a mutton chop</i>
the snail of happiness (J. Martin. Despair)	<i>the worm of conscience</i>
the ghost of a chance (O. Henry. The Ghost of a Chance)	<i>the ghost of a smile</i>

It is difficult to say which serves as a model to which. On the one hand, writers sometimes create tropes per sample of the idioms existing in the language (cf. D. Sayers' *The Busman's Honeymoon* < *the busman's holiday*). On the other hand, if an individual trope meets the requirements of the idiomatic canon it may gain popularity and wide usage, acquire language stability and become an idiom. This actually happened to a large number of tropes, e.g.

*wild goose chase* (< W. Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet)

*the Land of Nod* (< J. Swift. Polite Conversation)  
*man Friday* (< D. Defoe. Robinson Crusoe)  
*vanity fair* (< J. Bunyan. Pilgrim's Progress, popularized by W. Thackeray)

*bag of bones* (< Ch. Dickens. Oliver Twist)

Thus semantically integral free word groups are not idioms but they are similar to idioms in several ways and are one of the sources of the idiom fund replenishment.

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