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Phraseology in the American television series *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract

Phraseology is a big part of every language, and English language makes no exception. The series *Breaking Bad* is about middle class people that use everyday English that is very likely to be heard on the streets in regular life situations. Some of the PUs are more common in the slang, while some other are always used in situations that require extreme politeness and have fixed customs and patterns of behavior, such as attending a guest. This paper deals exactly with the language of the series, where an analysis is made through picking out 50 phraseological units to get the wider picture of the language and phrases that are being used. 50 phraseological units are being used as a corpus, and they are extracted randomly. Each of them is analyzed by their type, where 35 of them are analyzed in more details, as in what does each PU mean and when it is most frequently used. Most of the extracted PUs are familiar because they are being used for quite a while and their meaning is not so obscure to the native or more advanced speakers of English language. To be able to analyze the corpus correctly, it is important to get familiar with the theory and classification of PUs. That part is covered in the theoretical part, whereas the second part of the paper is the analysis itself.

Keywords:

Phraseology, Phraseological Unit, Idiom, *Breaking Bad*

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Abbreviations used:

BB-Breaking Bad

COD- Cambridge Online Dictionary

FD- Free dictionary

PU- Phraseological Unit

S(xy)E(xy)- Season(xy) Episode (xy)

1. Introduction

Every language has its own vocabulary and set of phrases. Phrases enrich language and offer the variety of choices to express a message that one desires. We are not always even aware that we are using a phrase because “our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines.” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 12) Most phrases cannot be understood literally and both speaker and recipient need to be well acquainted with the language to be able to express and understand the message that is behind a certain phrase. Phrases and idioms start in the language itself, but end in the mind of speakers. The fascination in phraseology is that using metaphors, it is possible to utter the words that denote something completely different, and the recipient will understand it. This paper deals with the phraseology of the TV series *Breaking Bad*. It focuses on the most common types of phraseological units and their meaning.

1.1. *Aim of the paper*

In this paper, phraseology of the TV series BB is analyzed. The aim of this paper is to get familiar with some of series' used phrases, their types and meaning. By picking 50 random PUs, and analyzing them, the main goal is to see if there is a pattern and is there a specific type of PU that is most frequently used.

The first part of the paper is theoretical and deals with the phraseology itself, its meaning and what it consists of. Furthermore, the terms *phraseological unit* and *idiom* are explained. To be able to understand the analysis, it is also necessary to explain and exemplify the types of PU.

The second part of the paper is the analysis itself. From the corpus that consists 50 PUs, 25 are analyzed more precisely.

1.2. *On the corpus*

Some of the PUs that occur through the TV series *Breaking Bad* are randomly taken out. The corpus consists of 50 phrases that are analyzed by their type. The everyday language is

characteristic for the series, so the pattern will be relatable to everyday life situations and usage. Most of the examples are from season one and two because in remaining seasons a lot of them are recurring, while in first two seasons it is the first time for them to appear.

2. Research design

In this paper, random 50 PUs are extracted from the series *Breaking Bad*, to get a clearer picture of PUs that are being used in everyday life. Because of the randomness, it will be easier to get a better picture because the PUs were not extracted by their characteristics. 25 random of those 50 PUs are analyzed not just by their types, but by their meaning as well, to get an even better analysis of the idiomacy of the language.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. *Phraseology in general*

Phraseology is a big and important part of the English language. To understand this paper and the problems it deals with, it is important to understand what phraseology is. “The term ‘phraseology’ can be used , firstly, to name the field of study (phraseology research), and, secondly, to denote the set of linguistic units that are investigated at this field. The latter consist of idioms and phraseological units, which constitute the *phrasicon*, i.e. the block of inventory and phrases.” (Fiedler 2007: 13) Language is constantly evolving and phraseology is flourishing with new idioms that are being coined every day and used by the speakers. “Known as phrases and idioms, phraseological units are fascinating because of the tone and colour they give the vocabulary and the insight they provide into the history of a language community and its culture.” (Fiedler 2007: 11)

3.2. *What is an idiom?*

“A peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of the language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one.” (Fiedler 2007: 21) We might say that an idiom is the tool which we use in order to express ourselves in a more metaphorical way. Let us just use the idiom that is the very name of the series: *breaking bad*. It is fair to say that the idiom is still pretty young in English language, and it denotes a person’s change from

being good and respectable person to doing some things that are considered as 'bad'. That is why idioms can only be used by native speakers or speakers of the English language that are more advanced and familiar with the expression enough to know that it does not mean literally to break something, and to break it badly. By using idioms, one is showing a higher level of knowledge of a language.

3.3. Conventional types of PUs

To be able to analyze idioms from the corpus, it is necessary to be familiar with the types of PUs that there are.

3.3.1. *Phraseological nomination*

“Phraseological nominations are word equivalents which have one common feature- their nominative function. They denote objects, people, states, processes, or relations”.

(Fiedler 2007: 39)

There are several types of phraseological nominations and we classify them by word classes.

There are nouns *an old maid*, adjectives *bored to death*, and adverbs *at the end of the day*.

3.3.2. *(Irreversible) binominals*

Irreversible binominals are “the sequence of two words pertaining to the same form-class, placed on an identical level of syntactic hierarchy, and ordinarily connected by some kind of lexical link”. (Fiedler 2007: 40) That lexical link are most frequently *and, or, but* or prepositions. Example for binomial is *law and order*.

3.3.3. *Stereotyped comparisons*

Stereotyped comparisons are linked to binominals because they are “structurally fixed and conditioned”. (Fiedler 2007: 43) Two most frequent subtypes are (as) + adjective + as + noun phrase *as old as the hills* and (verb) + like + noun phrase *eat like a horse*.

3.3.4. *Proverbs*

A proverb is a “well-known sentence which expresses a general truth, shared experience, a piece of advice, or a moral principle in an easy to memorize form and is handed down from generation from generation”. (Fiedler 2007: 44) It is mostly metaphorical and often can be used as an advice: *Strike while the iron is hot*, which can be understood as take the

opportunity while you still have it and act now. However, for example: “The earliest examples of the proverb 'to bite one's thumb at someone' that we find in dictionaries are examples of instantial use harvested from works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, uses which presuppose a pre-existing base form. In other words, the very fact that Shakespeare plays with the proverb is the reason we should not look to him as its coiner (as some critics have done), but as someone who is making hay with a pre-existing saying” (Wood 2013: 237)

3.3.5. *Winged words*

Winged words can usually be some famous quotations, or PUs that contain some sort of historical facts or terms from literature. Nowadays it is not so rare to see winged words that come/originate from some TV series. An example of a winged word is the famous Shakespeare’s quote: *To be or not to be (that is the question)*.

3.3.6. *Routine formulae*

Routine formulae are “conventionalized utterances that the language puts at our disposal as ready-made units for recurrent situations”. (Fiedler 2007: 50) They are fixed expressions that match a specific situation every time. For example, *last, but not least* we use when we are introducing the last person or subject, but want to emphasize that the person or subject is equally important as the first one.

3.4. *Special types of PUs*

3.4.1. *Paraphrasal verbs*

Paraphrasal verbs “consist of a transitive verb with a relative wide range of meaning, and a noun phrase which carries the semantic weight.” (Fiedler 2007: 51) Their usage and productivity grows day after day and that is the reason why the number of paraphrasal verbs is so great. They are called paraphrasal because they ‘paraphrase’ the original meaning of the verb. For example, *to give a smile- to smile*.

3.4.2. *(Restricted) collocations*

“A collocation may be defined as a combination of words which can be observed in close proximity to each other in discourse”. (Fiedler 2007: 51) However, if the collocation is restricted, it means that it has “one constituent that is used in a specialized or figurative sense”. A *close look* is one example of a restricted collocation.

3.4.3. Rhyming slang

Rhyming slang is a specific way of expressing. “It is kind of speech disguise with the pattern that two words paraphrase the concept intended and the second of these two expressions rhymes with the word that is meant. *Trouble and strife* is a jocular way of saying *wife*”.

3.4.4. Wellerisms

“A wellerism is a sentence-like PU which is mainly identified and defined by its triadic structure”. What is characteristic for wellerisms is that the first part consists of a statement which can often be a proverb or a figurative expression, second part where we have an agent, someone who reported that statement, and the third part that has an unexpected twist, often by using the literal meaning from the statement from the first part. “*Everyone to his taste*”, said *the farmer and kissed the cow*.

4. Analysis

In this part of the paper, idioms from the TV series *Braking bad* are identified, put into context and analyzed, based on the classification from the previous part. The main goal is to better understand the phraseology that is used in the series, and to try seeing if there is a pattern that is developed throughout the language of that series.

In this table is the list of the idioms extracted from the series, with the season and episode they occur in and their type. The first 35 are from the more detailed analysis.

Table 1. Types of PUs from the series

1. You all set?	S01E01	Phraseological nomination
2. An easy fix	S01E01	Phraseological nomination
3. A smart-arse	S01E01	Phraseological nomination
4. Happy birthday	S01E01	Routine formula
5. Too bad	S01E01	Phraseological nomination

6. That goes double for me	S01E01	Routine formula
7. A life saver	S01E01	Phraseological nomination
8. What the hell ?	S01E01	Routine formula
9. Loose ends	S01E02	Phraseological nomination
10. To be hot	S01E04	Phraseological nomination
11. Open to suggestions	S01E04	Phraseological nomination
12. Make yourself at home	S01E04	Routine formula
13. Thanks for noticing	S01E04	Routine formula
14. New kingpin	S01E04	Phraseological nomination
15. Are you kidding me	S01E04	Routine formula
16. You look like a damn movie star	S01E04	Stereotyped comparison
17. Wouldn't miss it for the world	S01E05	Routine formula
18. It's been ages	S01E05	Routine formula
19. up and down	S01E06	Irreversible binominal
20. Christmas came early	S01E07	Routine formula
21. Will you excuse us	S01E07	Routine formula

22. So good you're here	S01E07	Routine formula
23. Don't sweat it	S01E08	Routine formula
24. Take a look	S02E01	Paraphrasal verb
25. Long time no see		Routine formula
26. It's a bold plan	S02E03	Phraseological nomination
27. What's up	S02E04	Routine formula
28. all good	S02E06	Phraseological nomination
29. Calm down	S02E12	Routine formula (phrasal verb)
30. Good luck	S02E12	Routine formula
31. there are other fish in the sea	S03E02	Proverb
32. give you a call	S03E05	Paraphrasal Verb
33. fully loaded	S04E10	Phraseological nomination
34. a weak link	S05E02	Phraseological nomination
35. Oh, my God	S05E14	Routine formula
36. Way to go	S01E02	Phraseological nomination
37. Hold that thought	S01E05	Routine formula
38. Man of business	S01E05	Phraseological nomination
39. Cross my heart	S02E03	Routine formula
40. Beats me	S02E04	Routine formula
41. In the dark	S02E04	Phraseological nomination

42. To make use of	S02E04	Paraphrasal verb
43. It is my pleasure	S03E03	Routine formula
44. Wake up call	S04E08	Phraseological nomination
45. Man plans and God laughs.	S04E08	Proverb
46. As strong as a horse	S04E08	Stereotyped comparison
47. Take it off for a spin	S04E10	Paraphrasal verb
48. Good to go	S05E02	Phraseological nomination
49. Stellar work	S05E04	Phraseological nomination
50. Give a thought	S05E06	Paraphrasal verb

(1) “- **You all set?** - Yeah, I’m fine.”

According to the online Free Dictionary, it means to be “prepared, ready, or primed to begin complete a task at hand”. It is a phrase that is often used in everyday conversation. Because of its characteristics, we classify it as a phraseological nomination. *All set* has a function of an adjective.

(2) “-How does it feel **to be a smart-arse?**”

FD defines this idiom as “someone who is always trying to seem more clever than everyone else in a way that is annoying”. It is a variation of the idiom *smart Alec*, which basically means the same. It is a phraseological nomination. it functions as a noun.

(3) “**Happy birthday!**”

By FD, this is “an expression of good will offered on a person's birthday”. It is one of the most familiar and fixed expressions in English language that occur in a certain situation, on a person's birthday. Because of its fixation, it is routine formula.

(4) “I need an **easy fix**.”

An *easy fix* means a “quick an easy solution to the problem” (FD) that is not necessarily be the best or permanent solution. It is a phraseological nomination and it functions as a noun.

(5) “**Too bad**.”

Too bad denotes something that is “deserving regret”(FD). It is used in situations as a comment on something unfortunate or unpleasant that happened. However, it can often be used with a sarcastic tone that does not denote actual regret. *Too bad* is a routine formula.

(6) **That goes double** for me.

This is a routine formula that is used as an expression when a person agrees with what is said and wants to clarify his concurrence. In this expression, the agreement is stressed because the speaker not just agrees, but wants to “double” the statement that has been said.

(7) “You are a **life saver**.”

A *life saver* can be used literally to describe a person who saved someone's life, but it can be used to describe a person that did an important favor to someone. It is often used to stress the importance of the thing that the “life saver” did. It is a phraseological nomination and it functions as a noun.

(8) “**What the hell is this?**”

The idiom *what the hell (is this)* is a phrase used when one is “unpleasantly surprised and confused” (FD) It is part of the jargon and it is unlikely to be heard in a professional surroundings. However, phrase *what the hell* can also be used as a comment, “something that you say when you suddenly change your plans to show that you will not worry about any problems this might cause”(COD).

(9) “We are having some **loose ends**.”

It is a “minor unresolved problem or difficulty, especially a final detail preceding the completion of something”(COD). It can also be found in an expression *tie some loose ends*

which means to resolve some remaining problems. It is a phraseological nomination that functions as a noun.

(10) “He wants **to be hot.**”

To be hot is relatively new coined term that refers to being good looking and attracting attention. It is especially popular between the younger speakers of English language, so it is unlikely to hear this coming from a middle aged speaker of English language. It is a phraseological nomination, but it functions as a verb.

(11) “I am **open to suggestions.**”

Open to suggestions means that a person is willing to hear the suggestions that other people may offer because he/ she has no better solution. It is a phraseological nomination that functions as an adjective.

(12) **Make yourself at home.**

This is a phrase that is often used in house holdings when having guests. It is a phrase that people say to make a person welcome and comfortable in their home, so they are metaphorically saying to the guest to feel as comfortable and free as in his own home. It functions as routine formula.

(13) **Thanks for noticing.**

This is a fixed expression that is considered as a polite way of thanking the observer for the remark that he made. Nowadays it can be more and more used as an sarcastic answer as a response to a not so pleasant remark. It is routine formula.

(14) “I’m thinking Albuquerque just might have a **new kingpin.**”

Kingpin can mean “the most important person or element in an enterprise or system.”(FD) It is often used in a criminal context, referring to a drug cartel or some other criminal organization where there is a hierarchy. It is a phraseological nomination and it functions as a noun.

(15) “What, **are you kidding me?**”

This is a rhetorical question that is used in situations where one is upset and cannot believe what is happening, or is in state of shock and does not want to accept certain statement or event. That is when in denial the person uses a phrase *are you kidding me?* Because there are

specific situations where it can be used, it is safe to say that it can be observed as a routine formula.

(16) “**You look like a damn movie star**, man.”

Because of their exterior on the red carpet, movie stars are representing a certain elegance and style. Well dressed and sleek people are often described to look as good as movie stars. That is why this is a stereotyped comparison.

(17) “**Wouldn’t miss it for the world.**”

This is a phrase used when something is anticipated and important where person is describing how important it is for him/her to be somewhere at a certain time, meaning that there is nothing more important. It can also be observed as a routine formula.

(18) “**It's been ages.**”

This is something that is said in situations where people have not seen or heard each other for a long time. It is quite frequent and people often want to say: “It has been too long since we’ve last met/talked.” It is a fixed expression for a social situation, thus it is routine formula.

(19) “I knew I was gonna be **up and down.**”

According to COD, it means to be “sometimes happy and sometimes sad”(FD). It can also mean to “go repeatedly from one place to another”(FD). That is an irreversible binominal.

(20) “**Christmas came early** to the Shrader household.”

This is a phrase used when describing a situation where something pleasant happened that caused happiness and joy just as Christmas does to children. It can also be referred to a present that is given, because presents are characteristic for Christmas. It functions as a routine formula.

(21) “**Will you excuse us?**”

This is a fixed expression used in situations where people want to leave a social environment and it is an expression of politeness directed to the other people who are in that social environment. It can also mean that people want privacy and are telling someone else to leave them to be on their own. It is social formula.

(22) “**So good you're here.**”

So good you're here is usually said when people meet and one side expresses joy because of their meeting and presence of the other side. It can seldom be seen in situations where people are received as guests. It is similar to expression “so good to see you”. This is routine formula.

(23) “**Don't sweat it.**”

Don't sweat it is only used in informal speech and it is said when the speaker wants to say to the other person not to worry about a certain problem.

(24) Let me **take a look.**

It means to look at something. It is a paraphrasal verb.

(25) “**Long time no see.**”

Long time no see is expressed when people who meet have not met for a longer period of time. It is not so coloured with emotions and it does not necessarily mean that they are sorry that they have not met earlier. It is a neutral expression that functions as routine formula.

(26) “**It's a bold plan, Mr. White. You sure this is the way to go?**”

A *bold plan* is a “risky, brave plan”(FD). That is a phraseological nomination. It functions as a noun. *The way to go* means it is a good way to do something. It is also a phraseological nomination that functions as a noun.

(27) “- **What's up, brother? - Hey, bro.**”

What's up means “what is going on, what is new”(FD). It is used when the speaker wants to know what has happened since he last saw the person. However, it can also be used as a greeting when two persons who have a somewhat friendly relationship meet. In that case it is not treated as a question. That is why it is routine formula.

(28) “It's **all good.**”

This is used when one wants to emphasize that everything is all right and there is no reason to worry. It is phraseological nomination that functions as adjective.

(29) “No, no-- Listen. **Calm down**”.

To *calm down* is a phrase used when trying to make someone to “become less agitated, active, or unsettled”(FD). It is a saying that can be heard frequently in everyday conversations, every time someone gets upset. It is a phrasal verb, but functions as a routine formula.

(30) “**Good luck.**” *Good luck* is a fixed expression that is used in situations where the speaker wants to wish the recipient “good fortune or happy outcome”(FD). It can be often used as an indicator of politeness. It is routine formulae.

(31) “Well, **there are other fish in the sea**”.

This is a saying that means “to tell someone whose relationship has ended that there are many other people that they could have a relationship with”. It is a proverb.

(32) “I will **give you a call.**”

This means to call someone on the telephone. It is a paraphrasal verb.

(33) “He's going to pay 1,830 a month-- **fully loaded**. I mean, he even got the heated steering wheel”.

Fully loaded means “very wealthy” (FD). It can often come in a form where fully is omitted, but the meaning is still retained. It is a phraseological nomination, and functions as an adjective.

(34) “But there's always **a weak link** somewhere”

A *weak link* is “the weak point or person in a system or organization” (FD). It is also a phraseological nomination that functions as a noun.

(35) “**Oh, my God.**” (Breaking Bad, S05E14)

Oh my God is used as “an exclamation of shock or surprise”.(FD) Today is one of the most frequently used phrases, and it gained such popularity that it is frequently used with an acronym OMG. It is a routine formula.

5. Conclusion

By getting familiar with the theory of phraseology and analyzing the corpus that contained a list of 50 PUs from Breaking Bad, this paper tries to get a fuller picture of phraseology used in the mentioned series.

Through analyze of the types of PUs the following is concluded:

Table 2. Frequency of each type of PU

Routine formulae	21
Phraseological nominations	19
Paraphrasal verbs	5
Proverbs	2
Stereotyped comparisons	2
Irreversible binominals	1

After the analysis, the most frequent type of PUs from the corpus are *routine formulae* and *phraseological nominations*. Less frequent are *paraphrasal verbs*, *stereotyped comparisons* and *irreversible binominals*. *Winged words*, *(restricted) collocations*, *rhyming slang* or *wellerisms* are not present at all.

The language of the series is mostly everyday language that can be heard between colleagues and friends. The majority of the speakers were the middle working class people. It is unlikely that in everyday language *routine formulae* are the most frequent type of PU, however, it is interesting to see that they are more frequent than it is expected.

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