

# THE METACOMMUNICATIVE SETTING OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AND THEIR MODIFICATIONS – EVIDENCE FROM THE BRITISH NATIONAL CORPUS

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## Summary

The study reported in this paper examines the metacommunicative setting of phraseological units and PU modifications in particular, using the corpus of naturally-occurring data in support of statements (BNC). The corpus data indicate that it is not only PUs that are signalled in the context by means of metacommunicative introductions or comments, it also applies to PU modifications. However, the metacommunicative setting used to embed PU modification is shown to have a far more complex function, as it not only serves as an introduction, but pragmatically as an alert to users that they need to make more of an effort to interpret the modified PU.

## 1. Introduction

The study reported here is a part of a more extensive study of the modifications of phraseological units (PUs) in English based on the evidence from the British National Corpus. The searches for the instances of PU modifications in the BNC uncovered an interesting feature of both PUs and PU modifications, *i.e.* their tendency to occur in discourse in different kinds of metacommunicative settings. This metacommunicative ‘embedding’ is the focal point of the present study.

## 2. On the corpus

All the examples used in this study come from the British National Corpus (100 million words). The version of the BNC used in this study is the British National Corpus World Edition, released in December 2000.<sup>1</sup> The software tool used to search the BNC is SARA, version 0.98 (short for SGML Aware Retrieval Application).

## 3. Search procedures

Identifying PUs, and particularly PU modifications, in the corpus as large as the BNC is a rather complex task. The first step was to differentiate between grammatical transformations, phraseological variations, and PU modifications. To clearly define what we mean by ‘modifications’, we first need to distinguish between phraseological variations, which I believe to be institutionalised (*to be as white as a sheet/snow*); transformations, which I understand to be grammatical (*to sleep/slept like a log/logs*); and phraseological modifications (*The cloud in this particular silver lining is progesterogen, a synthetic form of the hormone progesterone...*) which I define as deliberate, creative, innovative, ephemeral, and often idiosyncratic, ad hoc changes of the canonical PU structure and/or meaning that produce different semantic, stylistic or pragmatic effects. Several criteria were used to differentiate between variations and modifications, first of all the frequency of occurrence. If a changed expression is attested only once in the corpus, chances are that it is a case of modification. With multiple hits for a certain changed expression, it is more likely that it is a variation. In unclear cases, phraseological dictionaries were consulted to see if the expression is recorded, and thus institutionalised. Understandingly, there arises the question of canonical form, *i.e.*, how it is decided whether it is a base form or a varied form. In those cases, phraseological dictionary entries were taken as base forms.

The inventory of different patterns metacommunicative settings was identified during searches for PUs and PU modifications. Those were mostly key-word searches, *i.e.* searches for particular lexemes that are part of the canonical form of a PU. When a particular pattern was identified, further specific searches for more examples of such patterns were conducted. Examples containing patterns of metacommunicative settings were recorded in a separate database, and later analysed.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, go to: <<http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/BNC>>

## 4. Corpus findings

The metacommunicative settings identified in the corpus appear to be of different kinds. They can be in the form of simple metacommunicative lexemes added or inserted into PUs or their modifications (such as *proverbial*, *proverbially*, *proverbials*, *idiomatic*, *idiomatically*), metalinguistic introductions preceding PUs or their modifications (*remember the old proverb..., as the old saying goes...*), or metalinguistic comments following PUs or their modifications (...*ran a popular proverb; the usual tired cliché*). The functions of the three types of metacommunicative settings are of necessity different, with further differences noted between their use with original and modified PUs.

### 4.1. Metacommunicative lexemes

Let us first look at the instances of what we call extension by metacommunicative lexemes. The most frequently used metacommunicative lexeme is *proverbial* and its derivatives, followed by *idiomatic*. 161 instances of *proverbial* were found in the corpus, of which 97 either preceded or were inserted into a PU or a PU modification. In the following examples *proverbial* is used to extend the canonical form of a PU:

- I should also say that these are already selling like the *proverbial* hot cakes, so maybe I should move swiftly on to the ME-10...
- He took to it like the *proverbial* fish to water.
- Debt has been *proverbially* frowned on: He that borrows must pay again with shame or loss, He that goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing, Out of debt, out of danger; Better go to bed supperless than rise in debt; Let him that sleeps too sound borrow the debtor's pillow; and, but only grudgingly, Debt is better than death.

In such cases *proverbial* and *proverbially* have the function of making a comment on the truth-value of the expression, making it a statement recognized as well-known, often used, or believed by many people. *Proverbial* thus reinforces the phraseological quality of the expression, marking it as fixed, conventionalized phrase.

Let us now compare this function with the function of *proverbial* when used with PU modifications. In all of the following examples, *proverbial* signals the modified use of a PU. It is used to attract the attention of readers/listeners to the modified phraseological expression, almost as if the authors wanted to make sure that the audience will recognize the expression alluded to, by making it stand out in the context. Arguably, its function is not to reinforce the fixedness of form or meaning as in the examples discussed above, or other phraseological characteristics of a PU for that matter, but rather the absence of them, or departure from them. Evidently, some of the following examples illustrate drastic departures from phraseological convention.

- An astute businessman and virtual workaholic, he has his finger in more *proverbial* puddings than Little Jack Horner.
- The Mitry peasants (like the *proverbial* cat) could look at a king, and they spoke the same legal language of customary rights and fairness as Charles and his faithful men used in their capitularies.
- This is not the *proverbial* free lunch.
- Uneasily, Montgomery felt that his hand was hovering over the *proverbial* can of worms; remove the lid and there they would be, writhing in a tortuous, slimy, unholy mass.
- Taken somewhat aback by the speed and scope of their success, and worried about the *proverbial* 'bursting bubble', they planned no future releases until well into the new year.

Another plausible explanation for the use of *proverbial* may be that speakers sometimes feel the need to apologize for using fixed expressions, as noted by Tannen (1982), instead of novel ways of expression. Tannen noted that many Americans, when uttering formulas, make apologies like 'I know this is a cliché, but...' or 'Everyone must say this, but...', or otherwise mark their expressions with verbal or nonverbal equivalents of quotation marks. Presumably, what Tannen referred to are mostly proverbs, sayings, familiar quotations, and some idioms. The corpus provided ample evidence of Tannen's observation:

- I know it's a cliché but we really do have to take it from game to game it's the only way.
- But as the cliché goes, it was too little, too late.
- And, when some other retired persons say in my presence 'I don't know how I found time for work', I no longer inwardly cringe with scorn at the well worn cliché as I used to do but instead I enthusiastically and of course sagely nod my head in hearty agreement.

A further confirmation of the tendency to embed or precede formulaic language by some sort of a metalinguistic comment comes from Dobrovolskij and Lubimova's (1993) study of German, only their preceding comments are not apologetic, but introductory in tone. Tannen's examples are more straightforward apologies than just using *proverbial*, but especially in cases where *proverbial* is used with the canonical form of PUs, we could say that it functions as an implicit apology for resorting to formulaic language.

A further distinct use of *proverbial* noted in the corpus is its occurrence in contexts heavily marked as impolite, slang, offensive, or even plain rude. *Proverbial* is used to soften the offensive tone of the expression, here clearly functioning as something of an apology.

- So when the *proverbial* shit had hit the fan in Whitehall, Connors, or somebody like him, would have drawled at the emergency conference.
- Getting hold of tickets for the game is like getting hold of the *proverbial* rocking horse s\*\*t i.e. a bit difficult.
- The pain in the *proverbial* ass that hampers an otherwise good idea is Mr Gameplay.

The next three examples illustrate the very specific use of *proverbial* and *proverbials*. Here, they became substitutes functioning as euphemisms for the missing original lexeme that is perceived by users as offensive. The resulting expression is clearly a modification of the original PU created by lexical substitution. It stands in a synonymous relationship with the original PU, but its expressive quality is much more toned down. We could say that *proverbial* and its derivatives in the following examples also have a signalling function, but such cases it is definitely not their primary one. Moreover, the effect achieved is a humorous one, which is not the case with other uses of *proverbial*.

- One word out of line, and the *proverbial* hits the fan.
- God, it's cold enough to freeze the *proverbials* off a brass monkey!
- Speed (10 credits): If you want a player to move like the *proverbial* off a shovel, this is the power-up for you.

The analysis of all examples including *proverbial* indicates that it tends to be used mostly with idioms of comparison and clipped proverbs and sayings.

As for *proverbially*, it occurs less frequently (only 19 hits), and usually with verbal idioms:

- Personally, I wouldn't trust you as far as I could *proverbially* throw you!
- Oh if only the ground would *proverbially* open and swallow me.

#### **4.2. Metacommunicative introductions**

Let us now look at more elaborate metacommunicative settings. Our corpus data clearly confirm that it is not only PUs that are signalled in the context by means of metacommunicative introductions and comments, it also applies to PU modifications. The following examples illustrate the practice of introducing PUs, with the introductory statement making a point that the expression that follows is used by others, thus stressing its conventionality and fixedness, as if the speaker is somewhat distancing itself from it.

- Oh, well, they say every cloud has a silver lining.
- There is a saying about there being more than one way to skin a cat: in the case of toxic wastes they could be contained in an indefinitely leakproof box.

The distancing may also occur with metacommunicative introductions that bring in PU modifications. Here, however, introductions have a preparatory function, sensitising users for the modified use, rather than reinforcing the phraseological status of the expression.

- But that did mean she was also between me and Prentice, who was hovering trying to cut off my retreat as well, so maybe it's true what they say about every silver lining having a cloud.
- You know what they say – the spice of life, and all that...

They may also 'buy time' for the speaker who aims to modify the canonical form of a PU, *i.e.* function as slot-fillers.

- But it's certainly, *how can I put it*, the silver lining.

In the following examples, metacommunicative introductions unambiguously signal the modified use. In addition, they mark the attitude of the speaker towards the expression he/she is about to modify. Presumably, the very attitude may serve as a reason why the user decides to resort to modifying the expression.

- However, in order to sway you over to their way of thinking, Peterson might paraphrase the old adage and say: Look after the cents and the dollars will take care of themselves.
- To paraphrase an old saying, the water has to be there for the horse to be able to drink.

#### 4.3. Metacommunicative comments

It is not unusual to find metacommunicative comments following the PU or a PU modification. They may be of two kinds: comments on either the phraseological form, or content:

- Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, that's what they say innit?
- What I said was...something quite different... Utterly different... entirely different... As different as chalk from cheese. Although when you come to think of it, cheese isn't all that different from chalk!

### 5. Conclusion

The metacommunicative setting of PUs and PU modifications in discourse is achieved using metacommunicative lexemes, metacommunicative introductions, and metacommunicative comments. The metacommunicative devices identified in this study used with the canonical form of a given PU were shown to perform the following set of functions:

- they signal the phraseological use;
- they provide information on the speaker's attitude towards the truth-validity and status of a given PU;
- they soften the tone of offensive, slang and impolite PUs;
- they function as implicit or explicit apologies for using formulaic language;
- offer interpretations of the meaning of used PUs.

On the other hand, the metacommunicative devices used with the modified PUs, though their forms and functions partly overlap with the ones listed above, have a rather distinct set of functions:

- they implicitly or explicitly signal the modified phraseological use;
- they activate the phraseo-lexicon of the user necessary for the decoding;
- they function as slot-fillers, buying time for users preparing to modify a PU;
- metacommunicative lexemes may even function as substitutes for PU constituents perceived as rude or offensive;
- they provide information on the speaker's attitude towards the truth-validity and status of a PU they are about to or have already modified.

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