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# Variance in Phraseology: A Contrastive Approach

ABSTRACT

The article presents various approaches to the problem of variance in the context of Polish and French phraseology. As it follows from previously conducted research, the phenomenon of phraseological variance may encompass a wide or narrow spectrum of morphosyntactic and/or semantic changeability of fixed combinations of words. Formal differences between variants or changes in the components should not, however, interfere with the identification of a set phrase in its various forms. Therefore, the extent of possible modifications in the signifier and their impact on the semantic identity of a unit becomes a vital issue. Thorough analyses conducted by Polish and French linguists are an attempt to address the problems and difficulties connected with the description of phraseological variants which have not been completely solved. The author of the present article discusses the types of phraseological variance on the basis of examples excerpted from contemporary general and specialized dictionaries; these types include morphosyntactic and lexical variances as well as the variance in length. There are synonymic, metonymic and hypernymic-hyponymic relations between the components of phraseological variants. In the study of the polymorphism of fixed units, the concept of invariant is also of importance.

Keywords: phraseology; phraseological units; canonical forms; types of phraseological variance; invariant

1. Introduction

The variance of fixed word combinations constitutes one of the important but not completely resolved theoretical problems in phraseology; it is a part of at least two more general trends in research. The first one concerns the question of the identity of linguistic units (Pajdzinska, 2011); the second one is connected with the synchronicity of the process of perpetuation of various linguistic patterns appearing in specific forms and their delexicalization (demotivation) or transforming the structures which already have a fixed shape (Rey, 1976, Fiala, 1987, Chlebda, 2005). Taking into account the co-presence of the abovementioned tendencies, the permanence of the structure and of the semantics of set phrases cannot be treated as a complete constancy. The question of the polymorphism of set phrases has been of particular interest to French and Polish linguists since the 1970s, as evidenced by the publications of, among others, Gross (1988), Bernet (1992), Gréciano (1996), Mejri (2013), Buttler (1982) and Lewicki (1982). In the light of this research, phraseological variance may encompass a wide or narrow spectrum of morphosyntactic and/or semantic changeability of fixed combinations. In the narrow sense, the changes pertain only to the signifier while the meaning, representation and the syntactic schema are retained. In the broader perspective, lexical differences within the structure of the units are permitted, as well as different stylistic and emotional focus of the variants. The issue of polymorphism of set phrases may also be studied from the perspective of a phraseological norm (Bąba, 1989, Jaroszewicz, 2012), the problem of setting a boundary between a variant and a new set phrase (Kosek, 2011), as well as the relationship between variance and phraseological synonymy (Lewicki, 1982, Pajdzińska, 1982).

2. The notion of variant

Traditionally, linguistic variants are defined as elements which are equal when it comes to their functionality but differ formally (Polański, 1993: 581). A similar approach may be found in French linguistics, in which a variant is defined as "forme différente d'une

forme de référence et ayant la même nature (étymologique, fonctionnelle)" (GRE) or

> écart par rapport à une norme géolinguistique ou sociolinguistique; forme ou sens d'un mot, d'un élément, d'une construction, différents de ceux de la forme de référence de même origine et de même nature (TLFi).

In Polish studies, phraseological alternations were initially treated as a subtype of lexical variance and had "features parallel to the changes in the forms of individual lexemes" (Buttler, 1982: 27-28)[1]. In this view, variants are connections with the same meaning, as well as emotional and stylistic character, which differ in terms of the morphological form of their components (*przebrać miarę/przebrać miarkę, trzymać się jak pijany płota/płotu*); the order of components in the structure of the unit (*mur chiński/chiński mur*); lexical exponents of syntactic relations (*spadać z ciała/spadać na ciele)* or a varying level of unit completeness (*Przyjdzie koza do woza, a nie wóz do kozy/Przyjdzie koza do woza*).

A different theoretical approach regarding this issue was adopted by Lewicki (1982), who considers variance a subtype of synonymy. According to him, a sequence of variants constitutes a "collection of paradigms of set phrases which are synonymous to each other and are characterized by a partial similarity in their signifier." Pajdzińska (2011: 220) points to the fact that, although inflectional variants of a phraseological unit are similar to paradigmatic forms, they do not have a categorial sense, which is evidenced e.g. by examples of the neutralization of important inflectional oppositions: *toś kładzie komuś w ucho/w uszy, że…., ktoś rzuca groch/grochem o ścianę*. The researcher considers phraseological variance as a special case of a more general phenomenon – the identity of linguistic units. She takes the middle ground between the minimalist and maximalist positions, claiming that phraseological variants should retain the same meaning and contain important identical elements in their signifier. According to Pajdzińska, the complex character of set phrases "makes variance in Polish phraseological inventory much more extensive than in other

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[1] See also Pajdzińska (2011: 220).

aspects of the language" and manifests itself on various levels: phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexical.

In turn, for Koziara (2011: 49), who analyzed biblical set phrases, connections which should be considered variants are those in which interchangeability occurs only within phenomena irrelevant to the status of the unit, e.g. it involves a different word order (*kainowe plemię/plemię kainowe*), optionality within the morphological category (*hiobowa wieść/hiobowe wieści*), or the omission of a non-vital component (*Duch wprawdzie ochoczy, ale ciało mdłe/Duch ochoczy, ale ciało mdłe*).

Ignatowicz-Skowrońska (2011) focuses mainly on the description of syntactic variance and, within the valence schemata of phraseological units, enumerates variants motivated by:

- a semantic selective factor, e.g. variants which differ in terms of their collocation to personal and impersonal nouns (*ktoś zniknął komuś z oczu*//*coś zniknęło komuś z oczu)*;
- a syntactic quantitative factor; opening space for a given item or allowing its omission (*ktoś nie owija w bawełnę czegoś//ktoś nie owija w bawełnę)*;
- a morphological categorial factor, e.g. variants opening space for an item filled with an analytical case with various prepositions of different or identical case government (*coś budzi mieszane uczucia u kogoś//coś budzi mieszane uczucia w kimś).*

In the study on the polymorphism of set phrases, the range of formal similarity between variants has not been fully specified. According to some researchers, the notion of invariant may be useful in this context. As emphasized by Giułumianc (1977: 306), the analysis of variants would amount to defining the level of their similarity to the initial stereotype – the chronologically oldest form of a unit. The basic difficulty, however, is establishing the prototype whose original shape, in the course of various subsequent exchanges, may only marginally resemble the contemporary variants existing in a language (Giułumianc, 1977: 307).

The notion of invariant is also connected with structural and morphological as well as semantic schema of nominal and verbal[*] set phrases[2] (Lewicki, 1982, *schéma locutionnel* in Fiala, 1987, Fiala and Achard, 1997) or the most typical, when it comes to the range of its use, fixed combination of words, representing a specific structure, lexical and grammatical composition and, above all, semantics (Treder, 1982: 87).

In this context, the distinction – made with the use of necessary criteria – between a range of variants (various phraseological unit forms belonging to the same unit) and a series of connections between which there exist derivational and modificational relations is still an open issue.

In French literature concerning the studied subject, phraseological variance encompasses changes both in the signifier and in the contents of the components; however, the elements which are indispensable for recognizing a set phrase in its various forms are retained (Bernet, 1992). For Mogorrón Huerta (2011), variance encompasses, besides morphosyntactic, graphical and lexical alternations, also changes in the forms of phraseological units stemming from their formal and syntactic adaptation to a given context, changes in the order of the components of a verbal set phrase, as well as lexical exchanges concerning the constitutive elements of the unit, which may result in differences regarding its stylistic and emotional focus[3].

In this context, an interesting view is presented by Mejri (2013), who considers the problem of variance in relation to

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[2] In verbal phrases, the constant element may consist of, e.g. a nominal segment and a verbal prefix (*ktoś kogoś z kwitkiem odprawi/odeśle*) or a nominal segment and the main verbal morpheme (*coś budzi w kimś krew/coś wzburza w kimś krew*). The exchanged part is, in this case, the verbal segment of the phrase (Lewicki, 1982: 45).

[3] In extreme cases, the described phenomenon encompasses variants differing in phonological and graphical composition, grammatical morphemes, properties of grammatical categories, lexemes, as well as various modifications affecting the semantic, structural and stylistic identity of a phraseological unit. Such modifications include, e.g., substitution, reduction, ellipsis of a component, or nominalization of a verbal set phrase (Dawes, 2009).

dephraseologization. According to this author, variance is conditioned by the properties of a given linguistic system[4], while dephraseologization stems from the character of the discourse, which is, in turn, an expression of the sender's activity. Therefore, variance must fall within closed paradigms, which are marked by the capabilities of a linguistic system, whereas in the case of dephraseologization, there is a collection of items without clearly marked boundaries[5].

Following the review of different views on the problem of variance, I shall now move on to discuss selected mechanisms conditioning the polymorphism of set phrases in the Polish and French languages[6].

3. Selected types of phraseological variance

In the phraseological inventory of both studied languages, there are similar types of variants with regard to the morphosyntactic and lexical spheres.

3.1. Variants differing with regard to the morphological form of their components

In both languages, phraseological variance is based primarily on the opposition in the number category and concerns the changeability of inflected forms, with both of these changes frequently occurring parallelly[7]: Fr. *quelqu'un fait un accroc/des accros à la réputation, quelqu'un est sur la braise/ sur des braises, quelqu'un met la clé/les*

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[4] In the context of Polish phraseology, the issue was raised by Buttler (1982: 35), Lewicki (1982), Pajdzińska (1982), among others.

[5] Mejri (2013: 85) juxtaposes two terms in this context: *paradigme fermé* and *paradigme ouvert*.

[6] Examples from French were excerpted from two general dictionaries (*Le Trésor de la langue française, Le Grand Robert de la langue française, Le Nouveau Petit Robert*) and a specialized dictionary (*Dictionnaire des Expressions et Locutions*). The Polish material comes from *Słownik frazeologiczny współczesnej polszczyzny* (2002) and *Słownik frazeologiczny* (2007).

[7] See also Jaroszewicz (2012).

*clés sous la porte, quelqu'un entre dans le décor/dans les décors, quelqu'un crie haro sur le baudet/sur les baudets, quelqu'un porte les culottes*[8]*/la culotte;* Pl. *biała plama/białe plamy, ze łzą w oku/ze łzami w oczach, ktoś dostaje po uchu/po uszach, ktoś rzuci kamyk/kamyki do czyjegoś ogródka, ktoś chodzi krętą drogą/krętymi drogami, ktoś wstawia komuś bajer/bajery, włos staje komuś na głowie/włosy stają komuś na głowie.*

In the Polish language, various forms of a set phrase may have different inflectional endings and thematic alternations: *ktoś wychwala kogoś pod niebiosa/pod niebiosy, ktoś siedzi z założonymi rękami/rękoma, zdrów jak ryba/zdrowy jak ryba.*

Another group is constituted by variants differing in word-formative morphemes. Such variants are much less frequent in French than they are in Polish: Fr. *quelqu'un crache au bassinet/au bassin, quelque chose chauffe/réchauffe le coeur*; Pl. *niebieski ptak/niebieski ptaszek, krzyż na drogę/krzyżyk na drogę, małe piwo/małe piwko, kamyk do czyjegoś ogródka/kamyczek do czyjegoś ogródka, droga cierniowa/droga ciernista, ktoś ma piach/piasek w rękawach, ktoś daje nura/ nurka.*

## 3.2. Lexical variants

The second group of variants consists of set phrases differing in terms of lexical elements belonging to the same functional class and the same thematic range. They are marked by the same meaning, identical or similar lexical composition, complete or relative stylistic identicalness, and identical or approximate structure of imagery. They also constitute a realization of certain invariant abstract schemata.

## 3.2.1. The exchange of the nominal segment

In both languages, the analyzed subtype encompasses substantive and verbal phraseological expressions. The noun constituting the structural

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[8]The manner of recording the phraseological units in *Le Grand Robert* (2005) and the evidence collected in our corpus of press texts indicate that the plural form is more frequent.

basis of substantive set phrases and the nominal component of a verbal set phrase is most frequently substituted by an expressive synonym or a word very close semantically: Fr. *larmes/pleurs de crocodile, figure/gueule en coin de rue, à un cheveu/un poil près, à son idée/à son gré/à son goût, C'est toujours la même chanson/la même histoire, quelqu'un a le derrière au vent/à l'air, quelqu'un est cousu d'or/d'argent/de pistoles/d'écus, quelqu'un baigne dans l'huile/dans le beurre/la margarine;* Pl. *głucha wieść/plotka, nić/kłębek Ariadny, białe tango/biały walc, chodząca kronika/encyklopedia, cielęcy wiek/cielęce lata, czarna księga/lista, ktoś bije w dzwony/w bębny na trwogę, ktoś jest łagodny jak baranek/jak jagnię, ktoś czerpie wodę sitem/rzeszotem/przetakiem, ktoś nie czuje kości/gnatów, ktoś czuje się jak w raju/jak w niebie, coś jest czyimś czułym punktem/czułym miejscem, ktoś jest czysty jak brylant/jak kryształ, ktoś szuka igły/szpilki w stogu siana, coś jest palcem/patykiem/widłami po wodzie pisane.*

In the case of an identical referent, the exchange of the descriptor is also permitted: Fr. *second/deuxièe souffle, Ce n'est pas une petite/mince affaire; quelqu'un prend un bon/sacré/sale coup dans les dents*; Pl. *ostry, cięty dowcip, kawalerska/ułańska fantazja.*

3.2.2 The exchange of the verbal segment
As already mentioned, phraseologcial variants are characterized by the same meaning, syntactic structure and distribution. The verbal segment may be substituted by its expressive synonym or a lexeme close in meaning. The exchangeability is, therefore, determined in a certain set of words: Fr. *quelqu'un fait/met une croix sur quelque chose, quelqu'un dépasse/franchit/passe un cap; quelqu'un jette/pousse des hauts cris, quelqu'un est/vit comme un coq en pâte, quelqu'un ne sait de quel côté tourner/aller, quelqu'un est/s'entend/vit comme chien et chat, quelqu'un file/part/s'en va, se sauve à l'anglaise, quelqu'un manque/loupe/rate le coche, quelqu'un enfonce/remue/retourne le couteau dans la plaie, quelqu'un se serre/se met/s'attache/se boucle la ceinture*; Pl. *ktoś porywa się /rzuca się z motyką na słońce, ktoś staje/sterczy komuś nad głową, ktoś*

*dostaje się/trafia/wpada z deszczu pod rynnę, kręci się/szumi/wiruje komuś w głowie, ktoś wyczyści/oczyści/czyści stajnię Augiasza, ktoś mówi/plecie/gada, co ślina na język przyniesie.*

There are also cases in which both the nominal and verbal segments are subject to variance: Fr. *quelqu'un met/verse un baume sur la plaie/la blessure*, Pl. *ktoś wpada/przerzuca się z jednej ostateczności/skrajności w drugą.*

Apart from synonymic relationship, the following types of relations may occur between the components of a verbal set phrase:

- metonymic: Fr. *Les doigts/les poings/les mains me démangent, quelqu'un se creuse la tête/la cervelle, qulequ'un répond du bout des lèvres/du bout des dents;* Pl. *ktoś nie czuje rąk/nóg/kości, ktoś traci grunt pod nogami/pod stopami, ktoś ma nogi/kolana jak z waty, ciarki przechodzą komuś po plecach/po skórze, ktoś strzeże coś jak oka w głowie/jak źrenicy oka.*
- hypernymic-hyponymic: *oiseau/corbeau de mauvaise augure; ktoś jest wesoły jak ptaszek/jak szczygiełek, alkohol uderza komuś do głowy/wino uderza komuś do głowy, dziecinna pora/godzina.*

It should be noted here that this group lacks aspect pairs such as: Pl. *ktoś ładuje/naładował akumulatory, ciarki przechodzą/przeszły komuś po plecach, odejmuje komuś mowę, odjęło komuś mowę, Fr. ne rien perdre/n'avoir rien perdu pour attendre*. They should not be treated as variants but as forms of the inflectional paradigm (Liberek, 2006: 59). The enumerated forms carry information concerning the imperfective or perfective character of the verbal segment of a phraseological unit.

### 3.2.3. The exchange of prepositions

The exchange of prepositions is also considered an example of lexical variance[9]: Fr. *pour/sur l'article de..., bon à mettre à Charenton/bon pour Charenton, quelqu'un prend à sa charge/en charge, coup de pied au cul/dans le cul*; Pl. *ktoś rzuca kamieniem na kogoś/w kogoś, ktoś*

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[9] See also Lewicki (1982), Pajdzińska (2011).

*depcze koło/około/wokół czegoś, coś₁ rozbija się coś₂ w drzazgi/na drzazgi, ktoś wbił sobie coś do głowy/ktoś wbił sobie coś w głowę, kto bije głową w mur, ktoś bije głową o mur, coś bije po oczach/w oczy, ktoś piecze dwie pieczenie przy/na jednym ogniu, ktoś nabiera wody w usta/do ust.*

### 3.3. Length variance[10]

This type of changeability characterizing set phrases concerns connections which are identical in terms of their meaning but differ in the number of their components (Pajdzińska, 2011: 221-222). Facultative segments perform primarily the expressive and emotional function and, therefore, intensify the meaning: Fr. *quelqu'un est (tout) cousu d'or, un (bon) bout de temps, au (premier) chant du coq, au (grand) complet, quelqu'un traîne sa (vieille) carcasse, quelqu'un compte pour du beurre (fondu), quelqu'un arrive comme un boulet (de canon), quelqu'un est toujours sur les (quatre) chemins, quelqu'un dit blanc et (puis) noir, quelqu'un s'ennuie comme une croûte de pain (derrière une malle), quelque chose va (droit) au coeur ;* Pl. *ktoś nie boi się (żadnej) pracy, z (wielką) biedą, ktoś ma (święty) spokój, bomba (poszła) w górę, ktoś zmierza (wprost) do celu, bez (żadnych) ceregieli, nie można zjeść ciastka i (nadal) go mieć, ktoś ma (dobrze) w czubie, ktoś nie daje się (długo) prosić, na dobre i (na) złe, ktoś spadł z obłoków (na ziemię), (ostatnia) kropla goryczy, do (suchej) nitki.* Some components are also tautological: *komuś zapiera dech (w piersiach), ktoś urabia (sobie) ręce po łokcie, quelqu'un ne se fait pas d'ampoules (aux mains).*

### 4. Conclusion

Due to the complicated formal and semantic structure as well as peculiar properties of fixed word connections, the issue of the variance of these units is important for phraseological research. The

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[10] The term was proposed by Pajdzińska (2011). In traditional studies, set phrases with an additional component whose presence is not necessary were referred to as variants with a facultative segment.

conducted analysis proves that both in Polish and in French the fixedness of idiomatic units is relative. The criteria adopted in the study allowed identification of similar types of variants with regard to the morphosyntactic and lexical spheres. Still, one of the basic issues in phraseology is clarification of the boundaries between a variant and a new set phrase as well as the relationship between variance and derivation and between variance and phraseological synonymy.

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