

## THE SEMANTIC NATURE OF FIXED EXPRESSIONS IN DIPLOMATIC LANGUAGE

### NATURA SEMANTICĂ A EXPRESIILOR STABILE ÎN LIMBAJUL DIPLOMATIC

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*This article delves into the intricate domain of diplomatic language, particularly focusing on the semantic characteristics of its fixed expressions. We examine the vital role these expressions play in ensuring clarity, consistency, and decorum in international relations, along with the challenges they pose in cross-cultural communication. This paper aims to explore the concept and the nature of fixed expressions, to define them in clear terms and to emphasize their main features and characteristics. By explicitly delimiting this concept, we aim to facilitate a deeper understanding of how words combine and interact to produce more complex lexical units, shedding light on their semantic nature and their pivotal role in shaping diplomatic discourse. The occurrence of different types of fixed expressions, rich in cultural and historical undertones, can both facilitate and complicate cross-cultural communication. Although the presence of an impressive number of research that addresses the phraseology of different languages, this linguistic phenomenon continually creates contradictory discussions, requiring some clarifications and research aspects regarding the definition and elucidation of the term fixed expression.*

**Keywords:** diplomatic language, fixed expressions, idioms, semantic fixity.

*Acest articol abordează particularitățile limbajului diplomatic, concentrându-se în special pe caracteristicile semantice ale expresiilor sale stabile. Vom examina rolul major pe care îl joacă aceste expresii în asigurarea clarității, consecvenței și decorului în relațiile internaționale, împreună cu provocările pe care le prezintă în comunicarea interculturală. Acest articol își propune să exploreze conceptul și natura expresiilor stabile, să le definească în termeni clari și să sublinieze principalele aspecte și caracteristici ale acestora. Prin delimitarea explicită a acestui concept, ne propunem să facilităm o înțelegere mai profundă a modului în care cuvintele se combină și interacționează pentru a produce unități lexicale mai complexe, determinând natura lor semantică și rolul lor esențial în conturarea discursului diplomatic. Determinarea diferitor tipuri de expresii stabile opulente în acțiuni culturale și istorice, poate atât facilita cât și complica comunicarea interculturală. Deși prezența unui număr impresionant de cercetări care abordează frazeologia diferitelor limbi, acest fenomen lingvistic creează continuu discuții contradictorii, necesitând unele clarificări și aspecte de cercetare privind definirea și elucidarea termenului de expresie stabilă.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** limbajul diplomatic, expresii stabile, expresii idiomatice, fixitate semantică.

## INTRODUCTION

Linguistics, as a scientific field of language study, has explored various lexical units and semantic structures over time to better understand the complexity and versatility of the language. One of these units, essential for the structure and semantics of the sentences, is the fixed expression. Although it may seem a simple element at first glance, this kind of expression, as a semantic entity, plays a crucial role in building the meaning and coherence of discourse. The fixed expressions are of particular interest to linguists because they are a way in which language can codify complex meanings and ideas in a concise way. They also provide a window to the culture and history of the language, as many expressions are based on metaphors or cultural allusions.

In Anglo-Saxon linguistic research, the fixed expressions were studied from multiple perspectives, including in terms of semantics, stylistics and pragmalinguistics. Particular attention was paid to how these expressions contribute to the style and tone of speech and how they are used in communication.

Diplomatic language, characterized by its tact, precision, and nuance, employs various fixed expressions to convey messages among nations. These expressions, imbued with rich semantics, are often the keys to understanding diplomatic texts and the subtle intricacies underlying international discourse.

Fixed expressions in diplomatic language refer to specific phrases, collocations, or idiomatic expressions that are routinely employed in the realm of diplomacy to convey messages, attitudes, or positions in a standardized and often nuanced manner. These expressions are utilized to ensure clarity, avoid misunderstandings, and maintain the essential orderliness in the international relations.

## THE NATURE OF THE DIPLOMATIC LANGUAGE

Diplomatic language is a specialized form of communication characterized by its distinct nuances, tact, and precision. It plays an essential role in the realm of international relations, facilitating dialogue between states, international organizations, and their representatives. Thus, it requires a special wording where the terms must be explicitly defined, and the semantic architecture can only be interpreted in one way, at the same time, the meaning of the concepts is gradually conveyed by combining multilayered units that ultimately tend to create a semantic management of ambiguity [1, p.3].

From the historical and linguistic perspective, the language of diplomacy, relies on two major components: the first refers to the linguistic component that orchestrates the maintenance of the official relations and formulates the international treaties; the second highlights the significance of the terms, special expressions and fixed expressions that constitute the diplomatic vocabulary. Historical events, precedents, and longstanding traditions influence the way diplomatic language evolves. Certain phrases or terms may carry historical weight and are used to signify respect for the past agreements or understandings.

It is considered that the language is not only a form of action or an act of communication, but the very quintessence of diplomacy. The language of diplomacy is a

specialized form of communication characterized by its refinement, discretion, and particularity, playing an essential role in the sphere of international relations, facilitating the communication among nations, international assemblies, and their councils. Understanding the nature of diplomatic language entails diving deep into its features, purposes, and the dynamics underlying its usage. Notably, the famous Durant's thought that expresses the very nature or better said essence of diplomacy – “To say nothing especially when speaking, is half the art of diplomacy” [2, p.78].

Furthermore, the function of the diplomatic language is to convince, determine, conceal, urge, and support national interests in political, economic, integration, defense matters, etc. In the mediation process it acts as a bridge between parties, aiding in the resolution of disagreements and facilitating consensus. Also, it expresses a nation's stance, interests, and intentions on the international stage using protocol and ceremony as diplomatic language upholds traditions and formalities, marking events like state visits, treaty signings, and international conferences. Additionally, the language of diplomacy aims to convey messages with clarity and exactness to minimize potential misunderstandings. This language typically adheres to established conventions and uses a more formal tone than everyday speech, moreover tact, subtleness and ambiguity are its defined features. Ambiguity is characteristic in certain circumstances, particularly in sensitive negotiations where diplomatic language might deliberately be vague to allow room for interpretation and flexibility. Diplomatic language often employs ambiguity to navigate sensitive political situations and maintain flexibility. Here are some examples of ambiguity in diplomatic language:

- *We will consider your proposal* - a non-committal statement that does not necessarily mean they will accept it.
- *We appreciate your perspective* – a double entendre or double meaning, could mean either genuine appreciation or a polite way of disagreeing.
- *We support a peaceful resolution to the conflict* - leaves open the question of what that resolution might entail, a kind of constructive ambiguity, deliberately creates room for interpretations.
- *We will address this issue in due course* - does not specify when that will be, a very vague timeframe reference.
- *We might be willing to consider X if Y happens* - using conditional statements to avoid making firm commitments and leaving options for negotiation.
- *Relevant parties* - avoiding naming specific individuals or entities (unspecified actors) can also create ambiguity.
- *It would be helpful if certain actions were taken* – the use of indirect requests rather than making direct demands, diplomats might phrase their requests as suggestions or expressions of concern.
- *Mistakes were made*- passive voice can obscure responsibility or avoid attributing actions to a particular actor.
- *May have misspoken* - using plausible deniability when backtrack is necessary.

Moreover, the use of diplomatic terminology and protocol can be intentionally vague to outsiders, that is why expressions like *amicable discussions*, *frank exchange of views*, or *mutual understanding* may sound positive but leave the actual outcome open-ended.

These examples illustrate how diplomatic language can be intentionally ambiguous to allow for negotiation, maintain relationships, and avoid unnecessary conflicts in the complex world of the international diplomacy.

#### FIXED EXPRESSIONS PERSPECTIVES

In linguistics, fixed expressions are pre-established combinations of words that have a particular significance, distinguishable from the individual meanings of their components. Examples in English include idiomatic expressions like:

*Extend an olive branch* – to make an offer of peace. “It is the third time Beijing *has extended an arm of friendship* towards Canberra since the new Australian Labour Prime Minister Anthony Albanese assumed power. The desperate move comes at an interesting juncture of geopolitical and economic tensions between the two nations”. [<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/06/05/extending-the-olive-branch-china-australia-relations/>]

*Behind closed doors* – without public knowledge. “The UN Security Council will convene this week to discuss simmering tensions in Jerusalem, diplomatic sources said on Monday. Tuesday’s closed-door meeting comes at the request of China, France, Ireland, Norway, the United Arab Emirates and US”. [<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/un-security-council-to-meet-behind-closed-doors-on-jerusalem-unrest/2566702>]

*To keep an eye on* – under careful observation. “While keeping an eye on the naval base development at Ream, the U.S. is unlikely to push hard for closer ties with Cambodia and will instead focus on consolidating relationships that have more promise”.

[<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Cambodia-s-new-leadership/Cambodian-PM-Hun-Manet-heads-to-China-in-early-diplomatic-push>]

*To keep out of the crossfire* – to avoid two opposing or arguing sides. “Chhengpor Aun, a visiting fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said Hun Manet’s priorities will be keeping Cambodia “out of the crossfire” and trying to improve relations with the U.S. and Europe”. [<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Cambodia-s-new-leadership/Cambodian-PM-Hun-Manet-heads-to-China-in-early-diplomatic-push>]

*To call the shots* – take the initiative, exercise authority. “Ian Chong, an associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore, said any foreign policy changes under Hun Manet appear unlikely in the short term, as there is an expectation his father will still call the shots”. [<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Cambodia-s-new-leadership/Cambodian-PM-Hun-Manet-heads-to-China-in-early-diplomatic-push>]

They also include formulaic language which in diplomacy refers to fixed, conventional expressions that are used routinely to convey specific meanings or to follow certain protocols. These expressions offer a combination of precision and civility in international interactions. Here are some examples of formulaic language commonly found in

diplomatic contexts: *in the spirit of cooperation, it is with great pleasure that, to have the honor to, mutually agreed upon, to wish to reaffirm, cordially to invite to, gravely concerned, without prejudice to, subject to the provisions of, desiring to strengthen the bonds of friendship, etc...* Traditionally, in the East European linguistics these expressions and the above mentioned are defined as: *phraseological units* (V.V.Vinogradov), *phraseological entities* (D. Gouadec, I. Busuic), *semantic phraseme* (I. Mel'cuk), moreover the term *linguistic unities* and *phrasemes* are met in the studies of A. Martinet and G. Matoré, whereas, American linguists (George Lakoff, Dwight Bolinger, Charles Fillmore) and English School (John R. Taylor, Rosamund Moon) do not normally use the term *phraseological units*, or *phrasemes*.

However, the concept is closest to what Anglo-Saxon linguists would call *idioms/idiomatic expressions* or *fixed expressions*. It is important to mention that the phrasemes and phraseological unities are more frequently used in linguistics of the East European or Russian studies, otherwise in American and British linguistics, similar concepts are usually described using terms such as *idioms, collocations, and fixed expressions*.

Thus, a *stable/fixed expression* is a combination of words that is frequently used together and has a specific meaning that may be different from that of individual components that it is made up of. For example, the expression *by the way*, is a fixed expression used to introduce a new topic or an additional idea into a conversation.

An *idiomatic expression (idiom)* is a phrase which meaning cannot be understood only by analyzing the meanings of the individual words that make it up. For example, the expression *to turn a blind eye* - means *deliberately overlook something*, is used when intentionally ignoring an action or situation, and has nothing in common with blindness. Idioms are fixed expression that have a figurative meaning and are used to convey certain ideas and concepts in a more discreet manner or in a way that provides a reflection of historical events and traditions. Here are some examples to illustrate the concept:

*To bury the hatchet* – means - to make peace or literal practice of putting away weapons. In the diplomatic language, it is used to indicate the end of hostilities or of a conflict. “The funeral of the hashses was part of the diplomatic culture among the five Iroquois nations in northeastern North America. In negotiating with foreigners, they refer to burying the hashses in a deep hole, over which they planted a tree to symbolize the peace” [3, p.38].

*To play hardball* – act aggressively and ruthlessly, this expression refers to an adoption or a delivery or a need in negotiations or discussions. „France and Germany are ready to play hardball with Russia”. “We need to be able to play hardball, but at the same time, we must never let the dialogue stop”, Maas said, according to an English translation. “We need Russia to resolve the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Ukraine” [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-navalny-france-idUSKBN26T1QJ>].

*To play for time* – use specious excuses or unnecessary manoeuvres to gain time. “Dialogue is not an excuse for playing for time. We must be very clear: dialogue with Russia does not mean doing it a favour,” France’s Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian

told a security conference in Bratislava [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-navalny-france-idUSKBN26T1QJ>].

*To walk a tightrope* – to deal with a difficult situation. In diplomacy, it is used to describe a delicate or precarious situation in which decisions must be made very carefully. „In spite of Jordan’s close ties to the United States and Europe, Amman has found itself walking a diplomatic tightrope in the wake of Russia’s invasion of neighboring Ukraine in late February. The initial reaction by Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, two days after the invasion, was to call for a political solution to the crisis in Ukraine, without any mention of Russia” [<https://www.mei.edu/publications/jordan-walking-diplomatic-tightrope-russias-invasion-ukraine>].

*To smooth over* – efforts to calm or resolve a tense situation or conflict „...to smooth over difficulties and adjust disputes arising between the Governments to which they are accredited and the Government which appoints...” [4, p.32].

Fixed expressions create a unique collection in their nature of predominantly native and borrowed idioms, sometimes challenging in the translation process. Therefore, the diplomatic language does not abound in this type of expressions, although, being descriptive and expressive linguistic units, that project the historical background, technology grounding and cultural authenticity. So, idiomatic expressions can be used in a variety of contexts, and their presence in diplomatic communications aims to express complex ideas in a more concise, colorful, and evocative way.

#### THE SEMANTIC NUANCES OF FIXED EXPRESSION

Analyzing the contexts regarding idiomatic expression, its presence in specialized language, namely in diplomatic language, is debatable. The general definition says that idiomatic expression is a linguistically fixed expression, the meaning of the whole construction differs from the meaning of its component parts as well, denoting realities specific to the language community, for example: *bite the bullet*, *walking on eggshells*; but there are also some universal ones, based on civilizational references: *Chinese whispers*, *Spartan lifestyle*, *Indian summer*; as well as metaphorical idioms, often used in all languages with reference to soft power (subtle power) and hard power (coercive power) – the famous expression *sticks and carrots* (punishments and rewards), which supports the expressiveness of language.

When mentioning fixed expressions, idioms, metaphorical idioms meaning similar concepts, we bring to light George Lakoff’s approach and contributions to conceptual metaphor theory. His works explore how idiomatic expressions and fixed expressions reflect the conceptual patterns of speakers. G. Lakoff argues that language and thinking are intricately linked and that much of the way we understand the world is structured by metaphors [5, p.5]. It also includes idiomatic expressions, which he sees as expressions of conceptual metaphors. In his book “Metaphors We Live By” (co-author Mark Johnson), the American linguist explores how metaphors and idiomatic expressions are incorporated into everyday language. He argues that these are not just figures of style or



rhetorical ornaments but are in fact essential to the way we understand the world, and that our conceptual system has a metaphorical character [5, p.8]. The following examples - *on top of the world, catch up the idea, lost in one's thoughts, crossing the line, at a dead end* - involve understanding or thinking of the spatial metaphors, that in fact, reflect fundamental conceptual metaphors.

Fixed expressions or idiomatic expressions are types of phrases that can be fully understood only in the contexts they occur, considers Rosamund Moon, an expert in fixed expressions, who wrote extensively about their use and meaning in English. In her book “Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English: A Corpus-Based Approach” (1998), Moon defines fixed or semi-fixed expressions as groups of words that appear together more frequently than would be expected by chance. This includes idiomatic expressions, but also other types of expressions, such as collocations, proverbs, slogans, and other types of expressions that appear frequently together [6, p.36]. Moreover, the linguist emphasizes that fixed expressions can vary in their degree of “fixity”. Some are completely fixed (idioms, diplomatic formulae) and cannot be modified in any way (e.g., *to whom it may concern, in short*), while others (slogans, some collocations) may be modified in certain contexts (e.g., *in the long run/term*).

Without a shadow of doubt, defining and elucidating the concept of fixed expressions gives rise to a wide variety of approaches and visions. Conventionally the association or combination of words, which has unitary meaning leads to the idea of fixed units or to other terms that express the same concept. Thus, analyzing the definition of the object of study of phraseology, which studies a stable unity consisting of two or more words having subordinative relations. We will try to specify the concept of fixed expression, which was defined as terminological expression, phraseological unit, phraseological term [7, p.57] or bimembral/ trimembral constructions, lexical unit, lexical phenomena, phraseme, conventional expression, formulae, fixed expression, set of expressions, set of phrases, combinations of words, phrasal lexemes (Corpas 1997; Cowie 1998; Pawley 2001), semantic phrase (Mel'čuk 1998); idiomatic expression (Gläser, 1988); figurative idiomatic expression, restrictive collocation [8, p. 4].

It is important to emphasize that the definition of the concept of fixed expression occupies a central place in linguistics, having significant implications for understanding the structure, semantics and functioning of the language. Additionally, a fixed expression is an intermediate unit between a word and a sentence, which study and analysis offers a decryption method of how words combine into various units, giving meaning and coherence to communication. An analysis of these phrases can reveal the semantic relations between words and how they contribute to the global meaning of a context. This is an essential phenomenon to understand language subtleties, meaning adjustment, also an explicit and consensual definition of fixed expression allows researchers to refer to the same analysis unit, thus making it possible to compare and replicate the studies.

- *Parallel diplomacy /Track two diplomacy* - is the interaction between non-state actors, such as non-profit organizations or private individuals, in attempts to resolve the

conflict or contribute to peace. But if we analyze the terms separately, we will identify: the term *diplomacy* - activity carried out by a state through its diplomatic representatives/set of methods and procedures used in the field of international relations and the term *parallel* – extending in the same direction, equidistant at all points, and never converging or diverging [9, p.800].

- *Decision-making transparency* - although in the field of physics the term *transparency* refers to the quality of being easy to get through undulating or corpuscular radiation [9, p.1203], in the diplomatic context, it has acquired a specific meaning and means openness to communicate policies, intentions and actions to other nations and to the public.

The semantic composition of fixed expressions refers to the meaning that a phrase or linguistic unity transmits. The fixed expressions are rigid constructions that have a non-compositional meaning, which acceptance that cannot be deduced directly from the individual words that make up the expression. The semantics of these expressions is often deeply incorporated into the culture and history of a language. Therefore, when analyzing the semantic composition of phrases, namely idiomatic expressions, we must look at the whole expression as a single element with a unitary meaning, not at the individual words that make it up. The semantic meaning of the sentences is largely conventional and must be learned because it cannot be deduced logically or literally.

Charles Fillmore, who is known for developing the theory “case frames” or “frame semantics”, suggests that the meaning of words and semantic units is intricately linked to our knowledge and experiences of the world. Therefore, the meaning of a sentence may depend on the cultural context and circumstances. Taking over the ideas of C. Fillmore, cognitive linguist G. Lakoff developed the theory of conceptual metaphors, suggesting the way we understand the world and language is largely determined by the expressive units we use to structure our thinking, moreover, metaphors are ways in which we understand the abstract in concrete terms, based on our physical and social experience. In addition, metaphors influence the way we understand and use language, according to its vision, namely conceptual metaphors are the basis of idiomatic expressions or fixed expressions [10, p.28].

As a result, the study of fixed expressions and its semantics is a complex research that requires an interdisciplinary approach, including linguistics, psychology, philosophy and anthropology, the mentioned above linguists have significantly contributed to understanding the semantic composition of these types of expressions through their research and theories.

## CONCLUSION

While rooted in tradition, diplomatic language is not static, but it evolves to address new challenges, incorporates technological advances, and reflects shifting international norms and dynamics. The language of diplomacy follows specific conventions and tends to avoid colloquialisms, as well, it adheres to established protocols, which vary from one



culture or institution to another but generally prioritize a level of decorum, standing as a beacon of subtlety, nuance, and tact.

The primary goal of diplomacy is to foster peaceful and constructive international relations and the language plays a pivotal role in this process. The way messages are conveyed can greatly influence the outcome of diplomatic engagements that is why, a poorly chosen word or phrase can escalate tensions, while a well-crafted message can open doors to cooperation and mutual understanding. Therefore, diplomatic language is a tool designed to navigate the complex and sensitive world of international relations, balancing the need for clarity with the equally important needs for convention, perspicacity, and flexibility.

Diplomatic language, with its rich tapestry of formality, subtlety, and precision, is a cornerstone of international relations. It reflects both the complexities of inter-state interactions and the ever-present need for cooperation, dialogue, and mutual understanding in a globalized world. Within this specialized mode of communication, fixed expressions – the unities which meanings cannot be inferred from the meanings of their constituent words – play a significant role.

The semantic nature of fixed expressions in diplomatic language is rich and multi-layered, reflecting the complexity of international relations. While these expressions provide clarity and maintain the architecture required in such interactions, they also pose challenges, particularly in cross-cultural settings. It is essential for diplomatic professionals to be aware of these semantic nuances and to continually adapt to the evolving landscape of international discourse.

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