

## **Cognitive Aspects of the Functioning of French Phraseological Units in the Communicative Space**

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**Abstract.** *This study investigates the cognitive dimensions of French phraseological units (PUs) within the framework of communicative space. Drawing on the theories of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), conceptual integration (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), and image schemas (Johnson, 1987), the paper demonstrates how idiomatic expressions in French encapsulate culturally embedded knowledge, metaphorical reasoning, and pragmatic intent. French idioms such as *avoir le cafard*, *mettre les pieds dans le plat*, and *tomber des nues* exemplify how figurative language emerges from mental space interaction and embodied experience. The study further examines the discourse functions of PUs—such as irony, solidarity, and intensification—and explores mechanisms of phraseological innovation, including neologization, ellipsis, and recontextualization. Additionally, intercultural aspects are analyzed, showing how idioms reflect national identity and cognitive-cultural variation. The findings highlight the role of phraseological units as dynamic cognitive tools for discourse construction, social interaction, and conceptualization, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the link between language, thought, and culture in contemporary French.*

**Key words:** *French phraseology, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, conceptual integration, image schemas, idioms, communicative space, pragmatic function, phraseological innovation, intercultural communication.*

**Introduction.** In recent decades, the study of phraseological units has undergone a cognitive turn, aligning with the broader cognitive-linguistic paradigm. Phraseology, once examined through structuralist and functionalist lenses, is now increasingly viewed through the prism of conceptual structures, mental spaces, and communicative intent. This shift is especially pertinent in French, a language rich in idiomatic expressions, metaphorical constructions, and culturally loaded phraseologisms. The communicative space, understood as a dynamic environment shaped by discourse, context, and interlocutor interaction, serves as a crucial field in which phraseological units (PUs) reveal their cognitive potential. This paper explores the cognitive aspects of French PUs within the communicative space, focusing on their conceptual underpinnings, mechanisms of semantic transformation, metaphorization, and discursive integration.

**Literature Review.** The study of phraseological units (PUs) has evolved significantly over the past decades, transitioning from purely structuralist and functionalist frameworks to more cognitively oriented approaches. Foundational works such as Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* laid the groundwork for conceptual metaphor theory, emphasizing the centrality of metaphor in everyday language and cognition. Their insights have proven especially relevant for analyzing idioms and phraseologisms in various languages, including French, as they demonstrated how abstract concepts are structured through metaphorical mappings grounded in physical and social experience.

Building on this, Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) theory of conceptual integration or blending offered a more dynamic model of how mental spaces interact during language processing. Their framework has been applied to understand how French idioms such as *chercher midi à quatorze heures* function as emergent products of cognitive blending, merging incongruent mental spaces to create figurative meaning.

Within the domain of phraseology, scholars such as Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005) introduced a cognitive-semiotic approach, exploring how idioms are embedded in conceptual and cultural systems. They stressed the importance of culture-specific image components, arguing that phraseologisms serve as carriers of cultural information and cognitive models. Their work supports the claim that French idioms not only encode metaphorical thought but also reflect culturally entrenched schemas and social stereotypes.

Furthermore, Kövecses (2002) expanded on conceptual metaphor theory by integrating cultural context into metaphor variation. His studies emphasized that idiomatic meaning cannot be dissociated from cultural models, a notion especially pertinent when analyzing intercultural misinterpretation of French PUs.

The cognitive-linguistic notion of image schemas, as discussed by Johnson (1987) and further developed by Langacker (1987), also plays a key role in understanding how French phraseological units operate. These basic mental patterns, such as CONTAINER, PATH, and BALANCE, are recurrently found in idioms like *tomber des nues*, *mettre la charrue avant les bœufs*, and *être dans tous ses états*, indicating how embodied experience underlies figurative expressions.

More recent studies, such as Bardovi-Harlig (2012) and Boers & Lindstromberg (2008), have focused on the pedagogical implications of teaching idioms from a cognitive and metaphor-based perspective, emphasizing their role in second-language acquisition and intercultural communication. These works support the idea that cognitive approaches can enhance comprehension and usage of idioms among non-native speakers by revealing the underlying conceptual structures.

Finally, discourse-oriented research, including Wierzbicka (1992) and Cienki (2007), has demonstrated that idioms are deeply integrated into communicative practices, serving pragmatic functions such as expressing irony, solidarity, or evaluation. This aligns with the idea that PUs are not mere lexical units but crucial tools in shaping discourse and social interaction. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study, which seeks to integrate cognitive, cultural, and pragmatic perspectives on the use of French phraseological units in communicative space.

**The Cognitive Nature of Phraseological Units.** Phraseological units in French, such as *avoir le cafard* ("to feel blue") or *mettre les pieds dans le plat* ("to put one's foot in it"), are more than fixed expressions; they are cognitive constructs that encode culturally specific knowledge and conceptual mappings. Drawing on Fauconnier and Turner's theory of conceptual integration (2002), many idioms can be seen as the product of blending processes, where two or more mental spaces fuse to produce emergent meaning. For example, in *chercher midi à quatorze heures* ("to complicate things unnecessarily"), the mental space of time is combined with a conceptual frame of irrational behavior, leading to a metaphorical interpretation inaccessible through literal analysis.

Cognitive linguistics posits that PUs are grounded in image schemas—basic cognitive patterns derived from bodily experience (Johnson, 1987). In French idioms, spatial schemas (up-down, in-out), force dynamics (resistance, compulsion), and motion schemas are often embedded. The idiom *tomber des nues* ("to be very surprised"), for instance, draws on the vertical schema and metaphor of disorientation or unexpected descent, tapping into embodied experience to convey emotional shock.

**Phraseological Meaning and Conceptual Metaphor.** One of the central cognitive mechanisms behind French PUs is the use of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this framework, idioms are understood as linguistic manifestations of metaphorical thinking. For instance, *avoir un poil dans la main* ("to be lazy") employs the metaphor *INACTION IS HAIR GROWING ON THE HAND*, a humorous exaggeration rooted in embodied knowledge and social stereotypes.

French phraseology exhibits a rich inventory of conceptual metaphors such as:

**ANGER IS HEAT** – e.g., *péter les plombs* (“to blow a fuse”)

**LIFE IS A JOURNEY** – e.g., *être à un tournant* (“to be at a turning point”)

**EMOTIONAL STATE IS A CONTAINER** – e.g., *être dans tous ses états* (“to be very agitated”)

These metaphorical structures are not random but reflect deeply entrenched conceptual models that French speakers share and rely upon in communication.

**Cognitive Categorization and Phraseological Semantics.** Categorization plays a vital role in the cognitive processing of idiomatic expressions. PUs often function as prototypical expressions of categories such as “emotional states,” “interpersonal conflict,” or “social behaviors.” For example, a set of idioms expressing deceit (*mener quelqu'un en bateau, rouler quelqu'un dans la farine, se faire avoir*) all converge semantically but differ in imagery and intensity. This variation illustrates the cognitive principle of radial categorization, where central and peripheral members are organized around a prototype.

Moreover, many French PUs participate in metonymic reasoning. Consider *avoir la tête sur les épaules* (“to be sensible”)—here, the *head* metonymically stands for rationality. Metonymy allows speakers to activate specific parts of a scenario or conceptual frame to represent the whole, increasing communicative efficiency and evocativeness.

**Discourse Integration and Pragmatic Functions.** Phraseological units are not isolated lexical items; they function within discourse, contributing to coherence, modality, and speaker attitude. In communicative space, idioms serve various pragmatic functions: intensification (*mort de rire* – “dying of laughter”), attenuation (*pas piqué des hannetons* – “not bad”), irony (*merci du cadeau* – sarcastic “thanks a lot”), and solidarity (*tenir le coup* – “to hang in there”).

Cognitively, idioms are efficient tools for mental alignment between interlocutors. They trigger shared schemas and cultural knowledge, reducing inferential load and enhancing interpersonal rapport. In political discourse, media commentary, and social media, idioms are strategically deployed to encode ideology, emotion, and humor—often through recontextualization or punning.

For example, the idiom *faire le buzz* (“to go viral”) has entered the French digital communicative space, showing how neological PUs emerge via metaphorization and metonymization from English borrowings (*buzz*) and adapt to local usage.

**Cognitive Mechanisms of Phraseological Change and Innovation.** Phraseological creativity in French relies on cognitive flexibility. Speakers frequently manipulate idioms through ellipsis (*c'est la goutte...* for *la goutte d'eau qui fait déborder le vase*), contamination (merging two idioms), or paraphrase. These processes involve mental space compression and conceptual projection, often for humorous or ironic effect.

Additionally, new PUs are generated through analogical reasoning, such as *être sur le radar* (from English “on the radar”), and metaphorical extensions like *blacklister quelqu'un* (from English “blacklist”). This shows how cognitive linguistic processes are central to phraseological neologization.

**Phraseology and Intercultural Cognitive Differences.** Given that phraseological meaning is culturally encoded, cross-cultural communication involving French idioms often leads to cognitive mismatches. Idioms that are transparent to native speakers may appear opaque to second-language learners. The idiom *appeler un chat un chat* (“to call a spade a spade”) seems transparent, but understanding its pragmatics requires knowledge of French communicative norms—such as valuing frankness over euphemism in certain contexts.

Moreover, idioms are vehicles for national and cultural identity. The French preference for irony, understatement, and playful expression is mirrored in its phraseology. This highlights the need for intercultural competence in interpreting phraseological meaning.

**Conclusion.** The functioning of French phraseological units in the communicative space is deeply intertwined with cognitive mechanisms. Idioms serve as crystallizations of metaphorical and metonymic reasoning, embody image schemas, and facilitate pragmatic interaction. From a cognitive perspective, they are not simply linguistic relics but dynamic tools for conceptualization, discourse construction, and social interaction. Their analysis reveals how language reflects and shapes thought, emotion, and culture. In a multilingual and globalized world, understanding the cognitive aspects of phraseology is vital for linguists, translators, and language learners seeking to grasp the subtle interplay between language, mind, and meaning.

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