

Syntactic Phraseology in the Modern Russian Language (Exemplified by Constructions with the Element to the Point)

Karpova Ye.V.

Department of Philology
Novosibirsk State Technical University
Novosibirsk, Russia
ev_karpova@mail.ru

Permiakova T.N.

Department of Philology
Novosibirsk State Technical University
Novosibirsk, Russia
uchi70@mail.ru

Abstract – The article is devoted to the controversial phenomenon of *syntactic idiom*. The peculiarity of these units is that, on the one hand, they have the main features of the sentence; on the other hand, they are characterized by phraseological nature. In their composition there are components of two types: constant, defining the construction itself and being the exponents of meaning and variable, the words of the categorematic parts of speech which are lexically free. Such a composition of syntactic idioms suggests that phraseological sentences are partially reproduced. The analysis of existing approaches to its understanding allows specifying a number of differential features as well as proposing a working definition of syntactic phraseology. The conducted analysis of lexicographical description and semantics interpretation of the construction with the element “*to the point*” confirmed the complex nature of the studied linguistic phenomenon and revealed the factors determining its interpretative potential.

Keywords – *syntactic idiom, syntaxeme, communicative grammar, subjective modality, interpretative potential of language units*

I. INTRODUCTION

Being an important direction in modern linguistics, the phenomenon of syntactic phraseological units has received numerous terminological variants from different scientists: phraseologized constructions, communicemes, relatives, stationary sentences, ungrammatical statements, communicatives, syntactically related structures, syntactic idioms, etc.

Until now, there is no single definition of syntactic idiom and the boundaries of this phenomenon are vague. Consequently, the variety of existing terminology does not allow asserting that the issues of classification and functioning of these syntactic units have been completely studied by researchers.

However, as a phenomenon of language, syntactic idiom has certain distinctive features, which are identified on the basis of numerous studies analysis and the empiric material analysis: the reproducibility of the construction, the cohesion of grammatical relations, for example: the city as a city, friend is a real friend, our University is much better)

N.Yu. Shvedova specifies the following phenomena as syntactic idioms: “sentences with the individual components relationship and individual semantics. Word forms are associated with each other idiomatically in these sentences; function and pronominal words, particles and interjections do not operate according to the current syntactic rules”. N.Yu. Shvedova indicates non-single-component character as the peculiar feature of these sentences; however, a part of a sentence that coincides in form and meaning with the subject of the sentence can be distinguished in some types (these are divisible phraseological sentences), the other types do not possess such part of a sentence and can be named indivisible [1].

G.A. Zolotova also argues about the phenomenon which can be attributed to the syntactic phraseology. She divides the minimal units of syntax – syntaxemes – into free, conditioned and related [2]. “Communicative grammar considers this triad as a functional-semantic principle of significant language unit classification at all levels of the language system” [3]. Conditional and related syntactic structures are of special interest from the point of view of syntactic phraseology. “Syntactic conditionality is expressed in belonging to a certain communicative register”, and related syntactic structures are characterized by “not only external (textual) conditionality, but also internal connectivity of components”. Communicative grammar places conditioned structures to the “periphery of the basic models fields”, and related ones are placed to the “periphery of the entire syntactic system” [3].

In this article the authors dwell on syntactic phraseological units (idioms), which are phraseological constructions with a certain modal-evaluative meaning and a peculiar structure.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The materials of the Russian National Corpus were used during the preparation of this article.

III. PROBLEM OF SYNTACTIC IDIOMS

Syntactic idioms express the attitude of the speaker to the statement, one's reaction to the events and facts described in the communication act. This refers to sentences of the following type: *To tell (not) to the point*;

The theory and practice were to the point; there was no special preparation observed for the head of state visit even on Friday morning in "Seliger-2013" camp. Unless, of course, one mentions banners hanging on the pine-trees with sayings of three types: thoughts of great people ("Only a man can understand that he is a man. Spinoza"), Putin's quotes on the inexplicably communal theme ("We need to repair roofs, taps and pipes") and for an unknown reason statements about the Cossacks ("Cossacks' courage will demolish any fortress"). Here, quite to the point could be the graffiti seen on the way to Seliger on one of the walls of Rzhev: "The worst thing is that everything is in our hands" [Dmitry SMIRNOV. Vladimir Putin: "It is necessary not just to make noise and shout, and to offer some action plan" // Komsomolskaya Pravda. 2013.08.02).

Their essence is that they have the main features of the sentence and at the same time are characterized by phraseological character. They are formed by two types of components: constant and variable, or free. Permanent components define the configuration or construction model and express their meanings. Variable components are lexically free words of categoric parts of speech combined with them. Therefore, phraseologized sentences are partially reproduced. The semantics of such sentences is the expression of subjective modality; in modern linguistics it is understood as reflecting the complex interaction between the speaker, the addressee, the content of the message and reality.

In other words, subjective modality characterizes phraseologized structures as communicative units. They express the attitude of a speaker to the content of a statement and are associated with the participants and components of communication situation. Syntactic phraseological units by virtue of their semantics are closely connected with the content of the communicative text and take a certain position in it. Usually they do not start the speech, the text, and are used, as was already mentioned, "in connection with something", "about something". In this position, these constructions allow the speaker as the main participant and initiator of communication expressing his or her attitude to the message or interpretation of what is happening.

Syntactic constructions began to be referred to as **idiom (phraseologism)** approximately in the 60s of the last century in the scientific works of N. Yu. Shvedova, G. Y. Solganik etc. They considered these linguistic units to be the constructions consisting of idiomatic components and representing the reaction of a speaker to a statement or an extra-linguistic situation, as well as having emotional and expressive connotations.

Other researchers pay greater attention to the functioning of such sentences instead of their phraseologized nature emphasizing that those constructions mostly belong to a spoken text which is characterized by ellipticity. For example, O.B. Sirotinina suggests that in case of such sentences, "one omits everything that can be omitted. Such principle of economy applies to colloquial speech at all levels of the language system, being particularly evident in the syntax. In fact, neither complete sentences nor the full-fledged representation of the word valences are present in the colloquial

speech. And that is one of the most striking differences of colloquial speech from all other realizations of language" [4].

Thus, the linguistic units in question seen as syntactic idioms were the object of linguistic research to some extent. The variety of approaches to the description of syntactic idioms reflected the intention of researchers to find optimal methods for their linguistic description. However, syntactic idioms did not receive a complete and systematic description in the linguistic literature and dictionaries, and there were a number of underdeveloped issues as well. These included:

- 1) insufficient accuracy of the concept of **syntactic idiom** and the boundaries of this phenomenon;
- 2) the lack of a complete and systematic description of the structural and semantic organization of syntactic idioms;
- 3) the status of phraseologized syntactic constructions in the language system is not yet defined;
- 4) insufficient description of syntactic idioms in various sections of the syntax, including simple and complex sentences;
- 5) syntactic idioms were not yet described from the point of view of intonation.

IV. DIFFERENTIATING PROPERTIES OF SYNTACTIC IDIOMS

Leaving aside the issue of phraseologization of such type of sentence, researchers approached syntactic idioms differently and studied them from the point of view of functioning: syntactic idioms were defined as units belonging to a special functional class which represented one of the specific features of the Russian colloquial speech and functions as a response to the interlocutor statements or to the actual extralinguistic situation.

The fact that the structure of a syntactic idiom is reproducible can be proved by referring to the presence of phraseological schemes identified during the analysis of syntactic idioms. Thus, there is a prearranged grammatical scheme for each syntactic idiom. This scheme is realized in speech, being filled with various lexical material which is conditioned by the phraseological scheme of a syntactic idiom.

S.G. Smirnov discusses syntactic idioms in detail as phraseologized models which allow filling the structure with the known lexical material. Some of the structural components are constant, with the others being variable [5].

G.Y. Solganik describes a phraseological model, which, in his opinion, manifests itself usually in the form of a generalized, abstracted idiom and thus turned into a kind of modern language model. It is made up of constant and variable elements and has an independent meaning that does not coincide either with the syntactic meaning of the construction, or with the individual meaning of an idiom which the model originates from. Constant elements (content or functional words) retain their lexical-morphological form in all expressions created according to the phraseological model; variable elements regularly fill in certain syntactic positions (certain word forms or words) in these phrases [6].

Thus, it is possible to identify a number of distinctive features inherent in the studied units based on the existing research on syntactic idioms:

1. a construction can be reproduced;
2. it has multiple components;
3. some of the construction components are constant, while some of them are variable;
4. one can observe grammatical cohesion in the construction;
5. the construction semantics is formed by the totality of all its members.

However, analyzing constant and variable components of syntactic idioms there are certain issues to consider: though a syntactic idiom may have constant and variable components, in some cases it consists only of the variable ones. Yet, syntactic idioms demonstrate constant grammatical forms even consisting only of variable components.

In addition, certain variability of grammatical forms is allowed in some syntactic idioms, though a certain part of grammatical forms should remain unaltered.

For example, the construction “noun + *to the point*”, allows changing its first component, a noun, which is a variable not only lexically but also grammatically, while at the same time the “*to the point*” is unaltered, example: *By the way, you shouldn't say that the stripes are not to the point...* The element “*to the point*” demonstrates some features of the units described as word equivalents in the corresponding dictionary (while not represented in it) [Rogozhnikova 2003], namely the simultaneously observed similarity with the word and phraseological combination.

The remarks about the potential of some, primarily, unchangeable words in expressing various evocative or emotional shades of meaning are further supported by promising observations on the formal realization of this semantics: “The development of language makes it necessary to express subtler shades and relationships, the functions of the invariant parts of speech are taken by prepositional case forms of content words, which are in fact combinations of words (function and content words or only function ones) becoming somewhat a single word and resembling it not only in semantic terms, but also in speech functioning” [7]. While not using the term *syntactic idiom*, the author of the dictionary formulates significant trends in the language system. At the same time, ambiguous characteristics of the phenomena in question, similar to the “*to the point*” element, their grammatical cohesion as well as consistent patterns of the closest contextual environment organization justify the need to study such linguistic phenomena as syntactic idioms.

On the basis of the above mentioned theories and analyzed material it is possible to suggest the following definition of syntactic idioms: syntactic idiom is a syntactic construction of a reproducible structure, with a part of its grammatical relations united and in some cases inexplicable from the point of view of syntax; it possesses consistent grammatical forms which combine into the basis of a syntactic idiom as well as modal and

general meanings; it possesses the variable component which has an effect on semantics of the syntactic idiom with the latter additionally being based on the totality of the structure's components.

V. INTERPRETATIVE POTENTIAL OF SYNTACTIC IDIOMS

The construction with the element “*to the point*” was purposefully chosen to be the unit of analysis. Currently, expansion of this word in Russian (lit. topic, theme, point, point, idea) potential along with the constructions including it seems to be an obvious direction. The lexicographical description of this word varies in the definitions of the literary language dictionaries and has two to four meanings. The development of the existing meanings and the emergence of new ones takes place due to modern technologies and peculiarities of Internet communication, where this word is understood as “the forum section devoted to the discussion of a single problem” or “a set of ready-made settings and add-ons that determine how the interface of the program or web page will look like” [8].

In the first case, the unit is attached to a certain genre of Internet communication, while the number and naming of these genres is growing and changing, which in general does not seem to affect the reflection of expressive semantics: with all the variety of Internet communication forms and their naming, some genres turn out to be a written polylogue on a certain topic. At the same time, “Internet Language Dictionary.ru” [9] does not have the definition for the unit. The list of word forms and constructions containing the unit is expanding: to the point, to be in the subject, that's it etc., for example: Despite the shortness of the slogan, it was absolutely to the point of what was happening (Yulia Khozhateleva, Yelena Lapteva. Guests of the “Nashestvie” festival were looking for future wives, shocking the crowd with Stas Mikhailov T-shirts and organizing speed marches // Komsomol'skaya pravda. 2013. 07.07).

Obviously, the stylistic markedness of linguistic facts is in question. The distributive characteristics of the studied unit are to some extent connected with youth jargon: the environment which is thought to be relevant for the analysis in modern sociolinguistic studies: “Owing to the fact that the users of youth jargon are numerous and represent the socially active layer in the structure of modern society, lexical and phraseological jargon invade other subsystems of the language, in particular the vernacular language and the colloquial speech of the literary language and even the journalistic style, which is a relatively standardized style of the literary language” [10].

In journalism, there are cases that allow the discussion on the development of special functions of structures with the element “*to the point*”: the unit under study which, to a certain extent, preserves its immanent evaluation in the youth speech acts as a marker of the journalistic text compositional division often emphasized by graphic means. As a rule, these are commenting and additional information, for instance: *On September 10, 2009 Russia hosted Wales in Moscow as a part of the 2010 World Cup qualifiers with the score 2:1). Slovenian referee awarded one penalty to each team. On August 25, 2010 “Zenit” lost to “Auxerre” in the rematch during the 4th qualifying round of the Champions League (0:2), and Skomina removed from the field two players of the St. Petersburg team:*

Malafeev and Gubochan. FACTS TO THE POINT The last name Skomina comes from the word skomin, which translates from Slovenian as inching or scabies... (Sergei Kuzovenko. Slovenian “scabies”. Referee Skomina is going to umpire the match between Portugal and Russia // Soviet sport. 2013.06.03);

In case officials waive her aside with no support in adapting to new rules, there will be a tragedy, because hundreds of children will become unsettled, marginalised. We have already gone through all of this in the nineties. We are still eating up the consequences in the form of illiterate youth! REMARK TO THE POINT Yulia Belotserkovskaya, representative of the child centers managerial initiative group: – Right now we, the managers of child clubs, are facing difficulties. There are no official explanations and it is still unclear as to what kind of standards we have to comply with after the adoption of the new law on education. We went to the district department of education and were sent away with the answer that they “don’t know what the child clubs are”. We called a fireman, but he scoffed, checked the fire extinguishers and said that we needed a second fire exit, though he had no idea what class of facility to designate us to (Yaroslava TANKOVA. Does successful upbringing depend on the number of toilets? // Komsomol’skaya pravda. 2013.06.09).

Grammatically put in a special way, the unit “to the point” is found in several dictionaries of youth slang. Thus, the dictionary of T.G. Nikitina describes it as the unit representing a phraseological modification of the corresponding lexeme with the meaning “by the way, to the point”, followed by the remark “approbative” and having a negative equivalent “not to the point” with the corresponding characteristics, which are negative evaluation and the meaning “off the mark, ill-timed” [11].

Illustrative material presented in the dictionary entry demonstrates ambiguous linguistic nature of the units under study, example: *These nuts/ are on fleek with the beer; Boots for adults are out of place on the child not to the point and It’s no good you came, I’m sleeping.* The variability of the part of the sentence (the so-called variable part of the construction) in the morphological aspect is obvious: the element “to the point” mixes well with nouns and verbs alike, which in turn has certain implications for the interpretation of its part-of-speech status.

The semantic category of quality is realized in both cases and the attributes of both objects and actions are expressed, cf. for example: *Small flags with the words “survive against all odds” (which is the name of the artist’s new set) have appeared in people’s hands during her speech. Despite the slogan being so short, it was quite to the point of what was happening. Against all odds, people survive dressing up as Simpsons and wearing silly t-shirts. As Chizh said in his lyrics, having performed on the second day of the set, that is a bloody eternal youth (Yulia KHOZHALETEVA, Elena LAPTEVA. Guests of the “Nashestvie” festival were looking for future wives, shocking the crowd with Stas Mikhailov T-shirts and attending speed marches // Komsomol’skaya pravda. 2013. 07.07).*

-Forward, march! - quite “not to the point” commanded the man with a megaphone. For a second there was a silence of surprise over the “liberal” column (Pyotr Kozlov, Elena

Teslova, Paul Stoker. Urlashov and Arctic Sunrise made their debut on the opposition demonstration // Izvestiya. 2013.10.27).

On the one hand, in this case we see an explicit manifestation of at least one of the distinctive features of syntactic idiom, namely the construction semantics being formed by the totality of all its constituents. On the other hand, this feature of the construction, namely its so-called variable part, seems to actualize the question of the separability of syntactic idiom and interpretation of its meaning in the context. The relevance of this issue was proved during the short pilot testing.

University students of Humanities interpreted the meaning of the unit under study in proposed contexts, some of which included constructions with the element “to the point”, being able to look up the definition in the dictionary or formulate it themselves in case the definition is not present in the dictionary. The material of the analysis included three statements with the studied prepositional-case form, which has corresponding meanings: the first meaning is fixed in the dictionary of the literary language, the other – in the dictionary of the Internet language, and the third meaning, immanent to youth jargon – within the appropriate means of codification, for instance:

(1) *The performance is based on six monologues that have turned it into a play about addiction which not everyone can overcome. “I will miss you so much. I will always remember you...”. Letters to someone you want to break up with are part of the rehabilitation course: this is one of the psychological practices that allows people to unburden their inner space. Letters come one after another as a kind of prologue to the play, an introduction to the theme, a hint for the viewer who may not have yet read the program and does not know what will unfold before them (Tatyana Filippova. On the needle: the Theatre of Nations has staged the drama about drugs titled “It’s easy to quit” // RBK Daily. 2014.02.20).*

This context obviously appeals to the common-literary meaning. The subject of the narrative and the image is actualized by the total content of the fragment and the naming of the elements of theatrical discourse, which was reflected in what respondents said: prepositional-case combination “to the point” was interpreted as a free syntaxeme and some characteristics, complementary (sometimes redundant) to the answer are supposedly connected with the influence of context: specifically, among other things indications of the introductory function of letters in the play are described as an independent lexical entry, for example: *subject of the narrative; plot, root motive of the play; plot introduction.* The studied element “to the point” was characterized as a free syntaxeme by the respondents.

(2). *Before I opened my mouth, my ex-husband (native resident of the Stalin-era building on Leningrad Avenue) ironically objected to the reader: “Yeah, right, all the Moscow dwellers sure make no less than 150 – 200 thousand a month. Like hell they do”. Next, we formed a council of sorts. My colleagues — the locals — came running into the thread. Together we managed to convince the opponent that the salary of 5 thousand euros is very big in Moscow (Dariya Zavgorodnyaya. How Moscow devours people // Komsomol’skaya pravda, 2014.06.26.).*

The meaning “forum section dedicated to the discussion of a single problem” was formulated by only four of the sixty-seven respondents: *a forum, a discussion in the group, a forum section*. A significant number of answers were connected with the common literary meaning. The combination with the verb *came running*, which was used metaphorically and expressively colored, did not affect the interpretation in this case. The features of the Internet communication, inherent to this fragment and significant for the discursively conditioned meaning of the lexeme *point* as a part of the free syntaxeme turned out to be uncompetitive in relation to other contextual means. The description of the communicative situation actualized the well-known literary meaning.

Another part of the answers (ten) was related to the meaning of the element “*to the point*” as a syntactic idiom: *thereto, on cue, to the point, conveniently*. It seems that in this case the main factor turns out to be the content of the fragment: the relevance of support towards one party during the discussion allows for such an interpretation, as well as a kind of eclecticism in the choice of language means of different styles, inherent to the Internet communication, which in this case represents both the form and the content of the message.

(3). *He shouts, attacks and gives static out of sympathy towards her — not a wise move, but a human one. If you remember that, there will be no evil in return and no anger deep inside. As one philosopher said, “if you knew the troubles of your enemies, it would be enough to understand and forgive them”. Here are some more examples to the point: “Let a hundred flowers bloom”, “Either everyone is right or no one is” and the famous saying of Voltaire “I don’t agree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it”... Wise people seem to have often tried reconciling enemies. But for some reason the idea of “herbivory” is not the most respected concept in the world. It is obvious that you can’t solve a problem by starting a conflict (Yaroslava Tankova. I am “herbivore” and I thank God for that! // Komsomol'skaya pravda, 2013.06.14).* The positive meaning “by the way, to the point” of the word-group “*to the point*” in the given fragment was noted by 28 respondents out of 67, that is, about 19 percent of young people, for instance: *by the way, to say to the point, meaning of appropriateness, synonym “furthermore”, for that matter, spot on, conveniently, precisely*.

In other cases, the unit corresponded to the meanings fixed in the definitions of the literary language, primarily, to the meaning 'narrative subject, image, research'. Answers of those respondents who could not distinguish between a free phrase and a set expression seem to have been influenced by several factors. Among them are stylistically limited use of semantically redefined word forms; the fact that the fragment originated in the media; profound changes in the syntax of the Russian language which researchers call the expansion of the prepositional structures, that is, the displacement of some non-complex combinations of prepositions.

At the same time, the very combination of the characteristics of the word and phraseology in the studied unit (the unit does not lose its lexical meaning completely and is reproduced in speech in a certain meaning, etc.) seems important, because it influences its interpretation by native speakers who have some knowledge of the features of the stratum, with reference to which the unit acts as its element.

VI. CONCLUSION

The results of the experiment confirmed the need for further study of the syntactic idiom detachability and interpretation of its meaning in context.

They are the actual object of study together with the observed stylistic markedness of the construction with the word *point*, in particular, with the form of the accusative case with the preposition *to*. The peculiarity of the relatively new combination of a name with a preposition allows qualifying it as a syntactic idiom which has the features of reproducibility and multicomponent construction, constancy and variability of certain components, grammatical cohesion and formation of semantics for the totality of all structural members. The perspectives for the syntactic idiom phenomenon study are associated with the description of its transformational possibilities, the distributive characteristics and interpretive potential.

References

- [1] N.Y. Shvedova, Special syntactic constructions. Russian grammar, vol. 1. Moscow, 1980, pp. 217–221.
- [2] G.A. Zolotova, Communicative aspects of the Russian syntax, Moscow, 2001.
- [3] N.K. Onipenko, “Theory of communicative grammar and the problem of systemic description of Russian syntax”, Russian language in a scientific light, no. 2, pp. 107–121, 2001.
- [4] O.B. Sirotnina, Modern colloquial speech and its features. Moscow, 1974.
- [5] N.G. Smirnov, Syntactic phraseology of simple and compound sentences. Phraseology of simple and compound sentences. Kazan: Kazan University, 1982, pp. 90–103.
- [6] G.Y. Solganik, “Phraseological models in the modern Russian language”, Russian language in school, no. 5, pp. 73–78, 1976.
- [7] R.P. Rogozhnikova, Definition dictionary of set phrases equivalents to words About 1500 set phrases of the Russian language. Moscow: Astrel; AST, 2003.
- [8] V. F. Khaidarova, Short dictionary of Internet language: about 350 words. Moscow: Flinta; Nauka, 2012.
- [9] Dictionary of Internet Language.ru. Moscow: AST-PRESS KNIGA, 2016.
- [10] L.P. Krysin, Russian word, native and borrowed: Studies on modern Russian language and sociolinguistic. Moscow: Languages of Slavic culture, 2004.
- [11] T.G. Nikitina, Youth slang: definition dictionary: about 20 000 words and idioms, 2nd ed., Moscow: AST; Astrel, 2009.