



## Section 6. Linguistics

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### ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS RELATED TO TIME AND ITS MEASUREMENT (SEMANTIC–COGNITIVE ASPECT)

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#### Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of English phraseological units containing lexemes that denote discrete time intervals, such as *second*, *minute*, *hour*, *day*, *week*, *month*, and *year*. The relevance of the research lies in the need to reconsider the mechanisms of temporal conceptualization in modern English within an anthropocentric framework, as well as to distinguish between general temporal notions and specific metrological units that acquire secondary meanings in phraseology. The aim of the study is to identify and systematize the structural and semantic characteristics of such units and to reconstruct the cognitive models underlying them.

The study also examines the degree of semantic transparency of idioms, showing that it ranges from motivated expressions to fully idiomatic forms, which supports the idea of a continuum in phraseological meaning. The results have practical implications for linguistic disciplines such as theoretical grammar, lexicology, stylistics, and translation studies, contributing to a more integrated understanding of language and its conceptual foundations.

**Keywords:** *cognitive linguistics, phraseology, temporality, conceptual metaphor, linguistic worldview, English language, semantic opacity, chrononym, discourse, idiomaticity*

#### Introduction

The category of time, being one of the fundamental ontological constants of existence, is invariably the focus of attention for philosophers, physicists, and linguists, since it is time that structures human experience, giving it the forms of sequence, duration, and rhythm. In the linguistic science of recent decades, there has been a steady interest in

the problems of time verbalization, which is caused by the turn towards anthropocentrism and cognitivism, where language is viewed as a key to understanding mental processes. However, despite the significant body of research dedicated to the general concept of TIME and its grammatical expressions, the sphere of phraseological representation of specific units of time measurement – the

so-called chrononyms (*second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year*) – remains insufficiently illuminated. Most scientific inquiries focus on the abstract lexeme *time*, ignoring the fact that human consciousness attempts to “tame” the flow of time precisely through its discretization, i.e., division into understandable, measurable segments. Consequently, researching how these “time quanta” behave within idioms acquires special significance for reconstructing the worldview of English speakers.

The importance of studying measurement units specifically, rather than just abstract time, lies in the fact that these lexemes are intersection points between objective physical reality (astronomical cycles) and subjective human perception. When a speaker uses the expression *in a New York minute* or *donkey’s years*, he appeals not to a chronometer, but to culturally marked codes where a minute can equal an instant, and years – eternity. This phenomenon of semantic transformation of metrological terms into expressive means requires detailed cognitive analysis. It is necessary to clarify why some units (e.g., *hour*) become symbols of critical moments, while others (*month*) – symbols of boredom or rarity. Such selectivity is not accidental; it reflects deep cognitive strategies of mastering reality, which are the subject of our analysis.

The scientific novelty of the proposed research lies in the attempt at a systemic description of the phraseological field of temporal measurement units through the prism of theories of semantic transparency and conceptual metaphorization. We move away from the traditional descriptive approach, proposing instead an explanatory model that integrates psycholinguistic data on idiom processing and cultural information regarding the origin of set expressions. The paper consistently differentiates the cognitive profiles of micro-, meso-, and macro-time intervals in phraseology, which allows identifying specific metaphorization patterns for each level of the temporal hierarchy.

### Literature Review

The theoretical and methodological basis comprises works examining idiomaticity from various perspectives, creating a holistic picture. In the context of definition, the

approaches of G. Pastor and J. Colson (Pastor G., & Colson J. P. (Eds.), 2020), as well as F. Boers and S. Webb (Boers Frank, & Webb Stuart), are determining; they emphasize *semantic opacity*, where the expression’s meaning is not derived from the sum of components (for example, *through thick and thin* or *donkey’s years*). P. Kallens and M. Christiansen complement this with the concept of lexical integrity, viewing idioms as indivisible gestalts (Kallens P., & Morten H., Christiansen. 2022). The cognitive direction is represented by the works of Z. Zeng and S. Bhat (Zeng Z., & Bhat S., 2021), who interpret idioms as expressions based on conceptual metaphors: time is money, time is a moving object, and time is space. Researchers argue that expressions like *waste time* or *time flies* reflect a deep mode of thinking; however, their works largely overlook the specificity of concrete time measurement units.

The psycholinguistic aspect is highlighted in the works of S. Yermolenko (Yermolenko Svitlana, 2024) and T. Kuptsova (Kuptsova T., & Koliieva I., 2023), who assert that idioms are stored in the mental lexicon as holistic patterns, which accelerates communication. This is also pointed out by B. Short (Short Brian. 2014), who notes that when using the phrase *beat the clock*, the brain does not construct meaning from individual words but activates the ready-made scenario “to make it before the deadline”. Pragmatic dimensions are explored by W. Hsu (Hsu W., 2020), noting the correlation between idiom type and genre: *idioms of urgency* are characteristic of news, while *idioms of temporality* are typical of formal registers. It is also emphasized that transparent metaphors are acquired more easily than culturally specific ones like *once in a blue moon*. The cultural code is analyzed by R. Gläser (Gläser Rosemarie. 2023), emphasizing that abstract time is anchored to concrete domains of experience, transforming phraseology into a repository of cultural memory where specific associations of a certain linguoculture are fixed.

Summarizing the review, it is worth noting that although individual aspects of temporal phraseology have been subjects of interest (Hsu, Gläser, Yermolenko), a comprehensive analysis of the group of idioms containing names of calendar and clock periods (*year*,

*week, month, minute*) as a separate subsystem has not yet been conducted. Most existing studies view these units within the general mass, without differentiating specific cognitive mechanisms activated when using micro-intervals as opposed to macro-intervals. This defines the scientific niche of the work: to investigate exactly how time measurement units become instruments of cognitive modeling of reality in phraseology.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The primary aim of this study is the identification and systematization of structural-semantic features, as well as the reconstruction of cognitive mechanisms forming the meanings of English phraseological units containing time interval components. Achieving this aim involves the sequential solution of a number of interrelated tasks:

- to carry out an inventory and classification of phraseological units by the key temporal component, identifying the productivity of each;
- to conduct componential and etymological analysis of the selected units to establish the degree of their semantic transparency and motivation;
- to reconstruct basic conceptual metaphors and cognitive scenarios underlying the reinterpretation of time interval names;
- to determine the pragmatic functions of the studied idioms in various types of discourse.

### **Materials and Methods**

The material basis of the study consists of a sample numbering over 150 phraseological units of modern English, obtained through continuous sampling from authoritative lexicographical sources (Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary, Collins Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Dictionary) and analysis of corpus data (British National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English). The selection criterion was the presence within the phraseological unit of a lexeme denoting a time measurement unit: *second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year*. The sample included classic idioms as well as phraseological combinations, proverbs, and sayings demonstrating stability of form and semantic integrity.

The research methodology is comprehensive in nature, combining traditional linguistic methods with the latest tools of cognitive science. The primary method is the method of conceptual analysis, which allows penetrating the internal structure of the concept objectified in the phraseological unit and revealing the connection between linguistic form and mental representations. To determine the type of metaphorical transfer, the method of cognitive modeling was applied, which involves the reconstruction of mapping schemes from the source domain to the target domain. This method allowed us to reveal how physical properties of space or substance are transferred onto abstract time. The analysis of the internal form of idioms was carried out taking into account etymological data, which allowed verifying hypotheses regarding the cultural conditioning of certain images (for example, the origin of expressions *donkey's years* or *blue moon*). Furthermore, the method of contextual-interpretative analysis was used to establish the pragmatic features of idiom functioning in real discourse, particularly for analyzing connotations and emotive coloring. The application of psycholinguistics principles allowed interpreting the peculiarities of perception and storage of the studied units in the memory of native speakers.

### **Main Part**

The conducted analysis of the factual material allowed for the identification of a clear hierarchical structure of the phraseological field of temporality, where each time measurement unit plays a specific role in the cognitive modeling of reality. We propose a classification into three levels: micro-time (seconds, minutes, hours), meso-time (days, weeks), and macro-time (months, years, eras).

Micro-time units: Second, Minute, Hour. Lexemes denoting the shortest time intervals become carriers of maximal intensity, speed, suddenness, and criticality values within the English phraseological system. They mark moments of transition, crisis, or instantaneous change of states. The component Minute demonstrates high productivity in creating idioms describing time compression. A vivid example of a culturally specific metaphor is the expression in a New York minute,

which means “very quickly”, “instantly”. This idiom, originating from the southern US, is based on the stereotypical perception of New York as a space of frantic speed, where time flows differently than in the rest of the world. Here we observe a complex interaction of the TIME IS SPACE metaphor (localization in New York) and the concept of social rhythm. Another interesting example is five-minute wonder (a flash in the pan, someone or something enjoying short-lived success). In this case, the numeral “five” does not indicate actual duration but serves as a symbol of an insignificantly short term of existence in the public space, echoing Andy Warhol’s famous expression about 15 minutes of fame. For cognitive linguistics, it is important here that the minute becomes a unit of measurement of social attention, not astronomical time.

The component Hour often acquires a dramatic, even fatal coloring. A classic example is the idiom at the eleventh hour, meaning “at the last moment”, “just in time before the inevitable end”. Its origin, as noted by researchers, goes back to the biblical parable about the workers in the vineyard, but in the modern consciousness, it is firmly associated with the clock face, where the hand approaches the number 12 – the symbol of the cycle’s end. Here, the metaphor TIME IS A CONTAINER WITH A BOUNDARY is realized, where the 11th hour is the last opportunity to act before the “container” closes. Similar weight is carried by the expression zero hour, borrowed from military lexicon, which denotes the beginning of a decisive operation. In the idiom darkest hour, the hour is metaphorically colored with the hue of an emotional state (darkness = despair, trouble), which is an example of synesthesia in language. A separate group consists of idioms with the word Clock, which metonymically replaces time. The expressions beat the clock (to meet a deadline), race against the clock, and against the clock (short of time) vividly illustrate the metaphor TIME IS AN OPPONENT. In this model, time is personified as an enemy to be defeated or outrun. This is a typical example of “idioms of urgency” according to W. Hsu’s classification, which dominate in sports and business discourses. Around the clock visualizes time as a circle, emphasizing the continuity of the process through the spatial preposition around.

Meso-time units: Day, Week. Units of medium duration, such as day and week, are closely related in phraseology to social rhythms, work and rest cycles, routine, and domestic planning. The component Day is one of the most polysemantic. The idiom call it a day (to stop working) demonstrates the conceptualization of the day as a completed cycle of activity. The act of “naming” (call it) is performative here: the speaker establishes the boundary of the time segment by their will. The expression save for a rainy day exploits the metaphor of future time as a potentially dangerous space (rain = trouble) for which one must prepare. Here, the day acts not as a unit of measurement but as a conditional point in the future. The idiom make someone’s day metonymically extends the positive emotion of a single event to the entire time segment of the day, emphasizing the significance of the emotional experience – “filling” the day with joy.

The component Week often marks monotony or, conversely, the relativity of time perception. The expression week in, week out (constantly) uses reduplication and spatial prepositions in/out to create an image of cyclical entry and exit from the time container. This creates an effect of endless, monotonous repetition of events. In political discourse, Harold Wilson’s phrase a week is a long time in politics has gained wide currency. This aphorism, which has turned into an idiom, emphasizes the relativistic nature of social time: an objectively short astronomical interval (a week) subjectively stretches due to high event density and the speed of change. This is a vivid example of how event density influences the categorization of a time segment. Mention should also be made of idioms related to specific days of the week, such as Blue Monday, Black Monday, and Man Friday, which demonstrate how days of the week become “containers” for specific cultural and emotional contents.

Macro-time units: Month, Year. Names of long time intervals are used to denote stability, duration, historical distance, or, conversely, the rarity and exceptionality of events. The component Month appears in such idioms as a month of Sundays, where the meaning of “a very long time” is based on cultural perception. Another expression, flavor of the

month, denotes temporary popularity. The component Year is often used to denote an indefinitely long time or the deep past, as in donkey's years or since the year dot. The idiom once in a blue moon denotes an extremely rare event, where "moon" functions as an astronomical time marker.

### Results

The analysis of the factual material makes it possible to identify a clear hierarchical organization within the phraseological field of temporality, where different time units correspond to distinct patterns of semantic and cognitive representation. Micro-time units (minute, hour, second) are primarily associated with meanings of urgency, intensity, speed, and critical moments. They frequently occur in discourse types that emphasize competition, deadlines, and rapid change, such as news and sports communication. In contrast, meso-time units (day, week) tend to reflect routine, cyclicity, and everyday experience, often carrying evaluative or emotional connotations related to social life and habitual activities. Macro-time units (month, year) are typically used to express duration, historical distance, rarity, or stability, and they are more characteristic of narrative and descriptive contexts.

The study also reveals that phraseological units are structured around several dominant cognitive models that shape the conceptualization of time. Among these, the most prominent are the metaphors TIME IS A CONTAINER, TIME IS A RESOURCE, TIME IS SPACE, and TIME IS AN OPPONENT. These models determine how temporal expressions are interpreted and used in different communicative contexts. For instance, time may be perceived as a bounded entity that can be filled or divided, as a valuable resource that can be spent or saved, as a spatial dimension through which one moves, or as an adversary that must be overcome.

Another important result concerns the degree of semantic transparency of phraseological units. The findings confirm that many expressions have undergone a process of semantic shift, where their original literal meanings become less accessible, and the units function as holistic lexical signs. This indicates a high level of cognitive automa-

tization in language processing, as speakers no longer rely on the original imagery but directly access the conventional meaning.

Finally, the analysis demonstrates that the distribution of phraseological units across different types of discourse is not random but functionally motivated. Different communicative domains favor specific temporal models and expressions, which reflects the interaction between linguistic structure, cognitive representation, and pragmatic needs. These results confirm the systematic nature of temporal phraseology and highlight the strong interdependence between linguistic form, conceptual structure, and discourse function.

### Conclusions

The semantic-cognitive research of phraseological units with time interval component names conducted in this article allows formulating the following generalizations.

1) Chrononyms (*second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year*) within phraseological units undergo substantial semantic transformation. They lose their primary function as tools of precise chronometric measurement, transforming into expressive quantifiers of subjective time. A minute becomes a symbol of instantaneity, and a year – a symbol of eternity. This process of desemantization is accompanied by the acquisition of new connotative meanings (evaluation, emotion), making these units indispensable for expressing the human experience of perceiving time.

2) At the basis of the meaning formation of the studied idioms lies a complex interaction of three basic conceptual metaphors: time is a container, time is a resource, and time is space. Precisely these cognitive mechanisms allow objectifying abstract time, endowing it with the properties of physical objects (it can be saved, killed, filled, stretched).

3) A clear dependence has been established between the "scale" of the time unit and the idiom semantics. Micro-time units (*minute, hour*) tend towards expressing meanings of urgency, dynamics, and critical states. Macro-time units (*year, month*), conversely, serve to conceptualize stability, long duration, boredom, or historical depth.

4) The degree of semantic transparency of temporal idioms is heterogeneous. Alongside transparent metaphors (*darkest hour*), there

exist deeply idiomatic, culturally marked units (*donkey's years, month of Sundays*), the understanding of which requires knowledge of the cultural code (religious traditions, folklore, history). This confirms the thesis that phraseology is not only a linguistic but also a cultural phenomenon, where time acts as one of the key categories of culture.

Thus, the phraseological subsystem of time interval names is a dynamic, cognitively motivated fragment of the linguistic worldview, which allows speakers not only to measure time but also to comprehend their place in it, manage it, and emotionally experience its flow.

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