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**MODERN LIFE OF BIBLICAL PHRASEOLOGY AND ITS  
VARIANTS IN ENGLISH**

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***Abstract***

The paper deals with the ways and means of employment of the phraseological units of biblical origin (BPUs) in modern English texts, in the different types of a discourse presented in the British National Corpus (BNC), namely: in media texts, in texts of historical, political and cultural fields and also in texts of fiction. The problem of identity and variability of biblical phraseology is paid prior attention to as well as the problem of co-relation of modern English phraseological units with their biblical prototypes. The object of the research comprises about 500 phraseological units of biblical origin that are actively employed in modern English. The theoretical background of the research is the phraseological conception of A.V. Kunin and his method of identifying phraseology and of phraseological analysis suggested by the linguist and successfully tested in a number of studies of not only English but also German, Swedish, Holland, Norwegian and Russian phraseology. Variability of biblical phraseological units (PUs) is studied through the process of the contextual analysis. As the result of the research different types of variants are found out: lexical variants and their subtypes (lexical-substantive, lexical-prepositive-substantive, lexical-adjectival, lexical-verbal ones), morphological, syntactical and complex variants. The research shows that variability and identity of biblical phraseology do not contradict one another as variability of biblical phraseological units is relevant within the frames of their own, keeping their structural and semantic identity.

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## 1. Introduction

It is hardly possible to imagine modern English without biblical expressions such as *the apple of one's eye*, *Balaam's ass*, *the prodigal son*, *one's guiding star*, *cast the first stone at somebody*, etc. They are worth studying, on the other hand, because “the cultural origin of such idioms becomes obscured, and indeed irrelevant”: “widespread idioms are all silver lining and no cloud” as MacKenzie puts it (2018, p. 71). Some of those expressions found their original form in the texts of the Holy Bible, others were formulated later, having been based on biblical plots. The most curious thing here turns out to be the fact that the majority of phraseological units of biblical origin do not remain frozen entities, but, over time, they acquire and acquire new variants, which is an evident means of language development (Fedulenkova, 2018, p. 55). In this respect, i.e. in the sense of language development, variability is to be considered a language universal (Mieder, 2018, p. 75). The important cause of lexical variability in phraseological units is discreteness of their structure. Nevertheless, PU variability depends on the character of their motivation, on the degree of semantic coherence of PU components (Zhukov, 2019, p. 104).

### 1.1. The problem of variability in language and in speech

The problem of variability in language and in speech is tackled in quite a number of works, the most considerable of them being the dissertation researches of G. I. Kramorenko on variability of the German phraseology and of E. I. Dibrova on variability of the Russian phraseology as well as Chapter II of Kunin's book (1972) on variability of the English phraseology and works of Jerome Baghana and his disciples (2016) on variability of the French and Spanish phraseology.

### 1.2. The variability of English phraseology of biblical origin

However, the variability of English phraseology of biblical origin was considered only sporadically, in a number of short articles (Leshcheva, 2019). The urgency of my paper is dictated by the need to study the modern state of biblical phraseology, in connection with which the work is aimed, first of all, at finding different variants of phraseological units of biblical origin functioning in modern English and, secondly at the qualification of the types of their variability.

## 2. Problem Statement

The research is carried out with the view of the problem of variability of the linguistic sign. The first scientific works dedicated to the questions of phraseological variants appeared about the middle of the previous century. Nevertheless, this problem is far from having being solved and still draws the attention of more and more language researchers every year. The complexity of studying the problem of variability is caused by complexity of the process of linguistic change, which represents not the uniform act, but cumulative result of a number of absolutely various processes proceeding more or less independently of each other.

## **2.1. Two trends of thought on the problem of variability**

Existing in modern linguistics numerous points of view on the problem of variability can be combined into two groups at least. Variability is often treated as a non-natural phenomenon, as a sign of lacuna in a natural language and as a superfluous notion at all. Opposite, variability is treated as an ultimate feature of language, which is categorical for every language unit and level, and variability is argued to be a most essential aspect in the function of the language that guides its evolution (Kunin, 1972). Many linguists of the new generation maintain that variability is a leading mechanism that causes the progress and updating of the language as far as that category is inherent to the units of every level of the language. Though the phenomenon of variability reveals a certain contradiction between the form and the meaning of the PU (Zhukov, 2019), the development of phraseology is impossible without variations and changes. And the key note is here the limit of the variability that ensures the identity of the linguistic sign.

## **2.2. The maintained point of view on the problem of variability**

The analysis of the dynamics of development of the variability category as a whole, revealed by comparison of individual language systems, does not testify to the unity of views. Some researchers conclude on the transient nature of the variant, arguing that the variant as a whole is gradually and definitively decreasing. Adherents of an opposite view tend to recognize the progressive nature of language variations, which plays a major role in the development of language. Fully sharing the views of linguists on the enduring nature of language variation, I emphasize that it is impossible to imagine the change and development of language without variation and outside variation.

## **3. Research Questions**

The language material for the study was taken from the English-language texts of the Old and New Testament of the Bible (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017), as well as from the contexts of the British National Corpus (BNC) (1994–). The research questions are caused by the language material of the study.

### **3.1. Detailing the research questions**

The research questions are as follows:

- What types of variants can be found in the field of English phraseology of biblical origin?
- How are those variants represented in the language?
- What is the ratio among the different BPU variants in modern English?

### **3.2. To answer the questions**

To answer the questions I appealed to the texts of the Holy Bible for the original versions of biblical phraseological units. Second, I appealed to BNC contexts to find as many new variants of biblical phraseological units as possible. Third, I made use of dictionary definitions (Rundell, 2012; Warren,

2019) to differentiate between the meaning of the biblical PU versions and the meaning of new variants of the phraseological units under analysis.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The research is targeted at detection of different types of variants in the biblical phraseological units that function in modern English. To achieve it a set of the accompanying research tasks are put forward:

- to find out the contexts with phraseological units of biblical origin—primarily those that develop variability—in BNC and store them out,
- to compare the biblical contexts with the modern ones (irrespective of their discourse),
- to find out different types of variants of the biblical phraseological units and describe them.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The choice of research methods is a very important stage of every study. My research paper is based on two modern groups of methods for the study of phraseology: 1) paradigmatic methods of research, and 2) non-paradigmatic methods of research.

##### **5.1. Paradigmatic methods of research**

In my work I first of all appeal to a number of paradigmatic methods of research. To select phraseological units out of other set expressions of biblical texts I adopt the method of identifying phraseology which was introduced into linguistics by Alexander Kunin (1996, p. 38–43) and proved to be the most reliable method in the study of English phraseology as well as phraseology of other Germanic languages (Katamadze, 2018, p. 173). To differentiate phraseological units from phraseomatic word combinations and collocations, I make use of Zhukov's (2019) method of componential analysis for phraseological differentiation (p. 14–25).

##### **5.2. Non-paradigmatic methods of research**

Some non-paradigmatic methods of research are also employed in the study of phraseological units of biblical origin.

- Contextual method is used to appeal to contexts and analyze them with the view to see how biblical phraseological units are used nowadays and what types of variants they develop.
- Method of phraseological description and descriptive method are employed to present the way and the outcome of the research (Komarova, 2018; Kunin, 1996).

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Lexical variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

#### 6.1.1. Lexical-substantive variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

The text of the Bible runs as follows: “And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Juda **from the four corners of the earth**” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Isaiah 11:12).

In this regard, the basic version of the phraseological unit under study is considered to be the form *from the four corners of the earth* (a). Along with the use of the original, or basic, version of the biblical PU (a), over time, this phraseological unit acquires a lexical-substantive variant *from the four corners of the world* (b), in which the substantive component of the PU prototype *earth* is replaced by another substantive component *world*. See contextual illustrations:

(a) They got a nasty shock: real bush pilots had been attracted to the UK ***from the four corners of the earth*** to get these well-maintained examples, and the high prices they fetched reflected the great demand that still <...>. (BNC). (b) Craftsmen laboured for nearly a millennia on intricate carvings. Scholars gathered wisdom and knowledge ***from the four corners of the world***. (BNC).

In modern English of a later period, another lexical-substantive variant of the PU in question appears, that with the component *globe*, accompanied by another lexical variant, i.e. replacement of the numeral component *four* with an adjectival component performing an identical function of the attribute in a given syntactic structure, and with a variation of the preposition. The contextual analysis makes it obvious that the variants of the phraseological units under study, while preserving the meaning and functional affiliation with the adverbial phraseological units, do not violate the identity (for the term see: Fedulenkova, 2019) of the language unit in question. Further, the development of the biblical phraseological unit goes in the direction of reducing the componential composition and converting the adverbial phraseological unit *from the four corners of the earth* to the nominative PU *the four corners of the earth*.

#### 6.1.2. Lexical-prepositive-substantive variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

In the same section of the Bible we read: “Behold, the nations are as **a drop of a bucket**, and <...>” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Isaiah 40:15). The context of biblical verse confirms the original version of the biblical PU *a drop of a bucket* as a two-component structure comprising two substantive components, tied by the preposition ‘of’, and performing a nominative function in speech. According to the British National Corpus (2020), the biblical version of that PU in pure form did not take hold in English and instead the rights of citizenship in the language were given to such variants as the lexical-prepositive variant *a drop in the bucket* (a) with a two-element variation of structure and the lexical-prepositive-substantive variant *a drop in the ocean* (b) with a *three-element variation, for example*:

(a) Sales in the product's first year of deliveries amounted to only \$1m, ***a drop in the bucket*** for a firm that's been through two rounds of venture capital totalling \$7.5m provided by Aspen Partners, <...>. (BNC). (b) The EBRD has 10 billion Ecus of capital, ***a drop in the ocean*** compared with the needs of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union <...>. (BNC).

The comparison of contexts (a) and (b) conveys the identity of two lexical-substantive variants of the biblical PU *a drop in the bucket* (a) and *a drop in the ocean* (b), each of them being used in the meaning of “a very small amount that will not have much effect” (Rundell, 2012, p. 428). The same statement is true for occasional variants with component composition expansion through an adjective component (*important, small, mere, etc.*): *an important drop in the ocean, a small drop in the ocean, and a mere drop in the ocean, etc.*, as evidenced by contextual usage. Cf.:

(a) <...> and we have to develop priorities. It's important to put Oxfam's work into perspective, we are ***a drop in the ocean*** but ***an important drop in the ocean***. (BNC). (b) But we are a few guys, not interested in politics, who will play golf with anybody as 50 per cent individuals and <...>. Yet we cannot get visas and we are such ***a small drop in the ocean*** compared with the businessman. (BNC). (c) We munched our way through an average 18 pasta meals per head last year: ***a mere drop in the ocean*** compared to the Italians, who managed to swallow <...>. (BNC).

The comparative contextual analysis shows that occasional expansion of the component composition through the adjective components *important, small, mere: an important drop in the ocean, a small drop in the ocean, and a mere drop in the ocean, etc.* does not violate the identity of a given biblical phraseological unit, maintaining its integrity as a language unit.

### 6.1.3. Lexical-adjectival variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

Adjectival variants are quite common among English phraseology of biblical origin. For example, in the Book of the New Testament we read: “He was a burning and ***a shining light***: and <...>” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, John 5:35). In modern English, according to dictionaries data confirmed by the contexts of the British National Corpus (2020), along with the true biblical version *a shining light* (a) a new variant with the component *leading* functions: *a leading light* (b). Cf.:

(a) The panel which selected Cllr Cooper described her as ‘***a shining light*** to others’ and ‘a woman who has done a lot for Liverpool.’ (BNC). (b) Peel Hunt, where ***a leading light*** is Charles Peel, Robert's brother, will collect a 200,000 fee in connection with MCI's 151m rights issue. (BNC).

The quantitative analysis of the contexts of the British National Corpus (2020) shows that a new variant of the given BPU *a leading light* is used five times more often than its biblical original.

#### 6.1.4. Lexical-verbal variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

In the Old Testament phraseological unit *play the fool* is encountered in the context of the book by Samuel 1: “Then said Saul, I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have **played the fool**, and I have erred exceedingly” (*King James Bible*, 2017, 1 Samuel 26:21). Over time, the lexical-verbal variant *act the pool* (b) develops:

- (a) The eunuch had made a cursory search and then had reported the matter to Prince Narouz. Narouz had been angry, first with the girl for *playing the fool* and then with the eunuch for not finding her. (BNC). (b) If only he would drop all this ridiculous pretense, stop *acting the fool* and raise his game one more time. (BNC).

The variant of the verbal component does not deprive the given PU of identity to itself, but, we note that the biblical variant is found in modern texts three times more often.

The analysis of contexts shows that the verb component of the PU studied can undergo a variable replacement in its participial form as well, as in the PU *dead and buried* and *dead and gone*.

The analysis of the contexts extracted from BNC makes it obvious that both phraseological units are identical regardless of the availability of the variant.

#### 6.2. Grammatical variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

Grammatical variability of English phraseological units of biblical origin embraces two types, that is, morphological variability and syntactic one.

##### 6.2.1. Morphological variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

Within the scope of the language material studied, morphological variants are very rare and consist mainly in varying the form of the number of the substantive component. Thus, in the Bible the prototype of the phraseological unit *in deep waters* is met: “<...> I am come **into deep waters**, where the floods overflow me” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Psalms 69:2), where this phrase is used in its direct meaning.

In modern English, there are two morphological variants of the phraseological unit that arose from this prototype: *in deep waters* (a) and *in deep water* (b):

- (a) What makes such a hypothesis meaningful? <...> We are here already **in deep waters**, for what needs to be decided is just what sort of existential claims can be significantly made. (BNC). (b) But the nuclear parts were designed by Combustion Engineering. # Britain **in deep water** over sea-dumping <...> Britain suffered a double setback at last. (BNC).

Both variants, as shown by their contextual employment, are used in the same meaning “in a difficult situation” (Rundell, 2012, p. 1616) and thus—having a structural-semantic invariant—retain the identity of the phraseological unit in question. On the other hand, variability of the adjective component

*deep/stormy* leads to a lexical variant preserving the identity of the phraseological unit to itself, and furthermore to the emergence of a new phraseological unit, due to the *murky* component slightly violating the semantic identity of the PU and meaning “in a mysterious situation” (Rundell, 2012, p. 1616).

### 6.2.2. Syntactic variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

The most represented kind of syntactic variability of phraseology of biblical origin are such syntactic variants, in which “the verbal-objective phrase with a possessive pronoun or noun in the genitive case is replaced by a verbal-objective phrase with a prepositional-nominal attribute standing in postposition to the noun” (Kunin, 1972, p. 183-184), as for example in the PU *strengthen somebody's hand/ strengthen the hand of somebody*. The original version of this PU is found in the text of the Bible in the syntactic form of the first kind of (a) *strengthen somebody's hand*: “And Jonathan Saul's son arose <...> and **strengthened his hand** in God” (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, 1 Samuel 23:16).

In modern English, the second syntactic variant (b) *strengthen the hand of somebody* develops, which preserves the semantic invariant of the PU in question – “give more power to do sth or act against sb/sth” (Warren, 2019, p. 277) – and, as a consequence, holds the identity of a given language unit. Cf.:

- (a) New military commanders <...> made new military appointments on June 15 in what was seen as a move to **strengthen his hand** in the fight against the Medellin drug cartel. (BNC). (b) <...> Clinton has already moved to **strengthen the hand of environmental bodies** by upgrading the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), giving it the status of a fully fledged department. (BNC).

However, that phraseological unit retains its identity despite the appearance of grammatical-syntactic variants, because the latter completely keep the initial sense of the language unit in question.

### 6.3. Complex variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

#### 6.3.1. Verbal-substantive variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

Complex variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin can be represented by phraseological units in which both the verbal and substantive component varies: (a) *separate the wheat from the chaff*, (b) *sort the wheat from the chaff*, (c) *sift the wheat from the chaff*, (d) *sift the grain from the chaff*. Cf.:

- (a) <...> the court's leave at the outset. This gives the courts a useful power to **separate the wheat from the chaff** among the pending cases. (BNC). (b) When presented with ‘antiques’, an established knocker will have no difficulty **sorting the wheat** 20 or more years <...>. (BNC). (c) The case was <...> and showed that **sifting the wheat from the chaff** was no strong point with her <...>. (BNC). (d) <...> Mary sees her task as **sifting the grain from the chaff** – the genuine cases from the cruel and careless. (BNC).

Comparative analysis of the identified contextual variants of that PU with the verbal component *sift* and with the substantive component *grain*—in comparison with the variants specified in the dictionary—shows that the global meaning of the PU does not change and remains identical to itself.

### 6.3.2. Quantitative variants of English phraseological units of biblical origin

An example of the development of a number of more complex variants is given by the biblical phraseological unit that is found in the Book of the New Testament: *a thorn in the flesh* (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, 2 Corinthians 12:7). The contextual analysis shows that over time, that biblical phraseological unit develops several variants.

First, it is a quantitative variant that appears by expanding the componential composition of the PU by means of a prepositional-substantive attribute standing in postposition to the defined noun: (a) *a thorn in the flesh* > (b) *a thorn in the flesh of somebody*, cf.:

(a) And in fact the coffee rooms not only were not profitable but <...> were even subsidized by the directors' own pocket <...>. Indeed was er er I think ***a thorn in the flesh***, to say the least. (BNC). (b) Their racialist Fascist policies and activities were ***a thorn the flesh of Sir Oswald Mosley's movement*** throughout the 1930s, and their flag was the Union Jack <...>. (BNC).

Second, it is a syntactic variant that appears when the postpositional attribute to the noun *flesh* is changed for the prepositional attribute to the same noun and obtains two contextual realizations of the component *somebody's*: (c) with a possessive pronoun or (d) with a noun in the genitive case: *a thorn in the flesh of somebody* > *a thorn in somebody's flesh/ side*. Cf.:

(c) The driver wound down his window and cursed him, adding that for two pins he'd tell the police. 'Blooming ***thorn in my flesh***, you are,' Wexford said to the dog as he clipped the lead on. (BNC). (d) Tommy Gemmell and Bertie Auld were ***a thorn in Jock Stein's side***. Soon after Celtic's European Cup success he was forced to send them home from a pre-season American tour when their behaviour failed to meet his standards. (BNC).

On the whole, the complex variability of the biblical PU under consideration *a thorn in somebody's flesh / side(s) // a thorn in the flesh / side of somebody*, including lexical-morphologic-syntactical variants with concomitant quantitative changes, does not violate the boundaries of its identity.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis shows that 39.3% of the investigated volume of biblical PUs are exposed to various types of variability, which are “furiously fast” to appear in the language (Buerki, 2019, p. 5).

In the field of variability of biblical phraseological units (accepted as 100%)—through analysis of definitions and contextual analysis—the main types of variants of English biblical PUs are established: a) lexical variants with their subspecies – 36.25%, b) morphological variants – 7.5%, c) syntactic variants – 6.25%, d) quantitative variants – 16.87%, e) complex variants – 19.37%.

All types of established variation of the studied section of English phraseology occur within the framework of the phraseological unit itself, without violating its identity, while maintaining its structural-semantic invariant, i.e. in that case no formation of new phraseological units is observed.

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