

**SET EXPRESSIONS, SEMI- FIXED COMBINATIONS AND FREE
WORD GROUPS**

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Abstract, this article provides an in-depth analysis of set expressions, semi-fixed combinations, and free word groups in English, exploring their structural and semantic characteristics. It examines how these lexical units differ in terms of fixedness, meaning, and syntactic flexibility. The study provides numerous examples to illustrate these distinctions, offering insights for linguists, language learners, and translators. Understanding these types of multi-word units is essential for achieving fluency in English and effective cross-linguistic communication.

Keywords: set expressions, semi-fixed combinations, free word groups, idioms, collocations, phraseology, lexical units, syntactic flexibility

Introduction english, like all languages, contains a wide range of multi-word units that convey meaning in different ways. These units can be broadly categorized into set expressions, semi-fixed combinations, and free word groups. Each category has its own degree of rigidity and its role in communication. This paper investigates these categories, emphasizing their linguistic features and providing illustrative examples.

Set expressions are fully fixed, non-compositional units where the meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words. These expressions often reflect cultural nuances and historical usage. Set expressions include idioms, phrasal verbs, and proverbs.



Examples of set expressions:

"Break the ice" – to initiate conversation in a social setting.

"Bite the bullet" – to endure a painful situation.

"A piece of cake" – something very easy to do.

"To hit the nail on the head" – to describe exactly what is causing a situation or problem.

Set expressions are commonly used in both written and spoken English, and their meanings are often figurative. For instance, "spill the beans" means to reveal a secret, but its literal meaning has no relevance to its idiomatic use.

Semi-fixed combinations are word pairs or triplets that allow for some variation but still follow certain patterns. These combinations tend to be more predictable than free word groups but less rigid than set expressions. The fixed components often include verbs or adjectives combined with specific nouns.

Examples of semi-fixed combinations:

"Make an effort" – This phrase can sometimes be altered (e.g., "put in an effort") but retains a basic pattern of verb + noun.

"Give a chance" – Variations like "take a chance" are possible, but the combination of the verb with the noun is restricted.

"Take responsibility" – The verb "take" collocates specifically with "responsibility" rather than "accept" or "bear" in this context.

"Strong coffee" – While adjectives like "bitter" or "hot" could replace "strong", the adjective itself is somewhat fixed when used with "coffee".

These combinations display a level of flexibility, but changing key elements (like the verb or noun) could lead to unnatural or incorrect expressions.

Free word groups are more flexible than semi-fixed combinations and set expressions. These groups consist of words that are freely combined according to grammatical rules. They do not have a fixed pattern and are open to various modifications. Unlike idiomatic phrases, their meaning is directly derived from the individual words in the group.

Examples of free word groups:



"Read a book" – The verb "read" can easily combine with different nouns: "read a newspaper," "read a letter," etc.

"Walk in the park" – The phrase can be modified as "walk by the river" or "walk around the city" without changing its fundamental meaning.

"Eat an apple" – Again, the verb "eat" can be combined with numerous other nouns, such as "eat a sandwich" or "eat fruit".

"Write a letter" – The structure remains flexible, with other verbs like "compose" or "draft" working in place of "write."

These free word groups are common in everyday speech and writing. They provide speakers with a vast range of expression based on the flexibility of word choice and sentence construction.

The distinction between these types of word combinations is crucial for several reasons. Set expressions are essential for fluent communication, as they allow speakers to express ideas concisely and idiomatically. Semi-fixed combinations provide a balance between predictability and flexibility, while free word groups offer the most freedom in constructing new ideas. For language learners, understanding the nuances of each category aids in mastering collocations, avoiding awkward or ungrammatical combinations, and enhancing overall fluency.

In translation, it is vital to recognize the equivalence of these expressions across languages. Set expressions, for instance, often require cultural adaptation rather than direct translation. Conversely, semi-fixed combinations and free word groups can generally be translated more literally.

Conclusion, in summary, set expressions, semi-fixed combinations, and free word groups form a core part of English syntax and lexicon. Each category has its own characteristics, ranging from fixed and idiomatic expressions to more flexible and free combinations. A deep understanding of these distinctions is crucial for advanced language learners, translators, and linguists. Mastery of phraseological units not only enriches vocabulary but also enhances fluency and accuracy in both spoken and written English.



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