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Level: Master 1

Lecture 02: Phrases (part two)

Common phrases

As we mentioned above, grammatical phrases are just one broad category of phrases. The other category, common phrases, are pieces of figurative language that rely on the listener's familiarity with them to be understood. When the listener (or reader) isn't familiar with a specific phrase, they might misunderstand or misconstrue the message. Keep this in mind when you're writing. A big part of effectively writing with your readers in mind is accurately gauging whether they're likely to understand the phrases you use.

Types of common phrases include:

Euphemisms

Euphemisms are phrases that communicate specific ideas through "softer," more polite language. Euphemisms are typically used to avoid speaking directly about subjects that evoke an unpleasant image or otherwise make the speaker or listener uncomfortable.

Common euphemisms include:

- **Use the restroom** instead of use the toilet
- **Passed away** instead of died

Sayings

A saying is a pithy phrase that uses figurative language to describe something. A few common sayings are:

- In a nutshell
- A drop in the bucket
- A piece of cake

Adages

Sayings that convey a general truth or observation—usually through metaphor—are known as adages. Two common adages are:

- A penny saved is a penny earned.
- The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

Proverbs

A proverb is a type of saying that, like an adage, expresses a universal truth. However, the difference is that proverbs impart advice. They are the deeper sayings that convey wisdom, such as:

- "'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all."—Alfred Lord Tennyson
- Two wrongs don't make a right.

Figures of speech

A figure of speech is another kind of phrase that expresses a point through symbolic language. Figures of speech are typically used for rhetorical and storytelling purposes and come in many forms, like:

- Similes: comparing objects using the words *like* or *as*
  - Her car was like a rocket.
- Metaphors: comparing objects without using the words *like* or *as*

- His room was a sauna.

- Personification: ascribing human traits, actions, or emotions to animals or objects

  - The clock glared at me menacingly.

- Paradoxes: self-contradictory statements that express a truth

  - The more you know, the more you realize you don't know.

- Understatements: deliberately underplaying something to make a statement about how large it actually is.

  - He's got a few bucks in the bank.

- Metonymy: referring to a concept by a closely related term

  - The pen is mightier than the sword.

- Synecdoche: referring to an object or person by just a part of the whole

  - They've got a lot of mouths to feed.

Fixed expressions

A fixed expression, also known as a set phrase, is a phrase that's been cemented into our consciousness in a specific order. The key here is that the phrase doesn't *have* to be in this order to express its concept, but it's become so familiar in this order that expressing it any other way would just sound weird.

A few examples of common fixed expressions include:

- Pain and suffering
- So to speak
- Pop the question

What do phrases mean?

So why do we repeat common sayings, even when they're impossible to understand at face value?

Because they're so ingrained in our language—and nearly every language has them—that they're often the easier way to express an idea than expressing it through literal language.

In other words, they're a linguistic shorthand. Think about it—if your new colleague tells you to make sure you bring a sweatshirt to work because the office is like the North Pole, you know exactly what they mean. If instead, they described the office as "really cold," you might not be as convinced to bring the sweatshirt because "really cold" is subjective and doesn't have the same impact that "like the North Pole" has.

However, understanding common phrases can be a bit of a paradox. To understand what somebody means when they use a common phrase, you have to already know what the phrase means—and when you're learning a new language or becoming acquainted with a new culture, you don't have that luxury.

When you encounter a phrase you don't understand, tools like The Phrase Finder can be very helpful.

Often, phrases are deeply rooted in the cultures that create them and because of this, their meanings aren't always obvious to people outside those cultures. For example, "of flowers, the cherry blossom; of men, the warrior" is a translation of a common Japanese proverb. To somebody who doesn't know the cherry blossom is considered the foremost flower in Japan, it isn't obvious that this proverb is saying that warriors are the foremost among men. Instead, one might guess the proverb is saying that warriors are the most beautiful men or that the cherry blossom is the toughest flower.

Employing phrases effectively involves two different skills: understanding the parts of speech and how they operate within sentences and knowing when to deploy specific phrases to create the desired impact. Grammarly can help with both. Not only

does Grammarly catch mistakes in <u>grammar</u>, <u>spelling</u>, <u>punctuation</u>, and more, but also its tone detector helps you get your word and phrase choices just right.