

# A Contrastive Study of Phraseological Units in English, French and Italian Political Discourse

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## **ABSTRACT**

Political discourse is pervasive in the media and plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of political processes and phenomena. Although media texts dealing with political issues are expected to inform citizens in a clear and unbiased manner, this type of discourse is often characterised by a high degree of expressiveness and the frequent use of attention-seeking devices. For the sake of comparability, this study focuses on domain-specific political phraseological units (PUs), namely those referring explicitly to political issues and phenomena. The aim of the paper is to examine political PUs in English, French and Italian from a contrastive perspective, with particular attention to language contact, in order to identify patterns of borrowing, and to identify the tendencies in language borrowing. It also proposes a classification of phraseological equivalents across the three languages based on idiomaticity, compositionality, origin, and the degree of equivalence of individual components. The analysis shows that French phraseological influence was more prominent in the past, whereas English currently exerts a particularly strong influence. Italian influence on English and French political phraseology is also attested; however, such borrowings vary in their degree of entrenchment and are typically restricted to Italy-specific political contexts.

**Keywords:** phraseological units; political discourse; English; French; Italian.

## **1. Introduction**

The field of phraseology is characterised by a strong interdisciplinary dimension, as phraseological units (PUs) can be analysed from a wide range of perspectives (e.g., stylistic, grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, cultural, cognitive,

historical, language teaching, and contrastive). Although pervasive across all domains of language, this branch of linguistics has only relatively recently become established as an autonomous discipline. An outline of what would eventually become phraseology was first proposed in 1909 by the French linguist Charles Bally, who was the first to recognize PUs as multiword units whose meaning does not correspond to the sum of their constituent elements. Inspired by Bally's work, the Russian linguist Viktor Vinogradov introduced the term *phraseological unit* in 1946 and established phraseology as a distinct linguistic discipline (González Rey, 2021, 22–23).

Nevertheless, phraseology remained undervalued and was long considered marginal, despite ongoing research in different parts of the world. This marginalisation may be attributed to the fact that the discipline's subject matter resists strictly linguistic analysis, in the sense that a comprehensive analysis of PUs involves pragmatic factors, including elements of extralinguistic knowledge. Consequently, a certain degree of interdisciplinarity is required in order to account for all relevant aspects of PUs as linguistic constructions shaped by the cultural context of a given speech community. The marked increase in interest in this field over recent decades has been driven largely by advances in corpus linguistics. As a result, a range of diverse approaches has emerged, leading to the proliferation of heterogeneous terminology referring to the basic unit of phraseology. Whereas *phraseeme* is commonly used within European tradition, there remains considerable variation in terminology (e.g., *phraseologism*, *phraseeme*, *phraseological item*, *fixed expression*, or *multiword lexical unit*) according to Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2022, 36–38). Given this terminological diversity, the present study adopts the term *phraseological unit*, as it is both widely used in contemporary research and relatively neutral in its connotations.

## 2. Fuzzy Boundaries of Political Discourse

Political discourse, as a specialised form of communication, is characterised by strategic language use, ideological positioning, and rhetorical persuasion. It is typically associated with institutional settings and professional actors – politicians, officials and commentators – but its scope extends far beyond this core. Political discourse has increasingly permeated public, informal, and media spheres, giving rise to what may be described as “fuzzy boundaries” between political and non-political domains.

A growing body of research has examined the linguistic features of political discourse, including metaphor (Charteris-Black, 2011) and framing strategies (Lakoff, 2004). Phraseological units (PUs), however, remain a relatively underexplored category in this context. While several studies have analysed their rhetorical use in political speeches and media texts within individual languages (Baghana *et al.*, 2021, 129–141; Cortelazzo, 2024, 49–61; Musolff, 2016), there

is still a lack of systematic research on domain-specific PUs across multiple languages. This gap is particularly evident when considering how PUs circulate across domains and languages, and how their idiomaticity and cultural embeddedness affect cross-linguistic equivalence.

This section therefore examines the fuzzy boundaries between general and political phraseology, focusing on how PUs – whether originating in political discourse or borrowed from other domains – are employed for expressive, persuasive, and attention-seeking purposes. A lack of clear-cut boundaries between general and domain-specific political PUs can be explained by two main factors.

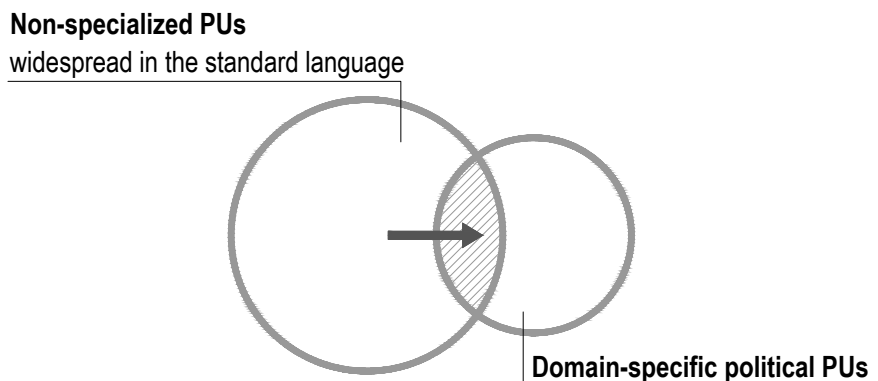
First, the political domain is inherently intertwined with issues that extend beyond institutional politics, such as elections, party competition, and government activity. Politicians, activists, journalists, and commentators address a wide range of topics affecting different areas of social life, and are therefore required to communicate about phenomena that go beyond narrowly defined political concerns. Moreover, as politics is intrinsically linked to disagreement (Heywood, 2013, 1–26), political communication tends to provoke – either intentionally or accidentally – emotional responses among both engaged citizens and those affected by political decisions (Lakoff, 2004). As a result, PUs are widely used in political discourse regardless of their origin, provided that they effectively convey ideas or evoke emotional reactions. It is therefore unsurprising that newspaper headlines frequently rely on idiomatic PUs, which are more likely to attract attention than expressions whose meaning can be inferred solely from their denotative components. Some PUs that are well entrenched in the political discourse of one language have close counterparts in others, for example:

Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt ‘*at loggerheads*’ over tax cuts (Wright and Swinford, 2024)

Législatives 2022 : Macron et Mélenchon, l’affrontement à *conteaux tirés* (Gatinois and Carriat, 2022)

Meloni e Schlein *ai ferri corti* su tutto. Ma gli staff si parlano per il duello tv (Meli, 2024)

The communicative function of the PUs *at loggerheads*, *à conteaux tirés* and *ai ferri corti* is comparable across English, French and Italian. The extralinguistic contexts of these headlines are also highly similar, as they depict conflict between political actors. The notion of disagreement is intensified through the PUs whose etymology originates in the domain of armed confrontation involving cold weapons. Such processes are common in political discourse more broadly, not only in media reporting. The use of non-political PUs by political actors for rhetorical or explanatory purposes thus contributes to blurring the boundary between domain-specific and general phraseology.

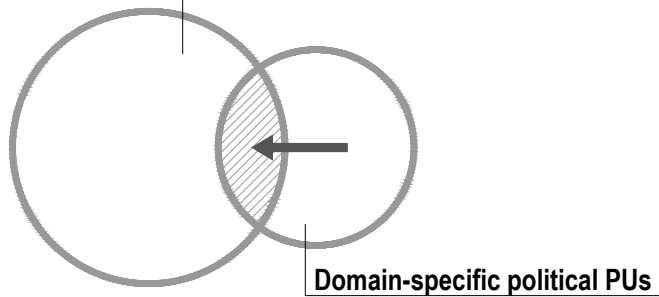


**Fig. 1.** The diffusion of non-specialized PUs into political discourse  
Source: Authors' own elaboration

A second factor contributing to this fuzziness is the permeability of standard language to domain-specific political PUs. As political concepts become more widely known and socially relevant, PUs originating in political discourse tend to enter general usage and gradually lose their domain specificity. This process is often driven by extensive media coverage. Political catchphrases provide a particularly clear example of the deliberate use of PUs to reach a broad audience, especially potential voters. As noted by Baghana *et al.* (2021, 134), “politicians, resorting to the use of idioms, can covertly express their attitude to a particular event or phenomenon and voice their goals and plans”. Today, the dissemination of such expressions is further amplified by social media and word-of-mouth communication. The coinage of political catchphrases is often associated with individual political figures or their communication teams, for example *Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime* (former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair); *Mon adversaire, c’est le monde de la finance* (former French President François Hollande); *Il potere logora chi non ce l’ha* (former Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti). Such artful and often witty uses of language aim to communicate complex ideas in a concise and rhetorically effective manner. Figure 2 illustrates the diffusion of domain-specific PUs into the general phraseological repertoire of a language.

**Non-specialized PUs**

widespread in the standard language



**Fig. 2.** The diffusion of domain-specific PUs into general phraseological repertoire  
Source: Authors' own elaboration

Political discourse may be approached from different perspectives, depending on the definition of politics as a specific domain of human activity. From a narrow perspective, “political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, mostly politicians, the group of people who are being paid for their (political) activities, and who are being elected or appointed (or self-designated) as the central players in the polity” (van Dijk, 1997, 12–13). However, since discourse inherently involves interaction, it is necessary to enlarge the scope of political discourse and take into account all actors in the realm of politics, notably political journalists, who function as key intermediaries between professional politicians and the wider public.

### 3. Scope of Research, Research objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of this paper is to identify patterns in the occurrence of PUs in selected texts pertaining to political discourse, based on an analysis of corpora drawn from English, French and Italian newspapers. For the purposes of this study, a multilingual newspaper corpus was manually compiled by the authors. It comprises articles published between 2000 and 2024 in nine newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Telegraph* (United Kingdom); *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *Le Figaro* (France); and *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (Italy). The selection of sources was guided by their national prominence and, to some extent, their ideological diversity. The articles were selected on the basis of thematic comparability, focusing on the same or similar political events, which allows for a more consistent cross-linguistic comparison. Texts were retrieved from official newspaper websites and online archives and subsequently converted into plain text format. PUs were identified manually

through close reading of the articles. The key criterion for inclusion was domain specificity, meaning that only PUs directly related to political contexts and phenomena were considered. Particular attention was paid to expressions occurring across multiple languages or recurring within a single language, as these were taken to indicate salience within political discourse. Whenever possible, occurrences were cross-checked against phraseological dictionaries in all three languages. However, only a relatively small proportion of PUs attested in the corpus are recorded in existing lexicographic resources. The corpus comprises approximately 120 articles in English, French, and Italian. Owing to copyright restrictions, it is not publicly available; however, it constitutes a coherent and representative dataset for examining cross-linguistic patterns in contemporary political discourse in British, French, and Italian print media.

In analysing newspaper texts, it is necessary to make a distinction between non-specialized PUs that are widespread in standard language and domain-specific political PUs. The former tend to exhibit a higher degree of equivalence in English, French and Italian than the latter. For example, *la possibilité d'une autre voie* corresponds to *the possibility of another path* in English and *la possibilità d'un'altra via* in the Italian version<sup>1</sup>.

An important methodological insight emerged during the corpus-based identification of political PUs. The initial intention to include only expressions attested in English, French and Italian phraseological dictionaries (Cowie, Mackin and McCaig, 1983; Fergusson, 2002; Parmentier, 2006; Pittàno, 2009; Quartu and Rossi, 2012; Rey and Chantreau, 1990) was ultimately abandoned, as the corpora revealed a substantial number of idiomatic expressions and domain-specific PUs not captured in traditional lexicographic sources. This finding underscores the importance of corpus-based approaches, particularly when dealing with politically contextualized and culturally specific phraseology.

Based on the results of our previous research on English loanwords in French and Italian daily newspapers (Varga, Orešković Dvorski and Bjelobaba, 2011, 71–84), which indicates a strong influence of the English language, the following hypotheses are proposed: (H1) contemporary English exerts a significant phraseological influence on French and Italian; and (H2) phraseological units of French and Italian origin are comparatively rare in the political discourse of the other two languages.

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1 French *le Conseil a ainsi incarné la possibilité d'une autre voie, celle du dialogue entre ces deux pays*; English *the Council offered the possibility of another path, a path of dialogue between the two countries*; Italian *il Consiglio incarnava la possibilità d'un'altra via, quella del dialogo*.

## 4. Degrees of Idiomaticity of Domain-Specific Political PUs

On the basis of the corpus analysis, two poles of a continuum can be identified, forming the basis for the classification of domain-specific political PUs. One pole can be labelled as a lack of idiomaticity, with full reliance on compositionality as the primary criterion for identification of PUs. At the other end lies full idiomaticity, which results in semantic opacity and makes interpretation less transparent. In this respect, not all PUs can be considered idioms, as noted by Weinreich:

A phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsenses, will be called an idiom. Thus some phraseological units are idioms; others are not. (Weinreich, 1969, 42)

Within political discourse, the functions of non-idiomatic and idiomatic units can be clearly distinguished. Elspaß points out that non-idiomatic units play an important role in the grammatical cohesion and textual organisation, whereas idiomatic units contribute significantly to stylistic expression (Elspaß, 2002, 106). This observation also applies to other types of political texts, including newspaper reporting.

As Table 1 shows, the selected English, French and Italian PUs are characterised by a high degree of compositionality and a correspondingly low degree of idiomaticity. From a cross-linguistic perspective, this category of PUs exhibits full semantic equivalence, resulting in a high degree of similarity across the three languages.

**Table 1.** Non-idiomatic political PUs 1

NON-IDIOMATIC POLITICAL PUs		
ENGLISH	FRENCH	ITALIAN
class struggle	lutte des classes	lotta di classe
freedom of speech freedom of expression	liberté de parole liberté d'expression	libertà di parola libertà di espressione
civil disobedience	désobéissance civile	disobbedienza civile
fiscal conservatism	conservatisme fiscal	conservatorismo fiscale
politically correct	politiquement correct	politicamente corretto

The continuum between idiomaticity and compositionality is further illustrated by the examples in Table 2. In this case, the PUs included are still largely compositional but display a moderate or low degree of idiomaticity, resulting in only partial semantic equivalence across languages. Therefore, when it comes to cross-linguistic analysis, there is a high (e.g., *Head of State*, *Chef d'État*, *Capo di Stato*) or moderate (e.g., *welfare state*, *état-providence*, *stato sociale – sistema previdenziale*) level of similarity. These examples also demonstrate that different donor languages may be involved in the formation of equivalent expressions.

**Table 2.** Non-idiomatic political PUs 2

NON-IDIOMATIC POLITICAL PUs		
ENGLISH	FRENCH	ITALIAN
welfare state	état-providence	stato sociale (sistema previdenziale)
Head of State	Chef d'État	Capo di Stato
go through to a second ballot	être en ballottage	andare al ballottaggio

The PUs presented in Table 3 are characterised by high levels of non-compositionality and idiomaticity, yet they display full semantic equivalence across the three languages. This results in a high degree of cross-linguistic similarity, which facilitates intercultural communication.

**Table 3.** Idiomatic political PUs 1

IDIOMATIC POLITICAL PUs 1		
ENGLISH	FRENCH	ITALIAN
the silent majority	la majorité silencieuse	la maggioranza silenziosa
the fifth column	la cinquième colonne	la quinta colonna
the fourth estate (power)	le quatrième pouvoir	il quarto potere
a hot potato	une patate chaude	una patata bollente
white-collar crime	le crime en col blanc	il crimine (reato) dei colletti bianchi
witch hunt	chasse aux sorcières	caccia alle streghe

The PUs listed in Table 4, by contrast, exhibit only partial semantic equivalence, despite their high degree of both non-compositionality and idiomaticity. Their interpretation may therefore not be immediately transparent to speakers of another language. For example, *keyboard warrior*, *internaute agressif/agressiva*, *leone da tastiera* are pragmatically equivalent, rather than directly semantically equivalent. Their meanings converge at the level of pragmatic interpretation

rather than through direct correspondence between lexical components such as *warrior*, *agressif*, and *leone*, which share the feature of ‘readiness to attack’. A particularly noteworthy example is provided by *neck and neck*, *au coude à coude*, *testa a testa*. They are structurally extremely similar, yet at the level of content there are differences in the idiomatic use of different body parts (necks, elbows, heads) for the identical communicative purpose. This variation illustrates how idiomatic meaning is constructed through culturally embedded metaphorical associations, often linked to the domain of competition.

**Table 4.** Idiomatic political PUs 2

IDIOMATIC POLITICAL PUs 2		
ENGLISH	FRENCH	ITALIAN
culture war	guerre culturelle	scontro tra culture
keyboard warrior	internaute agressif/agressive	leone da tastiera
hung parliament	parlament sans majorité	parlamento sospeso
test the waters	tâter le terrain	tastare il terreno
champagne socialist	membre de la gauche caviar	radical chic (esponente della sinistra al caviale)
bleeding-heart liberal	libéral au cœur tendre / grand cœur	buonista, politicamente corretto (radical chic)
neck and neck	au coude à coude	testa a testa
landslide victory	raz-de-marée électoral / victoire écrasante	vittoria schiacciante / valanga di voti

## 5. Political Phraseology in Cross-Linguistic Contact

Political systems, rules and conventions of political behaviour vary from country to country. For this reason, concepts lexicalized through PUs that are absent or less common in other linguistic and cultural contexts require neological solutions to fill lexical gaps. As there is a lack of research on cross-linguistic contact in the field of phraseology, particularly with regard to domain-specific PUs, the following section addresses this aspect of contrastive analysis.

**Table 5.** Phraseological borrowing from French

PHRASEOLOGICAL BORROWING FROM FRENCH		
FRENCH	ENGLISH	ITALIAN
une main de fer dans un gant de velours	an iron hand/fist in a velvet glove	(con) pugno di ferro in guanto di velluto
retourner sa veste	turn one's coat; be a turncoat	cambiare bandiera
être plus royaliste que le roi	be more Catholic than the Pope (himself)	essere più realista del re

The etymology of the French political PU *une main de fer dans un gant de velours* (Table 5) can be traced back to the nineteenth century and is attributed to the king of Sweden and Norway Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, who claimed that the French people needed to be governed by an iron hand in a velvet glove, i.e., that the king's power over people should be strong and relentless in character, yet diplomatic and gentle in form. The effectiveness of this metaphor allegedly crafted by a political figure from the past is reflected in the fact that both English and Italian equivalents preserve its core semantic components. Interestingly, in other cases the structure of the PU has remained intact, while certain elements undergo semantic modification in English (*royaliste* > *Catholic*; *le roi* > *the pope*).

As Table 6 indicates, phraseological borrowing from Italian mostly concerns rather recent political phenomena conceptually anchored in specifically Italian political contexts. As the English and French equivalents of *governo tecnico* and *mani pulite* are mainly used in reference to Italian political reality, they are rendered either as close translations or as unadapted borrowings. The witty catchphrase *Piove, governo ladro!*, which is widely used in Italian everyday conversation on politics, is included in the analysis despite the absence of direct borrowing into English and French. This example is illustrative of the fact that phraseological equivalence may sometimes be identified within temporally and culturally specific contexts. *Thanks, Obama!* in contemporary US English functions as a sarcastic expression used to attribute blame for unfavourable developments in society, thus showing a functional rather than formal equivalence.

**Table 6.** Phraseological borrowing from Italian

PHRASEOLOGICAL BORROWING FROM ITALIAN		
ITALIAN	ENGLISH	FRENCH
governo tecnico	"technical" government technocratic government	gouvernement « technique » gouvernement d'experts
Mani pulite	Mani pulite	Mani pulite
Piove, governo ladro!	Ø (Damned government!) Thanks, Obama!	Ø (Il pleut. Maudit gouverne- ment!)

Corpus analysis confirms our prediction that English currently exerts the strongest cross-linguistic phraseological influence. Table 7 provides selected examples of three types of phraseological borrowing from English, namely the French and Italian calques (semantic loans) that are used to refer to the concept of *lame duck*; non-idiomatic, yet more transparent and explanatory equivalents of *running mate*, and an example for widely used unadapted borrowings such as *spin doctor*.

**Table 7.** Phraseological borrowing from English

PHRASEOLOGICAL BORROWING FROM ENGLISH		
ENGLISH	FRENCH	ITALIAN
<i>lame duck</i>	canard boiteux	anatra zoppa
<i>running mate</i>	candidat(e) à la vice-présidence	candidato/a alla vicepresidenza
<i>spin doctor</i>	“spin doctor”	“spin doctor”

## 6. Conclusion

As an integral component of political discourse, PUs play an important role in conveying carefully framed messages, shaping emotional responses, and reflecting the cultural heritage of a given speech community. A contrastive analysis of domain-specific political PUs in English, French and Italian shows that cross-linguistic similarity is not determined solely by idiomaticity and compositionality, nor is it necessarily the result of language contact. Structurally and functionally similar PUs in the three languages may instead be the outcome of parallel or independent development within each linguistic system.

This study reveals a dynamic interaction between general phraseology and domain-specific political PUs. Yet the tendency of the latter to be diffused beyond the boundaries of political discourse is not adequately reflected in existing phraseological dictionaries. A more systematic inclusion of such items would contribute to a more comprehensive representation of contemporary phraseological usage. Given that politics permeates everyday life and constitutes a frequent topic of public communication, this domain warrants greater lexicographic attention.

From the perspective of language contact, French phraseological influence used to be more pronounced in the past, whereas English currently exerts a particularly strong influence. This imbalance may be attributed to the fact that political events occurring in some English-speaking countries, notably in the USA, receive more international media coverage than those in French and Italian contexts. There is Italian influence on English and French political phraseology; however, such borrowings vary in their degree of entrenchment in the two

languages and their use tends to be limited to Italy-specific political contexts. These observations broadly support H1 and H2. Future research could usefully extend the analysis to additional languages in order to further substantiate these conclusions and provide a more comprehensive account of domain-specific political phraseology and cross-linguistic transfer.

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