

PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS OF COGNITION AND LEARNING: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Summary: *This article examines a selection of English phraseological units that describe cognitive processes, specifically mental effort, thorough understanding, and skill acquisition. The study investigates the grammatical structure, etymology, semantic characteristics, and contextual usage of three phrases: "Rack one's brains", "Know something inside out", and "Get the hang of". Through literary examples and linguistic analysis, the article demonstrates how these fixed expressions encode abstract mental activity in concrete, embodied terms, and how they enrich the vocabulary of English language learners.*

Key words: *phraseological units, idioms, etymology, semantic analysis, fixed expressions, cognition, English language, linguistics.*

Phraseology, as a branch of modern linguistics, is dedicated to the study of stable, reproducible expressions that function as integral units within a language system. Phraseological units — encompassing idioms, proverbs, collocations, and fixed word combinations — are fundamental to natural and fluent communication. Their significance lies not only in their frequency of use but in their capacity to convey layers of meaning that single words cannot easily express. Scholars such as A.V. Kunin and A.I. Smirnitsky have contributed greatly to the theoretical framework that underpins phraseological research, classifying these units by structure, formation, and semantic transparency.

The present article continues in this analytical tradition by examining three phraseological units that share a common cognitive domain: mental effort, comprehensive understanding, and the acquisition of practical skill. "Rack one's brains", "Know something inside out", and "Get the hang of" have been selected because they represent a range of grammatical forms — reflexive verbal, adverbial-complement verbal, and phrasal verbal — and because each illustrates how English speakers habitually describe abstract cognitive states through concrete, often bodily, imagery. Each phrase is analyzed from grammatical, etymological, and semantic perspectives, and their usage is illustrated through authentic literary examples.

Comparative Analysis of Phraseological Units

1. "Rack one's brains"

"Rack one's brains" is a widely used English idiom meaning to think very hard about something, typically in an effort to remember a fact or solve a difficult problem. It is generally used to describe sustained, effortful mental activity, often bordering on frustration, rather than easy or casual recollection.

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Grammatically, the phrase is a verb phrase with an obligatory possessive determiner: [verb (rack) + possessive determiner (one's) + noun (brains)]. The possessive element agrees with the grammatical subject, so the phrase surfaces as "rack my brains", "rack her brains", or "rack their brains" depending on person and number. It functions as the main predicate of the clause and is most often used in simple or progressive aspect: "I've been racking my brains all morning."

Etymologically, the phrase draws on the historical meaning of "rack" as an instrument of torture used to stretch and strain the body. By the sixteenth century, this literal sense had been extended metaphorically to mental strain, framing the mind as something that could likewise be stretched to its limits in pursuit of an answer. The expression has been documented in English literary and everyday use since at least the late sixteenth century, and it survives today largely as a fixed idiom, since the verb "rack" rarely occurs outside this and a small number of related collocations.

Semantically, the phrase functions as an intensifier of cognitive effort. It signals that ordinary recall or reasoning has failed and that the speaker is resorting to deliberate, strenuous mental exertion. It often carries an implied tone of mild exasperation or urgency, distinguishing it from more neutral expressions of thinking such as "consider" or "reflect".

For example, "She racked her brains for some means of escape from this new complication of her trouble" [4, 156]. In this passage, "rack her brains" is used to convey a character's urgent, strained search for a solution under pressure. The phrase emphasizes the intensity and difficulty of the mental effort, suggesting that ordinary thought has proven insufficient and that the character must push her reasoning to its limit. It functions as the main verb phrase of the clause, foregrounding cognitive struggle as the dominant action of the sentence.

Furthermore, "He racked his brains to remember where he had seen the man before, but the harder he tried, the further the memory seemed to retreat" [2, 98]. Here, "racked his brains" is paired with a result clause that undercuts the effort, illustrating a common pattern in which the idiom introduces an attempt that is frustrated rather than rewarded. The phrase amplifies the sense of cognitive labor by contrasting deliberate effort with the involuntary, uncooperative nature of memory itself.

2. "Know something inside out"

"Know something inside out" is an English phraseological unit meaning to understand or be familiar with something thoroughly and in complete detail. It is most commonly used to describe mastery gained through long experience or careful study, and it implies a completeness of knowledge that leaves no aspect unexamined.

Grammatically, the phrase is a verb phrase with an adverbial complement: [verb (know) + object (noun phrase) + adverbial (inside out)]. The adverbial "inside out" follows the object and cannot be separated from the verb by more than the direct object, giving the fixed pattern "know X inside out" rather than freely movable word order. The verb readily takes progressive-resistant, stative uses: "She knows the contract inside out."

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Etymologically, the phrase derives from the literal image of turning a garment or object inside out to examine its interior surface as thoroughly as its exterior. This literal sense of complete physical inspection was extended by the nineteenth century to intellectual and practical mastery, so that to know something "inside out" came to mean knowing both its visible and hidden aspects equally well. The expression appears in both informal speech and formal writing from the Victorian period onward.

Semantically, the phrase functions as an intensifier of completeness rather than a mere synonym for "know well". It signals exhaustive familiarity, often implying that the speaker or subject could operate confidently without external reference, and it frequently occurs in contexts of professional competence, technical mastery, or long personal acquaintance.

For instance, "He knew the old house inside out, every creaking stair and every draughty corner, as though it were a part of his own body" [5, 211]. In this context, "knew the old house inside out" is used to establish the character's deep, almost physical familiarity with his surroundings, built up through long residence. The phrase functions as the predicate of the main clause and is reinforced by the appositive detail that follows, which itemizes the completeness of his knowledge.

Moreover, "You cannot advise me on this matter, for I know the business inside out, and you have been in it scarcely a year" [3, 64]. In this sentence, "know the business inside out" is used as a claim of superior authority, contrasting the speaker's thorough experience with the addressee's comparative inexperience. The phrase serves a persuasive and evaluative function, asserting competence as grounds for rejecting advice.

3. "Get the hang of"

"Get the hang of" is a common English phraseological unit meaning to learn how to do something, particularly through practice, until it becomes manageable or intuitive. It is typically used to describe the process of acquiring a practical skill rather than abstract or theoretical knowledge.

Grammatically, the phrase is a phrasal-prepositional verb construction: [verb (get) + determiner (the) + noun (hang) + preposition (of) + complement (noun phrase or gerund)]. It most often appears in progressive or perfect aspect to convey a process rather than a single completed event: "I'm getting the hang of it" or "She has finally got the hang of driving." The complement following "of" may be a noun phrase or a gerund clause.

Etymologically, the noun "hang" in this expression is generally traced to the specialized sense of how a tool, weapon, or garment hangs or balances in the hand or on the body — a good "hang" meaning that an object handles comfortably and naturally. This craft-related sense, associated especially with tools and weapons, was extended by the early nineteenth century to any skill that becomes comfortable and natural with practice. The expression is recorded in English usage from the early to mid-nineteenth century onward.

Semantically, the phrase functions as a marker of gradual competence. It signals a transition from initial difficulty to comfortable proficiency, and it typically frames skill acquisition as incremental and experiential rather than instantaneous, often implying that instruction alone is insufficient without direct practice.

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For example, "It took him the better part of a week to get the hang of the new machine, but once he had it, his hands moved almost without thought" [1, 87]. In this passage, "get the hang of the new machine" is used to describe a gradual process of skill acquisition that culminates in fluent, near-automatic competence. The phrase functions as the predicate of a time clause, and the surrounding text reinforces its meaning by contrasting the initial period of difficulty with the eventual ease that follows.

Furthermore, "Once you get the hang of it, you will wonder why it ever seemed difficult at all" [6, 142]. Here, "get the hang of it" opens a conditional clause that promises eventual ease as a reward for persistence. The phrase serves an encouraging, instructional function, common in contexts where a more experienced speaker reassures a learner that present difficulty is temporary.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this article demonstrates that phraseological units such as "rack one's brains", "know something inside out", and "get the hang of" are far more than convenient shorthand in the English language. Each expression encapsulates a rich history of usage, a well-defined grammatical function, and a depth of semantic meaning that exceeds the sum of its individual components. Their origins in concrete, embodied experience — whether the strain of the rack, the physical act of turning something inside out, or the tactile balance of a well-made tool — speak to the way that English habitually renders abstract cognitive processes in tangible terms. For students and scholars of linguistics alike, the study of such phraseological units offers an invaluable window into both the structural mechanics and the expressive soul of the English language.

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