
HYPOCRISY AS A FORM OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR REPRESENTED BY IDIOMS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Inna E. Fedyunina, Vita A. Kuzmicheva, Igor V. Lyashenko,
Anna N. Doborovich, Olga V. Dekhnich

Belgorod State University, 308015, Belgorod, Pobeda Street, 85 (RUSSIA)
fedyunina@bsu.edu.ru

DOI: 10.7813/jll.2016/7-2/20

Received: 13 Apr, 2016

Accepted: 22 May, 2016

ABSTRACT

The article deals with English idioms covering the semantic area of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is seen as a specific form of social behavior and communication. Idioms are examined as a linguistic representation of hypocrisy as well as an effective means of creating pragmatic impact and thus revealing the social attitude of English native speakers to hypocrisy as a form of behaviour. The research is carried out within the boundary of cognitive-pragmatic approach. The authors apply contextual analysis in order to define the key factors affecting social attitude to hypocrisy in various communicative situations.

Key words: hypocrisy, social attitude, social behavior, communicative situation, idiom, pragmatic impact, context, connotation, appraisal

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally agreed by linguists that idioms are closely associated with the cognitive dimension of the culture and society and thus “contribute to the expression as well as the formation of the world view” [1]. It means that one of important functions of idioms is reflecting cultural concepts of the society, as well as “the system of ideological beliefs, values and modes of social behavior which constitutes the society’s cultural identity” [2]. Admitting a vital role of language as an instrument of thought and action, a lot of researchers nowadays support a cognitive-pragmatic approach to studying idioms. According to this approach, idioms are capable of both characterizing a thing, a person or a situation and causing certain emotions and attitudes towards a described phenomenon. The most important factors influencing a pragmatic impact caused by idioms are their inner form, i.e. the image a particular idiom is based on [3], an attitudinal aspect of their meaning and the context an idiom is used in. Scientists point out that idioms are a typical display of language creativity: “everyday discourse is frequently patterned creatively in ways which make it memorable and striking...” [4]. But nowadays, linguistic research is particularly emphasizing the importance of studying an important linking “language – society”, keeping in mind that idioms are “a cognitive and a social phenomenon, not only a linguistic ornament” [5]. In this paper we are focusing on the ways English idioms with the general meaning of hypocrisy reflect the whole range of social and personal attitudes towards this phenomenon of human relations and communication.

2. METHODS

As our aim is to analyze the variety of pragmatic impact caused by idioms for hypocrisy, we will start with discussing specific features of hypocrisy as a social phenomenon employing the data provided by the studies into psychology and sociology of lying. Then we are going to define the most frequent semantic groups of the idioms under study which actualize various forms of hypocrisy and examine the contexts. While analyzing the contextual “behavior” of the idioms, we intend to focus mainly on the attitudinal aspect of their meaning in order to reveal the basic factors influencing social and personal attitudes to hypocrisy. The contexts to be examined were derived from idioms dictionaries and fiction books.

3. MAIN PART

Dictionaries define hypocrisy as “the act of pretending to believe, feel or be something very different from, and usually better than, what one actually believes, feels, or is; extreme insincerity” [6]. Thus, logically, hypocrisy is considered to be a form of deception, which means that it should be treated as something negative and forbidden. On the other hand, experts admit that nowadays we live in a society where lying and deception is a common thing [7]. It is particularly true about hypocrisy. As J.A. Barnes states in his work on a sociology of lying, there is a wide range of situations, both in professional and personal relations, where disguising one’s true feelings, attitudes and opinions is not only allowed, but strictly required by social norms

and rules[8]. Such a contradiction often results in a specific mental state which psychologists define as a “cognitive dissonance” [9]. On one hand, hypocrisy is considered to be a negative and anti-social form of behavior; on the other hand, the reality is that it is hardly possible to survive, achieve our aims and build relations doing completely without any hypocrisy [10]. As a result, the attitude towards this or that form of hypocrisy often depends on social norms, a particular situation or just personal feelings and relations. It is also important to note that some idioms covering the semantic area of hypocrisy display rather a high degree of context sensitivity. According to our research, this feature stems basically from the flexibility of their attitudinal meaning. Linguists state that an attitudinal meaning, which consists of the two closely intertwined elements – a rational one and an emotional one [11] – is usually fixed. It is either positive or negative, i.e. causes either positive or negative feelings and attitudes towards the phenomenon described by an idiom, whatever context an idiom is used in. But some idioms, including idioms for hypocrisy, have a flexible attitudinal meaning: the connotation they carry depends on the context, and it can be positive in one context and negative in another one, depending on the aim of the speaker. Experts suppose that this feature reflects a contradictive social attitude towards hypocrisy as it is. Now we are passing to examining the evidence.

From a semantic point, the idioms selected for analysis could be roughly subdivided into three semantic groups, according to the forms of hypocritical behavior they actualize. Idioms belonging to the first group (*to play a double game*, *to keep one's foot in both camps*, *to carry water on both shoulders*) represents the most condemnable form of hypocrisy – double-dealing, or, in other words, pretending to support both parties, but in reality not being loyal towards any of them and pursuing only one's own goals. The inner form of the idioms is based on the image of duality, associating with betrayal and thus representing semantic properties of greed, unreliability, insecurity and danger. The pragmatic impact made by these idioms is always negative and causes distrust, contempt and dislike. In contexts, negative pragmatic impact is often intensified by contraposition between the hypocritical behavior of a person and his / her true aims, intentions or actions: *You want to carry water on both shoulders. You behave friendly with people, but you betray their confidences* [12]. In some situations it is emphasized that a double game can't last long and will soon be punished: *You've got to decide where you stand in this issue. You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.*

The second semantic group, although containing only one idiom (*to worm oneself into smb's confidence / life / affections*), is also important for our research, as it represents one more condemnable and at the same time very widely-spread form of hypocritical behavior – trying to achieve somebody's trust, affection or love by treating this person in the most pleasant way, usually in order to use him / her for one's own purposes or do some harm. The attitudinal meaning of this idiom is negative, mainly due to its inner form containing the element *worm*, which provides the image of something disgusting and reptile. Combined with implied semantic properties of acting underhandedly, danger and betrayal, it provides strongly negative pragmatic impact: *I'm not so much concerned about the legal side, as Susan contacting Jinnie behind my back trying to worm her way into our girl's life. She's a cunny bugger, an' no mistake* [13].

The third semantic group comprises idioms to *put up a front*, *to put up a poker face*, *to play the game* with the general meaning of dissimulation or pretence, i.e. talking and acting so that your true intentions, feelings and opinions remain hidden. The inner form of these idioms stems from a base metaphor of stage acting and gambling. The idioms belonging to this group are context-sensitive and have flexible attitudinal meaning, which means that social attitude to this form of hypocrisy is complex and ambiguous. It can be clearly seen from the following examples.

1) *Don't you dare start playing games with me! Your poker face needs work, my friend. ...I can see that you're lying* [14]. This context represents hypocritical behavior of the speaker's partner as senseless and irritating. Besides, the speaker definitely sees the attempt to deceive him as harmful and malicious, which causes anger and makes the pragmatic impact of the idiom negative.

2) *Mattie... was straightening herself, putting on a public face... "A public face, for me..." The sense of exclusion cut through her... as a knifeblade* [15]. In this communicative situation the speaker feels deeply injured and offended not with the hypocrisy as it is, but with the fact that it is her close friend who behaves in this way. Such attitude is perceived as dishonest. Thus, the context clearly demonstrates that insincerity in personal relations is seen as unacceptable and antisocial. But it should be pointed out that such insincerity can be seen as desirable, and, moreover, as a display of care, tact and love when it is convenient for both partners or they just have an emotional need for it. In such situations the idiom practically loses its negative semantic properties: *She felt ridiculous wearing make-up and high heels, but she was willing to play the game to please her mother* [16].

3) *He hadn't shown any signs of grief over his father's death, but I'm sure he's just putting up a front* [17]. This context is a good example of a so-called conventional pretence, particularly typical of a British society, where demonstrating your true feelings and emotions (especially negative ones) in public is not approved of. For this reason, the idiom doesn't have any negative connotation.

It should be noted that the idiom *to play the game* has one more specific meaning – “to do things exactly as you are expected to do them, especially in order to be successful, or to behave in a way that it is accepted or demanded by those in authority”. Contexts quite frequently actualize the necessity for such behavior in the situations where one's career development, success and well-being depends on it, for example: 1) *You have to learn to play the game if you want to be successful at work* [17]. 2) *Harry refuses to play the game, so he will never be promoted* [16]. Thus, we can conclude that social attitude to this form of hypocrisy is rather tolerant. Moreover, such form of hypocrisy is a kind of a social norm, or even a rule, and rejecting this

rule is likely to result in trouble, facing serious career obstacles etc. The semantic property of tough necessity mitigates negative connotation to some extent.

4. CONCLUSION

Hypocrisy is a complex psychological phenomenon and a widely-spread form of social behavior. We specified and examined the most frequent semantic groups of idioms actualizing various forms of hypocrisy, which are double-dealing, pleasing people in order to use them and dissimulation, or pretence. We also defined the two main factors which determine the pragmatic impact – the base metaphor (image) represented in the inner form of the idiom, and the context the idiom is used in. From the point of social and personal attitude, double-dealing and pleasing people, trying to win their confidence in order to use or harm them are certainly seen as condemnable and anti-social and are treated as a malicious deception. It is reflected in purely negative pragmatic impact made by appropriate idioms which objectify semantic properties of danger, betrayal, dishonesty etc. Idioms representing pretence are context-sensitive and have a flexible attitudinal meaning. Contexts containing these idioms show the following tendencies. Negative social attitude to pretence can be seen in communicative situations where insincerity is perceived as harmful, irritating or offensive, especially when it takes place between relatives or friends. But the evidence also shows that such insincerity might be quite acceptable or even demanded for practical or emotional reasons. In this case, a negative connotation is mitigated to such a degree that the behaviour described in the context is not even qualified as hypocrisy, although it logically is. There are also social situations of so-called conventional pretence where display of true feelings, opinions and attitudes is disapproved of or even forbidden by social norms and rules, and might result in professional and personal problems. Being used in such contexts, idioms for pretence don't provide positive pragmatic impact, but a strong semantic element of tough necessity make them partly lose their negative connotation.

5. RESULTS

To summarize, the function of idioms for hypocrisy is not limited to pure linguistic aspects. Idioms are capable of conveying the whole variety of social attitudes to hypocrisy as a form of social behavior and communication. In our opinion, these idioms well deserve further studying within the boundaries of cognitive-pragmatic phraseology.

REFERENCES

1. Granger, S. and F. Meunier, 2008. *Phraseology: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*. New York: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp: 232.
2. Scandera, P., 2007. *Phraseology and Culture in English*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp: 109.
3. Baranov, A.N. and D.O. Dobrovolskiy, 2008. *Aspekty teoriiy frazeologiyi*. M.: Znak, pp: 157. (In Russian).
4. Carter, R., 2016. *Language and Creativity: the Art of Common Talk*. New York: Routledge Linguistics Classics pp: 34.
5. Alefirenko, N.F., 2009. *Problemi funktsionalnoi leksikologiyi*. M.: Flinta: Nauka, pp: 184. (In Russian).
6. Summers, D., 2006. *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. London: Pearson Education Limited, pp: 690.
7. Ekman, P., 1997. *Lying and Deception*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp: 47.
8. Barnes, J.A., 1994. *A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp: 68.
9. Eysenk, M., 1998. *Psychology: an Integrated Approach*. London and New York: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, pp: 737.
10. Morozova, E.I., 2005. *Lozh kak diskursivnoye obrazovaniye: lingvokognitivnyy aspekt*. Charkov: Ekograf, pp: 155. (In Russian).
11. Teliya, V.N., 1996. *Russkaya frazeologiya. Semanticheskiy, pragmaticheskiy i lingvokulturologicheskiy aspekty*. M.: Shkola "Yazyki russkoy kultury", pp: 112-116. (In Russian).
12. Grafton, S., 1999. *N is for Noose*. London: Pan Books, pp: 283.
13. Cox, J., 1992. *Jinnie*. London: Headline, pp: 191.
14. Brown, D., 2003. *The Da Vinci Code*. London: Corgy Books, pp: 552.
15. Thomas, R., 1989. *Bad Girls, Good Women*. London: Penguin Books, pp: 583.
16. *Longman Idioms Dictionary*, 1998. Pearson Education Limited, pp: 133.
17. *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary*, 2006. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp: 155, 319.