

## IDIOMS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY, CULTURE AND MENTALITY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the differential and integrative features of phraseological units in different languages, their correlations with language and mental structures. Universal and specific indications in phraseology are caused by prototypical category of linguistic thinking and ways of their organization in a human mind. The adequate interpretation of the image-motivated meaning of phraseological units is carried out by cultural and linguistic competence of native speakers. The process of implementing the phraseological statements is considered as a constant correlation of the communicative information with conceptual and linguistic categories.

**Key words:** phraseological unit, universal and national-cultural features of idioms, the categorization of real-surface, cross-cultural analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The issues of interrelation between mentality and natural language have long been in the focus of scholarly studies. It is considered well proven that national languages are a key component of thinking. More explicitly, a native language provides its carriers with a certain way of expression through specific linguistic habits.

Some researchers note that the consciousness of individuals, while using fixed phrases, is “completely free” of any ideas associated with their literal meaning [1, 2]. However, nationally-marked units, in the dynamics of their inter-generational reproduction, contribute to the “building of both cultural identity of a person and national identity of the people in the processes of acquisition and use of the native language” [3]. Thus, a Russian, using an idiom “rodilsya v rubashke” (and being fully aware of what it means) is not absolutely free from the image of a linen garment (literally “born in a shirt”); a French, using the expression “être né coiffé”, remains “tied” to the figurative component of the idiom (literally “born well combed”); an English, saying “he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth”, is, to some extent, “protruding” the image into the phrase’s semantic structure.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

The context-analysis of materials was used to research the different aspects of idioms representations, such as the specificity of natural language, interpretation of adequate image-motivated meaning of phraseological units, cultural and linguistic competence representation of native speakers.

### 3. MAIN PART

A natural language has a unique structural dynamics transforming mental operations through arraying. In this sense, we can speak about the impact of language on cognitive processes. Language is not just a symbolic representational system, but above all, a means of receiving and transmitting information including a complex relationship between the speaker and a listener.

The participants of a speech act enter a kind of language game and unconsciously seek to subjugate the interlocutor. In one way or another they tend to self-assert at their counterpart’s expense and this fact can be considered as an “atavism” of the primordial self-preservation instinct [4, 5]. This act of communication is seen as an active, creative process of its members where an idiom is a complex unity, whose decoding is due to both linguistic and general behavior patterns. Idioms’ ethnocultural parameters can be identified both at the levels of the language and speech representation. Culturogenic aspect has a fundamental impact on the semantic parameters of the language since culture in itself is a special semasiological system that vectors and structures information. The mentality of a nation is actualized in the speech of its representatives by means of specific use of linguistic units, particularly idiomatic resources. Culturogenic ‘luggage’ allows native speakers to

easily allocate prototypical meanings and distinguish them from one another, which is manifested in verbal behavior, namely, in the distribution of language units. It should be mentioned here that the prototype is not deduced from mere frequency of its use. Rather, it is determined on the basis of its representative properties due to the particular ethnic group's conceptual and topological mental structure formed in the framework of the lexical-semantic and grammatical systems of the national language interacting with each other.

Thus, an ethnoeidetic gesture accompanying the idiom "raboty po gorlo" (literally, "work up to the throat") would be the hand movement across one's neck, while a French would hold their hand at nose level. Contextual equivalents of the Russian phrase would be "jusqu'aux yeux" (literally "to the eyes") or "par-dessus la tête" (literally "above the head"). In a moment of superstitious fear a Russian could spit three times over their left shoulder (traditional ward gesture against evil spirits) while the French would rather cross their middle and index fingers, trying to make it unseen by outsiders. National-cultural mental specificity reflected in phraseology is manifested mainly at the level of connotations [6]. For example: In different languages the meaning "heavy rain" is rendered as follows: Russian *lyot kak iz vedra* (literally "pours as from a bucket"); English *rains cats and dogs*; German *regnet in Strömen* (literally "pours in floods"), *regnet Bindfäden/Strippen* (literally "pours ropes"); French *comme vache qui pisse* (literally "as a cow pisses").

The meaning "death" is rendered by the following variants: Russian *sygrat' v yastchik* ("play in the box"), *duba dat'* ("give some oak"), *protyanut' nogi* ("stretch legs"); English *kick the bucket, bite the dust*; German *der Natur den Tribut zollen/bezahlen/entrichten* ("pay the tribute to the nature"), *die Augen schließen* ("close the eyes"); French *remercier son boulanger* ("thank one's baker"), *graisser ses bottes* ("smear one's boots").

Universal features of idiomatic systems are found primarily due to common human emotions. Since easily reproducible units of language are connected in most cases with an emotions, basic emotions are universal for any individual, they are characteristic of humanity as a whole, they can not always be controlled, they occur as a response to a stimulus. Therefore emotive phraseology first appears as a bright cross-cultural phenomenon. Consider the following collocations from different languages that partly match both in lexical units and in meanings: Russian *za dvumya zaitkami pigonishsya – ni odnogo ne poymayesh* ("if you chase two hares you will catch none"); German *wer zwei Hasen hetzt, fängt keinen* ("who chases two hares, catches none"); English *if you run after two hares, you will catch neither*; French *qui court deux lièvres n'en prend point* ("who chases two hares, will catch none"; Latin *duos qui sequitur lepores neutrum capit* ("who chases two hares, catches none"). As we can see, the general meaning of all these phrases is perfectly the same (following two objectives simultaneously and reaching none), while syntactic structures are but slightly different, showing structural features of every particular language.

We, therefore, quite agree with Levin-Steinmann's idea that an idiom's spread is reciprocal to its cultural and linguistic particularity [7]: Russian *govorit' v litso*; German *ins Gesicht sagen*; English *say to someone's face*. Universal features are seen in particular comparisons: Russian *krasny kak rak*; German *rot wie ein Krebs*; English *red as a lobster*. But such symmetry is not always so obvious throughout different comparative collocations. In the following examples semantic fields are different: Russian *pokhozhy kak dve kapli vody* (similar as two waterdrops); German *ähnlich wie ein Ei dem anderen* (alike as one egg to another); English *as like as two peas*.

The difference shows that linguistic specificity merges with a universal image. V. Maslova also explains the difference via "mismatch of secondary nomination techniques, not differences in cultural backgrounds". Specifics of any language, she continues, "lie within cultural and national connotations", symbols, stereotypes [8]. The interpretation of image-motivated idioms is due to the cultural and linguistic competence of the language speakers (and also cultural traditions) [9, 10]. Both universal and specific aspects of phraseology are closely connected with the origin of the idiom. If the origin of the collocation and its foreign-language counterparts comes from the same source, especially an ancient one (the Bible, mythology, legends, history, etc.), or these sources are copied from other languages, such collocations show a higher degree of "universality" than the idioms that have emerged and developed in a particular language.

Similar idioms, though, can emerge independently in different languages [11, 12]. The reason is the regularities in the development of closely related languages, and with it and, hence, a single, clear image of the idiom that allows to interpret its meaning from the standpoint of similar stereotypes and common cultural values.

Some scholars [13, 14 et al.] speak of the mixed nature of the idiom occurrence. Universal idioms, similar in both structure and semantics in several languages, can be formed either simultaneously or by borrowing from one language to another. It is often difficult to pinpoint or even suppose which language borrowed the idiom from the other. Such cases are far more frequent than idioms' disambiguation. For example: Latin *similia similibus curantur* (similar cures similar); English *like cures like*; German *ein Nagel treibt den anderen* (one nail drives out the other), *den Teufel treibt man mit Beelzebub aus* (one drives out the devil with Beelzebub); Russian *klin klinom vyshibayut* (a wedge is driven out with a wedge).

Here, obviously, the English idiom derives from its Latin counterpart while Russian and German variants retain the idea of "ridding of something using a similar means" but the associations underlying each idiom are different. Even less frequent are the cases of different semantics in structurally identical idioms if given word-for-word translation: Russian *obvesti vokrug pal'tsa* ("drive around one's finger") = cheat, trick; German *um den Finger wickeln* ("drive around one's finger") = subjugate, make submissive. A. Reichstein dubs such identities as 'translator's false friends': German *auf dem Teppig sein* ("be on the carpet") = know the advantages; Russian *byt' na kovre* ("be on the carpet") = receive a rebuke from the boss. Such differentiation lies within

denotation and, therefore, semantics of similar collocations [15]. Conceptual and communicative potential within the semantic structure of idioms can express a lot, while saving effort and at the same time revealing connotative meanings, “the spirit of nation”, according to W. Humboldt. Due to idioms’ reproducibility people subconsciously reflect a world view common to all the cultural and linguistic community. For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to identify all the implicit cultural meanings of idioms that are the link between language and culture, as evidenced by that cultural coloring that idioms bring into various types of discourse.

Comprehension of reality is mainly associated with the prototypical principle of categorization, which is implemented by representatives of each national and cultural community – as a rule, in accordance with the specific inherent laws of a particular ethnic group’s perception [16]. The prototype is considered the most representative unit, which has the maximum number of features with less typical representatives of the category clustering around. Nuclear and peripheral elements of cognition are distributed in linguistic structures depending on the configuration of communication lines inherent to a certain conceptualization type.

Nuclear knowledge forms differ throughout ethnic groups, despite the possible overlap between the peripheral areas, and are conditioned by a particular thought pattern, a system of cognitive (perceptual) structures specific to the national and cultural community. A prototypical French drink is wine; a prototypical French vegetable is, evidently, spinach, while in Russia it is vodka and potatoes. This is also pronounced in quite a few idioms: *quand le vin est tiré, il faut le boire* (when the wine is poured it should be drunk = if you begin something you should end it); *mettre du beurre dans les épinards* (put some butter on the spinach = become rich or get a surplus income); *nos kartoshkoy* (= bulbous nose, literally “potato-shaped”), etc. National types of conceptualization may be found at all levels of idiomatic expressions, the problem is the delimitation of universal and individual functioning of the national elements in semantics, which are part of the ethno-cultural way of dividing reality.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Each nation has a specific set of psychological and behavioral stereotypes, in one way or another common to all members of the historically developed society. Typology of behavior is caused by many factors, of which culturogenic aspects seem the most significant, being associated with the national peculiarities of cultural formation and development of a particular ethnic group with a certain mode of life. The psychological and communicative aspects of culture can be defined as a set of knowledge, ideas, images, feelings and attitudes that reflect the organization of human activity, which are represented in artefacts, rules, institutions, spiritual values and people’s attitude towards the outside world and to themselves. In this sense, culturogenic information has an organizational impact on the individual’s thought patterns and the structure of society in terms of their interaction with the environment, real or virtual.

If we consider the process of communication as a permanent correlation of communicative information with the system of conceptual and linguistic categories, it is possible to speak of a direct link between the process of perception and its designation by units of the language. Interiorization of information, or the transition from perception to cognition, goes through categorization. According to V. Mikhailov, “The categorization is an act of thinking, is a thought, a judgment on the subject of thought and the act of making a decision on its designation. (...) Categorization as a definition of the subject’s image in the form of knowledge, in the form of accumulated experience, as the process of recognition of experience and its conceptual definition is a process of object’s nomination in certain circumstances and for a specific purpose” [17].

Epistemological basis for linguistic and cultural study of phraseology is ethnolinguistics, but it examines the specific features of phraseological stock of a particular language in the diachronic aspect, while research in the field of cultural linguistics phraseology involves consideration of the interaction between language and culture of one nation or several cultural and linguistic communities in contemporary semiotic presentation. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to approach the study of phraseological stock from different perspectives of language and general educational disciplines, forming, thus, comprehensive knowledge in the field of linguistics and to give a complete picture of perceptions of the inexhaustible richness of collocations, their semantics, options of personal outlook and worldview as well as those of human society as a whole.

Thus, the material in question helps reveal both universal features of idioms in different languages and specific features in the semantics and structure of collocations. Similarities and differences are often due to the origins of language units of data. The main causes of the universal idioms are ancient sources (the Bible, mythology, ancient writings, etc.) [18], or transiting from one language to another.

#### 5. SUMMARY

The cause of the national specificity of phraseology is vagueness in the relationship between the content and form, i.e., a low degree of “shape-sense” correlation which mainly constitutes idiomaticity [19]. The degree of specificity of the different idioms varies. The difference of idioms throughout languages is due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors: traditions, rituals, historical events, beliefs, etc., which determines the identity of a nation.

Comparing phraseology of typologically different languages is aimed primarily at identifying common patterns of imaginative remodeling of collocations, or major differences in the ways by which idioms are

produced and reproduced by the members of the same nation. Interlingual comparison of phraseological units shows relative identity, while overlapping in non-related languages is, indeed, quite rare.

Comparing phraseology of related languages reveals the historical linguistic community reflected in the semantic and structural identity of the language units. Comparison of idioms in unrelated languages makes it possible not only to determine phraseological equivalents for translation, but also to study the phraseology in all aspects of cross-cultural complex.

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