

## Psycholinguistic Criteria for Understanding Phraseological Units

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### Abstract

*This article deals with the problems of mental perception and cultural interpretation of phraseological units in their occasional use in the English and Russian languages. The role of phraseological unit's inner form in ability to undergo any transformations is investigated, imagery associations are compared, functions of stylistic devices in transformation of phraseological units are defined in structurally different languages as English and Russian. The main goal is to investigate the cultural and national specificity of phraseological units in occasional use, to define language standards and stereotypes, as well as the cultural interpretation of phraseological units. The hypothesis stating that phraseological unit possesses a structure of knowledge including denotative, evaluative, emotional, cultural and stylistic components was experimentally confirmed.*

**Keywords:** *psycholinguistic experiment; occasional use; imagery associations; archetype; stereotype.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The nature of nonce phraseological units

The term "phraseology" was introduced by a prominent Swiss scholar of French origin Charles Bally at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first to raise the question of phraseology as a linguistic subject was Professor Ye. D. Polivanov, a well-known Russian scientist. Academician V. V. Vinogradov was the first to work out the classification of Russian phraseological units, which gave rise to extensive investigation of phraseology in other languages (Vinogradov 1974).

A man is a bearer of national mentality, which can be investigated through language, being the most important means of man's identification (Gvozdev, 2010). The nature of nonce phraseological units determines the necessity of their investigation in the anthropocentric paradigm. The sources of enriching the phraseological fund of the languages are economic and political activity, sport and show business of native speakers, whose intentions serve as pragmatic background for phraseological transformations.

In comparison with other branches of linguistics with many centuries of development phraseology can be considered a young child though rather intelligent and shrewd. Its domain is constituted by picturesque and vivid elements termed phraseological units (PUs), which are characterized by a certain transference of meaning (Kuiper, 2014).

Phraseology is a special part of wealth of each language in which the originality and uniqueness of the language and the people are shown (Melerovich, 2008). In the light of keen interest in studying of cultures and languages of the different people linguists-lexicographers, translators and teachers of foreign languages are more increasing the need for more exact transfer of semantic volume of this or that language unit. Phraseological creativity is the ability of macro-metaphorical conceptual models, on the one hand, to systemically create phraseological images, on the other hand, to individually adapt any phraseological image to the communicative process (Arsenteva, Safina 2014).

It is the experimental data that gives us reason to highlight the stereotypical comparisons, considered as cliches, characteristic of people of certain language and of certain culture.

When we have objective data about typical and stereotypical comparisons, we can understand the ontology and mechanisms of their functioning in a language or a text (Khalikova, 2004).

### 1.2 *Idioms in the works of European and Russian linguists*

Questions relating to the functioning of phraseological units in a non-standard form in various discourses were considered in the works of Russian scientists as Kunin A. (Kunin, 1996), Mokienco V. (Mokienco, 1995), Alefirenko N., (Alefirenko, 2004), Shadrin N. (Shadrin, 1991), Molotkov A. (Molotkov, 1977), Ryzhkina E. (Ryzhkina, 2003), Boldyrev N. (Boldyrev, 2007), Bondarenko V. (Bondarenko, 2012) and others. There was identified the community of transformation processes occurring in different languages, the universality and system changes of phraseological units in speech, the nature of occasional changes of language units and its attitude with contextual environment.

The study of occasional features of phraseological units was carried out in the framework of functional and stylistic approaches, where the emphasis was given to the identification of the stylistic role of phraseological units in individual style of different authors like in the works of English poets and writers as Byron, Chaucer, Dickens and others.

Scientists are investigating psycholinguistic mechanisms of author's creation and transformation of phraseological units, its methods and techniques, revealing the peculiarities of semantic content in a literary text.

Scientist Andras Balint defines an idiom as "phraseological unit when the whole meaning can not be singled out of its separate meanings of components" (Balint, 1969). Thus he excludes from consideration of idiomaticity all what is called lexemic idioms. In the field of investigating the idioms, the first place takes semantics, then lexicography and only then goes syntax.

The representative of the Prague linguistic school F. Cermak considers that "the peculiarity feature of each idiom is any anomaly, at least one of its components if we touch it paradigmatic and syntagmatic aspects" (Cermak, 1991).

B. Frazer offers a rather original and reasonable interpretation of an idiom from the transformational production point of view (Frazer, 1968). He states that idioms, which are classified in seven levels of "freezing", usually symbolize author's dialect and, thus, should be recognized as universally valid. This position is quite clear and includes an idiomatic analysis of all parameters.

Thus, in the Western linguistics phraseological unit is considered to be as a unique and fixed combination of at least two elements, some of which do not operate in other situations but act in very limited number.

Taking into account the existence of a common word-building base, we are able to explore the material from different perspectives, to identify its similarities and differences by establishing the degree of coincidence of semantic processes in the formation of phraseological units in the English and Russian languages.

### 1.3 *Psycholinguistic experiment as a relevance evaluation and semantics identification of a phraseological transform*

Series of psycholinguistic experiments intending to find out the specific nature of nonce phrases conceptualization in phraseology (347 questionnaires, more than 1,7 thousand reactions), and also intending to investigate the process of perception of phraseological transforms, were carried out in Russia and England from 2007 to 2014.

The form of the psycholinguistic experiment was written and individual. Restriction of phraseological transforms in experimental list (30 units) to illustrate the main points of the research (verbal nature of a phraseological sign, symmetry of form and meaning, established as a result of a phraseological transformation) was held according to the principle of semiotic models variety. These models differ in their degree of standardization and functional load, caused by creation the effect of language sign arbitrariness, stimulating the recipients to use the semiotic code and cognitive models of a language.

### 1.4 *The hypothesis of the experiment*

The hypothesis of the experiment can be stated in the following way: the mechanisms of cognitive processing of figurative base of a phraseological unit work simultaneously, as they are responsible for different aspects of nonce phraseological unit meaning. Figurative base presents not only base for conceptualization and categorization of objective reality but also the emotion stimulus, motivating stimulus, a "hint" for cultural interpretation of the meaning, causing native speaker's emotive attitude. There upon it is actual to indicate how right the ethnopsychologists are, studying ethnocultural stereotypes, when they state that economically developed nations value intellect, efficiency, industriousness, whereas less developed nations value kindness, heartiness, hospitality.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 The procedure of the experiment*

The aim of the psycholinguistic experiments is to explore cultural and national specific character of nonce phraseological units applied in the languages which are genetically and systematically different, and to reveal the characteristic features of Russian and English cultures reflecting psychological peculiarities of native speakers. In this experiment the following problems have been solved: 1) to define national vision of a man in language models and stereotypes; 2) to ascertain the mechanism of cultural interpretation of nonce phraseological units; 3) to examine the hypothesis experimentally, according to which figurative base of phraseological units represents the structure of knowledge, consisting of denotative, evaluative, emotional, emotive, cultural and stylistic components.

### *2.2 Participant Characteristics*

In the course of the experiment the following requirements were complied: 1) absence of informants' interest in experiment results; 2) anonymity of informants; 3) unlimitedness of associations; 4) limitedness of latent period (30 seconds). The total quantity of informants were 177 English and Russian native speakers.

The experiment was carried out in 3 stages:

On the first stage the informant was offered a stimulus - phraseological transformation, which he was supposed to interpret. He was recommended to use the first reactions, coming to his mind, his choice was not restricted by any classifying features. On the second stage associative and notional field of reactions, received from the given stimulus, was classified according to its notional constituent. On the third stage adequacy of interpretation and author's individual intention in the text was evaluated.

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 The asymmetry of Russian and English images-associations*

The main results of the experiment can be formed in the following way: all the native speakers defined the semantics of phraseological modification. The differences took place when evaluating the connotative, functional and stylistic components of meaning: ironic against humorous, vulgar against abusive, etc.

Informant's answers were characterized by the set of synonyms to the author's nonce phraseological transformation. It should be noticed that nonce phraseological units, taken in a context, were more expressive in informants' answers than those nonce phraseological units without context. Emotions differed too when perceiving phraseological units out of context and nonce phraseological units in context.

Experiment showed that Russian native speakers' images-associations, which occur when perceiving nonce phraseological units, were more various than those of English native speakers. English native speakers use images connected with natural phenomena and mythic characters. Russian native speakers use images from literature and folklore characters. Quantitative analysis of stereotypes, appearing in the text, shows that in Russian linguistic consciousness there are less stereotypes than in English linguistic consciousness (Davletbaeva, 2012).

### *3.2 Nonce phraseological units as a reflection of stereotypical nature of native speakers*

Nonce phraseological units, presented in context, were noticed to be more expressive than those out of context. It should be noticed that emotions varied in course of perceiving phraseological units out of context and nonce phraseological units in context.

Stereotypical nature of native speakers' reactions towards nonce phraseological units allow to make conclusion that typicality of images, underlying phraseological meanings, and involvement of the symbol, models and culture settings, reflecting the understanding, characteristic of the linguocultural unity, brings us to the idea that phraseological unit is the result of a collective thinking (Maslova, 2001). Moreover, the fact that it is impossible to comprehend a phraseological unit only according to the individual experience, figurativeness of these linguistic units and their ability to cause certain feelings, emotions and relations, allows to determine the cultural identity of the speakers. All this makes it possible to assume that phraseological units are the collective representations that belong to the archaic way of thinking, and therefore phraseologisms must be generated and perceived by the archaic structures of consciousness that co-exist

along with the structures of logics. This type of consciousness is characterized by the syncretism of psychic processes, concrete and imaginary nature of nature processes, unique logics that does not presuppose the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship and based on the law of "communion" meaning the identification of the object and the subject.

It was revealed that the acceptability of any construction from recipient's point of view is determined by correlation with a linguistic norm and the corresponding model and ability to its logically correct interpretation. In its formal structure many nonce units are entities, corresponding to an active or passive phrase-generating model created, however, in violation of the laws of the compatibility and interoperability of immediate constituents. Therefore the interpretation in many cases is entirely dependent on the context.

### 3.3 Phraseological units serve as cultural and linguistic stereotypes

The original PhU is not a product created in the act of communication, in opposition to an occasional phraseological unit. It is reproduced in a speech in its actual form. They have already laid the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. The speaker only needs to identify his intentions with that, what is conventionally attached in idioms, in their standard use and perception. This feature of phraseological units determines ability to serve as cultural and linguistic stereotypes.

As for the nonce PhU, their indirect meaning and statement aims are conventionally fixed, prescribed and predetermined by structure and purpose of the context.

Nonce PhU with a positive connotation, denoting the traits, arouse more varied responses than PhU describing negative traits where answers are more monotonous and stereotyped. At first glance, this contradicts the well-known fact: all the negative in the language is recorded in detail, thoroughly and diversely. However, a closer look shows that PhU with a negative evaluation, exceeding positive ones in quantity, divide the continuum picture of the world into smaller segments, that is more accurate.

Comparison of Russian and English material revealed that many meanings of nonce PhU produce similar images-associations, but even in this case their "profiles" are quite different. Because of the remoteness of the cultures and languages national linguistic consciousness in presented ethnic groups have different aesthetic ideals.

It appears that the way of thinking, connected with comprehending PhU, mostly inherits archaic forms of thinking. These forms are characterized by illogicality because it functions on the basis of the law of participation and communion, involving the identification of a subject and an object.

As experimental data showed that national linguistic personality perceives an object not according to space and time, but also according to the meaning, containing cultural stereotypes and models.

As the members of the same national unity see the world and perceive the world through these stereotypes, it is reflected and reserved in language with the help of linguistic stereotypes and model. Model in this case is an idealized stereotype, which represents on social and psychological level a reflection of a person's normative vision about humans, world, society, etc.

As shown in informants' answers, components of personal meaning are present both in the English and the Russian mentalities. Comparative analysis revealed that understanding of nonce PhU meaning and presence of personal meaning are two different, but coexisting levels of meaning representation in native speaker's consciousness. Therefore the image is always open for new interpretations and is subject to semantic transformations.

However in English speakers' answers non-conventional interpretation of the image prevails. This image can be interpreted on the base of nonce transformation of PhU.

The perception of nonce PhU depends on three parallel processes: the first one relates to the native speakers' reaction on a literal interpretation of the image and the actualization of the deep structures of consciousness; the second one relates to the logical structures of consciousness that provide a metaphorical interpretation of the image; the third one relates to the immersion of subjects in the context of cultural meanings, that is suggests some level of cultural and linguistic competence in general.

In its most general form it is possible to represented a scheme reflecting the structure of knowledge, as well as a mechanism of cultural interpretation of nonce PhU:

Table 1:

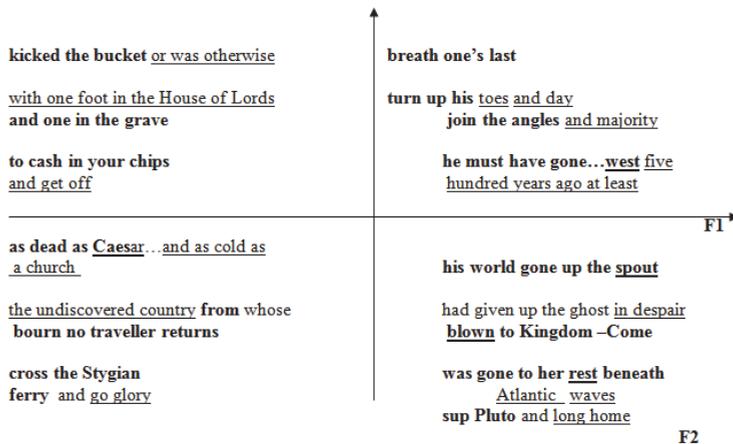
	Mode of knowledge existence	Reaction on type of knowledge	Level of analysis
1	Attitudes of the culture	Emotivity	Interpretative
2	Denotatum	Evaluation	Rational
3	Image	Emotion	Affective
4	Archetypical image (culture code)	Archetypical relevance of an image	Unconscious interpretation
5	Archetypical attitudes	"Basic feeling"	Deep reflexive

Native speakers have the cultural code by which they interpret the meaning of the PhU not only consciously, but also on the level of the unconscious, traces of which are identified in the course of the experiment.

As a rating scales, the adjectives covering the whole range of sensations (e.g. hot-warm, fresh - musty, light - heavy, hard - soft, incomprehensible - clear) were used.

#### 4. Discussion

The data processing procedure was carried out as follows: the individual matrix (protocols) of informants' answers were combined in the total matrix (15h16), which underwent the correlative and factor analysis. The procedure of factor analysis allows us to go from the description of objects (nonce PhU) with the original set of scales (adjectives) to more integral description given by a small number of factors, which are a form of a generalized set of adjectives.



As a result of factor analysis, nonce PhU and adjectives were distributed on two factors having the following factorial weights: F1 (9 , 764) and F2 (2, 812) in English and F1 (7 , 673 ) and F2 (3, 450) in Russian language .

F1, formed by the adjectives: cold (cold), blunt (sharp), musty (musty), heavy (heavy), restraint (bound), etc. corresponded to the following nonce PhU: kicked the bucket or was otherwise; to cash in your chips and get off; as dead as Caesar ... and as cold as a church. Factor F1, formed respectively by the adjectives: soft (soft), light (light), warm (warm), weak (weak), fresh (fresh) and etc. correspond with such nonce PhU as: breath one's last; join the angles; his world gone up the spout; blown to Kingdom-Come.

This factor corresponds to the classical Ch.E. Osgood's terms "evaluation" and "activity – passivity." Positive evaluation coincides with the passive vector and the negative evaluation coincides with the active vector. Thus, the following PhU received positive evaluation: join the angles; cross the Stygian ferry and go to glory; was gone to her rest beneath the Atlantic waves. The following PhU received negative evaluation: to cash in your chips and get off; he must have gone ... west five hundred years ago at least.

Factor F2 is called "effacement – clarity," which is a variant of the classical factor "strength" (intensity).

The pole "effacement" formed by the adjectives: obliterated, indistinct, hollow, deaf, far, corresponded these nonce PhU: the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns; was gone to her rest beneath the Atlantic waves; sup with Pluto and long home; cross the Stygian ferry and go to glory; he must have gone ... west five hundred years ago at least; had given up the ghost in despair in the English language.

The pole "distinctiveness" corresponded the adjectives: distinct (clear), clear (clear), close (close), resounding (ringing) and nonce PhU: with one foot in the House of Lords and one in the grave; turn up his toes and day.

Thus, a small weight of factor F2 both in English and in Russian can be explained due to the fact that the semantic content of this factor is less significant for the subjects of the two nations, as the informants did not indicate the nonce PhU, whose figurative base, from their point of view, "it is difficult imagine" or, on the contrary, "very well presented."

The experimental data reveals that nonce PhU of ideographic field «death» are perceived and experienced by speakers of both languages in the same way.

## 5. Conclusion

Transforming idioms, the native speaker tries to update the elements of the internal structure of phraseological unit by manipulation of the components. Phraseological transform is perceived then by the recipient by establishing the connection with the original language unit. The new meaning is based on the conventional idiomatic sense.

Comparison of Russian and English of the experimental material, aimed at identifying similar and different reactions in the perception of nonce PhU, helped to identify the cultural and national identity of these two people.

The process of perception of phraseological units in occasional use can be regarded as a process of solving a practical problem: whether this problem is creative for a native speaker or not. Does the native speaker know the conventional meaning of the phraseological unit? It is revealed that native speakers follow different cultural guideline when describing the meaning of imaginative base of phraseological units in occasional use.

It is evident that the way of thinking associated with the perception of phraseological units inherits the archaic forms of thinking, involving the identification of subject and object.

The results can be used to explore the cultural identity of British and Russian phraseological transforms and provide a basis for bilingual dictionaries.

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