

English idioms describing a person's character!

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Abstract

The article is concerned with the study of English idioms describing a person's character. Comprehensive analysis of an emotive evaluative component of idioms indicating on the person's character traits has been performed. As the material of the study, 752 idioms of English language were used.

In this paper, we analyzed the positive, negative and neutral evaluative connotations within the semantic meanings of idioms that indicate a person's character. Phraseological units with zoonym component were classified.

The study found that sub-groups "rudeness", "cruelty", "impudence", "meanness" and "haughtiness" exceed in the number of English phraseological units. The research has also shown idioms expressing negative traits of human character dominate the positive or neutral evaluation.

Key words: phraseological units, emotive evaluative connotations, idioms-zoonyms, English language, semantic analysis, anthropocentricity

Introduction

Idiom can be defined as a cluster of cultural information, where cultural and national character is accumulated (Telija, 2014; Liu, 2017). Idioms reflect the life of the nation, and their meaning cannot be determined without background knowledge of native speakers (Caldas-Coulthard, van Leeuwen, 2003). Phraseological units (PU) attribute to object the signs that are associated with a worldview, they also mean a descriptive situation (text), evaluate it, express the attitude to it. PU and their semantics are referred to characteristic of a person and his/her reality.

That is exactly why while analyzing the linguistic view of the world created by the idioms, anthropocentricity becomes its main feature (Angelova, 2004; Hellinger, Motschenbacher, 2015; Kecskes, 2014; Krasnyh, 2002; Kunin, 1989; Peromingo, 2010; Piirainen, 2014; Sternin, 2006). If lexical means of language express almost the entire conceptual worldview, phraseological means of language characterize areas with anthropomorphic semantics generally (Semushina, 2010).

Emotional sphere plays an important role in the development of a common base of knowledge and values and, consequently, in the formation of PU as a figurative and marked nationally linguistic unit. PU of emotive semantics, as well as other PU demonstrate the close relationship of the national, social (Rampton, 1999), and linguistic phenomena.

The analysis of idioms identifying a person's character makes it possible to understand the culture and traditions of the nation internally, as well as to study the language from the linguoculturological point of view (Angelova, 2004). Language images embodied in phraseological system, being national ways of world perception, are based on the general for all the people logical-psychological and linguistic grounds. On the one hand, their explication helps to reveal the mechanism of visual thinking, and on the other hand, to discover the immanent laws of language as a system of signs, which are responsible for the internal organization of phraseological system.

Any language is inherently anthropocentric, since, on the one side, it describes the reality through its perception by a person, and, on the other side, the language has an extensive tool set for the description of the person (Angelova, 2004; Hellinger,

Motschenbacher, 2015; Krasnyh, 2002). The linguistic direction of current importance is the study of human language assessments and all the variety of its characteristics. Therefore, the study of person's character in the language system (in our case in phraseology) is the basis of our research.

During the analysis of the peculiarities of idiomatic expressions about human character, national and cultural context is important. Three levels can be distinguished, where the national and cultural identity of phraseology may be revealed:

- 1) in overall phraseological meaning (unequivalent or lacunar phraseological units);
- 2) in the meaning of the individual lexical components (PU that have in their composition the designation of national and cultural reality);
- 3) in the proper meaning of free combination, which has been imaginatively reinterpreted (i.e. in PU prototypes) (Arsent'eva, 2006).

This three-level approach to the identification of cultural and national markedness of PU for the first time was described by Vereshagin and Kostomarov (2005).

As part of phraseological language linguocultural community identifies their national consciousness and idioms, in particular, impose on speakers a particular world perception, situations (Telija, 2014). Different language communities, using different tools for generation of concept, form a diverse worldviews, which are, in fact, fundamental for national cultures (Bragina, 2000; Kecskes, 2014; Zykova, 2013).

Multitudinous lexical set of the English language includes PU with adjectives that indicate a person's character. The researchers attribute this idioms an evaluative connotation, which serves as the main macro-component in their connotative meaning (Ilyushenko, 2011). Such an evaluative connotation makes it possible to define the positive and negative traits of character. We are of the opinion that the issue of phraseological units that characterize the person's character are analyzed insufficiently. The researchers are not paying great attention to the emotive aspect of idioms (Peromingo, 2010; Sinelnikov, 2015).

Linguistic research of nominative units with animalistic component was carried out on the certain language material (Kryzhko, 2006; Sharova, 2010) and in the aspect of interlanguage comparison (Hsieh, 2014; Piirainen, 2014; Sava, Apelkvist, 2014). However, the study of linguocultural signs of English zoonym term system remains underexplored. The analysis of the literature confirmed the insufficient study of phraseological units describing a person's character.

In this paper, phraseological units with animalistic component were structured according to features of human character (with positive and negative evaluation). The aim of the article is a comprehensive analysis of emotive-evaluative component of idioms describing a person's traits of character. Hence, the following tasks of the article were accomplished:

- a comprehensive analysis of English idioms indicating the person's character has been made;
- a classification of emotive evaluative component of the connotations of English phraseological units has been proposed;
- idioms-zoonyms that describe person's character has been defined.

Methods and Materials

As the material of the study, 752 idioms of English language were used and taken from monolingual and bilingual phraseological dictionaries. The analysis of phraseological units, which describe person's character, has been carried out based on excerpts of idioms from such phraseological dictionaries as Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms and English Idioms & Idiomatic Expressions.

The classification, which was implemented in this study, makes it possible to trace the functioning of phraseological units as an integral group indicating qualities human traits of character. We received 25 groups, which express such traits of character as cowardice, obedience, helplessness, garrulity, haughtiness, innocence, kindness, naivety, uncertainty, empathy, guile, foolishness, vigour, intelligence, courage, perseverance, cunning, resoluteness, loyalty, greed, frivolity, petulance, malignity, honesty and diligence.

The analysis of phraseological corpus showed that phraseological units, which denote negative qualities of person's character are dominant in speech. For a more systematic study, received 25 groups were divided on positive, negative groups and those where the positive-negative characteristic depends on the context. The phraseological units with zoonyms that describe both negative and positive traits of character were placed among the groups.

Results

Phraseological units identifying person's character are numerous group of idioms; they have a developed meaning, image and expressive mean system. Due to plurality of PU, which causes some problems in analysis, we have selected three main groups of idioms in English depending on the evaluation connotation of the phraseological meaning: positive evaluation, negative evaluation and neutral evaluation. The numeric distribution of the PU in mentioned groups indicates the presence of common pattern, the similarity between phraseological microsystems of PU.

The study have shown that the majority of idioms that indicate a person's character, define negative traits. This is largely due to the fact that such expressions person uses in the heat of passion. Psychologists define passion as a negative emotional state, a sense of psychological discomfort and insecurity with individual hypersensitivity. The researchers explain that by the reason that negative phenomena mostly produce the vivid emotional reaction of people, and in this condition, established terms are being used (Sternin, 2006). The most common idioms that define negative traits of character are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Phraseological units with negative evaluative connotation.

Evaluative connotations	Phraseological unit	
Haughtiness, vanity, impudence	have a chip on one's shoulder	swelled head
	big-headed	bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh
	drop (weep) millstones	blood from/out of a stone/turnip
Cruelty	(one's eyes drop millstones)	
Unamiability, callousness	trigger-happy	
	be full of vinegar	hard-hearted
	hard as a flint	have no bowels mouth off
Cowardice	hard-boiled egg	
	be afraid of one's shadow	yellow dog
	lily-livered	as weak as water
Laziness	timid as a hare	as scared as a rabbit
	lazy beggar (dog, bones)	eat the bread idleness
	let the grass grow under one's feet	a man of nothing to do
	twiddle one's thumbs	sit like a bump on the log
Greed, egoism	to idle away one's time	
	be full of oneself	whip the cat
Foolishness	hoggish	an itching palm
	as dumb as a rock	dead from the neck up

Characterlessness	as dumb as a doorknob	nutty as a fruitcake
	a dumb bunny	as dumb as a box of rocks
	have rocks in one's head	
	to follow like sheep	weak as water
	nose of wax	as harmless as a dove
Hypocrisy	poor fish	as harmless as a kitten
	an old bird is not caught with chaff	make semblance (put on a semblance) of something
	double game	look one way and row another
	window dressing	cry with one eye laugh with another
	play a double game	shoot a pigeon and kill crow
Frivolity	show a false face	go out of one's head
		have a cylinder missing
	light as butterfly	two heads are better than one
	have a head like a sieve;	to have rocks in one's head
	scatterbrain	
	flibbertigibbet	
	wooden-headed	

As Table 1 shows, the most common idioms of negative evaluation describe such traits of character as haughtiness, vanity and impudence. In the vocabulary of these phraseological units there are words defining the upper parts of the human body: have a chip on one's shoulder; big-headed; swelled head; bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh; to crane one's neck; to throw back one's head. This is due to the fact that through these parts of the body a person expresses haughtiness, vanity and impudence. Numerous enough to form a subgroup of PU with an overall meaning of "cruelty" form sufficiently numerous sub-group.

In addition to the above idioms, there are other groups, which are less common such as hesitancy (buridan's ass; a donkey between two bundles of hay), impatience (ants in one's pants/slippery as an ell, as hot as pepper, as mad as a hatter, ants in one's pants, as tough as old boots, as crazy as a loon, as crazy as a coot, as crazy as a bedbug), adulation (tame spaniel; hay it on with a trowel), unreliability (weak sister; man of straw; as changeable as the weather, as changeable as a weathercock, as changeable as the moon).

Idioms with a positive connotative evaluation are those that have approving meaning as a statement of social evaluation of certain character traits. Their number is significantly smaller than the number of idioms with a negative evaluation. The idioms that define positive traits of character are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Phraseological units with negative evaluative connotation.

Evaluative connotations	Phraseological unit	
Restraint	to keep oneself in the check	to keep one's shirt on
	possess one's soul	to keep a grip on oneself
	keep one's balance	not to bat an eyelid
	put a good face on something; in one's sober senses	to get hot under the collar
		to up the wall
		to hit the roof
		to blow a fuse
	to quarrel with one's shadow	
	to be strait-laced	
	not to turn a hair	

	keep (observe) measure (measures) to keep one's hair on man of courage take something well as brave as a lion take it on the chin as hard as iron as hard as a stone fear no colours high blood	
Courage		grasp the nettle be free of one's flesh a heart of oak man of action man of horseback as bold as a lion as hard as nails
Resolution	a man with plenty of guts steady as a rock play a straight bat as straight as a die	Daniel come to judgment straight goods straight dealing keep on the course
Honesty	as honest as a man as ever broke bread (as ever lived by bread) shoe leather honest, as the skin between his brows	come from the shoulder the clean thing as honest as a day
Politeness	all things to all man bland as oil	keep a civil tongue
Mercy	be milk of human kindness have a heart	man of feeling man of heart
Prudence	man of sense sober as a judge true as the needle to the pole	man with brains have a ready wit birds of a feather flock together
Allegiance	true as steel every dog has his day bear pool	true as flint true as the needle to the pole
Diligence	have one's heart in one's work be a devil to work a willing horse work one's head off put some ginger into	work double tides work at high pressure work up to the collar take off one's coat

PU with the meaning "restraint" form the most numerous phraseological semantic sub-group. The next most numerous group of idioms has evaluative connotation "courage".

The following classification determines the rest of the phraseological units with a positive assessment.

Besides the above listed groups of idioms, there are phraseological units denoting some traits of character that are neither positive nor negative. This so-called intermediate meaning depends on the situation. In this case, positive or negative trait will have occasional character.

Obstinacy/stick-to-itiveness: keep a stiff upper lip; obstinate as a mule; stiff neck; bull-headed; stubborn beggar.

Cunning: as clever as a cartload of monkeys; as tricky as a monkey; artful as a cartload monkey; be up to trap; sly as a fox; too far north.

Vigour: Ants in one's pants; As hot as pepper; Hothead; Hotter than a pistol; Man of action; Slippery as an ell.

Composure: Bear and forbear; Have iron nerve; Cool head; Man of nerve; Keep a level head; Cool as cucumber.

The phraseological group of zoomorphic phraseological units is interesting for consideration.

Idioms with zoonym component can be divided into several subgroups: idioms related to animals, idioms related to birds, idioms related to insects, idioms related to fish and idioms related to reptiles. The idioms related to animals and birds are divided into idioms with names of wild animals and idioms with names of the domestic animals in turn.

The comparison to any animals is built on the associative characteristics of habits of this animal. For example, comparison with trickery of monkey – as tricky as monkey; fox cunning – old fox; butterfly light – light as a butterfly; goose stupidity – as silly/stupid as a goose; snake intelligence and wisdom – as wise as a serpent and etc.

The phraseological units with zoonym components can be expressed:

- positive evaluation: take the bull by horns (confidence, activity, purposefulness), gentle as lamb (kindness);

- negative human character evaluation: proud as a peacock (proud (from pride)); a dumb bunny (stupidity), sly as a fox (cunning), as stubborn as a mule (stubbornness), as gruff as a bear (awkwardness), as awkward as a cow on roller skates (clumsiness), as mad as a March hare (madness).

As the above examples show, the range of idioms with a negative evaluation of negative traits is significantly wider. This is due to the relationship of man to the animals as to the creature of a much lower level.

The phraseological units, defining the human character, can have connotations inside the positive or negative meaning of expression.

For example, the positive connotation relation to people is represented by the following meanings: “assistance/mutual assistance”, “justice”, “peacefulness”, “hospitality” and etc., and the negative connotation of rage is represented by the net evaluative meanings: “state”, “scandal” and “dispute” and etc. (Table 3, 4):

Table 3. The evaluative connotations of phraseological units, defining “relation to people” as display of human character.

Evaluative connotations	Phraseological unit
Assistance/Mutual assistance	to be in somebody’s corner; to be at the back of somebody; to go all the way with somebody ; to pull the rug out from under somebody;
Justice	to see somebody in the same light;
Peacefulness	to make good bed fellows; to go all the way with somebody; to have a soft spot for;
Hospitality	to make smb. free of one’s house, to throw open the door to, to be “at home” to people; to treat somebody like a lord; to keep a good table/house; to keep open house/table.
Self-sacrifice	fling/throw oneself into the breach; pull/snatch smb. out of the fire;
Openness	a good mixer; as open as the day
Obsequiousness	be lavish/loud in one’s praise(s); plaster smb. with praise; dance attendance on smb.; sing smb’s praises; curry favour with smb.; say ditto to smb.; hay it on with a trowel.
Trust	a sheep among wolves; a babe in the wood(s);

Neglect	to leave somebody in the cold; to make a stranger of somebody; to turn a cold shoulder on somebody; to turn a blind eye to somebody; to give somebody the back; to pass somebody by on the other side; to cut somebody dead;
Mockeries, scorns	to look down one's nose at somebody; to think small beer of others; to make fish of one and flesh of another;
Persistence	to trip over yourself; to use all muscles; to follow to the letter; to move the mountains; clockwork precision; draw the bow up the ear; move heaven and earth; as hot as pepper; hotter than a pistol; slippery as an ell.

Table 4. Evaluative connotations of phraseological units, defining "rage" as display of the human character.

Evaluative connotations	Phraseological unit
State	to be in a fume; to have steam coming out of one's ears; to bite the carpet; to blow off steam; to lead with one's chin; to throw one's weight around; to rattle one's cage; to add fuel to the fire
Scandal	to kick up a row/dust; to raise the roof; to make a stink; to wake snakes; to take the law into one's own hands; to make mincemeat of somebody; to eat somebody alive; to wipe the floor with somebody; to put one's foot on another's neck;
Dispute	to give somebody the (rough) edge of one's to give somebody a bit of one's mind; to give somebody a rap on the knuckles; to haul somebody over the coals; to throw something in one's teeth/throat/face; to throw something in somebody's dish; to come down on somebody like a ton of bricks; to go bald-headed at; to drive to the wall; to fall upon somebody hammer and tongs
Cruelty	trigger-happy; blood from/out of a stone/turnip;
Irritation	get one's back (or dander) up;
Impudence	as bold as brass; a cool beggar/card/customer/fish/hand

Some evaluative connotations in the phraseological units are connected with mythology, cinema and literary heroes, biblical characters etc.

For example, the phraseological unit "Devil's advocate" acquired popularity after publication of the mystical drama of Taylor Hackford with the same meaning «Devil's advocate». The phraseological unit means "a human, who protects the mistaken deed or wrong state of things", "fervent debaters", "prejudiced critic, who fundamentally take the party of opposition".

Nevertheless, the phraseological unit entered into daily usage after appearance of the film, and this expressed was used in the Latin language yet – "Advocatus diabolic". The meaning of this expression was connected with the process of canonization that provided dispute between "God's advocate" – a human, who protected dignities of the future saint and "Devil's advocate" – a human, who denied the right for holiness, speaking about shortages of canonized person.

The positive connotation in the meaning of human character as a dreamer, fighter for justice is represented in the meaning of phraseological unit "the knight of the Rueful Countenance". This phraseological unit was borrowed from the novel "Don Quixote" – the knight of sad image that meant a human dreamer, whose ideas were finished by misfortunes. However, the phraseological unit has positive and negative connotation, as the conceptions of the "knight of sad image" are considered to be generous.

The phraseological unit, describing the character of a human, who lost himself in life, and then repented, lies in the biblical parable about Prodigal son. The evaluation in the content of phraseological units is determined by the national cultural traditions of people, their outlook, history and traditions.

Discussion

Phraseology fully describes all those fragments of objective reality, which are associated with characteristic of human psychological traits, thinking processes, individual and typological traits of the person. This confirms the need in research in the field of phraseological system concerning human. The analysis of the literature (Arsent'eva, 2006; Bragina, 2000) showed that there are significant gaps in the study of idioms identifying the character traits of the person (Ilyushenko, 2011). This research work provides a comprehensive analysis of phraseological units and categorizes them according to evaluation connotation.

The evaluation connotation, i.e. an approving and disapproving evaluation, contained within the meaning of phraseological units, is a major in the connotative meaning of an idiom because of its sociolinguistic reality (Kunin, 1989; Semushina, 2010). Subjectively evaluative element of phraseological meaning can be explained by the different response of people to the positive and negative phenomena, and it is integrated in the semantic structure of the PU.

The study found that sub-groups "rudeness", "cruelty", "impudence", "meanness" and "haughtiness" exceed in the number of English phraseological units, and there are more idioms of such sub-groups as "cheerfulness", "honesty" and "diligence".

Probably, this fact can be explained by the quantitative and qualitative reflection of the national traits of the people in the phraseology. The research has also shown idioms expressing negative traits of human character dominate the positive or neutral evaluation. It can be explained by a more differentiated emotional, verbal and cogitative reaction to negative events.

Image characteristic of traits of person's character, his /her inner world, is expressed by animalistic phraseology and considered as universal of different languages and cultures, as it refers to the folklore. The classification of English phraseological units of this type according to the estimated connotation of human character (positive and negative characteristics) distinguishes this study from the previous ones (Hsieh, 2014; Sharova, 2010).

Conclusions

Emotional sphere plays an important role in the development of a common base of knowledge and values and, consequently, in the formation of idioms as a figurative and marked nationally linguistic unit. PU of emotive semantics, as well as other PU demonstrate the close relationship of the national, social, and linguistic phenomena.

Thus, English PU with a negative evaluative connotation predominate among idioms of emotive evaluative character. In addition, idioms describing the character traits that cause the greatest social stigmatization greatly predominate over other phraseological units. At the same time, comparing the quantity of idioms belonging to some phraseological semantic sub-groups, we can observe a certain unevenness (for example, in sub-groups "falsehood" "haughtiness", "hypocrisy"). It can be explained by the different ways of expressing the features of everyday life, social attitudes and mental make-up in different languages. Among English phraseological units with a positive evaluative connotation most of PU indicate restraint, courage and diligence. This fact is also explained by cultural characteristics of the nation.

Phraseological units with zoonym component also determine the traits of human character. Therefore, the names of animals are often used in PU in order to describe the traits of character.

One of the promising direction of research is a comparative analysis of the common patterns and specific national traits in the semantics of idioms nominating a person of various linguocultures. In addition, a comparative study of PU can be carried out as in the sociolinguistic direction, in order to find out similarities and differences in the social living conditions of ethnic groups reflected in phrasemic signs, as in linguoculturological direction, in order to describe similar and different cultural characteristics represented in idiomatic concepts and symbols.

The conducted research provides an opportunity to understand English better and more deeply learn it, especially for the residents of non-English speaking countries.

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