

Prototypes of Russian and English Phraseological Euphemisms as the Basis of Their National and Cultural Specificity

By

Yulia Svyatoslavovna Arsenyeva

PhD, Associate Professor, Kazan Federal University,

Email: juliarenat251@gmail.com

Elena Fridrikhovna Arsenteva

Doctor of Philology, Professor, Kazan Federal, University,

Email: helenaarsentiewa@mail.ru

Antonio Bertran Pamies

PhD, Professor, University of Granada,

Email: antonio.pamies@gmail.com

Iskander Engelevich Yarmakeev

Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor, Deputy Director for Science of the Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University

Email: ermakeev@mail.ru

Abstract

The article is devoted to the comparative study of national and cultural specifics of Russian and English phraseological euphemisms (PE) from the point of view of their prototypes. The aim of the study is to determine the features of the construction of prototypes of Russian and English phraseological euphemisms as the basis of their national and cultural identity formation. The following research methods of the selection and analysis of linguistic material were used: the method of continuous sampling, the method of phraseological description developed by A.V. Kunin, the method of dictionary definition analysis and semantic analysis, and the comparative method. The result of the study has revealed that the figurative and motivational bases of phraseological euphemisms play a significant role in the formation of the national and cultural originality of phraseological units of both languages. Isomorphic and allomorphic characteristics of the national and cultural originality of the prototypes of phraseological euphemisms in two compared languages, including those associated with the peculiarities of the presence of two variants of the English language – British and American, have been determined. At the same time, the meaning of a phraseological euphemism is motivated by its prototype in the presence of a transparent or translucent internal form of euphemistic expressions. In some cases, the study of etymological data and knowledge of certain cultural and historical traditions and characteristics of the life of native speakers are necessary factors in determining the national and cultural specifics of such phraseological euphemisms.

Key words: phraseological euphemism, prototype, meaning motivation, image, inner form of phraseological euphemism

Introduction

The study of national and cultural specifics of phraseological units has drawn much

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attention over the past two to three decades since it is phraseological units that accumulate and transmit the cultural potential of the people from generation to generation. V.N. Telia speaks of a clearly expressed national connotation of phraseological units. The scientist believes that a characteristic feature of phraseological units is “a figurative-situational motivation, which is directly related to the worldview of the people” (Telia, 1996). E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov distinguish three components of the regional geographic value of phraseological units: integral idiomatic meaning, individual units of their composition, their prototypes (Vereshchagin, 1983). Thus, the “contribution” to the national-cultural specificity of phraseological units, according to scientists, is made by non-equivalent phraseological units (in terms of their integral idiomatic meaning), the component composition of phraseological units, and their prototypes. The role of national consciousness of native-speakers as a valuable part of their language and culture as well as their cultural peculiarities are analyzed in the articles of Kazan researchers (Gabdrakjmanova et al., 2018; Reflection of the Dialogue of Cultures of the English and Russian Languages in the Study of Phraseological Units with a Transparent Inner Form and in the Process of Teaching Native and Non-native Languages, 2016).

The importance of studying the prototype of phraseological units, and their component composition was indicated by D.O. Dobrovolsky, Yu.P. Solodub, and V.N. Telia (Dobrovolsky, 1997; Solodub, 1986). E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov point out that the prototypes of PU, i.e. genetically free phrases that underlie the formation of phraseological units, reflect specific traditions, customs, historical events, cultural facts, details of everyday life, etc. of native speakers (Vereshchagin, 1983). Political correctness as one of the means of creating a specific type of nomination also attracts attention (Nazarova et al., 2018). It is also necessary to point out the fact that the most important spheres of activity of native speakers are most fully reflected in the prototypes of phraseological units, also testifying to the national and cultural features of the formation of phraseological imagery in the light of the national worldview.

Phraseological euphemisms are complex linguistic units that combine the characteristic features of both phraseological and euphemistic units. As phraseological units, they are characterized by transference of meaning, separability, stability (lexical and grammatical) with the possibility of contextual transformations, imagery and high significance of connotation in the structure of their phraseological meaning. As euphemisms, they are units of indirect nomination, the main purpose of which is to soften and veil taboo or socially and morally condemned denotations of real ones with pejorative evaluation. Such an evaluation, which constitutes an important component of phraseological unit connotation (Yarullina et al., 2019) is as a rule transformed into a neutral or meliorative one in phraseological euphemisms.

Methods

The procedure of continuous sampling has been chosen for selecting phraseological euphemisms from unilingual and bilingual dictionaries of euphemisms and phraseological dictionaries.

Our research requires scrutinizing the meaning of each phraseological euphemism and its prototype dealt with, therefore methods of phraseological description and dictionary definition analysis as well as semantic analysis is the inherent part of our work.

Comparative method is absolutely necessary to compare Russian and English

phraseological euphemisms belonging to different groups of Indo-European family of languages.

Results and Discussions

In the Russian language, a number of phraseological euphemisms, which denote the transition to another world, are based on a vivid and memorable image, their prototype makes us understand the event described without any problem.

A vivid image of very sparse hair on a human head is presented in the prototype of the Russian vernacular euphemistic expression “волосинка за волосинкой бежит с дубинкой” (literally: a hair runs after a hair with a club) – “about sparse, poorly growing hair”. There is an analogous phraseological counterpart of this Russian unit in the English language “<as> scarce as hen’s teeth”, however, the image underlying the Russian expression is much brighter and more original.

The designation of a drunk person by using two phraseological euphemisms “в нетрезвом виде” (literally: in intoxicated form) and “в нетрезвом состоянии” (literally: in intoxicated condition) is also quite clear for the native speakers of the Russian language thanks to the presence of the component “нетрезвый” – “intoxicated, drunk” as a part of their prototypes. The meaning of the vernacular euphemistic expression “из ума вышел” (literally: has gone out of mind) – “someone has become stupid, has lost clarity and strength of mind while getting old” with the emotive sense of disregard is also quite deducible from the meaning of its prototype.

The image of a person going not voluntarily to the bottom of a river, lake, sea gives us the idea that this person has drowned; therefore, the prototype of the euphemistic expression “уйти на дно (ко дну)” (literally: to go to the bottom) with the meaning “to drown” is quite transparent.

We emphasize once again that the national-cultural color of all the Russian phraseological euphemisms considered above is created by their prototypes; all of them have phraseological counterparts in the English language.

A number of other phraseological euphemisms also belong to similar linguistic units of the Russian language.

For example, the designation of a toilet using euphemisms is common in English. In Russian, we meet a vivid and figurative expression “куда царь пешком ходит (ходил)” (literally: “where the Tsar walks (walked)”). It is quite clear that we will not find such an image in the English language, also due to the presence of the “tsar” component, denoting the title of monarch in Muscovite Russia as well as in Russia before the Revolution.

The peculiarity of drinking tea or coffee without sugar, which circumstances forced many residents of Russia to resort to in conditions of poverty, was reflected in the colloquial phraseological euphemism with the emotive sense of irony “вприглядку пить чай (кофе и т.п.)” (literally: to slyly drink tea (coffee, etc.)) – “to drink tea (coffee etc.) without sugar, empty” (Senichkina, 2008). The prototype of this expression is based on the image that people only have to look at sugar, and not add it to a drink, as opposed to drinking while biting sugar or putting it into a cup.

Folk humor can be traced in the images of bad, non-warming outerwear of the phraseological units “на рыбьем меху” (literally: on fish fur) and “подбит ветром” (literally: knocked out by the wind.) In these two examples, we observe an oxymoron – a figurative combination of conflicting concepts, while the comparison of conflicting concepts is witty and vivid.

The designation of the national drink of Russians – vodka – with the help of non-equivalent euphemistic phraseological unit “живая вода” (literally: living water) testifies to the positive image of this drink, including its prototypes, in the mentality of the Russian people.

As the analysis shows, quite often the phraseological euphemisms of the Russian language with the manifestation of national and cultural specificity in their prototypes are humorous or ironic in nature.

So, for example, the phraseological euphemism of the colloquial style “есть просит (просят)” (literally: asking for food) – “<shoes or clothes> are torn, needs to be repaired” and the colloquial euphemistic expression “дом едет (поехал)” (literally: the house is going (went) – “someone is behaving strangely, gone crazy” have an emotive mark of irony. The irony is also inherent in the collision of the meliorative evaluative senses of the components “краса” (literally: beauty) and “радость” (literally: joy) with the pejorative evaluative senses of the euphemistic units “во всей <своей> красе” (literally: in all their glory) – “in all their ugliness” and “какая радость” (literally: what joy) – “an expression of displeasure, neglect”.

The English language is also rich in phraseological euphemisms, the national-cultural semantics of which is manifested in their prototypes.

Thus, the English phraseological euphemism “at her Majesty’s pleasure” meaning “indefinitely” refers us to the image of Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, and the semantics of this expression is connected with the fact that the fulfillment of the Queen’s promises can be expected indefinitely.

One more English phraseological euphemism includes into its component composition the lexemes “her Majesty” – “to enjoy Her Majesty’s hospitality”. The meaning of this euphemistic expression is “to be in prison”. “A Dictionary of Euphemisms” by R.W. Holder gives an explanation that “In jail you don’t have to pay for your keep. The phrase is suitably adjusted for kings and presidents” (Holder, 1995).

The prototype of the phraseological euphemism “to draw the king’s (queen’s, president’s) picture” meaning “to counterfeit banknotes” is quite transparent thanks to the fact that UK banknotes often featured images of a king or queen, and US banknotes often featured the country’s presidents. Therefore, the image underlying this euphemistic expression is absolutely transparent for English speakers and understandable for Russian speakers who are at least a little familiar with the peculiarities of government and the monetary system of English-speaking countries.

Calling a dark-skinned prostitute with the help of a nice-sounding euphemism “black velvet” was originally used by British soldiers in India, the former colony of Great Britain. Thus we see the reflection of Britain’s colonial past in the creation of the prototype of this euphemistic expression which has entered the phraseological fund of the English language.

The closeness of the United States to Mexico in which the drug trade is flourishing is

reflected in the phraseological euphemism “Acapulco gold” – “marijuana”. The image of the expression is based on the pun of the word “gold” on its color, the quality, and the cost, and the use of the geographical name of the city which is a port and tourist center on the Pacific coast of Mexico is connected with the fact that marijuana is grown near this city (Holder, 1995).

A number of phraseological euphemisms combine two levels of manifestation of their national and cultural specifics: the level of figurative components (prototypes) and etymological ones, since the prototype of such units does not always allow us to understand their meanings correctly without knowledge of certain historical or other etymological components.

For example, the English euphemistic unit “absent parents” with its figurative basis indicates two child’s parents but we are talking only about fathers who do not live with their young children. The dictionary entry in R.W. Holder's dictionary indicates: “Not fathers and mothers who are temporarily away from home, but specifically divorced, single, or separated men who have fathered children for whose upbringing society rather than the progenitor is paying, in addition to the normal state provision of free schooling, free medical care, weekly cash allowance, etc” (Holder, 1995).

Such phraseological euphemisms are also present in Russian. E.g., the euphemistic expressions of the 20th century “известная организация” (literally: known organization) and “компетентные органы” (literally: competent authorities) mean state security bodies in the USSR and the Russian Federation. The euphemistic unit which is fixed in the Russian language from the beginning of the 21st century “виртуальная зарплата” (literally: virtual salary) means “extremely low, almost unreal salary”. A sufficient number of people in Russia received and still receive such a salary in comparison with their foreign colleagues. The image carried by the lexical unit “virtual”, i.e. “logical, not having a physical embodiment or realized only in a computer” gives a clear picture of such beggarly payments to working people.

The group of English phraseological euphemisms, showing national and cultural specificity at the level of figurative components (prototypes), also includes a number of euphemistic expressions, mainly used in the American variant of the English language. For example, an unmarked police car is called “the brown paper bag” in the United States by the color of these cars. Cancer is designated with the help of the phraseological Americanism “big C”. The following “decryption” of the name of this severe and often fatal illness is given in «A Dictionary of Euphemisms» by R.W. Holder: “... ailments are apt to be called by their names or by superstitious shortened forms: arthritis, emphysema, cancer (or the Big C)” (Holder, 1995).

A person of low intellect is called in American English “fifty cards in the pack”. It is quite understandable that there can be either 36 cards in a deck, or in a traditional “French deck” there are 52 cards of four suits and thirteen denominations, plus three jokers. Therefore, the inconsistency in determining the number of cards in the deck testifies to the illogical thinking of a person who cannot count them correctly. Thus, the prototype of this expression helps us understand the meaning of this euphemistic Americanism.

The American euphemism “balloon room” which is based on a bright image means “a place where marijuana is commonly smoked”. Only the knowledge of the fact that this narcotic was usually stored in rubber balloons in the USA, as well as the knowledge that it sometimes may induce the feeling of levitation help us to understand the meaning of this euphemistic

expression (Holder, 1995).

Summary

The results of our study point to the fact that prototypes of both Russian and English phraseological euphemisms play an important role in understanding their national and cultural specificity. The reason of it lies in their ability to reflect specific national features of the development of Russian and English speaking countries including some historical facts, traditions and customs of native speakers as well as their national and cultural values. Besides, a number of phraseological euphemisms may combine two or even three or four levels of manifestation of their national and cultural specifics: the level of figurative components (prototypes), the etymological one, the level of figurative components, and the level of aggregate phraseological meaning, since the prototype of such units does not always allow us to understand their meanings correctly without knowledge of certain historical or other etymological components.

Conclusions

The conducted comparative analysis has shown that in a number of cases the prototypes of both Russian and English phraseological euphemisms promote understanding of the described event or phenomenon without any problem, i.e. the internal form of such euphemistic expressions is transparent or translucent. As a rule, in both languages, phraseological euphemisms are based on vivid and memorable images, the semantics of such expressions is diverse.

Only the English language is characterized by the presence of euphemistic units, used mainly in the American variant of the language. Their prototypes can reflect phenomena that are typical only of American reality.

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