

IDIOMS AND PROVERBS AS CULTURALLY-MARKED UNITS WITHIN THE LANGUAGE PICTURE OF THE WORLD

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Abstract: *This article examines the theoretical foundation of phraseology, its role in constructing cultural and cognitive worldviews, and its practical implications for language learning and intercultural communication. Through a theoretical and practical analysis, the article highlights how phraseological units act as vehicles for collective cultural knowledge and cognitive processes.*

Key Words: *language picture of the world, idioms and proverbs, culturally-marked units, cognition, intercultural communication, teaching*

1. Introduction

The term “language picture of the world” is grounded in the works of linguists like Wilhelm von Humboldt, who argued that language shapes thought and perception. According to Humboldt (1836), every language represents a unique worldview, reflecting cultural and cognitive patterns. This idea was further developed in the theory of linguistic relativity by Edward Sapir (1949) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), who posited that the structure of a language influences its speakers’ worldview.

Phraseology, which encompasses idioms, proverbs, collocations, and fixed expressions, plays a significant role in shaping the “language picture of the world”. The “language picture of the world” is a framework through which human experiences and perceptions are linguistically constructed and expressed. Phraseological units are verbal tools for encoding collective memory and cultural norms, they offer insights into how different societies conceptualize reality.

Phraseological units concern the culture-marked lexicon which have specific structure and meaning. So, this article explores the idioms and proverbs as culture-marked units in the language picture of the English people.

2. Idioms and proverbs in the language picture of the world

Phraseological units, such as idioms and proverbs, are rich sources of cultural and cognitive insights. These expressions encapsulate historical experiences, social norms, and metaphorical thinking, offering a linguistic representation of shared human understanding. The language picture of the world is based on a universal model of a certain culture that includes verbal-semantic and cognitive thesauri. The peculiarity of this language picture of the world lies in the realistic form of displaying this model using culturally-marked units that reflect folk wisdom, national mentality and value orientations, the specifics of communicative behavior, traditions, etc.

The theory of conceptual metaphors developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) is a basis for study of such culture-marked units. So, metaphors such as “time is money” or “life is a journey” allow to revealing how abstract concepts are understood through tangible experiences. Idiomatic units often serve as carriers of these metaphors, embedding them in everyday language. For example, the idiom “spill the beans” reflects a metaphorical understanding of revealing secrets as an act of spilling something tangible. Similarly, expressions like “a heavy heart” embody the emotional and physical interplay inherent in human cognition, illustrating the embodied nature of thought.

In turn, proverbial units serve as mirrors of cultural values and traditions. For instance, English proverbs like “The early bird catches the worm” highlight the value placed on punctuality and initiative, while Russian idioms such as “Без труда не вытащишь и рыбку из пруда” (“Without effort, you can’t even pull a fish out of a pond”) reflect the importance of hard work.

The cultural worldview represented in the idioms and proverbs are related to historical and societal or moral contexts. For example, English idioms often stem from 1) national specificity – English disease or English tea; 2) ancient

stories or parables – Achilles’ heels, Forbidden fruit is sweetest; 3) historical facts or stories – King of Beasts (a symbol of King Richard II, who is brave, fierce, dignified); 4) encapsulating moral lessons – What will Mrs. Grundy say?

3. Teaching idioms and proverbs

In intercultural communication, the understanding of described idioms and proverbs – is crucial. Misinterpreting idiomatic and proverbial expressions can lead to confusion or misunderstanding. For instance, literal translations of idioms or proverbs often fail to convey their intended meaning, as they lack the cultural context that necessary for interpretation.

It is known that in language education, teaching such kind of expressions equips learners with both linguistic competence and cultural understanding. By mastering idioms and proverbs, learners can navigate intercultural interactions more effectively and avoid cultural faux pas.

To explore the practical role of phraseology, a study was conducted among 1-year students of Tashkent state pedagogical university named after Nizami, focusing on their ability to interpret and use idiomatic expressions while English speech production. Participants were given English idioms and proverbs and asked to explain their meanings and cultural significance.

Here are ten English proverbs and idioms explained with their meanings and cultural significance:

Proverbs

1. “The early bird catches the worm”

- Meaning: Success comes to those who prepare well and put in effort early.

- Cultural Significance: This proverb emphasizes punctuality and hard work, values often associated with Western work ethics and productivity-focused cultures.

2. “Actions speak louder than words”

- Meaning: What you do is more important than what you say.

- Cultural Significance: This reflects the value placed on sincerity and integrity in actions, a common belief in Western cultures where results matter more than promises.

3. “A penny saved is a penny earned”

- Meaning: Saving money is as valuable as earning it.

- Cultural Significance: This aligns with frugality, a value historically rooted in Protestant work ethics and capitalism.

4. “Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”

- Meaning: Avoid assuming the outcome of something before it happens.

- Cultural Significance: This proverb reflects a cautionary approach to life, prevalent in many cultures that value patience and realistic expectations.

5. “Many hands make light work”

- Meaning: Tasks are easier to complete when many people contribute.

- Cultural Significance: It highlights the importance of teamwork and collaboration, values that are central to many collectivist cultures.

Idioms

6. “Break the ice”

- Meaning: To initiate conversation in a social setting or ease tension.

- Cultural Significance: This idiom often reflects the cultural importance of politeness and making others comfortable, a key aspect of social etiquette in English-speaking societies.

7. “Bite the bullet”

- Meaning: To face a difficult situation with courage.

- Cultural Significance: This idiom originates from military practices, symbolizing resilience and bravery, values admired in both individualistic and collectivist cultures.

8. “Burn the midnight oil”

- Meaning: To work late into the night.

- Cultural Significance: This phrase highlights dedication and hard work, often tied to academic or professional success in cultures that value perseverance.

9. “Spill the beans”

- Meaning: To reveal a secret.
- Cultural Significance: This idiom has roots in voting practices in ancient Greece, where beans were used to cast votes. It reflects transparency and accountability.

10. “A piece of cake”

- Meaning: Something very easy to do.
- Cultural Significance: Originating in the 19th century, this idiom reflects a celebratory and lighthearted attitude towards simple tasks, emphasizing optimism.

The final results showed that learners who had prior exposure to the cultural contexts of these idioms and proverbs performed better in interpretation and usage. For example, learners familiar with Anglo-Saxon culture easily understood the proverb “Actions speak louder than words,” while others struggled with its non-literal meaning.

This highlights the importance of integrating cultural studies into language education, emphasizing the role of phraseology in fostering both linguistic and intercultural competence.

4. Conclusion

Phraseology occupies a central place in the language picture of the world, reflecting the interplay between language, thought, and culture. Idiomatic expressions and proverbs encode collective experiences, shaping how societies perceive and interpret reality. Understanding the phraseological richness of a language enhances both linguistic competence and cultural awareness, making it a vital component of language learning and intercultural communication. As globalization continues to bring cultures closer, the study of phraseology offers valuable insights into the shared and diverse ways humans conceptualize their world.

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