SEMANTIC AND LINGUOCULTURAL FEATURES OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract. This paper examines the semantic and linguocultural characteristics of phraseological units in English and Russian from a comparative linguistic perspective. Phraseological expressions represent an essential part of a language's lexical system because they preserve cultural knowledge, historical experience, national traditions, and collective perceptions of reality. The study focuses on the semantic structure, figurative meaning, cultural associations, and translation peculiarities of English and Russian phraseological units. Particular attention is paid to expressions related to human character, emotions, interpersonal relationships, and everyday life. The research employs comparative, contextual, semantic, and linguocultural methods. Examples such as to spill the beans, to break the ice, a piece of cake, бить баклуши, водить за нос, and душа нараспашку demonstrate how phraseological meaning is shaped by metaphorical imagery and culturally specific associations. The findings indicate that English and Russian phraseological units share universal semantic features but frequently differ in their imagery and cultural background. The study also demonstrates that functional and contextual equivalence is often more effective than literal translation.

Keywords: phraseological units, semantics, linguocultural analysis, idioms, metaphor, cultural identity, English language, Russian language, phraseological equivalence, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units constitute one of the most expressive and culturally significant components of a language. Unlike free word combinations, they possess relatively stable structures and meanings that often cannot be understood through the literal interpretation of their individual components. Their semantic organization reflects not only linguistic conventions but also the historical experience, social values, traditions, and collective worldview of a particular speech community.

The relevance of studying English and Russian phraseological units is determined by the growing importance of intercultural communication, translation, and comparative linguistics. English and Russian contain numerous idiomatic expressions that describe similar human experiences, emotions, and social relationships. However, the images through which these meanings are expressed frequently differ. For instance, the English expression to spill the beans means to reveal a secret, whereas its Russian functional equivalent выдать секрет expresses the same communicative meaning without reproducing the original metaphorical image.

The theoretical foundations of phraseological studies are associated with the works of C. Bally, who examined stable linguistic combinations and their expressive functions [1], and V. V. Vinogradov, whose classification contributed significantly to the development of Russian phraseology [2]. A. V. Kunin developed an extensive theoretical framework for English phraseology, focusing on the structural, semantic, and functional characteristics of phraseological units [3]. R. Moon investigated idioms in contemporary English, emphasizing their semantic, syntactic, and discourse-related properties [4]. A. Wierzbicka's research on language and culture provides an additional theoretical basis for explaining the cultural meanings embedded in idiomatic expressions [5].

The aim of this study is to identify the semantic and linguocultural characteristics of English and Russian phraseological units through comparative analysis and to determine the role of cultural imagery in their interpretation and translation.

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The scientific novelty lies in examining English and Russian phraseological units through an integrated analytical model that combines denotative meaning, metaphorical imagery, emotional evaluation, and cultural association. The study also proposes a comparative classification of selected idioms according to their dominant semantic and linguocultural features.

METHODS

The research is based on a qualitative comparative analysis of English and Russian phraseological expressions. The material consists of 24 selected phraseological units, including expressions related to human behavior, emotional states, interpersonal communication, and everyday activities.

The following methods were employed:

1. Comparative analysis – to identify similarities and differences between English and Russian phraseological units.
2. Semantic analysis – to determine their literal and figurative meanings.
3. Contextual analysis – to examine how phraseological meanings are realized in particular communicative situations.
4. Linguocultural analysis – to identify cultural associations, national imagery, and historical elements reflected in idiomatic expressions.
5. Functional translation analysis – to establish whether phraseological equivalents preserve the original communicative and emotional effects.

The examples were selected from established English and Russian phraseological usage and interpreted according to their conventional meanings. The quantitative classification presented below is an author-created analytical sample rather than a statistical representation of the entire phraseological systems of the two languages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Semantic characteristics of English and Russian phraseological units. Phraseological units are characterized by semantic integrity, relative structural stability, and figurative meaning. Their overall meanings frequently differ from the literal meanings of their components.

For example, the English idiom to break the ice does not refer to the physical destruction of ice. It means to overcome initial awkwardness and establish friendly communication. Its Russian functional equivalent is растопить лёд, which preserves a similar metaphorical image. Both expressions conceptualize interpersonal distance as a cold physical substance that can be melted.

Another example is to spill the beans, meaning to disclose confidential information. Its Russian equivalent may be выдать секрет or, in an appropriate context, раскрыть карты. Although the expressions communicate a similar idea, their imagery differs. The English idiom uses the image of scattered beans, while the Russian expression раскрыть карты is based on a metaphor associated with revealing information in a card game.

These examples demonstrate that phraseological equivalence may be based on shared meaning rather than identical lexical composition.

2. Linguocultural features and national imagery. Phraseological units preserve cultural information through images derived from everyday life, historical activities, social practices, and traditional perceptions.

The English expression to bring home the bacon means to earn money or provide financial support for a family. Its imagery is connected with food and household provision. The Russian functional equivalent зарабатывать на жизнь conveys the same general meaning but does not preserve the original image of bacon.

Similarly, the English idiom a piece of cake means something very easy to accomplish. Russian uses expressions such as проще простого or раз плюнуть. Both languages communicate the idea of simplicity, but their figurative structures are different.

Russian phraseology also contains culturally and historically significant expressions. For example, бить баклуши means to waste time or do nothing useful. Its historical imagery is associated with the production of wooden blanks, although the modern expression functions as an idiom meaning idleness.

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The expression водить за нос means to deceive or mislead someone. Its imagery is based on leading someone by the nose, metaphorically representing manipulation and control.

The expression душа нараспашку describes an emotionally open, sincere, and generous person. Its meaning reflects a cultural metaphor in which the soul is conceptualized as an inner space that can be opened to others. The English expression an open-hearted person provides a close functional equivalent, although the two expressions do not have completely identical cultural associations.

3. Comparative analysis of phraseological units. The following table presents selected English and Russian idioms, their meanings, and their functional equivalents.

Table 1. Semantic and linguocultural comparison of English and Russian phraseological units

English phraseological unit	Russian equivalent	Semantic meaning	Main figurative feature
To break the ice	Растопить лёд	To overcome social awkwardness	Ice as interpersonal distance
To spill the beans	Выдать секрет	To reveal confidential information	Beans as concealed information
A piece of cake	Проще простого	Something very easy	Food as a symbol of simplicity
To bring home the bacon	Зарабатывать на жизнь	To provide financial support	Food and household provision
To be over the moon	Быть на седьмом небе от счастья	To feel extremely happy	Height as emotional elevation
To kill two birds with one stone	Убить двух зайцев одним выстрелом	To achieve two goals at once	Hunting imagery
To pull someone's leg	Подшучивать над кем-либо	To joke or deceive playfully	Physical action as humorous interaction
To be all ears	Слушать очень внимательно	To listen attentively	Body part as attention
To beat around the bush	Ходить вокруг да около	To avoid speaking directly	Circular movement as indirectness
To make a mountain out of a molehill	Делать из мухи слона	To exaggerate a minor problem	Spatial exaggeration
—	Бить баклуши	To be idle	Historical everyday activity
—	Водить за нос	To deceive someone	Physical control as manipulation
—	Душа нараспашку	To be sincere and open-hearted	Soul as an open inner space

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of A. V. Kunin's English phraseological research [3], R. Moon's study of English idioms [4], and established English and Russian phraseological usage.

The table demonstrates that some English and Russian idioms possess close metaphorical equivalents, while others communicate similar meanings through different cultural images. For instance, to break the ice and растопить лёд share the same metaphorical basis. In contrast, to make a mountain out of a molehill and делать из мухи слона express exaggeration through different images.

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4. Metaphorical structures and cultural conceptualization. Metaphor is one of the principal mechanisms through which phraseological meanings are formed. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but an important element of human conceptualization [6]. People frequently understand abstract experiences through concrete images derived from the physical and social world.

This principle can be observed in English and Russian idioms related to emotions.

The English expression to be over the moon and the Russian expression быть на седьмом небе от счастья conceptualize happiness through vertical elevation. In both cases, positive emotions are associated with a position above ordinary physical space.

Likewise, to have a heart of gold and золотое сердце associate kindness and generosity with the symbolic value of gold. These expressions demonstrate the existence of similar metaphorical patterns in both languages.

However, cultural differences become more visible when the metaphorical images are not shared. The Russian expression душа нараспашку emphasizes openness and sincerity through the image of the soul. English more commonly expresses a similar characteristic through open-hearted or wear one's heart on one's sleeve. Although these expressions are functionally close, their imagery and contextual distribution differ.

5. Quantitative analysis of the selected phraseological material. To summarize the comparative observations, 24 phraseological units were classified according to their dominant semantic functions. The classification includes three categories: emotional states, human behavior and character, and interpersonal or social relationships.

Table 2. Distribution of phraseological units according to their dominant semantic function

Semantic category	English units	Russian units	Total
Emotional states	4	4	8
Human behavior and character	4	4	8
Interpersonal and social relationships	4	4	8
Total	**12**	**12**	**24**

Source: Author's classification of 24 selected English and Russian phraseological units.

According to the classification, emotional expressions account for 33.3% of the material, human behavior and character-related expressions constitute another 33.3%, while interpersonal and social relationship expressions also represent 33.3%.

The equal distribution results from the selection criteria and is intended to provide a balanced comparative sample. It does not indicate that these semantic categories occur with equal frequency in the actual English and Russian phraseological systems.

The analysis also reveals three major types of phraseological correspondence:

- Full or close image-based equivalence: expressions that share similar semantic content and metaphorical imagery, such as to break the ice – растопить лёд and to have a heart of gold – золотое сердце.
- Partial equivalence: expressions that have similar meanings but differ in lexical composition or imagery, such as to make a mountain out of a molehill – делать из мухи слона.
- Functional equivalence: expressions that communicate a similar intention or meaning through different linguistic structures, such as to spill the beans – выдать секрет.

This classification confirms that the translation of phraseological units requires attention to both semantic meaning and cultural imagery. Literal translation may preserve individual words but fail to reproduce the conventional meaning of an idiom.

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6. Translation challenges and intercultural communication

Phraseological translation is particularly challenging because idioms frequently contain culturally specific images that cannot be transferred directly into another language.

For example, the literal translation of to spill the beans into Russian as рассыпать бобы does not communicate the idiomatic meaning of revealing a secret. A functional equivalent such as выдать секрет is therefore more appropriate.

Similarly, translating бить баклуши literally into English would not convey the meaning of idleness. Depending on the context, expressions such as to laze around or to do nothing are more suitable.

The translator must therefore consider three principal factors:

1. The conventional figurative meaning of the phraseological unit.
2. The cultural and emotional associations attached to its imagery.
3. The communicative context and stylistic purpose of the original expression.

Wierzbicka emphasizes that linguistic expressions are closely connected with culturally established ways of interpreting the world [5]. This perspective is particularly important in phraseological translation, where identical meanings may be expressed through different national images.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis demonstrates that English and Russian phraseological units possess both universal semantic characteristics and culturally specific features. Although many idioms express similar human experiences, their metaphorical structures and historical associations are not always identical.

The findings reveal that phraseological meaning is formed through the interaction of lexical semantics, figurative imagery, cultural knowledge, and communicative context. Expressions such as to break the ice and растопить лёд demonstrate close metaphorical correspondence, whereas to make a mountain out of a molehill and делать из мухи слона illustrate how different cultural images can represent a similar semantic concept.

The analysis also confirms that phraseological units serve as important carriers of national-cultural information. English and Russian idioms preserve distinctive associations related to everyday life, social relationships, emotions, and historical experience.

The quantitative classification of the selected 24 units demonstrates the distribution of the material across three semantic categories. However, these figures represent an analytical sample rather than the overall frequency of phraseological expressions in either language.

In conclusion, effective phraseological translation requires more than lexical substitution. It involves identifying the intended meaning, interpreting the cultural imagery, and selecting an equivalent that preserves the communicative function of the original expression. The findings may contribute to comparative linguistics, phraseology, translation studies, and intercultural language education.

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