

AN ETYMOLOGICAL STUDY OF ENGLISH CULTURE-SPECIFIC PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

Eugenia STRUNGAR, *student, Faculty of Philology,
Alecu Russo Bălți State University*
Scientific adviser: **Svetlana FILIPP**, *lecturer*

Rezumat: *Articolul respectiv adresează domeniul frazeologic centrându-se pe etimologia frazeologismelor în limba engleză. Cu scopul de a analiza importanță studiului etimologic și de a demonstra efectivitatea lui, articolul prezintă rezultatul unei cercetări a 200 de frazeologisme conform studiului etimologic. Cercetarea s-a realizat în conformitate cu domeniile de origine a frazeologismelor cunoscute, descrise și exemplificate în articol. În final, articolul reprezintă o diagramă ilustrând procentajul exact a celor mai frecvente sau rare surse de origine a frazeologismelor.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *frazeologisme, metode, etimologie, origine, studiu, cultură, domeniu, vocabular nativ, motivație, cercetare, analiză.*

Phraseology constitutes one of the most fascinating aspects of the language as it both gives plenty of information about our ancestry and encourages our curiosity with never-ending mysteries. As a result of this unique language phenomenon the speakers imply into their daily speech wonderful expressions meant to convey complex meanings. A student must be cognizant of specific fixed word groups in order to interpret and use them correctly and avoid misunderstanding. Otherwise, these units will constitute a great barrier in mastering a foreign language. In order to overcome this language barrier, while studying English one should pay greater attention to set expression, especially to their etymology, as this is one of the best ways of identifying the motivation and the true meaning of a phraseological unit. In doing so, it becomes much easier to be always aware of culture-specific phraseological units, as well as of their etymology.

The etymological study of phraseological units is one of the most precise and sure ways of finding out the authentic motivation of a stable word combination. Therefore, this method presents great interest and is widely used by linguists in order to get to the very root of a unit. Despite the fact that there had been conducted multiple investigations in this field, the use of etymological study of phraseological units always added new shades of meanings to unchangeable word groups and gave life to new thoughts on the origins of not only separate word groups but on the basic aspects of the language. This is one of the main reasons why this method should be analyzed and constantly reviewed.

Thus, in the present research we will focus on the most essential sources which gave existence to culture-specific phraseological units according to their etymology. As it is well-known, the synchronic motivation of a phraseological unit often does not coincide with its “true” etymology, and sometimes the two can contradict each other. In such cases, the question arises whether it is the synchronic motivation or the etymology that is more important for the functioning of a phraseological unit. This involves examining the research of various types of phraseological units by means of methods suitable specifically for etymological investigation. At the end of this study, we will establish the most frequent fields from which culture-specific phraseological units originate and the causes which lead to such results.

The topic of culture-specific phraseological units always requires from the speaker a certain degree of cultural and metaphorical awareness for linking the literal and figurative meanings of a phraseological unit. Furthermore, definitions of phraseological units often include references to understandability of a particular culture, excluding people who do not share the same particular cultural knowledge [1, p. 60-66].

The lack of cultural awareness can make the interpretation of the phraseological meaning more difficult or cause misunderstanding. *Whistlin’ Dixie*, *armchair quarterbacking* and *slam-dunk* are all idioms specific to American culture. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for speakers who are not familiar with the American Civil War, football, or basketball to comprehend these phrases. This culture-specific knowledge that non-native speakers often lack is one of the reasons that phraseological comprehension can be such a difficult task.

In order to classify the culture-specific phraseological units according their etymology, one should first distinguish them between “native” and “borrowed” units. Native phraseological units are those related to the country where the language comes from and to the speakers who use it daily [7, p. 12-20]. Their meanings usually address the cultural characteristic realia, history, customs and mentality, for example *to eat the humble pie* –‘to submit to humiliation’; *to beat about the bush* –‘not to speak openly and directly’; *to lose one’s rag* –‘to lose one’s temper’ etc. [4, p. 22]

The borrowed phraseological units originate whether from other versions of English, like American English, or from foreign sources. These happen to become a part of the English language due to some special causes like cultural blending, war, politics etc., e.g. *be home and hosed* ‘to have completed something successfully’

(Australian); *every dog is a lion at home* 'to feel significant in the familiar surrounding' (Italian: 'ogni cane e leone a casa sua'). [4, p. 61]

The native culture-specific phraseological units are of greater interest for us in this study as they represent the essence of British culture and their linguistic ancestry. In order to study them from their etymological point of view we need to examine their origin. According to this matter we can start analyzing the roots of the selected phraseological units starting from terminological and professional lexics e.g. sea trade. Let us take the fixed word group *to nail one's colours to the mast* – 'to be resolute, unwavering in one's opinions and principles, to declare one's allegiance publicly'. This unit refers to battleships, which always fly their colors – their national ensign. If the flag was taken down, this meant "surrender". However, if a flag was literally nailed to the mast, it showed the crew's desire to fight on [4, p.61].

When it comes to battlefield or arts of warfare one can remember the fixed word-groups *to bite the bullet* which means to show courage in facing a difficult or unpleasant situation. On the battlefields of the last century the wounded men were encouraged to bite on a bullet to help them forget the pain in the absence of painkillers and anesthetics [4, p. 27].

The native English speakers have always been aware of the presence of bibleal phraseological units since there are so many of them in daily speech. For example the phraseological unit *doubting Thomas* refers to someone who will not easily believe something without strong proof or evidence. It can be said of a man or a woman. The source is the biblical account of the apostle Thomas who would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he actually touched the risen Christ. [8, p. 256].

Sport and games used to be and still are very popular in English speaking countries and gave life to numerous sayings and fixed units which are still implied nowadays. Observing the unit *to pass the buck* one may discover that it means to pass the responsibility on to someone else or to pass the blame onto somebody else. Generally, this is a poker term which refers to the marker (buck) that was placed in front of a player to show that it was his or her turn to deal [4, p. 41].

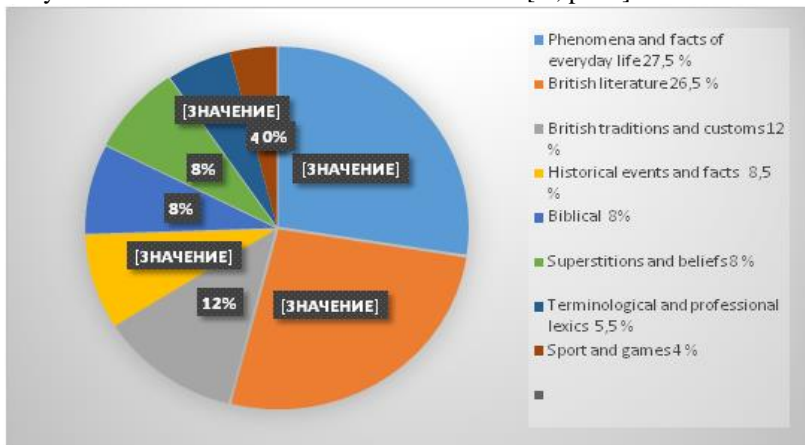
A great majority of English unchangeable word combinations come from British literature. One of them is *all that glitters is not gold* meaning that not everything that is shiny and superficially attractive is valuable. Shakespeare is the best-known writer to have expressed the idea that shiny things aren't necessarily precious things. The original editions of *The Merchant of Venice* (1596) contain the line as 'all that glister is not gold'. 'Glister' is usually replaced by 'glitter' in modern editions of the play.

Examining the stable word combinations originating from British traditions and customs, one may be surprised noticing their great number, as well as their creativity. For instance, *to ride a high horse* and *on one's high horse* – in the fourteenth century John Wyclif recorded that in a royal pageant persons of high ranks were mounted on 'high' horses. The tradition died. However, the phrase remained meaning the person considering himself or herself very important and superior to others. It relates to an arrogant person [5, p. 87].

Some phraseological units have become a part of English language due to people's superstitions and beliefs. Thus, one might hear such set expressions as *the halcyon days* which refers to a very happy or successful period in the past. According to an ancient legend a halcyon hatches and grows its fledglings in a nest that sails in the sea and during this period, for about two weeks the sea is completely calm and does not present any danger for the sailors [4, p. 33].

Historical events and facts also influenced the English language and added to its richness and diversity. For example, referring to some rivalries, there are numerous phraseological units with the word *Dutch* all of which have negative connotations because of England's wars with Holland. For example *Dutch courage* which is used to be inspired by alcohol, *Dutch uncle* means a severe critic. As well, it would be useful to mention the units containing names of personalities, like *according to Cocker* which refers to Mr. Cocker who wrote a mathematics textbook that was popular in British schools. Consequently, anything described as *according to Cocker* means right and correct in all areas. [4, p. 25].

In the end, one can run into plenty of English phraseological units inspired by phenomena and facts of everyday life. For instance, *eat like a bird* means to eat very little. This simile alludes to the mistaken impression that birds don't eat much (they actually do, relative to their size), and dates from the first half of the 1900s. An antonym is *eat like a horse*, dating from the early 1700s, and alluding to the tendency of horses to eat whatever food is available. [4, p. 43].



After having analyzed the origin of the selected phraseological units we have established the main sources which generated and caused their existence. The attached rating is meant to represent the aim of this study, namely the identification of the sources which serve as origins to the chosen phraseological units. Additionally, it indicates the percentage of the fields which gave life to the majority and the minority of stable word combinations. The study was conducted using a list of phraseological units selected from *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary* by Spears R. A. and

analyzed according to the *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins* by Flavell L., Flavell R.H. and by observing the information it provides regarding each separate unit.

After examining 200 phraseological units selected from different fields and domains, and finding out about their etymology and history, it has been established that the greatest part of them originate from British literature (26,5% - 53 PhUs) and phenomena and facts of everyday life (27,5% - 55 PhUs). This result matches the expectations of the study as throughout the time, during the evolution of the English language the speakers were going through rough periods and had to be able to express their feelings precisely by means of the words they knew. Thus, people would base their colloquial speech on metaphors or use some constructions picked up from the books they read.

The third frequent source of culture-specific phraseological units refers to British traditions and customs (12% - 24 PhUs) and historical events and facts (8,5% - 17 PhUs). That probably happened because of numerous wars and rivalries the British countries went through, fact that left a noticeable mark on the language they spoke. As well, people implied even names of personalities and names of nationalities in order to express some negative or positive connotation. Thus, for example, the Dutch nation is frequently addressed to as something negative and despicable in phraseological combinations.

The least frequent sources happened to be the Bible (8% - 16 PhUs), the superstitions and beliefs (8% - 16 PhUs), terminological and professional lexis (5,5% - 11 PhUs), and the sport and games (4% - 8 PhUs). This result is probably caused by the fact that biblical and superstition expressions are disappearing from the language as the human race becomes more pragmatic and less religious. The lack of terminological and professional lexis could be explained by the slow process of forgetting the old professions and terms. The sport and games sphere might simply be not that popular and universal for penetrating the register of daily speech.

To conclude, one must to say that phraseological units are tightly connected to the British culture and the everyday life of the British people. For a non-native speaker it must be very difficult to penetrate the meaning of each separate unit, to distinguish its connotation and its background, and to interpret it correctly. However, if the learner is paying attention to other non-linguistic aspects of the British nation, if he or she is investigating the characteristic history, the customs, the national literature and the lifestyle of the British people, then no misunderstanding should ever occur.

References:

1. GUNDERSON, L. Slade, K., Rosenke, D. *The Cloze Response Patterns of L1 and L2 Students to Literal and Idiomatic Text*, Canada, 1988, 66 p.
2. LAKOFF, George. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, Chicago, 1987, 42 p. ISBN 95 94 93 92 91 90 89 88 87
3. LEE, Wen Shu. *On Not Missing the Boat: A Processual Method for Inter/Cultural Understanding of Idioms and Lifeworld*, Belmont, CA, 1994, 161 p.
4. FLAVELL, L. FLAVELL, R.H. *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins*, London, 2005, 2nd. edition. 228 p. ISBN 1856263681

5. FUNK, I. K. WAGNALLS, A. W. *New World Encyclopedia*. NY, 2002. 87 p.
6. SPEARS, R. A. *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*, USA, 2000. 625 p. ISBN 978-0844202747
7. BJORNSON, K. *The Role of Cultural Awareness on L2 Comprehension and Retention of Culture-Specific Idioms*, Minnesota, 2010, 97p.
8. LAMSA, G. *Idioms in the Bible Explained and a Key to the Original Gospels*, NY, 1985, 256p. ISBN 978-0060649272