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Semantic modulations of phraseological units

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Abstract: The article deals with semantic modulations of set phrases. Such notions as compositionality, idiomatic sense, semantic complexity, semantic motivation and semantic metalanguage are analyzed. The author also notes that an idiomatic sense is contextually specified.

Keywords: idiom, phraseme, set phrase, compositionality, motivation, idiomatic sense.

Linguists have been studying phraseological stock of a language for more than half a century (Ch. Bally, 1905, 1909; F. Sailer, 1922, L. P. Smith, 1925; M. Halliday, 1966; A. Makkai, 1972; P. Hohnich, 1980; Ch. Fillmore, 1988; D. Sinclair, 1991; R. Moon, 1998; P. Howarth, 1996, 2002, 2006; A. Wray, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2011; V.V. Vinogradov, 1946, 1947, 1953; M.M. Shanskii, 1963; N.M. Amosova, 1963; V.L. Arkhangelkiy, 1964; A.B. Kunin, 1970; V.M. Telija, 1966, 1981, 1996, 2006; I. Mel'čuk, 1968, 1984, 1997, 2007; etc.). The issue of semantics of phraseological units arose in the late 1940s – early 1950s with the distinction of phraseology as a separate linguistic discipline. One of the most important points is the systematization of phraseological material due to the necessity to get to the bottom of semantic systematization of phraseological types. **The aim of the article** is to trace semantic modulations of phraseological units.

Idiomaticity is a pervasive feature of language. Igor Mel'čuk formulates it like this: "People do not speak in words; they speak in phrasemes" [9]. By that he means that many expressions in language are not free combinations of lexemes (words or other atomic forms) but are fixed, frozen phrases. Meanwhile, in linguistic literature, the term "idiom" is most often used for a subclass of fixed expressions with specific semantic properties. That is, "idioms" are fixed expressions that are semantically opaque, non-compositional and unanalyzable [7]. Most researchers would agree that these complex units are syntactic expressions that exhibit lexical co-occurrence restrictions that cannot be explained in terms of regular rule-governed syntactic or semantic restrictions.

The classical view on the semantics of idioms is that they do not have an internal semantic structure, they are semantically non-compositional. Moreover from the definition above we can see that non-compositionality is even taken as one of the defining criteria for idioms. F. Čermák supports this position when calling the idiom's non-compositionality "a condition *sine qua non* for its semantic substance" and claiming that "semantically, the idiom is a ho-

listic, Gestalt phenomenon, a feature often acknowledged, which excludes any possibility of an objective semantic analysis" [3]. This traditional view was challenged by T. Wasow et al., who claimed that there exists a class of idioms for which parts of the idiom "have identifiable meanings which combine to produce the meaning of the whole", a class of compositional idioms [10]. A more recent view recognizes a continuum between fixed idiomatic expressions on the one hand and freely combinable words on the other hand, with different degrees of both syntactic flexibility and semantic analyzability in between [1; 5]. Taking this into account, we decide for each idiom part separately whether we take it to have a meaning of its own, or not, i.e. we distinguish between meaningful and meaningless idiom parts. This leads to a third class of idioms, called partially compositional idioms, which consists of the idioms having both meaningful and meaningless components. We describe the meaning of an idiom by means of one or more literal, non-idiomatic paraphrases, one of which is selected as the main paraphrase. The main paraphrase is supposed to reflect the idiom's semantic type.

U. Weinreich's work "Problems in the analysis of idioms" (1969) contains an important and careful discussion of the semantics of idioms. He illustrates how an idiomatic sense of a complex expression may be the result of a suppression, addition or replacement of some component of meaning. U. Weinreich argues that many morphemes (words) appear in a dictionary with more than one sense. Each sense is contextually specified, and the contextual features may be of several kinds. They may be syntactic; the subsense may vary for transitive (*to walk the dog*) and intransitive use (*to walk*) of the verb. The contextual feature may be semantic; *blind* has at least two senses: "*unseeing*" and "*without exit at opposite end*". The latter is only available in *blind alley* [4]. Finally, the selection of the subsense might be dependent on the contextual presence of a specific morpheme: *blind date* and *blind appointment* [4; 11].

The following semantic aspects are often believed to be specific to phrasemes: complexity, vagueness, expressivity and pragmatic surplus value [2]. Phraseologisms are generally semantically more complex than words. In the terminology of the seme-analysis, this means that in addition to its semantic kernel, the phraseme possesses more “differentiating and concretizing semes” than a semantically comparable word. The phraseologism *to make a mountain out of a molehill* [4] and its lexical equivalent *to blow something up, to exaggerate* can illustrate that. As for vagueness, it is often said that many idioms are especially vague. What does actually *to kill two birds with one stone* [4] mean? It is not known exactly what the “two birds” are and which action is alluded to when the person in question “kill two birds with one stone”, and so on. The phrasemes offer empty formulas which would be filled by the context. There are many different characteristics under the title “expressivity” of the phraseological units. However they would better be called “connotative surplus value”. Phraseologisms have a surplus of connotative characteristics compared, respectively, to the corresponding simple words or to equivalent word combinations. These are partly latent characteristics though that will become effective only in certain contexts [2]. The other two characteristics are especially important: 1) In phrasemes with two meanings, the literal meaning can “resonate” or be “actualized”. This is especially important in metaphorical or metonymical idioms. Thus, in some works, expressivity is equated with figurativeness; 2) Metaphoricity and metonymicity are not the only “tropes” that may characterize phraseological units. As to pragmatic surplus value, we should note that semantic and pragmatic aspects cannot be fully (clearly) separated.

An idiom as a whole has a “phraseological meaning” that is an overall meaning. The fact that *kick the bucket* [4] means “die” does not follow from any underlying principle or from our knowledge of the world [7]. An idiom consists of components that have a lexical or a grammatical meaning. At the non-phraseological, “literal” level, these components are normal syntagms whose meaning emerges from the regular combination of the components, i.e. from their combination in accordance with the normal semantic and morphosyntactic rules. The phraseological meaning of the word combination has no apparent connection with the non-phraseological one, e. g. in *spill the beans* [4] a lexeme *spill* does not have the meaning “divulge” and *the beans* – “information”. The absence of such a connection is called “idiomaticity”. One of the main semantic problems in phraseology is describing and explaining if and how the two meanings or levels of mean-

ing are connected. The stronger the connection, the more the idiom is “motivated”. In respect of motivation, the scientists D. Dbrovol’skij and E. Piirainen have distinguished between the following types of idiom semantic motivation: the metaphoric motivation with its subtypes (kinetic idioms and play on words), the symbol-based motivation, intertextuality, the indexal motivation and mixed type of motivation [6].

The fact that we have to say *spill the beans* and not *spill the peas* does not follow from any grammatical rule but simply has to be learned, even if we assume that this idiom is semantically compositional or analyzable. This means that idioms are (idioms) set phrases by convention, like all conventions they have to be learned and remembered [7]. Of course, there are limits to what can constitute an idiom. Often these limitations are invoked by grammatical principles, but sometimes idioms are restricted in form because of extralinguistic factors.

Phraseological symbol is a type of lingual signs the basis of which is transparency of the inner form (outgoing or reinterpreted etymological meaning that serves as a connecting link between an actual meaning and literal semantics of figurative base of phraseological units). The symbols of numerous phrasemes are based on the symbols of the inner form, which represents the abstraction extent from figurative base, the outgoing meaning of a phrase. A good example is the semantics based on metaphor: *the pink of health* [4] – *in very good condition, physically and emotionally*.

“The meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign in which it is more fully developed” [8]. Up till now, there have been no special metalanguages for the description of phraseological semantics. Its description was reduced to the lexical definitions in dictionaries. However, by no means can the problem of the semantic description of phrasemes be limited to picking out their *differencia specifica*. In contrast to the other types of lexicon units, most set phrases have a living inner form, which is a very important component of the meaning of an idiom. In other words, the description of idiom semantics should have two interconnected parts: 1) the description of semantics in a strict sense (representation of *differencia specifica* and integral components of meaning) and 2) the description of the image component, i.e. inner form [2]. Modern semantic metalanguages are based on the assumption of arbitrariness of a linguistic sign, introduced in linguistics by F. de Saussure as an important postulate of the structural approach to language analysis. Possessing their inner form, idioms contradict this postulate, because it influences idiom meaning formation. The

semantic interpretation of inner form can be explicit and implicit. Explicit strategy based on semantic operators, introduced in semantic representation an idea of comparing of two entities. In the implicit strategy of semantic representation, there are no special operators for the inner form, and relevant semantic information is distributed among different components of the definition. In the explicit strategy, it is possible to enumerate operators of inner form representation; in the implicit strategy, every case is unique [2]. In practical lexicography, both the explicit and the implicit strategy can be used in one and the same definition.

Thus, having conducted the investigation we should note that idioms are set phrases by convention and one cannot create them with the help of rule governed restrictions. The extent of compositionality

differs greatly among idioms because there are compositional non-compositional and partly compositional idioms. Contextual features play an important role in semantics of set phrases. Phraseological meaning is a factor of a language and not a speech. It may be discovered in units which are characterized by phraseological steadiness. The steadiness of phraseological meaning is closely connected with the steadiness of lexical structure of a unit. The inner form may be explicit and implicit and it influences the meaning of a set phrase. The most important feature of phraseologisms is fully or partly reinterpreted meaning. The nature of the meaning is reinterpreted if there is any departure from the literal meaning. The perspective of our further investigation is lexical and grammatical features of set phrases.

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Негрич Н. Семантические модуляции фразеологических единиц

Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются семантические модуляции фразеологических единиц. Анализируются такие понятия: композициональность, идиоматический смысл, семантическая сложность, семантическая мотивация и семантический метаязык. Автор обращает внимание на влияние контекстуальных особенностей на идиоматический смысл.

Ключевые слова: идиома, фразема, устойчивое выражение, композициональность, мотивация, идиоматический смысл.