

SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION OF ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS DENOTING HUMAN CHARACTER

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Abstract. This article provides a semantic analysis of English phraseological units expressing human character and identifies their primary semantic groups. The study examines phraseological units expressing positive, negative, and neutral-evaluative character traits, highlighting their semantic motivation, imagery, and evaluative possibilities. Using phraseological units such as *a heart of gold, a cold fish, a dark horse, a big mouth, a tough cookie, a wet blanket, a loose cannon and an open book*, the expression of human qualities such as kindness, coldness, secrecy, talkativeness, persistence, dampening other's enthusiasm, lack of control, and openness is analyzed. As a result, it is revealed that in English phraseology, human character is often expressed through evaluative, figurative, and metaphorical semantics.

Keywords: phraseological unit, human character, semantic classification, evaluative meaning, imagery, idiomatic semantics.

INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units are one of the important layers that show not only the lexical, but also the evaluative and figurative possibilities of the language. Through them, a person's external actions, internal state, behavior, and character traits are expressed in a concise, impressive, and often expressive form. In particular, phraseological units that serve to describe human character are actively used in everyday, artistic, and journalistic speech of the English language. Character represents a set of psychological and behavioral traits that a person regularly manifests in specific situations. In the language system, these features are expressed both through individual adjectives and phraseological units. However, unlike simple adjectives or lexemes, phraseological units can simultaneously

express an assessment of a person, an emotional attitude, and a figurative imagination. For example, the unit *a heart of gold* indicates that a person is kind and generous, while *a cold fish* describes an emotionally cold person who does not get close to others. *A big mouth* is used in relation to a person who cannot keep a secret or talks a lot. In these units, the meaning is not limited to naming a characteristic of a person, but also expresses a positive or negative assessment of it.

C. Fernando emphasizes that one of the important features of phraseological units is their semantic integrity and idiomaticity [1; 30-36-p.]. R. Moon pays attention to the semantic and pragmatic features of fixed expressions and idioms in real speech [2; 3-9-p.] From this point of view, the division of phraseological units expressing human character into semantic groups allows for a better understanding of their semantic system.

Phraseological units expressing human character can be semantically divided into several main groups. In such a classification, the central meaning of the unit, its evaluative direction, and which aspect of human behavior it represents are considered the main criteria. A. P. Cowie points out that when analyzing phraseological units, it is necessary to take into account their semantic and functional features, as well as their lexical composition [3; 1-6-p.] The first large group consists of phraseological units expressing positive character traits. For example, the phraseological unit *a heart of gold* is used to describe an extremely kind, sincere, and generous person. Here, the gold component serves as an image representing high values, goodness, and valuable qualities. The phraseological unit conceptualizes a person's inner spiritual quality through a physical organ – the heart.

The unit *salt of the earth* also has a positive evaluation and represents an honest, simple, reliable, and useful person for society. In the semantics of this unit, the moral value of a person is specifically emphasized. In this case, the evaluation is of a general nature, describing not a single individual characteristic of the individual, but their general spiritual image. The phraseological unit *a tower of*

strength represents a strong and reliable person who can be a support for others in difficult situations. In this unit, the image of physical strength is transferred to the characteristics of psychological stability and reliability. Z. Kövecses's views on metaphorical conceptualization show that in such units, concrete physical images serve as a means of explaining the abstract characteristics of a person [4; 17–24-p.].

The second group includes phraseological units expressing determination, resilience, and the ability to adapt to difficult conditions. *A tough cookie* is typically used to refer to a person who has a strong character, is resilient to hardships, or does not give up easily. This unit can refer to a positive person in some contexts, and a slightly rude or harsh person in other cases. Therefore, the evaluation of a phraseological unit is not always fixed, but can change depending on the context. *Hard as nails* also represents a person who is strong, tough, and emotionally tough. However, compared to *a tough cookie*, the semantics of hardness and cruelty can be more pronounced in this unit. Therefore, closely related phraseological units also have certain differences in evaluative semantics.

The third semantic group consists of phraseological units expressing negative character traits. In English phraseology, such units are very productive, figuratively and expressively describing various human flaws. The phraseological unit *a big mouth* is used to refer to a person who talks excessively, especially one who is unable to keep a secret. In this unit, the component *mouth* not only expresses speech activity but also evaluates an individual's behavioral characteristics. A negative attitude is clearly expressed in the general semantics of the phraseological unit.

Two-faced or *a two-faced person* describes a person who is hypocritical, behaving the same way in one situation and completely differently in another. Here, the image of “two faces” expresses insincerity and distrust in human character. This unity is formed as a result of the combination of an external image and an internal moral assessment. *A snake in the grass* is used to represent an unreliable and treacherous person who poses a hidden threat. The image of the

snake is associated with caution, hidden danger, and cunning in many cultural traditions. The negative evaluative power of the phraseological unit occurs precisely through this image. *A loose cannon* is used in relation to a person who is difficult to control, who may act unexpectedly and dangerously. Although this unit was previously associated with seafaring terminology, it has become an active phraseology describing human character in modern English. D. Dobrovolsky and E. Piirainen emphasize that the cultural and conceptual foundations of the phraseological image influence its semantic motivation [5; 17–23-p].

The fourth group consists of units expressing emotional coldness, indifference, and aloofness. *A cold fish* is one such phraseological unit that expresses a person who does not show their emotions externally, who is cold and distant from others. The use of the component *cold* in the sense of emotional coldness is based on the metaphorical connection between physical temperature and mental state. The unit *An ice queen* can also express emotional coldness, but its use is more evaluative in relation to a female person. Since such units can also have gender-related connotations, their evaluation outside the context requires caution.

The fifth group includes units that express secrecy, a mysterious character, or not fully revealing oneself to others. *A dark horse* unit represents a person whose capabilities, plans, or internal characteristics are not fully known to others. This unit is not always negative; sometimes it can also mean a person with unexpected abilities. In this regard, its evaluative direction depends on the context. In contrast, *an open book* represents a person whose thoughts, feelings, and behavior are easily understood by others, and whose hidden aspects are almost imperceptible. The image of the *book* is associated with the “readability” of the content, that is, the possibility of understanding the inner world of a person. These two units can express semantically opposite character traits.

The sixth group includes phraseological units expressing social behavior and the ability to influence others. *A wet blanket* is used in relation to a person who reduces the joy or interest of others, making the environment boring or depressing.

Here, the concrete idea that a wet blanket extinguishes the fire is metaphorically transferred to the negative impact of a person in the social environment. *The life and soul of the party* is the opposite. This unit describes a person who is cheerful, active, and able to inspire others in a group or circle. This phraseological unit has a positive evaluation and indicates a person's socially active and communicative character. *People person* also represents a person who quickly gets along with people, loves communication, and is successful in social relationships. Although this unit differs slightly from classical phraseological units in terms of idiomaticity, it is actively used in modern English as a stable unit expressing a person's communicative character.

The seventh semantic group consists of units expressing arrogance, self-esteem, and self-superiority. *Full of oneself* describes a person who considers themselves very important, excessively self-important. *Having a big head* also has a similar meaning, indicating that a person overestimates their abilities or achievements. *Look down one's nose at someone*, on the other hand, expresses the quality of disregarding others and considering oneself superior to them. In this unit, body movement and spatial orientation are transferred to social assessment. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson show that the high-low spatial opposition in metaphorical conceptualization can be associated with evaluative meanings [6; 14–21-p].

The eighth group includes phraseological units expressing cowardice, hesitation, and indecision. *Chicken-hearted* or *chicken* units are associated with cowardice in English. *Lose one's nerve* refers to the state of losing courage or determination in a specific situation. In such units, the semantics of character can sometimes express a permanent quality, and sometimes a temporary behavioral state. Therefore, when classifying phraseological units expressing human character, it is necessary to consider the difference between a constant character trait and situational behavior. In English phraseology, there are also units that express intelligence, insight, and, conversely, ignorance or inattention. Units such as *a smart cookie* or *quick on the uptake* represent a person who thinks quickly and

understands the situation easily, while not the sharpest tool in the shed ironically describes a person who thinks relatively slowly or is not very smart. The evaluative character of such phraseological units is particularly strong, and irony and humor also play an important role in their communicative use.

A. Langlotz notes that the semantics of idiomatic units do not consist only of a ready-made lexical meaning, their figurative and conceptual motivation is also important [7; 3-9-p.] This is especially relevant for phraseological units expressing human character. Because the characteristic power of units such as *cold fish*, *loose cannon*, *wet blanket*, *dark horse* comes from their figurative basis. D. A. Cruse considers evaluative and connotative meanings within the framework of lexical semantics as an important part of the general semantic structure of a lexical unit [8; 37-42-p.] Even in phraseological units expressing human character, denotative content and evaluative semantics are not separated from each other. For example, *a heart of gold* not only names a kind person but also expresses a positive attitude towards them; *a big mouth*, while naming a talkative or indiscreet person, also reveals a negative assessment of him. Analysis shows that phraseological units expressing human character in English can be semantically divided into groups such as positive qualities, persistence, negative behavioral qualities, emotional coldness, secrecy or openness, social activity, arrogance, cowardice, and intellectual characteristics. However, such a classification is not absolute, as some units can simultaneously express several semantic signs and evaluations.

Another important feature of phraseological units is their evaluative capacity depending on the context. For example, *a tough cookie* can express a positive meaning, such as “resilient and resolute” in one context, and “hard and uncompromising” in another. *A dark horse*, on the other hand, can vary from a neutral content as a mysterious person to a positive or cautious assessment of an unexpectedly strong opponent. Therefore, in the semantic analysis of phraseological units expressing human character, it is necessary to take into account their pragmatic and contextual features, as well as their lexical meaning.

CONCLUSION

The research results showed that phraseological units expressing human character in the English language are semantically diverse. Through them, many character traits are expressed, such as kindness, honesty, persistence, reliability, coldness, cunning, talkativeness, arrogance, cowardice, secrecy, openness, and social activity. During the analysis, it was found that most phraseological units not only perform a nominative function but also create a positive, negative, or neutral assessment of a person. Units such as *a heart of gold*, *salt of the earth* can have a positive meaning, phraseological units such as *a big mouth*, *a snake in the grass*, *two-faced* can have a negative meaning, and units such as *a dark horse* can have different evaluative meanings depending on the context.

The meaning of phraseological units expressing human character often has a metaphorical and figurative basis. Heart, cold, animal, object, physical strength, spatial direction and other concrete images are used to express the abstract psychological characteristics of a person. This situation shows that phraseological semantics is directly related to human thinking and evaluative activity. Thus, the semantic classification of English phraseological units expressing human character allows for the systematic elucidation of their semantic structure, evaluative orientation, and figurative motivation. The study of such units, along with understanding the phraseological richness of the English language, also deeply reveals the expressive and semantic possibilities of the language in the description of a person.

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