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**TRANSFORMATION OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS
IN MAGAZINE HEADLINES**

Irina V. Stepanova (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia, musicair14@gmail.com, +7(351) 7997150

Abstract

The article discusses the transformation of idiomatic expressions used in the Economist magazine headlines. The headline of the article is considered as performing both informative and expressive functions. Transformation of set phrases and idioms is viewed as a powerful linguistic tool of making a magazine headline more emphatic, memorable, and charged with connotative meanings. The findings reveal that the predominant type of transformation of the original idiomatic expression is the modification of its structural organization as compared to the usage of the conventional structural form which is accompanied by the semantic shift of meaning. Regarding the lexical aspect of research, the article examines four groups of idiomatic expressions pertaining to the basic word stock of the English language, including word collocations, idioms, proverbs and sayings, and special terminology. Regarding the cultural aspect of research, particular attention is paid to differentiating the sources of the original phrases, to which belong classical and contemporary literature, mass culture, famous quotations, biblical references. The researcher attempts at interpreting the complex semantic interactions arising between the original idiomatic expression and its modified variant used in the headline with due consideration of the context of the magazine article.

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1. Introduction

The headline of a magazine article, understood as the line of words introducing the title of the story, performs various functions in the media discourse of the publicist style. The headline may present the main thesis of the article in the form of an extended summary sentence, or it may only outline the major topic(s) the article is devoted to. It informs the reader briefly of what the article that follows below is about and states the essence of the article in a syntactically compressed form. Alongside with the purely informative function, the article headline fulfills the expressive function while trying to impress and involve the potential readers, make them interested in the subject matter of the published material. It is for this purpose that a great variety of expressive means of language are used in the headlines, including phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactical stylistic resources.

The focus of the present paper is on considering one particular lexical feature which, as the research findings demonstrate, is common to the significant number of the Economist magazine headlines – the use of idiomatic expressions. To idiomatic expressions in the present article we refer a wide range of idioms, set phrases, colloquial expressions, phrasal verbs, conversational clichés, ready-made speech formulas, proverbs and sayings, familiar quotations, etc., all of which are considered as an important characteristic of the natural, authentic spoken English. Idiomatic expressions appear to be highly informative linguistic units that possess various stylistic connotations, they are charged with linguo-cultural and socio-cultural meanings, for which reason these expressions often present quite a challenge for the non-native speakers of English in recognizing and grasping their meaning and semantic interconnections.

The use of an idiomatic phrase even in its original form already increases the expressive potential of any utterance, among them a magazine headline. In order to make the headline yet more expressive, memorable and eye-catching the writers of the Economist magazine headlines often resort to the method of transformation, or modification, of an original set expression, an idiom, or a quotation (Stepanova, 2014). This helps to make a stronger impact on the potential reader, to influence the opinion and judgment of the audience, to elicit some emotional response, to evoke meaningful associations in the reader's mind (Melerovich & Mokienko, 2014).

2. Problem Statement

The research material reveals that some of the idiomatic expressions represented in the Economist magazine headlines belong to the basic word stock of the English language, while others are recognized as references to the linguo-cultural sources, i.e. textual allusions, aphorisms, and quotations, whose origins go beyond the scope of the general bulk of the vocabulary. The research is focused on the differentiation between these two groups of the original idiomatic expressions, and furthermore, on more precise definition of (1) the specific layers of vocabulary and (2) the diverse origins of the intertextual and cultural sources.

The research data also demonstrates that the idiomatic expressions in the Economist magazine headlines can appear either in the newly modified form or in their original wording. The research looks particularly at the proportion between the cases of structural transformation (of different types) and the cases of purely semantic shift of meaning (of the structurally unchanged forms).

3. Research Questions

In accordance with the problem statement, the following research questions were developed:

- What principles of classification can be applied to the analysis of headlines which are based on the transformation of idiomatic expressions?
- What layers of the basic word stock of the English language are mostly employed in creating the Economist magazine headlines?
- What original texts serve as the sources of idiomatic expressions used in the Economist magazine headlines? Which areas of cultural knowledge do they refer to?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of the research is to provide an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the dynamic correlation, which emerges as a result of the interaction between the original idiomatic expression (as it stands in the system of the English vocabulary) and its modified variant (as it appears in the magazine headline). The study focuses on both structural and semantic levels of analysis.

5. Research Methods

The overall methodology of the current research can be presented as follows: the January-March issues of the Economist magazine (The Economist, 2018) were examined, the headlines containing various types of transformation of idiomatic expressions were identified to form the databank of over 130 headlines, the obtained research material was further analyzed, classified and interpreted.

The following methods of linguistic analysis were applicable at different stages of the given research:

- contextual analysis, used while reading an article to get a general idea of its contents, to grasp the author's message, to specify the exact meaning acquired by the modified idiomatic expression used in the headline;
- semantic analysis, used when dealing with the dictionary definitions (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018) of idioms and conventional contexts of their usage, as well as studying the semantic structure of individual lexical units – components of a given idiom (both original and transformed) – thus revealing their expressive, emotive, evaluative, and stylistic connotations;
- distributional analysis, employed while studying lexical and grammatical environment of linguistic units in a modified idiom as compared to the conventional one in order to specify the type of the semantic and structural transformation of an original idiomatic expression.

Apart from essential procedures of linguistic analysis mentioned above, two other methods can be outlined – that of interpretation which helps to provide possible explanations for the choice of the original idiom to be used in the headlines as well as to show any cultural links and connotations (Wikipedia, 2018), and that of classification, which together with the statistical method are used to render the typology and numerical results.

6. Findings

We obtained the following results.

6.1. Classification of headlines by the source of the original idiomatic expression

According to the source of the original idiomatic expression used in the headline in its modified version all magazine headlines can be roughly subdivided into two groups.

The first group – comprising almost two thirds (64%) of the overall quantity of the research material – is represented by the headlines containing the idiomatic expressions belonging to the *basic word stock* of the English language and thus being registered in English dictionaries, e.g. *No storm but lots of tea cups* (March 8, 2018), the headline given to the article about changes in Chinese politics concerning abolishing the two-term limit on a president's tenure (cf. *a storm in a teacup*).

The second group – comprising one third (36%) of all magazine headlines analyzed – revealed the presence of *intertextual elements* the origins of which can be traced back to a wide variety of cultural sources – both universal and nationally specific, e.g. *A tale of two Washingtons* (March 8, 2018), the headline given to the article about the plans of the web giant Amazon to build its second headquarters near Washington (cf. *A Tale of Two Cities*, a novel by Charles Dickens).

6.2. Classification of headlines by the type of transformation of the original idiomatic expression

The transformed idiomatic expressions found in the headlines differ from the original ones both on the structural and semantic level.

Three fourths (75%) of the research material are the headlines which have undergone *structural changes* accompanied by the shift of their semantic meaning as well (as compared to the meaning of the original expression). Among all types of structural changes observed, 72% is taken up by the *substitution*, e.g. *From Russia with youth* (March 15, 2018), the headline introducing a selection of interviews with Russian teenagers before presidential elections 2018 (cf. *From Russia with Love* (1963), a British spy film in James Bond series). This most frequent pattern of structural transformation is represented by various types of substitution of (one of) the lexical units in the original idiomatic expression – by a contextually more appropriate word (in around half of research material cases of substitution), by a paronym, by a homonym, by an antonym. Some other changes of the original structure may involve extension / clipping of the original idiomatic expression (Stepanova, 2014), misplacement of its key components, blending of two idioms into one new phrase (Melerovich & Mokienko, 2014).

One fourth (25%) of all the headlines contain the idiomatic expressions used in their *conventional structural form*, e.g. *Off the beaten track* (March 10, 2018), *Down the slippery slope* (March 8, 2018), *No rose without a thorn* (March 8, 2018). It should be noted that while conventional structure of the idiom is retained and stays unchanged the new semantic meaning is acquired by this phrase due to the extended context of the article.

6.3. Transformation of idiomatic expressions: lexical aspect of research

The research revealed that idiomatic expressions which traditionally pertain to the English *basic word stock* (used in the first group of magazine headlines) fall into four different classes of lexis. They are as follows: (1) colloquial phrases and word collocations, (2) idioms, (3) proverbs and sayings, (4) special terminology.

Colloquial phrases and word collocations are found in over half (56%) of such type of magazine headlines. Here belong some of the well-known and commonly reproduced in natural speech idiomatic expressions. For instance, the standard fairy-tale cliché *Prince Charming* as a result of blending with the expression *charm offensive* ('an intentional attempt to achieve something using charm') is transformed into *Prince Charm-offensive* (March 8, 2018) in the article devoted to the visit of Saudi Arabia Prince to Britain which was accompanied by a lot of PR. The typical warning sign for rail passengers *Mind the gap* is extended into *Mind the WikiGap* (March 8, 2018), the headline of the article about the Swedish initiatives to create a more gender-equal Wikipedia, redressing the current imbalance when overwhelming majority of contributing writers are men. Substitution of one of the components of the original idiomatic phrase by a homonym can be illustrated by the headline *Mrs Merkel goes fourth* (March 10, 2018) (cf. *go forth*) used to speak about the chancellor's fourth term. A similar case of language play is observed in the headline of the article on Paris climate agreement *A word of warming* (March 15, 2018), which is paronymous with the conventional collocation *a word of warning*.

Idioms and *proverbs and sayings* creatively used in the headlines are equally represented in the research material (18% and 18% correspondingly). The literal sense of a common idiom *go Dutch* ('share the cost of something') used in the headline in its conventional structural form *Going Dutch* (March 15, 2018) is revealed by the context of the article telling about the Britain's largest consumer-goods firm Unilever moving its headquarters to the Netherlands. An idiom *hale and hearty* ('healthy and strong') is modified by means of paronymous substitution into *Shale and hearty* (February 7, 2018) to discuss the favourable prospects of shale-oil projects in America. The well-known English proverb *You can't have your cake and eat it* through clipping and contextual substitution is turned into *Grow your rice and eat it* (March 15, 2018) in the article devoted to the problems of local rice production in Nigeria. The headline *Falsehood flies* (March 9, 2018), which is a re-created version of the proverb *Time flies*, is given to the article sharing the results of the recent study which show that false stories are retweeted by more people and thus travel more quickly.

The smallest proportion of headlines (8%) makes use of a very specific group of idiomatic expressions – *special terminological word combinations* belonging to the semantic field of economics and economic science. For example, the professionally marked word collocation *net gain* ('bottom line') is transformed into *Net gains* (March 10, 2018), the headline of the article about an innovative and lucrative way of fish farming with the help of open-ocean aquaculture net. The article named *Dead cat bounce* (March 15, 2018), which tells about slowing down of the British economy due to the Brexit effect, uses the original form of the economic professional lexical unit metaphorically revisited by the context. All in all, the usage of terminological phrases in headlines is conditioned by the Economist target audience factor and is connected with the sphere of their professional interests, i.e. business and finance.

6.4. Transformation of idiomatic expressions: cultural aspect of research

Idiomatic expressions functioning as cultural allusions (observed in the second group of magazine headlines) can roughly be subdivided into four groups which name the original sources of these phrases: (1) classical and contemporary literature (prose and poetry), (2) mass culture (music and film), (3) famous quotations, (4) the Bible.

The use of such intertextual components as *allusions to literary sources* is characteristic of the largest group (40%) of the headlines. Typically the book titles, e.g. *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome K. Jerome, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) by Jane Austen, are used to serve as phrasal templates for headlines. As a result of paronymous substitution the newly created magazine headline points to the situation around three activists in Hong Kong politics – *Three men and a vote* (February 8, 2018), or tells about linguistic verification of the fact that people tend to use very limited vocabulary when describing smells – *Scents and Sensibility* (January 18, 2018). Another book title – *Notes from a Small Island* (1995) by Bill Bryson – is used in its original form (March 10, 2018), but due to the word play based on the polysemy of the noun *notes* ('a short piece of writing', 'a piece of paper money') the headline acquires a completely new meaning when describing the digitization process of the Development Bank of Singapore.

Textual allusions also frequently appear in the headlines in the modified form. The headline *Sing a song of sonar* (March 10, 2018) – a contextually altered wording of a well-known English nursery rhyme *Sing a song of sixpence* – presents the story of the scientific discovery of the new ecosystem in the deeper sea layers which was found by means of sending the sonar signals to the bottom of the sea. The article headlined *O Fractions, my Fractions* (March 8, 2018) tells about the benefits of applying machine-learning to the analysis of literary texts and can be linked to two interconnected sources simultaneously. One is Walt Whitman's poem *O Captain! My Captain!* (1865), the other is the feature film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) in which the above-mentioned line from Whitman's poem is recited by the students and is used as a form of address to the teacher of poetry who showed his disregard for any statistical approach to evaluating verses. The line from Lewis Carroll's novel *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1865) is semantically played upon in the headline *Jam tomorrow* (January 20, 2018), which is used to state that driverless cars of the future, contrary to popular belief, would still create traffic congestion problems.

Around one-third (34%) of the headlines using intertextual elements contain *references to popular culture*. As the research shows, most of these references are connected with different musical sources, including classical and contemporary jazz, rock, or pop music. A case in point is the original line of the famous song from the Gershwin's opera 'Porgy and Bess' (1935), which is used in the headline *It ain't necessarily so* (March 10, 2018) to ironically render the idea that not all of Mr Trump's statements concerning economics and free trade are true. The well-known line *Let my people go* from the American spiritual 'Go Down, Moses' (1862) due to the substitution by an antonym is changed into the headline *Let my people stay* (February 1, 2018) to speak about Israel's society being split on the issue of the government plans to deport African migrants to Rwanda. The headline *Gliders on the storm* (March 8, 2018), which is clearly related to a song 'Riders on the Storm' (1971) by an American rock band 'The Doors', involves the readers into the topic of using drones of all shapes and sizes in the process of ocean monitoring to predict weather or protect wildlife. R.E.M.'s biggest hit single *Losing my religion* (1991) has become a source for

the headline *Losing their religion* (March 15, 2018), which draws the readers' attention to the problem of growing apostasy among Muslims living in the US.

Equally represented in the headlines are *famous quotations and aphorisms* (13%) and *biblical quotes* (13%) which are used either in the original wording and structure or in non-conventional structural form. The article headlined *Faster, stronger... higher?* (March 6, 2018), placed in the rubric 'Sports in Britain', reveals the disappointing results of the parliamentary report on doping. The drug-related connotation of the adjective *higher* is revealed due to the context of the article as well as the change of the original word order of the source quotation – the Olympic motto *Faster, higher, stronger* (Lat. *Citius, Altius, Fortius*). Historically significant phrase *The King is dead, long live the King!* (Fr. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi!*) dating back to the 15th century France and used to mark the transfer of sovereignty is recognizably modified into *The GroKo is dead, long live the GroKo* (March 5, 2018), which retains the original idea of ruling power while commenting on the Grand coalition in the contemporary German government.

The use of unchanged biblical quote can be illustrated by the headline *The last shall be first* (March 15, 2018). This line, taken from the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:16), in the context of the article refers to the tendency of professional dance competition judges and examiners to give better ratings and grades to those who are judged later in the process. In another example the sentence from the Lord's Prayer *Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10) is transformed into the headline *In heaven as it is on Earth* (January 18, 2018). The inverted word order of the key components of the original expression reflects the concept of man conquering space as the article speaks about Falcon Heavy rocket sending Elon Musk's sports car in orbit around the sun. This modified headline also underlines the idea of reversal of the usual order of things which has long been characteristic of the relationship between the human race and natural environment.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the research was to analyze the usage of the transformation of the idiomatic expressions in the Economist magazine headlines. The attempt was made at interpreting the interrelation arising between the original idiomatic expression and its modified variant while taking into account the context of the magazine article. The three research questions were answered. The two criteria for the classification of headlines – by the source and by the type of transformation – were established. The four lexical groups of the basic word stock of the English language were identified as the sources of idiomatic expressions used in headlines: (1) colloquial phrases and word collocations, (2) idioms, (3) proverbs and sayings, (4) special terminological word combinations. The four groups of original intertextual elements used in the headlines were revealed: (1) allusions to literary sources, (2) references to popular culture, (3) famous quotations and aphorisms, (4) biblical quotes.

It should be admitted that the usage of idiomatic expressions both in their original wording and particularly in their modified form might hinder the thorough understanding of the connection between the subject matter of the article describing some present-day fact, important event or development and the concept underlying the original idiomatic phrase, and thus detract from the pleasure of reading an article. This can presumably happen due to a variety of factors including (a) the reader's inability to immediately

recognize the idiomatic expression and recollect its figurative meaning, (b) the reader's limited previous experience with specific spheres of knowledge (e.g. literature, music, folklore, science, religion), (c) the recipient's incomplete linguistic or cultural competence, which is especially true of learners of English as a foreign language or representatives of other world cultures.

It can be inferred that the process of recognizing the original idiomatic expressions used in their modified variants and decoding the cultural sources of intertextual components is a challenging task demanding effort on the part of the reader. It is our considered opinion that the thorough analysis of the magazine headline can largely contribute to the deeper understanding of the present-day world view, which is reflected in the headlines due to describing the current events and present-day issues through the prism of language, history and culture.

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