

TILTM 2020
Topical Issues of Linguistics and Teaching Methods in Business and Professional Communication

**LINGUOPRAGMATIC ASPECT OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS
IN ENGLISH BUSINESS DISCOURSE**

Elena N. Malyuga (a)*, Olga V. Aleksandrova (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, 6 Miklukho-Maklay Str., Moscow, Russia, en_malyuga@hotmail.com

(b) Lomonosov Moscow State University, GSP-1, Leninskie Gory, Moscow, Russia, ovaleksandrova@gmail.com

Abstract

The article discusses linguopragmatic properties of idioms presented in English business discourse. Among the imaginative tools used by English-speaking businesspeople, idioms accounted for 40% of the examined sample. The study relies on the linguopragmatic analysis to single out 5 most frequent semantic groups shaping the meaning of idioms used in English business discourse. Acting as figurative expressions that bring in a variety of meanings in view of the speaker's intentions, idioms play a special role in any language. They become the vehicles of thought, which is reborn in speech in the form of living images, contributing to the creation of a figurative portrayal of the world, transmitting native speakers' cultural codes. Business discourse idioms, based on the interaction of the subject-logical and contextual meanings, comprise the subjective criterion, which depends upon a multitude of factors. The context of use contributes to the figurative expression of the metaphorical core and makes it accessible to perception. This is why one of the critical conditions conducive to the productive assimilation of the meaning and pragmatic implication of idioms in the learning process is the delimitation of semantic groups that make up the substantive basis of a particular expression.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Linguopragmatic analysis, idiom, business discourse, English, semantic group.



1. Introduction

English-language business discourse has significantly changed in response to socio-economic factors and has acquired new properties that require serious analysis.

This paper aims to study the linguopragmatic properties of idiomatic expressions in business discourse. The linguopragmatic analysis of idiomatic expressions acknowledges the ever-growing interactions between businesspeople and thus most clearly reflects the sociocultural aspect of the corresponding communicative processes as a relevant object of scholarly interest.

2. Problem Statement

Acting as figurative expressions that bring in a variety of meanings in view of the speaker's intentions, idioms play a special role in any language (Liu, 2017, p. 29). They become the vehicles of thought, which is reborn in speech in the form of living images, contributing to the creation of a figurative portrayal of the world, transmitting native speakers' cultural codes (Savitsky, 2019).

An idiom is defined as an expression (a figure of speech), used as an integral entity, not subject to further decomposition and usually not allowing for the rearrangement of its constituent parts (Liontas, 2017, p. 5). Therewith, the method of composition guiding the interconnection of the components within the idiom is often illogical and even grammatically untenable. In her book "In Other Words", Mona Baker defines idioms as "frozen patterns of language allowing only for minor changes in their form and often carrying a meaning that cannot be deduced from their individual components" (Baker, 2018, p. 33). The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms interprets idioms as "elements of a language that often ignore the rules of logic and create great difficulties for those studying this language" (Ammer, 2018, p. 14). This "illogical" nature of idiomatic expressions and the way idioms might be applied in business discourse for various pragmatic reasons and depending on various speaker intentions present challenging research problems to be investigated.

3. Research Questions

Being analytical, English is extremely rich in idioms, and although comprehensible business communication can be built using only a non-idiomatic norm, such exploitation of language means appears superficial, one-sided and less effective from a pragmatic point of view (Malyuga et al., 2016). In the course of training, lack of awareness or understanding of the practical "power" of idioms can significantly complicate the process of cognition when reading, participating in discussions, debates and, of course, in the future activities of a university graduate and in direct contact with native speakers. Taking this into account, this study poses research questions associated with probable benefits of the linguopragmatic analysis of business discourse idioms in teaching LSP.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the linguopragmatic properties of idiomatic expressions in business discourse. The study revealed that among the figurative tools used by businesspeople in both

dialogical and polylogical communication, idioms occupy an important place, making up 40% of the sample. The peculiarities of idioms use depend both on the specific speech situation and on the format of business communication (interviews, negotiations, scheduled meetings, etc.) (Malyuga, 2008). Although the vocabulary of business discourse is usually neutral, idiomatic expressions that are always emotional are increasingly used to create a certain effect as per speaker's intention.

5. Research Methods

The communicative-pragmatic function of idioms is also rather apparent: the pragmatic potential of phraseological units is determined both by the context and the properties of the phraseological units themselves (Horvath & Siloni, 2019, p. 854). The context of use contributes to the figurative expression of the metaphorical core and makes it accessible to perception (Kulkova & Fischer, 2019, p. 1155): this is why one of the critical conditions conducive to the productive assimilation of the meaning and pragmatic implication of idioms in the learning process is the delimitation of semantic groups that make up the substantive basis of a particular expression. Such semantic groups are distinguished on the basis of the linguopragmatic analysis of idioms, whereby the study of language means is associated with the study of speaker intentions determined by the communicative context.

6. Findings

Study results revealed five most frequent semantic groups, which are the meaning-forming base for the idiomatic expression used in the English-language business discourse.

1. The semantic group of idiomatic expressions in which business processes are endowed with the anthropic properties. The pragmatic goal is to "humanize" the subject of conversation, thereby overestimating its significance and importance in the eyes of the communication partner. For instance:

*This year's annual report will be a **bitter pill to swallow**.*

*Looks like the project is **alive and kicking**, so good job on that.*

*In its current state, our economy simply cannot afford **catching another cold**.*

*The economy finally seems to be **on the mend**.*

The manifestation of the anthropological attribute in idioms is designed to facilitate the perception of meaning by the listener and reduce the likelihood of the need to verify the speaker's intention. Such an attribute is actualized through referral to a specific set of the object's properties; these, in turn, can be represented by the linguocultural models associated with the corresponding denotation, a specific anthropological function associated with the action/state/quality in question, or an inference drawn from the idiom's pragmatic and linguistic components (Mancuso et al., 2020).

2. The semantic group of idiomatic expressions comparing business and spousal relations. The pragmatic goal is to idealize and romanticize the subject of conversation in order to euphemize certain notions and/or manipulate the addressee. For instance:

*It's no time for a scandal, so make it an **amicable split** before our shares go down.*

*There's no chance this winning streak is going to last after the crisis really sets in, which is why we will need to buckle up. **The honeymoon is over**.*

*This merger is a **match made in heaven**.*

*With no foreseeable contributions coming our way, we will have to **break up with** our foreign investors.*

The actualization of the attribute depends on the “gestalt” underlying the process of meaning decoding. Because of the differences in reasoning and varying worldviews, a semantic attribute that is often the same in its objective essence can be expressed through various media in completely different contexts (Böttger & Költzsch, 2019). The difference, of course, lies not in awareness, but in perception. As far as the properties of consciousness are concerned (the ones reflecting the properties of reality itself), no new phenomenon or attitude, being perceived through experience, remains isolated, separated by a wall from all previous experience. In the process of perception, it is introduced into certain previously developed semantic complexes – associated, for example, with the designation of marital relations – and thus takes its place in the system of a person’s ideology. Regardless of the listener’s volition, the comparative aspect of idiomatic expression “enforcing” the idea of similarity between business and spousal relations will become somewhat superimposed on the socially determined worldview through linguistic and pragmatic inventory (Pitzl, 2018).

3. The semantic group of idiomatic expressions indicating the similarity of business processes with the features of military operations. The pragmatic goal is to motivate the interlocutor or to emphasize the significance of the described objects, actions, situations, etc. For instance:

*We might have another **arrow in the quiver** here, but the market risks are not looking good.*

*You have **dodged the bullet** with this one but leaving things to chance is not a strategy I would boast to our investors.*

*This contract is our number one priority, and we’ll have to **fight an uphill battle** here.*

*The IT department managed to join forces and have pulled through **with flying colors**.*

Professional vocabulary is a regular source of idiomatic borrowing. Terms and set expressions, going beyond the limited sphere of use, become part of institutional conversational practices. Military rhetoric often dominates modern English-speaking language consciousness in general and business discourse in particular, as war remains an inexhaustible source of vivid images and strong arguments for the representatives of the business community (Rafatbakhsh & Ahmadi, 2019). An idiomatic expression can be assigned to the conceptual sphere of “war” based on the lexical markers present in its structure – for example, weapons and their modifications, including military equipment (as in “*time bomb*”, “*armed to the teeth*”, “*of heavy caliber*”, “*a blank shot*”, etc.). For example, the idiom “*time bomb*” used in business discourse denotes existing problems that are not recognized up to a point when they suddenly turn into a disaster, where certain events, prerequisites and conditions can be assessed as a harbinger of serious shocks. Thus, even a limited set of examples reveals the prominent place that military idioms hold in English business discourse. In the minds of the participants in communication, they are steadily associated with irreversibility, power and strength. At the same time, military images are actualized not only in cases where a conflicting speech strategy is being implemented (in discussing sensitive, problematic topics), but also in contexts of cooperative strategies taking place (as a sign of “consensus”, general recognition and approval of someone’s professional merit and skill).

4. The semantic group of idiomatic expressions that find semantic similarity with the process of being on the move, going forward. The pragmatic goal is to convey the meaning of purposefulness, productivity and meaningfulness of business interaction, thereby arousing the interlocutor's interest in the subject of the conversation. For instance:

*In this market they only stand a change if they **follow in IBM's footsteps** and lure in some major capital providers.*

*Let's **get the ball rolling** before the conference call starts.*

*Merger may be **the best route to success** at this point.*

Each specific situation can be described using an existing stereotypical model (Stepanova, 2017). Many of these models – which can be vividly exemplified by those actualizing the meaning of “being on the move” and “going forward” – are fixed in the language in the form of idiomatic expressions. The cognitive base is described as a specifically structured body of knowledge and ideas that all representatives of a linguistic and cultural community possess. The semantic structure of an idiom explicates a minimal set of common features that are characteristic of a number of similar situations that are part of people's life experiences. This explains the variety of areas that frequently occurring idioms are used in, and the variety of contexts of their use (Fellbaum, 2019). Moreover, it doesn't just imply isolating a certain common feature or a set of features among many specific cases, but, on the contrary, a certain seemingly unremarkable situation from human experience suddenly becomes a kind of prototype that can be used as a model to indicate other unrelated situations (Miller, 2020).

5. The semantic group of idiomatic expressions that draw a parallel with the activity of tracking down and garnering something. The pragmatic goal is to describe business processes as strategically thought-out activities, thus translating it in the eyes of the interlocutor as well-coordinated work aimed at achieving a premeditated result. For instance:

*Our competitors are out there **fishing for** deals that are out of their reach.*

*In the long run they managed to **trap** an estimated \$40 bln of hedge fund assets.*

This semantic group clearly illustrates that the most important component of an idiom is a bright imaginative plan, which not only contributes to the manifestation of expression, but also constitutes a very convenient means of compressing information. The idiom helps create a brief and very vivid description that allows the speaker to concisely express a complex idea, or to evaluate a certain state of affairs, actions, etc. This is achieved thanks to a bright figurative plan of the idiom, because it is the image as a representation of the general through the specific that has a significant capacity for compression, which is at times very important in the context of business discourse.

7. Conclusion

The study singled out five most frequently encountered semantic groups of idiomatic expressions found in English business discourse: the group in which business processes are endowed with the anthropic properties; the group comparing business and spousal relations; the group indicating the similarity of business processes with the features of military operations; the group explicating the semantic similarity with the process of being on the move, going forward; and the group drawing a parallel with the activity of tracking down and garnering something.

The tendency to saturate business English with expressive means continues to persist. Considering that a significant part of such tools constitutes idiomatic expressions, the need for detailed training in idioms is pretty much transparent. At the same time, a systematic presentation of knowledge through the semantic grouping of idiomatic expressions will become an effective aid in the learning process.

Acknowledgments

This paper was financially supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research.

References

- Ammer, C. (2018). *American heritage dictionary of idioms*. McGraw-Hill.
- Baker, M. (2018). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Routledge.
- Böttger, H., & Költzsch, D. (2019). Neural foundations of creativity in foreign language acquisition. *Training, Language and Culture*, 3(2), 8-21. <https://doi.org/10.29366/2019tlc.3.2.1>
- Fellbaum, C. (2019). How flexible are idioms? A corpus-based study. *Linguistics*, 57(4), 735-767.
- Horvath, J., & Siloni, T. (2019). Idioms: The type-sensitive storage model. *Linguistics*, 57(4), 853-891.
- Kulkova, E. S., & Fischer, M. H. (2019). Idioms in the world: A focus on processing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1155.
- Liontas, J. I. (2017). Why teach idioms? A challenge to the profession. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 5(3), 5-25.
- Liu, D. (2017). *Idioms: Description, comprehension, acquisition, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Malyuga, E. N. (2008). Lingvocognitive aspects of cross-cultural business communication. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 2, 31-37.
- Malyuga, E., Shvets, A., & Tikhomirov, I. (2016, July). Computer-based analysis of business communication language. In *Proceedings of 2016 SAI Computing Conference* (pp. 229-232). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/SAI.2016.7555987>
- Mancuso, A., Elia, A., Laudanna, A., & Vietri, S. (2020). The role of syntactic variability and literal interpretation plausibility in idiom comprehension. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 49(1), 99-124.
- Miller, J. (2020). The bottom line: Are idioms used in English academic speech and writing? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 43, 100810.
- Pitzl, M. L. (2018). *Creativity in English as a lingua franca: Idiom and metaphor* (Vol. 2). Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Rafatbakhsh, E., & Ahmadi, A. (2019). A thematic corpus-based study of idioms in the corpus of contemporary American English. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 4(1), 11.
- Savitsky V. M. Cultural codes: essence, structure and functioning in the process of communication. *Professional Discourse & Communication*. 2019, 1(4), 68-77. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2687-0126-2019-1-4-68-77> (In Rus.)
- Stepanova, A. A. (2017). Word-building patterns of English business neologisms (based on the web-site wordspy.com). *Issues of Applied Linguistics*, 25, 69-78.