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FIGURATIVE IMAGERY AND SOCIAL EVALUATION IN SELECTED ENGLISH IDIOMS

Abdusalimova Marjona Otabekovna
Master's Student in Linguistics (English), Group M2502
Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
marjonotabekovna@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article examines how figurative imagery contributes to negative social evaluation in eight selected English idioms. Research methods include lexicographic analysis and a qualitative comparison of semantic distinctions and documented cultural references. The principal evaluative categories identified in the study include concealed hostility, obstructive behaviour, conditional loyalty, localised disruption and burdensome attachment. Dictionary definitions of the idioms are distinguished from the author's interpretation of their imagery and evaluative meaning. Sentences provided as examples of idiom use are identified as constructed examples. Results of the comparative analysis show that negative evaluation does not always imply moral fault. Some of the idioms attribute harmful conduct to an agent, while others present a person or circumstance as an obstacle from the evaluator's perspective. Literary, biblical and fable parallels provide insights into the imagery but do not establish whether speakers are familiar with these sources. The article proposes recording the target of evaluation and the attribution of responsibility separately in the semantic and linguocultural analysis of idioms.

Keywords: English phraseology, idiomatic meaning, figurative imagery, social evaluation, cultural reference, interpersonal relationships, evaluative connotation.

Аннотация

В статье рассматривается роль образности в выражении отрицательной социальной оценки на материале восьми английских идиом. Лексикографический анализ сочетается с качественным сопоставлением семантических различий и документированных культурных отсылок. В анализе выделены пять оценочных фокусов - скрытая враждебность, препятствующее поведение, условная лояльность, отдельная помеха и обременительная связь. Словарное значение отделяется от авторской интерпретации. Иллюстративные предложения обозначены как специально составленные примеры. Анализ показывает, что отрицательная оценка не всегда предполагает обвинение в нравственном проступке. Одни выражения характеризуют вредоносное поведение человека, другие представляют лицо или обстоятельство как препятствие с позиции оценивающего. Литературные, библейские и басенные параллели объясняют отдельные образы, но не доказывают осведомлённость говорящих об этих источниках. Предлагается отдельно фиксировать объект оценки и приписываемую ответственность.

Ключевые слова: Английская фразеология, идиоматическое значение, образность, социальная оценка, культурная отсылка, межличностные отношения, оценочная коннотация.

Annotatsiya:
Maqolada sakkizta ingliz idiomasi misolida obrazlilikning salbiy ijtimoiy bahoni ifodalashdagi o‘rni o‘rganiladi. Leksikografik tahlil semantik farqlar va manbalar bilan tasdiqlangan madaniy havolalarni sifat jihatidan qiyoslash bilan birlashtiriladi. Iboralar yashirin adovat, to‘sqinlik qiluvchi xulq, shartli sadoqat, alohida to‘siq va og‘ir yuk sifatida talqin qilinadigan bog‘liqlik bo‘yicha guruhlanadi. Lug‘aviy ma’no muallif talqinidan ajratiladi. Izohlovchi gaplar muallif tomonidan tuzilgan misollar sifatida belgilanadi. Tahlil salbiy baho har doim ham axloqiy ayblovni anglatmasligini ko‘rsatadi. Ayrim iboralar zararli xatti-harakatni tavsiflasa, boshqalari shaxs yoki holatni baholovchi nuqtayi nazaridan to‘siq sifatida ko‘rsatadi. Adabiy, bibliyaviy va masalga oid parallellar ayrim obrazlarni tushuntiradi, biroq so‘zlovchilar ushbu manbalarni bilishini isbotlamaydi. Baholash obyekti va yuklatiladigan mas’uliyatni alohida qayd etish taklif qilinadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Ingliz frazeologiyasi, idiomatik ma’no, obrazlilik, ijtimoiy baho, madaniy havola, shaxslararo munosabatlar, baholovchi konnotatsiya.

INTRODUCTION

English idioms related to interpersonal relationships can also express a judgement about those relationships. Saying that a person is unreliable leaves room for interpretation. Saying that a person is a fair-weather friend specifies how that person is unreliable. An obstacle may be described as a fly in the ointment or a millstone around someone’s neck. These expressions frame the obstacle in different ways. It is useful to note evaluative differences as well as similarities among idioms.

This paper analyses eight English idioms about people and social interactions. It discusses how their imagery conveys negative evaluations and how cultural associations affect their interpretation. The analysis asks what aspect of a person or situation is evaluated, how the image foregrounds that aspect and what evidence supports the proposed cultural association. The scope is limited to the evaluative contrasts among the selected idioms. An unfavourable description is treated as an accusation of deliberate wrongdoing only where the meaning and context support that reading.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen argue that conceptual metaphor theory cannot fully account for idioms. Conventional figurative expressions can retain knowledge specific to their established imagery and use.[1] Their later work underscores the role of cultural knowledge in connecting literal imagery with figurative meaning.[2] These observations help distinguish a general association, such as representing difficulty as physical weight, from the particular image used in an idiom.

Social evaluation refers here to the presentation of a person’s conduct, a relationship or its consequences as favourable or unfavourable. The analysis examines evaluation conveyed by the expression. Three analytical levels are discussed. Conventional meaning is supported by a dictionary, image-based interpretation is proposed through semantic comparison and cultural reference is supported by an identifiable text. A textual parallel supports the proposed cultural

connection. Establishing how an expression entered English would require separate historical evidence.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material for this study consists of eight purposively selected expressions, namely a snake in the grass, a wolf in sheep's clothing, a dog in the manger, a wet blanket, a fair-weather friend, a fly in the ointment, an albatross around one's neck and a millstone around someone's neck. Seven of the phrases are documented in Cambridge Dictionary. The figurative sense of albatross is documented in Collins English Dictionary. The expressions were selected to illustrate semantic contrasts within the dissertation's thematic scope. The sample was designed for qualitative comparison.

The working category of phraseological unit includes established multiword figurative expressions. Some expressions in this category are noun phrases that appear as nouns in learner dictionaries. Examples include wet blanket and fair-weather friend. The unit analysed for albatross is the multiword construction an albatross around one's neck. Variants such as around and round are counted as forms of the same unit.

Each record contains a reference form, a paraphrase of the selected dictionary sense, the principal evaluative focus and a description of the imagery. The comparison examines whether a negative judgement concerns an agent's conduct or an unwanted consequence. The author grouped the items into five analytical categories for this purpose. The texts used to identify cultural parallels include the fable The Dog in the Manger, Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and three biblical passages. The biblical passages are Matthew, chapter 7, verse 15, Matthew, chapter 18, verse 6, and Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, verse 1. Historical first attestations fall outside the scope of the comparison.

The numbered sentences below are examples created by the author to highlight distinctions. They illustrate possible readings under specified conditions. Evidence of frequency, typical collocations or actual speaker intentions would require independently collected usage data. The conclusions therefore concern semantic contrasts among the selected expressions.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1. Selected definitions and key distinctions in assessment. Definitions are paraphrased from Cambridge Dictionary and Collins English Dictionary. Last column includes the author's analytical classification.

Expression	Selected conventional meaning	Principal evaluative focus
a snake in the grass	An apparently trustworthy person who acts deceitfully	Concealed hostility
a wolf in sheep's clothing	A harmful person concealed by a harmless or friendly appearance	Concealed hostility
a dog in the manger	Someone who denies others something they do not want themselves	Obstructive behaviour
a wet blanket	Someone who diminishes other people's enjoyment	Obstructive behaviour
a fair-weather friend	A friend who withdraws when difficulties arise	Conditional loyalty
a fly in the ointment	A person or detail that spoils an otherwise positive situation	Localised disruption
an albatross around one's neck	An encumbering burden or source of distress	Burdensome attachment
a millstone around someone's neck	A troublesome responsibility that is difficult to bear	Burdensome attachment

Hidden animosity and deceptive appearances

A snake in the grass and a wolf in sheep's clothing both describe a concealed threat.[3] [4] Variations in the imagery of the two idioms emphasise different features of hidden threats. In a snake in the grass, the snake is hidden by grass. In a wolf in sheep's clothing, the wolf's true nature is hidden by its appearance. The former foregrounds unsuspected treachery, while the latter foregrounds the discrepancy between apparent harmlessness and harmful character. These emphases may overlap in particular uses.

Example 1 (constructed)

"I trusted him with the draft, but he passed it to our competitor. He was a snake in the grass."

Example 2 (constructed)

"The adviser promised protection while secretly selling clients' details. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing."

The circumstances support an accusation of deception. Either idiom might fit both situations, although Example 2 gives particular prominence to the adviser's apparently protective role.

In Matthew, chapter 7, verse 15 juxtaposes sheep's clothing with inwardly dangerous wolves. This passage provides a documented biblical parallel for the second expression. Whether a particular use deliberately alludes to the passage depends on the context. The discussion of a snake in the grass is limited to its conventional meaning and imagery.

Obstruction and moral assessment of actions

A dog in the manger is a person who prevents others from having or using something they do not want or need themselves. The fable hosted by the Library of Congress involves a dog who

prevents cattle from eating hay that the dog cannot eat. The narrative clarifies the role of control in denying others access to an unused resource. The image is therefore more specific than a general accusation of selfishness. The fable provides a documented cultural parallel.

Example 3 (constructed)

"She never uses the shared studio, but refuses to let anyone book it. She is a dog in the manger."

Without the information in the first clause, there would be less evidence for applying this label because other explanations are possible for her behaviour. The semantic analysis indicates that the person's lack of use for the resource is important to the interpretation.

A wet blanket describes someone who reduces other people's enjoyment.[6]

Example 4 (constructed)

"Everyone was enjoying the reunion until he began criticising every activity. He was a wet blanket."

Cambridge labels the expression disapproving. The image may suggest the suppression of enthusiasm. The label can apply regardless of whether the person intends to cause harm. A cautious person could be called a wet blanket by those who dislike an unwelcome warning. The negative evaluation may therefore reflect a difference in priorities among participants.

Conditional loyalty and localised disruption

A fair-weather friend is someone whose support is limited to favourable circumstances.

Example 5 (constructed)

"They celebrated every promotion with her, but disappeared when she lost her job. They were fair-weather friends."

The contrast between favourable and difficult circumstances is central to the expression's meaning. Weather can be interpreted as an image for changing conditions. The social criticism concerns the conditional nature of the friendship.

A fly in the ointment means a person or thing that spoils an otherwise favourable situation.

Example 6 (constructed)

"The accommodation was excellent. The only fly in the ointment was the unreliable heating."

Here, the referent is a technical fault, so the judgement concerns its effect on the stay. When the expression describes a person, it can likewise identify that person's effect on the situation without attributing deliberate misconduct.

In Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, verse 1 describes dead flies spoiling perfumed oil.[13] The passage provides a textual parallel for the image of contamination. The relevance of the surrounding religious argument depends on the particular use. The comparison also helps distinguish wet blanket from fly in the ointment. Wet blanket conventionally refers to a person who reduces enjoyment. Fly in the ointment can refer to a person, condition or detail that mars an otherwise favourable situation.

Burdensome attachment and attribution of responsibility

An albatross around one's neck and a millstone around someone's neck share the spatial image of an attached burden. Collins records the figurative sense of albatross as an impediment or source of distress and connects it with Coleridge's poem. In the poem, the bird the mariner killed is hung around his neck. The literary passage connects the attached burden with the consequences of his act.

The millstone image foregrounds oppressive weight. In Matthew, chapter 18, verse 6 presents a millstone placed around someone's neck in a warning about wrongdoing. The modern dictionary sense concerns a troublesome responsibility that is difficult to bear. Punishment and drowning belong to the biblical scene. Their relevance to a modern occurrence depends on the context.

Example 7 (constructed)

"The failed partnership remained an albatross around the founder's neck."

Example 8 (constructed)

"The maintenance contract became a millstone around the organisation's neck."

Both examples present continuing burdens. Whether the burden-bearer was responsible for creating the burden would require additional context. The literary image permits a reading involving the consequences of an act. In both modern examples, the expressions evaluate an attachment and its effects. More information is needed to assess whether anyone is to blame.

Table 2. Comparison of evidence levels and interpretive limits. Cultural analogies are comparisons of written texts, not efforts to establish historical relationships.

Image	Documented reference	What the evidence does not establish
Dog blocking a manger	The Dog in the Manger in The Æsop for Children	A uniquely English social value or a first attestation
Wolf wearing sheep's clothing	Matthew, chapter 7, verse 15	Conscious religious allusion in every modern use
Fly spoiling ointment	Ecclesiastes, chapter 10, verse 1	The relevance of the whole biblical argument to each use
Albatross hung around a neck	Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Part II, and the Collins entry	Moral guilt in every modern application
Millstone hung around a neck	Matthew, chapter 18, verse 6	Punishment as a necessary component of the current sense

DISCUSSION

The comparison suggests two questions that the broad label negative connotation can obscure. One question is what receives the unfavourable evaluation, such as concealed conduct, refusal of access, withdrawal of support, reduced enjoyment or an enduring obstacle. The other question is whether responsibility is attributed to an agent. The heating example involves an adverse effect caused by a technical fault. The shared studio example uses the idiom to criticise a person's use of control.

The suggested analysis shows the limits of classifying idioms by image type alone. Snake, wolf and albatross are all animal images, but the constructions foreground different relationships, including concealed hostility and burdensome attachment. The albatross and millstone images share the spatial feature of a burden attached to the neck. A classification based on animal

imagery alone would overlook this similarity. Interpretation therefore requires attention to the whole expression, its conventional sense and the relationships among its components.

The cultural evidence varies across the expressions. Some images are tied to specific literary, biblical or fable passages. Other expressions are explained through dictionary definitions and semantic comparison. This unevenness reflects the evidence assembled for the study. Claims about a shared national mentality would require a different kind of evidence. Stories from the Bible and fables circulate beyond one language community. Familiar phrases can be understood without detailed knowledge of their textual background.

For teaching and translation purposes, the analysis suggests comparing near alternatives by the kind of judgement they express. Translating all of these expressions as “a bad person” or “a problem” would lose distinctions relevant to interpretation. Learners can ask whether the target is a deceiver, an unreliable supporter, an obstructive person or a continuing burden. This is a pedagogical implication of the comparison.

The small purposive sample, reliance on dictionary descriptions and coding by a single author limit the generalisability of the results. The constructed examples allow close comparison of selected meanings. Independently retrieved examples would be needed to examine patterns of natural use. Further research could compare the proposed distinctions against discourse data, record ambiguous cases and examine disagreements between coders. The sample was chosen to illustrate contrasts, so the study does not report frequency estimates.

CONCLUSION

The eight idioms show how figurative imagery differentiates negative social evaluation. Images of concealment, denial, conditional support, contamination and attached weight express different judgements about people, relationships and situations. The comparison distinguishes the target of evaluation from the attribution of responsibility. An idiom can describe someone or something as a burden without establishing moral fault.

A semantic and linguocultural approach to idioms involves documenting conventional meaning, image-based interpretation and documented cultural references separately. Relationships among these levels can be examined using the evidence appropriate to each claim. Etymological claims require historical evidence, while claims about contemporary interpretation require attention to current meaning and context. The analysis of these eight idioms provides a starting point for further research on interpersonal relationships and social behaviour in English phraseology.

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