

English Phraseology: Cognitive, Symbolic and Terminological Aspects (Based on Idioms with Colour Adjectives Black/White/Red)

Natalya N. Zerkina

Foreign Languages for Engineering Chair, Institute of Humanities,
Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University,
Magnitogorsk, Russia

Yekaterina A. Lomakina

Linguistics and Literature Chair, Institute of Humanities,
Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University,
Magnitogorsk, Russia

Natalja V. Kozhushkova

Department of Sociology, Document Science and Archive Science,
Institute of Humanities, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University
Magnitogorsk, Russia

Abstract

The authors focus on idioms as means of categorization of the world and means of keeping temporal and spatial cultural-historical data transmission. Special attention is given to the symbolic meaning of idiom components. Aspects of English phraseology are analyzed by emphasizing phraseological antonymy as an important linguistic universal that is pointed out as binary structures playing an important role in cognition by participating in cognitive and structural processes. The analysis considers explicit and implicit representation of the concept of 'white', its semiotic and symbolic meanings and its psychical effect on a human being. The article focuses on the process of phrase-forming as a language phenomenon and an efficient means of term-formation in the English language. The authors discuss possibility of using and reproducing idioms with the phraseological model adjective + noun and forecasts further term-formation according to the phraseological model. The article is aimed at showing interaction of linguistic and extra linguistic aspects within an idiom, as a linguistic unit, and the way the linguistic aspects transform into extra linguistic ones and vice versa.

Key words: English, idiom, semantics, semiotics, symbolic meaning, term-formation

Cite as: Zerkina, N. N., Lomakina, Y. A., & Kozhushkova, N. V. (2017). English Phraseology: Cognitive, Symbolic and Terminological Aspects (Based on Idioms with Colour Adjectives Black/White/Red) Speaking Skill. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (4).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no4.9>

Introduction

The main point of a human being's cognition is constant comparison, estimation of the surrounding objects and as a result their likeness and unlikeness are distinguished. The process has linguistic realization thought antonymic connections of linguistic units in general and idioms particularly. As for the idioms from different languages, they are a terra incognita from one side and the source of information about the nation on the other side. Idioms tend to lay bare nation's enthusiasms, fixations, antipathies and idiosyncrasies. Symbolic and semiotic content of the colour adjective meaning influence on connotation of idioms and forming of terminological idioms. Lexical-pragmatic function of these units is the filling of lexical gaps, as the vast majority of idioms of this type has no lexical synonyms.

The research is based on the material of the English language as:

English plays a significant role in people's lives today. Several decades ago it used to be just a foreign language but it is the language of international communication now. Generally speaking, the whole world speaks English when dealing with political, economic, scientific and sports issues. English has been adopted as the official and working language of the UN. Different summits and meetings of heads of governments, enactment of laws and decrees, negotiations and disputes are carried out and held in English. English is used in the international trade, banking operations, maritime, land and air transportation system activities (Zerkina, Kostina, & et al., 2016, p. 5147).

The manuscript is an original work based on theoretical and empiric materials and data base of authors.

Cognitive Aspect Thought Phraseological Antonymy

A cognitive approach to phraseological antonymy, its binary structures allows stating its important role in a human being's cognition by participating in cognitive and structural processes. Cognition reflects contradictive essence of existence and it is demonstrated at empirical, ratio-logical and irrational levels. Cognition is simultaneously the process of reflecting and estimating. It is based on opposite, converse notions.

Antonymy is an important linguistic universal. It is based on association of contrariety which reflects differences of congenerous subjects, phenomena, actions, quality and indication. Being a basic lexical category, antonymy reflects universal duality of existence and services to two types of thinking: formally-logical and symbolic.

Phraseological antonymy as a process of verbalization shows emotional estimation of events in view of national thinking. It allows touching upon the processes of world-perception and reflecting culture; features of national character in the semantics of phraseological units.

Antonymy is a part of the meaning of an idiom: it is a characteristic of lexico-semantical filling of an idiom on the one side and its verbalization of contrariety and contrast on the other side. It allows analyzing not only the meaning of an idiom generally but the meaning of its components particularly.

The importance of the binary oppositions in the English culture is very high. They depict fundamental categories of existence which are universal and immanent at all stages of historical evolution. Thus, binary oppositions are used in world-modeling.

In the group of idioms containing colour-adjectives *black*, *white*, *red*, phraseological antonymy is firstly based on binary opposition of *black::white* (***white magic-black magic***) and secondly is based on socially determined norms and shows the specific features of phraseological antonyms (***to look white about the gills - to look red about the gills***) There is no lexical binary opposition between *white::red*. It is a sophisticated entwinement of logical and lexical categories. Idioms may depict opposite social-cultural notions and phenomena, even if they have been formed by the same mode. It allows speaking about modeling in phraseology (***Black letter day-Red letter day; to be in black -to be in red***).

The given group of idioms contains so-called “false” antonyms (***Black Friars-White Friars; Black Flag-White Flag***). Idioms are based on different images. They can not be opposed. The cause of the phenomenon is symbolic and semiotic meanings of the colour which create different images. Symbolic and semiotic meanings of the colour predefine the paradigmatic position of the idioms. Capability of the idioms to form antonyms reveals “hidden” semantic of colour adjective.

Thus, phraseological antonymy is a case of general antonymy which is so entwined with cognition and estimation, conceptualization and categorization with the aim of structuring the world. Identification of specific features of phraseological antonyms allows us to establish linguo-epistemological substance of the process, semantic and expressive potential of lexical antonyms. Binary oppositions are types of cognitive structures which are participating in cognition and modeling.

Symbolic, Explicit and Implicit in Adjectives and Idioms

The dictionary definitional analysis and the recorded examples do not provide a comprehensive content analysis of the concept white, “... the language as a means of transmitting information improves human intelligence, creates new texts that have some informational value and contribute in their turn to circulation of information, including valuerelvant information.” (Zerkina, Lomakina, Kostina 2015, p. 256).

Verbalization of the concept actualizes through the lexeme “white” and its semantic variants “ashen”, “colourless”, “pale”, “pallid”, “pasty”, “wan” etc. The lexical variants verbalize different characteristics of the general concept white. It is obvious the concept determines the semantic of linguistic means which are used to express it. But if we want to characterize the semantic usage properly which is accepted in any speech community and belongs to the described language, we should not only describe it. We can achieve the result only by applying collective estimations which are adopted in the community so we must take into consideration the public opinion. One and the same thing may have different descriptions in different civilizations. Such semantic definitions must have substantial consequences for the formal analysis of linguistic units.

So the concept white analysis and its explicit and implicit means of representation are possible only by considering semiotic and symbolic meanings of the white colour and its psychical effect

on a human being. Originally the biopsychic experience of a human being and life experience of a person as a social being accept the white colour in the following meaning: it associates with light; it indicates the direction and significates beginning, purity and cleanliness. The entwinement of symbolic and semiotic meanings of any colour has a very long history.

Having studied the dictionaries of symbols and some works about colour symbolism, we bring up the fact that the analyzed colour and the concept which is formed by it in the human mind can display the following symbolic meaning.

The white colour signifies cleanliness, simplicity, innocence, the truth, hope, holiness, charity. It is a symbol of peace, forgiveness. The Church regards the white colour as the colour of God (God rose in the White Clothes). It is the colour of Christmas, Easter, Ascension tide. It is the colour of ghosts in the folklore and the colour of beasts which took off knights to the full of adventures woods. It is the colour of majesty and aristocracy.

According to Cirlot (1973), symbolic colour meaning has three sources of origin.

- 1) The inherent characteristic of each colour, perceived intuitively as an objective fact;
- 2) The relationship between a colour and the planetary symbol traditionally linked with it;
- 3) The relationship which elementary, primitive logic perceives. (Cirlot,1973, p.53)

Cirlot (1973), asserts that contemporary psychologists and psychoanalysts give the third source the primary importance and consider the second one as an interlink. The purity of any colour reflects the purity of its symbolic meaning.

The basic colours reflect the main evident emotions; the minor, peripheral colours reflect more complicated, confused, derivative notions.

Thus, the analysis of the explicit and implicit representation of the concept white proves the fact that any concept is formed in a human mind as a result of his sense experience and practical activity and as a result of generalization of concepts of his mind. The process of forming is constant and its speed and qualitative changes depend on linguistic and extra linguistic reasons.

English cultural-historical idioms containing the colour adjective component have some symbolic value that is a special kind of the word meaning of sustainable and conventional or an associational correlation between a symbolizing one and the one being symbolized is motivated by extra linguistic social function of a symbolizing one. Such idioms act as a means of categorizing the world and contribute to the storage and transmission of cultural and historical values. Besides, such idioms as a linguistic sign are involved in the categorization process within history and culture concept spheres, serve as history and culture artifacts; participate in symbolization of the world. The motivational source of these idioms, the way they save cultural-historical symbols and the way meanings are "woven" in phraseological semantics are the questions which are to be considered.

The following idiomatic example also allows to trace the specific features of the symbolic meaning as conventionality, the iconic character, motivation and sustainability, reproducibility.

“Phraseological units absorb values of the ages in which it lives. The problem of understanding the meaning of a phraseological unit is linked with a possibility of increasing our knowledge about the world diachronically.”(Zerkina, Kostina, 2015, p. 143)

In the English language, culture and history the adjective purple has a special connotative meaning, as the colour assigned to this lexeme is a Royal symbol of power of the monarch. The actualization of this concept in phraseology (*to be born (cradled) in (the) purple - to be the offspring of the king; to be highborn*) only underlines its importance for the British. The history artifacts that have turned the colour into the symbol can be found when examining the etymology of the adjective purple.

The word “purple” comes from the Latin, *purpura* and from the Greek *porphyra*. The words originally meant purple fish or shellfish and were the names for the whelk or snail from which a brilliant dark red or purple dye could be obtained. The dye was the basis for the wealth of the Phoenician trading Empire, which flourished in the lands around the Mediterranean Sea several thousand years ago. The whelk was extremely rare and costly, and cloths dyed with it was worth, its weight in gold. In fact, the people of the Phoenician city of Tyre were so grateful to the little animal that made their fortunes, they stamped their coins with the picture of a whelk shell. At one time the Roman emperors restricted the use of this dye to the imperial family, so it is sometimes called imperial or royal purple. As purple came to be associated with rulers and loyalty, a person born to rule was sometimes spoken of as “born to the purple”. (Balk, 2002, p. 68).

In these examples, the important is not the colour itself but its symbolic meaning, which transforms the phrase into the idiom, thus, the semantics of the idiom is specified by a symbolically marked component, and the idiom itself, as a secondary sign of semiotization, performs a specific function in the symbolization of the world.

The study of modern English lexical composition conducted by scientists of different directions, indicates that extra linguistic, referent referral of the word has an effect on its linguistic features. Any natural language is a special sign system that stores and transmits information of all kinds in time and space. The main and essential difference of the language is that it is a primary sign system, the system that is the basis of human consciousness. Its formation occurs by means of natural language. Using the language, a person acquires the ability to communicate, inference, think.

The example of the colour adjective red, as a component of the idiom, the interlacing and reflection of the symbolic and semiotic interpretations of color in the connotative aspect of the phraseological meaning is worth considering. In the syntagmatic sense, the colour adjective red can appear in its nominative meaning, but the motivation for its use has different sources, based in the field of extra linguistics and relating to some background knowledge.

The red color is associated with blood, fire and indicates danger, anxiety, stopping. E.g. *the red cock; to see the red light; to be like a red rag to a bull; to blush like a black dog.*) Semantics of the colour is interpreted as: a fiery life, energy, vivacity, love, strength, wealth, power, fame danger, war. E.g. *A red letter day; to paint the town red; You have the red cap-said to a marriage-*

maker; Lass in the red petticoat (shall pay for all) - young men answer so when they are chid for being so prodigal and expensive, meaning they will get a wife with good portion, that will pay for it.

In these idioms, connotative value includes a cultural element of socio-historical character: the former fashion for red colour in higher circles. In other words, the adjective red retains its nominative value, but it is relevant only to identify the attribute underlying the expression. The value of the idiom in general is directly dependent on its denotative orientation, which has a pronounced socio-cultural, national character. Because of its greater saturation in comparison with other colours, red colour has the property of being conspicuous, on which its use is based as a means of underlining, highlighting (**to be in red, red tape**).

Adjective red in the English language and red colour are able to display the following symbolic interpretation:

- in church interpretation, this is the colour of the feast of the Trinity, as well as of the martyrs, and it acts as a symbol of supreme power. This is the meaning of the colour of cardinal clothes (**Red hat**). In combination with black it symbolizes hell, the devil. The name of Adam, the first man created by God, means, according to ancient Jewish traditions, both "alive" and "red."
- in folklore, this is the colour of magic: since ancient times the fairy's cap and the musician's caps have always been red. In popular superstition, a positive connotation of red has remained, according to which red colour scares off witches and neutralizes their charms (Baker, 1974, p.43). This judgment is reflected in the proverb: **Rowan tree and red ribbons scare the witches away**.
- red colour in heraldry means generosity, steadfastness. This is the colour of blood, and therefore symbolizes both love, and hatred, aggression. This is the colour of the struggle for life, superiority, fire, danger.

In the English language and society the state "loyalty" to the red color appears in the symbols of power: the flags, emblems, sets of laws and reflected in the phraseological units (**Red Dragon, the Red Duster The Red Book**). The motivating source of the symbolic use of red colour in the attributes of state power, is due to the days of the Roman Empire, where civil laws were printed on red called rubrica, and the rubrica vetavit expression means "it is forbidden by civil laws" (**The Red Laws** - set of laws of Ancient Rome). Later in the British Empire the rescripts and a number of state books were printed also in red (**the Red Book, the Red Book of the Exchequer, the Red Book of Hergest**). Besides, red was always the colour of British territory on official maps and in mapping the "**all red route**" means travel within the British Commonwealth (Theroux, 1994, p. 175).

Red colour is the colour of the royal guild, it is also considered the colour of hunters because of fox hunting, which Henry II proclaimed to be a royal sport. In all cases, the important thing is not the color itself, but its symbolic meaning, which turns the word combination into an idiom. In this case, we can say that symbolic meaning is the actualizer of phraseological meaning. "(Repnikova, 1999, p.121-122).

This color symbolizes iron and the planet Mars - the planet of war. Hence its importance as the colour of courage (*The Red Badge of Courage*), the revolution. In the idioms, containing an indication of the symbolism, the semantics of the colour adjective red is detached from the concept of the "colour" and acts as a qualitative characteristic of the person, a phenomenon, or an object.

The adjective red is able to develop a symbolic socio-religious semantics, not only as a way of embodying the colour symbol in the meaning of the idiom and the formation of some connotative meanings, but also by reversing the development of connotative meaning into denotative meaning. Such a feature is inherent only in idioms, which are the names of objects chosen by people as carriers of certain symbols. Symbolic social values develop real symbols, which are endowed with a symbolic colour. So, they are painted in this colour having symbolism known to a native speaker. For example, according to religious canons, harlots were depicted in red clothes - *Scarlet Woman of Babylon*, symbolic interpretation of colour is embodied in the Red Light District (*Red Lamp*).

Terminology and Phraseology

In the classical sense, terms are a class of emotionally neutral, uncommon vocabulary that does not have a portable meaning. But observations of modern speech processes suggest the integration of terminological and phraseological means in the terminology process.

In the speech practice, the process of stabilization and fixation of relatively stable definite verbal complexes is constantly undergoing, that is, the process of phraseologization that is the re-interpretation of the original word combination based on metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, alogism, etc., when the semantic transformation of the word into a component of phraseology takes place.

The process of phraseologization can be considered as an effective method of terminology in the English language, and phraseology as a constant and inevitable source of replenishment of terminological vocabulary.

The phraseological character of the terminology testifies to a special type of linguistic assimilation of reality. Phraseologization, as a productive semantic way of creating terms based on various metaphorical and metonymic transfers of the meaning, has a long history and realization today.

Terms based on phraseological formation possesses complicated meaning, partially transposed meaning, with narrowed meaning (*a red bead tree*), broadened meaning (*white bread*) or shifted one (*a Green Paper* = the government's consultation document on immigration, taxes and social benefits) by value.

As Kunin (2005) marks:

The characteristic feature for idioms is the presence of a meaning that clarifies the meaning of the components of the variable word combination, which is the prototype of an idiom, and the literal values of the components are an integral part of the value of a turnover and as a whole are its internal form. The added value is narrower in comparison with the value of the prototype of the idiom. (p.327).

The uniformity of the units (the adjective + noun) common to this kind of idiomatic terms (*a Green Paper / a White Paper*) allows us to talk about the existence of a phraseological model of terminological nature that can be viewed both as a kind of "mechanism" and as its reflection in consciousness by means of which the same type of combinations are made. This generalized abstract logical-semantic construction is an invariant unity of semantic constants. The phraseological nature of these terminological idioms constructed according to typical models presupposes their active functioning in discursive practice and wide possibilities of usualization, that is, the acquisition by the given phraseomatism of the property of reproducibility. And as a consequence, in the semantic plan, a certain lexico-phraseological concept is formed, which is fixed in the linguistic consciousness and predetermines the functioning of the terminological idioms in speech activity.

According to a specially undertaken study, Repnikova, (1999):

The formation of this phraseological model, where the same type of units occurs around the colour adjectival, can be attributed to the beginning of the XIV century, since the first written mention of most idioms of this group dates from this century. *red wine; white / red / black game; etc.*). (Repnikova, 1999,p.93)

In a number of idioms of this group, the component colour adjective is used to shade one or another side of a phenomenon (*black / white frost; white harvest; white / black squall*). "The phraseological model that existed in the Middle English language is very productive throughout the development of the language, but in the quantitative sense, the XVII century stands out particularly, which can be explained by the development of the natural sciences, which was accompanied by the need to create:

Accessible "terminology that could be used in journalism, colloquial speech, that is, words and expressions were needed that would give an idea of the object in an accessible form. Terminological word combinations perform the function of an exact name in any branch of human knowledge. They are based on a rigid combination of sem, in which the removal, replacement of any semes are almost impossible. (Repnikova 1999, p.94).

Lexical-pragmatic function of these units is the filling of lexical gaps, as the vast majority of idioms of this type, there is no lexical synonyms. When implementing similar turns in speech, the fact of an object designation is important, but not the stylistic use of the turnover, so these idioms are deprived of emotional colouring.

A sign is motivated with more or less clearly, but it is very conditional, as it in no way might be taken to reflect the substance of a feature of an object. This meaning is derived from paired or

multiple oppositions of terminology: *White/ black/ red game; white/ red blood cells; Red/ Black/ White Sea; a Green Paper/ a White Paper; white meat, white fish*

Although the term is a special kind of word, but even acquiring phraseological meaning, it, like any other word, can vary in the process of language development and gain other values and become polysemantic, to have synonyms (*Black Book - Black List; white-collar worker - a white tie affair; black-coated worker - blue-collar worker*). The process of change and acquisition of new values can be seen in the example of the idiom *red rag* – the language – the slang expression; anything that causes rage. *Red rag* is a derivative of an idiom *to be like a red rag to a bull*.

Also it is interesting for consideration the idiomatic fusions where the adjective component is included in the category of "ex-words". Their characteristic feature is a change in the denotations of denoting the literal meaning in which they are also terminological units. These idioms obtain their figurative meaning by semantic transfer, which is accompanied by the fact that the adjective loses not only its nominative value, but acquires sems, which are uncommon, potentially not inherent in its semantics. Intermediate steps of reinvention are the extra linguistic factors: tradition, social practice, customs (*a white elephant; a black sheep; a red herring; a black eye*). The loss of potential sems having nominative and nominative - derivative nature and acquisition of new sems contributes to the increase of the phraseological activity and valence of idioms.

Among the units of this group there is also the phenomenon of semantic shift, where a component of the adjective retains its nominative value, acquiring sem terminology: *White House, Blue Book, Blue/ White/Yellow Pages*.

In modern English there appear the phrases of the model (adjective + noun) that were not yet recorded by the dictionaries as idioms, but have all the signs of their formation. For example, *black hole(s)*. Not all "respectable" dictionaries, particularly The Oxford English Dictionary, still captures the meaning of the phrase as "unexplored, unknown, hypothetical object". (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, p. 1078) Another phrase - *white goods* – fixed the dictionaries, but with no tag "idiom". *White goods* mean home appliances. The use of an adjective is motivated by the fact that the majority of home appliances are white in colour, but, as practice shows, the white colour of home appliances has been already widely replaced by designers with other colours to create the desired effect, this phrase gets a terminological shade and the component colour adjective white becomes a potential word, the "former" word from a number of real words of idioms.

Thus, idiomatic terms as a special type of lexical units, being the names of flora and fauna, objects, tools, various phenomena, processes, etc. can be the result of a phraseologization process passing on a model - an adjective + a noun.

In the course of further development of society and science, the number of terms of this type in the English language will increase due to wider use of analogy between real-world objects.

Conclusion

Some fascinating information about English history, culture and politics came to light as we studied the subject. The cognitive approach to the study of English phraseology allows to designate a vector for the development of this type of vocabulary - from summarizing and generalizing of the people experience to its embodiment in terminology. Such universal linguistic categories as antonymy is (which phraseologic/idiomatic antonymy belongs to) reveal and demonstrate both the development of the language and the people as the bearer of the language, fixing all the stages of the evolution of its intellect: from primitive thinking to scientific thought.

About the Authors:

Natalya N. Zerkina, PhD (Philology), Assoc. Prof., the Head of Foreign Languages for Engineering Chair, Institute of Humanities, NMSTU, more than 20- year experience in teaching foreign languages (English, German, Russian) and allied subjects, active participant of international scientific and practical conferences and symposia; organizer of students' conferences, roundtable debate, summer schools for foreign students etc. Research interests include the English language, phraseology, semantics, abbreviation, onomastics, language in cyber space etc. Author of about 100 publications, 14 of them are indexed in Scopus and WoS; co-author of 4 monographs, textbooks.

Yekaterina A. Lomakina, PhD (Philology), Assoc. Prof. of Linguistics and Literature Chair, Institute of Humanities, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Magnitogorsk, Russia. About 20- year experience in teaching foreign languages and allied subjects, experienced extracurricular tutor, active partaker of international scientific conferences; coordinator of students' forums, working party debate etc. Author of about 40 publications, 5 of them are indexed in Scopus and WoS; including 2 monograph, textbooks.

Natalja V. Kozhushkova, Ph.D. (Philology), Assoc. Prof., Department of Sociology, Document Science and Archive Science, Institute of Humanities, Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, She is an active participant of international conferences, an author of articles, textbooks and monographs. Research interests include languages in documents and archive science.

References

- Baker, M. (1974). *Folklore and Customs of Rural England*, London: David & Charles
- Balk E.A., Lemenev M.M. (2002) *.Prichudlivyy angliyskiy [Queer English]*, Moscow: NTs ENAS Publ.
- Cirlot, J.E. (1973). *A Dictionary of Symbols*, London
- Kunin, A.V. (2005). *Course on modern English phraseology*, Dubna: Fenix+.
- Repnikova, N.N. (1999). *Semantics of Colour-adjectives and Its Reflection in Phraseology of the New English Period (based on color-adjectives black, white, red (Candidate of Sciences dissertation (Philology))*, Moscow.
- The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989).Vol. II. Oxford.
- Zerkina, N.N., & Kostina N. N. (2015). English Phraseology in Teaching Interrelation of Theory and Practice. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. (199), 143-148
- Zerkina, N.N., Kostina, N.N., et al. (2016). Axiological role of English adjectives in English language teaching. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, (11, 12), 5146-5154

Zerkina, N.N., Lomakina Ye.A., & Kostina N.N (2015) Axiological Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, (199), 254-260