

# Phraseological Units as a Mirror of National Mentality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The relevance of the study is caused by the continuing interest of linguists to the problem of phraseology as a special – national – sign in the language system, reflecting the national-cultural features of the perception of the world, national mentality, ideological and mental attitudes of native speakers. The analysis of scientific literature showed that the phraseological layer reflecting the national character of a person is rather understudied. In this regard, the purpose of this study is to identify the features of the national mentality of the British based on the analysis of the internal form of phraseological units (PUs), reflecting the nature of a person. In the given study there were analyzed the theoretical works of Russian and foreign linguists on the problems of definition of the term “phraseological unit”; there were analyzed semantic features, sources of origin and figurative bases of the selected PUs; were identified the specific characteristics inherent in the British, based on the frequency parameter of the components of phraseological units. The analysis of figurative sources of PUs, reflecting the national character of a person, revealed a large number of PUs with the following components: zoonyms, somatism, phytonyms and colors (46%); this indicates the national-cultural specificity of PUs, which is expressed in the figurative content of these units and is associated with the cultural and national features of the British. The practical significance of this study is that the results can be used in the lectures and courses of intercultural communication, linguoculturology and lexicology.

**Keywords:** Phraseological Unit; National Mentality; National-Cultural Specificity; Figurative Basis; Internal Form.

## 1. Introduction

Due to their semantic and idiomatic component, phraseological units attract the attention of Russian and foreign linguists up to now and occupy a special place in the theory of semantic, psycholinguistic and linguocultural studies. The Swiss

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linguist Charles Bally first formulated the basic definition of the phraseological unit as a set phrase in 1909.

Many scientists classify aphorisms, as well as proverbs and sayings as PUs (Bazarova & Gilyazeva, 2018; Bilyalova et al., 2018). For example, Chernysheva (1970) refers proverbs to stable phrases, noting that the phraseological units that have syntactic structure of sentences belong to this class.

Norrick (1995) also refers proverbs with a figurative meaning to idioms, since their proverbial meaning differs from the literal reading of a proverb.

Giovanni (1993) defines idiom as “a phrasal unit which meaning cannot be derived from its syntactic components” (p. 79). It is noted that linguists have not come to a common understanding of the term (Langlotz, 2006). Despite the sufficient development of perspective of phraseological units, a single definition of phraseological units has not yet been developed. Kunin (1996) defines PU as a “set combination of lexemes with fully or partially reinterpreted meaning” (p. 301). Popov (2010) writes that “PU is a complex linguistic unit, a “set” of features of which is hardly identified”; he refers to the characteristics of PUs “semantic cohesion and indivisibility with the “external” separate form of components of a given language unit” (p. 205). Arnold (2010) ranks “linguistic stability, semantic integrity and separate form” as the most common features of phraseological units (p. 167).

Therefore, we can conclude that a PU is a set phrase associated with the unity of the meaning contained in it. In speech, this unity is reproduced in the finished form and acts as a single member of the sentence.

Phraseological fund of the language is the most valuable source of information about the culture and mentality of the people, people's ideas about myths, customs, rituals, habits, morals, behavior, etc. The phraseological units, reflecting in their semantics the long process of development of the culture of the people, fix and transmit from generation to generation cultural attitudes and stereotypes, standards and archetypes.

## **2. Methodology**

The material of the study was selected by the method of a continuous sampling from the Large English-Russian phraseological dictionary of Kunin (2005), from the Cambridge Idioms Dictionary (2006) and Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (2010).

The total number of analyzed PUs is 751.

The analysis of theoretical and supporting data comprise the usage of such methods as the descriptive method, the method of the quantitative analysis, the method of the semantic analysis, the continuous sampling method, the classification method and elements of etymological analysis.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The sources of origin of PUs in modern English are very diverse (Gilyazeva & Bazarova, 2018). Kunin (1996) divides all phraseological units into 4 semantic groups:

1. Native English PUs;
2. Cross-language borrowings;
3. Intra-language borrowings (PUs, for example, borrowed from American English);
4. PUs, which are borrowed in a foreign language form.

Here are some examples from a rather large group of phraseological units-Americanisms that were borrowed, and are currently not perceived as borrowed: stickler for time (meaning “punctuality”); be on one's high horse (meaning “arrogance”); a calamity howler (meaning cowardice); be a lot of noise, shoot, throw the bull (meaning “talkativeness”).

The reasons for such borrowing are the growing influence of the United States on the whole world in political, economic and cultural life, and consequently the growing interest of the media to this country.

A number of phraseological units can be attributed to intra-language borrowings, which filled erased images with new meanings.

For example, the meaning “cruelty”: take-no-prisoners – very determined, uncompromising; cruel, ruthless. Initially, it was used in the context of military vocabulary, then it turned into the colloquial vocabulary through the media.

The meaning “stupidity”: brain washed. Originally, this PU was used in a narrow meaning: zombified; however, today it is used in a broad meaning: brainless, narrow-minded.

The meaning “naivety”: easy game, easy meat – trustful; easy prey.

A special place is occupied by the PUs, which arose in the English language on the basis of biblical scenes, since Christianity is the dominant religion of the English-speaking countries, thus historically there was a widespread quoting of the Bible, followed by the transition of expression in the phrasicon.

Examples of such PUs are: put one's hand to the plough/plow (“hard work”); a judgment of Solomon; as wise as Solomon (“perception, mind”); as hard as flint as the nether millstone; drop/weep millstones (“cruelty”); eat the bread of idleness (“laziness”); worship the golden calf (“greed”); unstable as water (“unpredictability”); turn the other cheek (submission).

These PUs were formed as a result of the metaphorization process. By the etymological analysis of the given phraseological units, it can be concluded that all expressions that go back to the Bible texts have been reinterpreted in the English language. Among them are phraseological units that have a meaning close to the original, and expressions that have completely lost their semantic connection with the biblical context.

A large number of PUs, reflecting the national character, arose from works of art:

The meaning “stupidity”: cousin Betty – feeble-minded, stupid (from the novel of Honore de Balzac “Cousin Betty”).

The meaning “hypocrisy”: Jekyll and Hyde – someone with both an evil and a good personality (the hero of R. L. Stevenson's novel “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”); Pied Piper – a man who gives false promises (the hero of R. Browning's poem).

The meaning “laziness”: Weary Willie – feebling, slack person (the image created by the American clown E. Kelly).

As for the figurative sources of PUs, reflecting the national character, a large number of phraseological units with components of zoonyms, somatisms, phytonyms and color namings were revealed.

For example, phraseological units with the meanings “envy” and “jealousy” have a common lexeme “green”: look through green glasses, green-eyed, green-eyed monster.

Antonymous PUs are expressed in opposite colors: the meaning “cheerfulness”: to take a rose-coloured view of smth. and “pessimism”: see through blue glasses. Similar are the PUs with the meaning “insight, mind”: to see things in their true colors and “intelligence”: know black from white.

Other examples of PUs with color components are: rose-tinted spectacles, look through rose-coloured glasses (“naivety”); swear black is white (“falsehood”); blushing is virtue's colour (“modesty”); blush to the roots of one's hair, ears are red (“shyness”); not worth a red cent (“obedience”); treat smb. white (“sincerity”); red blood (“courage”); have a yellow streak, white liver, milk-livered (“cowardice”); a white man (“honesty”).

A large number of set expressions of the English language includes somatisms. For example, using the word “liver”. The usage of the image of the liver as an associative word with the semantics of “bravery/courage” is explained by the following historical and cultural fact: before the battle, the Greeks determined the outcome of the battle by the color of the liver of the killed animal. If the liver was red, then the Greeks were expecting to win, but if it was white – to lose. Thus, the white liver symbolized misfortune and was often explained by the warrior's cowardice. Hence the PUs with this lexeme: milk-livered, chicken-liver (meaning “cowardice”), clean liver (“honesty”), close liver (“greed”).

Quite frequent in English is the somatism “heart”: get / have / keep one's tail up, a heart of oak (“courage”); to be whole-hearted, single heart / mind (“sincerity”); work one's heart out, have one's heart in one's work (“hard work”); to be open-hearted, tender-heart, kind / soft / warm-hearted (“responsiveness”); stout heart, to be single-hearted / single-minded (“loyalty”).

In most PUs, the component “head/brain” is connected with the lexeme “head/brain” in one of its meanings. The imagery of these PUs is associated with allegorical representations of the head as a physical repository of thoughts, knowledge and ideas, examples of these phraseological units are: big head, high head (“arrogance”); false head (“hypocrisy”); batter one's head against a brick/a stone wall (“stubbornness”); hot head (“recklessness”); have one's head in the clouds

(“carefree”); level-headed, a cool head, keep one's head (“restraint”); a clever head (“insight, mind”).

The next group of phraseological units with the lexeme “hand” reveals the diverse sides of human nature: clean hands (“sincerity”); a dab hand, a safe pair of hands (“hard work”); single-handed (“independence”); even-handed (“justice”); free-handed; large-handed; large-handedness; open-handedness; sharing the heart; large handedness; open handedness (“generosity”); cool hand (“hostility”); iron hand (fist) in a velvet glove (“hypocrisy”); iron hand (“cruelty”); light in hand (“naive”).

Phraseological units with the component “tongue” in its diversity describe person through verbal activities: he knows much who knows how to hold his tongue (“restraint”); rough tongue (“hostility”); a honey tongue (“hypocrisy”); a ready tongue, a sharp tongue, to have a long/loose tongue, loose tongue, have too much tongue, his tongue is too long for his teeth (“jaw”); a silver/oily tongue (“flattery”).

In comparison with other somatisms, phraseological units with the lexeme “ear” are not so numerous: draw the bow up the ear (“vigor/ energy”); have nothing between the ears, dead above the ears (“stupidity”); tickle ears (“flattery”).

PU with the component “foot” are diverse in their meaning: flat-footed (“determination, courage”); light of foot (“intelligence”); put foot in mouth (“stupid”); standing on own two feet, be on one's feet (“independence”); grass does not grow under one's feet/ never let anything grow under his feet (“vigor”); let the grass grow under one's feet (“laziness”); get/have cold feet (“cowardice”); have your feet on the ground (“earthiness”).

The imagery of body parts as a repository of some qualities is expressed in the anthropocentric character of the semantics of PUs. Thus, it is not surprising that a huge number of phraseological units with a component-somatism prevails in English when describing a person's character.

Analyzing the figurative sources of the studied PUs, a large number of PUs with the component-name of animals should be noted. This is due to the fact that man and animal since ancient times live in close cooperation with each other. We indicate the most frequent images of animals.

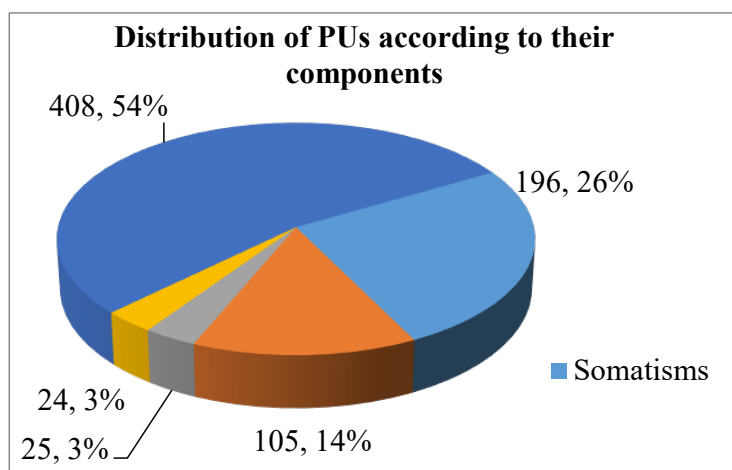
PUs with the component “fox”: sly fox, an old fox, as cunning as a fox (“cunning”). In English and in Russian, the image of a fox has the meaning of “cunning” under the influence of established mythological and folklore traditions.

PUs with the component “ass / donkey”: every ass thought himself worthy to stand with king's horses (“arrogance”); as stupid as a donkey (“stupidity”); talk the hind leg off a donkey (“talkativeness”). On the example of these phraseological units it can be concluded that by comparison with this animal the most negative features of the human personality are revealed.

PUs with the component “dog”: lazy dog (“laziness”); work like a dog (“hard work”); a clever dog (“perception, mind”); a dull dog (“boring person”); dirty dog (“meanness”); a sad dog, beware of a silent dog and still waters (“unsociable”); to blush like a black/blue dog (“impudence”); dog in the manger (“greed”). The image of the dog is interesting because it contains various and sometimes opposite characteristics.

PUs with components-phytonyms are few in number: a hard nut to crack, grass the nettle (“determination, courage”); know how many beans make five (“intelligence”); pure as a lily (“nobility”); grass does not grow under one's feet (“energy”); let the grass grow under one's feet (“laziness”).

Comparing the number of selected phraseological units with the given components, it was found that the most frequent are PUs with components-somatisms (in the amount of: 196 PUs = 26%); followed by PUs with components-zoonyms (in the amount of: 105 PUs = 14%); further PUs with the colour namings (in the amount of: 25 PUs = 3%) and with phytonyms (in the amount of: 24 PUs = 3%).



*Figure 1.* Quantitative and percentage distribution of PUs according to their components

Among the PUs with components-somatisms the greatest number is occupied by the phraseological units with the lexeme “heart”. The heart in English symbolizes the repository of feelings, thus words with this associative convey the moral qualities of a person (kindness, courage, etc.).

Next, the quantitative ratio is followed by PUs with the lexemes “head” and “eye”. These semes equally reveal various aspects of the human character.

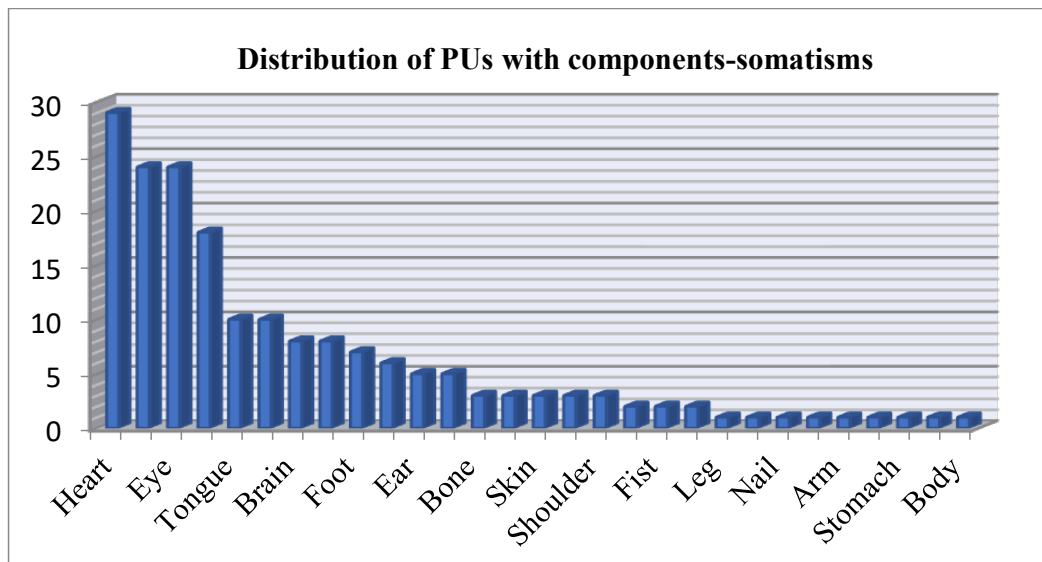


Figure 2. Quantitative distribution of PUs with components-somatisms

Through the identification of acceptable and unacceptable traits from the point of view of the British we have an opportunity to reveal the features of the mentality of the people.

As components of the national character of the British were selected the most frequent groups of PUs with negative and positive evaluative connotation with the presence of 20 or more phraseological units.

The positive characteristics include courage, diligence, cheerfulness, sociability, independence, loyalty and restraint. These characteristics are approved as a statement of socially established assessment in the English mentality.

The negative characteristics include arrogance, cowardice, stupidity, greed, hypocrisy and hostility, falsehood. These characteristics are condemned in the English mentality.

#### 4. Conclusion

The phrasicon is one of the main components of a language, which most clearly reflects the peculiarities of the mentality of peoples. In the phraseological units, ideas about habits, values, national features, and character of cultural and historical traditions of a nation are recorded (Gilyazeva & Bazarova, 2018).

The national character is the psychological characteristics of a particular people, set national traditions and habits that distinguish one nation from another.

The study examined and analyzed the PUs of the English language, reflecting the features of the national character of the British.

The analysis showed that the number of PUs expressing negative traits exceeds the number of PUs expressing positive traits. This is due to a more acute emotional and verbal reaction to negative actions.

The study of phraseological units that reflect the character of a person, based on the analysis and classifications of the modern English language, allowed to establish the diversity and uniqueness of stable expressions, to determine the features of the world perception of the British, to establish the individuality and identity of the English mentality, to understand what images are the basis of the selected PUs.

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