

Phraseological units with onomatopoeic components in English and German

Elena Fridrikhovna Arsenteva and Alsu Almazovna Nurullova

Kazan Federal University, Kremlyovskaya St. 18, Kazan, 420008, Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation

Abstract. The article deals with the analysis of motivation/non-motivation of meaning of phraseological units (PUs) with onomatopoeic components in the English and German languages. Such an analysis is conducted for the first time from the point of view of combining two types of motivation of meaning of phraseologisms: by the onomatopoeic component itself, and by the image, or inner form of the whole unit. Three groups of phraseological units are distinguished in the course of the analysis in three languages. The meaning of the first group of such units is motivated both by their onomatopoeic component and their inner form. The meaning of the second group of PUs is non-motivated by both of them. The third group presents phraseological units, the meaning of which is motivated by their image but is non-motivated by their onomatopoeic component.

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Introduction

Phraseological investigations play an important role in modern linguistic research. On the one hand, it is dictated by the fact that “Phraseology is a special part of wealth of each language in which the originality and uniqueness of the language are shown” [1]. On the other hand, results of comparative study of phraseological units in different languages present valuable material for typological deductions and revealing universal features even in typologically distant languages.

Specialists in phraseology still confirm a lack of standardized terminology as there are a lot of terms used to denote its main unit: idiom, multiword lexical unit, fixed expression, fixed phrase, phraseme, etc. Naciscione stresses the fact that “... the term *phraseological unit* has increasingly been used in phraseological research... The term *phraseologism* is mostly used in research written in German... Both terms have been widely used by phraseologists in Eastern Europe for more than half a century” [2:18-19]. The majority of specialists in phraseology are inclined to adhere to the following definition of a phraseological unit: “A phraseological unit is a stable combination of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning” [3:210]. This definition is best suited for the purpose of distinguishing PUs from free word combinations and set expressions as it includes their two inherent properties: stability and transference of meaning.

Transference of meaning is closely connected with its motivation. Academician Vinogradov was the first to single out the main types of Russian phraseological units according to the motivation/non-motivation of their meaning [4]. It

was discovered that from the point of view of transference of phraseological meaning the more weakened the lexical meaning of PU components is, the more integral the whole meaning of the phraseological unit remains. Melerovich states that a PU appears as a result of “... the loss of semantic independence of lexical components” [5:14], which means that PUs are in fact completely or partially transformed complex signs in comparison with free phrases from which they were derived.

Motivation/non-motivation of meaning may be observed in different types of derivatives as, e.g., in denominal possessive verbs [6], but its role is much more important in phraseological units. It is very important to point out the difference between motivation and deduction of meaning. While motivation means the influence of PU inner form, in other words, its image (or its deciphering), deduction refers to the mere summing of PU lexical component meanings, which is “prohibited” from the point of view of semantic inseparability of PUs. Even in phraseological combinations in which one of the components is used in its literal meaning, the meaning of the whole phraseological combination can't be deduced from the literal meanings of its components.

In modern phraseology, motivation/non-motivation of meaning may refer both to the role of one component of PU, or of the whole phraseological image. Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen stress the fact that the majority of idioms are semantically motivated, and that “The relevant traces of the mental image of a motivated idiom must be regarded as part of its content plane in a broad sense. As a rule, the image component is involved in the cognitive processing of

the particular idiom. This means that relevant elements of the inner form have to be included in the structure of the semantic explication of idioms” [7:75]. The researchers insist on the existence of motivation only in those cases where the image component is alive. “This can be the (historically) true etymology, but it can also be a reinterpretation of the original concept, a “modernized” folk etymology, brought into line with the extra-linguistic facts that are encoded in the inner form” [7:82].

On the whole, we may speak of two types of PU meaning motivation/non-motivation: based on the semantics of one component, or on the semantics of phraseological unit image (inner form).

Main part

Our main aim is to analyze the influence of the meaning of either onomatopoeic component, or of the whole phraseological image, on the motivation /non-motivation of PUs in question.

There are different definitions of onomatopoeia found in various dictionaries: “the act of creating or using words that include sounds that are similar to the noises the words refer to” [8], “Onomatopoeia - the naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of the sound associated with it (such as buzz or hiss). Onomatopoeia may also refer to the use of words whose sound suggests the sense. This occurs frequently in poetry, where a line of verse can express a characteristic of the thing being portrayed”[9]. The following categories of onomatopoeic words are distinguished: 1) words originated as a result of object contact (e.g. to rattle - to make or emit a quick succession of short percussive sounds; to squeak -to give forth a short, shrill cry or sound; 2) sounds produced by animals and insects (e.g. cock-a-doodle-doo - an imitation or representation of a cock crowing, to yap - to bark sharply or shrilly, yelp; 3) sounds of nature (e.g. to chatter - to flow with a murmuring sound; to gurgle - to flow in a broken irregular current with a bubbling sound; 4) sounds produced as a result of human activity (to hiss - to utter with a hiss; to lash - to strike with or as if with a whip [10: 54].

The examples of usage of phraseological units with onomatopoeic components are taken from the British National Corpus [11] and German National Corpus [12] as corpus-based technologies give the opportunity to study real language use and provide the user with the access to a great amount of texts from different sources. In these examples phraseological units with onomatopoeic components are used in three types of phraseological context: inter-phrasal, phrasal and super-phrasal [13].

Only a limited number of onomatopoeic words become a part of phraseological units in the

English and German languages. These phraseological units have not been studied thoroughly in the languages compared. At the same time the study of semantics of the onomatopoeic component within PU is of great interest. It is clear that one part of these PUs would be motivated by the meaning of onomatopoeic component, the other part being half-motivated or non-motivated at all.

Let’s analyze the examples.

In all three languages one of the components within PUs is the onomatopoeic unit *drop* and it’s analogue German language as *Tropfen*, correspondingly. PUs also may contain derivatives of these lexemes.

The literal meaning of the noun *drop* is the basis of the prototype of English phraseological unit *drop by drop*, that implies the meaning “gradually”. The same meaning can be easily observed in the PU *to the last drop (of blood)*.

One of the lexico-semantic variants of the noun *drop* is “a small amount of something”. It is this meaning that can be observed in such PUs as a *drop in the bucket (in the ocean)*, its German analogues *ein Tropfen ins Meer (lit. one drop in the sea)*, *<nur> ein Tropfen auf einen heissen Stein» (lit. merely one drop out of hot stone)*, also *a drop of something (coll. a swig)*.

In the English language the verb *to drop* corresponds to the object itself and is based on the sound of the action. This direct sense determines the semantics of the PU *drop from the clouds (the skies)*. Further the development of meaning can be traced – as for something falling from the skies happens unexpectedly, unpredictably, hence we have the figurative meaning “appear suddenly” = “come like a bolt from the blue”.

One of the lexico-semantic variants of the verb *to drop* as “to let fall” is presented in the prototype of PU *drop smb (smth) like a hot brick (like a hot potato)* rendering the meaning “to refuse hastily, get rid of or give up something”. The following development of meaning and image can be observed: both a hot brick or a potato burn one’s hands, therefore they are thrown immediately to the ground; one gets rid of them. At the same time reconsidered meanings of the verb *to drop* emerge here – “to stop doing something, discussing something, or continuing with something, to suddenly stop having a relationship with someone” [14: 481-482] (e.g. in Russian *to drop – to abandon and leave* [15:58]).

German phraseological units are based on the image reconsideration with partially motivated meaning *ein bitterer Tropfen im Freudenbecher (lit. one drop of bitter in a bowl of joy, pleasure)* – the bitter being admixed to pleasure, *j-m den letzten*

Tropfen Blut aussagen (lit. to suck the last drop of blood) - to exhaust smb., to wear smb. out. First example conveys a comprehensible meaning as the ingress of one drop of bitter in something sweet is quite enough to destroy the sweetness, taste and flavor of the beverage. The expressivity of the PU in the second example is achieved by the use of the component *letzten* that intensifies the component *Tropfen*, hence the transference of meaning is carried out in the following way: if one has been extracted up to the last blood drop, it means that he/she is completely tired out – he/she is worn out, exhausted.

At the same time the meaning of the following phraseological units is absolutely non-motivated by the meaning of their onomatopoeic components:

drop dead! - go away and stop bothering me;
get (have) the drop on smb - (US and NZ) to have the advantage over someone;

ein edler (gutter) Tropfen (lit. one good (noble) drop) – fine wines;

The next step of our investigation was connected with the analysis of the influence of the image (inner form) of PUs with onomatopoeic components on their meaning. In other words, we tried to prove if there is any connection between the motivation/non-motivation of PU meaning, the lexical meaning of its onomatopoeic component and its image, or inner form. “As a rule, the image component is involved in the cognitive processing of the particular idiom. This means that relevant elements of the inner form have to be included in the structure of the semantic explication of idioms” [7:75]. In order to capture the image (inner form) of German PUs we present its literal translation after the label *lit.*

The result of the investigation proves that the meaning of only a limited number of PUs with onomatopoeic component is motivated by both its component and image, or inner form. As a rule, these are units with the original image easily comprehensible for the speakers of the language in which the literal meaning of onomatopoeic component is also vivid:

drop by drop – hardly, barely;

In the majority of cases we meet the examples of non-motivation of PU meaning by both its onomatopoeic component and its inner form:

one's bark is worse than one's bite – someone makes a lot of harsh-sounding threats but never carries them out;

lower the boom – suddenly stop someone doing something you do not approve of;

go to the bow-wows! – is used when scolding somebody;

like a bump on a log – if someone sits or stands somewhere like a bump on a log, they do not react in a useful or helpful way to the activities happening around them;

have a drop <in one's eyes> – be drunk;

j-m beide Daumen drücken (lit. smb presses both thumbs) – wish somebody success .

The last group of PUs is of special interest. It presents phraseologisms, the meaning of which is motivated by their image but is non-motivated by their onomatopoeic component. A very vivid example is that of the PU *burst like a bubble* - vanish into thin air. The meaning of the whole PU has nothing to do with a bubble as “a ball of air or gas in liquid” or “a small amount of air trapped in a solid substance” [16:190]. On the contrary, its image and the meaning of its prototype shows us clearly that everything disappears when a bubble bursts.

The same is true of the German phraseological unit *da lachen ja die Hühner* (lit. even hens are laughing) – it is both unfortunate and funny, comic and tragic . The onomatopoeic component *Hühner* (hens) gives nothing to the meaning of the whole PU but the image of something, which is so absurd and ridiculous that even stupid hens will laugh at it is so vivid and is reproduced in the phraseological meaning.

Let us present some more examples of this group of phraseological units in question:

groan inwardly – to be utterly upset;

cut the cackle – to stop talking, chatting;

mit den Augen klappern (lit. bang with eyes) – to have a blank look;

Donner und Blitze schleudern (lit. throw thunder and lightning) – to fulminate.

Conclusion

The analysis has clearly demonstrated different motivational role of onomatopoeic components in the meaning of phraseological units in the English and German languages. Some of such components completely lose their lexical meaning, and the meaning of the whole phraseological unit becomes non-motivated and completely figurative. Others transfer their sense either directly or through the phraseological unit prototype.

It has also been proved that there are three groups of phraseological units with onomatopoeic component from the point of view of motivation/non-motivation of the whole phraseological meaning depending on such a component and/or the PU image, or inner form. The meaning of the first group of phraseological units is motivated by both of them. The meaning of the second group of PUs is non-motivated both by their onomatopoeic component and inner form. The third group presents the

examples of phraseologisms, the meaning of which is motivated by their image but is non-motivated by their onomatopoeic component.

Thus the specific character of phraseological secondary motivation is revealed in different role of onomatopoeic components and PU image in the process of phraseological unit meaning motivation.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Arsenteva Elena Fridrikhovna
Kazan Federal University
Kremlyovskaya St. 18, Kazan, 420008, Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation
elenaarsenteva@mail.ru, 89033141092

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