

Phraseological Units with Names of Trees in English, German and Russian

By

Olga D. Kuzmina

Department of theory and practice of translation, Institute of International Relations, e-mail:
olga.tari@mail.ru

Liya G. Yusupova

Department of theory and practice of translation, Institute of International Relations, e-mail:
liya.1979@mail.ru

Marina I. Guseva

Department of theory and practice of translation, Institute of International Relations, e-mail:
margarita7338@gmail.com <https://kpfu.ru/marina.guseva>

Abstract

The article is devoted to the comparative analysis of the English, German and Russian phraseological units with phytonym components, namely the names of trees. The relevance of research is defined by the contemporary interest to the continuous interaction between different languages and intercultural communication. Phraseological system of any language is an important source of cross-cultural information which reflects the collective consciousness of the language community. The aim of the study is to reveal semantic and structural peculiarities of phraseological units with names of trees in three languages: English, German and Russian. The article deals with different types of phraseological units, including proverbs and sayings, with the names of trees in their structure. The study involved descriptive, comparative, interpretative, continuous sampling and statistical methods. Quantitative analysis showed that in all three languages predominate phraseological units with the names of trees growing mainly in the habitat of native speakers. The majority of these trees are related to paganism, mythology and peasant life. The results of the semantic analysis indicate that some phytonym components have the same meaning in English, German and Russian idioms, but there are also differences in the use of phytonyms in phraseologisms with the similar meaning in different languages.

Keywords: language; linguistics; culture; communication; phraseological unit; phytonym

Introduction

The study of problems associated with phraseological units of different languages has a long history. For almost a century, phraseology has been the object of research for Russian and foreign scientists. Phraseology studies phraseological units, set expressions, proverbs, sayings and proverbial expressions that concisely and vividly reflect the traditions, customs and values of a nation which are based on its cultural and social experience. Stability and figurativeness are intrinsic features of any phraseological unit (Naciscione, 2010). Phraseological units exist in all languages. Life experience of the linguosocium accumulated and generalized in phraseological units is the object of study of both linguistics and sciences directly related to humans – linguistic culturology, ethnology, anthropology, etc.

Phraseological system of any language contributes to its originality and brightness; it

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is a part of the cultural heritage of a particular nation, as well as a part of the world cultural heritage. The study of idioms and other set expressions allow people to perform the intercultural communication more effectively (Subich et al., 2016). Phraseology is the main source of information about the culture and mentality of the linguosocium. The plane of content and the plane of expression in phraseological units are dependent on the peculiarities of representation of both the national and linguistic view of the world (Babiyan, 2017). The meaning of idioms is closely connected with the background knowledge of a native speaker, the practical experience of an individual, as well as the cultural and historical traditions of the whole nation (Gil'mutdinova & Samarkina, 2016).

Phraseological units with phytonym components – important cultural concepts used to study the role of plants in mythological, historical, religious, ethnographic and cultural contexts – are one of the most characteristic set expressions of any language. Phraseological units with names of different trees are widely used to encode metaphorically any situation (Chasovnikova, 2003). Depending on the context, the “tree” is endowed with various meanings: it is associated with a person, serves as a habitat for mythological creatures, it is a source of secret knowledge, and sometimes it is a deity (Teliya, 1981).

In times gone by people believed that trees were living beings into which the souls of the departed settled, and that the gods themselves chose trees to live in. These thoughts encouraged people to perform rituals associated with trees, they animated and honored them. The tree was treated as the carrier of the vital energies connecting the world of a man, nature and universe for the first paragraph in a section, or to continue after an extract.

Methods

The article presents the results of analysis of about 450 English, German and Russian phraseological units with the names of trees selected by the continuous sampling method from the phraseological dictionaries: English-Russian phraseological dictionary by A.V. Kunin (Kunin, 1998), English phraseological dictionary “Oxford dictionary of English idioms” (Oxford dictionary of English idioms. Oxford University Press, 2009), Phraseological English-Russian dictionary by P.P. Litvinov (Litvinov, 2007), German-Russian phraseological dictionary by L.E. Binovich (Binovich, 1995), Phraseological dictionary of the Russian literary language by A.I. Fedorov (2008).

Statistical, descriptive and interpretative methods were used for the analysis of the selected material. The statistical method allowed us to determine the frequency of use of the component “tree” and other names of trees in English, German and Russian. We used descriptive and interpretative methods to perform the semantic analysis of the linguistic units under study. The comparative method was used to identify common and specific features of the phraseological units with names of trees in three languages

Results and Discussion

Quantitative analysis of the English, German and Russian phraseological units with names of trees showed that “tree” is the most recurrent component of set expressions in these languages: 62 phraseological units in the German language, 47 in English and 39 in Russian (English: to pull up trees, to be at the top of the tree, to be out of (one's) tree; German: es brennt der Baum, zwischen Baum und Borke stehen, ein Baum von einem Kerl; Russian: за деревьями не видеть леса, вкусить от дерева познания, из всего дерева).

The high recurrence of this component, in our opinion, is due to the fact that wood has always been a widely used material, a building material in particular. A large number of phraseological units with the component “tree” in the English and German languages can also be explained by the fact that the English and the German treat trees and forest with care because these resources are limited in their habitat.

Another phytonym component frequently used in three languages under study is the word oak (Eiche, дуб). English: to sport one’s oak, heart of oak, great oaks from little acorns grow, German: wie eine Eiche, von einem Streiche fällt keine Eiche, immergrüne Eiche, Russian: дуб каменный, сильный как дуб, дуб дубом).

In ancient times, Germanic tribes revered sacred groves and treated an oak as a sacred tree. Oak forests served as pastures where herds of pigs grazed and acorns were their main food. Slavonic peoples also demonstrate positive attitude to oak. Oak takes the first place among trees in the English culture. It was believed that the oak can stand a lightning strike and it is as strong as the English people. Thus, oak is the most revered tree in the analyzed linguocultures which symbolizes strength and firmness.

The English phraseological units also have the following names of trees in their structure: aspen tree, willow, ash, chestnut (to quake like an aspen leaf, to wear the green willow, a hoary old chestnut etc.). Among exotic trees, such as palm, olive, gum tree, bay tree, pagoda tree (to shake the pagoda-tree, to flourish like a bay tree, to hold out an olive branch ect.) the most recurrent component is palm (to yield the palm to smb). It can be explained by the fact that in Christianity the evergreen and slender palm tree is associated with martyrdom and purity. During the crusades in Europe this tree was known as the symbol of longevity, and in the Renaissance it became a symbol of peace.

Frequently used components of the German phraseological units with names of trees are linden (Linde), hornbeam (Hainbuche), hazel (Haselnuss) aspen (Espe), spruce (Tanne) (in die Haselnüsse gehen, schlank wie eine Tanne), laurel (Lorbeer) and palm (Palme) (Lorbeer ernten, j-n auf die Palme bringen, auf der Palme kommen).

As for the Russian language, we should mention such trees as birch tree (береза), aspen (осина), spruce (ель), pine (сосна), linden (липа) (искать на березе калачи, угодить под елку, идти под сосну, осиновая балда). The word palm is used only in one borrowed idiom (уступить пальму первенства).

The semantic analysis of phraseological units with the phytonym component “tree” showed that these units are mainly used to describe the qualities of people and things: дрожать как осиновый лист, из всего дерева, до березки; immergrüne Eiche; oh, du dicke Eiche, or to explain the situation or problem in detail and to establish a causal relationship between the phenomena: to be at the top of the tree, to bark up the wrong tree, not see the wood for the trees.

The study of the connotative meaning of the phraseological units of the three languages revealed the prevalence of pejorative connotative semes over the meliorative ones. Taking into account the fact that the person’s behavior or character are most often expressed by the image of a tree, it can be concluded that the analyzed phraseological units serve to disapprove disgraceful behavior of a person.

Some tree components have both positive and negative connotations in the same language. For instance, the component oak as a tree symbolizes strength and power, and some phraseological units with the name of this tree are characterized by positive connotations in English, German and Russian: great oaks from little acorns grow, heart of oak; fest wie eine Eiche stehen, stark wie eine Eiche, дуб дуба давит, криком дуба не срубишь. Phraseological units with the component oak in English often express omnipotence, strength and firmness. The proverb “Great oaks from little acorns grow” means that large and powerful things once were very small and insignificant. However, along with positive connotation phraseological units with the word oak have negative connotations: “difficult task” in German: das ist eine große Eiche, “stupidity” in Russian: дубовая голова, с дуба рухнуть.

In the Russian language there idioms with the component oak (дуб) which are synonyms to the verb to die (умереть) (дать дуба, пахнет дубовыми досками) because the oak timber is used to make coffins. The same meaning have phraseological units with the words pine (сосна) and spruce (ель): идти под сосну, угодить под елку.

Set expressions with the component willow have only pejorative connotation: to wear the green willow, плачущая ива. This tree is a symbol of sadness and grief. In the English culture it is also associated with the death of the beloved one. In this case, willow is a traditional symbol of abandonment in love. The idiom to wear the green willow is associated with the ancient English custom of addressing a willow wreath to an abandoned lover. Thus, the ancient customs and traditions can be observed in the language in the form of set expressions.

In Russian the expression плачущая ива (a weeping willow) has negative connotation due to its appearance. Firstly, the willow leaves hanging down sadly involuntarily resemble streams of tears, and secondly, willow is one of the plants that excrete liquid from their leaves, which explains its comparison with a crying person.

There are phytonym components which are used in idioms of only one language, namely German: hornbeam (Hainbuche), hazel (Haselnuss). Hornbeam is one of the most valuable tree species which is highly valued as a fuel and building material. The properties of hornbeam were used to characterize a rough and low-bred person: hanebüchen grob. Hazel is a symbol of vitality and fertility, and hazel thickets are considered to be a place where children are born: in die Haselnüsse gehen.

Summary

Language as an integral part of culture contributes to the formation of the national language view of the world, creates and reflects reality. Numerous researches in phraseology proved that phraseological units are unique language material which carries information about a nation’s self-identity and self-awareness ([Makhmutova et al., 2019](#); [Abrosimova et al., 2018](#)). Since ancient times, plants have been playing an important role in the life of any nation. That is why phytonyms are widely used in the language, in phraseological units in particular. In the English, German and Russian languages phraseological units mainly comprise the names of trees which grow in their territory. The use of names of exotic trees as a component is associated with borrowings from the Bible and the ancient cultures.

The English phraseology tends to reflect the status of a people and their residence, while the Russian and German phraseological units mainly describe the surrounding and inner

world of a person. Despite the continuous development of the world and civilization the language retains set expressions originating from the pagan mythology but these units can change their semantic and stylistic features in the course of time.

Phraseological units with the phytonym component “tree” often describe the inappropriate behavior of a person. Such units carrying negative evaluative connotation are more expressive than the units with meliorative connotation. This tendency can be explained by the fact that positive traits of character or good manners are considered to the norm in the society, so they do not claim much attention and expressive nomination.

The same phytonym can be used in idioms with different connotations, both in the same and different languages, when some traits of the same tree are perceived as positive, while others are negative (for example, the component oak which is most common in the analyzed languages). A number of phytonym components carry only pejorative connotations, for example, willow in English and Russian. The fact that the linguistic view of the world with its objectivity and integrity is an interpretation of the world for each person in particular, as well as for speakers of different languages in general, explains the difference in the use of different names of trees in different languages.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overestimate the role of phraseological units in the language and culture. Phraseological units are unique language material which reflects the cultural peculiarities of the nation, its history, mentality and way of life. Set expressions with names of trees belong to an ancient layer of language culture and have a lot of meanings, which is based on the perception of a tree as a special denotation.

A tree can symbolize many things, and even people. The high use of names of trees in phraseology and a wide range of their meanings highlight the specific attitude of people to trees, as well as their special position in the conceptual representation of the linguocultures under study.

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Biographical notes

Olga Dmitrievna Kuzmina is a senior lecturer of the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation at the Institute of International Relations, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, where she teaches the English language, lexicology and translation practice. For more than ten years she taught general linguistics, theory of intercultural communication and English phraseology. Her research and publication interests include comparative phraseology, terminology, intercultural communication and translation practice.

Liya Gayazovna Yusupova is a senior lecturer of the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation at the Institute of International Relations, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University. She teaches the German language, the German phraseology and translation practice. Her research works are devoted to comparative study of phraseological units, in the German, Russian and Tatar languages in particular, and to culture study.

Marina Igorevna Guseva teaches the German language at the Department of Theory and Practice of Translation at the Institute of International Relations, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University. She also works at the Goethe-Institut Examination Center and is interested in teaching German to beginners. Her current research is in sociolinguistics and theory of intercultural communication. Ms Guseva studies the structural and semantic features of the youth vocabulary of the German language and German phraseology.