

# Phraseological units with the component “fire” in English, Russian, Spanish and Tatar

Albina Kaiumova, Natalia Konopleva  
Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University  
[alb1980@yandex.ru](mailto:alb1980@yandex.ru)  
[natali.konopleva@mail.ru](mailto:natali.konopleva@mail.ru)

## 1. Introduction

This article concerns English, Russian, Spanish, and Tatar phraseological units (PUs) with the component *fire* (Rus. *огонь*, Sp. *fuego* and Tat. *ym*). The PUs were selected from a number of paper and online phraseological dictionaries. The total number of PUs is 202 (46 English, 38 Spanish, 28 Russian and 90 Tatar PUs).

The purpose of the study is (1) to ascertain whether PUs with the component *fire* have positive or negative evaluative meaning and (2) find PUs that share the same lexical and semantic structure across the four languages. Three of them, namely English, Russian and Spanish, belong to the Indo-European language family (its Germanic, Slavic and Italic branches respectively); the fourth language, Tatar, is a representative of the Turkic language family.

The component *fire* was chosen because fire is one of the basic elements of the universe, along with water, air and earth.

## 2. Fire in culture

Fire has a dual character. On the one hand fire has been used by humans for cooking, generating heat, signaling, and propulsion purposes for centuries. On the other hand fire causes death and destruction.

There are plenty of myths that explain how people first acquired fire, either through their own daring or as a gift from an animal, god, or hero.

The ancient Slavs personified *огонь*<sup>1</sup> (Eng. fire) and called it Svarozhich. In myth he was the son of Svarog (a sky deity) and the brother of Dazhbog (a sun deity). He was worshiped in an *ovín*, a building for drying sheaves before

---

<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit word *agni* is cognate with the Russian word *огонь* (*ogon*).

threshing. Fire was connected with purification and rebirth; for example, a herd was run between two fires to stop it from dying (Платонов 2000).

The same quality was attributed to *fire*<sup>2</sup> in England. According to the "Chronicles of Lanercost" (1268) the people rubbed two pieces of wood together until fire was produced. This was the so-called *need-fire*. It had the power of saving cattle from the plague that ravaged the country (McPherson 2003).

The Tatar word *ym*<sup>3</sup> (Eng. fire) has two meanings: 1) fire and 2) *arch* grass. Linguist L.H. Shayakhmetova has come to the conclusion that there is a link between the two meanings of the word *ym*. The Turks worshiped the Sun, called Koyash Babai. The Turks believed that all plants are the children of the Sun. Grass played an important role in the nomadic tribes of the Turks. It was used as food for cattle and as fuel. The process of burning grass (*yt* – grass) might have given a name to the state of burning (*yt* – fire). The Turks believed in cleansing properties of fire. Newlyweds had to jump over the fire which was said to keep the evil spirits away. Also fire was called Ut-Ana (lit. Fire-Mother). It shows that fire was treated with great respect (Шаяхметова 2007).

The celebration of San Juan (23 June) in Spain is of pagan origin. One of its basic characteristics is *fuego*<sup>4</sup> (Eng. fire). Legend has it that the bonfires that burn on St. John's eve can cure various ailments by cleansing the body and the soul. It is said that a bad year may turn into a good year by jumping over the fire three times (although it could also be nine or any odd number) at the cry of "meigas fora" which means "witches off" (Hernández 2005).

### 3. Fire in phraseology

The general importance of fire in human life resulted in fire-worship in four cultures. It is not surprising that there are phraseological units with the component fire in the languages under analysis: 46 English, 38 Spanish, 28 Russian and 90 Tatar PUs.

---

<sup>2</sup> From Old English *fȳr* (fire).

<sup>3</sup> From Old Turkic *ot* (fire).

<sup>4</sup> From Latin *focus* (hearth).

It is generally assumed that cultural knowledge motivates lexical meaning, the connotative level inclusive.

Mainly negative values are related to fire in the Russian phraseological word-stock; for example, (1) destruction: *предавать огню* to set fire to smth (2) difficulties: *пройти [сквозь] огонь [и] воду [и медные трубы]* (lit. go through fire [and] water [and trumpets]) to experience many difficulties or dangers (3) fear: *бояться как огня* (lit. to fear smth like fire) to be very frightened of smth (4) dissatisfaction: *гори [всё] синим огнем/пламенем* (lit. burn it [all] like blue fire/flames) an expression of anger, cf. Blast it! (5) illness *антонов огонь* (lit. Anton's fire) gangrene. There are a few PUs with a positive evaluative meaning; for example, (1) enthusiasm and energy: *с огоньком* (lit. with fire) with enthusiasm (2) courage: *идти/пойти в огонь и в воду за кого-л.* to go through fire and water for smb's sake. The number of PUs with a negative evaluation exceeds the number of PUs with a positive evaluation.

In the English language PUs with the component fire have both negative and positive evaluative meaning almost in an equal degree. The negative connotations are related to (1) destruction: *set fire to smb/smth* to ignite smb/smth (2) pain and torture: *fire and brimstone* the threat of Hell or damnation after death (3) difficulties *between two fires* to have two choices that are both equally unpleasant or not convenient (4) conflict: *add fuel to the fire/flames* to make an argument or bad situation worse (5) criticism: *come under fire* to be criticized (6) haste: *Where's the fire?* Where are you going in such a hurry? The positive connotations are related to (1) love: *a fire in the blood* passion (2) friendship: *get on like a house on fire* to like each other very much and become friends very quickly (3) family and home: *keep the home fires burning* to keep things going at one's home (4) enthusiasm and energy: *ball of fire* an energetic and ambitious person (5) courage: *fire in your/the belly* be ready to fight with determination for what you believe is right.

In Spanish phraseology fire is perceived negatively. PUs with the component *fire* stand for (1) destruction: *poner/meter a fuego y sangre* (lit. put to

fire and blood) to destroy a country, ravaging it (2) pain and torture: *matar a alg. a fuego lento* (lit. kill smb. over low heat) to turn smb's life into hell; *huir del fuego y dar (caer) en las brasas* (lit. run away from the fire and fall into the coals) cf. get out of the frying pan (and) into the fire (3) conflict: *romper el fuego (los fuegos)* (lit. break fire) to open fire (4) short temper: *echar fuego por los ojos* (lit. throw fire with your eyes) flash with anger (about eyes) (5) illness: *fuego de San Antón (de San Marcos / de San Marcial)* gangrene.

In Tatar phraseology, unlike Russian, English and Spanish, mostly positive values are attributed to fire. PUs with the component *ym* stand for (1) enthusiasm and energy: *ym чыгару (уйнату)* (lit. produce fire) to work with zest (2) courage: *ym ашау* (lit. eat fire) be bold and fearless (3) eloquence: *ym авызлы* (lit. with a fiery mouth) giving a clear, strong message (4) love: *ym салу (кабызу)* (lit. set fire) to fall in love (5) family and home: *ym якмаган өй кура белән бер* lit. a house without a fire is like a dry stem (6) warmth and joy: *ymның кызыунда яхшы* lit. it is nice when there is fire burning. There are a few PUs that have a negative evaluative meaning; for example (1) pain and torture: *утка салу* (lit. put into the fire) to doom smb to suffering (2) anxiety and worry: *ym йоту* (lit. swallow fire) to have smth on your mind (3) conflict: *ym ягып кычкырышу (талашу, сугышу)* (lit. argue with setting fire) to have a heated argument (4) short temper: *ym очкынны кебек кызып* (lit. break out as a spark) to become enraged suddenly (5) impudence: *утка керсә йөзе кызармас* (lit. if smb goes into the fire, his face won't get red) shameless (6) haste: *ym борчасы* (lit. fire flea) fidget; *Ут чыкканмыни!* (lit. is there fire anywhere) Where are you going in such a hurry?

Some of the PUs with the component fire are widespread. According to E. Piirainen “widespread idioms (WIs) are idioms that – when their origins and particular cultural and historical development is taken into account – have the same or a similar lexical structure and the same figurative core meaning in various different languages, including geographically distant and genetically unrelated languages” (Piirainen 2012: 62). For instance:

Eng. *play with fire* to act in a way that is very dangerous and to take risks

Rus. *играть/шутить с огнем* (lit. play / trifle with fire)

Sp. *hugar con el fuego* (lit. play with fire)

Tat. *ум белән уйнарга* (lit. play with fire)

or:

Eng. *between two fires* between two dangers or two things equally unpleasant

Rus. *между двух огней* (lit. between two fires)

Sp. *entre dos fuegos* (lit. between two fires)

Tat. *ике ум арасында* (lit. between two fires).

The following idioms have almost the same imagery and the same figurative meaning:

Eng. *jump out of the frying pan (and) into the fire* move from a bad or difficult situation to one that is worse

Rus. *из огня до в полымя* (lit. out of the fire into the flame)

Sp. *huir del fuego y dar/caer en las brasas/llamas* (lit. flee from the fire and hit/fall into the coals/flames)

Tat. *уттан качып, ялкынга төшү* (lit. having fled from fire, fall into flames)

or:

Eng. *add fuel to the fire/flames* to make an argument or bad situation worse

Rus. *подливать масла в огонь* (lit. pour oil into the fire)

Sp. *añadir/ echar/poner leña al fuego* (lit. add/throw/put wood into the fire)

Tat. *утка керәчин/май сибү* (lit. pour paraffin/oil into the fire).

At the same time some differences may be typical; for instance:

Eng. *to go through fire and water*

Rus. *пройти огонь и воду* (lit. pass fire and water)

Tat. *ум-су кичү* (lit. pass fire-water)

Sp. *pasar las de Caín* (lit. go through the same as Cain).

#### 4. Conclusions

Fire idioms are abundant because of social regard for fire.

In Russian and Spanish fire mostly appears in negatively connotated PUs. In English fire tends to develop both negative and positive associations. In Tatar fire is perceived mostly positively.

Similarities between PUS of the languages under analysis are due to universal human experience.

### **Bibliography**

Weibel, P. (2004): *The big red book of Spanish idioms: 12,000 Spanish and English expressions*. McGraw-Hill Professional.

Gulland, D.M. and Hinds-Howell, D. (2002): *The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms*. Penguin Books Ltd.

Исанбет, Н. (1989): *Фразеологический словарь татарского языка в 2 тт.* Казань.

Diccionario de la Lengua Española: <http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/> (Access 02.04.2013).

Молотков, А.И. (1968): *Фразеологический словарь русского языка*. – Москва.

Piirainen, E. (2012) *Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond: Toward a Lexicon of Common Figurative Units*. Peter Lang Pub Inc.

Hernández, J.F. (2005) *Forms Of Tradition In Contemporary Spain*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.

Шаяхметова, Л.Х. (2007): *Концепт "Ут" и его отражение в лирике Р. Миннуллина: диссертация... кандидата филологических наук: 10.02.02.* Казань.

McPherson, J.M. (2003) *Primitive Beliefs in the Northeast of Scotland (1929)*. Kessinger Publishing.

Платонов, О. (2000) *Святая Русь: энциклопедический словарь русской цивилизации*. Москва.