

Phraseological Units Semantically Oriented to a Male Person in the English Language

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Abstract

The article, firstly, seeks to outline the main steps that gender studies have taken in the field of phraseology in Russia. The analysis of bibliographic databases showed that far more attention has been paid to **phraseological units** referring to a female person. Secondly, it illustrates the general criteria of selecting gender-specific phraseological units from lexicographic sources. *Thirdly*, it studies connotation of phraseological units semantically oriented to a male person, i.e. their functional-stylistic reference, evaluation, emotiveness and expressivity. Thus, this line of research connects phraseology, phraseography and gender studies.

Keywords: phraseological units, gender, male person, female person, connotation

1. Introduction

In comparison with other branches of linguistics with many centuries of development the study of gender and language can be considered young. It is often believed to have started with R. Lakoff's book *Language and Woman's Place* (Lakoff, 1975).

The first regular studies of gender and language in Russian linguistics were held in the late 1980s - early 1990s. Studies of gender and language at the initial stage of their development were not popular among Russian linguists because of their connection with feminist linguistics. According to A. V. Kirilina, they were considered to be non-scientific (Kirilina, 2001).

Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s, they began to develop rapidly. The basics of gender and language were formulated and developed by the Moscow School of Gender Linguistics, under the leadership of I. I. Khaleeva and A. V. Kirilina. The latter's monograph *Gender: linguistic aspects* was the forerunner of the modern gender linguistics in Russia (Kirilina, 1999).

The Kazan School of Phraseology is notable for comparative studies of phraseological units of different groups and families of languages (Ayupova, 2014; Tarasova & Mukharlyamova, 2014). However, the present work is the first attempt of the representatives of the Kazan School of Phraseology to study phraseological units from the gender perspective, in spite of the fact that phraseology is a very promising area from the point of view of gender studies. Phraseology, being a carrier of culture, gives a possibility to learn more about such cultural concepts as "man" and "woman".

V. N. Telija was among the first to make a link between phraseology and gender studies. V. N. Telija pays special attention to the reflection of the cultural concept "woman" in Russian phraseology in her monograph (Telija, 1996). In the course of the research the author comes to the following conclusions: 1) women are not perceived as the weaker sex in the Russian consciousness; 2) the base metaphor for all the phraseological units describing a woman as a sexual partner, is a gastronomic metaphor of a woman being a tidbit; 3) the stereotype of a stay-at-home woman is firmly embedded in the culture of Christianized Russia; 4) a special importance to the morality of women is paid through the phraseological stock of the Russian language; 5) the opposition of the concept "woman" is not to the one of "man", but the general "person"; and it is most clearly manifested in the phraseological units describing intellectual abilities (Telija, 1996, p. 98).

The publication of V. N. Telija's monograph was a trigger for further research of the concepts "woman" and "man" in phraseologies of different languages.

A. V. Kirilina studies gender stereotypes and their reflection in Russian and German phraseology (Kirilina, 1999). The following similarities of the compared languages are detected: androcentricity (i.e. being oriented mostly to men); low estimation of women; the treatment of women as a commodity.

G. V. Belikova's article represents a review of biblical phraseology of French and Russian (Belikova, 1999). The author draws attention to the fact that the phraseological units that represent biblical male and female images have almost no phraseological parallels in the compared languages.

G. Sh. Khakimova's comparative investigation concerns gender in English and Russian proverbs (Khakimova, 2003). The main focus is on gender-specific paremias which represent a semantic concept "woman". The author draws the conclusion that English phraseology is characterised by a greater degree of androcentricity than Russian.

E. A. Kartushina's research is dedicated to gender aspects of phraseology in mass communication (Kartushina, 2003). It proves the fact that woman-related English and Russian phraseological units with a negative connotation outnumber those related to men.

E. S. Gritsenko explored gender asymmetries and stereotypes in English phraseology (Gritsenko, 2005). The author conducted an experiment which involved native speakers. The experiment showed that the absence of explicit gender-specific components in the structure of a phraseological unit does not entail its gender-nonspecific character. A special term *hidden gender markedness* is coined to name this linguistic phenomenon.

Also there have been a number of comparative investigations of gender peculiarities in phraseological stock of different languages (Artyomova, 2000; Chibysheva, 2005; Semyonova, 2006; Misieva, 2009; Zhalsanova, 2009).

O. A. Vaskova addresses lexicographic description of gender-specific English phraseological units (Vaskova, 2006). At the first stage of the research diachronic analysis revealed a number of changes in the methods of presentation and description of phraseological units in dictionaries due to socio-cultural and linguistic changes; for example, the arrival of political correctness has had an impact on language use. At the second stage synchronic analysis of lexicographic editions enabled to classify phraseological units into four groups: 1) phraseological units of meta-gender reference; 2) phraseological units of masculine reference; 3) phraseological units of feminine reference; 4) phraseological doublets.

I. V. Zykova also takes gender approach to the phraseological fund of the English language (Zykova, 2003); however, her work is one of the most comprehensive in the field. This fact explains the introduction of a number of terms for those linguistic phenomena that were first distinguished during the study; for example, gender markedness (structural and semantic; full and partial), dual gender markedness, closed and open systems of gender oppositions; gender reference (masculine, feminine and inter-gender; direct and indirect), gender asymmetry at the morphological and conceptual levels; phraseological gender lacunarity, etc.

As to the terminology used when discussing phraseological units from gender perspective, it should be said that we mostly apply the terms introduced by I. V. Zykova.

2. Methodology

Researchers face the lack of clear criteria for the selection of gender-specific *phraseological units from lexicographic sources*. Our database of 975 English phraseological units (PUs) semantically oriented to *a male person was compiled following I. V. Zykova's criteria*.

The PUs were selected from a number of paper and online dictionaries, such as monolingual (Cambridge Dictionaries Online; Collins English dictionary; Pickett, 2011; Random House Webster's college dictionary, 1997) and phraseological dictionaries (Allen, 2008; Brewer, 1978; Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2006; Cowie, 1975; Gulland & Howell, 2001; Long, 1979; Makkai, 1987; Spears, 2002), a dictionary of slang and unconventional English (Partridge & Dalzell, 2006) and dictionary of nicknames (Delahunty, 2003).

Below we would like to outline how the data was collected using the two criteria.

Firstly, we selected PUs with a definition where a lexeme indicating a male person is present; for example:

– **a lounge lizard** *mainly American* a man who spends a lot of time trying to meet rich people, especially women, in bars and at social occasions (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2006).

Secondly, we selected PUs with a structure where a lexeme indicating a male person is present; for example:

– **Mr Right** a man who would be the perfect husband for a particular woman because he has all the qualities that she wants (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2006).

Then, the analysis of the PUs from a connotative angle was undertaken. Connotation, being a macro component of a phraseological meaning, is a set of evaluative, expressive, emotive and functional-stylistic micro components. Each PU was analyzed taking into account its connotative micro components.

Evaluative micro component is not reflected in lexicographic description of a PU in the form of any particular label; therefore, we judged evaluation by the following three criteria: 1. Criterion of components; 2. Semantic criterion; 3. Extralinguistic criterion.

Emotive micro component is reflected in lexicographic sources with the help of labels such as *ironic*, *disapproving*, *humorous*, etc.

Expressive micro component does not have any labels in lexicographic sources; therefore, we employed the same criteria as when dealing with emotive micro component. Expressive component is fixed in the dictionary definitions using intensifiers, for example, adverbs (especially adverbs of degree), adjectives, nouns or verbs rarely.

Functional and stylistic micro component is present in the semantics of any phraseological unit, being the most constant of all micro components. This micro component is designated with the help of labels such as *colloquial*, *bookish*, *old-fashioned*, etc. The following four criteria were employed in the analyses of functional and stylistic micro component: 1. Criterion of components; 2. Semantic criterion; 3. Etymological criterion and 4. Qualitative criterion.

All the PUs with (a) positive, negative and neuter evaluation, (b) emotive labels, (c) expressive intensifiers, and (d) functional-stylistic labels were counted in order to compare their frequency.

3. Results

Gender approach enabled to distinguish 975 English PUs which are semantically oriented to a male person.

The analysis of the constituent structure of the PUs and their definitions revealed four types of male gender markers: 1) anthropometric lexemes; 2) kinship lexemes; 3) anthroponymic lexemes; and 4) agentive nouns.

The percentage of PUs where male gender markers are present only in the definition of a PU is 17%. This group includes PUs semantically oriented to a male person but having female gender markers in the structure of a PU; their percentage is 5% out of 17%. Almost any comparison of a male person with a female person has an explicit negative evaluation in English phraseology.

The percentage of PUs where male gender markers are present only in the structure of a PU is 14%.

The percentage of PUs where male gender markers are present in both structure and definition of a PU is 69%. These PUs are said to obtain full gender markedness.

The abovementioned results are shown in Figure 1.

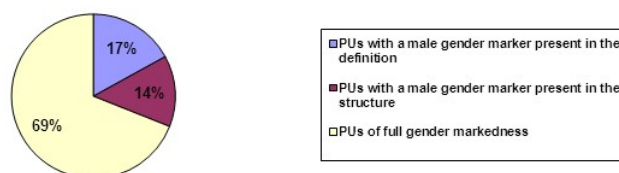


Figure 1.

The analysis of connotation showed that four micro components (functional-stylistic, evaluative, emotive and expressive) commonly act in various combinations with each other.

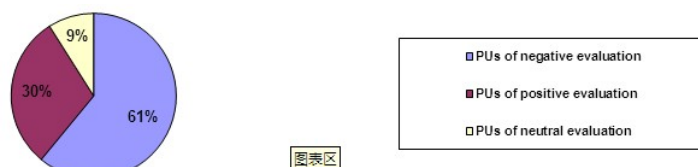


Figure 2.

As concerns evaluation, PUs semantically oriented to a male person is overwhelmingly of negative evaluation (61%). PUs with a positive evaluation is used less often, but in general they also constitute a large part of gender-specific phraseology (30%). Also examples of PUs with neutral evaluation are found (9%). The above mentioned results are shown in Figure 2.

Emotiveness is highly peculiar of English PUs. The dominating labels are humorous (40%), ironic (25%), disapproving (23%) and offensive (9%). The abovementioned results are shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3.

Expressivity is present in the majority of PUs (80%).

As concerns functional and stylistic reference, the prevalent part of gender-specific phraseology is informal or colloquial (70%). Vernacular phraseology (for example, abusive or vulgar PUs) is also present (15%). Quite a few English PUs are stylistically neutral (10%). Bookish PUs is scarce (5%). The abovementioned results are shown in Figure 4.

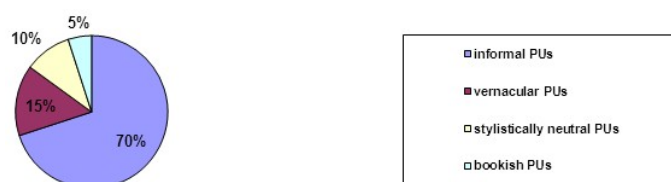


Figure 4.

4. Discussion

4.1 Selection of Gender-Specific PUs and Its Findings

The results obtained show that the number of PUs selected by semantic criterion (i.e. basing on their definitions) prevails the number of PUs selected by structural criterion (i.e. basing on their structure).

It is necessary to mention that semantic criterion enabled to reveal a group of gender-specific PUs with female anthropometric lexemes, such as *woman*, *girl*, *lady*, etc. which denote a male person; for example:

– **sister under the skin** *British* a man who supports women's action to improve their rights (Cambridge Dictionaries Online);

– **The answer to a maiden's prayer** an eligible bachelor (Allen, 2008).

According to our analysis, such PUs is predominantly of negative connotation; for example:

– **A big/great girl's blouse** *UK informal humorous* a weak and cowardly man (Cambridge Dictionaries Online);

– **A Miss Nancy** an effeminate man (Partridge & Dalzell, 2006);

– **To be tied to a woman's apron-strings** to be emotionally dependent on a woman, often used in reference to boys and young men (Gulland & Howell, 2001).

As concerns structural approach, it enabled us to reveal four types of lexemes that imply a male person. They are anthropometric lexemes, kinship lexemes, anthroponomical lexemes and agentive nouns.

Lexemes such as *boy*, *man*, *male*, *gentleman*, *Mr.*, etc. serve as an example of anthropometric lexemes. Let us give an illustrative example of a PU with the presence of an anthropometric lexeme in its structure:

– **A New Man British & Australian** a man who shows his belief in the equality of the sexes by helping his partner with the care of the children and by sharing the work that needs to be done in the house (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2006).

Two subtypes of gender-specific PUs with anthropometric lexemes were singled out:

a) gender-specific PUs referring to a male person exclusively; for example:

– **boys will be boys** *saying* said to emphasize that people should not be surprised when boys or men act in a rough or noisy way because this is part of the male character (Cambridge Dictionaries Online);

b) inter-gender PUs referring either to a male person or a female person; for example:

– **one of the boys** to be part of a group of men who are friendly and spend time together, doing the ordinary things that men are expected to do. You may hear people describe a woman as being one of the boys if she is friends with a group of men and likes doing the things they do (Long, 1979).

A distinguishing feature of this PUs is the presence of variable anthropometric lexemes in their structure; for example:

– **Feel like a new woman/man** to feel very much better (Cambridge Dictionaries Online).

Our database contains a great number of PUs where lexemes indicating a male person are present in both structure and definition of a PU. In other words they are characterized by full gender markedness; for example:

– **A man's man** a man who enjoys men's activities and being with other men (Cambridge Dictionaries Online).

Kinship lexemes include such lexemes as *father, son, brother, husband, uncle*, etc. present in the structure of PUs; for instance:

– **Dutch uncle** a man who gives frank and direct advice to someone (in the way an uncle might, but not a real relative) (Spears, 2002).

This group of gender-specific PUs similarly falls into two subgroups:

a) gender-specific PUs referring to a male person exclusively; for example:

– **sugar daddy** a rich old man who keeps a girl young enough to his daughter (Gulland & Howell, 2001);

b) inter-gender PUs referring either to a male person or a female person; for example:

– **Everybody and his brother or everybody and his uncle** everybody; lots of people (Spears, 2002).

Anthroponomical lexemes stand for proper names in the structure of PUs; for instance:

– **Tom, Dick and/or Harry** anyone, especially people that you do not know or do not think are important (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002).

The PUs with anthroponomical lexemes might be divided into four subgroups according to the nature of the anthroponym used:

a) PUs not referring to any particular person (real or fictional); for example:

– **Flash Harry/Jack** a showy fellow; a boaster (Partridge & Dalzell, 2006).

Proper names of the other three subgroups imply one specific referent.

b) PUs containing proper names which have real life prototypes. This subgroup consists primarily of nicknames, for example:

– **The Admirable Crichton** a person of great abilities or excellence. The original of the name was James Crichton, a 16th cent. Scottish nobleman noted for his scholarship and physical prowess, called 'the Admirable Crichton' by Sir Thomas Urquhart in *The Jewel* (1652) (Allen, 2008).

c) PUs containing names of mythological heroes or biblical characters:

– **A son of Adam** a man (Random House Webster's college Dictionary, 1997);

d) PUs containing names of fiction characters:

– **A Peter Pan** a youthful, boyish, or immature man (after the main character in *Peter Pan* (1904), a play by J. M. Barrie) (Collins English dictionary).

Gender specificity of the PUs belonging to this group is the ability of anthroponyms to shift from the category of proper names into the category of common names. This transition is usually associated with the final separation from the referent which leads in some cases to the loss of gender specificity, i.e. a PU might be used in reference

to both a male and a female person; for example:

- Grandfather was **a jack of all trades**, building houses, making furniture, shoeing horses (Bulz, 2011, p. 32).
- Thank heaven for Frankie, her friend, personal shrink, and resident astrological star charter. She was **a jack of all trades** (Prestia, 2011, p. 10).

Agentive nouns are nouns denoting various professions, positions, military ranks, etc. in the structure of PUs; for instance:

- **A white knight** someone who gives money to a company in order to prevent it from being bought by another company (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002).

The inclusion of these lexemes into the group of gender-specific is open to question because in the course of history agentive nouns are prone to the process of gender generalization, i.e. they have an ability of expanding relatedness from one gender to both. In this study such agentive nouns as *soldier*, *pilot*, *warrior*, *seaman*, *preacher*, and *fisher* were taken as semantically oriented to a male person.

4.2 Connotation Analysis

Evaluation micro component of the PUs under analysis was judged by the three criteria: 1. Criterion of components; 2. Semantic criterion; and 3. Extra linguistic criterion.

The analysis of the PUs selected by the criterion of components showed that positive, negative or neutral evaluation of the components of the PUs usually entails positive, negative or neutral evaluation of the whole PU. For example, the PU **bad egg**, which means ‘a repellent person’ (Spears, 2002), has a negatively charged component ‘bad’ which results in the negative evaluation of the phraseological meaning of the whole PU.

Through the analysis of the PUs selected by the semantic criterion, we found that the semantics of the prototype is a crucial factor in creating a positive, negative or neutral evaluation. For example, the same PU **bad egg** if taken literally means food that, when opened, turns out to be rotten inside. The negative evaluation of a free word combination that serves as a prototype for a PU leads to the negative evaluation of the phraseological meaning of the whole PU.

In case of extra linguistic criterion the presence of positive, negative, or neutral evaluation is connected with some extra linguistic phenomenon (a custom, superstition, legend, fairy tale, nursery rhyme, etc.) Etymological dictionaries are a valuable aid in the identification of this criterion. For example, negative evaluation cannot be derived from the semantics of the components in the PU **Jim Crow**, which means ‘a situation that existed until the 1960’s in the south of the US, when black people were treated badly, especially by being separated from white people in public places’ (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002). Its negative evaluation comes from obsolete **Jim Crow**, ‘a derogatory name for a black person, ultimately from the title of a 19th-century minstrel song’ (Pickett, 2011).

In general, PUs semantically oriented to a male person is overwhelmingly of negative evaluation; it contributes to the fact that negative evaluation is inherent in phraseology.

Emotiveness is highly peculiar of English PUs semantically oriented to a male person: 63% of the PUs have an emotive label in lexicographic sources; for example:

A bit of rough *UK humorous informal* a sexual partner, usually a man, from a low social class (Cambridge Dictionaries Online);

God’s gift (to women) *Fig.* a desirable or perfect man. (*Usually sarcastic.*) (Spears, 2002); *generally heavily ironic* (Partridge & Dalzell, 2006);

White van man *disapproving* a man who is thought to be typical of drivers of white vans by being rude, not well educated, and having very strong, often unpleasant opinions (Cambridge Dictionaries Online);

Dirty old man *disapproving or humorous* an older man who has an unpleasantly strong interest in sex (Cambridge Dictionaries Online).

The dominance of labels which refer to negative emotional experiences also proves the fact that phraseology carries mainly negative connotation.

Expressivity is present in the majority of PUs (80%) which demonstrates that most PUs express notions not in a neutral logical form, but emotionally expressive one if compared with words and free word combinations.

As concerns functional and stylistic reference, the PUs was judged by the three criteria: 1. Criterion of components; 2. Semantic criterion; 3. Etymological criterion and 4. Qualitative criterion.

The criterion of components showed that, for instance, if there is an animal, plant, body part name or a widely used proper name in the structure of a PU, then it is likely to be colloquial or informal; for example:

The Old Bill (*British informal, old-fashioned*) the police (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002);

MCP and male chauvinist pig a male who acts superior to and aggressively toward women. (From the woman's liberation movements of the 1970s.) (Spears, 2002).

Stylistically neutral words in the structure of a PU entail its neutral markedness; for example:

Make an honest woman of somebody (*humorous*) if a man makes an honest woman of someone that he is having a relationship with, he marries her (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002).

Through the analysis of the PUs selected by the semantic criterion, we found that the more vivid the imagery of a PU is, the more likely it is attributed to colloquial or informal layer of phraseology. Also, colloquial or informal PUs usually obtain an object from daily life in its semantics; for example:

Pot and pan; old pot and pan; old pot a man; a husband; a father (Australia) (Partridge & Dalzell, 2006).

Bookish PUs characterizing a male person have an abstract concept in their semantics, usually it is unrelated to daily life; for example:

A soldier of fortune *literary* someone who fights for any country or group that will pay him (Cambridge Idioms Dictionary, 2002).

Taken as a whole, PUs semantically oriented to a male person is predominantly colloquial or informal (70%); it stresses the fact that phraseology is originally a phenomenon of oral speech.

5. Conclusion

We hope that the case study will be interesting for linguists working in the field of phraseology as well as gender studies and phraseography. It may also be used to study PUs from a cultural-semiotic perspective.

Further research involving PUs semantically oriented to a female person in the English language may be undertaken. Additionally, a comparative study of gender-specific PUs of different groups and families of languages is considered promising.

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