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Metaphor as a Means of Representation and Modeling of Concept “Failure” Verbalized By English Idioms

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Abstract

The article deals with the peculiarities of phraseological representation of the concept “failure” in the English language. Special emphasis is placed on the semantic features of the idioms and the image basis in their semantic structure. Special attention is given to a prototype and metaphor, representing different spheres of human life. In this paper, the functioning of idioms in discourse is also under study. In the course of study we found out that the basis of the images of numerous idioms representing concept “failure” is formed by such metaphors as animalistic, ornithological, spatial, color, gastronomic, temperature, numerical, machine, and military.

Keywords: Cognitive phraseology, Concept, conceptual metaphor, Metaphorical model, Idiom, Image basis of idioms, Contextual functioning.

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Introduction

The problem of categorization of the social realm takes up one of the central positions in cognitive linguistics and metaphor as the manifestation of analog abilities of human mind plays a significant role in it. In modern cognitive linguistics it is accepted to define metaphor as “a mental operation, the method of cognition, categorization, conceptualization, evaluation and the interpretation of the world” [1].

J. Jaynes assigned metaphor an exceptional part in forming the human cognitive system [2]. The researcher linked the evolution of mind to the ability of metaphorization and believed that metaphor is a means of broadening of our comprehension of the world, the expansion of human mind. As J. Jaynes noted, “abstract concepts are formed by means of specific metaphors” [2], but the majority of people do not realize the metaphorical nature of many words – “the words denoting abstract notions are like ancient coins which image has become obliterated by frequent use” [2].

Metaphor reflects the universal human ability to link different spheres on basis of diverse associations. The theory of metaphor as a cognitive phenomenon enables to analyze things in their connection with human mind. The fundamentals of the theory are formed by the idea that our mind is an abstract mechanism, processing “raw” data and its inner structure correlates with the perceived objects and phenomena and that is why dependent on them [3]. It is typical of a man to comprehend one sphere in the light of another one that is to actualize a transfer from “source domain” to “target domain” and to reflect it in the language. In the course of metaphorization some “target domains” are structured upon the model of “source domain”, in other words, “metaphorical mapping” or “cognitive mapping” comes about [4]. With regard to this research there is a significant proposition in accordance with which the information about social realm is structured by mind, these structures are of metaphorical nature and can be reconstructed via available language data. Therefore, analyzing metaphors one can approach to the comprehension of the specifics of perception of phenomena by native speakers that is to describe mental entity (concept) via material (language). Conversely, it is possible to interpret language units taking into consideration their correlation with the particular concept that is to analyze material entity (language unit) via mental (concept and its metaphors).

Method

In this article the object of study is metaphorical modeling of concept “failure” represented by the idioms of the English language. English and American idioms dictionaries and fiction cover the empirical evidence. We analyze idioms focusing on their meaning, structure, inner form and semantic properties. Sometimes we point out the prototype to see the metaphor influences the connotation. Also we study idioms in contextual analysis in order to identify additional semantic properties in discourse. The research results are represented in the conclusions.

Discussion

The observation of image-bearing components in the idiomatic fund of the language enables to realize the process of conceptualization of the world by means of the particular language in the particular culture as “the language paints the conceptual model of the world with national and cultural colors via the system of its meanings and their associations” [5]. As Y. Karaulov notes quite fairly, the idiomatic fund of the language “has passed its way of development for thousands of years, and along with scientific ideas of various epochs, the fallacy and superstitions have been reflected and accumulated in it; and the prelogic stage of the formation of human thinking has been partially imprinted in it” [6]. It is obvious that metaphor underlies idioms and the connection of metaphor with the culture is indisputable. One and the same metaphor can unify whole numbers of idioms being “basic” towards them. So, there can be images of certain items as well

as images of particular situations in the basis of image representation of concept “failure”. This correlates with the propositions being elaborated in cognitive linguistics, and the point is that “operating with abstract notions, a man ... compares and identifies abstract entities with concrete” [7], using herewith the principle of analogy or metaphor. In the course of study we have disclosed conceptual metaphors, correlating concept “failure” with various concepts which may be presented by the following conceptual schemes. As there is a sizeable number of the schemes, in this article we examine some of them.

Conceptual metaphors FAILURE IS DOWN and LOW STATUS IS DOWN are objectified in a number of idioms, the semantic content of which conveys the idea of fall or spatial movement down and as a result of it a person finds himself in an unsuccessful situation, his status goes down. It is represented with the idioms like **go down like a lead balloon, drop like flies, down and out** (the basis of prototype here is the image of a defeated boxer who has been knocked down and has failed to get up before the referee counted to ten, and has therefore lost the contest), **fall flat (on one’s face), go into free fall, come down in the world, fall off one’s perch** (failure conceptualizes via the image of a bird falling from a perch), **down the drain (tubes), come (fall) to the ground, come down to earth (with a bump), one’s star (sun) is set, one’s stock is low**. Conceptual projection FAILURE IS THE LOWEST POSITION finds its confirmation in such idioms as **hit (reach) rock bottom, bump along the bottom, the bottom of the heap (of the pile)** [8, 9]. The idiom **drop like flies** contains an image-bearing presentation of some similar objects that vanish, stop existing during a short period of time. The meaning of the idiom “to fail”, “to wreck” is realized in the following antonymous context where the unsuccessful condition of petty dealers is contrasted with the success of major shopping malls: *While other retailers are dropping like flies, supermarkets are making fat profits* [10]. The comparison of a person’s life, career and success with the sunset at the end of daylight, with the setting of a star forms the basis of the images of the idioms **one’s star (sun) is set**: *The old man walked the floor all of the days, realizing that his sun was setting, that with Frank’s failure he failed* [11].

Conceptual metaphor FAILURE IS DEATH is embodied in a number of idioms, in the semantics of which one can distinguish such images like dead animals and birds (**flog (beat) a dead horse, a dead duck, dead as a dodo**); funeral knell (**the death knell sounds**); the day when one dies (**someone’s days are numbered**); a fatal blow (**the kiss of death**); the images of a man’s behavior linked to a great risk and as a result of it leading to an unfavorable outcome (**dig one’s own grave, sign one’s own death warrant, put one’s head (neck) on the block** (the “block here is a special piece of wood on which a prisoner was made to place his or her head before being beheaded), **put (stick) one’s head in a noose** (a “noose” is a loop and knot that is tied in rope in order to hang someone); **heads roll** (in the past, people in important positions were sometimes beheaded if they were considered responsible for a mistake or problem); the images depicting a negative result as a process of ruin, submersion, sinking (**abandon a sinking ship, like a rat leaving a sinking ship, a drowning man will clutch at a straw, sink or swim, keep one’s head above water, sink in the scale, sink like a stone**) [8, 9]. In these idioms the idea of failure correlates with the death of a living organism, some risky activity and also with the process of drowning. In the latter case the image is also motivated by such metaphors as FAILURE IS DOWN and INSTABILITY IS WATER. For instance, the idiom **abandon a sinking ship** possesses an impressive pejorative connotation as it describes the pattern of the behavior of a man who is capable of betrayal (*abandon*) when some unfavorable circumstances appear (*a sinking ship*). In the following suggestive context (*by this we mean the context that is in pre-position to the idiom; the point is about positional characteristics of the context: the position of surrounding elements preceding or following the idiom determine actualization of the meaning of an idiom*) this idiom actualizes its meaning “to desert, to leave a sinking ship” where the flop is explicated by the verbal markers *collapse, collapsed, deserted in droves*, and the expressive effect is achieved for account of contrasting the initial position of the agent as *a leading captain of industry* with the current state of affairs – *collapse: The collapse surprised the City and Tory Central Office, which had feted Levitt as a leading captain of industry. When Mint and Boxed collapsed,*

many of Levitt's rich and powerful contacts deserted him in droves.' This has hurt Jeffrey a great deal,' said the close friend.' They have fled like rats from a sinking ship' [12]. Loss of social rank, influence, popularity is illustrated by the comparative idiom with ornithological component **dead as a (the) dodo**. The negative evaluation of the idiom is determined by the extralinguistic factor: the prototypical image of the idiom is connected with the idea of a large flightless bird that lived on the islands of the Indian Ocean. It became extinct in the late 17th century as a result of hunting and the destruction of its nests by pigs belonging to settlers on the islands: *Take my word for it... English society is as dead as the dodo* [13]. The idioms **dig one's own grave**, **sign one's own death warrant** are characterized by vivid and expressive images presented in their inner form. The idioms actualize concepts-scripts and create a mental model of risky and thoughtless behavior leading to self-destruction. The pejorative connotation of the idioms is formed not only via negative evaluative semes of the lexemes *grave* and *death*, but also via the semantics of their prototypes. The meaning of the idioms is realized in the following suggestive and explicating (*by this we mean the context that is in post-position to the idiom*) contexts respectively: *'I tell you, Desmonde,' Glyn went on more quietly, 'you've got off to a false start, landed in bad company, and worst of all, you've been slacking abominably. If you don't take yourself up you'll have dug your own grave. The lowest pit in hell is occupied by the artist who does not work'* [14]; *As it is, I think every hour that passes increases the risk of your not seeing your daughter again whether you pay the ransom or not, and that by paying you may well be signing her death warrant* [10].

The presented conceptual schemes FAILURE / LOW STATUS IS DOWN and FAILURE IS DEATH reflect the correlation of concept FAILURE with concept SUCCESS, which in its turn can be presented by metaphorical models with antonymous content SUCCESS / HIGH STATUS IS UP and SUCCESS IS VITALITY and that is explicated in the idioms like **come (get, go) up in the world, up and coming, up and running, on the up, on top of something, room at the top, rise from the ranks, raise somebody a peg higher, ride high, one's stock rose, come back from the dead, be alive and kicking** [8, 9]. The idea of success in these idioms is associated correspondingly with staying up, movement up, with vitality and viability: *He had grown into an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man, who was safe to rise in the world* [15]. The meaning of the idiom "to succeed", "to make one's way in the world" is explicated in the suggestive context via the adjectives with positive evaluative semes. The evaluating agent has no doubts that the man possessing such merits as good sense, caution, discretion will go far.

Conceptual metaphor FAILURE IS LOSS is actualized by means of the idioms like **lose the day, lose ground/make up lost ground, lose face, lost/stuck for words/at a loss for words, fight a losing battle; win the battle, lose the war; a dead loss, a waste of space, waste your breath, lay waste, go/run to waste, be out of the saddle**) in which the idea of getting a negative result is sensed via such images as the loss of steady position, lost battle, considerable damage, etc. The correlation with concept LOSS in these idioms is designated by the lexemes *lose, loss, losing, waste, miss* the semantic content of which expresses the idea of vain efforts that haven't given a positive result, resources spent for nothing, loss of favorable opportunity of realization of one's plans. Within the framework of this metaphorical model lost battle correlates with failure in achieving stated goals: *fight a losing battle; win the battle, lose the war; lose the battle, win the war: Effective chemical treatment meant this field was largely unaffected, but with up to 60 per cent of slugs proving resistant to pellets, many farmers are fighting a losing battle* [10]. The meaning of the idiom "to try to achieve smth., but in vain" is realized in the context explicating the situation when it is impossible for farmers to exterminate vermin on account of their resistance to insecticides. In the following suggestive context the verbal contextual marker *recession* contributes to the actualization of the meaning of the idiom "to carry on a struggle that is doomed to failure in advance". The pejorative connotation of the idiom is determined by the contextual situation itself showing impossibility of development of regional political

strategies under the conditions of overall economic recession: *Under the present conditions of economic recession, regional policies are fighting a losing battle* [10].

Conceptual metaphor FAILURE IS ERROR is embodied in the semantics of the idioms like ***a slip of the pen/tongue, back (bet, pick) the wrong horse, get off on the wrong foot, bark up the wrong tree, a false dawn, on the wrong end of smth., on the wrong track; he who makes no mistakes, makes nothing; be at fault; a fault once denied is twice committed***. In these idioms failure correlates with improper, erroneous choice of means and facilities for obtaining a good result, incorrect strategy or accidentally made blunder. So, the idiom *back (bet, pick) the wrong horse* implies the image-bearing situation of support, trust towards an agent that does not deserve it as he will supposedly turn out to be a loser and will not be able to demonstrate the expected result. The meaning of the idiom is actualized in the following context: *...I have to do business for you with people we both know. In their view, I've backed the wrong horse. Fairly openly. It wouldn't have mattered so much doing it openly, if it hadn't been the wrong horse... I should be no good with these people any more. It's time to go* [16].

In the course of study it was also detected that concept FAILURE correlates with concept DRAMA. This metaphor is represented in the language via the idioms ***poor show, it's curtains (mean curtains, spell curtains), the curtain comes down on smth. (bring the curtain down on smth.), put up a poor show, the plot thickens***. For example, the idiom *the curtain comes down on smth.* realizes the idea of termination of some activity comparing it with the end of a theatrical performance emphasizing the moment when the curtain drops. This act symbolizes the end of a vigorous activity and the idiom can denote the failure of an agent as well as his death: *As the curtain comes down on Courage League rugby for 1992, the game's elite are gearing themselves for the biggest dog-fight since the competition's inception six years ago* [10]; *I don't care if I dissolve into a puddle the minute the curtain comes down* [10].

Conclusion

Metaphor is often the foundation of the idiom; metaphor interacts with the cultural experience of the ethnos, reflects various aspects of comprehension of different phenomena in the social consciousness. In English there is a great variety of idioms objectifying concept "failure". In this article we presented only a small part of it. In the course of study we found out that the basis of the images of numerous idioms representing concept "failure" is formed by such metaphors as animalistic, ornithological, spatial, color, gastronomic, temperature, numerical, machine, and military. Concept "failure" has a special meaning in a person's conceptual mind, in the system of national and cultural values as it is linked to virtually all spheres of a man's life, whereby the concept under consideration reveals correlation with such concepts like *down, death, instability, loss, error, danger, risk, success, drama* and that is indicative of indistinctness of the bounds and high degree of diffuseness of concept "failure".

To summarize, the diversity of metaphorical models participating in structuring of this notion corroborates the proposition about complexity and versatile nature of the phenomenon under study and its controversial perception. Thorough examination of cognitive metaphors and their role in the organization of complex abstract concepts seems to be a prospective area of further analysis.

Footnotes

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