

**DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v7i4.1808**

**Citation:** Mirgalimova, L., Ayupova, R., Arsenteva, E., & Pamies-Bertrán, A. (2018). Paradixical Word Collocations in the Structure of Idioms. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 7(4), 116-123. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v7i4.1808>

## Paradixical Word Collocations in the Structure of Idioms

Liliia Mirgalimova<sup>1</sup>, Roza Ayupova<sup>2</sup>,  
Elena Arsenteva<sup>3</sup>, Antonio Pamies-Bertrán<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

The paper describes the results of the study of phraseological units with paradoxical word combinations consisting of lexemes that semantically cannot collocate with each other. The empirical material of the research includes units of two widely spoken European languages: English and Russian which were collected from different unilingual and bilingual phraseological dictionaries by using continuous sampling method. The paper begins with a brief review of contemporary research for analyzing paradox as a phenomenon observed in phraseology and studies that might unfold the secrets of using semantically not collocable words as component parts of prototypes of such phraseological units. Etymological data gathered from various sources of the languages analyzed applying the method suggested by E. Piirainen and D. Dobrovolskij witness to the time the phraseological units were coined the word combinations we are analyzing did not use to sound paradoxical. It is due to some formal or semantic alterations that the prototypical word combinations or their component parts had to undergo they started to sound paradoxical.

**Keywords:** Phraseological unit, Paradox, Inner form, Etymology, Prototype, Motivation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate, Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University. [global@ores.su](mailto:global@ores.su)

<sup>2</sup> Doctor of Philology, professor, Department of germanic philology, Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University. [rosa40fet@mail.ru](mailto:rosa40fet@mail.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Doctor of Philology, professor, Department of germanic philology, Leo Tolstoy Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication, Kazan Federal University. [helenaarsentiewa@mail.ru](mailto:helenaarsentiewa@mail.ru)

<sup>4</sup> Doctor of Philology, professor, General Linguistics and Literature Theory Department, University of Granada. [antonio.pamies@gmail.com](mailto:antonio.pamies@gmail.com).

## 1. Introduction

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the term *paradox* as “a tenet contrary to received opinion” [1]. This is the wide and etymological sense of this word: from Greek παράδοξος (lit.: apart from the *doxa*), however the French Dictionary *Petit Robert* points a narrower meaning, and defines the paradox with another paradox: *une proposition qui est à la fois vraie et fausse* (a statement which is at the same time true and false) [2]. From a rhetorical point of view, a paradox is a statement which, though it appears to be self-contradictory, contains a basis of truth which reconciles the seeming opposites [3], and whose unexpectedness catches attention and adds force to the statement [4], i.e., *fearful bravery* (Shakespeare), *scalding coolness* (Hemingway), etc., but some of them became lexicalized. According to these assumptions, the paradox would be a particular feature of figurative language, whose literal meaning would be false but whose figurative meaning would be true [5]. In fact, Harald Weinrich considers these constructions as “a special kind of metaphor” [6: 390].

Researches in the field of phraseology have distinguished some illogicality or paradoxes observed on its various levels [7]. First of all it considers unmotivated phraseologisms the inner form of which is not transparent. In some cases it is connected with the reflection of the dialogue of cultures of the English and Russian languages [8]. The fact that “at the heart of the lexico-semantic technique is associative-figurative rethinking” [9: 175] also contributes to metaphorical peculiarities of phraseological units based on paradox. The figurativeness of a phraseological unit allows reconsideration of its meaning. Paradoxical nature of such units is a true reflection of language creativity [10]. In this way phraseological units also contribute to the peculiarities of national lingua cultures the study of which attracts a lot of attention nowadays [11].

## 2. Methods

Considering paradoxical fixed utterances, we distinguished two main groups. Firstly, those previously quoted, which contain an oxymoron, therefore, they are overtly self-contradictory since their origin; and, secondly, those whose apparently “illogical” nature has to do with an opposition between their current synchronic motivation (relation between inner form and global meaning) and their etymological motivation.

As for this group, the current research mostly bases on etymological analysis of phraseological units bringing together semantically not collocable words in their componential structures. Our research requires semantic analysis of each unit while comparing its phraseological meaning with literal meaning of their prototypes; which is important when designating whether the phraseological unit is motivated or not.

Comparative method is considered to be absolutely necessary to study phraseological units belonging to different languages of Indo-European family of languages. The methods of observation and description are also the inherent part of our research.

The procedure of continuous sampling has been chosen for selecting phraseological units from unilingual and bilingual phraseological dictionaries as well as from etymological dictionaries.

## 3. Results and Discussion

We support the opinion of our colleagues E. Piirainen and D. Dobrovolskij about the role of true and folk etymological analysis, therefore we consider any kind of information about the origin of phraseological units useful and worth referring [12].

So, the Native American phraseological unit *pie in the sky* represents an image that is totally impossible in the real life. Because only celestial bodies, such as stars, the Moon, the Sun etc. and flying objects can be in the sky. According to A.V. Kunin [13], the expression *pie in the sky* was coined by the author of a song written as a parody to the Salvation Army's hymn: "In the Sweet By-and-By". The song was first published under the title "Long Haired Preachers" in 1911 in the *Little Red Songbook*. In next publications (1973), the name of the song was "The Preacher and the Slave".

*Long-haired preachers come out every night*

*Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right*

*But when asked how 'bout something to eat*

*They will answer in voices so sweet*

Chorus Type #1:

*You will eat bye and bye*

*In that glorious land above the sky*

*Work and pray live on hay*

*You'll get **pie in the sky** when you die [14].*

The author of the song, Joe Hill was an itinerant labourer who migrated to the USA from Sweden. He was a leader of a radical labour organization and wrote many songs for workers. Hill's song, which became very popular among workers, criticized the Army's theology and philosophy for their concentration on the salvation of souls neglecting material problems the Army faced. This policy of the Army was supported by the movement, founded in 1865, spread from London, England, to many other countries of the world and called the Salvation Army. It was satirized by the organization The Industrial Workers of the World as the "Starvation Army". As it is clear from the above mentioned, the phrase *pie in the sky* is based on the satirical image of those serving in the Army getting all pleasure – *pie* – in the other world – after their death – which is denoted by the word *sky* in the expression under analysis.

So, to the moment of its first use in the line *You'll get **pie in the sky** when you die* of the above mentioned lyrics *pie in the sky* did not sound paradoxical at all.

It is not earlier than after the Second World War that the phrase began to be used figuratively to denote any promise of future happiness which is unlikely to come true. Wikipedia gives also the example of the phrase use in the report from the California newspaper *The Fresno Bee*, November 1939:

*The business world is fearful that Roosevelt's obsession with war problems will mean a continued neglect of questions which still restrict trade and profits. They are highly skeptical of Washington's promise that they will 'eat pie in the sky' solely from war orders, which they decry publicly [15].*

The phraseological unit *skeleton in the cupboard / closet* also demonstrates the use of words that semantically cannot collocate with each other and creates paradoxical image of some object being put to the place where it cannot be.

Collins Dictionary gives the following definition to this expression: "If you say that someone has *a skeleton in the closet*, or in British English *a skeleton in the cupboard*, then you "have an embarrassing or unpleasant secret about something that happened in the past [16].

Phrase Finder gives information about two possible variants of the origin of this phrase. According to the first one, *skeleton in the closet / cupboard* was created "as an allusion to an apparently irreproachable

person or family having a guilty secret waiting to be uncovered” [17], where a risk to come out is related to “the domestic imagery” of a closet or cupboard being close-to-hand.

The second version says that the 1832 Anatomy Act of the UK allowed using corpses in medical researches more widely, before it there was the period “of the notorious body snatchers”. Thus, some people acquired a corpse or skeleton illegally; therefore, they had to conceal it, even though they held those skeletons for teaching purposes. Doctors had to conceal also the skeletons got quite legally, because public opinion would not allow keeping them on open view.

Phrase Finder provides also information about the early use of this expression, according to which it was first used in early 1800s. As the example of the first reference the source gives the work by William Hendry Stowell in the UK monthly periodical *The Eclectic Review*, 1816: *Two great sources of distress are the danger of contagion and the apprehension of hereditary diseases. The dread of being the cause of misery to posterity has prevailed over men to conceal the **skeleton in the closet**...* In this case the word *skeleton* stands for infectious or hereditary disease [15].

The second example the Phrase Finder represents is an extract from the work by Edgar Allan Poe, the master of Gothic Novels, *The Black Cat* (1845):

*"Gentlemen, I delight to have allayed your suspicions", and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which **stood the corpse** of the wife of my bosom. The wall fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators.*

As the third example of using the phrase we are analyzing here the source gives an extract from the work by William Makepeace Thackeray, the Victorian period writer, “The Newcomes” (1845). This work was written as memoirs of one of the respectable families of the then society: *Some particulars regarding the Newcome family, which will show us that they **have a skeleton or two in their closets**, as well as their neighbours.*

Information about the etymology of this phraseological unit also witnesses about its prototype being not paradoxical, but quite logical word combination for that time, as the image of a skeleton in the cupboard or closet was “natural”.

In the componential structure of the Russian phraseological unit *зарыть талант в землю* (lit.: to dig one’s talent to the ground) one can also find a word combination made up of semantically not collocable words, since talent is an abstract notion which doesn’t undergo any physical action.

According to *Live Journal*, in Antiquity the word *talent* denoted the largest unit of currency in Greece, Babylon, Persia and some other parts of Asia Minor [17].

Evangelical parable says that a man, who was going to travel to a faraway country, leaving his house commissioned his servants to safeguard his property giving five talents to one of his servants, two talents to the second one and one to the third servant. The first two servants invested their talents to some business, while the third servant just dug his talent to the ground. When he returned, the master demanded a report. The first servant gave him back 10 talents instead of 5, the second one – 4 instead of 2, the third servant – the same 1 talent and explained his master that he had dug his talent into the ground to safeguard it. The master appreciated the first two servants and entrusted them to rule over many other things. “You are lazy. You should have given my talent to the bankers, and now I would get it with some interest”, said he to the third servant. The talent was taken away from him and given to the first servant.

Verse 14 says that the man “called his own servants and delivered his goods to them”. So the first point I want to make is that God has entrusted much responsibility to His servants [18].

Later the word *talent* acquired the meaning “gift, abilities” and the Biblical phrase *зарыть талант в землю* gave rise to the metaphorical meaning “to ignore one’s abilities, not to develop them”. The English equivalent of this phraseological unit, *bury one’s talent*, has the same origin as the Russian unit discussed here [19]. The Russian phraseological unit is said to have been borrowed from the *Gospel* through the Old Slavonic language, which was the language of the Bible for speakers of the Russian language.

The Russian phraseological unit *реветь белугой* (literally: roar like hausen/sturgeon) also exploits paradoxical word combination. Its meaning is “to cry or roar intensely, loudly and long”. The first component of the phraseological unit is polysemic and denotes: (1) HAUSEN: “valuable source of caviar and isinglass found in the Black and Caspian seas”; (2) STURGEON: “large primitive fishes valued for their flesh and roe; widely distributed in the North Temperate Zone” [20]. The paradox of this expression lies in the fact that this species as most fish cannot produce any sound.

Alongside with the meanings mentioned above, the Russian word *белуга* also has the meaning “white whale or Beluga whale – an Arctic and sub-Arctic species of cetacean which is also referred to as *sea canary* due to its high-pitched twitter”. In the Dictionary of Arkhangel dialect of the Russian language published in 1885 the word – equivalent of white whale – could be spelled both the variants *белуга* and *белуха* [21]. For this reason, the expression was not paradoxical at all. As it was already mentioned, in the contemporary Russian language only the variant *белуха* is used in this meaning [22]. The *Big explanatory dictionary of the contemporary Russian language* by D.N. Ushakov defines this meaning of *белуга* as “fish of species of sturgeon”, and notes that it is the same word as *белуха* which is misspelling [22].

The purpose of this paper is to study one more phenomenon, observed in phraseological and paremiological units, that seems paradoxical. It is the fact of word combinations used in some phraseological structures proving to consist of words which logically or semantically cannot collocate. Bright image of such units attracting our attention makes one think that the intention to create it lies on the basis of using these paradoxical word combinations. As phraseological units are specific units of language each of which with its own unique way of phraseologisation, only delving into this process can throw some light on where such strange word combinations come from. Therefore, our research focuses on the notions closely related to the process of phraseologisation: inner form, motivation and etymology.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Paradox may be understood in several senses: etymological, rhetorical, stylistic. Data from etymological dictionaries can serve as valuable information for studying phraseological units based on paradox. Delving into the etymology of the phraseological units including paradoxical word combinations in their lexical grammatical structures, we find out that at the moment of coining these phrases, the lexemes they consist of were semantically collocable with each other. One of the reasons of their becoming paradoxical is that the whole prototypical word combination could undergo various alterations, such as omission of some lexemes, omission of negation, or changes in spelling.

#### **Acknowledgements**

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

## Footnotes

- [1] Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018). Paradox. URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox> (accessed 7 March 2018).
- [2] Robert, R. A., & Rey-Debove, J., (eds.) 1986. *Le Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. Paris: Le Robert.
- [3] Beckson, K., & Ganz, A. (1961). *A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*. New York: Noon Day.
- [4] Shipley, J. T. (1953). *Dictionary of World Literature Criticism, Forms, Technique*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- [5] Fontainer, P. (1968). *Des Figures du discours autres que les tropes*. Paris: Maire-Nyon.
- [6] Weinrich, H. (1981). *Sprache, Texten*. Stugartt: Ernst Klett.
- [7] Pamies, A. (1992). Quelques paradoxes à propos de la structure du paradoxe, *Équivalences*, 21(1-2), 5-30.
- [8] Gataullina, V. L., Salieva, R. N., & Zakirova, L. R. (2016). Reflection of the dialogue of cultures of the English and Russian languages in the study of phraseological units with a transparent inner form and in the process of teaching native and non-native languages. *Modern Journal of Language and Teaching Methods, Special Issue*, 43-47.
- [9] Sadykova, A. G., Kajumova, D. F., Davletbaeva D. N., Aleeva, G. H., Iakovleva, E. L., Zaichenko M. A., & Matveeva G. V. (2018). Linguacultural specificity of transferring the category of comic by the language means. *Modern Journal of language teaching methods*, 8, 175-181.
- [10] Smirnova, E., Sadykova, A., & Davletbaeva, D. (2014). The study of occasional words: theoretical aspect. *Life Science Journal*, 11(11), 532-535.
- [11] Bolgarova, R. M., Safonova, S. S., & Zamaliutdinova, E. R. (2014). Comparison in Russian and Tatar linguocultures: systemic functional and comparative analysis. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 5(3), 148-152.
- [12] Piirainen, E., & Dobrovolskij, D. (2010). Idioms: Motivation and Etymology. *Yearbook of Phraseology*, 1, 73-96.
- [13] Kunin, A. V. (1984). *Anglo-russkij frazeologicheskij*. Moskva: russkij jazyk.
- [14] Fowke, E., & Glazer, J. (1973). *Songs of work protest*. Mineola – New York: Dover Publications.
- [15] Phrase Finder (2018). 2,000 English idioms, phrases and proverbs that we use daily, with their meanings and origins explained. URL: <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/pie-in-the-sky.html>. (accessed on 7 March 2018)
- [16] Cambridge Dictionary (2018). URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org> (accessed on 6 March 2018).
- [17] Livejournal (2018). URL: <https://www.livejournal.com/> (accessed on 6 March 2018).
- [18] King of Kings: Community of Jerusalem (2018). Using your Gifts — The Parable of the Talents. URL: <http://www.kkcj.org/teaching/article/using-your-gifts-the-parable-of-the-talents-matthew-2514-30> (accessed on 6 March 2018).
- [19] Bible Gateway (2018). Nuevo Testamento: Mateo; Spanish translation by Reina-Valera 1960. New Testament. English version by King James 1611; Nouveau Testament, version française de Louis Second

1910; Novyj Zavet, russkaja sinodal'naja versija [New Testament, Russian synodal version]. URL: <https://www.biblegateway.com> (accessed 6 March 2018).

[20] The Free Dictionary (2018). URL: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/> (accessed 6 March 2018)

[21] Birikh, A. K., Mokienko, V. M., & Stepanova, L. I. (2005). Russkaja phrazeologija. Istoriko-etimologičeskij slovar' [Russian phraseology. Historical-etymological dictionary]. Moskva: AST: Khranitel' [Moscow: Astrel': AST Khranitel'].

[22] Ushakov, D. N. (2014). Bol'shoj tolkovyj slovar' sovremennogo russkogo jazyka [Big explanatory dictionary of the contemporary Russian language] Moscow: Slavyanskii dom knigi.

## References

Beckson, K. & Ganz, A. (1961). A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms. New York: Noon Day.

Bible Gateway (2018). Nuevo Testamento: Mateo; Spanish translation by Reina-Valera 1960. New Testament. English version by King James 1611; Nouveau Testament, version française de Louis Second 1910; Novyj Zavet, russkaja sinodal'naja versija [New Testament, Russian synodal version]. URL: <https://www.biblegateway.com> (accessed 6 March 2018).

Birikh, A. K.; Mokienko, V. M. & Stepanova, L. I. (2005). Russkaja phrazeologija. Istoriko-etimologičeskij slovar' [Russian phraseology. Historical-etymological dictionary]. Moskva: AST: Khranitel' [Moscow: Astrel': AST Khranitel'].

Bolgarova, R. M.; Safonova, S. S. & Zamaliutdinova, E. R. (2014). Comparison in Russian and Tatar linguocultures: systemic functional and comparative analysis. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 5(3), 148-152.

Cambridge Dictionary (2018). URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org> (accessed on 6 March 2018).

Fontainer, P. (1968). *Des Figures du discours autres que les tropes*. Paris: Maire-Nyon.

Fowke, E. & Glazer, J. (1973). *Songs of work protest*. Mineola – New York: Dover Publications.

Gataullina, V. L.; Salieva, R. N. & Zakirova, L. R. (2016). Reflection of the dialogue of cultures of the English and Russian languages in the study of phraseological units with a transparent inner form and in the process of teaching native and non-native languages. *Modern Journal of Language and Teaching Methods*, Special Issue, 43-47.

King of Kings: Community of Jerusalem (2018). Using your Gifts - The Parable of the Talents. URL: <http://www.kkcj.org/teaching/article/using-your-gifts-the-parable-of-the-talents-matthew-2514-30> (accessed on 6 March 2018).

Kunin, A. V. (1984). *Anglo-russkij phrazeologičeskij*. Moskva: russkij jazyk.

Livejournal (2018). URL: <https://www.livejournal.com/> (accessed on 6 March 2018).

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018). Paradox. URL: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox> (accessed 7 March 2018).

Pamies, A. (1992). Quelques paradoxes à propos de la structure du paradoxe, *Équivalences*, 21(1-2), 5-30.

Phrase Finder (2018). 2,000 English idioms, phrases and proverbs that we use daily, with their meanings and origins explained. URL: <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/pie-in-the-sky.html>. (accessed on 7 March 2018)

Piirainen, E. & Dobrovol'skij, D. (2010). Idioms: Motivation and Etymology. *Yearbook of Phraseology*, 1, 73-96.

Robert, R. A. & Rey-Debove, J., (eds.) 1986. *Le Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. Paris: Le Robert.

Sadykova, A. G.; Kajumova, D. F.; Davletbaeva D. N.; Aleeva, G. H.; Iakovleva, E. L.; Zaichenko M. A. & Matveeva G. V. (2018). Linguacultural specificity of transferring the category of comic by the language means. *Modern Journal of language teaching methods*, 8, 175-181.

Shipley, J. T. (1953). *Dictionary of World Literature Criticism, Forms, Technique*. New York: Philosophical Library.

Smirnova, E.; Sadykova, A. & Davletbaeva, D. (2014). The study of occasional words: theoretical aspect. *Life Science Journal*, 11(11), 532-535.

The Free Dictionary (2018). URL: <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/> (accessed 6 March 2018)

Ushakov, D. N. (2014). *Bol'shoj tolkovyj slovar' sovremennogo russkogo jazyka* [Big explanatory dictionary of the contemporary Russian language] Moscow: Slavyanskii dom knigi.

Weinrich, H. (1981). *Sprache, Texten*. Stugartt: Ernst Klett.