Phraseology and Idiomatic Expressions in English and Russian:

A Corpus-Based Comparative Study

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Abstract: This article explores the similarities and differences between phraseological units and idiomatic expressions in English and Russian. Utilizing corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Russian National Corpus (RNC), this study investigates the frequency, semantic variability, and cultural significance of idiomatic expressions in both languages. By analyzing idioms across various contexts, the research demonstrates how idiomatic expressions function as markers of cultural identity and linguistic uniqueness. Furthermore, it provides insights into the translatability of idioms and the extent to which they reveal distinct cognitive and cultural patterns. The findings indicate that while both languages share common cognitive metaphors, their idiomatic usage reflects deep-rooted cultural and linguistic particularities.

Key words: phraseology, idiomatic expressions, corpus linguistics, English, Russian, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics

Introduction

Idiomatic expressions and phraseological units play a crucial role in both English and Russian, contributing significantly to the expressiveness and cultural depth of each language. Phraseology, as a branch of linguistics, involves studying fixed expressions, including idioms, proverbs, and other set phrases, which often hold meanings that cannot

be deduced from their literal components (Gläser, 1998). While previous studies have focused on individual languages, this research aims to compare idiomatic structures across English and Russian through corpus-based methods. By analyzing data from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Russian National Corpus (RNC), we attempt to highlight the similarities, differences, and cultural underpinnings of phraseology in these languages.

Methodology

The study uses data extracted from two primary corpora: the British National Corpus (BNC) for English and the Russian National Corpus (RNC) for Russian. Both corpora provide rich sources of idiomatic expressions and phraseological units across various contexts, including spoken and written forms. The research methodology follows a three-step approach:

1. Selection of idiomatic expressions: The most frequent idiomatic expressions from both corpora were selected. These idioms were categorized based on their frequency and context of use.

2. Comparative analysis: Selected idioms were compared to identify similarities and differences in terms of semantic structure, cultural significance, and cognitive underpinnings.

3. Contextual analysis: Using concordance lines from the corpora, each idiom was analyzed in its specific linguistic context to understand how phraseological units function across different registers.

Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals significant differences in the frequency and distribution of idiomatic expressions between English and Russian. English tends to employ a higher number of idioms in everyday spoken discourse compared to Russian, where idioms appear more frequently in literary texts and formal contexts. For example, idioms such as "a piece of cake" and "break the ice" appear frequently in conversational English, reflecting the language's reliance on metaphorical phrases in informal communication

(McCarthy & O'Dell, 2002). In contrast, Russian idioms like "делать из мухи слона" (lit. 'to make an elephant out of a fly' – equivalent to 'make a mountain out of a molehill') are more often found in formal or literary settings (Fedorov, 2004).

Semantic Variability

One of the key findings of the study is the high degree of semantic variability in both languages. While some idioms have direct translations between English and Russian, many do not, as they are deeply rooted in the cultural and historical contexts of each language. For example, the English idiom "spill the beans," meaning to reveal a secret, has no direct equivalent in Russian. Instead, Russians may use "выдать секрет" (lit. 'give out the secret'), a more literal phrase with the same meaning. This difference suggests that Russian phraseology tends to be more literal, whereas English idioms often rely on metaphors and imagery not easily translatable (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cultural Significance

Idiomatic expressions serve as a window into the cultural and cognitive frameworks of each language. English idioms often reflect a commercial and maritime history, with phrases like "miss the boat" or "foot the bill" pointing to specific historical contexts (Kovecses, 2002). On the other hand, Russian idioms frequently reflect agricultural or folk traditions, as seen in expressions like "как в воду канул" (lit. 'vanished into water,' meaning something or someone disappeared without a trace) (Arutyunova, 1999). This suggests that idioms are not only linguistic but also cultural artifacts that encode historical and social realities.

Cognitive and Conceptual Metaphors

Both English and Russian idioms frequently rely on shared cognitive metaphors, such as the concept of life as a journey. For example, English uses "at the crossroads" to indicate a significant decision point, while Russian employs "на распутье" (also meaning 'at a crossroads') in similar contexts. This shared metaphor demonstrates universal cognitive processes; however, the specific idiomatic expressions differ in form and

connotation. This reinforces the theory that while some metaphors are universal, their linguistic manifestations are culturally specific (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Conclusion

This corpus-based comparative study of English and Russian phraseology reveals both universal cognitive metaphors and culture-specific idiomatic expressions. English tends to favor metaphorical, image-rich idioms, while Russian often employs more literal or formal expressions in everyday discourse. The cultural significance embedded in idiomatic usage highlights the deep connection between language and societal norms. These findings underscore the importance of cultural context in understanding idiomatic expressions and suggest further research into the translatability and teaching of idioms across languages.

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