

## ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS AS REPRESENTATIVES OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

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***Abstract.** The article investigates the national and cultural aspect of phraseological units of the English language. This field is underdeveloped, but attracts more and more attention of linguists. This article focuses on highlighting the national and cultural specificity of phraseological units in such areas as cooking, weather, sports, social inequality and history. Each of the above areas is represented by several examples of phraseological units, with an explanation of the meaning and analysis of the cultural component. Understanding the cultural aspect of idioms is important for effective intercultural communication. Each phraseological unit has its own history and influence on modern culture around the world, as English remains the main international language of communication. The article expands the understanding of the relationship between language and culture, emphasizing that culture has a significant impact on both the language of its people and global communication in the world. Each phraseological unit analyzed in the article carries important information about the history, development and formation of the nation as such. Each phraseological unit connects the modern life of the British with their historical past. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to explore and deepen the understanding of the cultural aspect of phraseological units for better communication in international discourse. The study has highlighted the close relationship between language, culture and British national identity.*

***Key words:** phraseological units, cultural specificity, national-cultural context, national-cultural specificity, idioms, socio-cultural context, national identity.*

### Introduction

Language is a unique instrument, an integral part of the formation and development of the nation. And phraseology is the key to its history, language, and culture. Since ancient times, these expressions have been a source of information about national identity and cultural values. For centuries, idiomatic expressions have been rooted in traditions, beliefs, and everyday life. They are an extremely important source of information because they contain cultural and historical aspects. Being an integral part of all registers of the language, phraseology, alongside expressiveness and imagery, is characterized by the presence of a thick cultural layer of information and it shows a vision of the world and national culture (Tymchuk, 2020:118).

Idioms often conceal specific cultural nuances, and their study is an object of research for both linguists and cultural studies. This allows us to delve into the intricacies of language and conduct a more accurate analysis. In the contemporary world, international communication is becoming increasingly significant, and thus such research is becoming more crucial. Since English remains almost the only lingua franca, it is not enough to understand only the meaning of the message conveyed, it is worthwhile to realize the national and cultural connotations of the expression. This approach will ensure effective communication and interaction in an intercultural context.

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The study of national and cultural specificity of phraseological units is a relatively young and understudied field. However, this topic is becoming the subject of many studies, as the globalization of the world and intercultural communication play an increasingly important role practically for each individual. More and more often, people have to communicate with representatives of other cultures who use phraseological units in their speech in one way or another. And the recipients' demand not only to understand the meaning of expressions but also their national and cultural context for more effective and productive communication is increasing.

The purpose of this article is to study the national and cultural specificity of English phraseological units and to overview how idioms reflect the culture of the people in England.

### **Materials and research**

The main step in preparing the study was to compile a corpus of English phraseological units based on printed texts, literary works, digital media, English-language dictionaries, and the spoken word of film and TV actors. The core of the corpus consists of idioms with distinct cultural and national connotations.

To ensure the relevance of the studied phraseological units, several selection criteria were used in sequence. Firstly, the prevalence of phraseological units in modern English and the cultural specificity that is clearly traced in them were taken into account. The next step was to divide the idioms under study according to cultural reference, namely historical, everyday life, weather, and entertainment. The study aimed to show the diversity of cultural references.

Each phraseological unit was analyzed according to its national and cultural context. The historical events that could have influenced the emergence of the idiom, its connection with English life today, and its value in the modern language were taken into account. In order to analyze the national origin of the phraseological units we need to take attention to the historical, ethical-philosophical views, traditions, mental thinking, household, habits and national features of the people who create them (Bashirova, 2021:48). An example of the use of each idiom and its meaning is given.

No less importance was given to the use of the studied phraseology. After all, in order to sound more natural, one should not only know the meaning and cultural context but also pay attention to examples of the use of expressions in real or literary speech. In addition, it makes it possible to make sure that the given phraseological units are really in demand in everyday communication and to assess the importance of understanding phraseological units for the overall understanding of the context of the statement.

The results of the study are of great importance for translators, linguists, philologists, and language learners. This knowledge will help them to use these phraseological units appropriately when communicating with English speakers and native English speakers. For translators, the article will help them to understand the meaning of idioms better in order to create accurate professional translations.

### **Discussion**

Every year, scholars delve deeper into the topic of national and cultural specificity of English-speaking units. Such research is interdisciplinary, as it brings together knowledge from cultural studies, linguistics, history, and anthropology. Historically, phraseological units have been seen as a way of expressing national identity and language uniqueness. The phraseology of each language includes separate specific image components and combinations (Bebko, 2017:2). Some of the first studies in this area aimed primarily at classifying phraseological units according to their national and cultural context. In addition, in their works, researchers tried to analyze idioms in specific languages. After a number of studies, it became clear that phraseological units are not only interesting objects in languages but can also tell a lot about the history, traditions, life, beliefs, and habits of a people. They summarize all the ethnic characteristics of a particular population.

Thanks to scholars who have conducted thorough research and studied the historical origins and evolution of English idioms, we can deepen our knowledge in this sphere. Among the most prominent scholars is Peter Trudgill, who studied the sociolinguistics of idiomatic expressions, thus giving impetus to the further development of the field. Dialogues in Contact emphasizes the complex relationship between idiomatic expressions and cultural identity.

We should not forget the contribution of Susan Ervin-Tripp, whose work has expanded the understanding of the cultural nuances of phraseological units through the cultural relativity of idioms and their role in bilingualism.

Before the 1990s, very little attention was devoted to figurative idioms in EFL literature. Figurative expressions were thought to be merely ornamental, a way of dressing up messages in a colourful way. Consequently, they were considered to be relevant only to very advanced students, who could use idioms as the icing on their linguistic cake. It was generally assumed that the meaning of idioms was absolutely unpredictable. Because of this alleged arbitrary nature of idioms, it was believed they could not be taught in any systematic or insightful way. The only available option for students to master idioms was to 'blindly' memorise them, and as a result idiomatic expressions had limited appeal in educational linguistics (Boers, 2004:375).

Current research in this area is multidisciplinary and uses a variety of approaches. For a comprehensive analysis of national and cultural specificity, scholars combine linguistic analysis, historical and cultural studies.

It is noticeable that phraseological units develop, are influenced by various factors, adapt to the modern needs of the language, but retain their cultural essence and importance. This process can be traced especially clearly in the English language, which has been heavily influenced during its formation.

### **Main body**

It is worth starting with examples of phraseological units that describe the impact of certain historical events. And among such phrases, *bite the bullet* is worth highlighting. Its meaning is to overcome a difficult, almost insoluble problem with valor, equanimity and cold reason. *I decided I had to bite the bullet and take a couple of math classes even though I knew they were hard* (Cambridge Dictionary). The etymology of the expression is associated with the 19th century, military operations and their consequences. At that time, military operations were carried out without anesthesia, and to reduce the sensation of pain, soldiers squeezed objects like a bullet or a softball in their teeth. This method also helped to reduce the vocal expression of suffering among patients during painful but life-saving procedures. Thus, this phraseological unit describes the historical background of the war quite accurately, emphasizes the courage, endurance and courage of our ancestors, and encourages us to show similar traits in situations that will not affect our lives so much. *Burning the midnight oil* is another vivid example of an idiom with a historical background. The phrase conveys the meaning of working hard until late at night, which requires titanic efforts. The origin of the above idiom can be attributed to the period of human life when there was no electric illumination and people used oil lamps for lighting. People who could not complete their work tasks during the daylight hours had to burn oil in the lamps to illuminate the workplace and be able to work comfortably. In addition, the phraseology gives an idea of the English as a hardworking people who would rather find an opportunity to complete tasks than a reason to avoid work. *How shall we sit up late at night, burning the midnight oil of study, and yet rise with the dawn, strong from sweet sleep, to guide the plow?* (Jefferies, 1880:77)

In addition, there are many examples illustrating social inequality in society found in English phraseology. This phenomenon is best described by the expression *born with a silver spoon in one's mouth*. It is used to describe a person who was born into a privileged, wealthy family, has social advantages, and stands out from the crowd. Members of the society *born with a silver spoon in their mouths* are free from the problems that usually plague the lives of ordinary people. The phraseological unit uses the phrase *silver spoon* because historically, wealthy families owned a variety of silver cutlery and, as a Christian tradition, relatives had

to give a child a silver spoon. Another example of social inequality in society is the idiom *keeping up with the Joneses*. The phrase means to outperform your peers, neighbors, friends in life, to live better than others. *Any people were holding down three jobs just to keep up with the Joneses* (Collins Dictionary). Joneses is one of the most common surnames in the English-speaking society of the 20th century, symbolizing an average family with exemplary relationships and a sufficient material level, which is an example to follow. But whether this is just an ideal social picture or whether such relationships are maintained in the family behind closed doors is anyone's guess. The expression well describes people's desire for money, the desire to appear better in public than they really are. It emphasizes the influence of conformism, the attempt to conform to generally accepted standards and rules, and social image. A similar meaning is given to the common phrase *keeping up appearances*, which means not to lose one's image in public, to keep the social cover of one's personality. The modern world wants to see only ideal people who fit perfectly into society and follow its laws. People are afraid to think, dress, behave, and look differently from their surroundings in order not to attract too much attention. Almost everyone has a perfect role model, forgetting about their own identity. Non-compliance with the general norms makes a person different, even condemns him or her, and tries to force him or her to act and look in accordance with the rules.

The next area to search for phraseological units with national and cultural specificity was cooking. This sphere of human activity is one of the most diverse, concerns all segments of the population, and therefore has many examples of phraseological units. The first phraseology to be analyzed is the idiom *salad days*, which symbolizes the period of youth, naivety and inexperience. The etymology of the phraseology is associated with Shakespeare and his work *Antony and Cleopatra*. *My salad days, When I was green in judgment, cold in blood, To say as I said then* (Shakespeare, 1607:15). Metaphorically, a salad is compared to youth, inexperience, a period of mistakes, as well as freshness, creativity, and potential. Since Bran youth are exactly that, the phrase certainly has a cultural context. Another phraseology worth considering in the national and cultural context is *a recipe for disaster*. The meaning of the phraseology is that any situation or action has its consequences, which are not always predictable and sometimes even lead to disaster. Despite the fact that the term *recipe* does not have a specific cultural context, the idiom as a whole perfectly describes the British desire to follow the established rules. The idiom draws an analogy between a culinary recipe, which specifies the exact ingredients and their quantities to make a dish taste good, and a sequence of events that lead to logical pleasures. The phrase *couch potato* describes the British perfectly. Every year there is a growing trend towards a sedentary and inactive lifestyle among the population. More than 20 million people in the UK are physically inactive, according to a report by the British Heart Foundation (BBC news). *Couch potato* is used to describe a lazy person who prefers sedentary activities to sports. *Unless we have such a culture, we will always have the problems associated with couch potatoes* (Cambridge Dictionary). Meetings with friends are increasingly taking the form of meetings in a bar or cafe, with food and discussions of personal life, instead of a walk around the city or any kind of active recreation. Sports are not very popular among the population. This idiom aptly reflects the main behavioral traits of modern British society, illustrating the tendency to a sedentary lifestyle and reduced physical activity. *To butter someone up* is a culinary idiom that describes the use of flattering, pleasant words to gain the favor of the interlocutor and then use it for your own purposes. Butter is an ingredient in many dishes and a popular ingredient that is added even off the recipe because it makes the flavor rich, and pleasant. Again, the analogy is drawn between butter, which makes a dish taste delicious, and flattery, which makes interpersonal communication more pleasant and less conflictual. This idiom demonstrates the innate connection between culinary practices and linguistic expressions of British culture, where even ordinary ingredients transcend their culinary sphere and serve as powerful metaphors in language.

The weather is perhaps the most common topic of conversation in British society. And the most well-known and used phraseological unit is *raining cats and dogs*. Its origins are

still not fully known, but the most popular hypothesis links this expression to the 17th century. At that time, the streets of London were crowded with stray animals, including cats and dogs. Animals died of hunger and weather conditions in the streets, and their corpses were washed away by heavy rains. Therefore, raining cats and dogs is a metaphorical expression directly related to rain and these animals. This idiom illustrates the British passion for colorful and expressive expressions. Another common idiom among the British is *red sky at night, shepherd's delight; red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning*. The profession of shepherd is widespread in the agricultural sector of Britain and directly depends on weather conditions. Therefore, representatives of this profession have learned to predict the weather by the color of the sky. Over time, the people grouped all the knowledge in this area and deduced certain weather patterns based on observations, and shepherds played a significant role in this process. This idiom took root in British life, emphasizing the observation and importance of the shepherd's profession not only in the agricultural field but also in the cultural context. It is a testament to the practical wisdom and local knowledge preserved in British farming communities.

It is generally acknowledged that the British are fans of sports games, but more as fans and observers than direct participants. Therefore, there is a certain category of phraseology related to the topic of sports and games. First, let's look at the phraseological unit *to play the game*, which is directly related not only to sports but also to everyday life. It is important to follow the rules and play the game honestly and with dignity in any sphere of life. This idiom allows us to imagine the British as an honest people who primarily set rules and requirements, and fulfill expectations in good faith. It is justice that is a priority, not victory. An honest loss is better than an unfair victory. In addition, the British have a fondness for card games that are different and build strategies for a successful end game. In this context, the idiom *to play one's cards right* draws an analogy between making important, balanced decisions in life and in card games. Winning card games directly depends on the critical thinking of the player and the chosen strategy. The British have the same attitude to solving important life issues: careful analysis, search for several solutions and only then implementing one strategy that will lead to success. Success, which is important to the British, is reflected in the fabric of this phraseology, encapsulating the complex relationship between the idiom and the national context.

### Conclusions

Thus, this study of the national and cultural specificity of phraseological units has highlighted important information and the connection between language units and the cultural context they carry. The analyzed idioms from the historical, culinary, weather, gaming, and social spheres have opened a window into the cultural values, historical influences, and social priorities that shape the British linguistic landscape. Idioms related to sports and games reflect the British commitment to the principles of honesty, fairness, and strategic thinking. They embody a culture that values ethical behavior in both sport and life, and favors achieving success through principled means. On the other hand, culinary idioms like emphasize the centrality of culinary traditions in British society. They reflect cultural values associated with the symbolism of freshness, youth, and the enhancement of flavor through ingredients. These idiomatic expressions illustrate how the British weave their culinary preferences and practices into their language, using them to describe various aspects of life.

Indeed, the range of English phraseology is extremely broad, covering many aspects of the cultural and social spectrum. A characteristic feature of the British linguistic tradition is its ability to recognize the subtleties of everyday existence and to encapsulate these subtleties in idiomatic expressions. These idioms serve as a repository of invaluable knowledge, perpetuating their legacy not only from generation to generation in the British cultural environment, but also beyond national borders. Their dissemination among other nations contributes to a deeper understanding of the British ethos, social norms and everyday life. In

addition, these idiomatic expressions serve as time bridges, connecting modern life with historical epochs that are crucial for the formation of the nation.

Overall, the study has highlighted the complex relationship between language, culture, and British national identity. These idiomatic expressions serve as linguistic artifacts that encapsulate cultural values, priorities, and historical influences. Future research could delve into the evolution of idiomatic expressions in response to contemporary cultural changes, as well as examine the use of idioms in different regional contexts in the UK to provide a more complete understanding of their cultural significance.

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