

ENGLISH IDIOMS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MODAL MEANING

Anahit Hovhannisyan *

Shirak State University after M. Nalbandyan

Being a multifaceted unit idioms can be studied from five angles: meaning, function, style, emotiveness and contrastive analysis. The merit of this paper lies in the fact that it attempts to analyze the evaluative functions of English idioms. The analysis is performed within the functional framework of evaluative thesis to establish evaluative semantics of idioms. Idioms operate as encoded resources for amplifying attitudinal meanings to the entities and phenomena they describe. They serve to entail multiple modal meanings intensifying the evaluative force in the text. The values are further divided according to whether the value which entails the intensification is positive, negative or dual. A special category of positive values concerns the use of positive idioms amplifying the negative attitudinal force.

Keywords: *modal meaning, idiom, evaluative semantics, intensification of values, positive value, negative value.*

Introduction

It is well-acknowledged that a system of forms through which an object gets fixed on the normative language level is an objective linguistic phenomenon. However the selection of these elements into speech act is individual (subjective) and is termed *modality*.

Modality being transferred on the linguistic ground under the influence of philosophical and logical treatment joins two interrelated but actually different aspects: 1. the intentional subjective choice of a linguistic unit out of a number of its synonymic forms; 2. the modal language structure proper expressing a grammatically shaped meaning of volition. On the one hand modality is understood as the very meaning of possibility, reality, negation, necessity

* a_hovhannisyan@mail.ru

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which would express various shades of the speaker's attitude to the contents of his or her utterance and to those whom the utterance (request, wish, etc.) is addressed to. On the other hand it comes to be a common linguistic category determining the concrete use of a word in speech (Koshevaya, 1982).

It can be inferred from the above statement that modality can be understood as the reaction of the speaker towards reality based on the subjective emotional intention in the light of which the objective world is viewed. A question then should be posed *whether modality is an objective or subjective category*. It is an established fact that an extra-linguistic phenomenon when linguistically expressed is to be filtered through linguistic form. This process is determined by two factors: 1. by common linguistic means (i.e. by a language inventory of a certain historical period that is manifested in a strict number of words, forms in the grammatical structure and soundings in the phonological system); 2. by an individual ability to choose these vocabulary units and grammatical forms. Hence, being a psychological phenomenon it is organically interwoven with the linguistic structure of the language.

Modality as a grammatical category is an art of our world vision that is characteristic not of an individual but of a whole nation. As a general category of thought expressing the speaker's attitude to reality modality naturally is far from being identical to the outer world objects with which it is related *by the person who perceives and appreciates them*. In this choice he is restricted by two factors: 1. by the world of his subjective perception (such as emotions, evaluations, volition, etc.) and 2. by the range of forms objectively existing in the language that the speaker cannot overstep its limits as these forms are non-determined by the speaker's will. For example, it explains the appearance of the strongest form of negation (like don't) or a weaker one (like will you be so kind as not to..., etc.). In this respect, the most kernel coding language level modality operates as a secondary phenomenon in relation to the first primary coding process when the objective reality (objects of reality) is actually devoid of emotions. By just as the first stage of the code language reflection never exists without the second one represented as a language norm, logical appraisal of the object blurs with its psychological appraisal, i.e. that of sense perception by individual. On this stage the mode of coding is based on obligatory varieties of grammatical constructions peculiar to the structural type of language and these constructions are fixed on normative language level. The system of language forms is revealed in speech by their selection (selecting a certain part of the language inventory by the speaker/writer in the process of which some

kind of shift can be observed). Here it should be apt to describe modality as the category functioning at two stages: 1. initial where it causes transition of the immobile system into its mobile functioning; and 2. middle where it manifests itself in the subjective psycho-linguistic form in selecting the language inventory of the speaker/writer. The foundation of the given category as an objective psychologically linguistic phenomenon lies just in realizing an act of linking language as a relatively static phenomenon with speech as a dynamic phenomenon. Anyway, modality is neither extralinguistic nor purely intralinguistic. It is a specific bond transiting a selected linguistic material into a speech. In this respect modality acquires an *evaluative function*.

Apart from communicating propositional content speakers/writers also use language to express personal feelings, attitudes, value, judgments in the world (Halliday 1994/2000). Lemke, (1998), affirms that “lexico-grammatical resources enable us to construct attitudinal stances not only toward interlocutors and audiences but also toward the ideational content of propositions and proposals” (p. 33) (see also Halliday, 2000; Thompson, 1996/2000).

The term evaluation encompasses two subcategories of assessment: in the narrower sense the term unveils the semantics of personal attitude, positioning of a human being with his or her own world vision and attitude to a definite set of products, processes ongoing in this world. In a broader sense it encompasses the semantics of appreciation, attitude to the prism of cognition of the society where he lives and creates. In this respect, valuation transforms from a personal subjective category into a social one. The criteria for valuating something are for the most part institutionally specific. Valuation has to do with our assessments for the social significance of the product or process.

Valuation in our study is used as an umbrella term to encompass all evaluative uses of idiomatic expressions in the English language, specifically for decoding their *positive* or *negative* assessment of the speaker/ writer towards the entities that are institutionalized as a system of assessments.

As Chang echoes (Chang, 2004), idioms are important lexical resources which are evaluative in the sense that they are not neutral alternatives to their literal counterparts but include some attitude or comment on the entities and phenomena they describe. When speaker uses an idiom he/she is invoking an ideology, locating a concept within it, and appealing to it as authority, thus making the evaluation more forceful and harder to challenge (Chang, 2004).

Idioms are frequently used to encode affect and as Ch. Chang echoes affect can be realized prosodically, as a mental state or predisposition, where

attitudinal meaning is encoded as a quality attributed to the participants. (Chang, 2004). In a similar vein J. Strassler states that: “Idioms always comment on the world in some way, rather than simply describe it; they are evaluative” (Strassler, 1982, p. 116).

Further insights into the evaluative function of phrases is gained in the light of “functional theory”. Functional approach has looked to idiomaticity for an illumination of its evaluative function. Proceeding from this principle valuation establishes three sub-categories: positive, negative or dual.

We made use of the English segments (usually sentences) containing idioms in a definite context. Such a tool is of a great help to observe the correlation between the searched meaning of the phrase and the intralinguistic factors of the given context. In each case contextual (syntagmatic) analysis is interwoven with the paradigmatic one.

The first category serves to entail evaluation of positive intensity appreciation alone:

to count on something or somebody; bank on something or somebody – “to rely on something or somebody”

One can find these synonymous phrases in different dictionaries. They are not generally used in the passive and differ from each other by their style. The phrase “to count on” is literary whereas “to bank on” is colloquial. Besides, one would not say to a person: “Can I bank on you?” True, the colloquial “to bank on” looks more expressive in the negative content than the literary “to count on.”

*to be in seventh heaven – “to be very happy, ecstatic”
Your sixth sense – the one beyond sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell – may be leading you to seventh heaven, the very height of happiness. (Richard Lederer)*

In the above adduced example the positive overtone of the idiomatic expression is emphasized by the nominal phrase “the very height of happiness.”

a salt of the earth – “a very good and honest person.” the salt of the earth – “a very good and honest person or group of people”.

Scott, you are the salt of the earth. Oh, I'm sorry, excuse me.

Antonymous idiom: *scum of the earth* – “the worst type of people that can be imagined”.

to have a good innings – “used to say that someone who has died lived a long life.” To have good innings (also had a good innings) – “to have had a long and successful life, used to say that someone who has died lived a long life”.

I have already had a good innings right here on this ranch.
(Ridgwell Cullum)

Noticeably, this positively charged extract vividly underlines the positive stance of the phrase.

break the ice – “to say or to do something that makes people feel more relaxed”.

“The word break corresponds to the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing an uncomfortable social situation, and the word ice corresponds to the idiomatic sense of social interpersonal tension” The overtones’ sign (+) of idioms can be determined by the positive context (Glucksberg, 2001, p.74).

The phrase can convey negative overtones itself:

to turn a blind eye to something

The function of “pretending not to see something embarrassing or fraught with danger” may be also expressed by the phrase “to shut one’s eyes to something”. When a person who shuts his eyes to something is criticized for it because he is believed “to be irresponsible enough to overlook someone’s grave misconduct”, simply *turned a blind to it*, which is a negative attitude in criticism.

The phrase “*to look through one’s fingers*” or “*to wink at something*” may be used in the function of “to pretend for some reason not to see an error, piece of misconduct, etc.

And finally the phrase may have the function as being indifferent that is of not carrying damn about something or simply not troubling”. Thus, we can see that two phrases performing the same negative function can meet each other shaking hands and making a junction as allies and brothers-in-laws.

to kick the bucket – humorous “to die”.

“Kicking is a discrete act and so one could not say he kicked the bucket all week, even though one could say he lay dying all week” (Glucksberg, 2001, p. 74).

to rear one’s head. We can find in the dictionary also “*rear its (ugly) head*” to appear and cause problems).

It’s noteworthy to mention that the adjective “ugly” in this case plays the role of intensification and not much more than that.

A negative phrase in a negative context will also produce negative evaluation.

to break someone’s heart – “to cause someone to feel great sorrow or sadness”, “to make someone very sad”

Must I go bound while you go free, must I love a man who doesn’t love me, must I be born with so little art, as to love a man who’ll break my heart. (Cassandra Clare)

I’d rather love a million times and have my heart broken every time, than hold a permanently empty heart forever. (H.C. Paye)

We see here a perfect harmony between the negative meaning of idioms in the linguistic environment; the embedded sentence “than hold a permanently empty heart forever” makes the evaluation more forceful.

to give a black look/ black look – “an expression on a face that is full of anger and hate”.

At other times they get black looks, and they are afraid of trouble if they put forward suggestions.

to lose one's bearings – “to become lost, to lose sight of or become unable to determine one's orientation, position, or abilities relative to one's surroundings or situation” (The Free Dictionary, 2015).

The phone conversations about a possible TV series of 'Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell' stretch back years, but now that the moment has come, now that I am actually here at Wentworth Woodhouse, I lose my bearings. (Susanna Clarke)

To fall by the wayside – “If someone falls by the wayside, they fail to finish an activity, and if something falls by the wayside, people stop doing it, making it, or using it, fail or stop before they complete what they set out to do”.

I learned that life is a long and difficult road, but you have to keep going, or you'll fall by the wayside. (Steven Rodney McQueen)

Of equal interest are utterances in which the source of the evaluation is both the context and the phrase. The exploitation of the sentence “Disaster is a bad excuse for not having a good relationship with somebody” emphasizes the negative attitudinal force of the idiom.

sour grapes – “if you describe someone's behavior or opinion as sour grapes, you mean that that person is angry because they have not got or achieved something that they wanted”.

My life will be sour grapes and ashes without you. (Daisy Ashford)

In the above-adduced sentence the idiomatic expression “*sour grapes*” and the noun “*ashes*” are involved in the utterance for encoding negative additional meaning.

I verily believe all this is desirable on earth – wealth, reputation, love – will for ever to you be the ripe grapes on

the high trellis: you'll look up at them; they will tantalize in you the last of the eye; but they are out of reach: you have not the address to fetch a ladder, and you'll go away calling them sour. (Charlotte Brontë)

to dice with death – “to do something very risky (and dangerous)”

Dozens of youngsters are dicing with death by leaping 80ft from bridges into the waters of Salford Quays to cool down during the heatwave. (Manchester Evening News, UK)

“People who drink alcohol and swim in North Yorkshire’s rivers and lakes are dicing with death”, police drivers have warned. (York Press, UK)

We can see that the negative overtone of idioms finds its explicit reflection in the given contexts.

black sheep/black sheep of the family – “a person who has done something bad that brings embarrassment or shame to his or her family; if you describe someone as the black sheep of their family or of a group that they are a member of, you mean that they are considered bad or worthless by other people in that family or group”

It’s worthy to note that the term originated from the occasional black sheep which are born into a flock of white sheep. Black wool was considered commercially undesirable because it could not be dyed. In the 18th and 19th centuries England, the black color of the sheep was seen as the mark of the devil. In modern usage, the expression has some of its negative connotations, though the term is usually given to the member of a group who has certain characteristics or lack thereof deemed undesirable by that group.

In families children tend to take on stock roles, as if there were hatshungup in some secret place, visible only to the children. Each succeeding child selects a hat and takes on

that role: the good child, the black sheep, the clown, and so forth. (Ellen Galinsky)

I always believed I was an ugly duckling in a family of swans, you know? I was such a black sheep, and it was the same way in high school... I was just kind of that awkward theater kid with a bunch of athletes... it was very 'Glee'. (Lindsay Pearce).

Idioms of dual function

Very often values of two different axes (poles) work together to realize the amplification of meaning; idioms generally evoking positive meaning are used with negative meaning and idioms with negative attitudinal meaning are involved in encoding positive attitudinal value. A dual phrase cannot convey emotive evaluation alone; the source of the emotive evaluation is *the context*. For example, the idiom *red herring* which normally evaluates negatively is used in the passage below to express approval (positively):

There are red herring plots twists and anti-climax in the first two hours of this drama to keep the keenest mind guessing. (TV Guide, 11-17, September, 1978, as cited in Fernando, 1996, p. 118)

From the viewpoint of its emotive valuation, a context in its turn can be either positive or negative depending on the wish and will of the author (speaker). Sometimes modal meaning (attitudinal stance) of a phrase goes in harmony with the context where it operates and very often appears in disagreement between evaluative signs of the phrase and its context, yielding to various attitudinal meanings. For instance, the English dual phrase “have a hand in something” is able to agree to both negative and positive overtones. “To have a hand in something” and its innovated variant “to have one’s fingers in something”, where the component “hand” is replaced with “thing(s)” of the same class- *finger*. The word “finger(s)” is used by the author as a functional synonym to the component “hand”.

He had a dirty hand in this case.

In this example the addition of the adjective “*dirty*” ensures the presence of negative tone in the phrase. The use of the noun “murder” in the sentence (He had a hand in the murder) also serves to upscale the negative evaluation force of the context. However, in the context “the government took a positive hand in the attempt to represent Trade Union”, the author used the intensifier “positive” to ensure his *direct* evaluation of the Government actions in the passage and to eliminate all the positive doubts of the interlocutors in this respect.

Here is another example of *indirect* evaluation: the phrase “*filthy rich*” conveys positive overtone itself but in a negative context it encodes negative meaning. The idiom *filthy rich* contains the intensifier filthy which stands for very, extremely and the use of adjective “filthy” in the same context being synonymous “dirty shabby” implies the opposite of rich-poor.

I married him because I thought he was filthy rich and now I discovered he's simply filthy. (Baker, 1992)

As it was stated above, an evaluation of dual phrases can be either direct when a speaker presents his/her own opinion as a basis of the evaluation, or indirect when offers the opinion of some other person as a source of evaluation. A direct reference may usually take place when a speaker/author uses an idiomatic phrase which contains the adjective “black” as its component, e.g. *black sheep*, *black bark*, *black cat*, etc.. Generally “black” may cause negative connotations and sound insulting. For example, the phrase *black cat* based on an old Russian prejudice and on prejudices of other countries may lead an interpreter to a mutual misunderstanding. To English people, a black cat would mean “good luck” and some students are even said to be always looking for a black cat crossing their path on the way to college examinations. To Americans it is mostly a black cat that would mean “bad luck”. As to the people of India, the matter is more complicated. The cats who cross a person’s way from left to right mean “good luck”. Those, however, crossing the way from right to left mean “bad luck”. To Russians, any cat, irrespective of its colour, would mean “bad luck”.

behind the scenes – “being or working out of public view or in secret; something done secretly rather than publicly”.

The amplification of evaluative meaning is realized by two different polls – positive or negative.

*I am going to fight for human rights, whether I do it silently **behind the scenes** or vocally so that I get locked up. I can't just sit back; it's not in my nature. I can't sit back and blindly ignore it, and I won't.* (positive)

*No. Work was not a good idea, even though Jerry Miles was almost certainly plotting **behind the scenes** to finish off her career.* (negative) (Elton John)

to move heaven and earth – “to work very hard to do something; to do everything possible” (to achieve something”).

The expression *move heaven and earth* came into use in the 1700s, but its origin is uncertain. Some believe it is related to Archimedes' statement: “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” However, Archimedes lived in the 200s B.C. and the idiom did not come into use until 2000 years later. Others attribute the idiom to a passage in the Bible (Haggai 2:6: “...I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land...”). However, the word “move” is not an accurate synonym of the word “shake,” here (“Grammarist”, 2022).

Even the KGB would move heaven and earth to stop me if they could. (Higgins, Confessional, 1985)

The reader in this extract expects certain positive emotive evaluation to be made by the author but the context makes the meaning of the phrase sound negative.

Conclusion

The present-day English cannot be considered full of value without usage as the use of idioms is the first sign of the development of a language. Emotive evaluation conveys someone's positive or negative attitude to somebody or

something. The evaluative barriers in a phraseological text are the phrases and the text environment (context) motivating the use of the phrase.

The evaluative potential of phrases is determined not only by the positive or negative type of the context, but by the phrases' own ability (potential) to be used either in a positive or negative context only, or in both negative and positive contexts.

At paradigmatic level context is inferior to the own ability of the phrase. However, at the syntagmatic level the potential sign of a dual phrase does depend on the sign of a definite context. It happens that positive or negative intensifiers may be embedded into or added to a phrase. Idioms as special lexical items often serve to entail double values, thus intensifying the evaluative force. The sign of the dual phrase is determined by the context.

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Անահիտ Հովհաննիսյան

*Լեզուն երբեք չի կարող «չեզոք» լինել,
քանի որ այն կամրջում է անհատի և
հասարակության աշխարհները:*

Որպես բազմաշերտ լեզվական իրողություն՝ դարձվածքները կարելի է քննության առնել հինգ տարբեր դիտանկյուններից՝ իմաստ, գործառույթ, ոճ, վերաբերողականություն և զուգադրական քննություն: Սույն հոդվածը կարևոր է վերաբերական գործառույթները արժևորելու տեսանկյունից: Վերլուծությունը իրականացվում է վերաբերականության տեսության տեսանկյունից՝ դարձվածքների գնահատողական արժևորումները սահմանելու համար: Դարձվածքները հանդես են գալիս որպես կողմավորված իրողություններ, որոնք կոչված են որոշարկելու

իրենցով նշույթավորված երևույթների վերաբերական իմաստները: Սրանք ծառայում են բազմաթիվ եղանակավոր իմաստներ սահմանելուն և միտված են տվյալ տեքստում հզորացնելու գնահատողականության ուժը: Այս իմաստավորումները հետագայում դասակարգվում են ըստ գնահատման դրական, բացասական կամ երկակի իմաստների: Ինքնատիպ դաս են կազմում դրական արժևորմամբ այն դարձվածքները, որոնք որոշակի համատեքստում արտահայտում են բացասական գնահատական:

***Բանալի բառեր**՝ եղանակավորող իմաստ, վերաբերական իմաստներ, արժևորումների ուժգնացում, դրական արժևորում, բացասական արժևորում:*