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## IDIOMS OF HUMAN MENTAL ABILITIES' NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT SEMANTICS IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

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*This research deals with the category of evaluation and assessment in phraseology, in particular its usage in two European languages, English and Spanish, in comparison. It reveals the negative semantics phraseological units (PUs) study and negative assessment creating methods analysis in phraseological formations with a negative attitude towards the mental abilities of a man, some peculiarities in their functioning in both languages. It was found out how a negative evaluation in a phraseological unit can be created and what it depends on. The differences between its usage in English and Spanish PUs described. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of a man's mental abilities negative assessment phraseological units is given.*

**Keywords:** *phraseology, phraseological units, category of evaluation and assessment, negative connotation, negative semantics, mental abilities.*

**Бутко Н. Н. Ідіоми з семантикою негативної оцінки ментальних здібностей людини в англійській та іспанській мовах**

*Це дослідження стосується категорії оцінки у фразеології, зокрема, її вживання у двох європейських мовах, англійській та іспанській, у порівнянні. Виявлено негативну семантику фразеологічних одиниць (ФО) і методи аналізу створення негативної оцінки у фразеологічних утвореннях з негативним ставленням до розумових здібностей людини, деякі особливості їх функціонування в обох мовах. З'ясовано, як може утворюватися негативна оцінка у фразеологізмі та від чого вона залежить. Описано відмінності між її використанням в англійських та іспанських ФО. Надано якісний та кількісний аналізи фразеологізмів з негативною оцінкою розумових здібностей людини.*

**Ключові слова:** *фразеологія, фразеологічні одиниці, категорія оцінки, негативна конотація, негативна семантика, розумові здібності.*

## **Introduction**

The subject of this article is the category of evaluation and assessment in phraseology, which, in our opinion, has not received sufficient description in English and Spanish studies, and which is defined as “one of the main (along with norm and value) concepts of axiology (theory of values) and the logic of evaluations (formal axiology), which reflects the value aspect of the interaction of reality and a man.” (Abolina et al., 2002, p. 461), the attitude of the subject to the object. It plays “a significant role in judging a person’s ability or performance and improving their knowledge or skills for better performance”. (Rao, 2018, p.337)

In other words, the category of evaluation can be defined as a subjective-objective or objective-subjective attitude of a person to an object, expressed by linguistic means explicitly or implicitly. To our mind, the question of the evaluative meaning of phraseological units, and especially the negative meaning, has not yet been sufficiently studied in respect to negative connotation usage in such different languages as Spanish and English, especially from the point of view of phraseology, which “reflects the cultural and national specificity of the people”, being “a source of not only linguistic, but also cultural information”. (Butko, 2024, p.164). This article carries out the structural and semantic analysis of phraseological units of pejorative semantics and sets the following tasks:

- 1) Negative semantics phraseological units study in English and Spanish;
- 2) Negative assessment creating methods analysis in phraseological units (PU) with a negative attitude towards the mental abilities of a person;
- 3) Identification of common and distinctive methods of forming pejorative semantics PUs in Spanish and English.

## **Theoretical Background.**

This work is dedicated to the study of the category of evaluation in phraseology, in particular in English and Spanish idioms referring to human mental abilities. The category of evaluation is universal and present in every language. It is impossible to imagine that evaluative concepts and judgments are absent in some languages. However, differences in languages and cultures leave an imprint on the ways of expressing evaluation. This category within the framework of the theory of evaluation is studied by such scientists as Hunston (2008, 2025), Jabbarova (2020), Leiva Rojo (2012), Med (2020). Despite the presence of numerous works on this topic, there is no exact definition of the “category of evaluation”. The terms

“evaluation” and “assessment” are often used synonymously. Evaluation can be considered at different levels of the language system. In addition, it is often considered in relation to the categories of emotionality, emotivity, and expressiveness.

## **Methods**

In our work, we used ethnolinguistic, culturological approaches, general scientific (induction, deduction) and linguistic scientific methods and techniques (structural, comparative-contrastive, lexicographic analysis, component analysis (analysis of semes), phraseological description, continuous sampling etc.).

The main methods of study are structural-semantic and comparative-contrastive, phraseological description, contextual analysis, analysis of dictionary definitions, component (analysis of semes), continuous sampling, etc. Component analysis is used to determine the semantic structure of the studied phraseological formations and semantic changes of phraseological units; cultural analysis allows us to correlate textual meanings with information from a multicultural fund.

The structural method made it possible to study the semantic structure of semes when using component analysis. The method of lexicographic analysis was used to determine the place of phraseological formations in dictionaries; the comparative method - to determine the common or different in PUs interpretation of two different European languages, the method of phraseological description – to highlight and characterize different types of PUs of negative semantics in English and Spanish phraseology.

## **Results and Discussion.**

Phraseological units are often colloquial and familiar, they give the speaker's assessment of a particular event, fact, quality, in other words, they give the speaker's attitude (assessment). In a certain speech situation, the assessment is subjective, expressing the subject's personal attitude to the object. No one doubts that there are factors that negatively affect human life, objects that cause a negative attitude in a given society, social group or on the part of individuals. This explains the existence of negative assessments.

Thus, the problem of negative evaluation was studied in this work using the examples of a person's mental abilities negative semantics phraseological units in English and Spanish.

Having analysed the phraseological units of these two languages, we come to the conclusion that among the PUs with a person's mental abilities negative

meaning there are phraseological units of the verbal, adjectival and substantive types, with the most widespread being verbal ones. The negative evaluation in these phraseological units of three types is achieved in two ways: lexical and grammatical. Verbal and adjectival phraseological units in both languages form a pejorative meaning both grammatically and lexically, while substantive ones form it only lexically.

In verbal phraseological units, the negation seme is expressed grammatically using negation *not* in English and *no* Spanish:

(1) *not to distinguish A from B* “to be completely ignorant, not to understand the simplest things”

(2) *no saber ni la A* “not to know or understand anything”

(3) *no conocer (no entender, no saber) uno el abecé* “not to know or understand, to be completely ignorant”

In English, one of the grammatical indicators of negative evaluation is the preposition *off* in postposition. It is most often used with the verbs *to be*, *to go*:  
*be off the beam* “to go mad, to go out of your mind, to be out of your mind”  
*go off one's head* “to go crazy, to lose one's mind”

In verbal phraseological units, the verbal component is the bearer of grammatical meaning. Its presence in the idiom is obligatory, which distinguishes verbal idioms from other types of phraseological units (nominal, adjectival, adverbial), in which the presence of the parts of speech they represent, for example, a noun, adjective or adverb, is not strictly necessary. So, as already noted, verbal phraseological units can form a negation seme lexically. Due to what? The verbal component is always neutral and does not carry any negative seme. As a rule, it is contained in the adjective/participle, which gives a negative meaning to the entire phraseological unit: *to have a state loose* “missing”, *to have a till loose* “missing”.

The adjective *loose* and the participles *missing* (втрачений) carry a negative seme which is conveyed to the entire idiom (compare: *be a button short*), *Estar perdido de la cabeza* “to go mad, to be damaged in the mind (lit. to lose one's head”

The participle *perdido* (lost) has the meaning of loss. In this case, the loss of the mind, the “head”. The entire phraseological unit acquires the meaning of negation through this participle:

(4) *La pobre Rosario, que iba saliendo adelante gracias a nuestros cuidados, está ya perdida de la cabeza* (B. Pérez Galdos “Dona Perfecta”)

Often in Spanish the negation seme is contained in the adjective *mal* (*malo*) *bad* or the adverb *mal* – *badly*: *estar mal* (*malo*) *de la cabeza* “to be not quite normal to be out of one's mind (lit. out of one's mind)”:

(5) *Está Ust. mal de la cabeza? ¿Preguntarle a la novia qué apellido tiene es una indiscreción?* (M. Denevi “*Rosaura a las 10*”)

Negative evaluation in verbal phraseological units in English can be conveyed by a noun that is a part of the phraseological unit. This assessment, contained in the nominal component, is transferred to the entire phraseological unit: *act* (*play*) *the fool* “to act foolishly, to fool around, to do foolish things”:

(6) *If he stayed he was afraid that he would play the fool* (J. Galsworthy, “The Patrician”).

So, the verbal element of phraseological unit (*act*, *play*) does not contain a negative assessment, but this evaluation is expressed with the help of the noun *fool*. As a rule, verbs included in phraseological units with negative semantics of human mental abilities do not have a negative seme. The only exception, perhaps, may be the verb *to lose*: *to lose one's mind* “to go mad, to lose one's mind”.

(7) *She looked as if she had completely lost her mind* (E. Caldwell, “Jackpot”).

In subjective phraseological units, the negation seme, as already noted, can be achieved grammatically:

### **I. In English:**

1) with the help of the preposition *off* or *out of* in postposition; these prepositions in this case have the seme of absence: *off one's head/ out of one's head* “crazy, gone mad”.

(8) *His eyes were so shifty and bright we thought he was clean off his head.* (K.S. Prichard, “Winged Seeds”).

2) Using the negation *not*: *not in one's right mind*, *not worth a cent* (*continental*) “out of his mind”, *not worth a zac* “worthless, useless”, *zac* – “sixpence, sixpenny, bender, tannertizzy”, *continental* “devalued paper money during the War of Independence”:

(9) *So, if you're planning to stay in Australia, and you're not worth a zac you won't make any friends* (J.O. Grady “Aussie English”).

Therefore, in this phraseological unit, the structure itself contains the negation *not*, but the noun *cent* (*continental*, *zac*) has the seme of pettiness, insignificance. Thus, this negative seme is transmitted to the entire PU. The person himself, the

quality of his mind, his value are compared with a small coin. In this phraseological unit, at the level of associative connections, a comparison is contained. The negative assessment is clearly expressed both grammatically and lexically.

**II. In Spanish**, in adjectival phraseological units, the seme of negation can only be formed with the help of the preposition *sin*, which has the meaning of absence, like *sin substancia* “frivolous, empty, light”, *sin chaveta* “reckless, crazy, insane (lit. nut (screw) is missing)”:

(10) ... *nunca la habían juzgado con el espíritu de oración y contemplación indispensable para ser esposa de Jesucristo, o sea, hablando vulgarmente, que la habían considerado toda la vida como una joven sin chaveta*. (A. Padacio Valdés “La hermana San Sulpicio”).

In addition to the grammatical method, in adjectival phraseological units the negation seme is achieved by lexical means. Usually the negative evaluation is conveyed by PU by means of a qualitative component – an attribute, mainly an adjective containing a negative meaning: *soft (touched, weak) in the head* “stupid, half-witted”, *balmy (barmy) on the crumpet* (sl) “crazy, out of his mind, imbecile”:

(11) *I heard my aunt admit that one of the Stuart Durgan ladies did look a bit “balmy on the crumpet”* (H.G. Wells “Tono-Bungay”).

In this phraseological unit, the qualitative component “*balmy*” (*crazy*) contains a negative assessment of a person’s mental abilities. This seme is transmitted to the whole PU and is strengthened by the substantive component – *crumpet* (col. *head*), which also contains a person’s negative attitude. A special group of adjectival phraseological units are phraseological units that contain comparisons in their structure – comparative phraseological units. In English, they are made using the conjunction *as...as*, and in Spanish *mas...que* or the adverb *como*. The negative assessment is contained in both the adjectival and substantive components. The adjectival component is compared with the nominal one, as in *As stupid as a donkey (an owl)* “stupid (lit. stupid as a donkey)”, cf. Spanish *bruto (torpe) como un asno* “fool, stupid (lit. stupid as a donkey)” (Butko, 2025):

(12) “*Emily was always as stupid as an owl*”, said Miss Blenkinsop (W. Thackeray “Vanity Fair”)

In *as light as a butterfly* “thoughtless, frivolous”, the negation seme is contained in both components – the adjectival and the nominal. One of the meanings of the adjective *light* is shallow, fickle, frivolous, not serious; and the noun *butterfly* has the meaning of “*shallow beauty*”. As we can see, both

components of this phraseological unit have the same seme "*shallow, not serious woman*", *mas loco que una cabra* "abnormal, crazy, psycho, nutty (lit. crazy as a goat).

(13) *¡...!Y ya has visto que está más loco que una cabra, y que es capacísimo de cumplir sus amenazas!* (R. Solana "Ni lo mande Dior").

The nominal component of the phraseological unit *cabra* (goat) has the seme of restlessness, fidgetiness, capriciousness, qualities that are attributed to a person. The adjectival component *loco* contains a negative attitude towards mental abilities. Thus, the negative mental abilities attributed to the animal are transferred to a person.

PUs of the nominal type form the seme of negation only lexically, both in English and in Spanish. In this case, the negative assessment is contained either in the nominal or in the adjectival component of the phraseological unit.

*a wooden head* "stupid head, dumbass":

(14) *Well, he's got a bad ear for music, Joshua... When people have wooden heads, you know, it can't be helped.* (G. Eliot, "Adam Bede")

(15) *"¡Tiene la cabeza cuadrada!" "¡Es cuadrado de cabeza!" He a qué expresiones con que se quiere dar a entender al aplicares a un hombre que tiene un espíritu estrecho, dogmático e incomprensivo."* (M. De Unamuno "De esto y de aquello")

In these two phraseological units, the English and Spanish adjectives contain the negation seme *wooden, cuadrada* (square). The adjective acts as a modifier for the noun *head (cabeza)*. Naturally, a person's head cannot be either wooden or square. Its definition as such creates a negative effect, a negative assessment.

When examining nominal phraseological units, one can notice that the negation seme is usually contained in the nominal component, which gives a negative meaning to the entire phraseological unit, as in *a social butterfly* "a shallow socialite, a stupid girl":

(16) *You've done nothing but trail me round on the last three trips, asking surprisingly intelligent questions for social butterfly, I'll admit* (D. Cusack, "Picnic races").

The noun *butterfly* contains a negative seme. In this case, a person, a woman, is compared with a butterfly. One of the meanings of this word is a stupid, carefree beauty, as in *Burro de reata* "a stupid, humble person".

The nominal component *burro* (donkey) has the seme of a stupid, submissive animal. The qualities that this animal possesses are attributed to a person. The

negative evaluation contained in the nominal component is transmitted to the entire phraseological unit.

### **Conclusions and Perspectives.**

A negative evaluation in a phraseological unit can be explicated both grammatically and lexically in both English and Spanish, with the lexical method of formation being the most widespread, often based on associative links.

Having compared the methods of a negative seme forming in English and Spanish (using phraseological units with a negative evaluation of a person's mental abilities as examples), we came to the conclusion that very often pejorative semantics depends on the nominal adjectival or verbal components. Verbal phraseological units are the most widespread in both languages (60% in Spanish, 50% in English). The choice of verbs in Spanish is much wider than in English (about thirty, while in English there are only seven). In our opinion, this indicates greater expressiveness of Spanish phraseology. PUs with a negative assessment of a person's mental abilities are more common in Spanish than in English. Thus, in Spanish there are two hundred phraseological units of this kind while in English there are only thirty.

Thus, the negative seme is more common than the positive one in phraseological units marking a person's mental abilities. In fact, it is quite difficult to give immediately an example of a phraseological unit with a positive assessment of mental qualities and much easier – with a negative one. A number of extralinguistic factors (psychological, sociological, social) influence a negative assessment of a person's mental abilities. As a rule, negative assessment of these abilities expresses the subjectivity of our worldview. Phraseological units of pejorative semantics, despite their negative value, enrich our speech, make it livelier and more figurative. Through the use of such phraseological units, we convey our subjective attitude towards a particular person, towards his abilities and qualities of mind.

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