

Body Idioms in Russian and Serbian Languages

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Abstract: The purpose of the current paper is to display a comparative analysis of the body idioms belonging to two related languages, Russian and Serbian that metaphorically designate human physical and psychical features. A part of the Russian and Serbian idioms contain in their structure a word related to body that function as a symbol. The research of the phraseological material has revealed that phrasemes that have as a head-word a word related to body is one of the most numerous type of phraseological units in both the two Slavic languages.

Keywords: body language, body idioms, human psyche, human physiology.

1. Introduction

Somatic language resulted from the symbolization of the human body, of its extremities and of its internal or external organs. Their forms and functions have been put into analogy with different structures and elements of the Universe in a mythic and poetic system of thinking, namely the anthropomorphism. The richness of body idioms has its justification in what psychologists and historians call anthropocentrism (Evseev 2002: 305). Anthropocentrism manifests itself at the metaphorical level of the language. Humans incline to see the surrounding world comparing it with their own personality and corporality. Hence, in Romanian (Bucă, Cernicova 2015), for example, we can talk about a “mountain head“ [*creștetul muntelui* – mountain edge], a “mountain sole“ [*talpa muntelui* – mountain feet], a head of a bridge [*capul podului*], „arms of a river“ [*brațele râului* – river braces], “a river elbow” [*cotul râului* – river bight], “the umbilicus of the earth” [*buricul pământului* – the hub of the universe], or about “an eye of water” [*ochi de apă* – waterhole]. (To approach idioms for translation purposes, see Croitoru 1999 or Dejica 2010.)

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2. Our study

In our research, we used a corpus of Russian and Serbian idioms excerpted from *Bol'shoj frazeologičeskij slovar'* (2013), *Leksiko-frazeologičeskij slovar' ruskogo jazyka* (2010), and *Frazeološki rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskog jezika* (1982).

Anthropocentrism is reflected in the language especially through the polysemy of a great number of set phrases that describe man's physic features. Human face, hear, skin or blood are used to describe colors, eyes describe visual impression, bones and ribs describe the corps weight.

However, lexemes that convey determined meanings of psychical classification prevail. These lexemes, due to the richness of their semantic content, favor the appearance of phraseological images based on specific elements and different associations. Thus, Serbian lexeme "head" in body idioms refers to the level of intelligence as in *празна глава* [empty head], but also to psychical health, as in *главом фалити* [literally "to lack mind"] or to character features as in *тврда глава* [hard headed]. Serbian body idioms with the lexeme "chin" as a head-word refers to honor, conscience, for instance in *тврд образ имати* [to have a thick skin, literally "to have a thick chin"]. The lexeme "nose" appears in Serbian body idioms in a complex semantic structure in which prevail the next elements: body position that determines the person's status as in *носом небо парати* [with one's nose in the wind, literally "to rip the sky with one's nose"] and the organ's function as a part of the respiratory system that is indispensable to life (*душа му је у носу* [to be very sick, literally "to be with one's soul in his nose"]). The "mouth" is seen in Serbian phraseology as the organ we feed with, but also as a synonym for speech, as in *погана уста имати* [to have a dirty mouth], while the tongue appears exclusively with the meaning of speaking. The lexeme "heart" conveys meanings as kind soul, generosity, courage, for instance in *велико срце* [big-hearted], *бити лављег срца* [to be lion-hearted]. The spine refers to character features, as in *човек без кичме* [spineless man]. The lexeme "hand" is used in idioms that have the meaning of generosity, as in *широке руке бити* [free-handed, literally "to have large hands"], but also with the meaning of immorality, as in *прљавих руку бити* [to have dirty hands, literally "to be dirty hands"], while the lexeme "finger" appears only in idioms that have the pejorative meaning, for example *имати дуге прсте* [to have sticky fingers, literally "to have long fingers]. Nails, knees and heels are minor parts of the body, specific limits, associated with the idea of inferiority, conveyed by the following idioms: *бити коме до колена* [to be insignificant, literally "to reach one's knees"], *не бити вредан чијег нокта* [insignificant, literally „not to be worthy to reach one's knees"]. Bones, flesh and skin are commonly used as metonymies, for example we have idioms *старе кости* [old man, literally "old bones"] and *гомила меса* [literally "pile of flesh"]. Blood refers in Serbian body idioms to human temperament, as in *човек немирне крви* [bloodthirsty] or to emotiveness and other ethic values, while the

soul is associated with kindness, purity, emotions and sincerity and the spirit with rationality, for instance in *сиромашан духом* [poor in spirit].

The topicality of our research is determined by the current interest of the linguists to study the human (the individual) (Gordy 2007: 85) in all his manifestations, including his intellect and intellectual capacities.

One can notice the appreciative component (positive, negative or neuter) of the idiomatic meaning, which may consist in disapproval, approval, or lack of an expressed approval. These are the results of the social appreciation of a phenomenon, in our case a human intellectual capacity. For example we have body idioms that convey positive appreciation, for instance Russian *с царем в голове*, Serbian *имати соли у глави* [to have brains, literally Russian “with the king in one’s head”, Serbian “to have salt in one’s head”], negative appreciation, for instance Russian *голова не на плечах* [irresponsible, literally “with no head on shoulders”], Serbian *празна, шупља глава* [empty head, “hollow head”] or neuter appreciation, for example Russian *собраться мыслями* [to gather one's thoughts].

Analyzing idioms phrasemes that show intellectual capacities of a person, one can notice that neuter appreciation is conveyed by phraseological units that describe mental processes without any reference to the speed of its developing, as well as phraseological units that state only the actual existence of determinant elements of human intellectual capacities. As examples, we have Russian phrasemes Russian *приходить на ум* [to collect one's faculties, literally “to come to one’s mind”], *вертится в голове* [it runs in sb.'s head (mind)].

Phrasemes that bear positive appreciations define features such as sense of observation, wisdom, perspicacity, imagination, intelligence, for instance Russian *остер на язык* [to have a sharp tongue], *кладезь премудрости* [fountain of knowledge, literally “fount of wisdom”], *ума палата* [one has a fine store of wits, literally “to be a castle of mind”] or Serbian *оштар на језику* [to have a sharp tongue].

Correspondingly, phrasemes that bear negative appreciation designate features as foolishness, opacity, stupidity. For example, we have the body idioms Russian *мякинная голова, мозги набекрень* [blockhead, literally “chaff head” and „askew brains”], Serbian *празна/шупља глава* [empty head, “hollow head”], *човек кратке/плитке/лаке памети* [the same, literally „with a short/shallow mind], *брз на језику* [the same, literally “hasty at tongue”]. Another significant example is the phraseological unit *ни аза в глаза* that means “not to see anything”, literally “not even azj in eyes”, *азъ* [azj] being the first letter of the Cyrillic alphabet. These units usually have as constituent elements verbs with the negative particle *не*, for instance Russian “не смыслить”, “не знать”, “не понимать” [not to think, not to know, not to understand], designating a person that lacks intellectual capacities. As further examples we can consider the following idioms: Russian *ни в зуб ногой* [does not know beans about sth. or sb., literally “in no teeth with one’s feet”], *ни в зуб толкнуть* [the same, literally „not to action even in your teeth”], *ни уха ни рыла* [the same, literally „nor ear or snout”].

Further on, we want to mention the phrasemes that contain the semantic component “more” or “very” situated on both sides on the gradability scale. For example we have Russian *ясная голова* [clear mind, literally “clear head”] (“очень” [very]), Serbian *имати соли у глави* [very stupid, literally “to have salt in one’s head”].

Extremal positions of the scale are occupied by phraseological units that denote the highest grade of the feature. Phrasemes that designate talent or creativity denote a positive appreciation. As examples, we have Russian *семи пядей во лбу* [genius, literally “seven spans in the forehead”], *на голову выше* [head and shoulders above, literally “a head taller”].

The lack of intellectual activity, opacity, as well as behavior and gestures are designated by idioms that denote negative appreciation like Russian *медный лоб* [hard-headed, literally “copper head”], *не видеть дальше своего носа* [can see no further than the end of one’s nose] or Serbian *pileћа памет, птичији мозак, сврачији мозак, глава пуна ветра, букова глава, говећа глава, празна/шупља глава* [stupid, literally “chicken wit”, “bird brain”, “crow brain”, “head full of wind”, “beech head”, “ox head”, empty/ “hollow” head], *не видети даље од носа* [can see no further than the end of one’s nose].

3. Results

The analysis of phrasemes that designate human intellectual capacities allow us to highlight another criterion that helps us to evaluate this phenomenon in Russian and Serbian languages (Ћaran 2010: 32-41). In most of the cases at the basis of the appreciation of the human intellect lays the opposition “healthy/sick”. Positive appreciations is borne by phraseological units that designate features like wisdom, healthy mind and mental activity, as Russian *быть в здоровом/трезвом рассудке* [to have a healthy mind] or Serbian *бити при здравој памети* [to have a healthy mind]. A limited intellect, a low speed of mental processes or lack of a normal mental activity is generally associated with a temporal or chronic diseases, as in Russian *сходить с ума* [to go mad, literally „to go out of your mind”], *мозги набекрень* [blockhead, literally „askew brains”], Serbian *кренути намећу* [to go mad, literally „to go out of your mind”], *померити умом/намећу* [to lose one’s mind], *сићи с ума* [to go mad, literally „to go out of one’s mind”], *заћи с памети* [to go mad, literally „to go down from one’s mind”], *итукнути намећу* [to go mad, literally “to deviate one’s mind”], *бити ударен у мозак* [to go mad, literally “to be hit in the brain”].

The research of human intellectual capacity, as well as its formation and development, directly depends on the factor „time”. This is because the notion intellect is used in association with a person’s mental and cognitive capacities that can be developed and improved. This fact can be noticed while analyzing Russian and Serbian phraseologies too. However, we feel obliged to mention that in Russian language oldness is not necessarily associated with mental maturity, as demonstrated by Russian idioms *выжить из ума* [to lose one’s mind, literally „to go out of your

mind”], *жизнь прожил, а ума не нажил* [literally „one lived his life but his mind did not evolve”].

Among phrasemes that denote emotions are found units which contain partitive lexemes, for example soul and heart. These are words that designate some special points on the anatomical map of the human body that signify his emotiveness, as displayed by Russian idioms *бередить/разбередить душу/сердце* [to stir up sb.’s old feelings, literally “to irritate sb.’s soul/heart”], *братъ/взять, забирать/забрать, задевать/задеть, хватить/схватить за душу/за сердце* [to touch sb.’s heart, literally „to grasp, to take, to offend, sb.’s heart/soul”], Serbian *бити на крај срца* [irritated, literally „to be at the end of the heart”], *имати срца и душе* [to have a brave heart, literally “to have heart and soul”]. In the category of idioms that signify emotiveness prevail phraseological units with “heart” as a head-word, in this way being shown the fact that the lexeme “heart” has in Slavic languages a primary role in symbolic representation of the emotions, as well as the fact that the soul acts as an immaterial organ that is the center of the human interior life and has a cardinal importance for the personality.

Unlike soul, heart is the place where fillings and desires linked to these fillings find their place. However, it does not house the whole human interior life. Russian *сердце берет/взяло* [to choose with one’s heart, literally “the heart bears”], *сердце кипит* [tense, literally “the heart boils”], *сердце сжимается/сжалось* [said, literally „the heart is compressed/tightened”]. Although lexeme „heart” acts as a symbol of emotional phenomena, in its semantic is implicitly preserved the representation of the materiality of the organ, fact that contribute to the ambiguity of the phrasemes that contain this lexeme. Due to its symbolic usage, heart can signify both the cord and the metaphysic base of the fillings. In the meaning conveyed by idioms has been arrested in a syncretic way the representation of both the subjective living of an emotion and the physiological reactions that accompany it. As examples we have Serbian idioms *срце ми пукло (од бола)* [the heart is broke (from pain)], *срце ми заиграло (од радости)* [literally “the heart leaps (with joy)”] and Russian *сердце выграло* [to jump out of one’s skin, literally “the heart leaps”. Seemingly, in this case is displayed the way in which the language mirrors religious concepts on human emotional life like ambivalence or the oneness of the seen and unseen in an essential feature of Christian symbol.

The group of idioms that have the word “heart” as head-word is one of the most numerous groups of idioms in Slavic languages. The lexeme “heart” as a part of them cannot be limited to its semantic decodification because it has a deep ethno cultural meaning, for instance Serbian *велико срце*/Russian *большое сердце* [to have a great heart] “somebody that is able to have great fillings”, Serbian *бити доброг/меког срца, велико срце, златно срце* [to have a golden heart, literally “to have a good/soft, great, golden heart”] or *тврдо срце, камено срце, зла срца, без срца* [mean, literally “to be a thick, a stone, a mean heart, to be with no heart”].

For Serbians, heart is a symbol of God, of life, of reason, of love, of compassion, but also of joy and happiness: *имати срца и душе* [to have a brave

heart, literally “to have heart and soul”), *бити лављег срца* [lion-hearted] – “courageous”, *руком на срце* [literally “with your hand on your heart”] – “sincere”, *срце је заиграло (у грудима)* [literally “the heart leaps (in the chest)”] – “joyful”.

In the internal form of some phraseological units that denote emotions can be noticed a process of transformation of the human “physical components” into symbols, more precisely of the parts of the body and of the face. As examples we have Russian idioms *горло перехватывает/перехватило* [to have a lump in one’s throat, literally “to strangulate one’s neck”], *крутить носом* [turn up your nose], *глаза на лоб лезут/лезли* [eyes nearly popped out of sb.’s head, literally “eyes sit on one’s forehead”], Serbian *реч је у грлу застала* [speechless, literally “words stalled in the glue”], *очима попречити* [to survey, literally “to watch with your eyes”], *очима превртати* [to roll one’s eyes], *очима гутати/прождирати* [to admire, literally “to eat with one’s eyes”], *очи склопити* [literally “the eyes conclude”], *волети као очи у глави* [to love to bits, literally “to love like one’s eye in the head”]. There also are idioms on body protective layers, as Russian *лезть из шкуры вон* [to fall all over yourself, literally “to get out from your skin”], Serbian *из коже искоцити* [to fall all over yourself, literally “to get out from your skin”]), on the nervous system, as Russian *играть на нервах* [to irritate smbd., literally “to play on smbd.’s nerves”], Serbian *изгубити живце* [to lose one’s temper, literally “to lose one’s nerves”]), on fluids, as Russian *кровь вскипает/закипает в жилах* [stressed, literally “blood boils in one’s veins”], *кровь бросилась/ударилась/кинулась в голову* [to get angry, literally “the blood throw itself/ fling into the head”] or Serbian *крв игра, крв кипи/кључа* [the same, literally “the blood plays, the blood boils”]. In Slavic tradition, blood is associated with life and spirit, being a symbol of freshening, of rejuvenation. Aside from these associations, blood is also a symbol of revenge, of aggressiveness (sb. *жедан крви* [bloodthirsty] – “to have a desire to kill”). Beyond its semantic charge, the symbolism of blood is close to the symbolism of red color. The Serbian idiom *крв и млеко* [literally “blood and milk”] – “fresh, rosy and white at face” expresses, for example, beauty.

The semantic of these idioms display representations peculiar to primitive wizardry in which the metonymy had a highly important role in the perception of the surrounding reality. Human attitude towards parts and organs of his body clearly illustrates this idea. For example, heart, brain and eyes can give mystical powers to the ones that eat them.

Furthermore, we took into account phraseological units whose internal form shows the fact that different human physiological features have become symbols, such as, for example, visual sensations, fact illustrated by Russian idiom *не верить своим глазам* [not to believe one’s own eyes] and its correspondent in Serbian, *не веровати својим очима* [not to believe one’s own eyes]).

Sometimes, emotional appreciations can be related to the appearance of a person (weight, age, clothes), to his gestures, but also to his character and to his psychic capacities. This kind of idioms is found in all languages and their national specific is given by their structure. Here are some examples: features of character are

illustrated by, *дырявые руки у кого* [butterfingery, literally “with holey hands”] – “inability of a person”, Serbian *завући руку у туђи џеп* [literally “to dig into someone else's pocket”] – “steal”, Russian *у кого-то не голова, а дом Советов* [literally one does not have a head, but The Committee House] – “to have a capable mind”, *светлая голова*, Serbian *зовећа глава* [literally “an enlightened head”], Russian *ветер в голове у кого* and Serbian *глава пуна ветра* [to have an empty head, literally „the wind blows through one’s head”] – “foolishness”, Russian *одна нога здесь, а другая там* [all at sea, literally „a foot here, another there”]; Russian *руки в брюки* [to keep hands in one's pockets] - “not to do anything”, Russian *пальцем не шевельнуть* and Serbian *мотати/вртети палац око палца* [not to lift a finger, literally Russian “not to turn over fingers” and Serbian “to turn over thumbs”] – laziness.

Observations on the internal form of phrasemes also revealed that images that lay at the base of the phrasemes’ structure are not only clear in most of the cases, but they are also common in what concern related languages. As examples, we have idioms such as Russian *не видеть дальше своего носа*/Serbian *не видети даље од носа* [see no further than the end of nose], that are identical in both meaning and internal form.

A phraseological semantic field that is particularly interesting from a linguistic-cultural point of view is “human age”, due to the fact that it illustrates the ideas crystallized in the society in what concern one or another age group. The concepts of grave, death or ground have common symbolism in Serbian and Russian languages, describing inevitability. For instance, Russian idiom *стоять одной ногой в могиле*/Serbian *бити једном ногом у гробу* [to have one foot in the grave] – “old, sick” illustrates the immanence of death at aged people.

One can notice that idioms that have the meaning of „dying out” also have the meaning of being old. Although, the first meaning does not refer only to an old person, but also to a sick or injured man, or to a person in war that is very close to death. Age features are especially denoted by the following phraseological units: Russian *стоять одной ногой в могиле* [to have one foot in the grave], *стоять над могилой* [the same, literally „to stand on the grave”], *гробом/ одной ногой в гробу* [to have one foot in the grave], Serbian *једва се на ногама држи* [the same, literally „barely holding on one’s feet], *бити јеном ногом у гробу* [to have one foot in the grave].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, what is general and universal in phraseology is first of all revealed in phraseological units that refer to the human psyche (mental and emotional states and processes) and physiology.

Ethnocultural specific of human intellectual capacities illustrated in Serbian and Russian phraseologies reveals human features like quick-wittedness or effectiveness that are common to the two languages. In Serbian phraseology

cleverness is associated with cunning, as in *мудроте је пола уха доста* [wise, literally „a wisdom person does not need more than half an ear”] – “there is no need to explain much to a clever man”, while in Russian phraseology it is associated with criticism or sarcasm, as illustrated in *у кого-то не голова, а дом Советов* [smart, literally „one does not have a head, but The Committee House”]. In Russian language, wisdom and healthy mind are associated with a healthy body, with an adequate mental activity and with moderation (*быть в здоровом/трезвом рассудке* [to have a healthy mind]).

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