**Shakespeare’s idioms in contemporary English: a cognitive analysis**

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The subject of the present paper combines the study of grammar and phraseology as it focuses on the use of articles in English phraseological units. In particular, an attempt has been made to analyse the semantic link between an idiom as a whole and the categorial meaning of the article form of a noun as its central component.

The approach is new in the sense that until quite recently, the use of articles was examined only as part of the so called ‘free’ combinations of nouns, whereas phraseological units with nominative components were recommended to be memorized without any explanation of their article forms. This study can be carried out because of the method of cognitive-grammatical analysis which was devised at the English Department of the Faculty of Philology of Moscow Lomonosov State University. In general, it is meant to reveal the relation between mental operations performed in the human brain and their representations in language [Болдырев: 20]. In particular, it rests on the assumption that articles in English manifest grammatically the conceptual category of abstraction/specification which is represented by the three article forms of nouns, such as *zero*-forms, *a*-forms and *the*-forms. Thus the thing-meant can be referred to in more or less abstract/concrete way.

The cognitive method presupposes a correlation between the categorial forms of nouns and the underlying mental structures, or conceptions which are formed under the influence of such mental processes as abstraction, classification and individualization [Долгина 2018: 57 – 63; 81 – 82; 88 – 90]. The examination of article forms of nouns in view of these processes enabled the researchers to specify their categorial meanings: zero-forms express opposition as the basis of abstraction, *a*-forms and their plural counterparts denote comparison as the basis of classification, *the*-forms indicate discretization, i.e. the absence of opposition and comparison.

The material includes a list of Shakespearean idioms (78 in total) that was adduced in P. Logan’s “English Idioms” (1923) [Logan 1923: 36 – 37]. It has transpired that some of them have become obsolete in the course of time and are no longer used in British English. Thus to select the units which are still in current use, corpus data have been used. The most frequent idioms have been chosen as the subject of cognitive-grammatical analysis.

To begin with, the idiom *pride of place* originates from the play ‘Macbeth’. The meaning is formulated as “the most prominent or important position amongst a group of things” and is used to show that something stands out in a row of things of the same order, because it was given an advantage over something else. The noun is abstract and within the idiom its abstract properties are preserved, which is indicated by the zero article form. Taken separately, as a dictionary item, the noun ‘pride’ denotes the feeling of self-respect and in its zero-form usually demonstrates its opposition to self-denial, shyness, humiliation. However here, under the influence of the component ‘place’, its meaning seems to have been transformed and apparently stands for “superiority” which is implicitly opposed to “inferiority”.

The next idiom under discussion is *a tower of strength* which appeared in the play “Richard III”, but originally comes from the Book of Common Prayer: ‘O Lord … be onto them a tower of strength’ [ Oxford Dictionary: 280]. This phrase is a metaphoric way to refer to a person who can be relied upon to be a source of strong support and comfort. Most characteristic features of a tower, i.e. strength, an ability to provide a reliable support was applied to a person who is trustworthy and safe. Thus the idiom ranks a person to a specific class of ‘reliable things’ by comparing him with a tower. In its turn, this conception of a person is compared with “unreliable things”, which is manifested by the attribute “strength” postposition.

The idiom *salad days*which is traceableto the play “Anthony and Cleopatra” is defined as “the period when you are young and inexperienced; the period of heyday of something” [Oxford Dictionary: 251]. The form ‘days’ also demonstrates comparison, though this time through the grammatical omission of the indefinite article, as the noun is plural: it indicates an implicit comparison of a person’s younger and mature years. Thereby, these stages make up the common ground for a classified conception of human life.

All in all, the aim and purpose of the present discussion is to examine article uses from a cognitive perspective and, thus, show the feasibility of the cognitive-grammatical analysis of English idioms.

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