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The notion of “inner form” and idiom semantics

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One of the unsolved problems of idiom research is the question as to what extent the traces of the mental imagery underlying a figurative idiom reach into its lexicalized meaning and pragmatics. To answer this question it is necessary, first, to discuss the nature of such images along with the adjacent concepts, and, second, to address empirical data based on large text corpora.

Mental imagery and “inner form”

The term inner form (vnutrennyaya forma) in the discussed sense was coined by the well-known Russian philologist and philosopher of language of the 19th century Potebnya (Potebnya, 1892). This term initially goes back to Humboldt, who introduced the notion of the inner form of language (innere Sprachform), and understood it in a completely different sense: something like “national spirit” reflected in a language, i.e. the specific ways of conceptualizing reality characteristic of every language community (Humboldt, 1835).

Potebnya speaks of the inner form of a word (vnutrennyaya forma slova) and defines it as the ratio of the content of thought to consciousness (otnoshenie soderzhaniya mysli k soznaniyu). The inner form shows the way in which people reflect their thoughts. He connected the inner form of the word both with its etymology and with the psychological side of its motivation.

Typical of 19th-century philological studies, Potebnya’s definition is rather vague and difficult to operationalize. Nevertheless, the notion of the inner form has become an important research instrument in Russian linguistics (Zaliznyak, 2000).

“Inner form” and similar notions

In the course of time, many similar notions have been developed within the linguistic theories of lexical semantics, especially within the conceptions having to do with processing figurative units of language. Compare notions such as source domain (Lakoff,

1 « Ona pokazyvaet, kak predstvlyaetsya cheloveku ego sobstvennaya mysl’ » (Potebnya, 1892, p.102).

It might seem that the term *inner form* is justified only as part of the Russian linguistic tradition and can easily be replaced by such terms as *source domain, source frame, image component, background categorization* (cf. *fonovaya kategorizatsiya* in Baranov & Dobrovol’skij, 2008) and the like, at least in figurative language research along the lines of Frame Semantics or Cognitive Linguistics. But this is not quite true, for the meanings of all these terms are not completely identical.

In terms of present-day linguistics, the inner form of a lexical unit (word or idiom) can be defined as a kind of semantic paradigmatic relations between the target lexeme and the meanings associated with its constituent parts and/or the underlying mental image. In other words, the inner form of a lexical item is the image fixed in its content plane as well as the motivation of its lexicalized meaning, which the speakers derive from the meaning of its constituents (morphemes or words).

On the other hand, the *image component* (cf. the notion of *obraznaya sostavlyayushchaya* [Dobrovol’skij, 1996]) of a figurative lexical unit is defined as the linguistically relevant traces of the mental image underlying its semantics. It provides a semantic bridge between two levels of the figurative unit’s conceptual structure, i.e. between its meaning proper and the literal interpretation of the underlying lexical structure which triggers the corresponding mental image. For more detail see (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen, 2005).

As for the notion of *source domain*, it can be defined as a conceptual domain that is metaphorically used to provide the means of understanding another conceptual domain, namely the target domain. In a similar way, the notion of *source frame* has to be interpreted as the conceptual structure motivating the lexicalized

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2 Apresyan points to the study of Abaev in this regard (Abaev, 1948).
3 Cf. the definition proposed in (Baranov & Dobrovol’skij, 2013).
meaning of a given lexical item, *i.e.* the meaning conventionally ascribed to it. Compare, for example, (1).

(1)

*To throw in the towel:* to stop trying to achieve something because it has been too difficult.

The idiom comes from modern professional boxing and its rules, which were established at the end of the 19th century. It was common practice for the coach of one of the boxers to admit defeat and give up the fight by throwing a towel into the ring during an ongoing round to signal to the referee to stop the match.

The lexicalized meaning of (1) is based on a metaphoric mapping of the source frame *boxing round* onto a target frame *challenging situation*. As a whole, the idiom’s lexicalized meaning came about in two steps. First, the physical action of throwing the towel was metonymically reinterpreted as a symbolic action indicating admission of defeat. Second, this conceptual structure was metaphorically reinterpreted in the sense of ‘abandoning further attempts to achieve something because it has been too difficult’.

The inner form of a lexical unit differs also from its “etymological memory”. Etymological memory is understood as a part of the lexeme’s etymology that influences the actual semantics but is not recognized by native speakers. This distinguishes etymological memory from inner form. The latter is part of the speakers’ linguistic competence.

“INNER FORM” AS A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT:
CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

Now I would like to turn to some prominent features of the notion of *inner form* and compare this notion with similar concepts.
Inner form vs. image component of idiom semantics

Let us start with an example.

(2)

To take a sledgehammer to crack a nut: to try to achieve a goal by investing a great deal of effort and using a means that is too powerful for achieving this goal, which obviously does not require such effort; the consequence is that the results are insignificant when compared to the wasted effort.

The image component provides conceptual material that is used in constructing the actual meaning, namely the idea that the means (c) is fully inappropriate for achieving a given goal (to crack a nut), in that it is too powerful. Using a sledgehammer requires effort, much more than is needed to crack a nut, so that the subject of this action is wasting energy. Even if the intended result is achieved (the nut is cracked) it is so insignificant when compared to the wasted effort that the whole action has been inefficient. Thus traces of the underlying image can be found in all parts of the semantic definition.

An important feature of this metalanguage is that it does not point to all details of the “rich image” but exploits only those traces of the source concept that are relevant for the actual meaning. Another feature of the metalanguage (connected with the first one) is that it often uses formulations of a relatively high level of abstraction. This enables us to concentrate on the conceptual structures which are immediately relevant for constructing the actual meaning and which provide the semantic bridge between source and target concepts. This is also important for describing the relations of (near) synonymy and (near) equivalence across languages. Compare, for example, the Russian idiom strelyat’ iz pushek po vorob’yam or the German idiom mit Kanonen nach auf Spatzen schießen (both lit. “to shoot with cannons at sparrows”), with an actual meaning very similar to (2). On the level of “rich images” there is, of course, a great difference between “cracking a nut with a sledgehammer” and “shooting with cannons at sparrows”. All relevant conceptual details are part of the inner form rather than of the image component. These different images are used to convey the same general idea fixed in the semantic definition of (2).
However, since native speakers are aware of these details of mental imagery while processing the idiom, the conceptual details have to be described as relevant parts of the idiom’s content plane.

On the other hand, there are many cases in which the inner form basically coincides with the image component. This is the reason why both terms are very often used as synonyms. If we compare idiom (2) with idiom (3), which shows a certain resemblance to (2) but is not semantically identical with it, we see clearly that the semantic differences between them are rooted in their inner form and, at the same time, in the image component of their semantics. The inner form of both (2) and (3) contains conceptual features relevant for inferring their actual meaning together with all unique semantic details. Hence these conceptual features construct the semantic bridge between the source frames of both idioms, on the one hand, and their lexicalized meanings, on the other.

In terms of the cognitive modelling of idiom semantics (for more detail see Baranov & Dobrovol’skij, 1996; ibid., 2008), the motivation of this idiom can be described as follows. In the frame CARRYING WATER, the typical filler of the instrumental slot (a type of container appropriate for carrying water) is replaced by something entirely unsuitable, i.e. “a sieve”. The semantic effect of this replacement is a kind of situational dysfunction (carrying out an action with an unsuitable instrument). This leads to a conclusion of the following kind: to carry water in a sieve means to try to achieve a goal in a manner that dooms the action to failure, using a totally inappropriate means for achieving this goal, which inevitably leads to failure’.

| (3) | носить воду решетом/в решете | lit. to carry water with/in a sieve; to to try repeatedly to achieve a goal using a totally inappropriate means for achieving this goal, which inevitably leads to failure’.
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(3) must reflect all relevant aspects of the source frame. So the idea of using an inappropriate means to achieve a goal and the notion of failure as a semantic consequence are included in the semantic explanation. This is crucial from the perspective of the real usage of the idiom. Let us have a look at two textual examples from RNC (Russian National Corpus).

(4) 
Все усилия напрасны? Это воду решетом черпать. И что за сумасшедшая работа — дарить свои мысли другим, торговать ими, наивно полагая, что они необходимы еще кому-то...

All efforts are useless, are they? It is like carrying water with a sieve. What crazy work – to give one’s ideas to others, to sell them, naively believing that somebody else needs them...

(Vladimir Lichutin, Lyubostaj, 1987)

(5) 
Ну, матушка, с тобой говорить, что воду решетом носить, — молвил с досадой Василий Борисыч.

“Oh my dear, talking to you is the same as carrying water with a sieve,” Vasilij Borisych said with vexation.

(P.I. Mel’nikov-Pecherskij. V lesakh (Dans les bois), Kniga pervaya, 1871-1874)

In both contexts we are dealing with situations considered to be doomed to failure because, from the point of view of the writer, the Agent uses a completely inappropriate means for achieving his goal. In both cases the parts of the semantic structure of the given idiom which are inherited from the mental imagery and labelled here as the image component are crucial to an adequate denotation of the situation. Any other idiom from the semantic field of futile efforts would not be appropriate in contexts of this type. Compare Russian idioms such as (6) to (8).

(6) толочь воду в ступе lit. “to pound water in a mortar”, which points to the idea of a totally absurd action repeated many times (cf. the English idioms to beat the air and to mill the wind).
The reason why these idioms could not be used in the same situations as idiom (3) is obvious. Their image components focus on conditions and circumstances of futile efforts that are different from (3). In (8), for example, the idea of “persistence in a course of action” is focused. The Agent (fish) tries to struggle against forces and obstacles which are objectively not surmountable (ice), and the Agent hurts himself in this hopeless struggle. Thus on the level of the image component this idiom has very little in common with (3), where the Agent unwittingly uses an inappropriate instrument (without hurting himself). For more detail see Dobrovol’skij (2007).

On the other hand, all idioms discussed in this section are different with regard to the “rich images” behind their figurative meanings. The mental picture of ‘cracking a nut with the help of a sledgehammer’ differs from ‘shooting with cannons at sparrows’, and they both differ from ‘carrying water in a sieve’ or ‘pounding water in a mortar’ or ‘looking for a needle in a haystack’ as well as from the mental picture of ‘a fish hitting against the ice’. Of course, not all these conceptual details are linguistically relevant, in the sense that they are not primarily necessary for distinguishing between idioms from the same semantic field, including near-synonymous expressions as well as quasi-equivalent idioms from
various languages. Not all the features of the “rich images” have to be addressed in a semantic definition of every idiom. Nevertheless, conceptual details of this kind are psychologically real. Being a part of the inner form, they can be addressed in non-standard contexts, \textit{i.e.} in puns and contexts that include intentional plays on words.

\textit{Inner form vs. etymological memory}

The synchronic motivation of an idiom often does not coincide with the “true” etymology of that idiom. In most cases, what is important for the functioning of an idiom is synchronic motivation, \textit{i.e.} how most speakers intuitively construct the motivational “bridges”. However, sometimes an idiom’s figurative past may be accessible in the present in the form of traces of “etymological memory”, so that even where speakers do not know the etymology, the idiom is not used in combinatorial surroundings that would violate a historically relevant type of context. Idiom (9) demonstrates how this “etymological memory” of an idiom can determine its behavior in discourse. The idiom passes on an old symbolic concept which came into being in the Middle Ages and still has an effect on this idiom in its present-day usage.

\begin{quote}
\textit{die Hosen anhaben}\hspace{1cm}\text{lit. “to wear the trousers” ‘to be the dominant partner in a marriage; it is the wife rather than the husband or partner who makes decisions in the family’}.
\end{quote}

The origins of this idiom lie in the “Battle for the Trousers”, which was treated frequently in disputes, literature, and paintings from Early Modern Times. The figure of the virago, the domineering woman whose unfeminine aggressiveness was perceived as a direct threat to male authority, was a widespread stereotype at that time and treated explicitly in iconography\textsuperscript{4}. At first, this idiom was only applied to a female person, or more precisely to a woman who was married or lived in a partnership. In a case study which will be briefly summarized here, it was discovered that a restriction to women

\textsuperscript{4} For more detail see Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen (2010).
is still part of the semantic structure of idiom (9) (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2009: 125-130). Corpus analyses based on DeReKo (above all, its written language parts) show that the hit rate for the idiom amounts to 157 texts, 46 of which can be used for our purposes (see below for more detail). 44 texts refer to a female person; only two texts refer to a male person. This gender-specific character is due to the image component of breeches, which still has the symbolic function of representing men’s power, although different ideas are connected with trousers (breeches, pants) today and women wear trousers just like men. Despite the fact that the source frame fixing the underlying mental image has undergone a shift towards a “modernized” concept, the image component, namely the symbolic character of the garment, has remained constant.

Etymology rarely forms the motivational basis of an idiom, though occasionally it does. However, in some rare cases a given idiom may exhibit restrictions on its use that can only be explained by addressing its history, i.e. this idiom cannot be used in contexts that are not compatible with its etymological origins. Decisive in such cases is the “etymological memory” of a given idiom rather than its inner form.

**Inner form vs. literal reading**

The following examples show that the underlying lexical structure of a given idiom, i.e. its literal reading, on the one hand, and its inner form, including the image component, on the other, are not identical. Moreover, subtle differences in the inner form of expressions under consideration here often lead to differences in their lexicalized meanings. Compare (10) and (11).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(10)</th>
<th>(11)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>schwarz auf weiß</em></td>
<td><em>черным по белому</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lit. “black on white” in writing or print, therefore official.</td>
<td>lit. “in black on white” ‘clear, plain (only with regard to something in writing, mostly officially printed matters)”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These idioms show identical lexical structures and very similar, but not identical, lexicalized meanings. Their lexicalized meanings may even coincide in the core; however, they show different nuances. This means that they can function as equivalents in many but not all contexts. There are certain contexts that highlight these subtle differences. These can barely be noticed in an isolated presentation, so that we need corpus-based data to be able to describe properly the meanings of partly equivalent idioms from various languages. Compare the contexts (12) and (13), drawn from large German and Russian text corpora: from DeReKo and RNC.

(12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Damit bekämen sportliche Aktivitäten einen verbindlicheren Charakter. “Was einmal schwarz auf weiß festgehalten sei, werde nicht so schnell umgestoßen”, sagt Mayrhofer.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Salzburger Nachrichten, 19.05.2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By this, sporting activities would get a more obliging character. “What has once been recorded black on white, would not be upset as quickly,” says Mayrhofer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Зато на втором курсе моя курсовая была об Оскаре Уайльде, где черным по белому сказано, что красота выше морали, а искусство выше жизни.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nina Shcherbak, “Roman s filfakom” (Roman en études de lettres), Zvezda, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But in my second academic year I wrote an essay on Oscar Wilde, where it stands written in black on white that beauty is above morality, and art is above life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both idioms (10-11) have the same underlying knowledge fixed in their lexical structures (fragments of frame knowledge about printed and written material). The lexicalized meanings show little divergence. The semantic component ‘printed’ is a presupposition of the Russian idiom (11). The assertive part of its meaning consists of the semantic components ‘clearness, clarity’. However, the semantics of the German idiom (10) focuses on the ‘official character’ (of a printed or written document). This idea is a part of its assertion whereas in the semantic structure of (11) it is only a possible, non-obligatory semantic consequence.
Although the lexical structures of both idioms (10) and (11) are near-identical, i.e. they have identical literal readings, these idioms display semantically relevant differences in their inner forms and in the image component of their content planes. In the source frames evoked by the lexical structures, different slots are highlighted. In (10) it is the material nature of the document as well as the idea of being approved by an authority, whereas in (11) it is the contrast of black and white in the graphical design of this document. Thus expression (11) focuses on the semantic feature ‘clearly readable’. The semantic component ‘printed or written’ is a presupposition of the Russian idiom (11). The assertive part of its meaning (as contrasted with presupposition and conversational implications) consists of the semantic components ‘clearness, clarity’. However, the semantics of the German idiom (10) highlights the ‘official character’ (of a printed or written document) so that everything recorded black on white can be used as a piece of evidence. This idea is a part of its assertion, while in the semantic structure of (11) it is only a possible inference.

This leads to differences in the combinatorial profile of these two idioms: The German idiom (10) tends to appear in contexts such as “to give/show someone something in writing (i.e. officially)” or “to (want to) have/record something in writing (i.e. officially)” whereas the Russian idiom (11) is mostly used in co-occurrences such as “something stands/is set out clearly in writing or print”. These differences can be deduced from the usage of the idioms, i.e. by analyzing text corpora. In most cases, text corpora provide enough evidence for proving the subtle differences between seemingly very similar idioms of two languages.

Concluding remarks

The study of idiom motivation is an important linguistic issue because motivation may influence how an idiom is used. Motivation is understood as the possibility to interpret the underlying mental image in a way that makes sense of the use of a given idiom in the meaning conventionally ascribed to it. The
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motivational basis of an idiom consists, first of all, of linguistically relevant traces of the underlying image. This kind of image trace makes up the so-called image component of idiom semantics, and in this sense, it is part of the content plane of the idiom. However, other parts of the image which do not necessarily influence the idiom’s lexicalized semantic also play a certain role in its cognitive processing. The parts of the image that do not immediately construct the motivational link between the literal reading and the lexicalized meaning of an idiom can, nevertheless, be activated in non-standard contexts. The conceptual details of the image that do not provide the motivating link can, nevertheless, evoke certain stylistic properties of figurative lexical units. In this sense, the image basis of every figurative lexical unit (one-word metaphor or idiom), taken as a whole, is psychologically real. All these “additional” conceptual features along with the image component are subsumed under the term *inner form* (above all, in the Russian linguistic tradition). This notion has turned out to be quite useful in lexicological studies.

**Références bibliographiques**


Études et travaux, décembre 2016


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Corpora


RNC, Russian National Corpus [Nacional’nyj korpus russkogo yazyka], http://www.ruscorpora.ru/