

# The Meanings of Idioms With the Word ‘Tongue’ in Russian Language

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## ABSTRACT

Idioms are phrases or sentences which have different meanings from their literal meanings. Idioms are parts of expressions in language and the usage of idioms will enrich the speech, making the speech to become more interesting. The ability to use idioms shows the advance competence in the language comprehension since the structures and the meanings of idioms are not applied to common patterns. Metaphors, which are culture based, are very strongly related to idioms. Thus, the language teachers and students need to consider the morphosyntax and semantics in order to make sure that there is a precise understanding of the idioms’ interpretations. This paper discussed idioms in Russian language which contained the word ‘tongue’ in order to trace the meanings of idioms based on the metaphors used. Each of the idioms was examined in terms of morphosyntax and semantic aspects to get the appropriate meanings through the denotation and connotation using literature study and analytical descriptive method. The data were taken from a non-literary text titled *A Book of Russian Idioms Illustrated* written by Dubrovin (1980). The conclusion of this research shows that the meanings of the idioms are related to the people characters.

**Keywords:** *Language comprehension, Metaphor, Morphosyntax, Russian idioms, Semantics*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Guralnik [1] defines idiomatic expressions as the expressions which have different meanings from the literal meanings of the words used. This situation leads to a possibility of misunderstanding for people who do not have good comprehension of the idiomatic expression. The reason behind the misunderstanding is the thick cultural components in the idiomatic expressions. Metaphors as a part of the culture will be related to the meanings of the expressions [2]. The teachers and the students need to pay attention to the structures and the meanings in the expressions. Therefore, the good comprehension of the cultural components will be very helpful in order to understand the expressions.

The idiomatic expressions which will be discussed in this paper are idioms from Russian language which contain the word *язык* (jazyk) or ‘tongue’. This word is chosen since the word is polysemi in meanings [3]. The first meaning is tongue as a part of human body, it means that the word will be close to the speakers and the closeness will lead to the thickness of the culture in it [4]. The tongue is used for speaking, which leads to the second meaning, tongue as in language. This unique fact will be related to the meaning of the idiomatic expressions

with the word “tongue”. The source of the idioms is a book titled “A book of Russian Idioms illustrated” [5].

In order to understand the Russian idiomatic expressions, it is essential to understand the Russian grammars. The Russian grammars consist of Morphology and syntax. In Popov [6], morphology is a tool for learning the parts of speech (lexically and gramatically), the gramatical meanings, the word formation, and the gramatical categories. Nouns are one part of a speech and also the main sources of the data in this paper. There are three features of nouns [3]. Firstly, it is the general meaning of the object as the semantic. Secondly, it is the informations about genders, numbers, cases and also animate and inanimate as the morphological feature. Thirdly, it is the role of the nouns in the sentence as the syntactical feature. In Popov [6] syntax is a tool for learning the sentences and frases. The primary members of a sentence are subjects and predicate while atributes, objects and other information are the secondary. The definition of frases are a unity of words that has relations in attributive, objective and adverbial [6]. There are two patterns for the sentences in considerations of the agent existence. Those two patterns are the active and the passive constructions [7].

Nouns in Russian language has three characters which are genders, cases and numbers. There are three genders, amely *мужской род* (mužkoj rod) ‘masculine’, *женский*

*род* (ženskij rod) ‘feminine’, and *средний род* (srednij rod) ‘neutral’ [8]. Six case types in Russian language for nouns are *именительный падеж* (imenitel’nyj padež) ‘nominative case’, *родительный падеж* (roditel’nyj padež) ‘genitive case’, *дательный падеж* (datel’nyj padež) ‘dative case’, *винительный падеж* (vinitel’nyj padež) ‘accusative case’, *творительный падеж* (tvoritel’nyj padež) ‘instrumental case’, and *предложный падеж* (predložnyj padež) ‘prepositional case’ [8]. Two categories of number in Russian language are *единственное число* (edinstvennoe čislo) ‘singular’ and *множественное число* ‘plural’ [8].

Verbs in Russian language has three characters which shows the agents, times (tenses) and aspects [3]. Each agent in Russian language has its own form of conjugations. There are three time signals which are past, present and future. There are two aspects which are imperfective and perfective. Suffixes are used to show those three characters of Russian verbs [3].

Nouns and verbs are used very frequently in sentences or expressions including idioms. Idioms are not just a simple sentence or utterances since it is very related to metaphors. This happens since Idioms are unique [9] and Idioms in Russian language are very specific for Russians with emotional contents; the emotional expressions might have no similarity in other languages [10]. The reason behind its uniqueness is metaphors. The definition of metaphors is expressions or words that is used in figurative forms for showing characters, especially for the similarity of colors, volumes, forms and purposes [3]. The languages are applied for both idioms and metaphors. Therefore, they are very cultural based since languages are one of the signs in culture [3].

In order to learn about signs, we need to learn about semantics [11]. From learning the signs, we can figure out the meanings. Words or sentences are signs in languages and they can form expressions. One of the language expressions is idioms.

The denotation and connotation are also applied to learn signs. Denotation is a sign of reality [12]. Connotation is new meanings for the signs which have been developed based on the speakers’ culture [12]. The discussions about the Russian grammars and semantics is elaborated since it is connected to the aim of this paper. The aim of this paper is to compare the literal and the semantic meanings of the idiomatic expressions. The comparisons will reveal the culture of the speakers using the idiomatic expressions.

## 2. METHODS

The descriptive-analytical method was used in this paper. The occurring data will be collected, processed and analyzed in order to describe the phenomenon [13]. All the data is taken from “A book of Russian Idioms illustrated” [5]. First, the data will be written in the Russian alphabet or cyrilic. The Russian cyrilic will be italicized. Then the expressions will be transliterated into latin. The english meanings will then be provided. The following steps are the two ways used to analyze the idiomatic expressions. The first is the morphosyntax analysis which was done in order to find out the structures

of the idioms. The second is the semantics analysis which was done in order to find out the meanings, including the metaphors attached to the idioms. These two steps (morphosyntax and semantics) will be the content of the descriptions for the idioms. These two ways of analysis are used in order to compare the literal and the semantic meanings of the idiomatic expressions. After the analysis process and the descriptions, the conclusions are drawn. There are ten idioms with the word *язык* (jazyk) or ‘tongue’ discussed in this paper.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first idiomatic expression is *Бежать высунув язык* (bezat’ vysunuv jazyk) or ‘to run with one’s tongue hanging out’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case as the part of attributive of the predicate which is the word *бежать* (bezat’) ‘to run’ together with the word *высунув* (vysnuv) ‘hanging out’. The verb *бежать* (bezat’) ‘to run’ is written in the infinitive form. The denotation is the reality that the person is running with the tongue hanging out. If the tongue is hanging out of their mouth, it means that the person is having a difficulty to breath since he runs very fast without stopping. This then becomes the connotation and the referred meaning of this first idiomatic expression.

The second is *Держать язык за зубами* (Derzat’ jazyk za zubami) ‘to hold (someone’s) tongue behind (someone’s) teeth’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case. The verb *Держать* (Derzat’) ‘to hold’ is written in the infinitive form. The denotation is the literal meaning of the expression which is to hold (someone’s) tongue behind (someone’s) teeth. This literal meaning of the denotation leads us to the connotative meaning described as follows. If someone’s tongue is being hold behind his teeth, it means that his tongue does not move. The tongue can not make movements since there are teeth that restrain the tongue. If his tongue does not move, it means that the person who owns the tongue will not be able to speak or produce any utterances well. He will become silent. The word “hold” refers to an activity of keep, control or stop something temporarily [14]. It means that the tongue is controlled by stopping it from talking for a while. If a person stopped his tongue from talking for a while, it means that he takes time in talking. While he takes time in talking, he is thinking about what he want to say. This means that he is cautious in what he says. These all come to the real meaning of the expression which is that to keep silent and to be cautious in what someone says.

The third is *Длинный язык* (Dlinnyj jazyk) ‘long tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is a member of a phrase and in the nominative case with an adjective as the attributive. The denotation for the expression is that the tongue is long. This means that the teeth can not hold the tongue anymore. It becomes the opposite of the second expression above. Since the teeth can not hold it anymore, the tongue keeps moving. If the tongue keeps moving, it means that the person who owns the tongue will keep talking. He becomes talkative and may lose control on what he might say. Another situation

is that the person will spread the words that is supposed to be a secret. The connotations mentioned lead to the real meaning of the expression which is being too talkative or not being able to control of what is said or cannot keep a secret.

The fourth is *Как корова языком слизала* (Как korova jazykom slizala) ‘As if a cow has licked it off with its tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in a phrase together with the word *слизала* (slizala) ‘lick’ and in the instrumental case. The word *слизала* (slizala) ‘lick’ is in the past tense form for the third agent. The suffix that is used is *-ала* (-ala) to indicate that the agent of the action is a feminine singular. The literal meaning or the denotation refers to a cow and its habit. In real situation, the cow eats grass by licking the grass using its tongue until the root was plucked. It means that the grass which has been licked is taken off from the ground or uprooted. If the grass is uprooted, it means that the grass will disappear without a trace. This leads to the connotative meaning of the expression which refers to someone or something who disappeared without a trace. Although this seems like it is nothing to do with the ‘tongue’ as the tool of producing utterance, if someone or something disappeared, one will not able to find information and talk about it anymore.

The fifth is *Проглотить язык* (proglotit’ jazyk) ‘to swallow (someone’s) tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case. The verb *Проглотить* (proglotit’) ‘to swallow’ is written in the infinitive form. The denotation refers to the literal act of swallowing the tongue. If the tongue is swallowed, it means that the tongue is not in its position any more. If the tongue is not in its position, it means that there is no instrument to talk. No utterances will be produced. It leads to the connotative meaning of the expression which refers to a person who stopped talking or becomes silent.

The sixth is *Развязать язык* (razvjazat’ jazyk) ‘to untie (someone’s) tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case. The verb *Развязать* (razvjazat’) ‘to untie’ is written in the infinitive form. The denotation of the expression is that the word to untie the tongue means that the tongue is tied before. If the tongue is tied, it means that the tongue can not move. If the tongue is not moving, it means that the person who owns the tongue can not talk or is silent. The word ‘untie the tongue’ means that the tongue is now free of ties and can move again. If the tongue can do its movement, it means that the tongue can produce utterances again. Therefore, the connotative meaning of the expression is about the person who can speak again after he is being silenced.

The seventh is *Тянуть за язык* (Tjanut’ za jazyk) ‘to pull (someone) by the tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case. The verb *Тянуть* (tjanut’) ‘to pull’ is written in the infinitive form. The word ‘pull the tongue’ can refer to the activity of moving the position of the tongue to be outside of the mouth. If the tongue is not restricted behind the teeth anymore, it means that the tongue can produce utterances since the teeth as the barrier can not hold it anymore and the tongue can be free to move. This means that the person who owns the tongue, will be able to speak or say

something. Therefore, the connotative meaning refers to the act of making someone speak or say something.

The eighth is *Чесать язык* (Cesat’ jazyk) ‘to scratch (someone’s) tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case. The verb *Чесать* (cesat’) ‘to scratch’ is written in the infinitive form. The denotation can be inferred from the word *чесать* (cesat’) ‘to scratch’ which refers to the act of scratching, involving the use of hands to do the activity. It means that at least two things are involved: the hand and the tongue. The word *чесать* (cesat’) ‘to scratch’ also refers to an activity which is done repeatedly and intensely. When something is scratched, the surface of the thing is moved repeatedly. It means that if the tongue is scratched, it means that the tongue is moved repeatedly and it involves another thing beside the tongue to scratch it. If the tongue is moved, it means that the tongue produces utterances. Therefore, the meaning of the expression refers to a person who is talking continuously or chatting with another person.

The ninth is *Язык сломаешь* (Jazyk slomaesh’) ‘(You) break the tongue’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in the accusative case in a sentence with the active construction. The agent is not clearly written in the sentence. To find information about the agent or the doer, the suffix – *ешь* (esh’) is essential since the suffix in Russian verb refers to ‘you’ as the agent. It is very common in the Russian verbs to not clearly mention the agent and give the suffix in the verb instead for giving information about the agent or the subject. The subject is hidden. It means that the Russian people does not pay attention to the subject but focus on the action. The denotation for the expression is that if the tongue is broken, it will not work optimally in producing utterances since it is not in good condition. The result of the utterances (a word or a phrase or a sentence) will be difficult to hear or understand since it is also difficult for the tongue to produce them. This leads to the meaning of the expression which is difficulties to pronounce a word or a phrase.

The tenth is *Язык хорошо подвешен* (Jazyk хорошо podveshen) ‘Tongue is hung well’. For this expression, the *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ is in a sentence and in the nominative case. The sentence is in the passive construction. The literal meaning of *хорошо* (horosho) ‘good’ in the expression refers to the optimal position of the tongue. It means that the tongue can work optimally. The passive construction can also refers to the condition of the tongue that is in a perfect shape and function. Therefore, the connotative meaning refers to a person who is a smooth talker or a person who is really good at talking and persuading others. The mastery of the speaking skill makes him easy to make others follow and obey what he said.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The idioms as a unique expressions can not be taken literally since the meaning can not be derived only from the literal meaning and structures. We need to consider the cultural components along with the metaphors embedded in it. This means that the semantic meaning

comes to the consideration. This is especially true to the word *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ which is polysemi in meaning. Not only it has the meaning of a tongue which refers to a part of the body, but it also has the meaning as a language. The real life situation where the idioms spoken is taken into account to make sure that there is no misunderstanding. This is also a challenge not only for the teachers but also the students to comprehend the idioms.

In general, the idioms with the word *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ refers to the characters and activities done by the people. The characters and activities are most closely related to the function of the tongue to produce utterances or languages. The idioms can refer to the difficulties in talking, repeated talk, making someone else talk or say something, or even refer to a smooth talker. The previous explanations show that the idioms with the word *язык* (jazyk) ‘tongue’ are used to express situations indirectly connected to the speakers’ talking ability and characters. It means that The Russian speakers apply the idioms as the indirect way of expressions.

The Russian people do not pay attention to the agent or the subject but focus on the action. This is shown very clearly from all the idiomatic expressions discussed. All the idiomatic expressions use the infinitive forms, the suffix indicating the agent, and spoken in passive constructions. It means that all the subjects or the agents for all the idiomatic expressions are not clearly written. It is very unique and different from English sentences which put an importance on the agents where the subject is commonly written or mentioned clearly using the active constructions. This shows that the Russian culture, in this case, through the idiomatic expressions, is more focused on the actions and the results than the subjects or the doers of the actions.

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