

ANALYSIS OF SOME ENGLISH IDIOMS CONTAINING POPULAR PROPER NAMES

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with one of the most essential issues in modern linguistics: phraseological units. Phraseological units play an essential role in every language as they are able to describe real cultural and historical image of the nation based on the speech acts of those who use the language. Idioms that contain this or that proper name can tell us more data about the nation's culture and history. Any human being is given a name when he comes to the world and in most cases that name has got some related story how it started being used and what hidden information it keeps inside. Every nation has got some proper names that are popular cause of some reasons; they take us back to some historical event or cultural, traditional ritual dating back to very far. Usually those names are connected with the religious beliefs, rituals, rules and regulations kept in this or that society as sacred principles. Some proper names in idioms can belong only to that nation's cultural heritage. In this article we are going to analyze some idioms containing famous English proper names to see what they may hide related to culture or history as lexical units playing essential roles in vocabulary of the language.

Keywords: speech act, linguistic category, anthropocentricity, sociocultural factors, anthroponomastics, a reference, to convey, individuality, hypocorisms, symbolic, conditional.

Introduction

To give a name to people and objects is a traditional, common way of human nature that is being used for many centuries by humanity. Vocabulary of any language contains some lexical units that consist of proper names that give some clues about origin of this or that word. Idioms, proverbs, sayings also have got some proper names that make such lexical units unique and make them different from other complicated units. Not only linguists but some other professions investigate such lexical units as they may reveal some social, cultural, historical data related to the past. Anthropologists, philosophers, logicians, psychologists may find some essential facts related to their specialties by investigating words with proper names.

We aim at finding some data related to culture, history of English speaking countries by studying some phraseological units containing proper names.

Naming a single entity is one of the basic speech acts, included by Searle in the class of declaratives, alongside declaring war, dismissing and bequeathing. People and places, pets and hurricanes, rock groups and festivities, institutions and commercial products, works of art and shops are given a name. Naming serves to highlight entities that play a role in people's daily life, and to establish and maintain an individuality in society.¹

¹ Lehrer, Adrienne (1994): "Proper Names. Linguistic Aspects". In: Asher R. E. (ed.): The

It is generally agreed among linguists that PNs are a universal linguistic category. Proper names do not have linguistic meaning, as common names, they do not represent a concept, and a proper name is not a complete word, but symbolic and conditional. Proper names can be included in any lexical unit, they can be part of idioms, proverbs, aphorisms and etc. Every language contains some phraseological units that has got units that belong to names of people. This may refer to the fact that language is linked with culture, history of the nation, some historical events, cultural ties may be reasons of coming out such idioms into the language. This can really be interesting to analyze them in order to discover new facts, data related to their origin. Nearly every phraseological unit containing proper names can refer to some event or ruling regime in past or it may reveal some interesting traditions, rituals, stories related to culture of the nation. Considering the names in phraseological expressions, we can note a predominance of personal over place names (unsurprisingly, given the anthropocentricity of language); within the former, a predominance of male over female names, and first names over family names, with a number of hypocorisms. The very low presence of female names is motivated by sociocultural factors: in society, men played (and still play) a more active role than women. Among them, we find: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Florence Nightingale*, *Mrs. Grundy*, *Aunt Sally*, *plain Jane*, *Pandora*, (*Darby and*) *Joan*, *Fanny Adams*. They are usually employed to convey a negative or not wholly positive evaluation. With regard to the presence of hypocorisms derived from very common first names (*Bob*, *Dick*, *Harry*, *Joe*, *Jack*, *Larry*, *Mike*, *Mickey*, *Tom*), it seems to be a culture-specific feature of English phraseology; for example, hypocorisms are rarely found in Italian phraseology. In particular, *Mike* and *Mickey* are now the generic name for an Irishman; *Jack* has come to denote any individual person, and also occurs in compounds, denoting types of person (e.g. *Jack-in-office*, *jack-the-lad*), objects (e.g. *Jack-in-the-box*, *Jack-a-Lent*, *Jack-o-lantern*), plants (*Jack-in-the-pulpit*) and animals (*jackdaw*).²

Proper names can identify a person, a group of persons, a place, an animal or an object (e.g., ship, train, etc.). Consequently, a distinction is made between anthroponomastics and toponomastics. Anthroponomastics is a branch of onomastics studying anthroponyms (or personal names), i.e., proper names of a person or a group of persons. Toponomastics, on the other hand, refers to a branch of onomastics studying toponyms (or place names), i.e., proper names of places. Another term can be used as a hyponymous expression of the term toponym, i.e., the term geographical name. Geographical name is used if reference is made to a place on planet Earth. Both principal branches of onomastics can be further subdivided into various subgroups on the basis of a specific type of name.³

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² Patrizia Pierini, Opening a Pandora's box: proper names in English phraseology, Bern open publishing linguistik online journal, №3, 2022

³ Allerton, Derek J. (1987): "The Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Status of Proper Names". *Journal of Pragmatics* 11: 61–92

Phraseology of each language makes a significant contribution to the formation of figurative pictures of the world. Knowing the phraseology allows to get a deeper understanding of the history and character of the people. Phraseologisms exist in close connection with vocabulary. Their study helps to get better understanding of the vocabulary structure, education and the use of lexical units in speech. When we talk about this term, our tongue instantly curves into another notion that signifies the above concept. Phraseology resembles a picturesque gallery comprising the samples of eternal and marvelous customs and traditions of a nation, historical memorials, fairy tales and songs. Phraseology is not only the most colourful part of vocabulary, but also the most democratic layer. For the first time, phraseology was used in the study of literature. While translating some fiction from one language into another it became impossible to translate inseparable word combinations. It has been repeatedly pointed out that word-groups analyzed as functionally and semantically inseparable units are considered to be the subject matter of phraseology. It should be noted that proper scientific investigation of English phraseology has not been attempted until quite recently. English and American linguists tried to collect various words, word-groups and sentences by presenting some features of view, style, origin and usage which are peculiar to them. These units are usually described as idioms but no attempt has been made to analyze these idioms as a separate class of linguistic units.

If one analyzes phraseological units that exist in vocabulary of the English language, he can have come out with some that contains proper nouns, the names of people. They belong to various groups of people describing different features: personal names: they are further subdivided into first names, family names, epithets, pseudonyms, house names, names of mythic beings, theonyms, names of nationalities and ethnic groups, demonyms and inhabitant names. Every language has got mainly popular names that are probably linked to some interesting stories. Below we are going to analyze some phraseological units in English that contain famous proper names to see peculiar features of idioms that have got names in their forms.

“Jack of all trades, master of none” is one of the most popular idioms in the English language. This idiom is used in reference to a person who has dabbled in many skills, rather than gaining expertise by focusing on one. The shortened version “a jack of all trades” is often a compliment for a person who is good at fixing things, and has very good broad knowledge. The idiom is one of the most popularly used lexical unit that contains a famous English male name. If we look into origin of the phraseological unit, we can come up with some essential data related to it. The idiom 'Jack of the trades, master of none' originates from Elizabethan English. The idiom was famously used by Robert Greene in his 1592 booklet 'Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit' where he refers to William Shakespeare with this idiom.⁴

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy is another phraseological unit containing a proper name. People say this to warn someone that they will not be an interesting person by working all the time. If you talk about females it changes to “all work and no play makes Jill a dull girl”. The exact origins of the idiom remain unclear, though it was recorded as early as 1659.

“Jack the Lad” is another idiom used in the English language. It's not clear if the expression refers to an actual person. Various sources, however, point at a renowned thief named Jack

⁴ www.gingersoftware.com

Sheppard as the likely inspiration. By all accounts, he was said to have started his career as a skilled carpenter but fell in love with the wrong person and later resorted to stealing to fund his drinking problems and passion for women. Growing up in a poor town, Jack was ironically known for his other monikers such as Gentleman Jack, Jack the Lad, and Honest Jack. Jack Sheppard went on a crime spree, was arrested, and went to prison five times but escaped four times. These bold exploits made him a hero among the masses up until he died in 1724. Jack Sheppard was so famous that there were songs, plays, and engravings dedicated to him.⁵ A very confident young man who doesn't take life seriously and doesn't care much about other people. Her first boyfriend was a bit of a Jack the Lad.

John is another popular male name used in English speaking countries. One of the forms of the name is used as a part of the idiom "Johnny-on-the-spot", it means "someone who is ready to do something, especially help someone, immediately". We found our business threatened by this Johnny-come-lately. There he was, Johnny-on-the-spot, ready with his tool box.

The origin of this idiom is related to American history. The phrase 'Johnny on the Spot' was first recorded is in the 1896 April issue of the New York Sun: "JOHNNY ON THE SPOT: A New Phrase Which Has Become Popular in New York." The origin of the phrase can't be traced specifically, though it certainly originated from the expression 'Johnny is always on the spot when wanted.'⁶ Tom, Dick and/or Harry is another popular idiom containing not only one but three famous proper names in English. Usually the idiom is used in more negative context than positive one: "You need to send invitations. We don't want any old Tom, Dick and Harry turning up".

If we focus on the origin of the idiom, firstly we can mention that it has some other versions as well as "every mother's son", "every man Jack". The use of masculine names in this way dates from Shakespeare's time (he used Tom, Dick, and Francis in 1 Henry IV), but the current one dates from the early 1800s. The two variants are largely British usage but occasionally are used in America. The first is recorded as early as 1583, whereas the second dates from the first half of the 1800s. At present time the idiom is popularly used in both formal and informal speech.

Jane is a famous proper name in the English language, it is also included in the idiom "plain Jane" meaning "a girl or woman who is ordinary looking and not beautiful". Also it is used an adjective to describe something simple, basic or not popular. I felt such a Plain Jane when I was a teenager. If she'd been a plain Jane, she wouldn't have had all the attention. As we analyze samples taken from dictionaries we can conclude that the idiom above is used in negative context to mean people who are not attractive or interesting but still people give name Jane to their babies.

Mary is another popular female name in English speaking countries including England and it is included in various vocabulary items as well. "Contrary Mary" is an idiom containing a proper name meaning "a girl or woman who often disagrees with other people or does the opposite of what other people want them to do". As you see the phraseological unit above that

⁵ english-grammar-lessons.com

⁶ Wee, Lionel (2006): "Proper Names and the Theory of Metaphor". *Journal of Linguistics* 42/2: 355–371.

contains proper name “Mary” has a negative usage: She insists on wearing a coat in this hot weather – she’s such a Contrary Mary.

“Moaning Minnie” is another idiom that contains proper name that is contracted. In 1847, Claude Étienne Minié, a captain in the French Army, introduced a soft lead bullet which came to be known as the Minié (or minnie) ball (or bullet). These bullets were distorted by the action of firing them from a rifle, causing them to whirr in flight, and make a moaning sound. There are many references to **minnie balls** in print in the second half of the 19th century. None of them included any mention of moaning, or **moaning minnie**, and this is unlikely to be the source of the term.⁷ From descriptions above we can state that the idiom “Moaning Minnie” has got a military origin. By the way complaining person to whom the idiom is referring to can also be a male, it can be used to mean a man or a boy who complains a lot. Just eat your meal and stop being such a Moaning Minnie!

“To live / lead the life of Riley” means “to live a really good life with few problems”. Stop complaining. You're living the life of Riley. The origin of this idiom is in an old Irish song called "Is that Mr. Riley?" An easy life, as in Peter had enough money to take off the rest of the year and live the life of Riley. This idiom proves that phraseological unit with proper name can be linked to the song, culture of the nation. What people listen to a lot becomes a simple thing in their speeches as well, so the vocabulary of the language fills with essential lexical units.

“Bob's your uncle” is used after explaining a simple set of instructions, meaning that it's very easy to do: boil the pasta, drain it, put the sauce on top and Bob's your uncle!

The origin of the idiom is not clearly set as there are a number of versions of its coming out to the English vocabulary. Besides there are some other forms of the idiom that sometimes causes confusion and misunderstanding; that is why it is preferable to use it in its first form. Nevertheless we should mention that Bob is a famous name in English society and the idiom is actively used in people’s speeches.

“We are even Steven” is an expression used when someone has repaid a debt. It's clear that this name has been used because it rhymes with "even". Now that you have given me back the money I lent you, we are even Steven.

“Johnny-come-lately” means a newcomer, someone who has just joined a group. She may be a Johnny-come-lately in the office, but she’s doing really well. There's a song by Eagles in which this expression can be heard. You can find it at the end of this entry.

“Keep up with the Joneses” means to try to be as good as the neighbours by getting what they have and matching their lifestyle: Her neighbour bought a new car and she went out and bought another; she's always trying to keep up with the Joneses. There is no any exact origin of this idiom but one can possibly say that it was probably thought by ordinary people of English society as the content is related to simple neighborhood or ordinary deeds.

“Rob Peter to pay Paul” is to take or borrow money from someone in order to pay a debt to another person. If you take money from a credit card to pay off another, it's a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. It won't take you anywhere. The expression refers to times before the Reformation when Church taxes had to be paid to St. Paul's church in London and to St. Peter's

⁷ www.phrases.org.uk

church in Rome; originally it referred to neglecting the Peter tax in order to have money to pay the Paul tax.⁸ One more idiom with proper name that dates back to the long time period in the history of England pointing put specific historical and religious conditions of that time. Ordinary people did not see differences in paying to either to this church or another; they had to pay anyway! From this condition idiom says there is no difference to pay Paul after borrowing money from another person as there cannot be seen any profit.

“Every Tom, Dick and Harry” means everybody, every ordinary person: If you tell Louisa, soon every Tom, Dick and Harry will know about it. The idiom above is actively used in speeches of ordinary English people. It contains three male names in its form. What comes to the origin of the lexical unit we can state that there is no any proper, exact data related to it. But there are some possible predictions that the idiom seems to have arisen because Tom, Dick and Harry used to be very common names and, individually or collectively, they seemed to typify the common man. It probably appeared in the 18th or the early 19th centuries.

We can state that phraseological units with proper names in the English language are able to give some cultural, historical data about events, customs, traditions, rituals and even life-styles of local people living in the British Isles. Idioms with proper names may be compared to the boxes that contain much related to outer and inner parts of the containers as well as inside liquid. Idioms with popular proper names have been used in various social ranks for long time, they form a link of stories related to various aspects of life. Analysis of them proved that most phraseological units with proper names in the English language are linked to cultural, historical, traditional, social activities of society members. Some can reveal data related to religion or religious beliefs, music, historical event, cultural or traditional rituals, personal stories. What is more interesting is that some idioms with proper names have got negative but some can be used in positive context as well. But popularity of the name does not make any sense in forming that concept. A person who is not familiar with culture and history, traditions, social rules may even face difficulties to get the point such lexical units carry.

Whatever they reveal they are linked to the language and culture, actively used in the language keeping and growing interests of vocabulary units existing in the language. They resemble items kept in museums showing gracious, grand history and culture hidden inside.

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