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Research article

Structural and semantic congruence of Bulgarian, Russian and English set expressions: Contrastive-typological research

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Abstract

The main aim of the research is to analyze the degree of isomorphism and allomorphy (congruence) of set expressions in three languages – Bulgarian, Russian and English, and to highlight the main factors that have a bearing on the typological affinity of set expressions in these languages. The procedure of the research was two-fold. At the first stage, 4000 idioms were selected from Russian, Bulgarian and English idiomatic dictionaries through the method of random sampling (1334 idioms were selected from each language). For the sake of convenience and comparison, the selected idioms were divided into 5 thematic groups. At the second stage, 850 idioms were further selected for each group through stratified and quota sampling with the aim of subsequent quantification of recurrent keywords in each group. In order to quantify the number of the most frequent keywords in each group and to measure the prevalence of assonance and alliteration, the SPSS software was utilized. The results of the research revealed that the main factors that determine isomorphism and allomorphy among idioms from Bulgarian, Russian and English are (1) typological affinity between Bulgarian and English, (2) genetic kinship, (3) borrowings from English into Russian and Bulgarian and (4) from Russian into Bulgarian, (5) shared idiomatic stock and (6) such extralinguistic factors as the universal makeup of objects and entities, for instance, the same number of functional parts. The research results are relevant for comparative phraseology, areal and contrastive typology as well and for contactology.

Keywords: *cross-cultural congruence, idioms, cultural connotation, typology, Bulgarian, English, Russian languages*

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Научная статья

**Структурный и смысловой изоморфизм
и алломорфизм болгарских, русских
и английских устойчивых выражений:
опыт сопоставительно-типологического исследования**

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Аннотация

Актуальность исследования обусловлена взаимообогащением разных лингвокультур устойчивыми выражениями, отражающими особенности культуры и быта определённой лингвокультуры. Проблема исследования заключается в мнимой межъязыковой эквивалентности многих устойчивых выражений, которые на смысловом и концептуальном уровне обнаруживают культурно-семантические компоненты, отсутствующие в словарных источниках. Изучение фразефонда в сопоставительно-типологическом аспекте позволяет на контрасте показать общие и различные аспекты языковой и понятийной картин мира определённой лингвокультуры. Цель исследования – установить степень изо- и алломорфизма устойчивых выражений в русском, болгарском и английском языках, а также проанализировать факторы, которые влияют на степень типологического сходства устойчивых выражений в трех языках. Исследование проводилось в два этапа. На первом этапе материалом исследования послужило 4000 устойчивых выражений, отобранных методом случайной выборки из болгарских, русских и английских словарей устойчивых выражений (по 1334 фразеологизма из каждого словаря). В сопоставительных целях отобранные идиомы были поделены на 5 лексико-тематических групп. На втором этапе методом стратифицированной и квотной выборки в каждую группу было отобрано по 850 идиом. Для подсчета частотности опорных слов в составе устойчивых выражений использовалась программа статистической обработки данных SPSS. Результаты исследования обнаружили, что основными факторами, которые влияют на степень изоморфизма и алломорфизма между идиомами из трех анализируемых языков, являются (1) типологическое сходство и (2) генетическое родство между болгарским и русским языками, (3) заимствования из английского в болгарский и русский, (4) заимствования из русского в болгарский, (5) общий фразефонд и (6) некоторые экстралингвистические факторы, например, наличие определенного количества функциональных частей предметов. Результаты исследования вносят вклад в сопоставительную фразеологию, ареальную и контрастивную типологию и контактологию.

Ключевые слова: *межъязыковой изоморфизм, идиомы, культурная коннотация, типология, болгарский, английский, русский языки*

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1. Introduction

Phraseology, including proverbs and sayings, is a prolific source of axiological information, which contributes to the explication of culture and mentality of a linguacultural community and its linguistic worldview (Sharifian 2017, Nelyubova et al. 2020, Bila & Ivanova 2020, Diedrichsen 2020). The unique imagery, which is part and parcel of idiomatic expressions, emerges as a result of the figurative and transferred meanings conveyed by the key constituents of idioms (Maltseva 2017, Bagasheva 2017, Sharifian 2017). Given that extralinguistic knowledge develops in the context of a particular language and culture, both of which make cognition culturally determined, and because ethnocultural specificity of cognition manifests itself in various ways in language (Kozlova 2020: 900), investigation of phraseology from a typological and contrastive perspective is meant to reveal common and divergent aspects of linguistic and cognitive worldviews of a certain linguacultural community. Divergent linguistic and cognitive worldviews embedded in idioms are closely linked with the social and cultural identity of communicants (Kononenko 2020: 927).

Historically, the linguistic impact of Russian on Bulgarian has been more pronounced and long-lasting than the other way round (Karpov 2020). Like English, modern Bulgarian is an analytical language from the point of view of its typology (Ivanova 2019). This means that most grammatical concepts and relations are conveyed by function words – link verbs (copulas), particles, prepositions and clitics. Bulgarian thus reveals typological affinity with English and genetic affinity with Russian, being at the ‘mercy’ of different forces.

Previous research has established that idioms are expressive of speakers’ spirituality and are a result of an intricate, almost chemical interaction between language and culture (Lavrova, Nikulina 2020). The image conveyed by set expressions pertains to important fragments of material, social and spiritual culture, imbedding the mentality of a linguacultural community and revealing its speakers’ linguistic and cultural competencies (Stoyanova 2002: 6). This ‘double bind’ of idioms – with language and with culture – ensures their function in language as both nominative signs and purveyors of cultural values (Teliya 1996: 251). The presence of unique cultural connotations in the semantic and conceptual structure of set expressions prevents them from becoming completely cross-linguistically and cross-culturally equivalent.

This research is a complex study aimed at comparing the meaning and structure of spuriously congruent idioms from languages that differ in the degree of their genetic and typological affinity. The unique contribution of this research is that structural, semantic and conceptual affinity between set expressions was established on the basis of the method developed by V. D. Arakin (Arakin 2005).

2. State of the art and contrastive-typological analysis of Bulgarian, Russian and English idioms

2.1. Idioms with cultural connotations

Cultural connotations are additional semantic and conceptual elements, frequently elusive, acquired by an idiom due to the presence in its structure of the name of certain realia, connected with the history and culture of a linguistic community (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov 1982). These are typically proper names, lacunae, names of everyday objects and artifacts that play an important and sometimes unique role in the culture of a certain community of speakers (Peeters 2016, Senkbeil 2020). The spurious translational equivalence of many set expressions, which on closer inspection turns out to be only skin deep, lack of cultural and conceptual components in dictionary definitions of idioms results in a rather impoverished representation of their semantics (Wolf 2015).

Idiomatic cultural connotations have been studied in detail for English, Russian, Bulgarian and other languages (Wang Yan 2018, Goshkheteliani 2019, Lakshmi, Al-Fauzanb 2019). However, comparative typological research into idiomatic cultural connotations in the three languages has not been done over the period of the last 5 years.

The Russian expression «мастер на все руки» (lit. ‘a master of all hands’), for example, does not contain any cultural connotations, while its Bulgarian and English counterparts do: e.g. *мајстор Тричко прави всичко* (lit. ‘Master Trichko does everything’), *Jack of all trades*. Both contain proper names, and the Bulgarian idiom also has final assonance as a mnemonic device. Apart from that, Russian and Bulgarian idioms have a positive connotation, while in English the connotation is ambiguous and fluctuating: if we add the continuation ‘and master of none’, the connotation becomes negative. Most native speakers are aware of this and even when the shorter version of the idiom is used, the possible inference is that its user expresses a negative evaluation of its referent.

It has been established that due to the expressive function of idioms, rhyme plays an important role in their structure and acts as a certain aide-memoire. However, the role of final and initial assonance and consonance in Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms has been only tangentially studied. Frequently, despite the difference in the inner form of Russian, Bulgarian and English semantically comparable idioms, the same stylistic devices are employed, such as semantic contrast, assonance or alliteration, in order to focus on the idiomatic exponent: cf. Russ. *из грязи в князи* (lit. ‘from dirt into a prince’), Bulg. *от нищо нещо* (lit. ‘from nothing into something’), E. *from rags to riches*. Only the Russian idiom has an additional cultural connotation, as it contains the name of realia: the name of the chief of a feudal monarchic state or a separate political unit in IX–XVI centuries in Russia.

Different cultural connotations are embedded in the Russian idiom *без руля и веслу* (lit. ‘without a rudder and sails’), its English equivalent *up the creek without a paddle* and its Bulgarian counterpart *без цел и посока* (lit. ‘without a purpose and

a staff'). The first two idioms verbalize the maritime frame, while the third idiom explicates the land travelling frame, and all the three are manifestations of the conceptual metaphor 'life is a journey'. Semantically, Bulgarian and Russian idioms mean 'without a clear purpose', while their spurious English counterpart has the meaning of 'dire straits' and is sometimes used in its truncated form *up the creek*, especially in American English: "If my check doesn't come by tomorrow, I'll be up the creek. The rent is due on Friday." (<https://www idioms online / up - the - creek />). Since the origin of this idiom is connected with American English, it may also be considered to have an additional cultural connotation, which is 'lack of finances'.

The Bulgarian proverb *Тихата вода е най-дълбока* (lit. 'Still water is the deepest') is a closer conceptual counterpart of the English proverb *Still waters run deep* (cf. 'used to say that someone who is quiet may have very strong feelings or a lot of knowledge' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1998); 'Quiet people are often very thoughtful' (McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs 2006). 'A quiet person may be very profound' (The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms 2003). 'People say still waters run deep when they are talking about someone who is quiet and speaks little, to suggest that they are in fact interesting and complex'. 'A quiet or placid manner may conceal a passionate nature' (Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary 2017)), compared to their Russian counterpart «В тихом омуте черти водятся» (lit. 'There are devils in the whirlpool'), which has a pronounced negative connotation and is never used with reference to a quiet, but deep and thoughtful individual. Apparently, the negative evaluative connotation is down to the word «черти» ('devils'), whose referent can be considered the epitome of an evil creature. The conceptual link between evil spirits and a whirlpool reflects an ancient stratum in the structure of the concept 'an evil, impure place'. Unlike the Russian and English proverbs, the Bulgarian one uses rhyme as an additional mnemonic device, which contributes to its memorability and renders it humorous or even sarcastic.

The Russian idiom «продаваться как горячие пирожки» (lit. 'to sell like hot pirozhki') and its non-predicative Bulgarian counterpart *като топъл хляб* (lit. 'like warm bread') are loan-translations (calques) of the English idiom *to sell like hot cakes*. Here a cultural connotation emerged due to the different cultural value of cakes, хляб and pirozhki, all of which nominate the staple, affordable and nutritious food. Nearly every morning, the following recurrent scene can be observed in Bulgarian villages: people gather near the local shops and wait for the delivery of fresh and warm bread, which is sold out in the twinkle of an eye. In Russian gastronomic tradition, apart from bread, the so-called 'pirozhki' are highly valued by villagers, as they are tastier, nutritious and not as expensive as the fancier cakes. It should be noted that the Russian word «пирожки» is not an optimal equivalent of the English word *cakes*, as they refer to different denotata. The word «пирожки» has been loan-translated into English as *pirozhki* (a variant – *piroshki*), which is defined in the following way by the *Oxford Dictionary of English*: 'small Russian savoury pastries or patties, filled with meat or fish and rice' (Oxford Dictionary of English 2019).

2.2. Productive phraseosemantic frames

Idioms typically cluster around different phraseosemantic frames. However, not all frames are equally distributed or salient (Rafatbakhsh, Ahmadi 2019). Death, insobriety and failure to achieve are some of the productive phraseosemantic frames in Russian and English (Lavrova, Nikulina 2020: 68). Phraseosemantic frames are clusters of idioms that nominate a highly salient notion and are thus productive and frequent in the corpora. In the analysed linguacultures this is the frame ‘an unnecessary, non-functional part of something’: ср. Bulg. *петето колело на колата, деветата/десетата/седмата дупка на кавала*; Russ. *пятая спица в колеснице, нужен как пятое колесо в телеге, как собаке пятая нога, как прошлогодний снег, как покойнику галоши, как летошний снег, как козе баян, как рыбе зонтик, как попу гармонь*. In English, the idiom *to need smth. like a hole in the head* can be considered an ideogram, i.e. the most frequent and productive set expression that forms the centre of a frame. The following expressions are used as its synonyms in English: *like a fifth leg to a dog, like a moose needs a hat rack, like a giraffe needs a strep throat, to make oneself into a third wheel*. The last expression differs from the rest both structurally and conceptually, although the shared semantic component of an extraneous entity is retained. The closest Russian equivalent is «третий лишний» (lit. ‘the third, unwelcome person’), both are more restricted in usage: when there is an amorous affair between two people, a third one is unwelcome and should retreat from the scene. All the other expressions profile an additional appendage or part of a person, an animal or an object, which does not impede their function; however, it does not facilitate it, either.

The Russian frame «никогда» (‘never’) is less linguistically dense and therefore less salient than its Bulgarian or English counterpart. The typical low colloquial idiom that saturates this frame is produced in answer to the Russian question «Когда?» (‘When?’): cf. «Когда рак на горе свиснет» (lit. ‘When a crab whistles in the mountains’). The typical English counterparts are *Twelfth of Never. When two Sundays come together. Pigs might fly*. Like in Russian, in Bulgarian comparable idioms are colloquial: *Когато си видиш ушите без огледало* (lit. ‘When you see your ears without a mirror’); *Когато си видиш гърба си* (lit. ‘When you see your own back’); *На върба в сряда или на куково лято цъфнат налъмите* (lit. ‘Old rubber boots blossom on a willow Wednesday or in the mummers’ summer’); *конски Великден* (lit. ‘on a horse’s Easter’); *Когато израстнат на коня рога* (lit. ‘When a horse grows horns’); *Когато върбата роди круши/върже грозде* (lit. ‘When a willow gives birth to pears/grapes’); *Когато дойде четвъртък подир петък* (lit. ‘When Friday comes before Thursday’). The closest English-Bulgarian conceptual equivalents are the sayings *When two Sundays come together. Когато дойде четвъртък подир петък*. Their interpretation requires the activation of the fame ‘week’, in which weekdays are not conceptually on a par with one another. As a rule, the weekend arouses positive associations and emotions in native speakers, while workdays, especially Monday,

tend to have negative associations. It can thus be seen that at the basis of the frame ‘never’ lies the principle of absurdity, sacrilege, something which is in violation of the natural course of events, when something grows or is found where it is not supposed to be (Mokienko 1980, 1983). In all the three linguacultures these and similar expressions make fun of speakers’ unwarranted expectations: cf. *Този е страшен мошеник, парите ще ти ги върне на куково лято!* (≈ ‘This is a real villain, he’ll never give you back your money!’). *Ще сложии климатик на тази таратайка, когато цъфнат нальмите!* (≈ ‘You’ll never be able to install an air-conditioner in your old car’) (<http://news.flarus.ru/?topic=6763>). The nonsense effect arises because an entity is ascribed some semantic features that are incompatible with its referential status.

Even though all of the above idioms verbalize the frame ‘never’, they are only quasi-synonymous in one and the same language and are brought about by different contexts. Thus, sayings that begin with the word ‘When’ and its equivalents in Russian and Bulgarian are used in answer to the question that begins with the same word. The sayings about the ‘willow Wednesday’ and ‘horse’s Easter’ in Bulgarian are used when the speaker criticizes his interlocuter’s unrealistic plans for the future.

Structurally and semantically comparable images at the basis of the Bulgarian and English idioms *влиза ми муха в главата* and *to have a bee in one’s bonnet* correspond to the Russian expression «вбить себе ч.-л. в голову» (lit. ‘to drive home something into one’s head’). The shared semantic component in the Bulgarian and English idioms is the image of a pestering insect that produces a jarring and buzzing sound. In English, the frame ‘to be obsessed about something’ is especially salient and is verbalized by idioms in which the key word nominates a bothersome animal that is not welcome in a particular place: *to have a maggot in the brain, to have rats in the attic, to have bats in the belfry, to have a bee in one’s bonnet, to have kangaroos in one’s top paddock*. Some of these idioms are more productive in different varieties of English, as, for example, the idiom *to have kangaroos in one’s top paddock*, prevalent in Australian English.

2.3. Crosslinguistic homonymy

Due to common ancestry, cross-linguistic homonymy is more typical for genetically related languages (Pirainen 2005). The implication is that structurally identical or similar idioms have different semantics, though may be erroneously considered as cross-linguistic, translational equivalents (Nordman, Jambazova 2017). However, if a distant relative is added to a pair of closely related languages, the predominant relations are far from straightforward.

Despite a comparable structure of all the three idioms – Bulg. *дишам във врата на някого*, Russ. *дышать в спину*, E. *to breathe down smn.’s neck* – they are linguistic manifestations of different concepts, as only Russian and Bulgarian idioms are semantically and conceptually equivalent, while the English idiom stands apart. Its meaning is ‘to stand close to a person, impatiently waiting for them

to finish a task and sometimes urging them on'. The Russian idiomatic equivalent is *стоять над душой* (lit. 'to stand above someone's soul'). The meaning of Russian and Bulgarian idioms is 'to closely watch someone, wishing to upstage them'.

The Russian idiom *повернуться спиной к к.-л.* is typically used with a complement expressed by an animate noun and means to 'abandon someone'. The Bulgarian idiom *обръщам гръб на някого/нещо*, which is comparable to the Russian one in its structure, may be used with an inanimate noun and corresponds to the English idiom *to turn over a new leaf* 'to make a new start, to begin your life afresh' (Sabeva, Zagorova 2015): ср. *Обръщам гръб на проблемите/него и гледам само напред* ≈ 'I'm looking ahead, without dwelling on the past'. The English equivalent *to turn one's back on smn.* is a false friend of the Bulgarian expression and has the same meaning as the Russian idiom *повернуться спиной к к.-л.* (lit. 'to turn one's back to smn.').

The concept of physical exhaustion is conveyed by similar expressions in Russian and Bulgarian: cf. Bulg. *като изтискан лимон*, Russ. *как выжатый лимон*. English has a number of structurally allomorphic idioms, such as *on my/its last legs*, *to feel as if death warmed up this morning*. The English idiom *on its last legs* is frequently used with reference to inanimate objects that are about to fall apart or to break down. The idiom *a squeezed lemon* has two meanings, and the second meaning is a conceptual equivalent of the Bulgarian idiom *като изтискан лимон*: cf. '1) a married man whose energy and spirit have been exhausted by the relentless demands of his wife. Typically, a squeezed lemon works long hours in a dead-end job to earn the money demanded by his wife to support her purchases; 2) used as part of a comparison *like a squeezed lemon* meaning 'a useless thing or object': *He will dump you like a squeezed lemon*' (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=squeezed%20lemon>).

2.4. Systemic relations

It has been shown that in closely related languages inclusive and part-whole relations between lexis predominate (Hristova, Tzukev 2018). However, specific keywords in idioms that account for such relations have not been systematically studied from a typological perspective. The concept of psychological affinity (though not physical) between relatives is conveyed by comparable co-hyponymic expressions in the three languages: Bulg. *Крушата не пада по-далеч от дървото*; Russ. *Яблоко от яблони (не далеко падает)*; E. *The apple does not fall far from the tree*. In English and Russian, the image of a more prototypical, Biblical fruit is used, while Bulgarian gives preference to the word *круша* ('pear'). All the three idioms have a negative connotation and mean that one's offspring tends to inherit the genetic make-up of the parent. Apart from that, in English there is a synonymous expression *a chip off the old block*.

Co-hyponymic relations are also observed in the comparative somatic idioms Russ. *как слон в посудной лавке*, Bulg. *като слон в стъкларски магазин*, E. *like*

a bull in a china shop. The words «посудной», «стъкларски» and ‘china shop’ belong to the same semantic group, as well as the words «лавка» and «магазин», although stylistically the word «лавка» is vernacular in modern Russian. Despite being structurally and semantically isomorphic, the expressions are slightly different conceptually, since they contain the names of three different paragons of a clumsy animal.

The concept of dejection is conveyed by meronymic somatic idioms: Bulg. *кљумвам нос*, Russ. *повесить голову*, E. *to be down in the mouth* (or *to walk with drooping shoulders*). A comparable Russian idiom *клевать носом* (lit. ‘to peck with one’s nose’) means ‘to feel sleepy’. Different body parts were chosen by different linguacultures to express the idea of dejection or depression. The common conceptual basis is that all body parts are downward and are reflective of the conceptual metaphor ‘good is up, bad is down’.

The concept of lack of experience is conveyed in all the three languages through the use of a colour term associated with early stages of ontogenesis or through the usage of nutritional milk fed to the young or neonates: cf. Bulg. *имам жълто около устата*, E. *to be green around the gills*, Rus. *Молоко на губах не обсохло*. The Bulgarian idiom has a synonym *имам много хляб да яде* (lit. ‘to have a lot of bread to eat’).

A lingering image is embedded in the somatic Bulgarian idiom *гладно сърце*, corresponding to the Russian expression *на пустой желудок* and the English *on an empty stomach*. From the point of view of semantic cohesion, the Bulgarian idiom reveals a higher degree of idiomaticity, belonging to the group of phraseological fusions, despite the fact that the adjective is used in its direct meaning. The combination ‘hungry heart’ (the literal translation of the Bulgarian idiom) is misleading and is more readily associated with longing and unrequited amorous feelings rather than physical hunger.

2.5. Idioms with numerals

Numerical concepts play a culture-forming role from the point of view of cultural semiotics (Torop 2015, Bylinina, Nouwen 2020, Waęiel, Сага 2020). There are numerical concepts expressed by both isomorphic and allomorphic idioms in English, Russian and Bulgarian, in which a certain number becomes a metaphorical symbol of a certain notion, thereby giving access to culturally salient concepts (Cherneva 2002): cf.

Russ. *Один в поле не воин. Дважды два четыре. Одна голова хорошо, а две лучше. Сидеть в четырех стенах. Конь о четырех ногах, а спотыкается.*

E. *to put two and two together, one-horse town, to have two left feet, two’s company, three’s a crowd, on all fours.*

Bulg. *четири възрасти* (‘for a very long time’); *две жени – цял пазар* (‘two women are already more than enough’); *две дини под една мишница не се носят* (‘you can’t perform equally well two different tasks’); *правя се на две и половина* (‘to brag about smth.’); *с един куришум – два заека* (‘to manage to accomplish two tasks simultaneously’); *лягам си, че две не виждам* (‘to feel sleepy’); *ще те*

направля на две стотинки (an expletive addressed to a person who is being humiliated or threatened by the speaker).

The structural allomorphy of the Bulgarian proverb *Три пъти мери, веднъж режи* and its Russian counterpart *Семь раз отмерь, один раз отрежь* is down to two factors: first, a fewer number of times in Bulgarian corresponds to a greater number of times in Russian; second, the Bulgarian proverb also uses rhyme and assonance as a mnemonic device as does its English equivalent *A stitch in time saves nine*, where the symbolism of 9 shines through.

In some idioms a specific number is contrasted with a large number in general, which is typically expressed by a pronominal adverb ‘many’ cf. Russ. *У семи нянек дитя без глазу*; Bulg. *Много баби – хилаво дете* (lit. ‘If there are many women, the child will not be well’); E. *Too many cooks spoil the broth*. Here only Russian and Bulgarian idioms are (partly) structurally and semantically isomorphic, while a different image is employed in English to verbalize the concept of ‘high though ultimately unproductive concentration of labour force, which does not facilitate the performance of a task’. Conceptually, however, all the three idioms are on a par with each other. Number 7 in Russian metonymically stands for a large number and is probably an allusion to seven angels, which renders the proverb humorous or even sarcastic.

The brief analysis of the state of the art revealed that despite structural congruence, the majority of Bulgarian, Russian and English idioms are only partially isomorphic due to a number of linguistic, cultural and historical factors and precedents. This results in specific cultural connotations and conceptual content that inheres in idioms from the three analyzed linguacultures.

3. Research methodology: data collection and procedure

The research was conducted in a two-stage, stepwise fashion. At the first stage, 4000 set expressions were selected through the method of random sampling from the following phraseological dictionaries of idioms.¹ In order to equalize the

¹ Ankova-Nicheva, Keti. 1993. *Nov Frazеologichen Rechnik na Bylgarskija Ezik (Phraseological dictionary of Bulgarian)*. Sophia: Sv. Kliment Ohridski.

Banova, Marija & Dimova, Stamen. 2014. *Frazеologichen Rechnik na Bylgarskija Ezik (Phraseological dictionary of the Bulgarian language)*. Sofia: Ban Mar.

Bol'shoi Frazеologicheskii Slovar' Russkogo Yazika (Comprehensive phraseological dictionary of Russian). 2018. Moscow: ACT Press.

Kunin, Alexandr. 1998. *Bol'shoi Anglo-Russkii Frazеologicheskii Slovar' (Comprehensive English-Russian phraseological dictionary)*. Moscow: Zhivoi yazik.

Makartsev, Maxim & Zhernovenkova Tat'jana. 2012. *Bolgarskii Yazik. Tematicheskii Slovar' (Bulgarian Language. Thematic Dictionary)*. Moscow: Zhivoi yazik.

Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms. 1998. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chambers English Idioms. 1995. Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd.

Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms. 1995. London: Harper Collins.

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms. 1998. London: Addison Wesley Longman Dictionaries.

Oxford Dictionary of English. 2019. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms. 2001. London: Penguin.

number of idioms from each dictionary and each language, we used a random number generator: the number 1334 was picked by the random number generator, which is why we stuck with this number. At the second stage of the research, the selected idioms were divided into 5 thematic groups: (1) set expressions with a cultural connotation, (2) idioms that form productive phraseological frames, (3) crosslinguistic homonyms ('false friends'), (4) systemic relations, (5) idioms with numerals. The subdivision is to a certain extent intuitive and subjective (although maximal objectivity was arguably attained) and does not mean to suggest impermeable borderlines between the groups. Apparently, the so-called cultural connotation may be present to a greater or lesser extent in all the groups, as, for example, in the group of idioms with numerals. However, this subdivision contributes to a more methodologically rigorous procedure and facilitates the analysis of data. At the second stage of the research through the method of stratified and quota sampling 850 idioms were selected into each group with a view to a statistical count of frequency of keywords in each group. In order to quantify the frequency of keywords in idioms as well as to count the presence of some stylistic devices that contribute to the rhythm and rhyme of idioms, the SPSS software was used. To establish structural, semantic and conceptual affinity between set expressions the contrastive-typological method developed by V. D. Arakin (Arakin 2005) was applied.

The main research questions that were formulated prior to the actual research were as follows:

- (1) What languages out of the three reveal a higher degree of structural and semantic isomorphism?
- (2) What factors have a bearing on this?
- (3) What are some of the recurrent keywords in the 5 thematic groups of Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms?
- (4) What role do some phonetic devices play in Bulgarian, Russian and English idioms?

4. Results

Research findings demonstrated a higher degree of structural and semantic isomorphism among Russian and Bulgarian idioms: cf. Bulg. *морете ми е до колене*, Russ. *море по колено*; Bulg. *да си оближеш пръстите*, Russ. *пальчики оближешь*; Bulg. *мечешка услуга*, Russ. *медвежья услуга*; Bulg. *приличат си като две капки вода*, Russ. *похожи как две капли воды*, etc.

Consider comparable data for the three languages in 5 idiomatic groups (Table 1). Letters B., R. and E. are the shorthand for the names of the three languages – Bulgarian, Russian and English. In the column directly below these letters are some frequent keywords used in Bulgarian, Russian and English idioms. By keywords we mean those idiomatic components that carry the bulk of idiomatic meaning, creating imagery and having cultural connotations. However, it is not necessarily the main semantic component of an idiom. The percentage in brackets

indicates the relative frequency of these keywords. A caveat is needed with respect to the proper names. Unlike the rest of the keywords, proper names are unique for a particular culture (with the exception of typologically dispensable borrowed proper names), therefore in the table they are not replicated in all the three linguacultures. Other keywords may occur in all the three linguacultures, but again with the rider that some names or realia are expected to be restricted to one particular linguaculture (e.g. Russ. «царь» and «князь»). If a keyword is absent from a particular linguaculture, although it just might be expected there, number 0 is placed next to this word. For example, the word «Федура» is unlikely to be present in English even in its latinized form, unlike the word ‘knyaz’, which might be there as it was borrowed into English.

Table 1. The most frequent keywords in the 5 thematic groups of Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms

Five thematic groups of set expressions in Russian, Bulgarian and English	Subgroups	B (%)	R (%)	E (%)
Names of realia (with the exception of numerals) in Russian, Bulgarian and English set expressions (keywords)	Proper names, foodstuffs, names of authority (titles)	Михаль (23) Петка (14) Тричко (13) хляб (26) баница (12) пай (0) пирог (0) цар (1,5) княз (0,5)	Иван (28) Маша (17) Варвара (12) Федура (7) хлеб (28) пирожки (5) пирожные (0) царь (7) князь (1)	Jack (19) John (16) Jane (11) Jill (7) bread (17) cakes (8) pirozhki (0) tsar (0) knyaz (0)
Productive phraseosemantic frames (keywords)	Non-functional part of smth. (1)	(1): колело (13), куче(13), жирафа (0), лос (0)	(1): колесо (14), телега (11), колесница (2), собака (16), жираф (4), лось (0)	(1): wheel (12), cart (0), dog (12), giraffe (5), moose (3)
	Never (2)	(2): кон (12), свиня (0), рак (0), върба (10), грозде (11), калоши (7), четвъртък (12), петък (11), лято (9), неделя (0) никога (0)	(2): рак (5), конь (0), свинья (0), верба (0), виноград (0), калоши (3), пятница (1), воскресенье (0), четверг (0), лето (0), никогда (0,5)	(2): pig (4), cancer, crab (0), horse (0), willow (0), grapes (0), Sunday (4), Thursday (0), Friday (0), summer (0), never (3)
	Madness (3)	(3): муха (5), пчела (1), плъх (0), кенгуру (0), ларва (0)	(3): муха (0), пчела (0), крыса (0), кенгуру (0), личинка (0)	(3): kangaroo (4), bee (3), rat (3), larvae (1) fly (0),

Five thematic groups of set expressions in Russian, Bulgarian and English	Subgroups	B (%)	R (%)	E (%)
Cross-cultural homonymy (keywords)	Phytonyms, somaticisms	сърце (19) кожа (17) душа (13) врат (12) гръб (9) зъби (7) лястовица (11) лимон (13)	душа (18) сердце (16) кожа (14) шея (5) спина (7) лимон (13)	skin (16) heart (15) back (11) soul (11) neck (8) lemon (13)
Systemic relations among Russian, Bulgarian and English set expressions (keywords)	Hyperonymic and meronymic relations (phytonyms, zoonyms, somaticisms)	ябълка (14) круша (12) слон (8) бик (7) сърце (19) палци (7) юмрук (4) стомак (1) жълт (3) зелен (3)	яблоко (16) груша (2) слон (12) бык (11) кулак (10) пальцы (9) сердце (5) желудок (1) зелёный (9) желтый (7)	apple (14) pear (7) bull (8) elephant (7) fingers (12) fist (5) heart (4) stomach (1) green (6) yellow (4)
Numerals in Russian, Bulgarian and English set expressions (keywords)	Numerals from 1 to 10 and 100, 1000, 1000 000	1 (27) 2 (25) 4 (17) 3 (16) 7 (13) 9 (12) 10 (11) 100 (9) 1000 (7) 1000000 (4)	1 (29) 2 (24) 4 (17) 3 (16) 7 (13) 100 (11) 10 (7) 1000 (5) 1000000 (3)	1 (22) 2 (21) 4 (16) 3 (15) 9 (11) 100 (9) 1000 (7) 10 (4) 1000000 (2)

The following data were obtained for the frequency of usage of assonance and alliteration (consonance) in Russian, Bulgarian and English set expressions (Fig. 1).

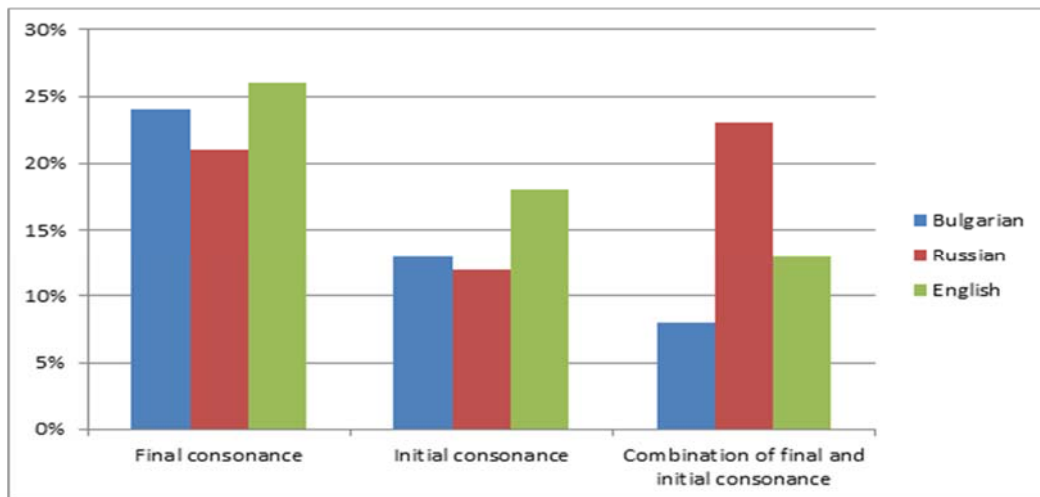


Fig. 1. Frequency of usage of assonance and alliteration in Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms

The main factors that have a bearing on the degree of structural and semantic isomorphism (congruence) in Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms turned out to be as follows (Table 2). The + sign marks the presence of a certain type of isomorphism, the – sign marks its absence; a combination of the signs + and – indicates an incomplete degree of isomorphism.

Table 2. Factors that have a bearing on structural and semantic isomorphism in Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms

Factors that determine structural and semantic isomorphism in Russian, Bulgarian and English idioms	Structural isomorphism	Sematic isomorphism	Structural-semantic isomorphism
Typological affinity between Bulgarian and English	+	–	–
Genetic affinity between Russian and Bulgarian	+	+	+
Borrowings of set expressions from English into Russian and Bulgarian	+	+–	+–
Borrowings from Russian into Bulgarian	+	+	+
Shared idiomatic word-stock (primarily fables and the Bible)	+	+–	+–
Objective extralinguistic reality (the number of functional parts of objects, including body parts)	+	+	+
Symbolic meanings of numerals	–	+	+–

The results that have been obtained during the research can be spelt out as follows.

1. The main factors that determine the degree of isomorphism and allomorphy among idioms in the three languages are (1) typological affinity between English and Bulgarian, (2) genetic affinity between Russian and Bulgarian, (3) borrowings of idioms from English into Russian and Bulgarian, (4) borrowings of idioms from Russian into Bulgarian, (5) the shared idiomatic stock, primarily fables and biblical expressions, (6) such extralinguistic factors as the number of functional parts of objects, including body parts, (7) the symbolic meaning of numerals.

2. Approximately the same number of culturally dense idioms inhere in the three linguacultures. However, Russian and Bulgarian idioms were found to have more names of shared realia. When idioms with cultural connotations are borrowed, for example, from English into both Russian and Bulgarian, a hyponymic paraphrase typically takes place, which results in a partial semantic and conceptual adjustment of the idiom (cf. *cakes* vs *пирожки* vs *хлеб*).

3. The most productive phraseosemantic frames turned out to be ‘never’, ‘non-functional part of something’ and ‘madness’.

4. Cross-linguistic homonymy was found to be more typical for Russian and Bulgarian. If a set expression is traced back to a common precedent, such as a fable or the Bible, despite structural isomorphism, such idioms tend to develop different cultural connotations, because different inferences have been drawn from them by different linguacultures.

5. Hierarchical and part-whole relations proved to be the most prevalent across all the groups of idioms. In order to express a similar or comparable concept,

different keywords are used in different languages, such as somaticisms, phytonyms or zoomorphic metaphors, depending on the cultural associations with a particular body part, flora or fauna.

6. Numerals 1, 2 and 4 are typologically and statistically significant in all the three linguacultures as a result of objective or universal properties of objects and phenomena. Numbers 3, 7 and 9 are more culturally loaded and play different roles in the analyzed linguacultures: numbers 3 and 7 are more relevant for Russian; number 9 may be used as a synonym of 7 in Bulgarian; in English, in order to express a comparable meaning, either number 9 is used or the general pronominal adverb ‘many’, which conveys an indiscriminately large number of entities. In all the three languages, numbers 100, 1000 and 1000 000 are used hyperbolically.

7. Final consonance plays a more significant role in the three languages. In other words, not only semantic and conceptual, but also structural factors play a role in the choice of idiomatic components and thus impact on the degree of idiomatic isomorphism across languages.

4. Discussion

History, contacts as well as typological affinity have a bearing on the degree of structural and semantic congruence of idioms in the three languages. Despite structural congruence, most idioms reveal culturally salient semantic and structural components that are absent from their dictionary treatment. Additional and divergent shades of idiomatic meanings develop, partly, due to different cultural contexts in which they function. This finding is thus in keeping with data obtained by Wolf (2015) and Torop (2015). The usage of somaticisms, phytonyms or zoomorphic metaphors is explained by different cultural associations with a particular body part, flora or fauna. This justifies the partial semantic and conceptual adjustment of keywords in borrowed idioms.

Crosslinguistic borrowings seem to be a factor that accounts for partial or complete structural and semantic congruence of idioms in the three languages. Since borrowings are not evenly distributed in the three languages due to a more prominent role played by English and Russian as compared to Bulgarian, the latter turned out to be more on the receiving end of loans.

The choice of a keyword in an idiom is determined not only by semantic or conceptual considerations, but is aligned with the rhyme and rhythm of a set expression. This serves as an aide-memoire and contributes to idioms’ more pronounced expressive function. This finding is in keeping with research by Benczes (2019). Predominance of final consonance in the three languages is justified by the mnemonic effect associated with words’ codas. However, because initial elements of words are more informative from the perceptual point of view, in English initial consonance also has some role to play, becoming a centrifugal force compared to the final consonance.

The pronounced negative connotation of the three most productive idiomatic frames is partly explained by the make-up of the human psyche, in which the negative tends to leave a more pronounced cognitive trace than the positive.

Numerical concepts embedded in idioms are comparable across the three languages. However, each linguaculture is characterized by the prevalence of specific numbers. In each case, the reason for numerical salience may be different. In some cases, historical precedents explain why a certain number symbolizes a certain cultural concept. In other cases, where more isomorphy is observed, the prevalence of certain numbers is constrained by extralinguistic reality, in which many objects are made up of the same number of functional parts. Finally, religious and mythological practices play a key role in the symbolic meaning of a numeral. The relative frequency of the numeral 2 in the three languages is explained by its pair-like quality, in which it is opposed to 1 and 3 simultaneously. When opposed to 1, its meaning is that two people are better than one in performing a task. Opposed to 3, it is meant to suggest that a pair of people may have amorous feelings towards each other: the third party is, therefore, unwelcome. The symbolic meaning of 4 and 5 is rooted in the topological properties of objects: because a room has 4 walls and because animals have four limbs, such expressions as the Russian «сидеть в 4-х стенах» (lit. 'to sit in four walls'), «как собаке пятая нога» (lit. 'to need smth. like a dog needs a fifth leg') appear. The symbolic meaning of the numerals 3, 7, 9, 12, 13, 40 is connected with the Bible. In Orthodox Christianity, a wake is held after a person has been dead for 9 and 40 days. The faithful believe that the soul of the deceased travels the Earth for 39 days, visiting the places a person saw or lived in during his/her life. Number 7 is also symbolic in many cultures around the world. In the Bible, this number is mentioned several times: there are 7 hierarchies of angels; seven demons were driven out of Mary Magdalene; there are seven deadly sins (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride) counterbalanced by seven virtues (chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, kindness, patience and humility). There is also a tradition in Bulgaria and Russia to place 7 dishes on the table during a religious holiday (a fete). When the usage of a certain numeral is primarily justified by formal requirements, its meaning may be devoid of any specific cultural connotations and is chosen ad hoc to align it with the rhyme and rhythm of an idiom: cf. Bulg. *Петима Петка не чакат*; Russ. *Семеро одного не ждут*; E. *There's no spoiling a wedding for one that's missing*. However, the choice of a proper name is usually from within the available native anthroponyms, which gives the whole expression an additional conceptual tinge.

Some of the limitations of the research are connected with slightly outdated dictionaries of Bulgarian: unfortunately, new modern comprehensive dictionaries are virtually non-existent or are nominally updated editions of older ones. This may partly be explained by the rather conservative nature of idiomatic word-stock and Bulgarian as a whole, which retains a lot of the linguistic features traced back to proto-Bulgarian. Another limitation is that we did not control for such parameters of our sample as frequency and style, something which may form one of the areas for further research.

5. Conclusion

The research expands the theoretical tenets of ethnophraseology – the study of culturally salient phrases. For Bulgarian speakers, these are set expressions that contain culturally loaded elements, such as *има да дава на Михаля; гоня Михаля; тънка Тодора; без време гост – от турчин по-лош; яж, Пено, сирене, че овчар си искала; с ченгел думите му вадя*, etc. These are idioms that contain either Bulgarian proper names or realia that are relevant for the history of Bulgaria, or names of artifacts that are unique to Bulgaria. For example, the word *турчин* ('Turk') is used in the saying above because of the long-lasting Turkish rule on the territory of Bulgaria. The Russian equivalent of the Bulgarian saying *без време гост – от турчин по-лош* reflects different realia: cf. *незванный гость хуже татарина*. The English equivalent *The unbidden guest is a bore and a pest* seems to be devoid of any cultural connotations; however, rhyme and rhythm as well as the unpalatable image of a parasitic creature make for a memorable idiom, whose pragmatic effect could be further investigated.

This study could also further develop the functionalist paradigm of Cultural Linguistics, which views intercultural encounters as problem situations that require certain skills to manage communication successfully. In this case, skills are linguistic and conceptual clarification strategies, such as meta-linguistic and cultural commentary on the cultural practice embedded in idiomatic expressions. The findings of this research will also be of benefit to the highly prolific field of Contrastive Typology and could stimulate further interest in comparative-typological research.

We would like to conclude this paper by quoting one of the pioneers and active practitioners of Cultural Linguistics, the late F. Sharifian, who believed that 'when faced with other cultures, we become conscious of our own cultural worlds... The proliferation of cross-cultural contacts calls for new forms of scholarly work in the humanities and social sciences...and demonstrates how cultural conceptualisations embedded in a language are relevant to all aspects of human life' (Sharifian 2017: 166).

Authors' contribution

Lavrova N.A. – the idea, design, data collection, structure and the writing of the text.
Kozmin A.O. – literature review, data analysis, avenues for further research, the writing of the text.

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