Semantic Relations in The Comparative Phraseological Units in English and Bulgarian

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Abstract. The investigation is an attempt to define the nature and the place of the comparative phraseological units in English and Bulgarian in respect to their semantics. A semantic classification of the units is developed. It stresses upon the symbols used in the comparative units. It also throws light on the way of the thinking, the everyday life, the historical events, the folklore and the beliefs of the investigated nations. The resemblances and the differences are outlined and discussed.

Key Words: Comparative phraseological units, Semantic groups, Image.


Anahtar Kelimeler: Karşılaştırmalı sözcüksel yapılar, semantic gruplar, simge.
INTRODUCTION

This article is part of a bigger investigation on the comparative phraseological units in English and Bulgarian, namely the author’s PhD thesis. The comparative phraseological units represent a specific layer in language phraseology due to their structure and semantics. They incorporate in themselves the three basic characteristic features of the phraseological units:

1) Segmental structure of the lexical components, 2) Reproduction in the speech act as ready-made units and 3) Expressive character as a result of a semantic transformation.

The corpus of the present investigation consists of 729 comparative units in English (ECUs) and 1315 comparative units in Bulgarian (BCUs). The corpora are drawn out of a significant number of lexicographic references (see below). The presence of the comparative unit into the phraseological compilations is considered to represent a proof for defining the unit as being fixed and not randomly uttered.

The aim is to establish the semantic relations that exist between the units, where we find the greatest resemblances or differences in the two investigated languages. The material is organized into several semantic groups that facilitate the investigation process. The study’s contribution is mainly to the process of translation and the rendering of an adequate meaning and also the English language teaching.

The contrastive method of the investigation involves the identification procedure that allows the finding of the exact unit match in both languages; English and Bulgarian. The methods of the investigation also include 1) contrastive analysis of the units’ structure that requires the structural-typological procedure and 2) contrastive analysis of the units’ functioning in the speech act that requires the distributional procedure. The leading role is given to the overall expressive meaning.

The results will show the percentage of the identical, the close in meaning and the comparative units that have no correspondence in one of the investigated languages. This quantitative approach throws light not only on the language facts but also on some spheres of the human thinking and culture.

Results and Discussion. The comparative phraseological units represent a two-component system of the type <as> white as snow (бял като сняг), <as> hungry as a wolf (гладен като вълк), work like a slave (работя като
The leading component in the present investigation is the symbol, the key-word expressed by the second element.

The following groups can be outlined:

**ECUs and BCUs that have an animal as a semantic base**

This group contains 153 ECUs and 334 BCUs.

**ECUs and BCUs that have a plant, fruit as a semantic base**

Here external qualities like the color, the freshness and the beauty are being taken into consideration. The group includes 23 ECUs and 65 BCUs.

**ECUs and BCUs that have objects from everyday life as semantic bases**

Such are 100 ECUs and 142 BCUs.

**ECUs and BCUs that have historical events, custom, celebrations, folklore, religion as semantic bases**

This group includes comparative units that are extremely culture specific. And that’s why we expect great differences between the symbols used in the phraseological units. In English there are 44 and in Bulgarian – 60.

**ECUs and BCUs that have people – their social status, profession, nationality, family relations as semantic bases**

This group presupposes great differences, too, bearing in mind the different way of life of the two nations. In English there are 15 and in Bulgarian – 133. This group shows great number differences. We can draw the conclusion that the social status of the people, their profession, nationality and family relations are of great importance for the Bulgarians and that is expressed in the existence of so many BCUs containing the symbol.

**ECUs and BCUs that can be generally said to have nature as a semantic base**

The comparative units here are based on the image of the mountain, the rocks, the stone, the storm, the lightning, the night, the wind, the rain, etc. such are 58 ECUs and 53 BCUs.

The analysis of the different semantic groups shows the following results:

**ECUs and BCUs that have an animal as a semantic base**

The ECUs and BCUs that have an animal as a semantic base express a significant dominance of the domestic animals used as symbols compared to the wild animals (67 ECUs – 43% and 198 BCUs – 59%). This fact is quite
normal and derives from the universal part of the human thinking to compare things with the closest and most well-known objects. This conclusion is also confirmed by S. Munitsa while analyzing the comparative units in German and in Ukrainian (Муніца / Munitsa, 1975, p.13).

The negative characteristics of the animal (appearance, behavior) prevail as a comparison symbol (102 ECUs – 66% and 291 BCUs – 87%). This fact also has its explanation – the negative characteristics are more powerful, expressive and emotional. The same conclusion is also drawn by I. Chernisheva in regard to the German comparative units:

“Наиболее ярко оценочный характер компаративных фразеологизмов проявляется при отрицательной характеристике, чем, очевидно, объясняется и их численный превес” (Чернышева / Chernisheva,1970, p. 48).

“The negative connotation of the comparative phraseological units prevails and that is evident from their great quantity” (Chernisheva, 1970, p. 48).

This semantic group includes many identical units (48 units – 10%) and ECUs and BCUs that are close in meaning (56 units – 11%). The identical comparative units have the same structure (form) and meaning in English and in Bulgarian. Relatively close are those units that experience a slight difference in structure and meaning. For example, the pig / swain is associated with negative features both in English and in Bulgarian:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eat like a pig</td>
<td>ям като свиня</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The dog as a symbol is used in 7 ECUs and 33 BCUs, the cat in 8 ECUs and 18 BCUs, the pig/swain in 6 ECUs and 12 BCUs, the rabbit in 5 ECUs and 15 BCUs, the sheep in 3 ECUs and 8 BCUs, the lamb in 4 ECUs and 2 BCUs, the donkey in 3 ECUs and 14 BCUs, the fish in 5 ECUs and 7 BCUs, the wolf in 3 ECUs and 8 BCUs, the horse in 2 ECUs and 13 BCUs, the mouse in 1 ECU and 12 BCUs.

In Bulgarian a great number of the comparative units are based on the symbol of the frog – 9 BCUs, the fly – 9 BCUs, the bull – 9 BCUs, the camel – 5 BCUs.

The symbol of the rabbit is the reason for the existence of many identical units in both languages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; timid as a hare</td>
<td>плашлив като зек</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The animal-based ECUs and BCUs show no great differences in the chosen symbol and their linguistic realization. Both nations recognize the pig as a symbol of uncleanness; the rabbit of speed, fear and fast breeding; the wolf of hunger, great appetite; the fox of slyness; the bee of work; the bull of strength; the donkey of stupidity, etc.

The semantic closeness expressed by ECUs and BCUs supports the thesis of U. Dolgopolov on the national specifics of the phraseological units and their investigation:

“В целом, однако, гипертрофирование или даже абсолютизация национальной исключительности фразеологии, с одной стороны, принципиально неверны, а, с другой стороны, заслоняют возможность сопоставительного и структурно-типологического изучения фразеологических систем различных языков” (Долгополов / Dolgopolov, 1973, p. 27).

“To underline the culture specificity of language phraseology is quite wrong and what’s more it hinders the possibilities for contrastive studies” (Dolgopolov, 1973, p. 27).

There are a definite number of ECUs (101) and BCUs (282) that lack in one of the languages. Comparisons based on the bandicoot lack in Bulgarian because of the simple fact that the animal does not exist in the Bulgarian nature. But even if it exists, the mere existence is not a guarantee for generating comparative units. This brings the problem of choice into light. Not all existing animals become symbols of the phraseological units. The comparative units are emotional and expressive in nature, not nominal. Their aim is to show attitude, not to name phenomena. Such nominal units are the words.

**ECUs and BCUs that have a plant, fruit as a semantic base**

This group includes 8 ECUs (34%) and 19 BCUs (29%) from all the phraseological units that fall into the different semantic groups. Most of them are formed on the basis of the color or the freshness of the plant. And exactly this objective quality is the reason for the great number of the identical or the close in meaning ECUs and BCUs:
Identical comparative phraseological units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; black as sloes</td>
<td>черен като трънка</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stick to smb like bur&lt;r&gt;</td>
<td>закачам се като шипка;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quake (or quiver, shake,</td>
<td>треперя като лист</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tremble) like an &lt;aspen&gt; leaf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grow (or spring up)</td>
<td>растат като гъби &lt;след дъжд&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like mushrooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Close in meaning comparative phraseological units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>blush like a rose</td>
<td>почервенявам / почервенаена като божур</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; fresh as a daisy</td>
<td>свеж (бодър) като кукуряк</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; red as a rose</td>
<td>червен като трендафил</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like two peas &lt;in a pot&gt;</td>
<td>лика прилика като два стръка иглика</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also comparative units that are not motivated and do not find their correspondence in the other language (10 ECUs and 52 BCUs):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; good as a wheat</td>
<td>наред като тиква на плет</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; cool as a cucumber</td>
<td>стоя (седя) като дъб</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like old gooseberry</td>
<td>пълен като слива</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ECUs and BCUs that have objects from everyday life as a semantic base**

The comparative units here vary considerably in their semantic relations. Most of them do not have a counterpart in the other language. They are typical for the different language realities. (79 ECU and 121 BCU – 82% altogether).

The identical and the close in meaning units are considerably less in number (10% identical, 8% close in meaning units):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; sharp as a razor</td>
<td>остър като бръснач</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The identical ECUs and BCUs are based on an objectively observed characteristic. And exactly this characteristic becomes the most typical for the object, in other words it becomes a symbol. In English sharpness is associated with the razor, hardness is associated with the iron, whiteness with the sheet and etc. Sometimes one and the same object generates different comparative units. Since an object is viewed as many-sided, one of the investigated languages may stress upon one characteristic and the other highlights another:

**English**

- smooth as satin
- hard as iron
- straight as a poker (or ramrod)
- white as a sheet
- flat as a board
- speak (or talk) like a book
- smoke like chimney
- go (or sell) like hot cakes
- thin as a lath
- white as chalk
- round as a barrel

**Bulgarian**

- гладък като сатен
- твърд като железо
- прав като пръчка
- бял като платно
- плосък като дъска
- говоря като по книга
- пуша като комин
- вървя (или продавам) като топъл хляб
- тънък като вретено (или остен)
- бял като сирене
- дебел като бъчва (или буре)

It’s also possible that the different characteristics of an object to generate several comparative units. The semantic base “wax” in English forms five comparative units:
yielding as wax  
(мек като восък)

stick to smb  
melt like wax (букв. топя се като восък)
like wax  
mould like wax (букв. оформям като восък)

(bукв. лепя се за нкг като восък)

fit smb like wax (букв. пасвам, прилягам на нкг като восък)

The same semantic base forms BCUs that are completely different in meaning than ECUs. Bulgarian associates wax with the yellow color: жълт като восък, пожълтявам / пожълтея (прежълтявам / прежълтея) като восък (<as> yellow as wax).

Bearing in mind the fact that the two nations have different ways of life, folklore, history, etc., we naturally observe many comparative units that do not have a correspondence in the other language:

English - <as> rough as a nutmeg-grater, <as> safe as the bank, <as> keen as mustard, phony (or queer) as a three-dollar bill, go up and down like a yooyo

Bulgarian - влача нкг подире си като съдран цървул, излишен като ер голям, отпуснал се като свински цървул, мътен като боза, свил се като наденица в копания, бистър като боза, гол като хурка (фурка), сериозен като ибрик, рошав като разплетена дамаджана, etc.

ECUs and BCUs that have historical events, custom, celebrations, folklore, religion as a semantic base

This semantic group presupposes the greatest differences in the investigated languages (34 ECUs and 50 BCUs – 81% altogether).

ECUs and BCUs based on historical events and characters

English  
<as> dead as Queen Ann

Bulgarian  
първя (или ходя) като в турски гробища;
минавам като през (покрай) турски гробища;

<as> dead as Julius Caesar

стоя (или заставам) като
Most of the BCUs are generated during the period of the Turkish reign. For example, \(\text{вървя (ходя) като в турски гробища} \) – walk like in a Turkish graveyard means walk with difficulty as the stones in the Turkish graveyards were placed without any specific order, in chaos. It’s important to point out that most of these units slowly pass into oblivience.

### ECU and BCUs based on celebrations, folklore, tales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; thin as a whipping-post</td>
<td>мълча като турско гробище;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; game as Ned Kelly</td>
<td>работя като на бейлик</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ECU and BCUs based on religion and beliefs

Christianity generates many comparative phraseological units that are close in meaning (16 КФЕ – 15% altogether):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; old as Methuselah</td>
<td>стар като Мефасуил</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; sure as death</td>
<td>грозен като смъртта</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; poor as Job</td>
<td>беден като Йов</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; still as death (or as the grave)</td>
<td>тих като смъртта</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; proud as Lucifer</td>
<td>хитър като дявол</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; black as hell</td>
<td>черен като дявол</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fear smb, sth as the devil fears holly water</td>
<td>страхувам се (или боя се) като дявол от тамян</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ECU and BCUs that have people – their social status, profession, nationality and family relations

This semantic group experience little resemblance between the ECU and BCUs (11 ECU and 130 BCU – 96% altogether).
Bulgarian uses the gipsy symbol in 25 units and the priest symbol in 18. All of them have negative connotations.

(lit. lie like a Gypsy) (lit. <as> black as a Gypsy) (lit. walk like a Gypsy)

лъжа като циганин черен като циганин ходя като циганин

(лъжа като циганин черен като циганин ходя като циганин)

крада като циганин — циганин — кълна се като циганин

(л. стеал like a Gypsy) (л. swear like a Gypsy)

(л. караме се като цигани дърля се като циганин)

(л. quarrel like Gypsies) (л. fight like a Gypsy)

ECUs use the symbol of the judge, the sailor, the trooper, the nigger, etc.

The following six ECUs and BCUs are identical in meaning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>live like a king</td>
<td>живея като цар</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>live like a lord</td>
<td>живея като бей</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>live like a prince</td>
<td>живея като царица</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ECUs and BCUs that have nature as a semantic base**

This group includes a great number of identical and close in meaning comparative units (23% identical and 20% close in meaning):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; hard as a flint</td>
<td>твърд като кремък</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; heavy as lead</td>
<td>тежък като олово</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; bright as day</td>
<td>светъл като ден</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; clear (or plain) as day</td>
<td>ясен като бял ден</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; white as snow</td>
<td>бял като сняг</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; firm (or steady, solid) as a rock</td>
<td>твърд като скала</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Close in meaning comparative phraseological units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;as&gt; old as the hills</td>
<td>стар като света</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
flow like water  

tече (лее се)  
како река

<as> red as fire (flame)  

gорещ като огън

sink like a stone  

падам/падна

(тупвам/тупна)  
како камък

Most of the identical and the close in meaning units derive from the objectively observed facts that are the same for the two language realities. The units that do not have correspondences are relatively small in number (34 ECUs and 29 BCUs):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bulgarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| <as> deaf as a stone          | изчезвам/изчезна  
како мъгла |
| <as> black as ebony           | минавам (преминавам/премина)  
како мълния |
| <as> green as grass           | тих като вода  
|
| <as> loud as thunder          | изчезвам/изчезна  
како (яко) дим |
| <as> black as soot            |                               |

**CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the different semantic groups of ECUs and BCUs leads us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Despite the structural differences, ECUs and BCUs experience a great closeness in respect to their meaning (110 identical units – 9% and 136 close in meaning units – 11,5%). This observation derives from the following facts:

   - people have close mentality, behavior, reaction and perception regardless of their nationality;
   - shared cultural values;
   - calques.

2. ECUs and BCUs based on national specific characteristics are less than expected. Bearing in mind the different historical background and the geographical distance between the two nations, we expected a significant difference in the language bases (269 ECUs – 68% and 664 BCUs – 84% or 932 units - 79% altogether).
3. The negative characteristics of the semantic base experience greater emotional effect. Thus most of the ECUs and the BCUs have a negative connotation (207 ECUs – 52% and 590 BCUs – 74%).

4. One and the same base can generate different comparative units in the two investigated languages. The different characteristics of an object can also form up to several comparative units (e.g. wax).

5. The semantic bases in ECUs and BCUs are not arbitrary. They are deliberately chosen to designate the most typical characteristics of an object.

6. According to their semantic closeness ECUs and BCUs can be presented into the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Identical Number</th>
<th>Close in meaning</th>
<th>No correspondence altogether</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number %</td>
<td>Number %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
Group A – ECUs and BCUs that have an animal as a semantic base.
Group B - ECUs and BCUs that have a plant, fruit as a semantic base.
Group C - ECUs and BCUs that have objects from everyday life as semantic bases.
Group D - ECUs and BCUs that have historical events, custom, celebrations, folklore, religion as semantic bases.
Group E - ECUs and BCUs that have people – their social status, profession, nationality, family relations as semantic bases.
Group F - ECUs and BCUs that have nature as a semantic base.

68% of ECUs and 84% of BCUs do not have a correspondence in one of the investigated languages. Most of them are formed on the culturally specific bases and derive from the everyday life, the history, the way of life of the two nations.

Despite the differences, there is a considerable number of identical and close in structure and meaning ECUs and BCUs (21%). This is due to:
a) close thinking and mentality of the people;
b) shared cultural values;
c) calques.

Most of ECUs and BCUs (90%) characterize people – appearance, behavior, emotional relations, moral values, social status, etc. A small number of ECUs and BCUs (10%) characterize nature – objects, animals, etc. Many of the ECUs and the BCUs that have an animal as a semantic base are identical (10%) or close in meaning (11%). ECUs and BCUs that are formed on the basis of everyday life activities differ considerably in their meaning (79% ECUs and 85% BCUs). The culture specific comparative units represent a valuable source for reaching language proficiency both in the foreign and the mother tongue.

The results of the investigation and the respected corpora can be used in the foreign language teaching and will undoubtedly facilitate the foreign teaching process. The paper is also of importance to the translators of English into Bulgarian. The outlined semantic groups of comparative phraseological units in English and Bulgarian are very appropriate for further contrastive studies in the field.

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