
The concept “Child” in English phraseology: semantic, cognitive, linguacultural perspectives

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Annotation *This study examines the phraseological representation of the concept “child” in the English linguistic worldview, focusing on how child-related lexemes function within idiomatic expressions. Phraseological units are regarded as carriers of cultural memory, reflecting social values, stereotypes, and historical experience. The material of the study consists of phraseological units extracted from authoritative lexicographic sources, including Kunin’s Phraseological Dictionary and major English idiom dictionaries. The analysis reveals that the concept “child” is verbalised through multiple semantic models, such as social typification, metaphorical reinterpretation, evaluative characterisation, and euphemistic usage. Special attention is paid to metaphor-based phraseological units, where child-related imagery serves as a cognitive standard for simplicity, emotionality, naivety, and dependence. The study also demonstrates that such units frequently extend beyond literal reference to denote professional roles, social identities, and behavioural patterns. Additionally, the research highlights culturally specific values, including discipline, responsibility, and independence, reflected in phraseological usage.*

Keywords *Phraseology, concept, linguistic worldview, metaphor, cultural semantics*

Ingliz frazeologiyasida “child” kontsepti: semantik, kognitiv va lingvokulturologik aspektlar

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Annotatsiya *Ushbu tadqiqot ingliz tilining lingvistik manzarasida “bola” konseptining frazeologik ifodalashini o’rganadi, bunda bola bilan bog’liq leksemalarning idiomatik birliklar tarkibida qanday faoliyat yuritishiga alohida e’tibor qaratiladi. Frazeologik birliklar ijtimoiy qadriyatlar, stereotiplar va tarixiy tajribani aks ettiruvchi madaniy xotira tashuvchilari sifatida qaraladi. Tadqiqot materiali sifatida Kuninning frazeologik lug’ati hamda ingliz idiomalarining yirik lug’atlari kabi nufuzli leksikografik manbalardan olingan frazeologik birliklar xizmat qiladi. Tahlil natijalari shuni ko’rsatadiki, “bola” konsepti ijtimoiy tipizatsiya, metaforik qayta talqin, baholovchi xarakteristika va evfemistik qo’llanish kabi turli semantik modellarda verballashadi. Metaforaga asoslangan frazeologik birliklarga alohida e’tibor berilib, unda bola obrazlari soddalik, emotsionallik, soddadililik va qaramlikning kognitiv standarti sifatida xizmat qiladi. Tadqiqot shuningdek bunday birliklar ko’pincha bevosita ma’nodan tashqariga chiqib, kasbiy rollar, ijtimoiy identifikatsiyalar va xulq-atvor modellarini ifodalashini ko’rsatadi. Bundan tashqari, frazeologik qo’llanishda aks etgan intizom, mas’uliyat va mustaqillik kabi madaniy xos qadriyatlar ham yoritiladi.*

Kalit so’zlar *Frazeologiya, kontsept, lingvistik dunyoqarash, metafora, madaniy semantika*

Концепт «Child» в английской фразеологии: семантические, когнитивные и лингвокультурологические аспекты

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Аннотация

В данном исследовании рассматривается фразеологическая репрезентация концепта «ребёнок» в английской языковой картине мира с акцентом на функционирование лексем, связанных с ребёнком, в составе идиоматических выражений. Фразеологические единицы рассматриваются как носители культурной памяти, отражающие социальные ценности, стереотипы и исторический опыт. Материал исследования составляют фразеологические единицы, извлечённые из авторитетных лексикографических источников, включая фразеологический словарь Кунина и основные словари английских идиом. Анализ показывает, что концепт «ребёнок» вербализуется посредством различных семантических моделей, таких как социальная типизация, метафорическая переинтерпретация, оценочная характеристика и эвфемистическое употребление. Особое внимание уделяется метафорическим фразеологическим единицам, в которых образы, связанные с ребёнком, выступают когнитивным стандартом простоты, эмоциональности, наивности и зависимости. Исследование также демонстрирует, что подобные единицы часто выходят за пределы буквального значения, обозначая профессиональные роли, социальные идентичности и модели поведения. Кроме того, в работе подчёркиваются культурно-специфические ценности, включая дисциплину, ответственность и независимость, отражённые во фразеологическом употреблении.

Ключевые слова

Фразеология, концепт, языковая картина мира, метафора, культурная семантика

Introduction

Phraseology occupies a central position in contemporary linguistics due to its ability to reflect the interaction between language, cognition, and culture. Phraseological units, as stable and reproducible combinations of words, represent condensed forms of collective experience and encode culturally significant meanings (Fernando, 1996). They function not only as expressive means of communication but also as repositories of historical memory, social norms, and evaluative attitudes.

Within the framework of cognitive linguistics and linguoculturology, particular attention has been paid to the study of conceptual structures and their linguistic representation. One of the most significant and universal concepts is the concept "child," which occupies a key position in the system of human values. This concept encompasses a wide range of semantic components, including age, dependence, socialisation, emotionality, and generational continuity (Wierzbicka, 1992; 45-60). Its linguistic

representation, especially in phraseology, provides valuable insights into how a speech community conceptualises childhood and its associated social roles.

In English, child-related lexemes such as *child*, *boy*, *girl*, *baby*, *kid*, and *son* demonstrate high phraseological productivity. These lexemes participate in the formation of numerous idiomatic expressions whose meanings often extend far beyond literal reference. As shown in previous studies, phraseological units frequently involve metaphorical reinterpretation, whereby elements associated with childhood are used to describe adult behaviour, social types, and abstract phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Despite the growing interest in phraseological studies, the systematic analysis of the concept "child" within the English phraseological system remains insufficiently explored, particularly from a linguocultural perspective. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the semantic, cognitive, and cultural aspects of phraseological units representing the concept "child" in the English linguistic worldview.

Methodology

The present study employs an integrated methodological framework combining elements of descriptive linguistics, semantic analysis, cognitive linguistics, and linguocultural analysis.

– The empirical material consists of English phraseological units containing nuclear lexemes related to the concept "child." These units were extracted методом сплошной выборки (continuous sampling) from authoritative lexicographic sources, including A.V. Kunin's *Great English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary* (2005), *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (2006), *Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms* (Heacock, 2003), and *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* (Spears, 2005).

The research procedure involved several stages:

1. **Data Collection** – identification and extraction of phraseological units containing child-related components.
2. **Semantic Classification** – grouping of units according to dominant semantic models (e.g., social types, evaluative characteristics, metaphorical meanings, euphemisms).
3. **Cognitive Analysis** – examination of conceptual metaphors and cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of phraseological meanings.
4. **Linguocultural Interpretation** – analysis of cultural values, stereotypes, and social norms reflected in phraseological units.
5. **Contextual Analysis** – interpretation of usage patterns and pragmatic functions of phraseological units in discourse.

Special attention was given to metaphorical reinterpretation as a key mechanism of phraseological formation. The study also applied the principle of semantic field analysis, allowing the identification of core and peripheral meanings associated with the concept "child."

The combination of these methods ensured a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the phraseological representation of the concept "child," enabling the identification of its structural, semantic, and cultural characteristics within the English linguistic worldview.

Results and Discussion

English phraseological units containing the nuclear lexemes of the concept "child" were extracted from the dictionary entries of V. Kunin's *Great English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary* (2005), *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (2006), *Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms* (Heacock, 2003), and *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs* (Spears, 2005). The analysed material demonstrates that English phraseology verbalises the concept "child" through a broad range of semantic models, including direct nominations of children, metaphorical reinterpretations of child-related imagery,

evaluative characterisations of human behaviour, professional and social labels, generational names, euphemistic expressions, and innovative units associated with modern science and media discourse.

One of the most important sources of enrichment of the phraseological system of any language, including English, is the metaphorical reinterpretation of the prototypes of phraseological units, especially variable word combinations. Metaphorical phraseological units are based on different types of similarity, either real or imagined. They usually refer to human beings and possess an evaluative character. Such evaluations may be either negative or positive. In the English phraseological system, the lexemes *boy*, *girl*, *kid*, *baby*, *child*, *babe*, *son*, and *daughter* serve as productive components in phraseological nomination, and very often their idiomatic meaning extends far beyond literal age reference.

Nominative-Substantive

Phraseological Units Denoting Social Types

According to the principle of similarity of situation, a number of nominative-substantive phraseological units may be distinguished. This group is particularly important because it shows that English frequently uses child-related lexemes not to denote literal children, but to classify **social roles, professions, and characteristic human types**.

The phraseological unit *a back-room boy* (colloquial) has two meanings: first, a scientist working in a secret laboratory, a researcher or engineer involved in the development of new types of weapons; second, an expert or specialist, particularly one who prefers to remain in the background. The expression originates from Lord Beaverbrook's speech on war production delivered on March 24, 1941 (Beaverbrook, Lord, 1941). Here, the component *boy* participates in the formation of a professional-social nomination that no longer refers to childhood in the direct sense.

The phraseological unit *Teddy boy* (*Teddy girl*) denotes a fashion-conscious youth, a

"dandy." The word *Teddy* is a diminutive of *Edward*, referring to King Edward VII, who was known for his distinctive style of dress. *Teddy boys* and *girls* were young people in the 1950s who imitated this style and were often associated with rebellious and aggressive behaviour (Hebdige, 1979). Thus, the expression encodes both appearance and social stereotype.

The phraseological unit *rah-rah boys* denotes students who prefer amusement and entertainment to studying, that is, idlers and loafers. The expression *rah-rah* is a distorted form of *hurrah*, which reinforces the semantic component of noisy superficial enthusiasm.

The phraseological unit *poster child* means a model example, an embodiment of something, a classic or typical example. The expression (*the new kid on the block*) denotes a newcomer, someone who has recently arrived in a new place or organisation and still has much to learn. The phrase originally had a literal meaning referring to a child who had just moved into a neighbourhood; through analogy, it developed the figurative meaning of a new member of a group.

The phraseological unit *the boy/girl next door* is used to describe someone completely ordinary, neither wealthy nor famous. When applied to a girl, it often refers to someone loving, loyal, attractive, and simple in a positive sense, that is, down-to-earth and emotionally accessible.

The phraseological unit *a girl Friday* denotes an experienced and diligent secretary, a reliable assistant, a "right-hand person." It can also refer more broadly to any person performing a large amount of routine and frequently uninteresting office work. The expression originates from *Man Friday*, the faithful companion of Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's novel.

This group also includes *a wide boy*, a British expression denoting a swindler or trickster who attempts to make money through dishonest means; *a cry baby*, meaning a whiner, complainer, or someone ready to cry for any

reason; and *the boys in blue*, meaning sailors or police officers. In British English, the latter refers mainly to sailors or police officers; in American English, however, it refers to the federal troops of the Northern states during the American Civil War of 1861–1865 (Heacock, 2003). These examples clearly show that the child-related component often functions as part of a historically and socially marked idiomatic label.

Phraseological Reinterpretation of External Reality

It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of phraseological units in general, including those containing representatives of the concept “child,” are connected with various aspects of human life and activity, as well as with people’s observations of surrounding reality. Human beings often tend to **animate objects of the external world**. For instance, the phraseological unit *Scavenger’s daughter* does not refer to a small daughter but to an instrument of torture, namely a device similar to a rack. It was named after Scavenger, a distorted form of the surname of Skevington, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London, who invented this torture device during the reign of Henry VIII. Another phraseological unit, *Skipper’s daughters*, serves as a figurative designation of high waves with white crests, metaphorically referred to as “the captain’s daughters.”

Human perception of the world is strongly influenced by emotion, and speakers often express their attitudes toward various objects through figurative phraseological units. In doing so, they consciously or unconsciously correlate the figurative meaning of phraseological units with the stereotypes and standards that exist within a particular linguistic community and that reflect the national mentality most fully.

Simplicity, Ease, and Joy as Child-Based Figurative Standards

Something easy or insignificant is expressed by the following phraseological units: *child’s play*, *kid’s stuff* (*kids’ stuff* in British

English, *kid stuff* in American English), all meaning something trivial or very easy. The same semantic field includes the cliché expression *as easy as taking candy from a baby*, which denotes something extremely easy to accomplish. In these units, the child functions as a cognitive standard for helplessness, simplicity, and lack of resistance.

Children’s ability to derive joy from surrounding objects formed the basis of such expressions as *be like a child in a sweet shop* (BrE), *be like a kid in a candy store* (AmE), and *like a kid with a new toy*. These expressions describe people who enthusiastically and emotionally express joy about things around them. In contrast, in the adult world, childishness is often perceived negatively, as reflected in the expression *not a kid anymore*, which is typically used as a reproach. With regard to older people, the phraseological unit *be no longer in one’s first youth* is frequently applied.

Comparative Phraseological Units Based on Children’s Physiological Features

A number of comparative phraseological units are based on the physiological characteristics of children, particularly infants. This comparative group characterises a property, action, or state through a concrete image, with which comparison reveals how a certain quality is manifested or how a particular action occurs. Stable traditional comparisons include images derived from real life. Each such comparison has developed as a result of the centuries-long experience of a people and therefore represents a set of images familiar to every member of the linguistic community and transmitted from generation to generation. In these constructions, the child or its physiological characteristics function as a kind of measure or standard.

The phraseological unit *bald as a baby’s backside* means completely bald; *soft as a baby’s bottom* (*backside*) means extremely soft and smooth to the touch; *weak as a baby* denotes physical weakness; and *sleep like a baby* means to sleep very soundly. In these

phraseological units, such features as softness, absence of hair, tenderness, and weakness are verbalized.

Phraseological Units Characterizing Children's Behavior and Development

A child who annoys others with his or her behavior may jokingly be referred to as *the child from hell*, whereas a very intelligent and successful child is described as a *whiz kid*, meaning a precociously gifted and knowledgeable child. A difficult child is referred to as a *problem child*. When speaking about a child who makes one proud, the expression *That's my boy (girl)* is used.

A child's readiness to enthusiastically engage in an interesting activity has formed the basis of the phraseological unit *go at something like a boy killing snakes*. This unit encodes energetic, emotionally intensive, and wholehearted involvement in an activity.

Collectivism, Solidarity, and Group Inclusion

Children's sense of collectivism and solidarity is reflected in the following phraseological units: *one of the boys (lads)*, meaning one of the group, "one of us"; and *the old-boy network*, meaning a circle of former classmates or associates who help each other professionally and facilitate employment through personal connections. A synonymous expression is *jobs for the boys*, meaning employment arranged through personal connections; in political discourse, the expression may also refer to the distribution of advantageous positions to supporters of the winning political party.

This group also includes the obsolete phraseological unit *man and boy*, which characterizes the entire life path of a person. The phraseological unit *"separate the men from the boys"* emphasizes that in certain situations, it becomes obvious who is strong and courageous and who is not. Thus, it becomes clear who will be able to accomplish a difficult task and who will fail.

Euphemisms and Phraseological Units Connected with Pregnancy and Birth

Very often, phraseological units containing components of the lexical-semantic group "child" are used as euphemisms. For example, *(to be with child)* means "to be pregnant," especially in the later stages of pregnancy. Other phraseological units describe situations connected with the birth of a child: *wet the baby's head* means to drink to the health of a newborn child; *the baby blues* denotes postpartum depression; and a *bachelor's baby* denotes an illegitimate child.

Discipline, Self-Organisation, Responsibility, and Independence

The phraseological material indicates that internal self-organisation, discipline, and self-control are dominant values in English-speaking societies. These traits are believed to be cultivated from childhood, as reflected in the expression *from a boy*, meaning "from childhood" or "from an early age." This cultural attitude is also reflected in the following phraseological units: *pass the baby*, meaning to shift responsibility onto someone else; *give someone the baby to hold*, *leave someone holding the baby*, and *be left holding the baby*, all meaning to make someone bear responsibility for another person's actions.

The phraseological unit *the children of this world* refers to worldly-wise, experienced people, whereas *a babe in the woods* and *a babe in arms* refer to a naive, inexperienced person. A similar meaning is expressed by *babes and sucklings*, referring to novices or completely inexperienced individuals; *babe unborn* denotes a person lacking worldly experience; and *Peck's Bad Boy* refers to a person who embarrasses others through naive tactlessness, the expression being derived from the title of the book *Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa* by G. W. Peck.

Members of English-speaking societies highly value and encourage early independence and self-confidence. It is believed that children should be capable of independent actions and should be able to manage without their parents for a certain

period of time while the latter are at work. Such a child is referred to as a *latchkey child (kid)*, literally “a child with a key,” whose parents work all day. Deborah Belle argues that it may be better for a child to stay at home alone rather than with a babysitter or older siblings in certain circumstances (Belle, 1999).

In the 1950s, mass surveys conducted in Britain revealed dominant tendencies in child-rearing practices. These included strict disciplinary influence exerted on children from a very early age and the acceptability of corporal punishment. This is reflected in the phraseological unit *a whipping boy*, meaning a scapegoat. Historically, it referred to a boy educated together with a prince who was punished physically for the prince’s misbehavior (Kunin, 2005).

Spoiled Children, Favorites, and Social Approval

Critical attitudes toward spoiled children are reflected in the following phraseological units: *a mummy’s boy (a mama’s boy)*, meaning a mother’s favorite or an overprotected son; *the baby of the family*, meaning the youngest and often most pampered member of the family; and *the blue-eyed boy*, meaning a favorite or darling.

A successful and respected person is called a *golden boy/girl*, while someone favoured by those in power may be referred to as a *fair-haired boy* or *blue-eyed boy*. Another expression describing a successful individual is *a child of fortune*, meaning a person favored by fate. These units show that child-related lexemes participate in both negative and positive evaluative nomination.

Gendered and Sexualized Social Stereotypes

A shy and timid man or young man may become the object of ridicule, as such traits are stereotypically associated with women; this is reflected in the phrase *a big girl’s blouse*, meaning an effeminate or overly timid man.

A sexually attractive woman who pays great attention to her appearance and clothing is referred to as a *glamour girl*, meaning an

attractive or glamorous woman. An easily accessible woman may be called a *hot baby*. An unmarried woman living independently is sometimes described as a *bachelor’s girl*.

This group also includes *a toy boy (a boy toy)*, meaning a young male lover of an older woman, usually financially supported by her; *a rent boy*, meaning a male prostitute, typically a young homosexual male prostitute; *Nancy boy (pansy boy)*, meaning a homosexual man; and *a call girl*, meaning a prostitute who visits clients by appointment. These units show how the lexemes *boy* and *girl* are extended beyond age reference and incorporated into gendered and sexualized phraseological structures.

Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that the phraseological representation of the concept “child” in the English linguistic worldview constitutes a complex, multidimensional system reflecting cognitive, cultural, and social processes. Phraseological units containing child-related lexemes function not only as nominative linguistic elements but also as carriers of culturally significant meanings that extend far beyond their literal reference. The analysis has shown that the concept “child” is verbalised through a wide range of semantic models, including social typification, evaluative characterisation, metaphorical reinterpretation, and euphemistic expression. In particular, metaphorisation emerges as a dominant mechanism, enabling the transfer of child-related features – such as simplicity, emotionality, naivety, dependence, and vulnerability – onto the description of adult behaviour, social roles, and abstract phenomena.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that phraseological units actively encode culturally specific values of English-speaking societies. Concepts such as discipline, responsibility, independence, and social integration are systematically reflected through idiomatic expressions involving child-related components. At the same time, both positive

and negative evaluations are present, illustrating ambivalent societal attitudes toward childhood and its associated characteristics.

It has also been established that child-related lexemes in phraseology frequently lose their direct denotative meaning and acquire secondary, figurative functions, contributing to the formation of social labels, stereotypes, and discourse-specific meanings. This confirms the high degree of semantic flexibility and productivity of phraseological units within the linguistic system.

In conclusion, the concept "child" occupies a central position in the English phraseological worldview, serving as an important cognitive and cultural reference point. The study contributes to the development of phraseological theory, cognitive linguistics, and linguoculturology by providing a systematic analysis of the interaction between language, culture, and conceptualisation. The results may be applied in further comparative studies, as well as in lexicography, language teaching, and intercultural communication research.

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