

# ENGLISH AND BELARUSIAN GENDER-MARKED IDIOMS AND PROVERBS: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PECULIARITIES

O. V. Kostochkina<sup>a</sup>, Ya. E. Khramaya<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Belarusian State University,  
4 Niezaliezhnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus, kostolga@bsu.by

<sup>b</sup> Belarusian State University,  
4 Niezaliezhnasci Avenue, Minsk 220030, Belarus, fmo.hramaya@bsu.by

This article explores how gender concepts are portrayed in English and Belarusian idioms and proverbs according to gender linguistics and linguocultural studies. Based on an analysis of over a hundred Belarusian and English examples, it concludes that societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity are shaped by culture, history, and religion. Furthermore, the study finds that English idioms and proverbs are more androcentric, while Belarusian phraseology demonstrates greater gender equality. The authors conclude that while English emphasizes male independence and bravery, Belarusian often highlights typical male professions and the role of a man as a husband or father, and the concept of mother is generally unique to the Belarusian language.

**Keywords:** concept man; concept woman; gender; linguacultural studies; idioms; proverbs; Belarusian; English.

## ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЕ И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ ПЕРЕДАЧИ РОДА В АНГЛИЙСКИХ И БЕЛОРУССКИХ ФРАЗЕОЛОГИЗМАХ И ПОСЛОВИЦАХ

О. В. Косточкина<sup>1)</sup>, Я. Е. Храмая<sup>2)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup> Белорусский государственный университет,  
пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь, kostolga@bsu.by

<sup>2)</sup> Белорусский государственный университет,  
пр. Независимости, 4, 220030, г. Минск, Беларусь, fmo.hramaya@bsu.by

Данная статья исследует, как родовые концепции изображаются в английских и белорусских фразеологизмах и пословицах, опираясь на гендерную лингвистику и лингвокультурологию. В результате проведенного анализа более сотни белорусских и примеров делается вывод, что общественные представления о мужественности и женственности формируются культурой, историей и религией, а также что английские идиомы и пословицы более андроцентричны, в то время как белорусская фразеология демонстрирует большее гендерное равенство. Авторы делают вывод, что если английский язык подчеркивает мужскую независимость и храбрость, то белорусский часто выделяет типичные мужские профессии и роль мужчины как мужа или отца, а концепция матери в целом уникальна именно для белорусского языка.

**Ключевые слова:** концепт мужчина; концепт женщина; род; лингвистические и культурологические исследования; фразеологизмы; пословицы; белорусский язык; английский язык.

Each nation has universal and unique ideas about man and woman, traits of masculinity and femininity. The structure and content of these often

stereotypical representations depend not only on the ethno-cultural identity, but also on the historical stage of development of a certain society, its level of urbanization, religion, and the like.

Gender research as a scientific direction was the result of a women's movement in the West in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century which opposed the current positions of women and men in the society. Gender studies are conducted in philosophy, sociology, sociolinguistics, semiotics, ethnography, cultural studies. Biological sex divides us into a *class of men* and a *class of women* based on physiology. Gender is the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women. Gender identifies the position of the individual in the social hierarchy. The World Health Organization defines gender as «*gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed*» [1].

In foreign linguistics appeared the direction that studies on the one hand, gender asymmetry, and the other – features of speech behavior of men and women. Gender linguistics was followed by the feminist linguistics which continues to exist these days and tries to prove *anti-female* asymmetry in the language system. In their opinion such asymmetry can negatively influence on various spheres of our life because language is not only a product of the development of society, but also a means of forming its thinking and mentality. There are two approaches to gender studies in linguistics [2, p. 53]: 1) the reflection of gender differences and social ideas about a man and a woman in language; 2) the study of male-female communicative behavior. The first approach has been used in the research.

Gender as a special subject of discussion is less typical of the Belarusian scientific tradition than of the Western one. However, the concepts of *man* and *woman* have certain national and cultural features. That's why, one of the most important objectives of gender linguistics is to find and describe gender relations in its different fields of language.

Linguacultural studies reveal the cultural specificity of gender, the general and specific in its construction depending on the language and culture of this society, which allows us to establish the degree of *androcentrism* (from gr. anēr (andros) – male) of different languages and cultures. According to V. A. Maslova's research [3, p. 102] the term *linguaculturology* means the science, which appeared at the intersection of linguistics and culturology. This science investigates the question of reflection and consolidation of nation's culture in language. The main category of linguaculturology is the concept which is defined as the conventional mental unit directed to the complex studying of language, mind and culture. In other words the subject of linguaculturology is the language picture of the world. Moreover, every language is an original system which is etched in native speakers' mind and build up their world perception, therefore linguaculturology is a promising field for linguistic investigations.

In modern linguistics, there are three main directions or approaches to understanding the concept: linguistic, cognitive and cultural. The linguistic approach is represented by the point of view different soviet authors, thoroughly analysed in the scientific work of I. Zykova [4, p.15], where she believes that the

concept exists for each dictionary item, and suggests considering the concept as an expression of the meaning. In general, representatives of this direction understand the concept as the full potential of the word meaning together with its connotative element.

Every language culture has language stereotypes and patterns. Often we do not notice them, do not perceive them as something significant. The reason is that this is something obvious and natural for us. Gender-marked idiomatic expressions are divided into masculine and feminine. Taking into consideration typically male or typically female allows us to avoid mistakes, as with positions of the language culture of communication and the culture of the people being studied language in general. The study of idiomatic expressions from a gender perspective is important for linguistic research. The phraseological layer of the language reflects the national identity of the people and cultural and historical changes that take place in different periods of development of society.

The material for the study was 100 gender marked Belarusian phraseological units (idioms) and 100 proverbs (paremias), extracted by the method of overall selection from several Belarusian dictionaries [5, p. 10; 6, p. 7; 7, p. 11] and 132 gender marked idioms and 77 paremias of the English language, chosen the same way from *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* edited by Judith Siefring; *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* edited by Jennifer Speake [8, p. 25; 9, p. 17]. It turned out that gender marked phraseological units occupy the same space (about 3 %) in the total mass of English and Belarusian idioms and proverbs.

After studying of English gender marked idioms it became obvious that *man* is depicted more often than *woman* in English. Also the study showed that *man* is expressed by the external form or the external and internal form at the same time, i. e. by male names (*Jack, Bob, Tom, Harry, Phillip, Mike, Peter, Paul, Richard, Paul, Thomas*); historical and ancient Greek figure (*Caesar, Midas, Hercules, Achilles, Procrustean*); biblical image (*Abraham, Adam, Cain*); lexemes (*man, boy, father, son, uncle, knight, master, prince*) and pronouns (*he – his*).

What concerns *woman*, there is not any significant difference in her representation. She is shown formal and formal-semantic with the help of personal names (*Jane, Molly, Matilda, Fanny*); lexemes (*woman, girl, wife, mum, mother, grandmother, lady, miss, damsel, princess*) and pronouns (*she – her*). Semantic i. e. by internal form woman is represented more widely than man (*belle of the ball, old trout, powder your nose, a bit of fluff/stuff/skirt/crackling, in the pudding club, in the family way*). Sometimes idioms describe women by their form but refer to men (*play the woman, big girl's blouse*).

Belarusian idioms are androcentric too. In Belarusian idioms *man* is expressed by the external form or the external and internal form at the same time with the help of male names (*Іван, Марка, Юрка, Мікіта, Фама, Макар*); historical and ancient Greek figure (*Ахілес, Мафусаіл, Гордзій, Янус*); biblical image (*Адам, Абрам*); lexemes (*мужык, пан, брат, дзядзька, дзед, рыцар, раб, казак, майстар, кум, гаспадар*). Semantic gender marking is shown by few idioms (*моцны пол, дужы пол, трымацца за спадніцу*).

*Woman* is shown formal by means of personal names (*Ганна, Мар'я, Маруся*); lexemes (*баба, бабуля, сястра, дзейка, дачка, жонка, маці, удава,*

цешча, гаспадыня). Semantic gender marking is shown by few idioms (сiнiя панчоха, прыгожы пол, слабы пол, нi дома нi замужам).

English proverbs do not show a big difference in the quantity of *man* and *woman*. *Man* and *woman* are depicted formal (*experience is the father of wisdom; the mother of mischief is no bigger than a midge's wing*); formal-semantic (*Jack of all trades and master of none; a woman's strength is her tongue*) and semantic (*beauty draws with a single hair; Marry in hast, repent at leisure*).

Belarusian proverbs pay almost equal attention to *men* and *women*. *Man* and *woman* markings are fixed almost always in the external form (казала Насця, як удасця; голад не цётка; Янка кiвае на Петруся, а Пятрусь на Янку) or in the external and internal at the same time (без гаспадара гумно плача, а без гаспадынi хата; брат любiць сястру багатую, а муж жонку здаровую).

To sum up, it is obvious, that the image of a man predominates in English and Belarusian idioms. But proverbs of both languages are less androcentric than idioms. The result proves androcentrism of the language picture of the world [10, p. 67]. It can be explained by such common signs of androcentrism such as identification of the concepts of man and human. In many European languages they are designated in a word: *man* in English, *Mann* in German, *homme* in French (*young men may die, but old men must die*), as well as the use of the masculine forms for individuals of any gender (*Tom, Dick and Harry*).

Comparative method showed almost the same number of positive and negative characteristics of a man in English idioms and proverbs. However a woman is considered negative far more often than positive. The image of a man is positive when he is active, independent, brave and negative by his hesitation and shyness. What concerns the image of a woman, such traits as talkativeness and cunning are negatively evaluated. The desire of a woman to hide her age and desire for external beauty in the absence of a good character is not approved. In English idioms, women are often viewed in terms of external attractiveness to men, especially as a sexual object. Intellectual abilities and dependence of a woman on a man have also a negative connotation. Moreover there are a lot of proverbs where a woman is defective, below the level of a man (*six hours' sleep for a man, seven for a woman and eight for a fool; the female of the species is more deadly than the male; man, woman and devil are three degrees of comparison*).

Belarusian material has a huge difference in the number of positive and negative descriptions of men and women. There is no gender asymmetry in connotation. Both men and women are described more often negative.

There is no big difference in the structure of the concept *man* in the phraseology of two languages, but in English phraseology it is presented more widely than in Belarusian. The fullness of the concept indicates its significance for the language picture of the world. The number of idioms objectifying this concept shows this difference (67 in English and 60 in Belarusian). English proverbs and idioms point to superiority of an old man over a young (*never send a boy to do a man's job; better be an old man's darling, than a young man's slave*). They appreciate highly independence (*be your own man, a man of his word*) and courage (*brave men lived before Agamemnon; old soldiers*

*never die*) and describe negatively such male traits of character as shyness (*big girl's blouse man of straw; a ladies' man; play the woman; faint heart never won fair lady*) and hesitation (*he who hesitates is lost*). Superiority of a man over a woman is also reflected in English proverbs (*a good Jack makes a good Jill; it is a sad house where the hen crows louder than the cock*). Typical male professions are shown most frequently (*a carpenter is known by his chips; a bad workman blames his tools; a man who is his own lawyer has a fool for his client*). The conceptual feature *fool* is represented equally in the idioms of both languages (*more people know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows – вырас да неба, а дурань як трэба*). In phraseology of both languages are given tips before marriage (*marry in haste, repent at leisure – шукай жонку не на ігрышчы, а на іржышчы*). However, Belarusian proverbs and sayings have their specific conceptual features for example, *dependence of a poor man on more influential master* (*паньы б'юцца, а ў мужыкоў чубы трашчаць; дзе толькі мужык з слаўцом, там за ім пуга з вузлом*); *master* (*калі абора цячэ, гаспадыня бліны пячэ, а калі гумно цячэ, гаспадар з хаты ўцячэ*).

The concept *woman* has more conceptual features in English idioms and proverbs than in Belarusian. They point to importance of appearance for woman (*to be belle of the ball; beauty draws with a single hair; never choose a young woman or your linen by candle light; a man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks*). Such female traits of character as cunning and talkativeness are the most significant in the language picture of the world (*the female of the species is more deadly than the male; man, woman and devil are three degrees of comparison; a woman's strength is her tongue; a sieve will hold water better than a woman's mouth a secret; hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*). Moreover English idioms pay attention to women as sexual object (*bit of fluff/skirt/stuff; a bit of all right; fancy/scarlet woman; a woman kissed is half taken*), to pregnancy (*in the pudding club; have a bun in the oven; in the family way*) and to socially active women (*Lady Muck; ladies who lunch; Lady Bountiful; lady of leisure*). Also woman is regarded as an object of violence (*a woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be; a woman and a ship ever want mending*).

Studying of the structure of concepts *man* and *woman* in English and Belarusian idioms showed universal and specific characteristics of the concepts. The most significant male characteristics and features in English picture of the world are superiority of an old man over a young man, superiority of a man over a woman, courage and independence, typical profession, a father. Belarusian idioms and proverbs pay attention to male typical profession, a man as a husband, a father and a fool, a master, a dependence of a poor man on more influential master. Thus, concept *man* is quantitatively and qualitatively presented wider and fuller in English idioms and proverbs. A woman in both languages is represented with the same number of idioms and proverbs despite the fact that the concept *woman* has more conceptual features in English idioms and proverbs than in Belarusian. Conceptual feature «mother» is represented only in Belarusian idioms and proverbs. Consequently we can speak about more expressed anti-female asymmetry in English language system while Belarusian language system shows more gender equality.

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