

Transformation of Set Expressions in Somerset Maugham's Works



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Set expressions are considered a part of everyday speech. Specialists of English have long recognized the importance of idiomatic expressions as a means of adding grace and precision to speech and writing. The problem of set expressions in Modern English is rather arbitrary, and different linguists adhere to different views concerning the phenomenon in question.

Set expressions have sometimes been called “word equivalents” and it has been postulated by A. I. Smirnitsky that the vocabulary of a language consists of words and word equivalents (word-groups) similar to words in so far as they are not created in speech but introduced into the act of communication ready-made. This means that set expressions form a section of the vocabulary which has to be set apart and learned or introduced to the students and into the memory of machines as a unity of stereotypical groups of words (Vasileyev 1982: 157)¹. For example, no substitution and variation are possible in the following unchangeable set expressions which differ in many other respects: *red tape, first night, to hope for the best, as busy as bee, fair and square, stuff and nonsense, time and again, to and fro, calf love*.

Any change in the set expression would destroy the meaning and the expressive quality of the whole. Besides, many of them possess unchangeable informational charge. Respectively, the sum total of the information contained in the word-group, including expressiveness, stylistic and emotional colouring, is created by mutual interaction of the elements forming the word-group. For example, *heads or tails* comes from the old custom of deciding a dispute or settling which of the two possible alternatives will follow when tossing a coin. The semantic correlative ties of the word-group are different from those in a free group of the same words where the information is additive and each element has a much greater semantic independence. To be more exact, the semantic relation between the components of the word-group are stable, fixed and unchangeable. The substitution of either component will undoubtedly affect the meaning of the whole phrase.

In the following group of words-*to cut bread, to cut cheese, to eat bread*, the information is additive in the sense that the amount of information we had on receiving the first signal, that is having heard or read the word *cut* is increased, the listener obtains further delimits and learns what is cut. Such groups are called changeable set expressions (Arnold 1983: 81)² and they fundamentally differ from word-groups or unchangeable set

expressions where the meaning of the whole phrase cannot be derived from the meanings of the separate components. They are also called clichéd expressions.

However, the main characteristic of being unchangeable does not at all mean that the fixation of the above mentioned expressions is drawn to an absolute in the language vocabulary and that they would never confront changes (Chinionova 1974: 27)³. There are many cases when the changed forms are recorded in the dictionaries and become another language norm.

When the traditional set expression *to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth* first appeared in the dictionaries in the 18th century, it had another form with the same meaning, namely, *to be born with a penny in one's mouth*. Then, at the end of the 18th century the former form of the phrase left out the latter. In the 19th century the transformed form-*to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth*, had already established itself as an indispensable part of the English vocabulary and has been used in oral and written speech since then.

Set expressions may confront some other changes. There are cases when a certain component containing the general meaning of the phrase rather than the primary meaning stands separate from the idiom. The word *moon* in the context *to cry for the moon* which, according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary means "to desire the impossible", may serve as a good example of the falling apart of the potential word from the structure of the idiom. Let us discuss the transformation of this idiom in the following example:

And yet there was the moon and he could not forget how Fleur had always wanted it.-But if you want to know or have anything particular, Fleur, I would like to be told .- Only the moon my dear.

(J. Galsworthy "Swan Song", p.56)

In this example the word *moon*, seemingly independent at first sight, is not used in its primary meaning of a "celestial body". Its meaning indicates to "something unachievable", as if extracted from the general meaning of the phrase *to cry for the moon*.

Thus, it is evident that the transformation of set expressions which is brought forth by linguistic as well as extralinguistic factors, is a necessary process and it enables the linguists to study set expressions as an individual creativity in order to make a strong expressive-emotional impact upon the reader.

Let us consider the analyses of some transformed set expressions:

We were born with a silver spoon in one hand and with a silver fork in the other.
(S. Maugham "The Moon and Sixpence" p. 115)

In this example we deal with the transformation of the idiom *to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth*. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the phrase means "having wealthy parents". The author has replaced the word *mouth* with *hand* and

has added the combination of words *and a silver fork in the other*, thus deforming the phrase with the special purpose of conveying a new meaning which is the opposite of the original one. Thus on the one hand, the author intends to show the hero's-Strickland's wealth and great success in life. *One thing can never be doubtful and that is that Strickland had genius. He was a great artist whose books were much spoken about. He was really a talented man.* On the other hand, by adding the phrase *with a silver fork in the other*, he implies that Strickland had some troublesome problems. The author mentions that fortune does not always smile upon Strickland. As the context reveals he *left Paris with another woman leaving his wife with no penny. He was staying in a poor, abandoned building looking ill at ease. Then he turned out to be badly ill and died in a horrible situation.* The author has created this contrast to show how one's success can be followed by failure, how *Pity and grandeur, malice and charity, hatred and love can find place side by side in the same human heart.* This conclusion, based on the transformation of the idiom, is the leading idea which can be traced throughout the whole story.

*I suppose every family has a **black and white sheep.***

(S. Maugham "The Ant and Grasshoper", p. 25)

There is no doubt that in this case we deal with the phrase "**black sheep**"- an ordinary phrase which has the meaning of "a person who is strongly disapproved of by other members of his or her family". But, as we see, the word "white" is added to the ordinary phrase. In this way the author has created a contrast between "the black and white sheep" and he means that one and the same family may include both good and bad personalities.

The narrow philological context reveals that the story is about two brothers, one of them is a hard working man, while the other-lazy and indecent. Thus the author used the phrase "black sheep" to describe Tom who, according to the context, was wild, thoughtless and selfish and blackmailed his brother John all the time. And then the author inserts the word "white" within the phrase to show the opposite personal value-George the other brother who, as we become aware of the story, is a serious and respectable man.

Surely the purpose of transformation is to make the comparison of two brothers stronger and more vivid to the reader.

*"Please, don't **bear me that much malice**, because I can't accede to your wish", - said Davidson with a melancholy smile." I respect you very much, doctor; and I should be sorry if you thought ill of me".*

(S. Maugham "The Rain", p. 37)

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* to bear malice means "hatred for somebody" or "desire to hurt somebody". And in the context given above, the phrase *bear malice* is used in its dictionary meaning. The word-combination *that much* is added to the original phrase to intensify its meaning and achieve a strong effect. The context reveals that *Mr. Davidson and Dr Macphail do not have a liking for each other. Once Dr*

Macphail called Davidson a damned busy body. And Davidson in his turn made fun of Dr. Macphail because of his ill success with the governor. Besides, he did not believe him to be an experienced doctor and did not like him at all. Thus, that much makes the feeling of hatred stronger and bigger.

I can eat like a wolf, did you notice?, - once he told me.
(S. Maugham "The Happy Man", p. 320)

In this example we deal with the transformation of the phrase *eat like a horse*. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, this phrase, has the meaning "to eat much and with big appetite, to eat with greediness". A question may well be asked why the author has replaced the word *horse* with *wolf*. He describes his hero in the following way: *He gulped a good bottle of wine greedily when he saw it. You might have hesitated to let him remove your appendix but you could not have imagined a more delightful creature to drink a glass of wine with. He had an amazing appetite.* Obviously in this phrase the transformation intends to emphasize the hero's greediness.

Thus, the contexts of the above mentioned examples demonstrate clearly that transformation is a linguistic phenomenon. The transformation of set expressions in different speech events is aimed at strengthening the emotional, expressive impact upon the reader and making speech more impressive. The role of transformed set expressions is great in fiction and many writers make a wide use of them. The broad applicability of these kinds of expressions in S. Maugham's works shows that they really change the image and expressiveness of the literary work.

References:

1. Vasilejev, L.M. (1982) *Virazitelnie svoistva frazeologicheskikh yedinits*. Saratov.
2. Arnold, I. V. (1973) *The English Word*. Moscow.
3. Chinenova, A.V. (1974) *Deformatsiya frazeologicheskikh yedinits*. Moscow.

Դարձվածաբանական միավորների փոխակերպումը Սոմերսեթ Մոեմի ստեղծագործություններում

Դարձվածաբանական միավորները գործածվում են ինչպես գրավոր, այնպես էլ բանավոր խոսքում և այն դարձնում հակիրճ ու նրբագեղ: Դարձվածքների փոխակերպված ձևերի օգտագործումը, որը հատուկ է խոսքին, միտված է ուժեղացնելու զգայական ազդեցությունը լսողի կամ ընթերցողի վրա՝ խոսքը դարձնելով ավելի արտահայտիչ: Դրանց դերը մեծ է գեղարվեստական գրականության մեջ, և շատ հեղինակներ լայնորեն կիրառում են ոճավորված դարձվածքներ: Սոմերսեթ Մոեմի կողմից մնաց դարձվածքների լայն կիրառությունը ընդգծում է հեղինակի անհատական ոճի ինքնատիպությունը, նկարագրվող պատկերները դարձնում գունեղ և տպավորիչ, ինչի շնորհիվ էլ հեղինակի ոճը դառնում է հեշտ ճանաչելի: