

## THE CULTURAL PECULIARITIES OF TIME MEASUREMENT IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

Time is of philosophical interest and is also the subject of linguistic investigation. It corresponds to the order of things in the world: the objective reality exists in time and space. Normally events in time are thought of in terms of the notions of past, present and future. The fundamental unit of time is a second. The other time-keeping units are a minute, an hour, a day, a night, a week, a month, a year, etc.

In English, time is expressed with the help of four groups of aspect-tense forms of the verb-predicate /indefinite, continuous, perfect and perfect-continuous tenses/, numerous adverbial lexical and syntactical expressions /yesterday, next year, when he comes/, etc..

A special consideration must be paid to language units, the semantic structures of which include the temporal elements. For example, the meaning of some English idioms is explained by referring to time dimensions. Longman Dictionary of English Idioms shows that the semantic structure of such idioms includes:

1/ the word “time” or words denoting time measurement /second, minute, hour, day, night, week, month, year, etc/:

a month of Sundays - /coll/ a very long *period of time*;

every other N – every *second*;

the /wee/ small hours /not fml/ - the *hours* after *midnight*, one, two, three o'clock *in the morning*;

2/ expressions functioning as adverbial modifiers of time, which may be expressed by:

-adverbs or adverbial phrases: nine times out of ten /not fml/ - *almost always*;

-nominal phrases: man and boy /not fml, old-fash/ - *since boyhood*; *from boyhood on*;

-adverbial clause of time: fiddle while Rome burns /not fml/ - to do nothing *while something important is being ruined or destroyed*.

The idioms with the temporal elements in their semantic structure may take different syntactical positions in the sentence, i.e. those, which are characteristic of adverbs, verbs, nouns and adjectives and interjections.

Taking the position of adverbs in the sentence, idioms function as adverbial modifiers of time. In this case they denote:

-fixed time /answering the question “when?”/:

here and now – at this present moment, immediately;

-duration /answering the question “How long?”/:

for time immemorial /rather old fash/ - over a period of time for longer than anyone can remember;

frequency /answering the question “How often?”/:

time and /time/ again – often; many times.

In some idioms, which take the adverbial position in the sentence, the temporal element is referred to in order to express other adverbial meanings:

for old time’s sake – because of or as a reminder of happy times in the past.

In this example, the reason is explained by referring to the notion of time.

The idea of time is referred to in some idioms functioning like adjectives to express quality: here today /and/ gone tomorrow /coll/ - present for only a very short time.

A number of idioms with the temporal element in their semantic structure function like nouns: one of those days /coll/ - a day on which nothing goes right.

The idioms functioning like verbs may express their meaning “action, process” by referring to time elements: strike while the iron is hot /not fml/ - to act at the most favorable moment when one is most likely to succeed.

Few are the idioms with the temporal component of their semantic structure, which can be used as interjections: never say die! /not fml/ - never give up hope! /said to encourage someone at a difficult time/.

The usage of some idioms is restricted semantically or structurally. For example:

On the wagon /coll/ - /*esp. of a person who drinks habitually*/ not drinking alcoholic drink, usu. for a short time: He’s taken his doctor’s advice very seriously and has gone on the wagon /Adv, after be, go, etc/

Some idioms under analysis have special style markers pointing to the sphere of their usage:

that’ll be the day /coll, *rather humor*/ - the day when that happens I’ll be very surprised;

Abraham’s bosom /*euph, old-fash*/ - the place where the good go after death;

days on end /*not fml*/ - many days, one after the other;

halcyon days /*rather lit*/ - times that are remembered as being happy, contented or perfect.

It is common knowledge that the expressions, which are called idioms, are metaphorical. It means that the exact meaning of the whole idiom can’t be derived from the lexical meanings of its constituents.

Sometimes the lexical meaning of a word, denoting time measurement, disappears and is not reflected in its semantic structure:

call it a day /coll/ - to finish or stop doing sth, esp. to stop working.

The given idiom contains the word “day”, which has the lexical meaning “time between sunrise and sunset”. The idea of time is not mentioned in the dictionary definition of this idiom

And, on the contrary, the temporal element may appear in the semantic structure of the idioms, which do not contain any time words:

ups and downs /not fml/ - *times* of happiness or success and *times* of sadness or failure.

The usage of “times” in this dictionary entry shows reference to the idea of time.

It is necessary to say, that in some examples the lexical meaning of the time word, which is a constituent element of an idiom, is completely preserved:

a red letter *day* /coll/ - a *day* on which sth good or special happens or is supposed to happen.

The opposite process to the absolute preservation of the lexical meaning of the temporal element is its reinterpretation. For example:

like there's no *tomorrow* /coll/ - as if the chance will *never* come again.

The time keeping word “tomorrow” has the lexical meaning “on the day after today”. This temporal meaning is reinterpreted in the idiom “like there's no tomorrow” as its semantical structure expresses the temporal meaning with the help of “never”, which has the meaning “at no time”

It is interesting to mention that in some idioms the lexical units of time keeping are reinterpreted to have nothing to do with the idea of time:

/as/ happy as the day is long – very happy.

The lexical meaning of the word day “time between sunrise and sunset” is completely reinterpreted. The subordinate clause, in which the word “day” is used, performs the function of an intensifier because it shows a certain degree of quality.

Analyzing idioms with temporal elements, we see, that they can take different positions in the sentence: adverbials, nouns, adjectives, verbs or interjections. This peculiarity of the idioms under analysis helps us to understand the different roles, which the temporal elements perform in the semantic structure: they either convey adverbial meanings or are referred to in order to denote substance, quality and action/process or even to express exclamations.