

Semantic and Pragmatic Properties of English and German Idioms for Deception

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Abstract: In this study, the researchers analyze English and German idioms covering the semantic area for deception. The research is carried out within the boundaries of cognitive-pragmatic approach and aimed at studying and comparing semantic features and pragmatic properties of English and German idioms for deception. The priority is placed on the inner form, attitudinal meaning and discourse functioning of the said idioms. Special attention is given to the ways idioms interact with the context they are used in. The researchers apply contextual analysis to examine the way idioms under study “behave” in discourse and to define the major factors affecting the pragmatic impact in a particular context. The researchers also try to reveal traits in common and differences in the ways English and German Native speakers regard deception in a particular communicative situation.

Key words: Deception, idiom, attitudinal meaning, pragmatic impact, context-sensitive

INTRODUCTION

Now a days, phraseology has become an important field of research in Russian, European and American linguistics. The world’s leading specialists emphasize the crucial role played by phraseological units in language acquisition and language use: “phraseology in the broad sense is one of the key components of language” (Cowie, 2007). Linguists also point out the strong necessity for studying phraseology across different languages and cultures. In this study, the authors follow the principles of cognitive theory of phraseology and apply cognitive-pragmatic approach while analyzing structure, semantic properties and discourse functioning of English and German idioms covering the semantic area for deception. Current research demonstrates that cognitive-pragmatic approach “provides interesting information about the interplay between universal cognitive principles, culture and phraseology” (Granger and Meunier, 2008). Thus, there is no doubt that cross-linguistic research on phraseology helps to reveal not only common properties and differences between phraseological units as they are but also specific features of native speakers mentality.

According to Alefirenko (2008) one of the leading experts in the field, the key function of idioms is “to express communicative-pragmatic intentions of communicators”. In other words, idioms express the speaker attitudes and emotions towards the event/person characterized. This property of idioms is defined as a pragmatic impact. One more important feature of idioms is

flexibility of their attitudinal meaning. Not all the idioms carry purely positive or purely negative connotation. Some of them tend to a certain degree, to change their attitudinal meaning when used in different contexts. In a purely linguistic aspect, this specific feature of context-sensitive idioms is characterized as “a creative use of language” (Tretyakova, 2011). From a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, it is seen as a manifestation of an evaluate categorization. As Boldyrev (2002) argues, this type of categorization comes from our personal values and may sometimes contradict a logical (or rational) categorization. In other words, what is considered negative from a social or rational point may be justified or even seen as positive on grounds of personal values, feelings or in a certain situation. Thus, idioms with flexible connotation are able to cause different emotions and attitude to a person or activity described when used in different discourses while idioms with a fixed (constant) attitudinal meaning normally produce more or less similar pragmatic impact in any discourse. Considering the principle of a close interconnection between human mentality and language, linguists argue that a large amount of context-sensitive idioms covering a certain activity (or event) definitely means an ambivalent or contradictive attitude held by native speakers towards this activity (or event). We fully support this position and in this study we intend to examine idioms for deception in order to reveal the attitudes native English and German speakers hold towards lying and deception in various communicative situations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following the principle of treating idioms as “not only purely linguistic phenomenon but also a cognitive one” (Baranov and Dobrovolskiy, 2008) which implies a close cognitive interconnection between a domain studied and the idioms covering this domain (Kovecses, 2010), we first outline the nature of deception as a universal phenomenon of human relations. Then, we specify semantic clusters (groups) of idioms within the semantic area of lie and deception in the languages under study, according to their semantic properties. The empirical evidence to be examined was derived from English and German idioms dictionaries and fiction. The next step is to analyze idioms belonging to each group, focusing on their meaning, structure, inner form and semantic properties. Where possible, we are going to define a base metaphor the idioms stem from in order to see the way the metaphor influences the connotation (especially attitudinal meaning) and thus, the pragmatic impact on the whole. While examining these aspects, we shall outline the common features of English and German idioms, as well as differences between them. Then, we apply contextual analysis to examine the way idioms under study “behave” in discourse. First, we aim at defining the major factors affecting the pragmatic impact in a particular context. The second important aim is revealing and comparing attitudes English and German native speakers hold to deception as a form of behavior and communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It should be noted that deception seen from both social and cognitive aspects is a rich but complex domain that has numerous forms, both verbal and behavioral. The major points crucial for our research can be summarized as follows. First, deception is a universal psychological and social phenomenon and to a certain degree, an integral part of each persons life. Second, deception is generally considered negative and immoral but in everyday life the attitude to any form of deception (including lie) is rather ambivalent. According to experts, there is nothing unnatural about it. As Krasavskiy (2010) points out, one and the same phenomenon “can have different semantic properties and connotations and receive different moral appraisal in different cultures”. Moreover, the attitude to the same phenomenon or event may also strongly depend on a specific situation as well as on a personal position or emotional state of a speaker (Zinken, 2004). Even the very idea of what is deception and what is not varies in different cultures as well as in different situations within the same culture. Scientists state that this complexity

stems from a contradiction between social norms representing deception as immoral and forbidden and impossibility of reaching one aims in entirely honest ways (Ekman, 1997; Morozova, 2005). This contradiction inevitably leads to an inner conflict a person suffers and the way out of it is as a rule creating a certain “list” of situations where deception may be partly justified or even be seen not as deception at all although it logically is. Doubtless, this conflict and the ways of solving it are bound to be reflected by idioms under study.

Now, we intend to examine the evidence. In this study, we look into three groups of idioms covering the semantic area for deception which includes lie as one of its forms and means.

The first semantic group to be examined contains idioms (to give smb) a pack of lie, lie through one’s teeth, lie into smbs face, lie without batting an eye (English); j-m den Buckel vollugen, j-m ins Gesicht lugen, lugt, dass sich die Balken biegen (German). Their structure and inner form are quite similar in English and German. The major semantic component (semantic invariant) of these idioms can be defined as “to lie a lot in a cynical and impertinent way” which implies purely negative connotation. But, it should be pointed out that the contexts reveal two different semantic elements that inevitably affect the pragmatic meaning. Now, we are going to analyze the contexts. They can be roughly subdivided into two groups.

The contexts belonging to the first group emphasize obviousness of the fact that a person is lying, for example:

- The man is lying through his teeth. He never said anything of the sort (McCarthy, 1999)
- Dem kannst du doch kein Wort glauben. Der lügt, dass sich die Balken biegen (Wermke, 2002). As a result, the attitude to the liar (as well as to the fact of deception on the whole) is more practical than emotional: this person is not to be trusted, it is better to avoid dealing with him/her. A moral appraisal is not involved. German contexts rather frequently represent various troubles the liar will have to suffer: Lügt mir dieser Bursche ins Gesicht, wird er seinen Arbeitsplatz nie erhalten (Wermke, 2002). But, the pragmatic meaning of idioms still remains rational, not emotional

The contexts belonging to the second group tend to represent a strong emotional reaction to the fact of deception. It occurs mainly in communicative situations where somebody lies to close friends, partners or family. In this case, idioms objectify semantic elements of insult, betrayal and thus evoke anger, offence, pain, etc., for

example: “Who do you think you are kidding This is me, your old partner, your old roommate! You gonna lie into my face?” At the same time, idioms for lie tend, though rather rarely to undergo contextual transformations like for example, pun. Pun takes place when the initial collocation is used in both direct and metaphorical meaning within the same context which creates a humorous effect and considerably mitigates negative semantic elements carried by an idiom. The following context presents a good example of pun: “You going forward with that lawsuit, after this?” Gomez asked, surprised. “Of course”, Mary lied, without batting an eye. It hurt to bat her eye anyway. She was beginning to hate being a Crime Victim (Scottoline, 2004). But, it should be pointed out that this tendency is much more typical of English than of German.

The second cluster includes idioms to make a fool/a mickey out of smb (English), j-m für dumm/blöd halten, an j-m einen Dummen finden (German). These idioms have rather a specific shade of meaning. They reflect the situation where a deceiver considers a potential victim to be extremely stupid and naive. The structure, connotation and pragmatic properties of these idioms are entirely identical in English and German. It is obvious that a major factor determining their pragmatic impact is a semantic element of stupidity clearly represented in the lexical structure (fool, dumm). This element inevitably implies humiliation suffered by an affected person which results in a purely negative connotation. The pragmatic impact is often intensified by using negative modifiers: It was infuriating! How dare he make the mickey out of me like that Bloody nerve, bloody men (Grafton, 1999). Studies into the communicative situations containing the idioms for “humiliating deception” reveal one more important tendency. These idioms are highly emotive. Moral and rational attitudes are very seldom involved. Strong negative feelings and emotions occur no matter whether the attempt to deceive was successful or not: Danza sah ihn argerlich an. “Denkst du, das weib ich nicht? Fur wie blod haltst du mich eigentlich! (Cotton, 2007).

Now, we go on to the third semantic group. It contains the idioms to pull the wool over smb’s eyes, which to muddy smb’s brains which to throw dust into smb’s eyes to pull smb’s leg to take smb for a ride (English) which j-m ins Gehirn spucken which j-m Sand in die Augen streuen, j-m hinters Licht führen (German).

The semantic invariant of the idioms belonging to this model can be defined as “deliberately give false information, often betraying your partner’s confidence”. The base metaphor is the same for both English and German idioms: “hurt or block somebody’s brains or perceptives in order to make them useless”. This image schema carries at least two negative semantic elements

violence and humiliation which certainly determines negative connotation of the idioms. About eighty percent of the contexts studied demonstrate anger, irritation, offence, disappointment etc. We can outline two types of communicative situations (typical for both English and German languages) where negative feelings grow particularly strong. First, these are situations where deception is taken personally and thus, seen as betrayal. In such contexts, the pragmatic impact caused by an idiom involves both moral and emotional elements: which Ist doch wirklich eine bodenlose Sauerei, wenn Ihr Freund Sie so schamlos hinters Licht führ (Cotton, 2007). The second group of contexts involves the situations where deception may seriously affect personal life, reputation or career or where the deceiver acts particularly cynically or obviously considers a potential victim unable to discover the deception for example which You’re talking a lot of damned lies. Don’t think you can pool the wool over my eyes like this (Grafton, 1999).

At the same time, our research demonstrates that a deceived person is not always sympathized. This tendency is especially frequently seen in German language where idioms for deception are often used within a specific pattern which sich lassen “let somebody (deceive) you”. Being used in this way, an idiom keeps its general negative connotation but contemptuous attitude focuses not on a deceiver but on the victim who has proved to be stupid, incompetent or gullible and thus, deserves being deceived (Wermke, 2002). A similar tendency, though not as frequent, occurs in English language. To emphasize the idea of a victim being blamed to a certain degree, the idioms are often used in their passive form: I am afraid you have been sold a pup here. You should always have an expert to look over a second-hand car before you buy it (McCarthy and Moore, 2006).

Now, we are going to analyze the contexts where the idioms under study display a high degree of context-sensitivity. Basing on our research, we can specify two groups of contexts where the attitudinal meaning of idioms for deception tend to change.

First, it occurs when deception is the only way to save the deceiver life, reputation or financial state. In such situations, deception is partly justified (at least by a deceiver himself). In general, the connotation remains negative but the attitudinal meaning and, thus, pragmatic impact on the whole are influenced by the contextual semantic elements of vital necessity and absence of other ways out which Wenn ich die Einkommensteuer in dieser Sache nicht hinters Licht führe seh ich keine Möglichkeit (Wermke, 2002).

Second, there are contexts where the deception is seen as quite innocent and is not aimed at destroying or hurting somebody and besides, is necessary for reaching a goal, for example: Danny'll need to do a snow job on his Dad if he's going to borrow the car again (McCarthy, 1999). In this case, the semantic elements of danger, humiliation, betrayal etc. are not involved at all which considerably mitigates negative connotation, turning the act of deception into a sort of a game.

CONCLUSION

Deception is a universal psychological and social phenomenon, normally considered as an immoral and forbidden form of behavior but both scientific research and everyday experience demonstrate that there are a lot of complexity and contradictions about the ways deception is categorized and appraised. Our cross-linguistic research carried out into English and German idioms for deception covered three semantic clusters, each characterized by a specific semantic invariant, base metaphor and pragmatic impact. Concerning the tendencies common for both languages, the following may be pointed out. From a semantic point, the idioms under study objectify:

- An impertinent and cynical deception
- A deception aimed at humiliating
- Giving false information, sometimes involving betrayal of confidence

The major base metaphor represents an image schema of hurting or blocking somebody brains or perceiving in order to make them useless. Though, base metaphor and semantic properties determine a negative connotation of the idioms, they are not the only factors influencing the pragmatic impact. One more important factor is that of a discourse. In this respect, we can specify idioms with a pure (i.e., fixed) negative connotation and context-sensitive idioms. Idioms with semantic properties of a humiliating and cynical deception demonstrate a strongly negative attitudinal meaning in any communicative situation. The idioms for giving false information tend to context sensitivity. Their pragmatic impact depends on:

- The aims of deception
- The relations between a deceiver and a person affected
- Moral position and personal feelings of a speaker. Specific features revealed in each language are the following

English idioms sometimes tend to contextual transformations resulting in a humorous effect which considerably mitigates negative connotation and is not characteristic of German language at all. Besides, English contexts more often explicit strong emotions and emphasize personal feelings and strong emotions resulting from deception. German idioms are often used within a specific pattern *weichesich lassen* which is aimed at focusing negative attitude on a deceived person who suffered due to his/her own stupidity or incompetence. On the whole, German contexts demonstrate more practical and at the same time less tolerant attitude to any forms and situations of deception.

To summarize, cognitive-pragmatic approach applied to cross-linguistic research into idioms for deception gives rather promising results in respect of revealing specific features of this semantic area in both linguistic and cultural aspects. Further, comparative studies of idioms for deception can also be useful for cross-cultural communication and translation practice.

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