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The Linguistic Conceptualization of Intelligence in Russian and English: Symbolism and Metaphorization

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Abstract: The article examines English and Russian phraseological units denoting intellectual qualities from the perspective of symbolism and metaphorization. Alongside a comparative semantic analysis of phraseo-semantic subgroups representing wisdom and quick-wittedness, particular attention is paid to the symbolic foundations and metaphorical models underlying phraseological meaning. The study identifies integral and differential semes, investigates evaluative, emotional, stylistic, and expressive components of connotation, and demonstrates how culturally significant symbols and conceptual metaphors contribute to the representation of intelligence in both languages. The findings reveal that phraseological conceptualization of intellectual abilities is shaped by both universal cognitive mechanisms and culture-specific symbolic reinterpretations.

Keywords: *phraseology, phraseological units (PUs), symbolism, metaphorization, conceptual metaphor, phraseological meaning; connotation*

Citation: Marina, A. B. The Linguistic Conceptualization of Intelligence in Russian and English: Symbolism and Metaphorization. Journal of Pioneer: Journal of Advanced Research and Scientific Progress 2026,5(3), 39-42.

Received: 10th Mar 2026
Revised: 11th Mar 2026
Accepted: 24th Apr 2026
Published: 18th June 2026



INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units preserve not only linguistic meanings but also culturally significant images and symbolic representations through which speakers conceptualize reality [1]. Human intellectual abilities constitute one of the most important domains reflected in phraseology, since intelligence, wisdom, and resourcefulness have traditionally been regarded as highly valued social qualities.

Modern phraseological studies increasingly focus on the cognitive and linguocultural dimensions of phraseological meaning [2]. In this respect, symbolism and metaphorization emerge as essential mechanisms in the formation of phraseological semantics. Phraseological images frequently rely on culturally established symbols and metaphorical projections that transform abstract mental processes into concrete, experientially accessible representations [3].

The present study aims to investigate English and Russian phraseological units characterizing intellectual abilities from both semantic and linguocultural perspectives. The objectives of the research include identifying integral and differential semes, analysing connotative components of phraseological meaning, and revealing the symbolic and metaphorical models underlying the conceptualization of intelligence and quick-wittedness in the two languages [4].

The analysis seeks to demonstrate that phraseological representations of human cognition are grounded not only in semantic structures but also in culturally mediated symbolic systems that reflect national patterns of thought and evaluation.

Particular attention will be devoted to a more in-depth examination of the selected phraseological units [5].

It is interesting to note that several English phraseological units generally possess an

ironic colouring and, consequently, are characterized by negative evaluative connotations (for example: *too clever by half*; *clever Dick*; *(as) solemn (wise) as an owl*). The phraseological unit *all there* is usually used in the negative form (*not (quite) all there*) meaning “not in one’s right mind; having a screw loose.” [6]

The Russian phraseological units *иметь голову на плечах* (“to have one’s head on one’s shoulders” — to be intelligent, sensible, and quick-witted) and *с царем в голове* (“to have a tsar in one’s head” — to be very intelligent, bright, and quick-witted) simultaneously belong to two phraseo-semantic subgroups, representing an overlap between the subgroups “intelligence, wisdom” and “quick-wittedness, resourcefulness.” The phraseological unit *с головой* (“very intelligent, competent, capable”) belongs to the subgroup “ability, talent, giftedness.” [7]

METHODS

Two Russian phraseological units, *на голову выше* (“much smarter, more experienced, better informed, etc.; indicating superiority in some respect”) and *головой выше* with the same meaning, only partially belong to the selected phraseo-semantic subgroup.

It is also of interest to determine the connotative components of the phraseological meaning of the unit *(as) solemn (wise) as an owl*. The emotional colouring of this phraseological unit is humorously ironic, while its evaluative connotation is mildly negative, arising from the “collision” between the semantics of its constituent components, namely *solemn*, *wise*, and *owl*.

From the perspective of symbolism, the *owl* image demonstrates the ambivalent nature of cultural symbols in phraseology. Although the *owl* has traditionally been associated with wisdom in European culture, phraseological usage may reinterpret this symbol ironically, endowing it with negative evaluative overtones. Such semantic transformation illustrates the dynamic interaction between inherited cultural symbolism and phraseological resemanticization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indeed, all three English phraseological units containing the component *owl* carry negative evaluative overtones. Compare *(as) grave as an owl* (“gloomy, sullen, morose; to look like an owl”) and *night owl* (American colloquial), meaning “a person who stays up late at night.”

The phraseological unit *(as) solemn (wise) as an owl* belongs to the interstylistic category of phraseological units. The expressive component of connotation is absent, while the lack of positive evaluative connotation is confirmed by contextual usage: *Hope looked at the three middle-aged men, who were as solemn as owls ... and shook with laughter* (АРФС) [8].

Zoomorphic symbolism thus functions as a productive source of phraseological imagery. Animal images not only preserve culturally shared associations but also reveal the capacity of phraseological metaphor to modify, weaken, or even reverse conventional symbolic meanings [9].

In English, the subgroup of phraseological units denoting quick-wittedness and resourcefulness includes the following units:

- *have (got) a good head on one’s shoulders (also with a head on one’s shoulders)* — иметь голову на плечах; быть смысленным, сообразительным;
- *have (got) one’s head screwed on right (the right way)* — иметь голову на плечах; быть смысленным, сообразительным;
- *know enough to come in (get or Australian keep) out of the rain* (American *know enough to go in when it rains*), colloquial — отличаться сообразительностью;
- *take notice* — проявлять признаки сообразительности (о ребенке);
- *something on the ball* (slang) — сообразительность, способность; винтики работают;
- *have a quick (ready) wit (also have quick wits)* — быть находчивым, сообразительным.

In Russian, this subgroup is represented by the following phraseological units:

- *не будь дурак* (прост.) — вовремя смекнул, сообразил, как следует поступать;
- *голова (котелок) варит у кого* — кто-либо сообразителен, догадлив, ПОНЯТЛИВ;
- *не промах* — ловок, сообразителен, не упустит своего;
- *схватывать (хватать) на лету (с лету)* — быстро, легко понимать, усваивать;
- *иметь голову на плечах* — быть умным, рассудительным, сообразительным;
- *с царем в голове* — очень умен, смышлен, сообразителен [10].

The integral semes characterizing this subgroup are the semes of *intellectual ability* and *quick-wittedness/resourcefulness*. However, a number of phraseological units are also characterized by additional semes denoting other intellectual qualities.

For example, the phraseological unit *have a quick (ready) wit (have quick wits)* contains the additional seme of resourcefulness. The Russian phraseological unit *с царем в голове* incorporates the seme of intelligence. The phraseological units *ИМЕТЬ ГОЛОВУ НА ПЛЕЧАХ*, *have (got) a (good) head on one's shoulders*, and *have (got) one's head screwed on right (the right way)* additionally include the semes of intelligence and sound judgment.

The phraseological unit *take notice* possesses additional semes of age (referring specifically to a child) and degree (showing signs of understanding). The Russian phraseological unit *голова (котелок) варит у кого* includes the additional semes of perceptiveness and understanding [11].

Many phraseological units denoting quick-wittedness are based on the metaphorical model "*thinking as a mechanism*."

The metaphorical conceptualization of cognition through mechanical imagery reflects a broader cognitive tendency to understand abstract mental activity in terms of familiar material experience. In these phraseological units, the human mind is perceived as a device whose efficiency depends on the proper functioning and interaction of its constituent parts.

Expressions such as *the wheels are turning* and *head screwed on right* rely on the symbolism of a properly functioning mechanism. This metaphorical model reveals the influence of technological experience on linguistic conceptualization and demonstrates how everyday material culture provides interpretative frameworks for understanding intellectual processes [12].

The semantics of the Russian phraseological unit *схватывать (хватать) на лету (с лету)* are also noteworthy, as they include the seme of intellectual activity.

The underlying image evokes speed and immediacy of perception, metaphorically representing comprehension as the act of physically catching a moving object. This embodiment of cognition through action reflects the anthropocentric character of phraseological metaphor and highlights the role of bodily experience in structuring abstract thought [13].

The phraseological unit *something on the ball* belongs to this phraseo-semantic subgroup only in the meaning of "*quick-wittedness*."

Consequently, the core of this subgroup consists of phraseological units containing only the integral semes of quick-wittedness and resourcefulness: *have (got) a (good) head on one's shoulders; have (got) one's head screwed on right (the right way); know enough to come in out of the rain; and something on the ball*. In Russian, however, all six phraseological units contain, in addition to the integral semes, a differential seme. The greater semantic complexity of Russian phraseological units may indicate a tendency toward more detailed symbolic profiling of intellectual qualities, whereby cognitive characteristics are supplemented by culturally salient nuances of evaluation and behavior [14].

The connotative components of phraseological meaning within this subgroup will now be examined. According to dictionary labels, most phraseological units belong to the neutral or interstylistic categories. Exceptions include *know enough to come in (get or Australian keep) out of the rain, something on the ball*, and *не будь дурак*, which belong

to the colloquial register; the latter is considered vernacular, while *something on the ball* is classified as slang [15].

CONCLUSION

The analysis of English and Russian phraseological units denoting intellectual abilities has demonstrated that phraseological meaning represents a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of denotative, connotative, symbolic, and metaphorical components. Despite the existence of culture-specific differences in imagery and linguistic expression, both phraseological systems reveal a predominantly positive evaluation of intelligence, quick-wittedness, and resourcefulness. The findings indicate that the core members of the selected phraseo-semantic subgroup share integral semantic features and similar evaluative orientations, while differences emerge primarily in the choice of symbolic representations and the degree of expressiveness encoded in individual units.

The study also confirms the importance of combining semantic, symbolic, and cognitive approaches in the investigation of phraseology. Symbolic images and conceptual metaphors not only enrich phraseological meaning but also reflect collective experience, cultural values, and culturally specific ways of interpreting intellectual phenomena. Consequently, metaphorization should be regarded as a fundamental cognitive mechanism underlying the conceptualization and evaluation of human intellectual abilities rather than merely a stylistic device. The integrated approach adopted in this study has made it possible to identify both universal tendencies and national specificities in the representation of intelligence within English and Russian phraseological systems, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

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