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SEMANTICS AND FIGURATIVE FUNCTIONS OF NUMERALS IN ENGLISH TONGUE-TWISTERS

Annotation

The article studies the semantic and figurative functions of numerals in the English tongue-twisters. The study is based on a corpus of tongue-twisters with a number component and aims to identify the mechanisms through which numerals shift from bearing quantitative meaning to figurative and text structuring roles. The analysis reveals several types of semantic shift, including weakened quantification, hyperbolization and text structuring. It is concluded that tongue-twisters are not only phonetically, but also semantically rich genre, in which numerals function as complex elements of language play and textual organization.

Key words: Numerals, tongue-twisters, semantics, language play, imagery, hyperbole, quantification

СЕМАНТИКА И ОБРАЗНЫЕ ФУНКЦИИ ЧИСЛИТЕЛЬНЫХ В АНГЛИЙСКИХ СКОРОГОВОРКАХ

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются семантические и образные функции числительных в англоязычных скороговорках. Исследование основано на корпусе скороговорок с числовым компонентом и имеет цель определить механизмы, с помощью которых числительные переходят от количественного обозначения к выполнению образных и текстообразующих функций. Анализ выявил несколько типов семантической девиации, включая ослабленную количественность, гиперболизацию и структурирование текста. Сделан вывод, что скороговорки не только фонетически, но и семантически богатый фольклорный жанр, в котором числительные играют важную текстообразующую роль.

Ключевые слова: Числительные, скороговорки, семантика, языковая игра, образность, гипербола, количественность

INGLIZ TEZ AYTISHLARIDA SONLARNING SEMANTIKASI VA OBRAZLI FUNKSIYALARI

Mazkur maqolada ingliz tilidagi tez aytishlarda sonlarning semantik va obrazli funksiyalari ko'rib chiqiladi. Tadqiqot son komponentiga ega bo'lgan tez aytishlar korpusiga asoslangan bo'lib undan maqsad sonlarning miqdoriy ifodalashdan obrazli va matn shakllantiruvchi funksiyalarni bajarishga o'tish mexanizmlarini aniqlashdan iborat. Tahlil semantik og'ishining bir necha turini, jumladan, kuchsizlangan miqdoriylik, giperbolizatsiya va matnni tarkiblashtirishni ochib berdi. Tez aytishlar nafaqat fonetik, balki semantik jihatdan ham boy folklor janri bo'lib, unda sonlar muhim matn shakllantiruvchi rol o'ynaydi degan xulosaga kelindi.

Kalit so'zlar: Sonlar, tez aytishlar, semantika, til o'yini, obrazlik, giperbola, miqdoriylik.

Introduction. Modern linguistics sees numerals as a unique word class. Their semantics goes beyond their literal quantitative meaning. Bylinina and Nouwen mention that numerals are a "family of meaning" that includes not only quantification but also such categories as plurality, degree, implicature/exhaustivity and contextual interpretations [1]. Thus, even at the basic level, numerals have the potential to be a part of semantic variations, which makes them a promising object of analysis in non-traditional linguistic contexts, including tongue-twisters. Traditionally, tongue-twisters have been covered under the light of applied didactic aspect as an effective tool for articulation and pronunciation training. However, their conceptual, semantic and figurative aspects have almost been neglected. When placed within the context of folklore discourse, numerals undergo semantic transformations and acquire symbolic, metaphorical and linguacultural functions. The numerical component becomes an important element of the architecture of a text and takes part in the construction of the linguistic worldview.

Linguacultural and semiotic aspects of the numerals were studied by Toporov who focused on sacred and mythopoetic meanings of quantitative symbols in traditional cultures [2]. In the context of linguistics, the concepts of Lackoff and Kovshova reflect semantic duality of numerals, which is expressed in the fact that they can express both exact number and qualitative identification [3] [4].

The aim of this article is to study the figurative functions of numerals in order to understand their role in the process of conceptualization typical for the English language paremiological discourse. In order to achieve that, the determination of the density of numerals in the corpus of English tongue-twisters and classification of the types of their semantic transformations are crucial.

Literature review. From the point of view of cognitive linguistics, numerals are interpreted as conceptual structures formed with the help of metaphors and embodied cognition. Numerical values are formed not only logically, but also through bodily and cultural human experience which allows to study them as elements capable of participation in creating figurativeness and semantic models of the text [5].

A lot of attention has been paid to the way numerals function in phraseological units. Shumenko and Kudryavtseva notice that numerals move from direct qualitative meaning and acquire additional connotative and symbolic meanings when they are a part of a phraseological unit [6]. The following terms were coined: desamentisation (weakening of the literal meaning of the numeral); dequantification (shift from quantity to quality); semantic transformation of components within a set expression [7]. Apart from that, the analysis of the English proverbs shows that some numerals (one, two, three) are more frequent than others and take part in the creation of stylistic devices (syntactic parallelism, antithesis) [8]. A separate

research direction concerns the symbolism of numbers and numerals in culture. Hui-Chin Yu's work emphasizes the dual nature of numbers – they are concrete and abstract at the same time, expressing quantity, and cultural, mythological, symbolic meanings respectively. [9] Such studies show that a numeral is not just a grammatical category but can also carry the culture code which can appear in various forms of a text.

A tongue-twister has been traditionally studied mostly from the point of view of its phonetic structure and its role in the methodology of language teaching where it is seen as a means of pronunciation and articulation training. Later, more attention started being paid to a tongue-twister's lexical and semantic potential. Semerjidi studies a tongue-twister as a space for language play and underlines that tongue-twister texts activate hidden semantic connections and enhance expressiveness and comic effect. [10].

However, most researchers focus either on phonetics or on language play, abandoning the question of semantic function of individual components including numerals. The problem is in the absence of studies that would systematically analyze numerals specifically in tongue-twisters, taking into consideration their figurative and cognitive functions and connecting the language material to number semantics.

Research methodology. The material for the research is English tongue-twisters collected from <https://www.tongue-twister.net/en.htm>. At the preliminary stage, we selected the units with an explicit numerical component. After that, an expanded list of candidate texts was formed for further functional-semantic assessment. As a result, a corpus of 105 tongue-twisters was formed. For a more detailed analysis, a shortened corpus of 36 texts was identified, where 30 items comprised the core of the analysis and 6 were taken as a control group. The selection was carried out according to the principles of semantic relevance of the numeral and representativeness of its functioning model.

The research methodology included continuous sampling, a functional-semantic filtration, and interpretational analysis. For each item, we identified the type of the numeral, the degree of literalness, the model of semantic behaviour and text-forming pattern. The analysis particularly focused on instances where the numeral goes beyond its primary quantitative function, turning into a device in creating gradation, hyperbole, ordinal structuring and compositional organization of the text.

Analysis and results. Semantic analysis of the comprised corpus shows that numerals in the texts of the English language tongue-twisters do not only function as a direct quantitative nomination. Even in situations when they have their direct meaning, numerals also play a role in the organization of the text by creating rhythmic symmetry, determining the order of actions, or acting as a means of hyperbole. For this reason, a shift from basic counting with the help of numerals to using them for the purpose of creating figurativeness can be observed as a part of a sequence of semantic transformations.

In the material studied, there are several models of semantic derivations: (1) numerals used as a means of representation of density; (2) function of numerals in text cohesiveness; (3) function of numerals in creating character identity; (4) derivative quantitative semantics of numerals

Numerals as a representation of plurality and density.

This is one of the most apparent functions of numerals. They are used to create the image of mass character and excessiveness. The following are examples of tongue-twisters with numerals that perform this function:

The thirty-three thieves thought that they thrilled the throne throughout Thursday.

Thirty-three thousand people think that Thursday is their thirtieth birthday.

Here the numerals are not neutral representators of the number of something. Instead, they work as a means of hyperbole, creating an effect of redundancy and excessiveness, which, in its turn, contributes to the comic effect. It is well-illustrated by complex numeral forms – thirty-three, forty-four, three thousand. Let us consider the following tongue-twister: Thirty-three thousand feathers on a thrush's throat. Here, there is an obvious disparity between a small object (bird's neck) and an extremely large number, which create an effect of absurd. Numerals here create the sense of 'too much', 'too many'. Numbers stop being a precise measure and move from the sphere of mere counting into the sphere of qualitative impression of quantity. That is to say, it begins to mean not an exact multitude but rather excess, overcrowding and implausibility.

Numerals as a cohesive mechanism.

Sometimes, a phenomenon of weakened literalness can be observed when studying numerals in tongue-twisters. For example, in *Through three cheese trees three free fleas flew*. While these fleas flew, freezy breeze blew, the number three can formally be interpreted literally (as a literal number of objects). However, its function goes beyond counting. It helps to create a cycle by returning the same image repeatedly. The repetition of the numeral creates an inner cohesion of the tongue-twister's text, turning the numeral into a cohesive device.

Similarly, in *Thomas Tattamus took two T's to tie two tots to two tall trees*, a serial doubling can be observed. The repetition of two goes through several syntax nodes in a row and connects the action, the subject and objects with each other. The two-part nature, as a result, identifies the structure of the statement.

Numeral as a character identity and means of figurative marking.

Numerals can function as a means of qualitative characterization, for example, in *A tree toad loved a she-toad, // Who lived up in a tree. // He was a three-toed tree toad, // But a two-toed toad was she. The three-toed tree toad tried to win, // The two-toed she-toad's heart, // For the three-toed tree toad loved the ground, // That the two-toed tree toad trod. // But the three-toed tree toad tried in vain. // He couldn't please her whim. // From her tree toad bower, // With her two-toed power, // The she-toad vetoed him.* numbers two and three become a part of a regular nomination of the characters – toads and are repeated throughout the whole body of the tongue-twister. It functions as an epithet, differentiating toads, creating opposition between them and making these characters distinct and recognizable.

A similar model can be found in *One-one was a race horse. // Two-two was one too. // One-one won one race. // Two-two won one too.* Numeral functions as a name here, becomes character's identity. Its function is marking or coding the character, making it distinct from others. It shows that a numeral can become one of the key mechanisms of artistic individualization of a noun.

Derivative quantitative semantics.

In some texts from the corpus, numerals turn into a derivative quantitative form that functions as an expressive intensifier. It can be seen in the following tongue-twister:

If you trouble trouble, triple trouble troubles you.

Here, triple does not mean that there are exactly three troubles. Instead, qualitative markedness is relegated to a secondary role and expresses a sharp increase in the degree of trouble (in other words, quantity here represents intensity). This example demonstrates that numerals and numbers can also be

an indicator of a qualitative assessment. Usually, numerals answer the question 'How many/How much?', but here, the real purpose of using the numeral in a tongue-twister is to show to what extent something is done/represented/believed/etc. In this sense, the derivative quantitative semantics brings numerals closer to expressive vocabulary. In tongue-twisters, it performs as an intensifier of the figurative effect.

In some tongue-twisters, numerals are used to describe a character in a particular way.

Conclusion. Numerals in tongue-twisters convey significantly more complex images than might appear when

only looking at them as at quantifiers. There are four key models of semantic transformations that numerals undergo in tongue-twisters: the representation of excessive plurality for comic effect, the use of numerals as a cohesive mechanism to support the general coherence of the text, the individualization of character identity through figurative marking and the transformation of quantitative semantics into an expressive intensifier of qualitative evaluation. Thus, in tongue-twisters and, as a result, in paremiological discourse, numerals go beyond measuring the physical world and carry the bearer of abstract, symbolic and structural information inside the text.

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