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## The verbalization of notion absence in the english language and culture

### Вербалізація поняття відсутність в англійській мові та культурі

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#### Abstract

The article identifies the relevance of studying the notion of absence in English vocabulary from the linguocultural perspective. The focus on phraseology enables to analyze vocabulary units as the reflection of cultural code, ethnic traditions and history. The mental notion of absence, recorded in English lexical and phraseological units, represents their national and cultural identity that was formed for centuries and has been manifested in the naïve linguistic worldview of English native speakers. The analysis involved phraseological units, verbalizing absence in different ways: using set expressions with not; nominative units absence, absent, where absence is reflected directly in the root morpheme, and also in idioms, which implicitly express this notion. It was found that phraseological units with the semantic component of absence determine typical features of thinking, mentality, and behavior of the English native speakers. Ready-made phrases with lexemes absence, absent, and not were characterized and described axiologically. It was pointed out that the semantic component of absence emerged at the early stages of the English ethnicity evolution, and from the very beginning it has been axiologically marked as it identifies the absence of important life elements for an English native speaker.

#### Анотація

У статті визначено актуальність і доцільність вивчення поняття «відсутність» в англійській мові в аспекті лінгвокультурології. За такого підходу метою аналізу мовних одиниць є віддзеркалення у фразеологізмах культурного коду, традицій, історії того чи того етносу. Ментальне поняття «відсутність», зафіксоване у лексичних і фразеологічних одиницях англійської мови, презентує їх національно-культурну своєрідність, що формувалася протягом тривалого історичного періоду і знайшла відбиток у наївній мовній картині світу носіїв англійської мови. До аналізу залучені фразеологізми, що вербалізують відсутність різними способами: за допомогою сталих виразів з часткою not; номінативних одиниць absence, absent, у яких «відсутність» відбито безпосередньо у кореневій морфемі, а також ідіом, що імпліцитно виражають це поняття. Встановлено, що фразеологізми з семантичним компонентом «відсутність» детермінують характерні особливості мислення, менталітету, поведінки представників англійського етносу. Усталені мовні вирази з лексемами absence, absent, not схарактеризовано та описано у аксіологічному аспекті. Виявлено, що семантичний компонент «відсутність» сформовано на ранніх шаблях еволюції етносу англійців, і з самого початку

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**Keywords:** language, culture, phraseological unit, notion of absence, linguoculturology, national-cultural specificity.

## Introduction

The focus of modern linguistic research includes the issues of correlation between the language and speech, language and culture, language and mentality, as well as language and thinking. These problems are not new for philology, since they have been drawing scholars' and researchers' attention in different epochs. However, currently they are studied from a new perspective, namely, from the positions of anthropocentrism. It primarily refers to cognitive linguistics, whose representatives have been seeking to answer the question of the human factor in creating and fixing certain language units and patterns in the minds of a particular language community. Language signs, in particular, verbal ones, determine the type of thinking that corresponds to a specific ethnic group. Set expressions and sentences emerged in every language in the pre-national period, they gained their forms over a long period of time, and have been passed down from generation to generation, keeping their worldviews and ancestors' reflections that are authentic (Cowie, 2001; Kubryakova, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Vakhovska & Isaienko, 2021; Wierzbicka, 1996; Wierzbicka, 2001).

Phraseological units verbalize ontologically and axiologically significant notions, including that of the absence (Radchuk, 2019; Skandera, 2007). The representation of this notion in a language, in this case in the English language, has its specific features, which is related to the English language world outlook.

The insufficiently analyzed functional, structural-semantic and ethnic-cultural features of the English lexical units and idioms with the semantic component of "absence" make this research is relevant and topical. Owing to their frequency of usage, their meaning and significance, the above lexemes and phraseological units should be linguistically considered and analyzed, their potential in shaping the linguistic image of the world and the English cultural identity should be discussed.

**The aim of the article** is to provide a comprehensive structural-semantic analysis of the English lexical and phraseological units with

він має концептуальне значення для носія англійської мови.

**Ключові слова:** мова, культура, фразеологізм, поняття відсутність, лінгвокультурологія, національно-культурна специфіка.

the semantic component of "absence", attending to national-cultural specificity.

**The subject of the paper** is the structural-semantic patterns of the above English set expressions and individual lexical units that are ethnically and culturally motivated.

## Research background

The phraseological corpus of any national language is a kind of linguistic knowledge about the culture of the people. Information about "people's cultural and national self-awareness" and their "cultural and national worldview" is encoded in set expressions (Teliya, 1996, p. 231).

In the theory of phraseology, the linguoculturological approach to the study of phraseological units was applied in the works by V. Teliya and representatives of her school (Beliaevskaya, 2007; Oparina, 2004; Teliya, 1996; Teliya, Bragina, Oparina & Sandomirskaya, 1998; Teliya, 1999, etc.). The main goal of the linguoculturological trend in phraseology is to describe cultural and ethnic connotative semantics of phraseological units, to identify the ways and means of manifesting culture semantically in this area of vocabulary (Teliya, 1999). The linguoculturological method of studying phraseological units, developed by V. Teliya and other scientists, made it possible to comprehensively describe the linguistic and cultural semantics of set expressions and explain the features of mentality typical of a particular people (Teliya, Bragina, Oparina, & Sandomirskaya, 1998; Oparina, 2004; Teliya & Doroshenko, 2010).

In modern linguistics, the linguoculturological approach is closely related to the linguocognitive analysis of linguistic material. O. Radchuk considered the linguo-cognitive representation of the basic concept of *absence* in set expressions in the Russian language. The researcher considered Russian idioms at the conceptual (cognitive) level of interaction between phraseology and culture on the whole (Radchuk, 2019).

The study of phraseological units in the linguoculturological aspect appeared to be effective not only in the study of key, but also in particular issues of the study of phraseological units. For example, ways to acquire symbolic meanings in English idioms with a quantitative component are considered by O. Palatovska and C. Zhang (Palatovska & Zhang, 2020).

The cultural approach to studying phraseological units is practically applied in compiling dictionaries and in the foreign language teaching methodology (Kostomarov & Vereshchagin, 1982; Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 2005; Nekrylova, 2016).

### Methodology

Methods and techniques of the research are determined by the pragmatic aspect of studying lexis with the semantic component of “absence” in the English language. To analyze the research language material, the research employs the methods of continuous selection of lexemes and set expressions from lexicographical sources, online resources, fiction; a descriptive methods, based on the analysis of the models of phraseological units and their components, whose interpretation is given in dictionary entries, and also used to establish structural-semantic features of the phraseological units, selected to study; etymological analysis was applied to explain archaic words that are included in the English idioms under consideration; a comparative method was partially used to establish common and differential characteristics in the perception and further verbalization of the phenomena, which correlate with the notion of *absence* in phraseological units, to identify their cultural and mental identity (Kunin, 1986; Maslova, 2004; Seidl & McMordie, 1983; Teliya, 1999).

The application of techniques, in particular, culturological, ethnic-cultural and interpretational comments, which take into consideration the axiological aspect of human interaction, enables to reveal the cognitive content of the lexical units and set expressions under analysis (Zykova, 2016, pp. 143-144).

The research scientific novelty is determined by the objectives of the modern linguistic paradigm – cognitive linguistics (Chikina, 2004). The specifics of the empirical material, i.e. English lexemes and idioms with the semantic component of the “absence”, provided an opportunity to broaden the knowledge and understanding of the historically determined

mental identification of the English speakers, specify the impact of the culture and folk traditions on the establishment of certain phraseological units.

### Results and Discussion

#### Lexico-grammatical representation of the notion of *absence* in English

English set expressions reflect the culture of the language speakers, their social, political, and economic stereotypes through their lexico-grammatical representation. The notion of *absence* may be manifested in every area of human activities as a basic notion of *being*. From the very conception of life on the Earth the existence of individuals has been in the binary space-and-time worldview perspective along with non-verbal and verbal reflections. The knowledge, gained by the ethnic group, is confirmed with the experience and it is gradually perceived as given. Meaningful cultural notions, though being universal, evolve; they are eventually personified, and what appears necessary and essential for one community, may as well become insignificant for another. The presence and absence are perceived differently in different societies.

Absence is always meaningful only being opposed to presence. It is also confirmed by the English idiom *a good thing is esteemed more in its absence than in its enjoyment*. Since the notions of *presence* and *absence* are typical of any system, in the English language this opposition and the names for the presence and absence are also observed across the strata of the language system.

In English, the representatives of notion under analysis are *absence* and *absent*. The word *absence* has three meanings: “1) the fact of not being where you are usually expected to be, 2) the fact of not existing, 3) the fact that something is not where it is needed or expected” (Cambridge Dictionary online (n/d)). The word *absent* was also converted into a verb, e.g. in *absent oneself from*. Lexical unit *no* is used not only for negation but also as the nomination of absence, for instance, as a result of prohibition (see *no smoking!*). English lexeme *not* combined with auxiliary and modal verbs (including contracted forms of *n't*: *don't*, *didn't*, *can't*, and *won't*) both intensify the negation and state absence.

The word *lack*, which is synonymous to *absence*, has several meanings: “1) the fact that something

is not available or that there is not enough of it, 2) to not have or not have enough of something that is needed or wanted (e.g. *lack of attention, lack of data, lack of honesty, total lack, lack resources, lack of visibility, lack of willingness, utter lack etc.*) (Cambridge Dictionary online (n/d)).

It is to be noted that the explication of *absence* may be implicit. Therefore, such words as *desert, deserted, barren, empty, shallow, and wasteland* also convey the meaning of absence. Although the number of lexical units in the semantic field of *absence* is considerable, only one of them was recorded in an idiom: *shallow streams make most din* (Barantsev, 1969, p. 850), some are active in collocations (*empty agenda, empty alphabet, empty argument, absent look, absent in confinement etc.*), while other idioms implying the absence or lack of something employ less explicit ways of manifesting this meaning (e.g. *blind spot, take name in vain, couldn't care less etc.*) (Ayto, 2020; Cowie, Mackin & McCaig, 1984). Furthermore, pragmatic Englishmen express the absence of something seeking language economy, in particular, not only at the level of phraseological and lexical units but also at the morphemic level using word-building formants.

The notion under consideration may be conveyed both by root morphemes (e.g. *absent-minded*) and derivational affixes. A renowned cognitive linguist O. Kubryakova, studying the word-building meaning of the formants of different parts of speech, noted that in morphological structures with suffix *-less* the latter is a marker of a certain type of relations – the lack of what is given in the stem being derived (compare *tactless*, i.e. having no tack, *bloodless*, i.e. without blood, *lifeless*, i.e. not lively etc.) (Kubryakova, 2004, p. 144). Consequently, this meaning of *-less* exists only because the *absence* is described in relation to the properties, associated with the characteristic marked by the motivating word to be derived. In general, the word-building meaning is formed as a nominating property, related to the absence of what is meant by the stem, in other words, the meaning, where the formant expresses only one of its elements (Kubryakova, 2004, p. 144–145). These affixes are highly productive and economical for the English language, because nearly any property may be marked as present or absent. For example, in English, the word *childless* is used in relation to a woman or a family couple. There are also other markers for this notion: *barren* “infertile” about soils, plants, trees, animals, and rarely about women, while the

word *infertile* is used for animals, women and soils, *fruitless / unfruitful* is used when speaking about trees as well as metaphorically about efforts, talks, regrets, negotiations, or labour, the word *acarpous* (from Greek *akarpos*, from a-+ *karpos* fruit) means not producing fruit, or sterile in scientific discourse. Over the past decades morpheme *free* has also been highly productive in coining new words with the meaning of absence/lack of something. Moreover, some of these neologisms have entered the lexical composition of other languages, such as the lexeme *child-free*, which semantically denotes a conscious refusal to have children. Still, originally this word was translated (for example, into Russian or Ukrainian) descriptively: *I am 24 hours child-free* (English) / *I am free from the child for 24 hours* (Russian). This example provides more evidence that in today's globalized world, English is the main donor of neologisms for other languages.

Thus, the language that unites and identifies the English, represents the notion of *absence* lexically and grammatically. The understanding of cultural, national and language identity passes through the recording of human knowledge and experience in set expressions. Owing to phraseological units, the speech creates the conditions and keeps the standards of naming ontological notions.

### **The use of nominative units *absence* and *absent* in English phraseology**

Each ethnic group has its own unique markers to name this notion. Therefore, it is worth dwelling on the English phraseological units to find out the conceptual significance of the substantive *absence*, which is one of the components of set expressions that explain the notion of absence in English.

The research vocabulary pool of selected phraseological units is given in lexicographical sources: *absence is a shrew, absence makes the heart grow fonder, absence of mind, absence sharpens love, presence strengthens it, absence without leave (mil.)* (Ayto, 2020; Speake, 2015). From the ethnic linguo-culturological analysis the above example metaphorically express cultural and national specifics of understanding the notion of *absence*. The significance of this notion is emphasized by the use of its opposite, substantive *presence*. As described above, the absence gains a special meaning only in the binary opposition of the words: *absence – presence*, and it is nearly always advanced to the front position. It is logical since, first of all, this



opposition reflects the parameter of space – an important factor of thinking, then, as a way of attraction, phraseological units associatively refer to what must be present, which the person should not lack.

The abovementioned phraseological units represent a fragment of the English worldview on the essential values, namely: courage, care, devotion and dedication. These are the most necessary human qualities during the period of national identity establishment. It is common knowledge that ancient Englishmen fought for their territorial integrity, protected their independence and were fearless warriors. In the above sayings, substantive *absence* reflects the cultural and historical orientation of folk beliefs. The accurate and appropriate use of this noun in English set expressions allows us to observe the creation of traditionally emotionally reserved speech patterns, which is an inherent feature in this ethnic group and its language as well.

The analysis also includes phraseological units with the nominative units of the same word family, where the *absence* is denoted in their root morpheme, for example, *absent: absent party is still faulty, the, absent voting (absentee ballot) (AmE), absent without leave (mil.)*. The lexicographically recorded examples provide English set expressions, referring to different fields of human activities. Some of them are limited in their field of use, because they are considered military, which is marked in the dictionary entry note. One phraseological unit is relatively new, since it is related to the American formal and business discourse.

Set expressions where the imaginary feature is clearly employed are worth considering. In idiom *absence is a shrew*, lexeme *a shrew*, literally “an animal like a small mouse but with a longer pointed nose and small eyes” (Cambridge Dictionary online (n/d)), while figuratively it has meant “an unpleasant woman who is easily annoyed and who argues a lot” (plus the entry note “old-fashioned disapproving”) since the times of W. Shakespeare. Jointly with the word *absence*, it forms an idiom that has been well-established in the English vocabulary, and the word *shrew* here does not correlate with either its primary or secondary meanings. This English idiom, built according to the model of a simple sentence, *absent party is still faulty*, is, in turn, not stylistically expressive.

The method of continuous sampling from other sources enabled us to find approximately 40 phraseological units with lexeme *absence*. It

should be noted that most of them belong to the field of feelings and emotions, when love and parting are described poetically. Some of these examples include: *absence makes the heart grow fonder; absence is the enemy of love; salt water and absence wash away love; absence kills a little love but makes the big ones grow*.

Being one of the brightest human feelings, love is reflected in all forms of art, but universally, it has always been conveyed verbally, regardless of the epoch or ethnicity. The availability of a significant number of the expressions of the kind confirms the importance, for the English, of these human feelings of devotion, respectful and passionate attitudes. Notably, the emotional element of the psychological condition is marked in mental patterns, which are in fact phraseological units. Semantic stereotypes indicate that in spite of being emotionally reserved, basic values are vital for the British.

Englishmen are famous for being conservative in their views, gentlemen – in their actions and behavior, thus honesty as a personal moral quality has a leading trait. This fact can be illustrated by such as set expression as: *In the absence of honest men, they made my father mayor*.

Another national cultural is the sense of humor. Normally, the family and friends are trustworthy; they are honest and reliable. An unexpected association may create a comic effect. The stereotypical image of honesty is conveyed in the following English phraseological unit: *You cannot shave a man's head in his absence*. This phraseological unit is based on the metonymic transference. Its phraseological synonym may be *He who maligns you in your absence is afraid of your presence*, which is also imaginative and evaluative. This idiom activates the binary opposition of *absence – presence*.

The sophisticated British (including English) humor can be found in the words of wisdom, in particular, set expressions: *in the absence of water lizards can claim to be crocodiles; it is the absence of a cat that allowed the rat to climb onto the table*. The use of these zoonyms is not accidental. The history of England shows that the British were the main colonizers of India, where the rivers are a natural habitat for alligators. The other of the given phraseological units is related to the special status of cats in England, where they have been considered both the best mouse catchers and favorite pets, even in palaces and official residences.

Philosophical thoughts and reasoning about life have been reflected in a number of phraseological units, including *A little absence does much good* and *Long absence changes friends*. These examples verbalize the notions of the “golden middle”, which is typical of the mentality of the nations who speak different languages, in particular, English.

Thus, in the English linguistic culture the meaning of the absence has psychological and mental grounds. That is also confirmed by the etymological reference: the words *absence* and *absent* date back to Latin *absentia* – “unavailability” and “lack”, which was originally considered to be a drawback. The use of lexemes *absence* and *absent* in phraseology is related to the lifestyle, interpersonal relations, place of residence and epoch. In set expressions, it is possible to observe the activation of the absence of tangible and intangible things for the Englishmen.

### The functions of particle *not* in English phraseology

Short folklore texts often convey and reproduce the notion of *absence* by using lexeme *not*. It refers to the trend for language economy in English that is cognitively determined and reproduced in phraseological units. The point is that lexicographic sources are rich in set expressions with particle *not* and the contexts of using it in fiction texts, which is also reflected on high frequency and the specifics of usage in speech. Some examples include: *not a breath of air*; *not a cat's (or dog's)*; *not a gleam of hope*; *not a living soul (not a mortal man, not a soul)*; *not a penny (not a rap, not a shot in the locker, coll. not a sixpence to scratch with)* (it originally meant a forged halfpenny coin, which was in circulation in Ireland in 1721-1737); *not a shadow of*; *not the ghost of an idea (or notion)*; *not to amount to a hill (or row) of beans (or pins)* (= AmE); *not to be able to do a thing for toffee*; *not to see the forest (or the wood) for the trees* (Ayto, 2020).

The history of Germanic languages shows that while in the modern English and German languages repeated negations have become less frequent, which is caused, in particular, by the fact that phonetically unstressed *ne* and *en* were replaced in these words with fuller words *not* and *nicht*, though this effect was encouraged by school logic and the influence of Latin (Jespersen, 2002, pp. 385-386). It is to be mentioned that in the works by W. Shakespeare there were still cases of double negation, but not

in phraseology. That might point to the fact that strict negation *not* was typical of the ancient speech, since these idioms belong to the folklore discourse.

Phraseological units *not to see the forest (or the wood) for the trees* mark the lack of attention, and more broadly – the understanding something elementary and primitive. These words of wisdom emerged centuries ago and were based on the English realia, which is confirmed by the nominative units *forest*, *wood*, and *trees*. Obviously, the features of the proverbial units refer to specific situations, which a person can face and operate visible objects and phenomena of the environment.

The theoretical and practical consideration of lexeme *not* functioning in English set expressions, allows us to find out that in speech the English tested and gradually transited from the usual to the normalized use of particle *not*. In the language, as a socio-historical phenomenon, the anthropocentric representation appeared to be decisive.

### The implicit conveyance of the notion of *absence* with the English phraseological units

In set expressions marking the *absence* it is possible to observe the creative thinking of many generations, since they reveal understanding of abstract notions, their recording in the language, and their time-tested practical use. The language enables people as the representatives of the English ethnicity to discover their creative abilities.

The notion of *absence* may be expressed directly and indirectly, in particular, by being conveyed through other notions. For instance, through the scope of meaning of being *naked* – *in one's birthday suit* or *without a stitch of clothing*; *dead* – *to join the silent majority*; silent in expression *dumb as an oyster*; the meaning of *poverty* – *on the breadline*. The final idiom is associated with forming the economic awareness of English native speakers. It is not surprising that England was the country where capitalism emerged and the first fundamental economic theories were developed. Money and wealth are highly important for the British mentality and social status identification. Therefore, the notion of *money* can be found in set expressions of the English native speakers: *be broke* – *have no money at all*; *money has no smell*; *money often unmakes the men who make it*; *money spent on the brain is never spent in vain*. All the above

phraseological units are cognitively determined and tested in practical language use.

It is in fact the colloquial speech, communication and actual everyday observations that are transformed into set expressions. The variety of phraseological units serves the language expressiveness, conveys emotions and shows attitudes, adds stylistic connotations to unmarked and otherwise neutral expressions.

Set expressions represent the national cultural semantics, i.e. those meanings that reflect the features typical of English household and traditions. An example that may be cited here is an old English expression, related to ancient realia – *to give someone a cold shoulder* (i.e. to be unwelcoming and inhospitable). In English the word *shoulder* means not only a part of the human body, but also a part of the animal carcass. It is common knowledge that the lamb shoulder has always been popular with the Englishmen. Their hospitality involved serving hot and freshly cooked food. If a guest was untimely or was not expected for, he had to put up with *a cold shoulder*. This idiom is within the English national identity, and it differentiates them from other ethnic groups.

Phraseological units play an important part in verbal communication, which has its mental and cognitive reasons. Any phrase can be uttered in different ways, the use of set expressions is a typical feature of oral communication; moreover, some phrases are said automatically, because they have existed in the speaker's unconsciousness. For example, the English use saying *to see a man about a horse (a dog)* to inform of their absence avoiding any explanations of the true reasons (most likely to go to a restroom, to buy a drink or to do something illegal). In this respect, it is worth mentioning an interesting statement made by U. Eko that the language taught us to convey certain facts, following certain rules of elements' combinability, using set patterns (Eko, 2004, p. 119). The above English idiom features an unconventional connotation, a bright metaphor and an unexpected metonymy. The verbalization of the notion of *absence* represents anthropocentricity and conveys the emotional content of this set expression.

The study of the indirect representation of the notion in question using English phraseological units facilitates better understanding of the English mentality, which is revealed in idioms, that integrate the experience, speakers'

communicative behavior in any unexpected and unforeseen situation.

## Conclusions

The intercultural communication is continuously gaining significance in the modern globalized environment. Information and data exchange, the knowledge of the world determine the understanding of ontological and axiological grounds for shaping linguo-cognitive, linguo-cultural and linguo-mental features of ethnic groups. The problem of studying abstract notions is relevant provided these notions have a substantial basis and gnoseological content. The above phenomena include, inter alia, the notion of *absence*, present in the consciousness of the English native speakers as one of the original, essential, basic and vital even at the early stages of the human evolution.

Therefore, the analysis of the phraseological units verbalizing the notion of *absence* is topical for linguistics and related studies. The representation of the mental abstract notion of *absence* in set expressions reflects the national culture, traditions, diachronic development of the ethnos and its language. In phraseology, the above notion explains various human relations, which have been gradually formed and verbalized in the naïve linguistic worldview of the English native speakers.

Phraseological units with a semantic component of *absence* show the mentality and commonsense of the English language speakers, and they actually demonstrate national identity in thinking, self-expression and the language.

The mental features of English lexical and phraseological units with the semantic component of *absence* reveal their pragmatic and rather reserved nature. The originality of phraseological units is in their verbalization. The analyzed set expressions reflect common psychological features of perception and further verbal reflection by the Englishmen. The findings of this research into the empirical language material is the understanding of the idiomatic verbalization of the most typical English traits of character, including: decisiveness and courage, faith in love and devotion, friendship, along with being practicality, reservation, and a fine sense of humor.

In view of the aforesaid, it may be stated that the English language is rich in phraseology containing the semantic component of *absence*.

This notion in set expressions is conveyed through the use of lexical units *absence*, *absent*, *not*, and also via metaphorization, the use of archaic lexis and words, denoting a specific absence of something or somebody. The latter aspect as well as the related lexemes of *deaf*, *blind*, *silent*, and *lose* where the internal form is associated with *absence* have not been sufficiently analyzed and require deeper linguistic research in further studies.

In contemporary phraseology, linguoculturological analysis of set expressions is inseparable from cognitive and interpretative research procedures. The prospects of this study may include a full-scale analysis of the contexts, containing idioms with the semantic component of *absence*, since it is only through the contexts that it becomes possible to adequately interpret the semantics of phraseological units, define their national and cultural features and explain motivational and evaluative component of its use from the standpoint of the language speaker's value-based worldview.

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