

PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS EXPRESSING “WEALTH/POVERTY” AND “WISDOM/FOOLISHNESS” CONCEPTS IN ENGLISH FOLK TALES

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Abstract. This article focuses on the semantic and linguacultural analysis of phraseological units that verbalize binary oppositions in English folk tales. In folklore, fundamental worldview dichotomies such as “wisdom/ foolishness”, “goodness/evil” and “wealth/poverty” are deeply rooted within the text, with idioms acting as key cognitive tools. The purpose of this study is to explain how British cultural values, such as pragmatism, experience and common sense, influence the imagery of idiomatic expressions. By analyzing set phrases within narratives, the study demonstrates how these linguistic tools serve as a cognitive framework for world-categorization and reflect the pragmatic national identity of the English speech community.

Keywords: binary opposition, English folk tales, cultural value, phraseological units, common sense, semantic and linguacultural analysis.

INTODUCTION

Modern language studies focus heavily on how language connects with human thought, culture and identity. A main way people organize their thoughts and morals is through opposites. Binary oppositions like such as “wisdom/foolishness” and “wealth/poverty” are not merely objective realities of human existence. They are deep conceptual models that show how a specific culture understands social classes, morality and daily survival.

Folk tales are highly valuable because they store a nation’s collective mind, worldview and history. Tales have been investigated by numerous scholars across various historical periods, each offering insights worthy of academic recognition. The origins of tale studies date back several centuries. Among the most prominent figures in this field is folklorist Vladimir Propp, who was one of the first to analyze the structure of folklore texts and identify their invariants – the immutable structural elements of the plot. V.Propp’s seminal work, “Morphology of the Folktale”, provides invaluable insights into fairy tales, the largest and most significant genre of the folktale. It has become the most celebrated study of twentieth-century folklore. In this masterpiece, Propp critically addresses the classifications of folk tales proposed by such scholars as A.Aarne, W.Wundt, V.Miller and R.Volkov [6]. Besides, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim explored the significance and essential impact of fairy tales on child development and shared valuable insights regarding the crucial role of fairy tales in children’s lives. He noted: “Nothing can be quite as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale. As one learns from them, they offer more information about the inner problems of human beings and of the right solutions to their dilemmas in any society than any other story within a child’s comprehension” [2].

In English fairy tales, fundamental opposites are deeply connected to the text. Rather than relying on abstract philosophical discourses, folklore expresses these dualities through idioms and traditional phrases. These phraseological units act as compact cultural symbols

that preserve the historical memory, creative imagination and teaching traditions of a nation. It is important to mention that investigating phraseological units in English folklore matters because these phrases reveal the specific national traits of the English people. For instance, the concept of “wisdom/foolishness” in British stories focuses on pragmatism, real-life experience and common sense rather than deep intelligence. Similarly, the divide between “wealth and poverty” often reflects how a character climbs from the bottom of society to economic comfort, a journey best described by the classic phrase “from rags to riches”.

In the famous English fairy tale, titled “The Story of The Three Little Pigs” there is one idiom, “to seek one’s fortune”. **It means to try** to leave home or travel to a new place with the hope of finding wealth, success, or better life opportunities”; **“to become rich [7].**

“There was an old sow with three little pigs, and as she had not enough to keep them, she sent them out to seek their fortune.”

The tale opens with a difficult economic situation where the old pig cannot support her family, showing a clear state of poverty. Instead of accepting this hard life, the characters take control of their own fate. Here, the idiom “to seek one’s fortune” acts as a cultural symbol of independence and practical action. In English folklore, success and wealth are rarely just magical gifts; they require active effort, leaving home and facing dangers. Ultimately, this phrase serves as a linguistic bridge that moves the characters from passive poverty into an active search for financial comfort.

An English tale “The Ass, The Table, And The Stick” has lots of phraseological units expressing the “wealth/poverty” binary opposition.

“A LAD NAMED JACK was once so unhappy at home through his father’s ill-treatment, that he made up his mind to run away and seek his fortune in the wide world”.

This introductory sentence clearly demonstrates the transition from poverty and unhappiness to the active search for wealth and success. The text starts by describing Jack as “so unhappy at home”, which establishes the negative side of the emotional and social axis. To escape this bad situation, the hero uses his personal choice and “made up his mind to run away”.

The core phraseological unit in this sentence is “to seek his fortune in the wide world.” This idiom acts as a linguistic bridge that moves the story from passive suffering to active improvement. In English folk tales, “fortune” represents both wealth and a better destiny. By traveling into the “wide world” the protagonist leaves his difficult past behind to search for economic stability and happiness. Therefore, this phrase shows that in the English worldview, a person must take independent action and face the world to overcome hardship and find success.

“It was soon known through the town that Jack had returned rolling in wealth, and accordingly all the girls in the place set their caps at him”.

This sentence contains two important idioms that illustrate the wealth/poverty binary opposition and its social impact in folklore. The first phraseological unit, “rolling in wealth” is a vivid idiom used to show the extreme positive pole of the wealth axis. It means that Jack did not just become rich, but he returned with an overwhelming, massive amount of money. The second idiom, “set their caps at him”, is a unique cultural phrase. Historically, it means that all the local girls tried their best to attract Jack and marry him because of his new financial status. Within the folk tale’s structure, this phrase demonstrates how a sudden shift from poverty to wealth instantly changes a character’s social standing. Wealth turns a previously ignored poor boy into the most desirable person in the community. Therefore,

these idioms show that in the English worldview, economic success directly dictates social relationships and status.

The famous tale “Jack Hannaford” also has several phraseological units expressing binary oppositions. This introductory sentence beautifully represents the extreme pole of poverty within the wealth/poverty binary opposition.

“THERE WAS AN OLD SOLDIER who had been long in the wars – so long, that he was quite out-at-elbows, and he did not know where to go to find a living”.

This introductory sentence beautifully represents the extreme pole of poverty within the wealth/poverty binary opposition. The core phraseological unit in this text is “out-at-elbows”. Literally, it describes someone wearing clothes so old that their elbows show through the holes. This idiomatic expression serves as a cultural symbol for extreme poverty and social neglect. It highlights the irony of an old soldier who, after spending his life in warfare, faces absolute financial ruin instead of receiving due recognition or wealth.

This state of poverty is further emphasized by the phrase “to find a living”. The expression shows that the character lacks the basic means to survive. He does not even know where his next meal or shelter will come from. In the structure of English folk tales, establishing a hero as “out-at-elbows” at the beginning creates a strong contrast for their future journey, where they usually use their wisdom or courage to escape poverty and achieve economic stability.

In the tale “Jack the Giant-Killer” the phrase “of a ready lively wit” is a phraseological unit that represents the “wisdom” side of the “wisdom/foolishness” opposition. In English culture, “ready wit” does not mean high academic intelligence. Instead, it means quick thinking, practicality and the ability to find a solution instantly.

“WHEN GOOD KING ARTHUR REIGNED, there lived near the Land’s End of England, in the county of Cornwall, a farmer who had one only son called Jack. He was brisk and of a ready lively wit, so that nobody or nothing could worst him”.

This sentence clearly shows the contrast between wisdom and foolishness, focusing on the hero’s sharp mind. The phrase “of a ready lively wit” means the character is very clever and practical. In English folk tales, having this kind of quick mind is highly valued. In English culture, being smart is not just about book knowledge; it is a practical tool used to defeat enemies and survive. Therefore, this description shows that the hero uses his quick thinking to stay safe and succeed.

The below episode from Joseph Jacobs’s tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” provides an excellent basis for both semantic and linguacultural analysis within the “wisdom/foolishness” binary opposition.

“Well, Jack, and where are you off to?” said the man. “I’m going to market to sell our cow here.” “Oh, you look the proper sort of chap to sell cows,” said the man; “I wonder if you know how many beans make five.” “Two in each hand and one in your mouth,” says Jack, as sharp as a needle.”

The idiom “as sharp as a needle” functions as a colorful metaphor. In English, the word “sharp” describes not only cutting tools but also high intelligence, mental alertness, and the ability to think quickly. In British culture, wisdom is rarely viewed as abstract philosophy. Instead, it is valued as “quick wit”

– the ability to react smartly and instantly in unexpected situations. Jack’s description as being “sharp” aligns perfectly with the traditional English concept of common sense. The text



demonstrates that in the English linguistic worldview, true wisdom requires practical success and economic rationale.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that English folk tales serve as a valuable source for understanding how human values are reflected in language. The semantic and linguacultural analysis of the selected concepts reveals two primary outcomes. First, fundamental worldview dichotomies such as “wealth/poverty” and “wisdom/foolishness” are not merely narrative themes, but form an integral part of the folklore text through phraseological units that act as key cognitive tools. Second, the findings indicate that within the British linguistic worldview, true intelligence is rarely viewed as an abstract concept; rather, it is directly connected to practical reasoning, situational alertness, and empirical judgment. Conversely, foolishness is linguistically represented as a distinct lack of real-world awareness and common sense. Ultimately, these idioms do more than just decorate the story – they mirror the foundational cultural priorities of the society, proving that the English mindset strictly measures genuine wisdom through rational actions and practical success.

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