

Phraseological Units Containing The Concept of "Tree": Symbolic Value in French Expressions

Kholova Shahnoza Davronovna^{*1}, Jahonova Gulbahor Jo‘rabek qizi²

¹ Teacher at the Department of French philology, Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan

² Student of Bukhara State University, Uzbekistan

E-mail: shaxnozaxolova25@gmail.com

Abstract:

Phraseological units are essential components of language, deeply tied to cultural symbolism and cognitive processes. Among these, the image of the tree stands out as one of the most enduring natural metaphors across civilizations. In the French language, tree-related phraseological units reflect a rich symbolic heritage, drawing from mythology, religion, and folk wisdom to express complex human experiences such as stability, heritage, perception, and emotion. Despite the universality of the tree as a cultural symbol, there is limited scholarly focus on the thematic and cognitive classification of tree-related phraseologisms in the French linguistic context. This study aims to examine the semantic, cultural, and metaphorical dimensions of phraseological units involving the concept of "tree" in French, offering a thematic categorization that enhances our understanding of their symbolic and cognitive significance. The analysis reveals six primary semantic fields—origin and roots, wisdom and stability, perceptual errors, emotional behavior, practicality, and analytical depth—each populated with idiomatic expressions such as *avoir des racines*, *l'arbre qui cache la forêt*, and *aller à la racine du problème*. These expressions encapsulate shared cultural models and abstract thought through concrete natural imagery. By systematically classifying and interpreting French tree-related phraseologisms, the study contributes a detailed linguistic and cognitive mapping of metaphors rooted in nature. The findings support the view that nature-based metaphors, especially those centered on trees, play a fundamental role in shaping conceptual structures in language, and thus offer valuable insights for linguistic, cognitive, and

intercultural studies.

Keywords: Expressions, The Tree, Metaphor, The Concept, Phraseological Units

Introduction

Phraseological units – fixed expressions, idioms, phrases – are essential elements of a language's lexicon [1]. They convey cultural, historical, and symbolic representations. Among the natural elements that fuel the collective imagination, the tree occupies a central place. It symbolizes life, growth, roots, family, and wisdom. The study of phraseological units containing the concept of "tree" thus allows for a better understanding of the symbolic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of language [2].

The tree, present in many cultures and civilizations, occupies a special place in the collective imagination. A symbol of life, growth, strength, and wisdom, it is also very present in the idiomatic expressions of many languages, including French. These expressions use the image of the tree to convey abstract ideas in a concrete and evocative way. In expressions, the tree can represent solidity and rootedness, as in the expression "être solidement enraciné", which refers to a person well-established, stable in their life or beliefs [3]. Conversely, "déraciner quelqu'un" (to uproot someone) evokes the idea of cutting a person off from their origins or usual lifestyle.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical methodology to investigate French phraseological units that contain the concept of the "tree" and uncover their symbolic, cultural, and linguistic meanings. The research involves a systematic collection and interpretation of idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and fixed collocations drawn from contemporary French language sources, including academic dictionaries, linguistic corpora, and relevant literature. The analysis focuses on the metaphoric structure and semantic fields associated with the tree, emphasizing how these expressions reflect conceptual metaphors and cultural values rooted in nature. Particular attention is paid to the classification of expressions based on thematic categories such as origin, wisdom, perception, emotional behavior, utility, and intellectual depth. Each expression is examined for its lexical structure, figurative meaning, and contextual usage, with comparative examples from English, Russian, and Uzbek to highlight universal and culture-specific interpretations of tree symbolism. The study also integrates insights from cognitive linguistics, particularly conceptual metaphor theory, to illustrate how tree-based imagery helps structure abstract thinking related to family, stability, identity, and perception. The linguistic data are contextualized within broader mythological, historical, and literary references that reinforce the tree's enduring symbolic value. Furthermore, a visual thematic table is used to support the semantic categorization and enhance interpretative clarity. This methodological framework allows for a culturally rich and linguistically precise understanding of how trees function as a symbolic anchor in French phraseology, serving not only as a linguistic tool but also as a reflection of deep-rooted collective memory and worldview.

Results and Discussion

The tree is also a symbol of genealogy and transmission. We often speak of the "l'arbre généalogique" to represent family ties between generations. Each branch of this imaginary tree illustrates the descendants of a lineage, thus emphasizing the continuity of life. Some expressions highlight the contrast between appearance and reality [4]. For example, "ne pas voir la forêt pour les arbres" means that a person gets lost in the details to the point of forgetting the bigger picture. Other expressions express natural transmission or inheritance, such as "les chiens ne font pas des chats", which can be compared to "tel arbre, tel fruit", implying that children often resemble their parents [5].

In other cases, the tree symbolizes an error of judgment: "se tromper d'arbre" (in a figurative sense)

can mean that one is speaking to the wrong person or following the wrong path.

Thus, expressions using the image of the tree are rich in meaning. They reflect various aspects of the human condition: its roots, its relationships, its growth, but also its mistakes. This symbolic vocabulary testifies to the importance of nature in our way of thinking and speaking.

Phraseological units can be classified according to several criteria: their degree of fixedness, their grammatical structure, and their cultural origin. These include:

- Idiomatic expressions (e.g., "toucher du bois"),
- Proverbs (e.g., "arbre qui cache la forêt"),
- Fixed collocations (e.g., "racines profondes").

The term "tree" is often used metaphorically or symbolically.

Analysis of phraseological units containing "arbre" in French. Here are some representative examples of the semantic richness of this concept in the French language:

- "**L'arbre qui cache la forêt**": this expression evokes an error of perception or evaluation, where a detail prevents one from seeing the whole. It reflects a biased perspective [6].
- "**Être solide comme un chêne**": the oak here symbolizes strength and stability. This unit emphasizes qualities of physical or moral resilience.
- "**Planter un arbre**" (also used metaphorically): suggests the idea of starting a long-term project, of investing in the future.
- "**Avoir des racines**"/"**Prendre racine**": These expressions refer to rootedness, the connection to the territory, family, or identity.
- "**Arbre généalogique**": A metaphor widely used in many languages to represent the ascending and descending family structure.

It is interesting to note that the concept of a tree is universal, but its phraseological interpretation varies depending on the language and culture. For example:

- In English, "**money doesn't grow on trees**" expresses the idea of scarcity and effort.
- In Russian, "**Дерево узнается по плодам**" ("A tree is known by its fruits") refers to the moral value of actions [7].
- In Uzbek, "**Daraxt bir joyda ko 'karadi**" ("A tree grows in one place") This phrase suggests that if a person lives and works in one place, it is easier to achieve success [8].

This shows that despite linguistic diversity, the tree is a universal archetype used to express notions of value, transmission, strength, and belonging.

Tree-based phraseological units convey a perception of the world based on the observation of nature. They help structure abstract thought (family, origin, solidity, duration). In the field of cognitive linguistics, they perfectly illustrate the conceptual metaphor, where the tree becomes a support for conceptualizing abstract realities.

The tree is one of the oldest and most universal symbols in cultural and linguistic traditions. Present in myths, religions, folk tales, and proverbs, it embodies a multitude of meanings. In French, the symbolism of the tree is reflected in a large number of idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and metaphors, where each tree species can carry its own symbolic value [9].

In the collective imagination, the tree is often associated with life and growth. It begins from a seed, develops slowly, takes deep root, and raises its branches toward the sky. This image makes it a perfect symbol of human existence and the connection between earth and sky, the material and the

spiritual. The tree of life, for example, is a universal symbol found in the Bible, Norse mythology, and Celtic traditions. In French, although this expression is used in religious or philosophical contexts, it also has a metaphorical meaning in everyday language, representing life force or collective memory.

The family tree is another striking example: it represents lineage and origins. This metaphor allows us to visualize intergenerational transmission, where the "branches" correspond to descendants, and the "roots" to ancestors.

Each tree species can convey specific symbolic values in the French language. These symbols are reflected in proverbs, popular sayings, and certain idiomatic expressions [10].

- The oak, for example, is traditionally associated with strength, solidity, and longevity. The expression "**fort comme un chêne**" emphasizes this robustness. The oak was sacred to the Gauls and considered the tree of the gods.
- The willow, on the other hand, symbolizes sadness and melancholy, particularly the weeping willow, which is often associated with mourning and the memory of the deceased. It appears in Romantic poetry as an element of pain or solitude.
- The poplar, slender and often solitary, is sometimes seen as a tree of isolation. Yet its very name evokes "the people," and its role in rural landscapes makes it a discreet symbol of social roots.
- The cypress is strongly linked to the world of funerary art, particularly due to its frequent presence in Mediterranean cemeteries. In France, it is often seen as a tree of silence and memory [11].
- The fig tree and the olive tree, of Mediterranean origin, have a spiritual and nourishing symbolic value. The olive tree evokes peace and wisdom (as in the biblical expression "tendre une branche d'olivier"), while the fig tree is a symbol of abundance.
- Finally, the apple tree is very present in Christian tradition, particularly through the story of the forbidden fruit. It symbolizes temptation and knowledge, but also beauty and femininity in certain stories. These expressions demonstrate the deep integration of nature, and particularly trees, into thought and language [12].

Table 1 in the image categorizes various French expressions that metaphorically use the word "tree" or its parts to convey a wide range of meanings [13]. It is organized into six thematic rows, each representing a conceptual category. The columns in the table are as follows:

1. **No (Number)** – This column sequentially numbers the themes from 1 to 6.
2. **Theme** – Describes the conceptual or semantic field associated with the expressions (e.g., Origin, lineage, roots; Wisdom; Perception; Behavior; Usefulness; Analysis) [14].
3. **Explanation** – Provides a brief description of how the expressions relate to the given theme (e.g., "These expressions refer to family ties, origins, or identity").
4. **Expressions** – Lists actual French idiomatic expressions that utilize tree-related vocabulary (e.g., Avoir des racines, Fort comme un chêne, Se perdre dans les bois).
5. **Meaning** – Offers an English translation or explanation of each expression's figurative meaning (e.g., "to be deeply connected to a place or culture", "solid, resilient").

Each row presents 2–4 idioms that reflect metaphorical thinking linked to trees and nature, showcasing how French language encodes ideas of identity, wisdom, confusion, behavior, pragmatism, and intellectual depth through botanical imagery. The table exemplifies a structured lexical-semantic analysis of French phraseology, particularly phytophrasemes (plant-based idioms) [15].

Table 1. Thematic classification of expressions related to "tree"

No	Theme	Explanation	Expressions	Meaning
1.	Origin, lineage, roots	These expressions refer to family ties, origins, or identity.	Arbre généalogique Avoir des racines (quelque part) Être de la même branche Prendre racine	representation of family origins. to be deeply connected to a place or culture. to be part of the same family or lineage. to settle down permanently somewhere (literally or figuratively). solid, resilient.
2.	Wisdom, experience, stability	Often associated with the oak tree, these expressions evoke strength, maturity, and wisdom.	Fort comme un chêne Être un vieux chêne Droit comme un peuplier Être dur comme du bois	experienced, wise. rigid or honest. difficult to influence or bend.
3.	Percep-tion, error of judgment	These expressions use the term "tree" to represent an error of perspective or poor analysis.	L'arbre qui cache la forêt Se perdre dans les bois	to focus on a detail and miss the essential point. to be disoriented or confused.
4.	Behavior, emotional reaction	Often in a colloquial or figurative register, these expressions describe attitudes or emotional states.	Monter à l'arbre Monter sur ses grands chevaux comme un cheval sous un platane. Prendre racine (en attendant)	to lose one's temper quickly (colloquial). to become conceited or angry (figurative expression). to remain motionless for a long time, to become impatient.
5.	Useful-ness, resource-fulness, action	These expressions highlight pragmatism, action, or adaptation, in connection with wood as a material.	Faire feu de tout bois Toucher du bois Bois dormant	to use all available resources. to ward off bad luck, a superstitious expression. (reference to the fairy tale), refers to a state of waiting, a frozen world.
	Analysis, depth, knowledge	Use of the tree or its parts (roots, branches) as an intellectual metaphor.	Aller à la racine du problème Se ramifier Tronc commun	To get to the root of the problem: to analyze in depth. To branch out: to develop or become more complex (like the branches of a tree). Common core: refers to a common foundation of knowledge or subjects.

Conclusion

Finally, the tree is often used as a metaphor for human beings themselves: the roots represent origins and foundations, the trunk is the body or inner strength, and the branches symbolize aspirations, projects, or descendants. This metaphor carries poetic, philosophical, and linguistic richness. The analysis of phraseological units containing the concept of the tree reveals a linguistic, symbolic, and

cultural richness. These expressions demonstrate the deep connection between language, nature, and culture. Studying these units not only allows us to better understand the French language, but also to explore the universal and specific representations that societies project onto natural elements.

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