

Смалько, Людмила, і Панченко, Вікторія. «Ідіома self-made man як концепт і символ американської культури: історичний і лінгвокультурний аспекти». *Лінгвостилістичні студії*, вип. 12, 2020, с. 194–202.  
Smalko, Liudmyla, and Panchenko, Victoria. "The Idiom Self-Made Man as a Concept and a Token of the American Culture: Historical Background and Linguocultural Aspect". *Linguostylistic Studies*, iss. 12, 2020, pp. 194–202.

УДК 811.111'373.73:930.85(73)

<https://doi.org/10.29038/2413-0923-2020-12-194-202>

## THE IDIOM *SELF-MADE MAN* AS A CONCEPT AND A TOKEN OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LINGUOCULTURAL ASPECT

**Liudmyla Smalko**

Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University, Lutsk, Ukraine

**Victoria Panchenko**

Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European National University, Lutsk, Ukraine

The article elucidates the phenomenon of a self-made man as an idiom, concept, and a symbol of the American culture. The meaning of the idiom is considered from the standpoint of its denotative and connotative meaning, including the historical background for its definition. The research into the nature of the concept of a self-made man is topical in the context of the growing interest of the cognitive linguistics and linguocultural studies in the axiological component of the linguistic picture of the world. The main purpose of the linguocultural studies is to disclose the mentality of the people and their cultural features via language units, and idioms, in particular.

The authors consider the concept of *self-made man* as a complex multilateral structure that includes not only conceptual issues, but also social, psychological, and cultural components. These components include associations, emotions, evaluation, and subconcepts of hard work, perseverance, legacy appropriate for the given culture. The scope of this research has been narrowed to the case study of Bruce Lee's success as a vivid illustration of an archetype of a self-made man to confirm the theoretical framework of this paper. The material of the case study was the book by J. Little 'The Warrior Within: The Philosophies of Bruce Lee'. The emphasis is laid on the component of hard work as an integral and the most fundamental aspect of the concept. The categories *hard work and persistence* manifested the highest frequency in verbal expressions in the discourse under study. The linguoculturological approach to the study of the issue provides clues to revealing the philosophical and cultural features of the self-made man concept. The key findings of the study offer ideas to explore the culturally specific features of the image of a self-made man at a cross-cultural level.

**Key words:** self-made man, components of the concept of self-made man, linguoculturological approach, American culture, Bruce Lee philosophies.

## ІДІОМА *SELF-MADE MAN* ЯК КОНЦЕПТ І СИМВОЛ АМЕРИКАНСЬКОЇ КУЛЬТУРИ: ІСТОРИЧНИЙ І ЛІНГВОКУЛЬТУРНИЙ АСПЕКТИ

Людмила Смалько

Східноєвропейський національний університет імені Лесі Українки,  
Луцьк, Україна

Вікторія Панченко

Східноєвропейський національний університет імені Лесі Українки,  
Луцьк, Україна

У статті феномен *self-made man* (людина, що всім зобов'язана сама собі) витлумачено як ідіому, концепт і символ/ознаку американської культури. Значення ідіоми розглянуто з позицій її денотативного та конотативного значення, включаючи історичне підґрунтя для визначення її змісту. Дослідження природи концепту *self-made man* є актуальним у контексті зростаючого інтересу когнітивної лінгвістики та лінгвокультурних досліджень до аксіологічної складової мовної картини світу. Матеріалом дослідження слугувала книга Дж. Літла «Шлях воїна: філософії Брюса Лі». Ключові висновки дослідження пропонують перспективні ідеї щодо дослідження культурно-специфічних особливостей образу-концепту *self-made man* на прокультурному рівні.

**Ключові слова:** ідіома *self-made man*, компоненти концепту *self-made man*, американська культура, лінгвокультурологічний підхід, філософії Брюса Лі.

**Formulation of the research problem and its significance.** The whole world today is concerned with providing opportunities for self-realization of every individual. The authors interpret self-realization as the realization of oneself and a feeling of comfort when you finally achieve what you set out to do. Numerous books are written to help a person to self-realize. We believe that every experience is actually the experience of self-realization. By every experience, we realize our capacities, settings of our soul, and our potential. In this respect, the study of the concept of a *self-made man* theory and practice seems to be a highly beneficial and promising one.

Searching for the meaning of the concept of *self-made man* seems to be as old as this world. It dates back to the early history of mankind since the humans have always had this instinctive desire to improve. It has been decades since the issue was given sustained scholarly attention and substantiation.

For the majority of people all round the world, a notion of “self-made man” is associated with American society, which is believed to be human-centered, providing everyone with equal opportunities for success.

Considering culture in the context of its manifestation in language allows investigating the core of cultural values and identities. It is the language that remains a basic mechanism of conveying the culture uniqueness. Language, as a multiplex system of cognition, accumulation, and transferring information, reflects human knowledge and awareness of the surrounding world in the cultural context that created it. That is why using a linguocultural approach to research has become one of the most promising trends in linguistic studies and cognivistics, in particular.

Different types of knowledge are represented in the human mind in the form of cognitive and linguistic categories that, on the whole, form global, universal, and cultural concepts. The study and description of language and culture, their interaction, interconnection, and different types of correlation, is a complex problem, the most promising solution of which is the analysis of cultural concepts, the so-called stereotypes of national identities.

The above analyzed provisions argue that the analysis of cultural concepts (and we refer the concept of self-made man to them) can contribute to deeper understanding of the national prototypical models of an individual's behavior in the diverse situations which are often culture-related. These models reflect the cultural norms and values of the nation.

Anna Wierzbicka acknowledges that defining everyday concepts is a difficult task as it should be done in a way that enables an outsider to the language and its culture to understand what the native speaker has in mind when using the word, or an idiom (5). To understand idioms, you need extralinguistic knowledge about the culture, which is always behind them, or at least their origin. Understanding an idiom meaning is rather complicated cognitive process.

**Analysis of the research into the problem.** The research into the nature of the concept of a *self-made man* is stipulated by the growing interest of the scholars to the axiological component of the linguistic picture of the world. More and more often, they interpret language phenomena depending on the cultural background. The research scope of the article implies an explanation of the fundamental concepts in the context of the linguocultural approach. First and foremost, they are the terms *idiom*, *concept* and *linguocultural aspect*.

Edward Sapir pointed out that "language does not exist outside of the culture, that is, outside socially inherited set of practical skills and ideas that characterize our mode of life" (185). V. Vorobiov states that, first of all, *linguocultural studies* deal with a selected and organized set of cultural values, explore live communicative processes of language evolution and perception, and linguistic experience. National mentality provides a systemic description of the linguistic picture of the world and ensures the fulfillment of educational and intellectual tasks (Vorob'ev 33). Therefore, we can state that in the focus of this study type is the mentality of the people and their cultural features transferred via language units, and idioms, in particular.

The *idiom*, as one of the language universals, reveals information about the relationship between culture and language. It is a fact of the general linguistic knowledge that the idioms require an in-depth analysis of their cultural and historical background. To understand their figurative meaning is hardly possible without such analysis since very often they have nationally-biased expressions in other cultures.

The notion *concept* as a linguistic-cognitive phenomenon can be interpreted as a unit of mental or psychic resources of our consciousness and the information structure that reflects the knowledge and experience of a

person. In other words, it is an operational content unit of the mental lexicon, conceptual system, brain language (*lingua mentalis*) and the holistic picture of the world, which is reflected in the human psyche (Karasik 115). The category of a concept and its structure involves several aspects of the cumulative mind, has the verbal realization in the language, represents the primary cultural formation, which reflects the national philosophy and experience. The linguoculturological approach to the interpretation of idioms gives grounds to argue that they have culture-based connotation and must be interpreted as a kind of an archetype or a culture code. Thus idiomatic expressions are to be studied not only as linguistic but also as cultural markers (Kovshova). From this point of view, any idiom is primarily an axiological concept.

Accordingly, the axiological concept of an idiom *a self-made man* is interpreted as: “A self-made man is someone who has made his own fortune. He started out poor and made himself rich; a person who works very hard on his / her own to accomplish his / her goals or aims in life; the person who takes the initiative on his / her own efforts to achieve his / her success” (Privalova 211). Through our everyday experiences, we get to understand better who we are and the world we live in, thus maturing as human beings.

**The goal and the specific tasks of the article.** The purpose of this article is to review and analyze the historical, philosophical, sociological, and cultural peculiarities of a *self-made man* concept. Although the headline of the article implies that the study considers a broad meaning of the idiom as a concept, the scope has been narrowed to the case study of Bruce Lee’s success as a vivid illustration, confirming the theoretical framework of this paper. This approach to scientific research can contribute to better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and extend the theories.

**Statement regarding the basic material of the research and the justification of the results obtained.** Originally, the term *self-made man* referred to a person who broke through the unfavorable circumstances, or indigent background to fame and recognized superiority in the financial, political, or other areas, owing to endurance and hard work, as opposed to achieving these positions through inherited fortune, family connections, or other privileges. Literally, the denotative meaning of *self-made* is “made by oneself”. From the Past tense of make, the form *made* itself has a verbal adjective meaning “assured of success or fortune” (since the late 1500s). We consider the concept of self-made man as a discretionary mental formation and a unit of the human's intellectual code with a well-ordered structure. It represents the result of an individual's cognitive activity. A concept has a complex multilateral structure that includes not only conceptional issues, but also social, psychological, and cultural components. These components, in turn, include associations, emotions, evaluation, national images, and connotations appropriate for the given culture.

The concept of *self-made man* seems to be quite easy to perceive, but it is not so easy to define, explain, and argue. F. Douglass, highly appreciated theoretician on the issues of self-made man, in his famous lecture “Self-made

Man” claims: *Self-made men* are the men who, under peculiar difficulties and without the ordinary helps of favouring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position and have learned from themselves the best uses to which life can be put in this world, and in the exercises of these uses to build up worthy character. They are the men who owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings, to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education, who are what they are, without the aid of any favouring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results” (Douglass 8). In this lecture, F. Douglass offers his arguments: “When we find a man who has ascended heights beyond ourselves, who has a broader range of vision than we and a sky with more stars in it in than we have in ours, we may know that he *has worked harder*, better and more wisely than we. He was awake while we slept. He was busy while we were idle and was wisely improving his time and talents while we were wasting ours” (9).

Many sources argue that the term “a self-made man” was coined by the American politician Henry Clay. As the U.S. Senator for Kentucky, H. Clay made a speech in the Senate on February 2, 1832, in which he said: “*In Kentucky, almost every manufactory known to me is in the hands of enterprising and self-made men, who have acquired whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor*” (Byrd, and Wolff 100).

But, in fact, we have found earlier use of “self-made man” in a letter signed by Prof. Newman, published in the October 9, 1828 issue of the Delaware Advertiser and Farmer's Journal. The heading above the letter was “A SELF MADE MAN” (with no hyphen). Newman's letter is about Roger Sherman, the Connecticut statesman and politician who served on the “Committee of Five” that drafted the Declaration of Independence, and later served as Connecticut's Senator in the new U.S. Congress. Professor Newman in his letter notes that Sherman rose from humble beginnings to “the Halls of our Congress” and was a self-made man.

The idea of a “self-made man” alludes to the issues of poverty, disadvantages, success, and hard work. The appellation “self-made man” or “self-made woman” simply describes a person who was born disadvantaged (physically, mentally, or without abundance), but achieved a great success in life owing to his/her hard work and creativity rather than to any privileges, connections, or inherited wealth. The archetype of self-made businessman remains a key ideal in the American conception of success.

There are numerous manifestations of this idea in the past and present, among the fictional stories and film characters, and those from the real life. In each of the cases of the prominent representatives of the self-making process, the emphasis is laid on the component of hard work as an integral element of the concept. The mass media very often emphasize the importance of transforming Victorian attributes of self-made man into the modern world. The idea is worth considering.

Scoping out the issue, we have revealed a great number of historical figures who achieved a lot on their ways to success, made a fortune, gained their goals, won through all the obstacles, and went down in history as unforgettable patterns on self-making. The study of the sources, describing the lives of such celebrities, allows classifying them into several groups: fiction and legends, historical, American, and contemporary. Let us mention only some widely-known fairy tales and books (*Cinderella, Aladdin, Oliver Twist, the Arthurian story of Sir Gareth, Martin Eden etc.*), movies (*Rocky, Rags to Riches, Trading Places, The Wolf of Wall Street, My Fair Lady, etc.*), game shows (*The Price is Right, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? etc.*), television reality-shows (*American Idol, The X Factor*), and many others.

The abovementioned examples give grounds to assume that the beginnings of a *self-made man* do not have its roots in the American culture only. But it is a symbol of American culture for most people, its archetype, a cultural ideal, a myth, or even a cult. Firstly, the creation of the idea of the American Dream was a very worthwhile business for those who wanted to sell the formula of how to make a fortune. The American way of perceiving the reality enabled to carry out the lucrative plan. Everybody admired the completely prepared clues for success in the country where nearly everyone was about to become a millionaire.

Jim Cullen, referring to the complexities of the concept known as the American dream, suggests: “The Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one American Dream. Instead there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity... Sometimes “better and richer and fuller” is defined in terms of money – in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the only definition – but there are others” (9).

Self-help-guides and fictional stories describe common people's stories, showing their way to success. Andrew Carnegie, a self-made man who started out as a poor immigrant and became one of the richest men in America, published essays advising young men how to succeed in business. At the turn of the century he wrote that success was a “simple matter of honest work, ability, and concentration” and so was available to “the sober, frugal, energetic and able mechanic” as well as to the office boy and clerk of similar character (Wierzbicka 122).

There are a number of examples of self-made men and women among our contemporaries: Andrew Carnegie, Chris Gardner, Dado Banatao, Henry Ford, J Joanne Rowling, Jim Carrey, Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah Winfrey, Ralph Lauren, Roman Abramovich, Steve Jobs, Walt Disney. The United States of America is not, of course, the only source of self-made men examples, but, definitely, it is the cradle of self-making, the concept, and a symbol of self-improvement and self-realization in the American culture.

The research has elucidated the need to identify the components of a self-made man concept, determine their main characteristics, and prove the

importance of each of them for a self-making process. The in-depth study and conceptual analysis of the notion in the diverse sources give grounds to suggest that the *fundamental components* of the concept are: mediocrity or poverty, hard work, dedication and perseverance, and an impact on the future generations.

The term of a *self-made man* is nearly always synonymous with *hard work*. It is one of the most vital attributes of all self-made man characteristics and is associated with almost superhuman efforts to realize one's ambitions. The connotative meaning of it is close to the metaphor "*pulling the bootstraps up*" or "*bootstrapping*". Pulling the bootstraps up is physically impossible when a person wears those boots, and it resembles the efforts of a self-made man who tries to achieve the unattainable and never gives up.

Among the other constituents of the self-made man concept (subconcept *success, education, social rank, etc.*), the categories *hard work and persistence* manifested the highest frequency in verbal expressions in the discourse under study. The phenomenon of *from-rags-to-riches* is indispensable as its legacy is obvious and appreciated very soon. Such a model has a number of followers in the foreseeable future, not necessarily many generations later. Carnegie bequeathed his legacy to the institutions he believed would facilitate the rise of the next generation of self-made men. He endowed libraries, colleges, museums, and concert halls where people might cultivate an appreciation of the arts, as he did. Definitely, a self-made man's deeds and heritage enrich a new generation.

As it was mentioned in the paragraph defining the goal of this study, the scope has been narrowed to the case study of Bruce Lee's success as a vivid illustration of an archetype of a self-made man to confirm the theoretical framework of this paper.

Having revealed the structural components of the self-made man concept, we explored the case of Bruce Lee's phenomenon of success in terms of this research methodology. In the case of Bruce Lee, these components are undoubtedly appropriate, fairly important, and convincing. His life and dedication to the career path is a model of selfless, sincere, and honest development of his potential and hard work. Bruce Lee faithfully advanced to his goal daily. He is really the person who, since his childhood, had the instinctive urge for improvement and growth, the features which are fundamental for a self-making process. The selected pages of Bruce Lee's biography, in our opinion, can contribute to a better understanding of his self-made personality and his phenomenon of success, offering an insight into the psychology of a self-making process and will help to reveal causal relationships between the components of a self-made man. The facts of the biography are taken from a reliable source – Bruce Lee's personal writings, scripts, and thoughts on paper obtained from the book by John Little.

In the Editorial Review to the book *The Warrior Within: the Philosophies of Bruce Lee*, we read that the author J. Little "is the only person who has ever been authorized to review the entirety of Lee's personal notes, sketches, and reading annotations and to edit the books on Bruce Lee's martial art and its far-reaching

philosophical underpinnings” (Cullen 3). That was the reason for choosing the book as a case study material.

We are going to consider the personality of Bruce Lee as a self-made man, laying emphasis on the most important components of the concept. Bruce Lee always had a *mysterious power* and *self-will* in his life choices, focused on self-improvement, the life-long process of education, and self-image creation. These aspects make him undeniably an exemplar of a self-made man. As a matter of fact, the study of Bruce Lee’s philosophies offers insights into the mystery of his colossal success.

Philosophy was his major in college. Bruce Lee conflated ancient ideas with his own, the most famous manifestations of which are:

1) (the famous water metaphor for resilience): *“Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. If you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it into a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow, or it can crash. Be water, my friend”* (“Bruce Lee”).

2) *A self-willed man has no other aim than his own growth. He values only one thing, the mysterious power in himself which bids him live and helps him to grow.” A self-willed man obeys a different law, the one law I, too, hold absolutely sacred — the human law in oneself, own individual will* (Little 19).

3) *In life, what more can you ask for than to be real? To fulfill one’s potential instead of wasting energy on [attempting to] actualize one’s dissipating image, which is not real and an expenditure of one’s vital energy. We have great work ahead of us, and it needs devotion and much, much energy. To grow, to discover, we need involvement, which is something I experience every day — sometimes good, sometimes frustrating. No matter what, you must let your inner light guide you out of the darkness* (Little 126).

The abovementioned selected quotations pinpoint the statement that Bruce Lee had a strong will and determination to reach the highest positions in his domain by doing his best, through hard work and self-improvement. He was a man who was always learning, growing, and evolving to become the best person one can be. The greatest impact of Bruce Lee is manifested in the fact that a lot of people, striving for advancement and success, followed his water-wisdom in their day-to-day lives on their way to self-making. Thus his personality involves all components of the concept of a self-made man: hard work, persistence, and legacy.

**Conclusions and prospects for further research.** Language is a complicated cognitive system of getting and exposing information. It reflects human experience, knowledge, and perception of the surrounding world in the cultural context that created it. Using the linguocultural approach to the interpretation of the idiom *self-made man*, this study shed light on the historical background, the components of the concept, and its etymology. Throughout history, self-made men were those who made their own way in life by reaching



high goals through willpower and hard work. The findings of the study argue that these components are the magic keys to success, allowing a person to create his/her own destiny, and while there are always many factors leading to success, all of them are subordinated to work and decisiveness. The case study of Bruce Lee's story of self-making clarifies the theoretical assumptions of the research and provides clues to understanding the phenomenon. The conclusions are consistent with the findings of the available studies in the topic area. Further research is needed to verify cognitive scenarios of a self-made man in modern society and highlight the culturally specific features of the image of a successful person at a cross-cultural level.

### Список використаної літератури

- Воробьев, Владимир. *Лингвокультурология (теория и методы)*. Москва: Издательство Российского университета дружбы народов, 1997.
- Карасик, Владимир. *Языковый круг: личность, концепты, дискурс*. Москва: Гнозис, 2004.
- Ковшова, Мария. «Сопоставительный анализ фразеологизмов: лингвокультурологический подход». *Филология и культура*, вып. 38(4), 2014, с. 115–20.
- Привалова, Ирина. *Интеркультура и вербальный знак*. Москва: Гнозис, 2005.
- Сепир, Эдвард. *Избранные труды по языкознанию и культурологии*. Перевод с англ. под ред. и с предисл. д-ра филол. наук проф. А. Е. Кибрика, 2-е изд. Москва: Прогресс, 2002.
- “*Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*”, edited by John Little, Tuttle Publishing, 1999.
- Byrd, Robert, and Wolff, Wendy. *The Senate, 1789-1989*, vol. 3: *Classic Speeches, 1830-1993*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1994.
- Cullen, Jim. *Problems and promises of the self-made myth*. The Hedgehog Review, 2013.
- Douglass, Frederick. “*Self-Made Men. Address before the Students of the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pa*”. Folder 1 of 16, 1874. URL: <https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.29002/>.
- Little, John. *The Warrior Within: The Philosophies of Bruce Lee*. McGraw-Hill Education, 1996.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. *Lexicography and Conceptual Analysis*. Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1985.

### References

- Vorob'ev, Vladimir. *Lingvokul'turologija (teorija i metody)*. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Rossijskogo universiteta druzhby narodov, 1997.
- Karasik, Vladimir. *Jazykovyj krug: lichnost', koncepty, diskurs*. Moskva: Gnozis, 2004.
- Kovshova, Marija. “A Comparative Analysis of Phraseological Units: the Linguoculturological Approach”. *Philology and Culture*, iss. 38(4), 2014, pp. 115–20.
- Privalova, Irina. *Interkul'tura i verbal'nyj znak*. Moskva: Gnozis, 2005.
- Sapir, Edward. *Izbrannye trudy po jazykoznaniju i kul'turologii*. Translated and edited by A. E. Kibrika, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Moskva: Progress, 2002.
- “*Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*”, edited by John Little, Tuttle Publishing, 1999.
- Byrd, Robert, and Wolff, Wendy. *The Senate, 1789-1989*, vol. 3: *Classic Speeches, 1830-1993*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1994.
- Cullen, Jim. *Problems and promises of the self-made myth*. The Hedgehog Review, 2013.
- Douglass, Frederick. “*Self-Made Men. Address before the Students of the Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pa*”. Folder 1 of 16, 1874. [www.loc.gov/item/mfd.29002/](http://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.29002/).
- Little, John. *The Warrior Within: The Philosophies of Bruce Lee*. McGraw-Hill Education, 1996.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. *Lexicography and Conceptual Analysis*. Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1985.

Стаття надійшла до редколегії 03.12.2019