

DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSLATING THE PICTURE OF THE WORLD REFLECTED IN SET EXPRESSIONS: ETYMOLOGICAL INSIGHT

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Prezentul articol este dedicat studiului imaginii lingvistice a lumii, așa cum este ea reflectată în expresiile idiomatice în limbile engleză și română, și problemei traductibilității acestora, ținând cont de discrepanțele dintre modelele conceptuale ale lumii prezentate de acestea. Articolul este axat pe tratarea a două aspecte: idiomaticitatea și coloritul etnocultural cauzat atât de circumstanțe socioculturale lingvistice, cât și extralingvistice. Un rol aparte îi este atribuit realității extralingvistice, drept factor decisiv în crearea imaginii lumii exprimate lingvistic și, de asemenea, drept factor important în condiționarea gradului de traductibilitate a expresiilor idiomatice sub aspectul etnocultural al acestora.

În articol sunt analizate modalitățile de traducere a imaginii interne a expresiilor idiomatice, fapt ce poate fi realizat prin următoarele procedee: naturalizarea și neutralizarea – în cazul dificultăților cauzate de prezența coloritului etnocultural, transferul metaforic – în cazul idiomaticității și neutralizarea sau calcul – în cazul imposibilității de a păstra imaginea internă inițială a expresiei frazeologice, prezentând o serie de exemple ce ilustrează toate modalitățile propuse de traducere.

Set expressions are units that render in a very prominent way the historical, geographical and culturally bound aspects of the objective reality reflected in the linguistic picture of the world. That is why they are the units which present the greatest difficulties in translation. But even though it might not nowadays be perceivable, all the set expressions of any language started by being ordinary word combinations and in time developed idiomatity and lack of motivation by losing the connection with the phenomena they used to describe at certain periods of language and history development.

However there are set expressions the origins of which can be traced back and this can sometimes be a helpful hand for translators as well as for paremiologists. These “roots” usually lead back to certain phenomena usual in the past but no longer existent at present, and can belong to different spheres of the social life as well as to certain natural conditions such as climate or geographical location.

F.Güttinger mentions for example that one of the peculiarities of English culture are rituals connected to tea, this fact is perfectly illustrated by the English set expressions that reflect the national peculiarity settled in for centuries. For example, in the situation when a Romanian speaker would say: **“furtună într-un pahar cu apă”** an Englishman would say: **“a storm in a tea-cup”** or **“a tempest in a tea-cup”**: which would literally mean: **“furtună într-o ceașcă de ceai”**. In the case when a Romanian speaker would say **“Nu-i de mine”** an Englishman would say **“It’s not my cup of tea”** literally – **“nu e ceașca mea de ceai”**. Or for example when an Englishman wants to say something he hopes to happen is not absolutely sure, he would say: **“I haven’t seen my cup of tea yet”** – literally: **“încă nu mi-am văzut ceașca de ceai”**. Also an English man would say **“that’s another cup of tea”** meaning – **“it’s better off”**, whereas a Romanian speaker would say **“asta-i altă găscă”** or perhaps, in a more neutral way – **“asta-i altă treabă”**, but he would definitely not say: **“asta-i altă ceașcă de ceai”**.

Another curious example also somehow connected to tea drinking traditions would be the name of the towel used to wipe the dishes after having washed them, Romanian people call it **“șervețel”** whereas English people have come to call it **“tea towel”** finding another link with the famous tea tradition. So, the translator should always be aware of both the source language and target language and the period in history he is to translate from.

Another example, also connected to social reality, is the Romanian idiom **“A-și da arama pe față”** which means **“to show who you really are”**. It comes from the ancient Romanian monetary system where coins were first made of copper and then gilded or silvered. After having been used for some time the thin layer of gold or silver was starting to wear out and the copper started to show up from the inside. By analogy the word combination started being used with reference to people, to their behavior, and gradually it lost its connections with the initial source. Nowadays no one remembers the origin of the set expression and it is accepted and acquired as it is, being very often successfully used in everyday speech.

The same can be illustrated with examples coming from the English culture. Let us in this case take first into consideration the social phenomenon and then the set expressions generated by it in time.

It is known that cockfights are a phenomenon peculiar for the American culture of the period of constitution of the country's power. This phenomenon was the source of appearance of the following set expressions: **“to show one's white feathers”** and **“the cock and bull story”**.

The first set expression used to be a common word combination conditioned by the fact that fighting cocks, when they were afraid, turned the back to their competitors, and showed their tail to them. The inner feathers of the cock's tail are white, this is why it was said that the cock was showing its white feathers. Since it was considered a sign of cowardice the set expression was extrapolated on other creatures, among which human beings, that is where the set expression comes.

The second example **“the cock and bull story”** has its roots in a human behavior pattern also connected to the tradition of the cockfights. The fighting cocks' masters used to boast with their cocks comparing their strength with that of bulls, but even in those times it sounded ridiculous and the obvious boasts were taken with a grain of salt. Thus when someone intended to say that a certain person is boasting, telling lies or exaggerating something, he/she used this set expression to suggest that. The Romanian version for this set expression – **“cai verzi”** is also very colorful but unfortunately its origins are unknown.

Examples of the same kind can be connected to any other activities peculiar for a certain culture. Let us take a curious example that is similar in Romanian and English:

e.g. As silly as a sheep – Prost ca oaia.

This example is a very clear one from the semantic point of view, it does not require additional explanations for understanding. But how does it happen that two cultures that differ to such an extent as Romanian and English have come to such an image similarity? The reason is very simple - both the Romanian and English peoples have in their agriculture generations and generations of shepherds, fact that explains the similarity of the conclusion drawn as a result of the activity in the same sphere. Another Romanian variant for this set expression can be **“a fi prost ca miezul nopții”**. This set expression is based on the analogy with another one **“a fi întunecat”**. It is centered on a metaphor – to be silly as being equivalent to have complete darkness in one's mind, that is, not to be able to discern anything.

There are also examples of set expressions the origins of which are, as mentioned above, conditioned by climate and geographical position, such as the following:

e.g. As uncertain as weather – Ca ziua cea de primăvară.

As right as rain – Normal, obișnuit.

As white as a lilly – Alb ca neaua.

The last example needs a special explanation; it considers the white color. In the English culture it is compared to the lilly and in the Romanian culture it is compared to snow. May be it is due to the fact that English people seldom have the chance to see snow and that is why they have picked the lilly as the sample of the supreme whiteness. Whereas in Romanian weather conditions snow is a very frequent phenomenon and that is why it has become the model of whiteness for our people. The same may be said about the example **“as uncertain as weather”** – it was conditioned by the English weather conditions, in our country the weather is far not as uncertain as in Britain, the period when the weather in our country is as uncertain as British is spring so this is where the set expression **“ca ziua cea de primăvară”** comes from.

The following example is worth being paid attention to:

e.g. Colac peste pupăză – It never rains but it pours.

This example perfectly illustrates the cultural tendentiousness of the set expressions. Both of them are rendering negative attitude to certain phenomena, both of them mean the same fact – that bad things never come alone but their images are both culturally bound.

“Colac peste pupăză” comes from the Romanian funerals customs. For the funerals there were baked two types of bread **“colaci”** – for giving them to the grownups, and **“pupeze”**, that were a bit smaller, for giving them to children. Two things create the negative shade of meaning in this case. The first – this type of bread was baked for funerals, which by notion are not a pleasurable event; the second – **“colac”** – the bigger bread was put on the **“pupăză”** – the smaller bread, as an allegory of the fact that after a bad thing an even worse is coming.

The English variant – **“It never rains but it pours”**, is based on an image built upon an analogy with weather conditions. The effect of negative connotation is created also by means of two shades of meaning. The first – that rain as such is considered to be bad weather, and second – that it is not simply raining, it is raining very hard- pouring.

Even though the images of the two set expressions do not coincide, they are both very colorful in illustrating the meaning and show very strongly their cultural appartenance.

Above there have been mentioned only examples of set expressions having their origins in events or phenomena happened long ago in time and not having connection to the present. However, though it may seem unnoticeable, as the language is a living and developing entity, the process of creation and crystallization of set expressions in the frame of the language is an on-going process. That is, set expressions are being created and ground for them is set nowadays as well as centuries ago.

An example accounting for this fact can be the set expression “to be nose to tail” which means to be stuck in a traffic jam. It is a set expression which belongs to the American culture and has its origin in a direct denomination of the way the cars stand in a traffic jam: they are standing one after the other in long rows so that the “nose” of each of them is close to the “tail” of the previous ones.

As it can be seen from the above-presented material all the set expressions really start their way by being simple word combinations. Then in time they lose they links with the original situation and thus lose their motivation becoming idiomatic units that are reproduced in oral and written speech the way they are, that is ready made. Sometimes their origins can still be traced back and that way their understanding is made easier, unfortunately this is not possible for all such units of the language. Even though the majority of set expressions are inherited from ancestors, it does not mean that this layer is not developing as the whole of the language does. However, the development of any language is a process slow enough not to be noticed very easily, and especially when it comes to set expressions which are the most rigid units from the point of view of structure and form. The loss of the link between the initial meanings of the separate words making up the collocation and its actual overall meaning makes the simple collocation give ground to a phraseological unit. At this point it is the newly-created idiomaticity that becomes the greatest problem for the translator. Idiomaticity manifests itself grammatically or lexically as an impossibility of translating analytically and a necessity of finding a global equivalent to an element that is larger than a moneme. In other words it can be called the metaphoric meaning of the set expression. It is the fact that it is expressed by an inner metaphor, which mainly causes the difficulties in translation, since different peoples are accustomed to build their peculiar cultural metaphors on different images. Thus in this case the hardest thing is to translate the metaphor of the source language set expression by a metaphor peculiar for the target language but at the same time preserve the overall meaning of the set expression intact.

From the point of view of “preservability” of idiomaticity in translation set expressions can roughly be divided into three main groups. The first group is set expressions that have equivalents in the target language, that is that have somehow parallel pairs in the target language. The second group is set expressions that do not have direct equivalents in the target language but can be translated by way of change of the inner image on which the initial metaphor was centered. The third and the most problematic group is the one which comprises equivalent lacking set expressions which can not be translated except for the use of explanatory ways which however can not be considered translation proper. We are going to consider each of the mentioned groups one by one to see the ways of solving the problem of interlinguistic metaphoric shift.

The first group, as it was already mentioned comprises units having complete coincidence of images in both languages, thus direct equivalents. This is the group that causes almost no difficulties in translation, but there are also units we should be very careful with in choosing the equivalents. The following examples are examples of non-problematic translation.

E.g.: as cold as ice – *rece ca gheața;*
 as sweet as honey – *dulce ca mierea;*
 as light as a feather – *ușor ca pana;*
 as hard as a flint – *tare ca cremenele;*
 as sly as a fox – *șiret ca vulpea;*
 as black as coal – *negru ca tăciunele;*
 as cold as a frog – *rece ca broasca.*

However such examples are very rare especially in languages which do not belong to the same linguistic group. That is why the task of the translator is not very easy.

As it was already mentioned the translator should be very careful in selecting a certain set expression from the target language, which seems to be equivalent to the source language, to translate it because sometimes apparently similar set expressions are not all the time bearing the same semantic connotative loading. Let us consider an example to make the situation clearer.

E.g.: *Mâini de aur* – *Jack of all trades*

The example works very illustratively to prove mistranslation. In the Romanian language the set expression “**Mâini de aur**” has a positive connotation and means “a person who does well whatever he begins

doing” whereas in the English language the set expression “**Jack of all trades**” describes a person who is completely incompetent but asserts to be able to do whatever needed. The mistake in this case was caused by the fact that the connotation of the set expressions was not taken into account. The misleading factor was the apparently similar formal structure.

The second group comprises set expressions conveying the same idea but based on different metaphoric images in translation. The difficulty in finding the equivalent is connected with lack of identical image. In this case the translator should look for set expressions identical at least in style and connotative value but the metaphorical image may differ. The degree of closeness to the image of the original can be different. There are very fortunate cases of image shift where the internal images on which the set expressions are centered, are very close. In such cases the translated units do not need additional detailing notes for making the meaning clearer or more perceivable. The following example is an illustration of such a case: *e.g. as old as hills – bătrân ca munții*.

The images are almost similar, mountains and hills are both tectonic structures and the difference between the two is not so striking as to make them ungraspable. In the next example the degree of image similarity is also quite high, the uncertainty of weather in general is comparable to the uncertainty of spring time.

E.g.: as uncertain as weather – ca ziua cea de primăvară.

In this example the degree of similarity is already much lower though it does not hamper the easy perception of the unit. The peculiarities of the cultural picture of the world start showing up in a stronger way and that is what causes the image change in the target language units. The set expressions from this group are usually translated by target language equivalents centered on different images. But in this case too the translator has to follow the principle of translating customary by customary. However, if the images on which the translations are built do not belong to the target language, it becomes very obvious when only the target text is available and there is no original to confront it with. The text acquires a very strong stylistic coloring and does not sound as belonging to the culture of the target text. The problem is that all the set expressions (which usually work as trite metaphors) that were to preserve their status in the translated version changed into metaphors and consequently changed the stylistic atmosphere of the text. Thus the translator should be very careful in translating such units preserving the images of the original, this would be more or less acceptable only in a text with very low frequency of occurrence of set expressions and even there, it might not all the times be appropriate or even possible.

The third group comprises set expressions that do not have their correspondents in the target language and do not allow translation except for explanation. Such units are in most of the cases translated word-by-word, if the structure allows and does not hamper understanding, or are explained, in unsolvable cases they are simply dropped out of the context or replaced by other language units.

*E.g.: as hot as an oven – fierbinte ca un cuptor;
as wet as a fish – ud learcă.*

Sometimes the word-by-word translation sounds well enough to satisfy the reader and to look and sound as real set expressions, here are some examples of really good translations to support the assertion:

E.g.: altă făină se macină la moară – a different kind of flour is now being ground in the old mill [1, p.15; 2, p.17];

a se ține de om ca râia – to cling to a man like the scab [1, p.32; 2, p.35];

a nu închide un ochi – not to get a wink of sleep [1, p.19; 2, p.21];

i-a înghițit pământul – the earth swallowed them up [1, p.37; 2, p.39];

Un nebun aruncă o piatră-n lac și zece deștepți nu o pot scoate. – One fool can throw a boulder into a pond and ten wise men cannot get it out [1, p.59; 2, p.61];

Ce ți-i scris în frunte ți-i pus – Whatever is ordained stands written upon a man's brow [1, p.34; 2, p.37].

After having considered the difficulties in translating set expressions the conclusion can be made that the rigidity of the structure cumulated with the integrity of the meaning as well as the national coloring prove to be the things that hamper translation most. However, even though set expressions are the hardest thing to translate in language, their translation – the target text obtained, gives to the translator the greatest pleasure possible because as V.Hugo said “mothers love most the children who have caused them the hardest pains”.

References:

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