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CONTEXTUALISED TRANSLATION OF FOOD-IDIOMS FROM ENGLISH INTO ROMANIAN: A CASE STUDY

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Using appropriate strategies to translate idiomatic expressions determines the quality of the translation product. As a rule, the meaning of these expressions cannot be extracted from each of the component words of an idiom. This article presents the results of a cross-sectional study, carried out with the purpose to analyse the quality of contextual translation of food-idioms and to determine the translation strategies applied by a group of 20 first-year students studying in the Department of Translation, Interpreting and Applied Linguistics. The strategies used by the students for rendering idiomatic expressions is based on the typology of Prof. Mona Baker. The teaching material proposed to the students is a text written in an informal register, containing 20 idiomatic expressions associated with the field of gastronomy. The data obtained from the qualitative analysis showed that *paraphrasing*, i.e. the use of non-idiomatic and stylistically neutral linguistic units, was the optimal choice as a translation strategy; it was also a method of idiomatic translation of the text from English into Romanian.

***Keywords**: idiomatic expression, translation strategy, contextualised translation, translation process.*

STUDIU DE CAZ ASUPRA TRADUCERII CONTEXTUALE DIN ENGLEZĂ ÎN ROMÂNĂ A EXPRESIILOR IDIOMATICE ASOCIATE GASTRONOMIEI

Utilizarea strategiilor potrivite pentru a traduce expresii idiomatice determină calitatea produsului traducerii. De regulă, sensul acestor expresii nu poate fi extras din fiecare dintre cuvintele care compun aceste expresii. Articolul de față prezintă rezultatele unui studiu transversal, realizat cu scopul de a analiza calitatea traducerii contextuale a unor expresii idiomatice asociate cu alimente și de a determina strategiile de traducere aplicate de un grup de 20 de studenți din anul I, care își fac studiile în cadrul departamentului Traducere, Interpretare și Lingvistică Aplicată. Participanții au aplicat strategiile de traducere a expresiilor idiomatice fundamentate pe tipologia prof. de traductologie Mona Baker. Materialul didactic propus studenților este un text scris în registru informal, care conține 20 de expresii idiomatice asociate domeniului

gastronomiei. Datele obținute din analiza calitativă au arătat că *parafrazarea*, adică utilizarea unor unități lingvistice non-idiomatice și neutre din punct de vedere stilistic, a reprezentat alegerea optimă ca strategie de traducere, inclusiv ca metodă de traducere idiomatică a textului din limba engleză în limba română.

Cuvinte-cheie*: expresie idiomatică, strategie de traducere, traducere contextualizată, process de traducere.*

Introduction. Idioms and culture

Although translation is recognised as a crucial aspect of communication in the present era, its significance is particularly emphasised in the field of higher education, where students have to accomplish different tasks of translation in order to showcase their achievements. The act of translation not only helps them understand the idiosyncrasies of the subject of Translation Studies, but also contributes to the advancement of knowledge and scientific progress. In this context, culture is not limited to the arts or human intellect, but instead, it encompasses all aspects of life that are shaped by social conditioning in the broader anthropological sense [1, p.39].

Culture is not static, but rather constantly evolving and it has significant implications for the process of translation. In this respect, the idioms we use on a daily basis are a reflection of the language's characteristics, as well as the community's way of life and culture and the formation process of idioms is closely tied to the community's way of life. Cultural characteristics also have a significant impact on the use of linguistic expressions in everyday life. The interaction between culture and language is thus inevitable and ongoing, as long as both exist.

From a linguo-cultural perspective, an *idiom* is a fixed expression, which is specific to a particular language, that cannot be translated literally into another language because its meaning cannot be deduced from the analysis of the structure and the sense of the elements that make it up. [2, p. 72] For example, the literal translation of the food-idiom *"to use one's noodle"* does not mean anything and does not refer to using any noodles for anything. Fixed expressions should not be changed; therefore, literal translation is not recommended. To translate idioms, phrasal verbs, and proverbs, one should find functional equivalents that exist in the language.

It depends on a variety of elements as opposed to only whether the target-language has an idiom with a similar meaning when determining how an idiom

or fixed expression can be translated. Other factors include whether the use of idiomatic language is appropriate or inappropriate for a particular level of formality in the target-language, as well as the significance of the specific lexical elements that make up the idiom, such as whether they are used elsewhere in the source-text, either in a spoken or visual form.

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original." [3, p. 1]. Therefore, context is needed in a sense-for-sense translation.

Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that cultural transference is crucial in the process of translation. This is evident in the frequent use of the term 'cultural' and its derivatives in modern literature on translation. Whenever there is a cultural imbalance between two language communities, it is reflected in the way their members communicate, which can create problems of obscurity and unacceptability in the culture of the target language. As professor of translation studies J. F. Aixela states: "This, faced with the difference implied by the *other*, with a whole series of cultural signs capable of denying and/or questioning our own way of life, translation provides the receiving society with a wide range of strategies, ranging from conservation (acceptance of the difference by means of the reproduction of the cultural signs in the source text), to naturalization (transformation of the other into a cultural replica)." [4, p.54]. The linguist also considers that the choice of these strategies will indicate the level of acceptance by the target society and its stability.

The role of the translator in recreating a cultural target-text is determined by their linguistic and translation skills. Moreover, a translator would need cultural sensitivity in manipulating idioms.

Method of research

The study aims at determining the most suitable and commonly used strategies applied by the students to handle the contextual meaning of idiomatic expressions and to achieve appropriate target-texts. Prior studies on idiom translation (on English-Arabic, English-Indonesian language combinations) show that *paraphrasing* is the most dominant translation strategy.

Since we have observed a tendency among our students to stylistically neutralise and use a more colloquial self-expressed translation product rather than use a pre-existent idiom, we hypothesise that *paraphrasing* should be the most common strategy applied by the participants in our study.

The empirical study was carried out at the Department of Translation, Interpretation and Applied Linguistics within the Faculty of Letters during a lesson on the topic "Context in translation" in the subject of Introduction to Translation Studies. This is a transversal study, involving twenty students in the first year with English as their first language of study. Students' task was to translate a text titled *Bringing home the bacon on the gravy train* [5] from English into Romanian. The 211-word text which contains 20 food idioms was retrieved from *The Internet TESL Journal*.

In organising and conducting the study, students had to accomplish the following activities:

1. Read the text for the overall contextual understanding of the idiomatic expressions;
2. Do a pre-translation exercise consisting of matching the food-idiom phrases with their non-idiomatic intralingual translation into English. This was to facilitate the insertion and alignment of idiom correspondents in context (target-text).
3. Translate the text into Romanian, applying M. Baker's strategies for translating idioms and identifying the most suitable equivalents for the food idiomatic expressions.

Students performed the pre-translation exercise as well as the translation of the text during a seminar lesson which lasts 90 minutes.

For the purpose of the present study, we used *the descriptive qualitative method*, which means that we analysed the data and the findings in the form of descriptions. In the process of data collection and investigation we used the method of *content analysis* in relation to the following aspects: determining the contextual adequacy of the equivalents used by the students in translating the idiomatic expressions, establishing the accuracy of the translation strategies used and assessing the overall translation quality of translation in terms of translation norms, more precisely *accuracy, acceptability*, and *readability*.

Data analysis and discussions

Culture is a dynamic system and it is in constant change; therefore, it plays a significant role in communication and in the translation act. P. Newmark defines culture as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" [7, p. 94]. Also, P. Newmark is of the opinion that identifying cultural words is usually straightforward as they are linked to a specific language and cannot be translated directly. However, various cultural practices are described using ordinary language. In such cases, literal translation may change the intended meaning, and it may be necessary to provide a descriptive-functional equivalent. In 1988 the linguist proposed several procedures for addressing cultural differences: *transference, naturalisation, cultural equivalent, functional equivalent, descriptive equivalent, synonymy, through-translation, shifts or transpositions, modulation, recognised translation, translation label, compensation, componential analysis, reduction and expansion, paraphrase, other procedures, couplets, notes, additions, glosses* [7, p. 95]. We consider this typology quite vast and although idioms are embedded with cultural connotation and portray culture in itself, the typology would rather apply to realia. Moreover, it would have been difficult for first year students who have only been familiarised with translation strategies and techniques to apply this classification.

On the other hand, M. Baker's perspective on translating idioms is rather straightforward as it is much more accessible to the participants of this study. The rationale behind selecting this very classification also resided in that the students were only to some extent familiarised with the concept of *translation strategies* at the time of conducting the study and had not had extensively applied the strategies during didactic activities. Therefore, we considered that M. Baker's typology would facilitate their understanding and application of the translation strategies. Students were briefly introduced to the underlying characteristics of each of the translation strategies in the mentioned typology.

M. Baker's perspective on idioms is that they are rigid language structures that offer minimal possibility for alteration in their form and they frequently convey meanings that cannot be inferred from their individual components [8, p. 69]. An idiom such as ***gravy train*** (a way of making money quickly, easily, and often dishonestly) or ***the cream of the crop*** (the best of a group of similar things or people) does not allow variations in form under normal circumstances. Except

when the translator deliberately intends to use humour, wordplay, or for other reasons, typically it is not possible to perform any alterations with an idiom. The following examples are food-idioms which successfully illustrate the rationale above:

1. change the word order, e.g. ***bread and butter***, not *butter and bread*,
2. delete a word, e.g. ***the cream of the crop***, not *the cream of crop*,
3. add a word, e.g. ***one's cup of tea***, not *one's cup of strong tea*,
4. replace a word with another, e.g. ***a piece of cake***, not *a slice of cake*,
5. change its grammatical structure, e.g. ***spill the beans***, not *beans were spilled*.

Being an element of culture and the object of this study, an idiom can be viewed from the perspective of "a word that often does not permit the usual variability they display in other contexts" [6, p. 236].

M. Baker's typology of strategies for translating idioms [8, pp. 77-87] is presented below.

1. *using an idiom of similar meaning and form* refers to using an idiom in the target language that conveys a similar meaning as the source-language idiom and uses equivalent lexical items, but this kind of match is rare.

2. *using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form* means that it is often possible to identify an idiom in the target language whose meaning is similar to that of the source idiom, but which consists of distinct lexical components.

3. *translation by paraphrase* appears to be the most common employed strategy of translating idioms, particularly when a suitable match cannot be identified in the target language, or when using idiomatic language in the target text appears unsuitable due to differences in stylistic preferences between the source and target languages.

4. *translation by omission* may be because the idiom has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons.

5. *literal translation*.

The appropriateness of applying any of M. Baker's translation strategies relies on the context in which a particular idiom is being translated. The first strategy may appear to be the optimal solution, but it is not always the case. Aspects such as style, register and rhetorical effect must also be considered.

Having analysed the translation versions provided by the participants in the study, we determined that overall, only translations of the following idioms are related to the field of *gastronomy*:

- ***put bread and butter on the table– a pune pâine pe masă*** (pâine),
- ***the cream of the crop – crema cremelor, cireașa de pe tort*** (cremă, cireașă, tort).

Other expressions entirely lose their original imagery related to food and, in turn, acquire new cognitive representations associated with *flora* as in the example presented below:

- ***a piece of cake – floare la ureche*** (floare).

Some translation versions serve as examples related to *fauna*:

- ***spill the beans – a-i scăpa porumbelul*** (porumbel),
- ***gravy train – a găsi peștișorul de aur*** (peștișor).

Translation was also done through shift of imagery towards *anatomy*-related linguistic units illustrated as follows:

- ***to chew the fat – a scărpina limba*** (limbă)**,**
- ***one smart cookie – om cu scaun la cap*** (cap),
- ***to polish the apple – a intra pe sub piele*** (piele)**.**

Substitution of imagery in translation was also possible through use of different *concrete objects*:

- ***gravy train – a face un car de bani/ a face bani cu ciocanul/ a-i cădea din pod*** (car, bani, ciocan, pod)**,**
- ***butter someone up – a-i da apă la moară*** (moară),
- ***out to lunch – dus cu pluta*** (plută).

Abstract objects and adjectives are also used as substitutes of food-idioms in translation, in order to acquire a natural version in Romanian:

- ***use one's noodles – a pune mintea în mișcare*** (mișcare),
- ***to chew the fat – a sta la taifas / a sta la taclale*** (taclale),
- ***to be nuts about something – a fi nebun după ceva*** (nebun).

Action verbs can be identified in the following translation versions:

- ***to chew the fat – a bate apa-n piuă/ a scărpina limba*** (a bate, a scărpina),
- ***to butter someone up – a peria pe cineva*** (a peria),
- ***use one's noodles – a pune mintea în mișcare*** (a pune în mișcare).

Several expressions in Romanian were obtained through a combination of types of imagery:

- ***a piece of cake*** (food) **– *floare la ureche*** (flora + anatomy),
- ***one smart cookie – om cu scaun le cap*** (concrete object + anatomy),

Figure 1 below presents a visual representation of the shift of imagery in translating food-idioms from English into Romanian.

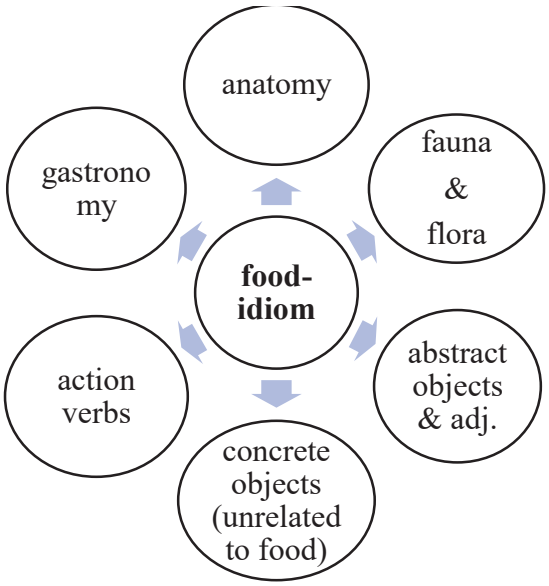


Fig. 1 Shift of imagery in translating food-idioms (author).

Among the 20 idiomatic expressions related to food, no translation version (0%) was obtained by means of using *an idiom of similar meaning and form*. The expressions that were translated using *an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form* (5.5% in total), were all phrases with figurative and familiar connotation. The most used translation strategy was *paraphrasing*, which accounted for 90.75% of the total number of idioms. *Omission* represented 3.75% of the total number of translation versions, while *literal translation* was completely overlooked (0%) because it was not considered a suitable strategy that would have produced adequate versions.

In a post-translation and quality assessment interview with the participants some of them stated that should they have been allotted more time to translate or to do the task as home assignment, they would have probably resorted to *using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form* more frequently.

Having analysed the contextual translation of food-idioms, we determined that students' translation versions almost entirely reflect the exact message of the original with only a few exceptions where word-for-word translation of idioms ***hot potatoes*** as ***cartofi fierbinți*** or ***gravy train*** rendered as ***trenul cu sos,*** was conducive to semantic errors. Similarly, the literal translation of the idiom ***big cheese*** as ***mare brânză*** (in Romanian, ***mare brânză*** means *an insignificant thing, an unimportant matter*) retains the colourful feel to the food image of the expression, although the meaning of the phrase and its stylistic effect are lost and the sense of the sentence is altered altogether.

Per general, the idiomatic expressions were translated appropriately in context, which means that one of the translation norms which states that the translation should read as if it were written in the target-language, was successfully applied. Discourse fluency was achieved through linguistic readability, maintaining consistent syntax and accomplishing precise meaning.

Conclusions

The study shows that one of the major problems in translating idioms is the discrepancy between the cultures and the languages in contact. The more pronounced the differences between source and target languages are, the more challenging it becomes to convey the intended communicative effect.

We have determined that the most commonly used strategy for translating food-idioms was *paraphrasing*. This could be due to the type and nature of the text and because the students may have had difficulties with finding equivalent idioms in the target language. *Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form* and *omission* were also employed but to a very small extent. *Idioms of similar meaning and form* were not used at all because of the dissimilarities of the linguistic system between English and Romanian. Finally, *literal translation* was also disregarded for the reasons mentioned in the introductory chapter of our paper.

At textual level, the students managed to render the message fluently, cohesively and coherently, using appropriate register, vocabulary and logical markers. This contributes to achieving a text that sounds natural and communicates the same message in Romanian.

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ANNEX. *Source-text used in the study.*

Bringing home the bacon on the gravy train

Bob works hard to **bring home the bacon**[1]**,** and put **bread and butter**[2] on his family's table. Every morning, he drags himself to his desk at the bank and faces his tedious 10-hour-a-day job. His boss, Mark, is a **bad egg**[3] but has somehow taken a liking to Bob so he always speaks well of Bob in front of Mr. Davies, the owner and **big cheese**[4] of the company. Mark tells Mr. Davies that Bob's **the cream of the crop**[5] and is **one smart cookie**[6] who **uses his noodles**[7]. Mark likes **to chew the fat**[8] with Bob during coffee break and discusses **half-baked**[9] company plans with him because he trusts Bob and knows that Bob won't **spill the beans**[10] behind his back. On these occasions, Bob tries to avoid any **hot potatoes**[11] and, even if Mark isn't **his cup of tea**[12], Bob makes an effort to **butter** him **up**[13] by leading Mark into discussions about electronic gadgets which Mark **is nuts about**[14]. Bob really thinks that Mark is **out to lunch**[15] and **nutty as a fruitcake**[16], but **in a nutshell**[17], if he **polishes the apple**[18], his job could become **a piece of cake**[19] and maybe one day he will find his **gravy train**[20].