THE FUZZY CONCEPT OF IDIOM AND WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN FOR BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

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Abstract. Linguistic categories were developed as tools for describing language systems and making them easier to learn. However, like many theoretical concepts and systems, they do not fully represent the real world and, in some cases, seek to imprison linguistic units within a well-ordered system – a procrustean bed as it were. Besides, although the most general categories are universal, the lower-ranking ones are often language-specific. Idiom (or phraseologism) is a very unclear linguistic concept, subject to never-ending debate. However, a strict adherence to categorisation is observable in practical bilingual lexicography and phraseography. This may lead to unwanted compartmentalisation and a skewed product. The conventional practice in bilingual lexicography is to provide B-language idiom equivalents or analogues for A-language idioms and B-language lexical items for A-language words. B-language idioms are not normally provided for A-language words and vice versa. This reflects thinking in terms of structures, rather than of semantic equivalence. The sharp demarcation of structures in dictionaries erects needless barriers by imposing the theoretical concepts of idiom, compound, derivative and metaphorical lexical item on to practical lexicography. The phrase-compound-derivative-idiom divide is often quite arbitrary and changes over time. Moreover, the only functional equivalent for a word is often an idiom and vice versa.

Key words: phraseologism, idiom, lexeme, bilingual dictionaries, category, equivalence

INTRODUCTION

Integrating phraseology into bilingual dictionaries involves several lexico-graphical conventions: marking idioms or phraseological blocks, use of labels, choice of equivalents, and so on (Farina, 2009; Mogorrón, 2011; Xia, 2015). The conventional practice in bilingual lexicography is to provide B-language idiom equivalents or analogues for A-language idioms and B-language lexical items for A-language words. Occasionally, in the absence of any corresponding idioms in the B-language, a lexical item or explanation may be provided. However, B-language idioms are not normally provided for A-language words. This reflects thinking in terms of structures, rather than of semantics (or semantic equivalence). The issue of lexical correspondences for idioms is not much discussed as it breaches the boundaries between linguistic categories, whereas equivalence requires remaining within the same category.

Idiomatic features (metaphor, figurativeness, opacity) are not unique to idioms; they can also be embodied in lexical structures, especially in derivatives or compounds. For example, English idiomatic phrasal and postpositive verbs, which are frequently fully idiomatic, tend to correspond to prefixated verbs in many languages. Other types of phraseological units frequently carry a meaning that can be better expressed in a single word or nonidiomatic phrase in the other language. Conversely, an English idiom would be the best equivalent for these nonidiomatic lexemes, derivatives or phrases. The dictionary must also take account of its target audience, level of sophistication, directionality and purpose, of course. However, lexicographers should think more in terms of equivalence of meaning, not structures, words or phrases (Atkins and Rundell, 2008). I believe that dictionaries should be 'much more phrasal than they currently are' (Granger, 2008: 1353).

1. LINGUISTIC CATEGORIES AND CONCEPTS

Linguistic categories were developed as tools for describing language systems and making them easier to learn, analyse and compare. However, like many theoretical concepts and systems, they do not fully represent the real world and, in some cases, seek to imprison linguistic units within a well-ordered system – a procrustean bed as it were. This, first of all, is not scientific as it distorts reality; second, such scholarly absolutism does not reflect the multiplicity and elasticity of reality; and, third, it tends to impose concepts and categories of one language on to others, though many categories are at least partially language-specific. There are many ludicrous historical examples of nonexistent categories being invented for some languages because they existed in another, for example, the retention of the Latin and Old English declension systems in modern English. Today's *lingua franca* English also seems to exercise an overwhelming influence on dominant conceptual frameworks – 'a conceptual cage' (Wierzbicka, 2014: ix). This, though, is certainly not the case as regards the concept of idiom, an opaque term in English, a natural word rather than a term in fact. The rationale behind these knowledge and pattern transfers is readily understood: they are ready-made and widely accepted, and apparently simple concepts and models are always attractive. They appear to solve categorisation issues easily. Many linguistic phenomena do indeed fit these general international models, but not fully and not always. Hardly any linguistic category illustrates these problems better than idioms and phraseologisms with their numerous terms and classifications. We understand a *category* to be a set of entities, for example, we can collect a set of idioms and refer to them as a category. We understand a *concept* to be a mentally possessed idea summarisable in a definition (see more on concepts and categories in Haspelmath, 2007, 2010; Moravcsik, 2016; Lehmann, 2018). Idiom or phraseologism is a prototypical concept, relatively clear at the centre, very blurred on the margins. It is a defined concept. But, since the definitions vary, the scope of the concept and category differs as well.

2. IDIOMS: THE THEORETICAL CONCEPT

Idiom or phraseologism (Cowie, 1998) is a relatively new linguistic concept. In many languages, the unclear term *phrase* has been and is used to designate a wide range of multiword combinations.

In this paper, we use the terms *idiom* and *phraseologism* synonymously, in keeping with the broadly accepted meaning of both terms. We are aware that the term *idiom* is often used in a narrower sense, as a subtype of phraseologism possessing less predictable meaning, a more frozen and holophrastic unit. The broad understanding of *idiom* presumes that it includes various subcategories, each of which gives more prominence to some of the main features and might have some other extra features. The broad understanding of the concept seems to be advantageous both theoretically (rather than attempting to categorise a multitude of units, a necessarily imprecise exercise since each exhibits one or another fundamental trait to some extent) and in practice (in phraseography, lexicography, corpus linguistics, text processing and the pedagogical sphere). Differentiating between various types of multiword units (idioms and collocations, free combinations, and various subtypes of transitory formation) is not easy (Bentivogli and Pianta, 2002; Oppentocht and Schutz, 2003: 219; Nuccorini, 2003: 367; Veisbergs, 2012) and generally does not make much practical sense.

Apart from the core units, phraseologisms or idioms thus also include the following subtypes:

- **Binomials** – two-component phrases: *bag and baggage, odds and ends, high and dry,*
- **Proverbs** – didactic, metaphorical advisory sayings: *a stitch in time saves nine, like father like son,*
- **Sayings** – informal, concise observations: *time flies, accidents happen,*
- **Catchphrases** – short, oft-repeated slogans: *softly, softly catchee monkey, make love not war, it takes two to tango,*
- **Phrasal or postpositive verbs** – *break down, come up with, come on,*
- **Clichés** – *burning question, head and shoulders above, good clean fun, of the first magnitude*
- **Pragmatic idioms** – phrases determined by social situation: *many happy returns of the day, how do you do?*
- **Hedges** – *to be exact, be that as it may, to wit, by and large.*

In addition, there are some marginal and obfuscated linguistic categories like **abbreviated idioms** OTT (*over the top*), which have multiplied in **internet abbreviations** (combining features of idioms and abbreviations), some of which have entered into use: *FML (fuck my life), LMAO (laughing my ass/arse off), SMH (shaking my head), MILF/milf (mother I'd like to fuck).* Casting the net

further might yield subclasses even more puzzling and controversial in theory, e.g. the **one-word phraseologism** (*Ein-Wort-Phraseologismus*) in German (a contradiction in itself) (Burger et al., 2007: 18) which calls the basic criteria of *idioms* into question (see below, under 3.2. Multiword criterion).

The theoretical debate on the concept of idioms (phraseologism, phraseological unit, idiomatic expression) and their classifications is never-ending. Most idiom classifications tend to focus on broadness of concept, frozenness and the differentiation between idioms and nonidiomatic formations. However, the authors of encyclopedia of Phraseology maintain that open boundaries and category fuzziness make any exhaustive classification or terminology of phraseology impossible (Burger et al., 2007: 15). Similarly, there is no hope for a 'unitary theory of idiom comprehension' (Glucksberg, 2001: 72). This is echoed by an experienced lexicographer: the issue may be interesting, but is not particularly rewarding in practice: Atkins concludes that 'our language is so fine and flexible and subtle and complex that such a task seems doomed to failure' (Atkins, 2008: 47). Corpus analysis, as can be seen in the study by Moon (1998), drives us to look at 'fixed expressions and idioms' together since collocations also present a cline (Cowie, 1998: 20; 2008: 164–165). To conclude: 'idiom is an ambiguous term, used in conflicting ways' (Moon, 1998: 3).

In order not to get bogged down in terminological issues, a working definition of *idiom* follows. Idioms or phraseologisms constitute a subcategory of fixed or stable multiword expressions, units or items, the other major group being fixed word combinations (collocations) with no semantic reinterpretation. Idioms are collocations in that they 'behave as phrases, albeit with certain constraints' (Glucksberg, 2001: 69). Idioms are usually expected to comply with three fundamental criteria: they are fixed, they are multiword combinations and they possess some degree of figurative, transferred or metaphorical meaning. Each of the three main criteria is a continuum that is relative, subjective and varied. Does the combination of the three criteria make idioms so special that their equivalents in contrastive studies and bilingual lexicography must always be idioms?

There is the somewhat imprecise idea of 'semantic plus value': 'many idioms, merely by their nature as idioms, have a semantic plus value' (Gouws, 1996: 70). However, there is no 'semantic plus' for all the idioms as a linguistic category (that should be preserved in cross linguistic transfer, see below). Rather, it 'stems from the specific cultural background or cultural reference' (Gouws, 1996: 70). In other words, these are idioms that possess some cultural specificity, which might be difficult to transfer to a different language. That being said, many words, collocations and supratextual features (such as Japanese haiku style, or particular stanza or meter types) also possess such 'semantic plus value' and are difficult to transfer.

3. IDIOM CRITERIA

3.1. THE STABILITY/FIXEDNESS CRITERION

Fixedness (as opposed to variability) is a relative trait. Idiom components may change over time (diachronic change), but this can be discounted as all language units change over time. However, idioms also exhibit synchronous variability. They often tend to have many lexical component variants: *to raise the devil/ hell/the roof/Cain, to put one's back/heart/oneself into sth, to bang/hit/knock one's head against a (brick) wall; not to lift/stir/raise a finger.* They also tend to have quantitative variants in that elliptical forms are possible: *the last straw (that breaks the camel's back), (to draw/pull) a red herring (across sb's path/track).*

A good example of instability can be seen in *bad/good press* (criticism/praise in the media (NB: not only in printed press)). This expression is often varied, for example, the adjective *bad* may be replaced by other adjectives. In addition, the phrase is usually preceded by a limited set of verbs, which are often considered to be part of the idiom (in dictionaries), normally *get, receive, have.* The indefinite article is also optional.

- *Banks have lately <u>received a lot of bad press</u> about their conduct.*
- *He often <u>had such a terrible press</u>, yet everyone who met him liked him.*
- *The fans of the Manchester City football team <u>get a fantastic press.</u>*

Many idioms not only have single optional components, but actually presume alternative components (usually adjectives) from a restricted or virtually unrestricted set, e. g. *make (some/ no/ not any/ little/ perfect) sense of; take the (easy/ simplest/ quickest/ coward's) way out.* This poses a problem for lexicographers: while two or three optional components can be introduced with an oblique in the headphrase or entry, having a limited but extensive list of these components might make it difficult for the user to identify the fixed elements in a long string of words (Cowie, 1976: xxii). Corpus linguistics contributes to the idea that the concept of stability is relative, for example, Gries defines stability as a greater simultaneous occurrence of components than would occur on the basis of chance alone (Gries, 2008).

Finally, idioms can undergo transformations contextually (Veisbergs, 1996; Naciscione, 2010) and are frequently used in this form. There seem to be differences of convention and norm as regards this phenomenon in various languages, to some extent affected by the flective/analytical language divide, but also by tradition and expectancy norm (Veisbergs, 2007: 240; Veisbergs, 2018:137), e. g. the proverb *a bird in hand is worth two in the bush* could undergo various transformations according to the user's wishes:

- *A bird in hand, I thought.* (ellipsis or allusion),
- *So <u>priceless</u> a bird…* (addition and ellipsis),

- *A bird in hand in the <u>economic</u> bush.* (insertion and ellipsis),
- *Why chase two birds when one is up for grabs*? (allusion),
- *A competent minister in hand is worth many generals in the bush.* (substitution).

Some more extreme cases leave little of the original idiom in place, sometimes merely a single word or just the structure.

Can these instances be theoretically viewed as varying uses of a single idiom? When we change a word virtually beyond recognition we normally consider it a new word. However, in the case of idioms the initial form (however blurred) is kept clearly in mind.

It is worth noting that collocations demonstrate a similar stability gradience (Van der Meer, 2000: 127), tending to be fixed, and restricted to various extents in semantic and morphological ways. Thus, the fixedness criterion should not be viewed as absolute.

3.2. THE MULTIWORD CRITERION

The multiword-unit criterion (polylexicality) is relative as a result of divergent spellings (together or separate) and often also normativising tendencies (Levin-Steinmann, 2007: 37) which can change the linguistic status of the unit. The compound/idiom divide is quite arbitrary and often changes over time, e.g. in English from *honney moone* to *honeymoon*. *C*heapskate combines *skate*, which began to appear in print in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, almost simultaneously meaning a worn-out horse, a mean or contemptible person, and a second-rate sportsman, with *cheap*, to signify tight-fistedness. For a time it was used as a phrase *cheap skate,* then blended into a compound. In many languages two-component nominal idioms often tend to fuse into a compound with the passage of time, e.g. Latvian *grēka āzis > grēkāzis* (scapegoat), thus nominally leaving the category of idiom. For some expressions, the spelling is not stable synchronically either, illustrated by the English saying: 'when in doubt, hyphenate'. It must be emphasised that in most cases there is no change of meaning accompanying this graphical change (a change of stress in pronunciation might be present).

A broader view offered by statistics and corpus linguistics shows that reality does not go by 'preformulated linguistic concepts' like idiom. Many multiword expressions defy the strict syntactical and morphological divide (Hüning and Schlücker, 2015). For example, the extremely common German prefix verbs, e.g. *aufgeben* (to give up) can be viewed either as a single unit or as two words, depending on the kind of sentence they appear in, e.g. *Er will den Plan <u>aufgeben</u>, Er gab den Plan <u>auf</u>.* There is a functional overlap between syntax and morphology (or the lexicon). A similar phenomenon can be observed in Latvian. Verbal meanings are generally differentiated through the use of a wide range of prefixes, e.g. *sist (to beat): sasist (to break), iesist (to hit), piesist (to attach), nosist (to kill).*

However, in some cases postpositive particles (adverbs: *apkārt, cauri, garām, iekšā, līdzi, (līdz), pāri, pretī (pretim), priekšā, virsū, atpakaļ, augstu, augšā, galā, iepakaļ, klāt, kopā, laukā, nost, projām (prom), riņķī, tālu* etc.) are used for creating different meanings, e.g. *sist nost (to kill), dzīvot nost (to waste), beigt nost (to kill), spiest nost (to crush), iet nost (to wash out, to be removed); celt pāri (to transfer), iet pāri (to overflow), plūst pāri (to overflow), palikt pāri (to remain); sist cauri (to beat through), strāvot cauri (to permeate); dzīvot līdzi (to empathise).* Often they are practically equivalent to the corresponding prepositional verbs: *nosist, nodzīvot, nobeigt, nospiest, noiet, pārcelt, pāriet, pārplūst, pārpalikt, caursist, caurstrāvot, līdzdzīvot.* In other cases a verb with a different preposition might correspond to the postpositive phrase, *e. g. izjaukt: jaukt laukā (to take apart), uzsliet: sliet augšā (to put up).* Both groups can be idiomatic, but the first would nominally fall under the category of idioms, the second under derivative verbs.

The fickleness of the dichotomy of multiword phrase and compound is further illustrated by some close formations of a semantic set, e.g. *underdog* (loser), *top dog* (boss; winner). Semantically these are parallel formations, etymologically going back to the same source, dogfights. Similarly, English *tightfisted* and *close fisted,* or Latvian *maitasgabals [piece of carrion];* (henceforth square brackets indicate literal translations) – *bastard; rada gabals [piece of relative]* – kinsman. The second items are idioms, but the first are lexical units. Semantically equivalent units can come in various forms, for example, the meaning of a *hardworking person* can be expressed in a single stem lexical unit (*beaver*), compound (*dogsbody*) and idiom (*eager beaver, busy bee*).

Semantically (and etymologically) identical creations in various languages have semantically identical full equivalents falling under a range of structural categories (words, compounds, collocations and idioms). Formations with two or three separate components in one language may occur as a single item in another. Thus, English *honeymoon* has the following counterparts:

> German *Flitterwochen, Honigmonat, Honigmond,*
> Russian *медовый месяц,*
> Polish *miesiąc miodowy,*
> Latvian *medus mēnesis,*
> Estonian *mesinädalad,*
> Lithuanian *medaus mėnuo,*
> French *lune de miel,*
> Italian *luna di miele.*

The expression is an idiom in five of the eight languages and a compound in three, purely as a result of spelling. Similarly, English *Don Juan* has both idiomatic and compound correspondences. In Latvian, it used to be a phrase (*dons Žuans*), but now has blended into a compound (*donžuāns*).

An idiomatic German three-component compound *Dünnbrettbohrer* [literally, a thin-board drill – used to mean a lazy or stupid person] borrowed in Latvian as *plānā galdiņa urbējs* has become an idiom perfectly corresponding

to the three main criteria. It could theoretically have become a two-element phrase (with the first two components blending), but not a three-component lexical unit as these are extremely rare in Latvian. Spelling rules are determined by each language's norms and conventions (and are subject to change). It has been noted that in interlingual comparison a compound in German often corresponds to a phraseological word combination in other languages (Burger, 2007: 103). This reveals the serious limitations of the standard idiom theory, which tends to disregard the issue of the language level below idiom. Čermak points out that, while the standard discussion of idioms focuses on collocations, with some theorists talking of sentence idioms, 'very few are prepared to go in the opposite direction, namely, below the word level' (Čermak, 2007: 20). Identical contents may be rendered either as a combination of separate forms (*split hairs, cut corners*) or of morphemes inside a lexical idiom, i.e. in a single word (*hair-splitting, corner-cutting*). Similar cognates: *to pick sb's pocket* and *pickpocket*.

Idiom theory is also dominated by a Eurocentric view, disregarding polysynthetic languages. While the existence of idioms is most probably universal, their formal manifestations depend on the character of the language. Noting that some European languages prefer compounding, Čermak concludes that 'too narrow a delimitation of the field of idioms is wrong' (Čermak, 2007: 20) and suggests that the defining feature should be multicomponent character.

Finally, frozen or fossilised phrases like *of course, not at all, to wit, by and large, in a measure, in part, all of a sudden* function as one-word items and the spaces have no linguistic significance.

Some theorists (cf: Chafe, 1968; Gouws, 1991; Botha, 1992) emphasise that words and idioms share a common trait in that they both exist as a single semantic unit. Zgusta (1971: 154) talks about 'parallelism between multiword units and words', which is suggestive of giving them independent entry status, which is echoed by Sinclaire (2010). It is well known that some phrases are lexical and behave like lexical items (Bejoint, 2010: 308). Thus, the multiword criterion is not absolute either.

3.3. THE IDIOMATICITY/TRANSPARENCY CRITERION

This feature of idioms has caused the most theoretical and terminological discussions as regards the term itself. But idioms are not all equally nontransparent: idiomaticity is scalar (Bruckmeier, 2017: 152). There is a touch of idiomaticity (in the broad sense) in many collocations that would not qualify as idiomatic under close scrutiny: 'idiomaticity is present in all the multiword 'expressions' that are chosen 'at one go' by the language user' (Bejoint, 2000: 211). Multiword phrasal expressions are part of the mental lexicon (Jackendoff, 1995: 165). To escape this conundrum an emphasis on naturalness (McCarthy, 1988) or typicality (Hanks, 1988) may be useful.

Besides, figurativeness is often subjective, depending on the individual's knowledge, experience and to some extent also perceptiveness, thus the phrase

to have a hair of the dog (to take alcohol to cure a hangover) is fully opaque to anyone ignorant of its origin. The full phrase is *to have a hair of the dog that bit you*, which is already more comprehensible as a metaphor. For someone knowing the full history of the term (the old wives' tale that a clump of hair from the dog that had bitten you, when rubbed on the wound, would help it heal faster) the phrase might be almost transparent. In turn, the phrase *(can't) have your cake and eat it* is a fairly logical statement that could be classified as a transparent metaphor. Some simple similes: *as cold as ice is* transparent, *swear like a trooper* and *curse like a fishwife* is less transparent and *as large as life* is fully idiomatic.

Sometimes idiomaticity or nonidiomaticity may be distinguished only from context, and even then not quite clearly. For example, the phrase *to shake hands* may be nonidiomatic (direct meaning) or idiomatic, and sometimes contextually unclear. There is thus no clear boundary between collocations and idioms, it is a cline. The degree of idiomaticity is not connected to the length or complexity of the idiom, nor to its function. Idiomaticity is not unique to idioms, it can be present in compounds, derivatives and root lexemes (Rio-Torto, 2012) as well as in the language levels above idioms.

Finally, idiomaticity is not distributed symmetrically and equally in all languages. For example, *to trumpet* is just as figurative as *to shout from the house-tops,* and the corresponding Latvian item is a metaphorical lexeme *izbazūnēt [to out+trombone].* It is noteworthy that the musical instrument's noun and verb *(bazūne, bazūnēt)* are not idiomatic in Latvian, it is the prefix that confers idiomatic meaning to the derivative verb. In any case, the Latvian lexical item is the closest equivalent to the English idiom and vice versa.

To conclude this part: first, fundamental concepts and fundamental terms can vary from language type to language type (Burger et al., 2007: 13); and second, all traits of idioms tend to be graded or scalar. This in my opinion has some consequences for dictionaries.

4. EQUIVALENCE, CONTRASTING IDIOMS

Equivalence is a concept that, after 2000 years of dominating translation issues, has been seriously called into question in modern times. It has come to be seen as unsuitable as a basic concept in translation theory, as well as imprecise and ill defined (Snell-Horby, 1988), offering too many interpretations, and having various imprecise, subjective and unclear attributes (dynamic, formal, semantic, communicative, full, partial, imitative, functional, statistical, etc.) (Chesterman, 1997: 9–10, 2016). Translation theory has since been largely preoccupied with seeking broader text similarity rather than focusing on unit equivalence (which in a way is similar to what we suggest below).

However, in bilingual lexicography, which mostly contrasts two language elements without context, the term cannot be thrown overboard, it is necessary and inevitable: 'equivalence is the axis about which the activity of translation

turns (Kromann et al., 1991: 2717) and it can be full, partial or surrogate equivalence, or nonequivalence' (ibid.: 2718). We may, generally, assume that perfect or total equivalence (lexical, grammatical, pragmatic, discursive and cultural) is rare and limited to those language units that can be translated into another language invariably, subject to the test of backtranslation, in all contexts. This would cover some symbols, technical terms, figures and numbers, some monosemantic lexemes and perhaps some simple phrases. Full equivalence (with some deviation from total equivalence) is relatively frequent in related languages with similar cultural backgrounds but rare in typologically different languages (Cristinoi, 2016: 100).

Idiom equivalence is usually viewed within the framework idiom versus idiom. There are various types of idiom similarity, mostly discussed in relation to translation, and various methods of translation and substitution can be used: full and partial equivalence, paraphrase, loss or omission, loans, calques, compensation with an emphasis on finding an adequate solution (Corpas, 2000).

Idiom equivalence is also researched in contrastive linguistics and linguistic phraseology. Researchers generally agree that several parameters must be taken into account: semantic, syntactic, pragmatic (Dobrovol'skij, 2000a) stability, connotations and valency (Korhonen, 2007: 577). Generally, 'functionally adequate equivalents' should be sought (Dobrovol'skij, 2000b: 169), a term which additionally encompasses any relevant combinatorial properties (Dobrovol'skij, 2000b: 182), as some idioms of similar mental image and lexical structure might not be fully replaceable. Equivalence is not always monosemantic (which users think is standard), sometimes there are differing denotational and connotational equivalents (Duval, 2008: 274). Similar image idioms (Schemann, 1991: 2792) present the risk of false friends or pseudoequivalents: deceptively identical idioms carrying different meanings.

As stated, idiomatic features (metaphor, opacity) can also be embodied in lexical structures, especially in derivatives or compounds. For example, English phrasal verbs, which are frequently fully idiomatic, tend to correspond to prefixated verbs in many languages. There can even be a certain regularity between the English postpositions and German, Latvian or Russian prefixes (see below). Other types of phraseological units occasionally carry a relatively simple idiomatic meaning that can be expressed in a word: _neck and neck (even, level), on the nail (immediately)_, _by and large_ (generally) and, where the other language has a corresponding lexeme, it is a full equivalent. The idea of idiom-word equivalence is not new: for a time the Soviet school even had the bold theory that phraseological units necessarily had word equivalents (Vinogradov, 1947; Babkin, 1970). This is often not the case, but occasionally it is, and occasionally even in languages in contrast.

5. THE RELEVANCE OF THE ABOVE FOR BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

When describing the fuzziness of the concepts and terminology of phraseology in the introduction to the encyclopedia of Phraseology, the editors state that the 'phraseological work could adjust to phraseographic and phraseodidactic practices' (Burger et al., 2007: 18). The editors also point out that, when phraseology was first studied, there was a 'tendency to circumscribe the research field for purposes of consolidation' (Burger, 2007: 11) while later corpus linguistics produced the opposite tendency. Indeed, it seems that it is better to adapt the theory to the more complex reality and to users' needs than to force reality into line with an imperfect theory.

Korhonen suggests that idioms can be contrasted either on the basis of denotative meaning (semantic equivalence which presumes corresponding units (*passende Einheiten*) will be found) or by contrasting corresponding morpho-syntactic-lexical structures (Korhonen, 2007: 575). The latter is important mostly because it presumes there are false-friend idioms which learners must learn (ibid.: 584).

Idiom treatment in general bilingual dictionaries covers various theoretical issues, prominent among which is the choice of primary component (keyword) under which to place the idiom (Schemann, 1991: 2790–1, Yong and Peng, 2007, Mulhall, 2010). It is well known that users are not sure where to find idioms (Atkins and Varantola, 1998: 30). In bilingual dictionaries, the theoretically insoluble choice of lexicographic equivalents should be tackled on an individual basis, finding and choosing equivalents, analogues and explanations. The problems professional translators face are many and the wider the choice offered, the better. However, the issue of idiom equivalence 'plays a remarkably small role within theoretical discussions' (Faro, 2004: 83) and tends to focus mostly on the degree of equivalence of the units offered (Potgieter, 2006).

There are certain conventions governing the treatment of idioms in bilingual lexicography (Bejoint, 2000: 220). In bilingual dictionaries, the A-language idiom is normally provided with an idiom equivalent or analogue in the B-language if any exists. If none exists, an explanatory definition is used, or sometimes a lexeme is provided to explain the idiom. This seems a reasonable solution. Occasionally it is suggested that supplying an idiom counterpart is dangerous, as it may not function as an equivalent in all possible contexts. However, a backtranslation check can resolve this issue.

In a subchapter on 'equivalents of idioms' in Svensén's book on lexicography, he plainly states 'idioms in the source language must as far as possible be paralleled in the target language by idioms with the same content' (Svensen, 1993: 156). Thus, the general rule is: idiom for idiom.

It is not always possible, nor should it be mandatory: language structures differ, and, as we have seen above, so do ideas about some linguistic concepts, such

as idiom and compound. Some researchers have been more cautious, pointing out that the issue of idiom lemmatisation is a never ending one, to a large extent because the definition of *idiom* is so unclear and the idiomatic cline precludes universal and clear solutions. However, it is a fundamental issue (Harras and Proost, 2005: 277). Lubensky and McShane talk of 'unused idioms' with no phraseological equivalents (though they speak of a phraseological dictionary, which in itself presumes a huge and unnecessary emphasis on structure) (Lubensky and McShane, 2007: 926). However, it is true that languages in contrast do feature idioms which have no idiom counterparts. Granger (2018: 21) notes the tendency to translate multiword units by multiword units rather than single-word equivalents. This is another case of 'categorial bias' (Granger and Lefer, 2012).

Bilingual dictionaries cannot generally serve L1 and L2 speakers equally well because their space is limited. Equivalents will most likely never be mutually replaceable, while explanations would take up too much space. Schemann talks of interlingual synonyms (Schemann, 1989: 1022). So, we look at functional equivalence which involves a number of factors: cognitive, preferred metaphorisation type, frequency, nationally specific elements, mental images and domains (Dobrovol'skij, 2000b: 172–173). Structure should come last. Dictionaries should aim at a 'similar image' (Schemann, 1991: 2792), or functional equivalents evoking 'mental images from the same conceptual domain' (Lubensky and McShane, 2007: 925). A similar image can be carried by different structures.

6. THE LEXICOGRAPHICAL TRADITION EXEMPLIFIED

In the absence of functional phraseological equivalents, dictionaries tend to offer lexical or nonidiomatic equivalents as an inevitable and reasonable solution. For example, for the English idiom *to have the hair of the dog* (to have a drink to alleviate a hangover) the following is usually offered: German *ein Konterbier trinken [to drink a counterbeer]*, Latvian *salāpīties [to mend oneself]*, Russian *опохмелиться [to unhangover oneself]*. This is optimal as these are the closest semantic correspondences. One could expect the English idiom as the best equivalent for these lexical items or collocations in the reverse variant. However, we usually see nonidiom equivalents, sometimes even cumbersome constructions: *to take a drink the morning after, to cure a hangover*. This illustrates a general phenomenon or pattern of bilingual dictionaries: the B-language part is always less idiomatic than the A-language part.

Lexical items and entries are normally provided with lexical counterparts. When the focus is on the B-language (active dictionaries), several equivalents are often given and, in very rare cases when it is the only possible option, a compressed idiom such as a postpositive or phrasal verb might appear. This again reflects thinking in terms of structures rather than of semantics or semantic equivalence.

Comparing parallel bilingual dictionaries (e.g. *Collins English-German-English Dictionary*) we see a prominent shift towards nonidiomatic solutions:

> ***to put oneself in(to) sb's hands*** *sich jdm anvertrauen,*
> ***sich jdm anvertrauen*** *to entrust oneself to sb.*

> ***dog's dinner*** **or** ***breakfast*** *Schlamassel,*
> ***Schlamassel*** *mix-up; mess.*

> ***to force sb's hand*** *jdn zwingen*
> ***jdn zwingen*** *to force sb to do sth*

> ***fall out*** *sich (zer)streiten*
> ***zerstreiten*** *to quarrel*

> ***tongue-in-cheek*** *ironisch (gemeint)*
> ***ironisch*** *ironic, ironical*

Or in the *Pons English-German-English Dictionary*:

> ***top dog*** *boss*
> ***boss*** *boss*

> ***aufs Haar*** *exactly*
> ***exactly*** *genau*

> ***(sich über etw) in die Haare geraten/kriegen*** *to quarrel/squabble (about sth)*
> ***to squabble (about/over sth)*** *sich (über/um etw) zanken*

> ***in this/sb's neck of the woods*** *in diesen/jds Breiten*
> ***in unseren/diesen Breiten*** *in our part/these parts of the world.*

> ***fall out (with smb)*** *sich (mit jdm) (zer)streiten*
> ***sich mit jdm zerstreiten*** *to quarrel with smb (over sth)*

> ***as mad as a hatter*** *total verrückt sein*
> ***verrückt sein*** *to be/become mentally ill*

> ***red herring*** *Ablenkungsmanöver*
> ***Ablenkungsmanöver*** *diversion.*

These examples fail the test of backtranslation. It is interesting to note that studies of translated text corpora show more stale phraseology and a preference for concrete rather than idiomatic use (Baker, 1996). Are these hard facts (and to some extent the poor equivalence of the translations) not at least partly the result of what the dictionaries offer? Atkins and Rundell have stated that it is the semantic content and the collocational needs that need to be matched, and that in the case of phraseology 'only the message really matters' (Atkins and Rundell, 2008: 469–472). By implication this means that our choice of

equivalents should not be ruled by structures. In real language and lexicographic practice these strict demarcations may be more burden than asset.

In my opinion, the rigid focus on categories (so often unclear and fuzzy) in dictionaries is wrong, as it erects barriers (nonexistent in reality) between idioms, compounds, collocations, derivatives and metaphorical lexical items, all of which are mere theoretical concepts. Instead, we should be focusing on meaning and register. In language pairs in contrast there are cases where the only perfect equivalent for a word is an idiom and vice versa. Failing to provide it distorts the equivalence of meaning, for example, dictionaries with English as B-language generally have much less idiomatic material in English and, as a result, English translations and usage are often more bookish, less 'typical' (Hanks, 1988), more Latinised than natural English usage. It is, however, well known that 'idiomaticity facilitates communication' (Bejoint, 2000: 216).

7. PROPOSAL AND CAVEATS

I think an A-language word might have not only B-language lexical equivalents but also a B-language idiom or two. Sometimes an idiom might be the only adequate equivalent. An A-language idiom in turn might have a B-language collocation or lexical counterpart that would be a better semantic match than an idiom with a divergent analogous image. Sometimes an idiom might have a good mix of equivalent words, phrases and idioms.

This seems advantageous since there is often no corresponding idiomatic material available to lexicographers. Sometimes a lexical item is the only corresponding item. This flexible approach to the idiom-word divide would tear down the conventional barriers of lexicographical thinking and practice. Thus, idiomatic material seems more natural in the B-part of a dictionary than we are used to.

All the above involves several caveats: not everything is universal. A small-scale dictionary providing one or two general equivalents will not have much space for idioms other than short frozen phrases. Directionality is of importance: if the dictionary is monofunctional (meant for speakers of one language) (Kromann et al., 1991: 2713) and active (aimed at native speakers looking for foreign equivalents), numerous correspondences are often welcome. Equivalents for words may be words, collocations and idioms. In passive dictionaries the B-part is often more explanatory, without equivalents. The passive/active divide, of course, is also not always clear and dictionaries are rarely targeted at one audience only (Berkov, 1996). In addition to full equivalence, equivalent combinatorial properties should also be sought (Dobrovol'skij, 2000b: 182), as some idioms or words of similar mental image might not be fully replaceable. Specific language pairs also carry certain linguistic idiosyncrasies, such as prefix versus postposition dominance in verb distribution. Frequency and currency must also be taken into account.

CONCLUSIONS

Idiomaticity pervades our languages; it is not an exclusive trait of idioms but is present below and above the idiom level. Dictionaries should reflect this pervasiveness in order to be trustworthy tools for their users. Since the concept of idiom is rather blurred and Eurocentric it should not be allowed to govern natural language reflection. The corpus approach leads to the dynamic integration of phraseology into lexis and grammar, and suggests that purely isolationist or compositional views of the lexicon are sterile (Moon, 2007). The sharp division between structures in dictionaries erects needless barriers by imposing the theoretical concepts of idiom, compound, derivative and metaphorical lexical item on to practical lexicography. The phrase-compound-derivative-idiom divide is often quite arbitrary and changes over time. Thus, a more liberal mix of lexemes and idioms in bilingual dictionaries would be of benefit to their users. Lexicographers have for some time been trying to integrate phraseological aspects of language into dictionaries, arguing that dictionaries should be much more phrasal, more pattern-driven or more phrase-centred. I cannot but agree with this trend. When faced with a choice between structural conventions and semantic common sense, we should prefer the latter. Lexicographers should think more in terms of equivalence of meanings, not structures, words or phrases.

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