# *CONTRASTIVE APPROACH ON IDIOMS OF COMPARISON FUNCTIONING AS ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH AND IN ROMANIAN*

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***Abstract:*** *Phraseological idioms are the result of collective cultural experience, reflecting certain social, moral, religion, political patterns vivid in the subconscious of the native speakers of a language. This paper analyzes idioms of comparison, their structure and components both in English and Romanian, as well as their power of expression.*
***Keywords:*** *phraseological idioms, structural pattern, comparison.*

Linguistics permanently stimulates researchers to attentively approach the most captivating problems occurring in phraseology. Starting from the very argued definition of phraseology itself (Is it a genuine independent area of linguistics? Is it a subdivision? Is it a partition in lexicology?) and up to the concepts, ideas and notions operated in phraseology (such as: phraseological units, idiomatic expressions, idioms, set phrases etc.), one cannot but meet a continuous dispute over it, argued by scholars from various countries, each having their own reasonings, each trying to impose new theories, definitions, classifications and points of view.

Irrespective of the terminology and regardless the language, whenever approaching the idiom issue, we must definitely take into account certain important aspects featuring in such units: the degree of fusion of idiom components and the global meaning, the structural models of phraseologisms, their syntactic and morphologic value and power of expression (figurativeness).

The complexity of the analysed units (approx. 215 in both languages) determined us to focus only on idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives in English and Romanian, leaving aside the phraseological units of comparision functioning as adverbs.

Another reason for our option was also our wish of completing the contrastive analysis of such phraseologisms in English and in Romanian as performed by researcher Constanţa Avădanei, who extensively analyzed idioms functioning as nouns and idioms functioning as verbs.

From the very beginning we ought to mention that a clear definition of the issue under debate is required: idioms functioning as adjectives are such phraseological units having a fixed structure and a global meaning, expressing qualities of beings, objects, phenomena, featuring partially or totally the same morphological categories and the same syntactic function as an adjective.

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Phraseologisms in general and the units under discussion in particular are the results of typical circumstances imagined in the same way by both English and Romanian speakers (*as stubborn as a mule* – hence the same figurative image in both languages) starting from the similar surrounding reality (the cultural, social and natural environments). And since cultural patterns are permanent productive sources and phraseologisms occur practically continually, there comes the need for analysis taking into account various points of view.

We must underline that the following display of view points does not necessarily mean a hierarchy ranked and categorized according to the magnitutde of significance[12].

**Structure and component elements of idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives**

Having analyzed the phraseological units from the view point of the constituent words, we conclude that such units have rather various structures:

Available in both languages:

- *(as)* + adj. + *as/ca* + (indefinite art.) + noun: *gras ca o scripcă, ieftin ca braga, as bald as a coot, as black as hell*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as/ca* + indefinite art. + noun + adj: *ruşinos ca o fată mare; bun ca pâinea caldă; as comfortable as an old shoe*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as/ca* + noun + noun in G: *negru ca pana corbului, bun ca sânul mamei, as cute as a bug's ear, as soft as a baby's buttom, as scarce as hen's teeth*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as/ca* + (indefinite art.) + adj. + noun: *simplu ca bună ziua, limpede /clar ca bună ziua, as mad as a wet hen*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as* + proper noun: *sărac ca Iov, as happy as Larry, as old as Adam*

Only in Romanian:

- adj. + *ca* + noun + prep. + noun: *drag ca sarea în ochi, drag ca ochii din cap, liber ca pasărea-n cer*
- participle + *ca* + prep. + noun: *tras ca prin inel, tras ca din condei, scos ca din cutie*
- adj. + *cât* + indefinite art. + noun + prep. + noun: *mare cât o zi de post, lung cât o zi de post*

Only in English:

- *(as)* + adj. + *as* + definite art. + noun + prep. + possessive adj. + noun: *as plain as the nose on one's face*
- *(as)* + adj. + noun. + *and* + noun: *as different as night and day, as different as chalk and talk*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as* + indefinite art. /num. + noun + *in* + indefinite art. + noun.: *as*

[12] It is indeed a reality that, as mentioned in Phraseology as a Language of Culture: Its Role in the Interpretation of a Collective Mentality – V. Teliya, N. Bragina, E. Oparina and I. Sandomirskaya, in Phraseology, Theory, Analysis and Applications, ed. by A.P. Cowie, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, pp 67, "interpretation of methaphorical collocations often require reference to language-specific cultural patterns", but still, in the overall human experience there are cases which can be found in most if not all languages.



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*happy as a dog in a doghouse, as alike two peas in a pod*

- *(as)* + adj. + proper noun in G. + noun: *as tight as Dick's hatband, as black as Newgate's knocker*
- *(as)* + adj. + *as* + definite / indefinite art. + past participle + noun : *as white as the driven snow, as quick as a greased lightning*

The first remark is that three essential elements are to be found in the structure of such units, both in English and in Romanian: an adjective or a past participle functioning as an adjective + adverb *as* (*ca*) and a noun (usually – a common one, seldom a proper noun), as the latter element of the comparison. Besides these components, there are many situations when a noun determiner occurs (be it an adjective, another noun etc.)[13].

Having analysed approx. 130 English idioms and 85 Romanian ones – all validated in dictionaries – we conclude that: ① The most productive structural pattern in both languages is the first mentioned in the list above: *(as)* + adj + adv. *as/ca* + (indefinite art.) + noun that is the one having in its structure the esssential and required elements; ② The less productive structural patterns are represented only by 2 or 3 examples, common in both languages or specific to either of them;③ English provides more structural patterns than Romanian.

**Morphological and syntactical categories of idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives**

Even if they function as adjectives, such idioms of comparison do not exhibit the entire paradigm of the adjective – because they have no degrees of comparison since they themselves *express* an absolute superlative.

We must mention that in Romanian the complete paradigm can be traced in units having in Romanian an adjective with two inflectional terminations, since features of a synthetic language as Romanian is are displayed for feminine and masculine adjectival forms and for singular and plural adjectival forms: *deştept ca oaia - deşteaptă ca oaia; deştepţi ca oaia – deştepte ca oaia.*

In English – as an analytic language – things are much simpler: the same invariability of the adjectival forms is assigned to the idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives.

Syntactically, such units have the role of a predicative following a copula (a linking verb), more often than not – the verb *to be*: *Without his glasses, the old man is as blind as a bat. Problema ridicată este simplă ca bună ziua,* or attributive: *His face, pale as death, frightened me. Păru-i galben, ca spicul grâului se revărsa pe umerii goi.*

[13] We underline that such idioms are used with the linking verb *to be*; yet these units must not be regarded as verbal phraseologisms since they express a quality, a feature. Syntactically we consider that the entire unit functions as a unitary predicate (in Romanian: predicat nominal), similarly to the situation when a simple adjective is used and not a phraseologism.



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**Semantical criteria classification**

Semantically – that is taking into account the meaning of the idioms functioning both in English and in Romanian as adjectives, registered in this research paper – we can detect a large range of human features, characteristics and qualities, such as:

- happiness, satisfaction: *as happy as a clam (clams), as happy as a flea in a doghouse, as happy as a lark (larks), as happy as Larry*
- kindness, generosity: *bun ca pâine lui Dumnezeu, bun ca pâinea (pita) caldă*
- courage, bravery: *as brave as a lion*
- cleverness, wittiness: *as bright as a button, as sharp as a tack, as smart as a fox; şiret ca vulpea*
- diligence, industry: *as busy as a bee / beaver; harnic ca o albină / ca o furnică*
- self-satisfaction, pride, arrogance, conceit, cockiness: *as pleased /proud as Punch, as proud as a peacock; mândru ca un păun*
- cunning, slyness, lack of frankness, slipperiness: *as sly as a fox, as slippery as an eel; şiret ca o vulpe*
- obstinacy, stubbornness: *as stubborn as a mule; încăpăţânat ca un catâr*
- speed, quickness,vivacity: *as keen as mustard; iute ca ardeiul*
- foolishness, stupidity, craziness*: as crazy as a loon, as mad as a hatter, as mad as a March hare, as nutty as a fruitcake, as thick as two short plank; deştept ca oaia / ca gardul*
- annoyance, irritation, anger, fury, rage: *as mad as a wet hen, as mad as hell*
- gentleness, mildness, tenderness: *as gentle as a lamb; blând ca un mieluşel*
- wisdom: *as wise as an owl / as Solomon*
- wealth: *as poor as dirt, as poor as a church mouse; sărac ca un ou*
- calmness or restlessness, ardour, passion, enthusiasm, inclination (predisposition) to quarreling: *as cool as a cucumber; iute ca ardeiul*
- honesty, integrity, discretion: *as close /dumb as an oyster, as straight as an arrow*
- awkwardness, (clumsiness): *as clumsy as an elephant*
- love, affection: *drag ca ochii din cap*
- degree of education and of being polite: *as good as gold*
- impudence, insolence, defiance: *as bold as a brass*
- alteration of senses or lack of senses: *as deaf as a post, as blind as a bat/ mole*
- beauty, ugliness, physical appearance: *as cute as a bug's ear, as pretty as a picture, as ugly as sin, as bald as a coot, as fresh as a daisy, as straight as a ramrod, as ugly as sin; chel ca în palmă, scos ca din cutie, urât ca dracu', frumoasă ca o cadră*
- state of physical fitness, natural strength: *as strong as an ox, as fat as a beached whale, as fit as a fiddle; puternic ca un taur, gras ca scripca, uscat ca toaca/ scândura, grasă ca o balenă eşuată, iute ca o zvârlugă*
- differences between two persons, lack of resemblance: *as different as night and day; diferit ca de la cer la pământ*
- freedom, lack of restrictions: *as free as a bird; liber ca pasărea-n zbor*
- death: *as dead as a doornail*
- greediness, state of inebriation (drunkenness), excessive eating: *as full as a tick,*



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*as high as the sky, as drunk as a lord, as drunk as a fiddle*

- lack of food: *as full as a tick, as hungry as a wolf / bear; sătul ca şoarecele în biserică, flămând ca un lup*
- indifference, (lack of concern) unfeelingness: *as hard as nails; rece ca marmura,*
- modesty, shyness: *as quiet as a mouse; ruşinos ca o fată mare,*

Idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives can also express features and characteristics of objects, such as:

- size (proportion) or quantity (amount): *as big as all outdoors, as big as life; mare cât roata carului, mare cât toate zilele, mare cât o zi de post, mic cât un purice*
- obviousness or lack of clarity (obscurity) of a statement: *as clear as crystal, as clear as mud*; *clar /limpede ca lumina zilei,*
- dullness, lack of value: *as dull as ditchwasher*
- dryness (dehydration): *as dry as a bone, as dry as dust; uscat ca iasca*
- clarity, simplicity: a*s easy as anything / an (apple) pie / a duck soup /A.B.C, easy as a falling off a log; simplu ca „bună ziua"*
- obsolescence (desuetude) or extinction: *as dead as a dodo*
- appraisal, (e)valuation: *cheap as dirt; ieftin ca braga*;
- weight, heaviness: *light as a feather; uşor ca fulgul*

An interesting and quite rich category is represented by colour idiom of comparison that may refer either to beings or to things. As speakers generally associate colours with different emotions (positive, negative or neutral), these phraseological units are often closely related to the figurative meaning of the respective colour.

The most numerous idioms that we recorded are formed with *black* having both neutral and negative connotations: *as black as crow / ebony / pitch/ / soot, as black as midnight / hell / Hades, as black as Newgate's knocker, black as a skillet, as black as a sweep, as black as a stack of black cats; negru ca pana corbului, negru ca tăciunele, negru ca fundul ceaunului, negru ca smoala.*

Idioms with *white* evoke purity, brightness: *as white as driven snow; alb ca neaua, alb ca spuma laptelui, alb ca helgea* or shock, illness or fear: *as white as a ghost, white as a sheet; alb ca varul.*

Red is the colour related with passion and vividness: *as red as a poppy/rose/cherry; roşu ca macul/ bujorul,* with embarrassment: *as red as a beet, roşu ca racul* and with negative feelings of danger and aggression: *as red as blood; roşu ca sângele, as red as fire; roşu ca para focului.*

In its turn, yellow is associated with the brightness of the sun or of the gold: *as yellow as sunshine/gold; galben ca soarele,* or with illness: *galben ca ceara, galben ca lămâia.* In Romanian the colour has also positive connotation when associated with the wheat and consequently with rich crops: *galben ca spicul grâului.*

Other colours are less productive: green: *verde ca iarba, verde ca bradul*; brown: *as brown as a berry*; blue: *albastru ca cerul/ca peruzeaua*.

**The degree of semantic fusion**

The second defining element of an idiomatic unit is the semantic fusion level – that is the degree or the extent to which such units are fused and inseparable. According to this criterion, idiomatic units can be classified in: set expressions (totally fused), semi-



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fixed (partially fused) and transparent (clearly recognizable). Such classification is popular among scholars who perceive linguistics in the broader sense. For those who take into account a restricted definition of the science of language, idioms can be classified into units with a total semantic fusion of their elements (also called *unmotivated* units) and units with a partial semantic fusion of their elements (also called *motivated* units).

Most of the idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives can be included in the group of motivated semi-fixed (partially fused) phraseologisms – actually the most numerous in either language – in which one element maintains its basic meaning (*as black as a crow – negru ca pana corbului*). Another characteristic of this type is the possibility of synonimic substitution without altering the meaning of the global meaning: *as black as a crow / ebony / pitch/ / soot, negru ca pana corbului/ abanosul/ tăciunele/ smoala.*

And yet there are situations where the meaning of comparison has become unmotivated for the speakers (and, therefore, it is no more transparent). In such cases we can speak about set expressions (totally fused phraseologisms) – such as: the English *as black as Newgate's knocker* or the Romanian: *limpede ca vioara* (originated in the linguistic contamination of the adjective *vioară* (= clear, limpid) (probably < lat *vivula < vivus) confounded with the noun *vioară* (< it. viola) – according to DEX 98.

The phraseological units have a life of their own – the same all other words do in a language: they emerge, operate and vanish. Anybody would notice that in dictionaries some of the units are marked as being obsolete, outdated – see for instance: *as black as the minister's coat, as black as the ace of spades*; *gol ca napul, gol ca degetul;* while other units make their way out into the language being used in and gain their place in the sun – the sun of (of course!) printed press, written literature or colloquial speech – though not yet recorded in dictionaries. (see: *as mad / crazy as a box of frogs* – new entry[14]).

**Origins**

From the point of view of their source, classification of phraseologisms is a realm of both fascination and welter.

Many such idioms are literary products: *as mad as a March hare* was first mentioned in John Skelton's *A Replycacion*, 1501, but became more familiar to the public due Lewis Carrol's Adventures... (1865)[15]; *as sure as death and taxes* (= very sure) was used for the first time by Benjamin Franklin in a letter, in 1789.

An important sub-class of this group is the classical heritage, from Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, i.e. mythology and characters of Greek and Roman antiquity: *rich as Croesus; bogat precum Cresus.*

The biblical sources are also an important supply for phraseological units – especially because such writings have virtually a universal significance – since the Scriptures have been translated into almost all the world languages; see for instance: *as gentle as a lamb*; *as wise as Solomon* = înţelept ca Solomon, *poor as Lazarus*, *poor as Job* = sărac precum Iov etc.

[14] https://idiomation.wordpress.com/2013/10/09/mad-as-a-box-of-frogs/. Accessed June 12, 2015. Recorded in the British printed press starting 2004, this phraseologism is supposedly Irish-originated, meaning in Romanian: *nebun de legat.*

[15] Linda şi Roger Flavell, p.192



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Other units are originated in the popular culture[16]: *pleased as Punch* (after Mr. Punch, from the traditional children's puppet show "Punch and Judy" (= extremely pleased).

In Romanian very many phraseological units are originated in the popular culture *tare ca fierul, iute ca oţelul, tare ca piatra, iute ca săgeata (*see*:"Sorcova").* In this respect we share Ms Rodica Zafiu's opinion[17], according to which it is *not* fortunate at all that the phraseological origins are not mentioned in the general Romanian dictionaries; the etymological explanations on sources are unsystematically pointed out in separate works of various scholars; there is no such extensive research work to comprise the origins of the idioms in a dictionary of the Romanian language. We underline that we could not find any explanations upon origins and sources of the units analysed in this study.

In English, many idioms are coined not only in Great Britain, but also in America (*as pretty as a picture; as cute as a bug's ear*), Australia and even New Zealand (*as happy as Larry*) – or in Ireland (see *supra*: footnote 3).

Some units may be dated quite precisely as they are related to a certain event. Here is, for example, a phraseologism born in America, in the middle of the 19-th century, after an accident that caused a molasses leak from a tank truck: *as slow as molasses in winter / in January* (= someone / something that is painfully slow[18]).

**Equivalence between English and Romanian idioms**

Life experience can be universal, and taking the common existence facts into account, we can settle a phraseological classification according to the degree of correspondence and similarity, as follows:

(**a**) Phraseological units with a total degree of equivalence – such as: *as stubborn as a mule = încăpăţânat ca un catâr = têtu comme un âne. = terco como una mula = testardo come un mulo (*we can speak about an international similarity);

(**b**) Phraseological units with another element of comparison): *as thin as a stick= slab ca un ogar*; *as poor as a church mouse = sărac ca un ou*;

(**c**) Phraseological units with seeming equivalence: = *negru ca smoala* (it refers to the colour) = black as pitch (it refers to the brightness, not to the colour) ; the proper equivalence is: *întuneric beznă* (it refers to the light amplitude). The English idiom *as red as a lobster* means sunburned while the Romanian one *roşu ca racul* is used in any context where a person's skin has turned very red either because of the sun or due to shame or embarrasment;

(**d**) Phraseological units having the meaning of a superlative in both languages but with different structures: *drag ca lumina ochilor =* foarte drag = *the apple of my eyes* and: *as black as midnight (very dark) întuneric beznă*.

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[16] Patrizia Pierini: The phrase was coined in the early 19-th century, but it is originated in a puppet show of Italian origin that became popular in England in the second half of the 17-th century.

[17] Rodica Zafiu, *Amorezat lulea*, article issued *in Dilema veche, no 496, August 15-21, 2013*

[18] Such units can be considered as effective time capsule; they fix a real event after which a phraseologism is born. As time goes by and memories and recollection fade away, the phraseological unit becomes less transparent and more opaque and it ends to be incomprehensible. Thus, they are either removed or replaced by an equivalent unit.



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As shown *supra*, the comparisons expressed by the analysed idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives are based on explainable situations, some of them mentioned in specialised dictionaries, and such situations either do exist in the English or Romanian cultures. In this respect, we can say that these comparisons are vivid and highly suggestive representations in both languages.

This *is* the reason why phraseologisms are to be found rather in the colloquial speech (and hence – pass to the literature) than in the scientific language, providing for the fictional text and context a special fragrance brought about by a proper usage, at the right place, in the right moment[19].

Some of the English dictionaries include part of such comparisons in the class of *cliché* – meaning: an expression used too frequently and too casually, and not recommended in writing – which is directly related to the occurance of these phraseologisms.

In English, many such phrases are considered as folksy: (as) tight as a drum / a fiddler / a brick, (as) drunk as a lord / a mouse / a pig, a sheet / three sheets in the wind.

Among features that make a clear difference between English and Romanian phraseologisms, we mention two:

(**A**) proper names used in idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives (names of persons or places)[20]: *happy as Larry, hot as Hades, old as Adam, pleased as Punch, poor as Lazarus, rich as Croesus*; with a very low occurance in Romanian;

(**B**) Alliteration and rhyme used in idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives[21]: In English there are much more examples of idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives with alliteration and rhyme than in Romanian: *as busy as a bee, as dead as a dodo, as good as gold, as hot as hell* (amer), *as pretty as a picture* (amer); the only one example in Romanian (with alliteration only): *uscat ca iasca.*

Due to the fact that the topic is complex and controversial and that the analysed material is quite great in amount, a separate future work will be assigned to idioms of comparison functioning as adverbs.

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[19] Patrizia Pierini *ibidem*

[20] Patrizia Pierini, *ibidem*

[21] Linda şi Roger Flavell – p. 237, p. 294: "Alliteration and rhythm make a phrase memorable and easy to say and it is often the key to the survival of one particular turn of phrase, from amongst other like it. This is undoubtedly the case with *as dead as a doornail*, which remains current while *as dead as a mutton, a mackerel, a herring, a neat* - are all now obsolete".



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