EQUIVALENCE AND COMPOSITIONALITY IN A FACE/MAKE, DO *IDIOMS*

Diana ANIŢESCU[G]

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to examine a number of idioms formed around the verbs A FACE/MAKE, DO, such as: a face din ţânţar armăsar – make a mountain out of a molehill. We try to show and explain the differences and similarities found between the two languages: English and Romanian. Thus, idiomaticity will be interpreted in terms of selection or cultural background in both languages. We focus on observing whether there is equivalence in translation between the two languages or not and whether the differences in the choice of another culturally or historically determined element come from collocation. Moreover, we argue that idioms are indeed compositional as they form at the level of a particular XP and they show regular syntactic patterns of formation and their non-compositionality may be given by cultural or historical references.*

Keywords: *idioms, equivalence, compositionality.*

1. Previous Analysis of the corpus

1.1. Introduction

This research is part of a more extended study exploring the syntax and semantics of the verbs *face/make/ do* (Anițescu, 2016 to appear). One property that we have investigated is their potential for idiom formation. It is known that these verbs function not only as lexical, but also as light verbs, which means that they have little descriptive content and are apt to occur in an extremely diverse number of lexical combinations, some of which have become idiomatic.

In agreement with *Bruening (2010),* we consider that the central lexical semantic property of idioms, from which other important properties derive, is collocation (i.e. lexical selection). Among the derived properties we mention that idioms must be listed as phraseological units in the lexicon (Jackendoff, 1997*)* and they must be learned by heart.

On the other hand, the syntax of idiomatic constructions is regular. Since collocations themselves are mostly analyzable and since the syntax of idioms is regular, idioms are mostly compositional.

Bruening (2010) formulates the theory of idiom formation, starting from the following principle and constraint:

1) *The Principle of Idiomatic Interpretation*
"X and Y may be interpreted idiomatically only if X selects Y."
(2) *Constraint on Idiomatic Interpretation*
"If X selects a lexical category Y, and X and Y are interpreted idiomatically, all of the selected arguments of Y must be interpreted as part of the idiom that includes X and Y." (Bruening, 2010: 532)

Therefore, as argued by *Bruening,* all idioms are formed via lexical selection.

∗ University of Bucharest, Diana_anitescu@yahoo.com

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

Since we are interested in how the status of an argument can affect its ability to give rise to idioms, s-selection plays an important role too because it is known that a predicate selects its arguments and their adjuncts based on their meaning as well and idioms are perfect examples of selecting certain arguments to achieve the exact intended meaning. Thus, they select only heads, leaving freedom in the case of adjuncts.

For example, *Bruening (2010)* shows that the nominal group is selected and not adjectives, possessors or determiners, since they can vary within an idiom:

(3) a. pull *some discreet* strings
b. pull *a few* strings
c. pull *yet more* strings (Bruening, *op. cit.:* 533)

This can also be seen in the case of face/make/do idioms, as shown in the example below:

(4) a. make *some* jokes
b. Make *a few* jokes
c. Make a *good/bad* joke

Furthermore, he makes a distinction between continuous and discontinuous idioms, formulating classes of idioms such as:

(5) Verb NP to NP
give it to NP – where the verb and the theme NP form the idiom, this being an example of a continuous idiom (*ibidem:* 542)

(6) Verb NP to NP
throw NP to the wolves – where "the idiom is discontinuous, with the verb and prepositional phrase having an idiomatic interpretation, excluding the theme NP." (*ibidem:* 544)

In the next subsection we present our previous analysis of the corpus, focusing on syntactic and semantic properties of idioms formed around the verb *a face*, particularly on the status of arguments and their ability to give rise to idiomatic interpretations.

1.2. The Analysis

1.2.1. The corpus

In Aniţescu, 2016 (to appear) we have investigated the syntactic and semantic properties of idioms based on the verbs *a face/make, do* in configurations with two internal arguments (ditransitives).

We have chosen the verb *a face* which is a transitive verb with an argument structure that includes only an Agent and a Theme and, as we have noticed, sometimes another internal argument, a Dative Goal, may be added.

The corpus included 256 Romanian idioms, taken from various Romanian dictionaries, such as: Dicţionarul Limbii Române (DLR), 2010; Dobrescu, A. 2008. Dicţionar de Expresii Idiomatice Românești. Therefore, the analysis was made at the dictionary level and not with respect to a specific context.

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

The problem that we investigated was whether the two internal arguments (i.e. the obligatory Theme and the added Goal) have the same potential for giving rise to idioms or not and whether the theta structure plays an important role in idiom formation.

1.2.2. Predictions

Starting from *Pylkkänen's (2008)* distinction between *core* and *non-core* arguments (i.e. any other arguments than those which the verb needs minimally to combine with), we expected idioms to be more frequent based on the argument structure than when they are based on non-core arguments possibly added, where the argument is optional.

Therefore, our main prediction was that core arguments should be more productive and that the verb *face* more often will have the structure V- Theme, rather than V - Theme – Goal, since the Theme argument is the core one and the Goal argument the non-core, optional one. (ANIŢESCU, *op. cit.* to appear).

1.2.3. Results of the quantitative analysis

The results of our quantitative analysis were in line with our predictions. As we can see from the table below, there is a large class of monotransitive idioms (7). This follows from the fact that *a face* is basically monotransitive and has an argument structure that includes only two obligatory arguments: the external argument (agent) and one internal argument which is marked as a Theme.

(7) a face boroboaţe/comedii/ A face naveta
"to make mistakes"/ "to make shuttle"
"to misbehave"/ "to commute"
a face spume
"to make foam"
"to rant and rave" (*ibidem)*

When discussing ditransitive constructions, we noticed that a Dative Goal may be added to the a-structure of the verb *a face* and, in most of these cases, this non-core argument is not interpreted idiomatically (8).

(8) a face scandal cuiva/A face cuiva coastele pântece/
"to make scandal someone-Dat."/ "to make someone-Dat. the ribs venter"
"to fight with someone"/ "to beat someone to a pulp"
a face o favoare cuiva
"to do a favour someone-Dat."
"to do a favour to someone" (*ibidem*)

Moreover, as we can see in the table below, we have found 93 such cases. Therefore, they form a numerous class, even though they are not as many as the monotransitive ones. Expectedly, we have also found cases where both the Theme and the added Goal are part of the idiom, but they are fewer than the other two classes. In fact, we have found only 3 such instances so far (9), proving yet again that core arguments are more productive than non-core arguments.

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

(9) a face umbră pământului/ a face cuib la barza chioară/a face un serviciu comunităţii

"To make shadow to the Earth"/ "To make a nest to the blind stork"/ "do a service to the community"

"To eat the bread of idleness"/ "To do something in vain"/ "do a service to the community"

Expectedly, we have found no cases where the Theme is not interpreted idiomatically, since it is a core, obligatory argument of the transitive verb *a face.*

We summarize our findings in the following table:

Idioms around the verb *a face*	
Total number	**256**
Monotransitive Idioms "a face popas" "to make stop-over" "to stop over"	**160**
V-Theme; Goal free "a face vânt cuiva" "to make wind someone – Dat." "to push someone"	**93**
V-Goal; Theme free	**0**
V-Theme-Goal "a face umbră pământului" "to make shadow to the Earth" "To eat the bread of idleness"	**3**

(10) Quantitative Analysis *a face* idioms (Aniţescu, *op.cit.* to appear)

1.2.4. Conclusions of the Analysis

We have concluded that, as core arguments are more productive, theta structure plays an important role in idiom formation. Our analysis shows that idiom formation observes the rules of syntax and selection: in this case, the grammar of ditransitive structures and the status of the argument. Therefore, idioms are compositional.

Since compositionality should encourage translatability, we expect these idioms to be formally translatable up to a point. In the following section we will try to argue in favour of this prediction.

2. Equivalence in Translation

2.1. Introduction

In the first section of this paper we summarized our previous analysis of *a face* idioms, an analysis that shows that they are syntactically compositional and as we believe that compositionality should encourage translatability, we were interested in how these idioms can be translated into English. Furthermore, we looked at both ditransitive idioms and other types of *a face* idioms, as we will show below.

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

2.2. Nida (1964): Formal equivalence vs Dynamic equivalence

One important distinction regarding equivalence in translation was made by *Nida (1964).* He distinguished between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence.

In his words, formal equivalence "focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content" (Bassnett, 2002: 34). It is also called "'gloss translation', which aims to allow the reader to understand as much of the SL context as possible" (*ibidem).*

On the other hand, dynamic or functional equivalence implies the fact that "the relationship between receiver and message should aim at being the same as that between the original receivers and the source language message" (*ibidem*).

In other words, what *Nida (1964)* argues is that formal equivalence aims at maintaining the form and content, while dynamic equivalence focuses on the message and overall effect on the reader.

In what follows we address both formal and functional or dynamic equivalence with respect to *a face/make, do* idioms, trying to show that we can establish certain correspondences between the two languages: English and Romanian.

2.2.1. Formal equivalence and A FACE/MAKE, DO idioms

As stated before, we expect these idioms to be formally translatable up to a point. We believe that we should not aim at a word-for-word translation, but at the same number of constituents. Some differences may appear, of course, but at the level of adjuncts.

(11) make a mountain out of a molehill - a face din ţânţar armăsar
"make from mosquito horse"
make a deal with the devil - a face pact cu diavolul
make smb a scapegoat - a face pe cineva ţap ispăşitor
do the dirty work - a face (toată) treaba murdară
do a service to the community - a face un serviciu comunităţii
(examples taken from: Trofin A. Dicţionar Englez-Român de expresii idiomatice şi locuţiuni, 1996 and Hulban, H. Dicţionar Englez-Român de expresii idiomatice şi locuţiuni, 2007)

With respect to the Romanian ditransitive idioms that we discussed earlier, we noticed that they can be translated into English with ditransitive idioms as well, thus being instances of formal equivalence, since the number and nature of the constituents is preserved. Here are some examples:

(12) a face dreptate cuiva – do somebody justice
a face pagubă cuiva – do somebody mischief
a face un mare serviciu cuiva – do somebody a good turn
a face o defavoare cuiva – do someone an ill office
(*ibidem)*

We also looked at other examples of *a face/make, do* idioms. Some of these examples are instances of a regular correspondence, including the possessive

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

Dative in Romanian, which is rendered in English with the help of the possessive adjective. We consider these examples to belong to formal equivalence as well:

(13) make one's flesh creep - a i se face pielea de gainã
make one's hair curl - a i se ridica pãrul in cap
make one's mouth water - a-i lasa gura apã

(*ibidem)*

2.2.2. Functional Equivalence and A FACE/MAKE, DO Idioms

As mentioned above, functional equivalence focuses on the overall meaning expressed by the idiom and on its effect on the reader. Therefore, the words used in the target language are "thought-for-thought or sense-for-sense correspondents of the source language idiom" (Stefan, 2014: 135). Here are some examples:

(14) make a narrow escape = a scapa ca prin urechile acului
make a brush = a spãla putina
make it snappy! = Da-i bãtaie!
a face anticamerã = to cool one's heels
a face o boacanã = to put one's foot in it

(*ibidem)*

A real difficulty is the fact that idioms are often non-literal and not necessarily based on the same referential mechanisms. Therefore, even in the case of formal equivalence some other metaphors may be employed and the idioms may not be translated using the same lexemes and this can lead to a problem in translation.

Furthermore, idiom formation is diachronic, therefore some of the meaning may be lost and they become opaque. Also, cultural references may contribute to the opacity of an idiom.

Such cases can also be regarded as instances of cultural equivalence, since changes have been made to the source language idiom in order to make them appeal to the reader. "Cultural equivalence means adapting the source text to the specific situation of the target audience, this is why some translation studies theorists call this strategy adaptation." (Stefan, *op. cit*.:138)

Let's discuss the following example:

(15) make mincemeat out of someone – a face pilaf/pftie pe cineva

Although a few centuries back *mincemeat was an entrée made of chopped meat, now it is mostly made up of fruit, spices and rum and used as pie filling*. In Romanian, the words used may be *pilaf* or *piftie*, or even in some geographical areas *mamaliga*, again traditional dishes for Romanians. They both mean the same thing: "beat someone to a pulp/ destroy someone", but different words are used in order to appeal to the traditional values of the speakers of the two languages.

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)

2.2.3. Conclusions

To sum up, we have shown that idioms are syntactically regular, thus compositional and that theta structure plays an important role in idiom formation.

We believe that compositionality encourages translatability and, in the case of *a face/make, do* idioms equivalence may be both formal and functional. Instances of formal equivalence are idioms with the same number of constituents in both SL and TL, the ditransitive Romanian idioms which can be translated into English as ditransitive idioms as well, and idioms which employ the possessive Dative in Romanian and the possessive adjective in English.

Cultural references play an important part in the translation of an idiom, since they need to appeal to the reader's cultural values. This is the reason why different words or lexemes are used in different languages to express the same concepts.

References

Aniţescu, Diana. *On Deriving Idiomatic Readings Around the Light Verbs A Face/Make, Do.* Brasov: Transilvania University Press: to appear 2016. Print.

Bassnet, Susan. *Translation Studies*. *3rd Edition.* New York: Routledge, 2002. Print

Bruening, Benjamin. *Ditransitive Asymmetries and a Theory of Idiom Formation*. Linguistic Inquiry, Volume 41, Number 4, 2010. Print.

Dobrescu, Alexandru. *Dictionar de Expresii Idiomatice Romanesti*. Iasi: Em.Olis, 2008. Print.

Hulban, Horia. *Dicţionar Englez-Român de expresii idiomatice și locuţiuni*. Iasi: Polirom, 2007. Print.

Iordan, Iorgu et al. *Dictionarul Limbii Romane (DLR).* Bucuresti: Editura Academiei Romane: 2010. Print

Jackendoff, Ray. "The architecture of the language faculty". Cambridge: MIT Press. *Linguistic Inquiry Monograph, no.28* (1997). Print.

Nida, Eugene. *Principles of Correspondence.* 1964, in Bassnet, Susan. *Translation Studies*. *3rd Edition.* New York: Routledge, 2002. Print

Pylkkänen, Liina. *Introducing arguments.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008. Print.

Stefan, Mihaela. *English Somatic Verbal Idioms. A Translational Approach*. – Phd. Thesis. Bucharest: 2014. Print.

Trofin, A.lexandru. *Dicţionar Englez-Român de expresii idiomatice și locuțiuni*. Bucuresti: Editura Stiintifica, 1996. Print.

BDD-A29831 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 20:06:10 UTC)