FURTHER REMARKS ON A NUMBER OF PHRASEOLOGICAL AND APOPHTHEGMATIC UNITS IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN – CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT POINTS

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Abstract

The present paper deals with a number of English phraseological and proverbial units, trying to compare them with their closest Romanian (dictionary) counterparts, in an effort to corroborate some of the most relevant points of convergence and divergence between the two languages in that specific field. The author was were essentially interested in revealing such aspects as: the degree of convergence (both in point of imagery or idea, and form/structure), the degree of international circulation, expressive/graphical referentiality vs. expressive abstractness, the etymological and historical/anecdotal relevance vs. opaqueness, the concentration of image, the aphoristic proclivity, form completeness vs. incompleteness, and the stylistic nuances.

Key words: *phraseological units, proverbs, apophthegmatic, expressiveness*

Résumé

L'article traite des phraséologismes des proverbes anglais et roumains inclus dans les dictionnaires, mettant en valeur les ressemblances et les différences entre les deux langues. On a étudié: les degré de convergence (du point de vue de l'imagistique et de la structure), la fréquence dans l'emploi international, l'éxpressivité abstraite, le relèvement étymologique, les formes complètes et incomplètes, les nuances stylistiques. Une série d'unités phraséologiques de circulation appartenant à des langues différentes, retiennent des éléments de ces proverbes.

Mots-clés: *unites phraséologiques, proverb, apophtegmatique, expressivité, lexique*

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1. The astounding multiplicity, and the prodigious idiomatic and figurative richness of the phraseological lexical stock (including the apophthegamtic units of a language) is not only remarkably attractive for linguists, but also worth every effort by the researcher. On the other hand, the exploration of the diachronic dimension of such gems of collective imagination is an undertaking both enriching and gratifying, but not devoid of arduousness and variegated challenges. Discovering "lost images" and "word stories" may be a safe and fruitful way to provide a broader, and more "human" picture of a nation's cultural quintessence. Moreoever, most images evinced by such lexical units tend to become international, addressing the innermost psyche of man.

The present paper's main aims are to compare such phraseological units, basically trying to assess their degree of convergence (as concepts/images/ideas, so in point of sense, and also in point of expression), the prevalence of either sense or expression, and the expressive quality mainly resulting from their figurative/graphical nuances, or from their stylistic overtones (e.g. absurdity, irony, etc.), the expressive concreteness in either of the two languages considered, the use of obsolete (possibly, archaic) terms, or of sheer idiomatic terms (which can sometimes be *nonce* words).

The author did not mean to form an undue demonstrative association between the concepts that are the very key-words of the present contribution, viz. *idiomatic*, *phraseological* and *proverbial/apophthegmatic*, but started from the unassuming remark that some common, widely circulated phraseologisms are at the same time allusions to, remnants or reminders of, (prior) well-known proverbial units. That is to say that, in such cases, the dividing line between the phraseological and idiomatic units, on one hand, and the proverbial/apophthegmatic units, on the other hand, is rather vague (cf. the manner in which the issue is treated by most dictionaries). In fact, much of the configuration of the phraseological and idiomatic of a language is actually shaped by the element which Eugeniu Coşeriu called *repeated discourse* (Rom. *discurs repetat*, Ger. *wiederholte Rede*, Sp. *discurso repetido*) – fundamentally a type of partial (linguistic) quotation.

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2. The ample domain represented by proverbs, maxims, adages, sayings and (wise) saws, aphorisms, and even epigrams[1] materializes through verbal expressions that set forth universal wisdom, usually a (general/basic/self-evident) truth (or practical precept), or some commonplace fact of experience. They are essentially memorable, short, concise, condensed, and can be found in frequent and widespread use; more often than not, they use bold imagery, and may summarize an abundance of ethical, cultural, and even practical aspects; sometimes, briefly stated rules of conduct, or guiding principles characteristic of a group, etc., are expressed.

On the other hand, an *idiom* is "a group of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent words, as for example (*It was raining*) *cats and dogs*" (*COLL*); "a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements, as in *keep tabs on*" (AmH); *idiomatic* means "1. peculiar to or characteristic of a given language" (AmH). The idiomatic character of the fixed expressions in a language is often ensured by those words which either have no definite (or etymologically certain) sense, or have – so to speak – no sense at all (e.g. Fr. *au fur et à mesure*).

3. In a previous contribution, we tried to analyze and compare the **expressiveness** of such phrases, starting from the assumption that the more concrete the phrases in question, the more graphical they are. In the process (which involved perusing such common use bilingual dictionaries as the ones compiled by the late professor Andrei Bantaş, or the collaborative edition now being prepared for print by the author of the present contribution), we came across and recognized – in the figurative-metaphorical, essentially expressive set of images displayed by the idiomatic and proverbial phrases in English – concepts and ideas familiar to most speakers of Romanian. They are obviously "transparent" on a semantic

[1] The dictionary definition of the word *proverb* involves the fact that it is old, popular, illustrating universal, and basic truths. Its quasi-synonyms are: (*wise*) *saw*, *saying*, *adage*, *maxim*, *dictum*, *gnome*, *byword*, *epigram*, *aphorism*, *apophthegm*, *motto*.

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(and, more often than not, ideological, achetypial) level. Consequently, a lot of such phraseological units can be recognized as **international** terms and phrases. What is more, many common phraseological and idiomatic units typical of English have ended up in the current use of numerous speakers of Romanian (most of whom are people working for the mass media).

Since comparison that is not made for the sake of comparison can lead to interesting – even illuminating – results, such procedures can make us more aware of the (older) actuality of the "global village". Thus, we tried to conduct a contrastive analysis along the said lines, with a view to attesting the sources of the idiomatic expressiveness characteristic of the units in question – starting from structural, as well as cultural data. The ampleness is quite evident of the constitutive elements (often coming as allusions) appertaining to various historical, cultural and mythological (especially biblical) layers. We consider those phraseological units that encapsulate old habits and ways (i.e. which indirectly referring to older *realia*) as being the most interesting cases in point. The etymological (and cultural) "surprises" that some of those phraseologisms analyzed could provide may be highly revealing of various aspects of the evolution of the human society, in the two national stances compared in the present contribution.

It seems only natural that many phraseological units should be, at least to a certain extent, international (through either meaning or phrasing – or both). Some English items can be considered (lexical or ideological) "variants" of what Romanians commonly use. Consider such instances as: *a cincea roată* (*la căruță*) – cf. *fifth wheel* "a hanger-on; a person who serves no function"; *a şterge de pe faţa pământului* "to wipe out" – Eng. *fml*. *to raze to the ground*; *a face o scenă* – cf. *to make a scene*; ("de indignare etc.") *to put up a great show* (*of indignation, etc*.); *ca sardelele* – cf. *packed like sardines*; *cu orice preț* – cf. *at all costs, at any price*; *cântecul lebedei* – cf. *swansong*; *a studia* (*ceva*) *la microscop* (*fig*.) – cf. *to put* (*smth*.) *under the microscope*; *în toi* "in full swing" (e.g. *în toiul luptei* "in the thick of the battle"), etc. The fact that some phraseological units (seen from the angle of both expression *and* image) tend to become (increasingly) international is no doubt an important feature of current phraseology.

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By conducting a modest – though essentially didactic-oriented – comparative analysis of the corpus sampled for English and Romanian, we could detect a number of points of (literal) convergence and divergence.

► There are units that seem to prove Romanian to be the more expressive language: *şi cu asta basta* – cf. *and that is that*; *îl paşte un pericol* – cf. *a danger threatens him*; *a bate toba* (*fig*.) – cf. *to make a great fuss*; *a băga* (*pe cineva*) *la apă* – cf. *to get* (*smb*.) *into trouble*; *a băga în mormânt* (*fig*.) – cf. *to be the death of…*; *a fi cu cântec* – cf. *to have its* (*hidden*) *meaning*; *a mânca cât patru* – cf. *to be a heavy eater*; *a nu se băga* – cf. *to stand aloof, to keep off*; *a o scrânti, a face una boacănă* – cf. *to put one's foot in it*; *a se băga pe sub pielea cuiva* – cf. *to ingratiate oneself with smb*.; *a se vârî* (*pe*) *sub pielea cuiva* – cf. *to curry favour with smb*.; *a sta în capul oaselor* – cf. *to sit up*; *a vorbi între patru ochi* – cf. *to talk* (*to smb*.) *in private*; *a-şi băga nasul* (*unde nu-i fierbe oala*) – cf. *to poke/stick one's nose* (*where it's not wanted*); *a-şi lua câmpii* – cf. *to run away*; *amorezat/îndrăgostit lulea* (*de cineva*) – cf. *nuts/carried away/crazy about*; *cântec de inimă albastră* – cf. *sad song*; *de atâta amar de vreme* – cf. *for such a long time*; *de căciulă* – cf. *per head, each, apiece*; *de-a berbeleacul* – cf. *head over heels*; *din acelaşi aluat* – cf. *of a kind*; *din burtă* (*fig*.) – cf. *off hand*; *în capul oaselor* – cf. *sitting up*; *nu te băga!* – cf. *mind your own affairs/business!*; *pe la cântători* – cf. *at cock-crow*; *pe toate drumurile/cărările* – cf. *at every corner*; *un bujor de fată* – cf. *a flower of a girl*; *una vorbim şi başca ne înţelegem* – cf. *we talk at cross purposes*.

► Then, there are differences in point of expressiveness, with English as the more expressive of the two languages; let us compare: *at loggerheads with…* – cf. *certat cu…*; *between you and me* (*and the bedpost*) – cf. *între patru ochi*; *good riddance* (*to a bad bargain*) – cf. *atâta pagubă*; *she is a fine bit of crumpet/fluff/ skirt/stuff* – cf. *e o bucăţică bună*"; *smitten* (*Inf*.) – cf. *amorezat/îndrăgostit/până peste cap lulea* (*de cineva*); *stale joke* – cf. *banc vechi*; *to be/keep mum* – cf. *a-şi ţine gura, a tăcea din gură*; *to cool one's heels* "a face anticameră"; *to drop a hint* "a face o aluzie"; *to go on a wild bender* – cf. *a face / trage o băută* (*zdravănă*); *to look seedy* – cf. *a arăta prost*. Sometimes, expressiveness is aided in English by a specific

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type of (somewhat rhetorical) overstatement as in: *he'd take a candy from a baby* "e un om fără (nici un pic de) inimă".

► It could be noted that, when the English structure has a higher degree of referentiality as compared to the Romanian one, the latter is either more figurative-metaphorical, or more conventional, e.g. *to be drawn into* – cf. *a se angrena în* (*ceva*); *I'd give my shirt to* (*do smth*.) – cf. *ce n-aş da să…*; *to get it hot/in the neck* – cf. *a mânca bătaie*; *a se mânia tare/rău* – cf. *to blow one's top*. Some expressive /graphical images in English mainly rely on the above-mentioned type of referentiality, e.g. *to be skating on thin ice* – cf. *a fi într-o situaţie delicată*.

► Conversely, the Romanian structure can have a higher degree of referentiality as compared to the English one, which is either more figurative-metaphorical, or more conventional, e.g. *a bea aldămaşul* – cf. *to wet the bargain*; *a-şi uda gâtlejul* – cf. *to wet one's whistle*, *to moisten one's clay*; (*galben*) *ca ceara* – cf. *as pale as death*; *n-aş pune mâna în foc* (*pentru el/că el nu*…) – cf. *I wouldn't put it past* (*him*); *a râde mânzeşte* – cf. *to put on a forced/wry smile*; *to give a hollow laugh*. So, the more conventionalized the structures are, the less expressive (i.e. stylistically neutral) they are overall: Rom. *tot o apă*/*tot un drac* – cf. Eng. *much of a muchness*; *a face pe cineva albie de porci* – cf. *to call smb. names*. Yet, such phrases as the ones below are altogether comparable: *a fi rebegit de frig* "to be stiff with cold, to be chilled to the bone/frozen to the marrow".

4. On the other hand, we happened to come across "etymological surprises" involving a façade/veneer of absurdity concealing (quite valuable) historical and cultural information, as in *a pig in a poke* "something bought or received without prior sight or knowledge", "something that is offered in a manner that conceals its true nature or value" ["A *pig in a poke* is concealed in a sack from the buyer. The noun *poke*[2] – meaning a bag or sack – dates from the 14th century in English. In many parts of Scotland *poke* means a little paper bag for carrying purchases or a cone-shaped piece of paper for an ice-cream cone. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives similar forms in other languages: Icelandic *poki*, Gaelic

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poc or *poca*, and French *poche*. *Pouch* and *pocket* are undoubtedly cognates"] (AmH). A similar case is Rom. *colac peste pupăză*.

Similarly, hidden **semantic** hints, some of which also belonging to the **cultural** (and often ideological) pool, prove greatly informative when it comes to "dead metaphors" and "lost images". In most cases, such allusions, hints and references are cultural, mythological, biblical, etc. Within that specific set, the **biblical** (cultural) allusions and references seem to represent the most significant subset – irrespective of their structural type: (a) phraseological units resembling the common phrases/syntagms of the language, e.g. ***an eye for an eye*** – cf. Exodus: "Thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot", ***forbidden fruit***, ***Job's comforters*** (i.e. someone who apparently offers consolation to another person but actually makes the other person feel worse), ***kill the fatted calf*** (cf. the return of the Prodigal Son), ***thirty pieces of silver*** (cf. the money Judas Iscariot received for betraying Jesus to the authorities), ***through a glass darkly*** (i.e. to have an obscure or imperfect vision of reality – cf. Apostle Paul), ***valley of the shadow of death*** (cf. the Twenty-third Psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd…") – meaning the perils of life, from which God protects believers), ***wolves in sheep's clothing*** (the image of false Prophets, adapted from words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount; figuratively, it stands for anyone who disguises a ruthless nature through an outward show of innocence); (b) phraseological units whose structure includes the conjunction *and*, e.g. ***alpha and omega*** – i.e. the beginning and the end – in the New Testament Book of *Revelation*; ***loaves and fishes*** – cf. Jesus' miracle, when he was preaching to a crowd of several thousand who grew hungry and needed to be fed); sometimes, the conjunction can be missing, e.g. ***easy come, easy go***; (c) phraseological units that have/can have a sentential structure, e.g. ***Consider the lilies of the field*** – cf. the words of Jesus, encouraging his followers not to worry about their worldly needs: "Why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these"; ***By their fruits ye shall know them*** – cf. Jesus' words suggesting that we are able to distinguish between false and genuine Prophets by the things they do and

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say; ***Cast not pearls before swine***/***Do not cast your pearls before swine*** – i.e. to refrain from sharing something of value with those who will not appreciate it; ***Cast thy bread upon the waters*** – cf. the Book of *Ecclesiastes*; the saying calls on people to act with the faith that the benefit of their good deeds will not be lost on them; ***The last shall be first***; (d) phraseological units having the structure of complex (or compound) sentences[2]. That some (biblical) proverbs (and quotations) have become (or else, have come to be used as) idioms proper can be proved by such instances as: *Spare the rod and spoil the child* – which implies, in fact, the biblical quotation *He that spareth his rod hateth his son*: *he that loveth him chastiseth him betimes*/Rom. *Cine cruță toiagul său își urăşte copilul, iar cel care îl iubeşte îl ceartă la vreme* (*Pilde*, 13:24).

Sometimes, the biblical-cultural allusion has a jocular tinge, e.g. Rom. *în costumul lui Adam* in one's birthday suit. (cf. Eng. *Adam's* ale/*wine* "water").

Similarly, the cultural allusion encapsulated by an idiom has, in some cases, become completely opaque, e.g. *mother Carey is plucking her geese* (Rom. "Baba Dochia îşi scutură cojoacele"): see *Mother Carey* "[Possibly translation and alteration of Medieval Latin *mater cara*, Virgin Mary: Latin *mater*, mother + Latin *cara*, dear]" (AmH). □ Even an isolated (expressive) term can display cultural allusion, e.g. *to kowtow* "a face temenele" – "[C19: from Chinese *k'o t'ou*, from *k'o* to strike, knock + *t'ou* head]" (*COLL*).

But the most interesting cases are, we think, those exhibiting different cultural loads in the two languages analysed (cf. the specific cultural and historical bias), e.g. *a o şterge englezeşte* cf. *to take French leave*. Quite similarly, there is the case of Eng. *to stand a Dutch treat* and Rom. *a plăti nemţeşte* [*a Dutch treat* means "an outing, a date, an entertainment, meal, etc., where each person pays for themselves", and *to go Dutch* means "(informal) to go on such a date, where expenses are equally shared"].

[2] See also Gheorghe Colțun, Monica Spirescu, *Aspecte ale frazeologismelor de origine biblică*, in *Language and Literature. European Landmarks of Identity*, Editura Universității din Pitești, 2009, p. 30-34.

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5. Here are some examples of embedded "historical and cultural anecdotes" (cf. the Romanian counterpart of the Eng. expression *as the saying goes*, i.e. "povestea vorbei"): □ *to let the cat out of the bag* "to make known smth. that was a secret, accidentally and at the wrong time; to disclose a secret" (Rom. "a-l lua gura pe dinainte; a lăsa să-i scape/dezvălui/divulga un secret; *infml*. a lăsa să-i scape porumbelul din gură"): Formerly, countryfolk going to market would sometimes put a cat in a bag that they pretended held a sucking pig, hoping to impose this on a greenhorn who would buy it without examination; but, if the intending buyer opened the bag, the trick was disclosed; □ (*to sit*) *above the salt*; (antonym (*to sit*) *below the salt*); *not fml*., *old-fash*". (To be) in a position of honour/not (to be) in a position of honour, *esp*. among guests at a dining table. From the fact that in the houses of rich and important people salt was formerly kept in a large container placed in the middle of the long dining-table"; Rom. "a fi aşezat în capul/*vs*. coada mesei; a ocupa un/a fi într-un post mare; *colloq*. a fi în capul treburilor"; □ *to pay through one's nose* (*colloq*.) "to pay an exorbitant price/an extortionate amount; to be overcharged": In the 9th century, the Danes imposed a poll tax in Ireland, and the penalty for non-payment was the slitting of the nose; □ *to take time by the forelock* (*not fml*., *rather old-fash*.): "to act quickly and without delay, *esp*. to take advantage of present chances; from the fact that time was represented by an old man with no hair on his head, except for a forelock over his forehead; the Greek god of occasion, Chairos, was represented with a full forelock. (Shakespeare, who uses the image in several plays, calls time, "that bald sexton" (King John, III, i, 324)". Rom. "a prinde momentul prielnic/favorabil; a bate fierul cât e cald; a nu pierde vremea (de pomană)"; □ *to go through fire and water* "to suffer risks or dangers willingly, because one is so determined to do smth. or to serve smb." (*COLL*); Rom. "a trece prin încercări grele; a trece prin multe; a trece prin foc şi pară (pentru cineva); *approx*. a trece prin ciur şi prin dârmon": The risk of being burned or drowned is used as a symbol of what a person is ready to undergo; the expression may allude to the mediaeval ordeal by fire and water in trials, in Anglo-Saxon times. We think it would suffice to add such (now

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semantically opaque) Romanian expressions as *a da sf*(*o*)*ară în țară*, *cal de gloabă*, *a plăti gloabă* (*pentru ceva*), etc.

The even more interesting (comparatively) recent cultural allusions can also be used expressively, e.g. *catch-22* (Rom. "cerc vicios") – "1. a situation in which a desired solution or outcome is impossible to attain because of a set of paradoxical/inherently illogical rules, or set of circumstances/conditions; the rules or conditions that create such a situation; 2. a situation characterized by absurdity, in which any move that someone can make will lead to trouble; 3. a contradictory or self-defeating course of action; 4. a tricky or disadvantageous condition; a catch" [from the title of a novel, *Catch-22*, written by the American author Joseph Heller in 1961]. There are cases of cultural allusion typical of British/English-speaking culture, e.g. *gentlemen's agreement/gentleman's agreement* (Rom. "acord tacit"): "a personal understanding or arrangement based on honour and not legally binding" (*COLL*); or of Romanian (folk/religious) culture, e.g. *e gerul Bobotezei* "it's freezing hard, it's bitter cold". A phrase like Rom. *coadă de topor* (*fig*.) "Trojan horse" can be read as a cultural allusion associated with the cultural corpus specific to the Romanian language and literature (cf. Grigore Alexandrescu's fable *Pădurea şi toporul*). □ There is a similar class of learned idiomatic expressions in Romanian, such as *a trăi într-un turn de fildeş* "to live in watertight compartments" – though the same image is used in English (where it is calqued/translated from French), e.g. *ivory tower* "seclusion or remoteness of attitude regarding real problems, everyday life, etc." (*COLL*); "a place or an attitude of retreat, especially preoccupation with lofty, remote, or intellectual considerations rather than practical everyday life. [Translation of French *tour d'ivoire*]" (AmH).

Interestingly enough, we could detect a category of "phraseological/ apophthegmatic False Friends" within the above-mentioned class, e.g. *to lead by the nose* "to make (someone) do unquestioningly all one wishes; dominate (someone)" (cf. Rom. *a duce de nas* "to pull the wool over (someone's) eyes"); *to beat the drum/drums* "to give enthusiastic public support or promotion", e.g. *a politician who beats the drum for liberalism* – vs. Rom. *a bate toba* (*fig*.) "to make a great fuss". Similarly, there are

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deceptive items deriving from false etymologies, or rather etymologies based on misreading, e.g. ***scapegoat*** "one that is made to bear the blame of others; (*Bible*) a live goat over whose head Aaron confessed all the sins of the children of Israel on the Day of Atonement" [*scape* (variant of escape) + goat (translation of Hebrew *ő¸zł'zl*, goat for Azazel, demon of the desert, misread as *őz 'ôzl*, goat that escapes] (AmH)

6. Last but not least, proverbs themselves can be used (and recorded in dictionaries and glossaries) as phraseological units, or rather apophthegmatic phraseological units – and no estimates of expressiveness seem to be possible in that field – i.e. comparison seems to be rather counterproductive, e.g. *unity is strength* "unirea face puterea". Equivalence is a matter of sheer translation, and / or conventionality, e.g. □ *Walls have ears*. ↔ (*Şi*) *pereţii au urechi*. ["We may be overheard without our knowing it. This saying is a warning to persons with secrets"]. □ *The devil is not so black as he is painted*. ↔ *Nu-i dracul aşa de negru* (*pe cât se spune*). □ *A tree is known by its fruit*. ↔ *Pomul se cunoaşte după roade* (*şi omul după fapte*). [cf. *By their fruits ye shall know them* "A teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount[3]; it suggests that we are able to distinguish between false and genuine prophets by the things they do and say"]. □ *Necessity is the mother of invention*. ↔ *Nevoia te învaţă*. ["A need or problem encourages creative efforts to meet the need or solve the problem. This saying appears in the dialogue *Republic*, by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato"]. □ *Time is a great healer*. ↔ *Timpul le vindecă pe toate*. [or: *Time heals all wounds* "People eventually get over insults, injuries, and hatreds"]. □ *Speech is silver, but silence is gold*. ↔ *Tăcerea e de aur* (*şi vorba de argint*). □ *To make a mountain out of a molehill*. ↔ *A face din ţânţar armăsar*. □ *Too many cooks spoil the broth*. ↔ *Copilul cu mai multe moaşe rămâne cu buricul netăiat*. ["When too many people work together on a project, the result is inferior"]. □ *A new broom sweeps clean*. ↔ *Sita nouă cerne bine*. ["New leadership injects energy"]. □ *It is easy to be wise after*

[3] "*Sermon on the Mount*: a major discourse delivered by Christ, including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 5-7)", in *COLL*.

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the event. ↔ (*approx*.) *După război mulți viteji se-arată*. □ *It takes all sorts to make a world*. ↔ (*approx*.) *Mare e grădina Domnului*.

7. Concluding, we can say that phraseologisms and idioms, and apophthegmatic units too represent, on the one hand, well-known challenges in the acquisition of English as a foreign language, and, on the other hand, most valuable instruments to use in becoming proficient in that language.

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