A SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC APPROACH OF GENDER IDENTITY OF THE WORD „WOMAN" IN OLD ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH IDIOMS

Ana Maria Birtalan, Assistant Prof., PhD, "Titu Maiorescu" University of Bucharest

Abstract: Whether an idiomatic expression is used creatively in specific contexts depends on the degree to which the idiom's intrinsic creativity is open to the language user as well as the degree to which the user can manipulate the original idiom to suit his or her purpose.. The hypothesis is that the size of an idiom's activation-set will correlate with its variation potential.

Keywords: gender identity, woman, idiom, implicature, inference.

The purpose of this work is to analyze the most frequently used English and Romanian idioms that include the word *woman*, in terms of pragmatic inferences and implicatures they entail. It will be interesting to see how the traditional country wisdom regarding husbandry is comprised in idioms, their metaphorical values, their social impact on both women and men. Furthermore, a contrastive approach and analysis will offer the possibility to compare the idioms of these two countries in terms of social interaction, intensity, effect, affect, frequency, impact, etc, giving a brief account of their pragmatic anchorage in nowadays reality. In very large terms, a diachronic presentation of the idioms from both countries will be helpful to see how evolution of women was transcribed, illustrated also by means of sayings that froze one idea in a phraseological construction.

The aim of the paper is to explain the relationship between idioms, idiom variation and the architecture of the human cognitive capacity, with the ultimate goal of developing a coherent cognitive-linguistic model of the mental representation of idiomatic creativity. We chose the husbandry (more specifically woman) concept comprised in idioms in both Romanian and English to illustrate this idea.

We shall start with a short theoretical classification of the meaning, denotative and connotative meanings of idioms, in general.

Different definitions of meaning have been suggested different linguists in the study of the meaning system of language, but according to what has long been the most widely accepted theory of semantics, **meaning** is the **idea** or **concept**, which can be transferred from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the hearer by embodying it in linguistic symbols, or meaning refers to what is meant, or intended to be indicated or understood. For example, when a speaker says, I bought a pen yesterday the listener understands what the speaker means according to the strings of the sounds he has produced, that is, according to the sound symbols.

Words in a language can be classified into **content or notional word and function words**. A content word can be defined by some **semantic features**. In general, a word will have at least one semantic "defining" feature. For instance, the word dog has the semantic feature: [**+ Animate**] **Animate** nouns may be **human or animal, male or female, young or old**. **Inanimate** nouns may he **concrete or abstract**. Some nouns may share some semantic features. For example, girl, woman, maiden, witch, actress, spinster and wife have the identical semantic features; **[+Female],[+Human] , [+Animate].**

A content word, when used in a sentence, usually has two kinds of meaning; lexical meaning and grammatical meanings. The lexical meaning of a word refers to the senses that a speaker attaches lo a linguistic element as a symbol of an actual object or event. It may cover denotative, conceptual or cognitive meaning, but also associated meanings. The

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denotative meaning of a word is the basic or conceptual meaning which is based on or abstracted from the physical object or the abstract idea. It covers all the semantic features necessary to define the word. The denotative or conceptual meaning of a word is the central factor in linguistic communication. Speakers of a language cannot talk about their knowledge of a physical object or natural phenomenon unless the word that signifies the actual physical object or idea has the same meaning for all the speakers of the language. So the denotative meaning of a word involves the relationship between the word and the actual object or abstract idea that exists outside language. For instance, if one talks about a pen, without the presence of the actual object, by just giving the denotative meaning: "An instrument for writing or drawing in ink", it is readily understood by all English speakers. So it is the denotative meaning of lexical items that makes communication possible.

The associated meaning of a word may be subdivided into: connotative meaning, social or stylistic meaning, affective meaning, collective meaning and thematic meaning.

The connotative meaning of a word refers to the emotional association which the word suggests, in addition to its explicit denotative meaning. For instance, the word *mother* denotes a "female parent", but, it generally connotes lime, care and tenderness, when it is used in particular contexts.

But the question that pops in here is what happens with idioms in terms of meaning. Langlotz gives a preliminary definition of idioms in his work " Idiomatic Creativity" pointing out their structural and semantic behavior.

Many phraseologists have noticed that it is impossible to capture the linguistic anatomy of idioms without relying on a set of different defining dimensions.

Traditionally, idioms such as *grasp the nettle*, *blow the horn* or *to go to the dogs* have been described as conventional multi-word units that are semantically opaque and structurally fixed. Thus the internal organization of idiomatic constructions can show more or less striking semantic characteristics, structural peculiarities and different constraints or restrictions on their lexico- grammatical behavior which cannot be explained by the general grammatical rules of the given language.

Nevertheless, idioms are conventional expressions that belong to the grammar of a given language and fulfill specific- communicative functions.

In short, idiomatic constructions can be described as complex symbols with specific formal, semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic characteristics. The following table summarizes these defining features and patterns them along the semiotic dimensions of form, meaning and grammatical status. Thus, the parameters of the structure of idioms will comprise a certain degree of conventionalism, grammatically speaking, will have a formal complexity of construction (a multiword unit), its meaning will not be derived from constituent words and, in terms of variability, they will be frozen.

Belonging to the grammatical system of a given speech community, idioms are linguistic constructions that have gone through a sociolinguistic process of conventionalisation. To capture an idiom's degree of familiarity and conventionality within a given speech community, the term *institutionalization* is used.

Fraser's notion of *frozenness* is adopted as a generic term to capture lexico-grammatical

restrictions (Fraser 1970). Frozenness can influence the variability of the lexical constituents and the grammatical behavior.

In other words, the overall meaning of an idiomatic construction is a semantic extension from the compositional result of the meanings of its lexical constituents. The relationship between an idiom's overall meaning and the sum of the meaning of the constituents reflects a *pattern of figuration*. Since idioms are institutionalized expressions,

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they extended meaning – and with it the conveyed pattern of figuration – has become fixed in the lexicon of a given

speech community. Thus, the idiomatic meaning represents the lexicalized extended meaning of the construction.

Finally, and most importantly for our purpose, idioms can serve different communicative purposes involving different types of ideational, interpersonal and textual functions (Fernando, 1996). Prototypical idioms primarily serve an ideational function. For instance, *grasp the nettle* communicates an experience or event (tackle a problem).

An idiom primarily has an ideational discourse-function and features figuration, i.e. its semantic structure is derivationally non-compositional. Moreover, it is considerably fixed and collocationally restricted.

Whenever speakers vary idioms in actual discourse, they open a linguistic window into idiomatic creativity- the complex cognitive processing and representation of these heterogeneous linguistic constructions. From that departure point, we shall take over Langlotz's model of idiom motivation by means of idiomatic activation-sets, the term used by the author to refer to "the mental network that can be potentially activated when an idiom is used" (Langlotz 2006, pag. 95). Each idiomatic activation-set is made up of various symbolic and semantic substructures associated with the idiom, the coordination and activation of which triggers the behavior of the idiom. Of course, not all idioms require activation of component structures on every occasion of use, nor are they activated at the same level of intensity. Three issues concerning the activation-set of an idiom, therefore, need to be addressed:

1. identification of the immanent symbolic and semantic substructures that form the activation-set of each idiom.
2. characteristic connections between these substructures, and whether or not these connections are accessible to speaker's check.
3. various ways in which these substructures can be activated in an actual usage-event (in most cases, conceptual metaphors provide the activation).

The concept of "woman" and husbandry was rendered in many idioms. A great number of idioms both in English and Romanian profile literal scenes related to their nature, attitude and behavior in different contexts and experiences building up scenarios, that, due to their repetitive occurrence, ended by being frozen in fixed constructions. We shall defend the broad vision of pragmatics based on the two categories: the producer's intention and motivation (illocutionary act) and the effect the contents of the idiom has on the receiver (perlocutionary act).

The general connotative meaning of the idioms selected for analysis introduces woman as either a powerful entity, that essentially wins the battle over man, or comprises its negative aspects of its nature, like deceitfulness, weakness and frivolity. Probably the ironical implicature is the most frequent pragmatic device used by the producer as an intended message.

To illustrate all these theoretical premises, we stopped at Shakespeare who knew only too well the paroemiological structure of his age, as M.P. Tilley discovered in his fundamental work *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England, in the 16th and 17th century*. He used to quote many sayings and idioms in his works using both the English version and their original language they were coming from (Latin, French). By using these idioms in his most famous works, he skillfully exploits their expressivity, rendering them new poetical and dramatic tinges.

Let's take, for example, an idiom extracted from one of Shakespearian plays *" A woman and a glass are ever in danger* (Measure for Measure, II, pag124). If we include it in the context (Angelo gives this piece of reflection to Claudio, the one he ordered to be

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beheaded for having carnal relations with a woman outside marriage) it becomes obvious that we deal with an expressive illocutionary act, acknowledging the speaker's attitude towards the woman's fragile status, the danger of losing it altogether. The communicative design behind the speaker's remark, that is, the illocutionary force, is strengthened by the use of an assertion, completed by the adverb "*ever",* uttered on a bitter tone by the merciless Angelo. Thus, the speaker's intention was effectively performed.

The Romanian equivalent sends an even tougher message: *Femeia ce şi-a pierdut cinstea e ca oglinda spartă ce la nimic nu foloseşte.* Actually, the idiom can be interpreted as a sequence and a consequence of the English one. The Romanian idiom brings in a more categorical message to the reader or hearer, thus, the perlocutionary force is at place, obtaining a strong effect on them. The activation-set mechanism proposed by Langlotz, entitles the reader or hearer to grasp the idea of luring danger, rendered by the symbolic and semantic substructure of the idiom. The activation is triggered by the use of an indirect comparison to glass. If the English idiom warns the reader or hearer of the fragile the weak nature of women, the Romanian half equivalent gives an account of the immanence of women's mischief and its consequences: if a woman fails to remain faithful, she will irreparably end up as an outcast:" *Femeia ce şi'a pierdut cinstea e ca oglinda spartă ce nu mai foloseşte la nimic"* The implicature derives clearly from the comparison of a woman to glass, the latter being the key that activates the complex cognitive processing of fully grasping the message intended by the speaker..

Another example that might have interesting pragmatic inferences comes also from a Shakespearian play, and this time, it is praising the woman: "*A woman has a more eye than a man*" (The Merry Wives of Windsor). The message unveils, by the use of a surreal exaggeration, that women's perspicacity supersedes man's. In actual discourse, the illocutionary force, that is, the communicative plan intended by the speaker is drawn up by the assertive nature of the idiom, as it is uttered as an acknowledgeable admittance by the powerful Antifolus of Siracus. By means of a simple anatomical addition of an extra sense of perception (in our case an extra eye) we come up with a hyperbole which creates a stronger image than it is warranted by the actual state of affairs and thus, emphasizes the idea of power of women over men. The activation-set mechanism intended by the speaker is triggered on the one hand by the simple violation of the maxim of quality and by entailing the implicature that woman is more perceiving and receptive than man.

In the Romanian version, the power of the message stays the same, with just a few changes in the lexical and semantic structure: *Femeia vede chiar unde bărbatul abia zăreşte".* At the semantic level, the very denotative meaning of the verbs gives a clear account of the differences between women and men at the level of perception (*a vedea* versus *a zări* accompanied by the adverb of quantity *abia*). Thus, the message is clearly sent, without any need of implicatures and inferences.

The last idiom to be analyzed here appears to be the conclusion Petruchio reaches in Shakespearian play *The Taming of the Shrew* at the end of the second act: *"Women are the devil's nets."* In order to unfold the functional proverbiality of this idiomatic expression, the speaker must be able to motivate them. His conceptual knowledge transcends the amount of information yielded by the individual meanings of the constituents, by the use of a conceptual metaphor. Following Lakoff, people can activate rich conceptual knowledge by means of which the literal meaning of the idiom can be mapped onto its idiomatic meaning.

The meaning of the idiom is motivated because the conceptual knowledge associated with the devil and his evil intricate work scene and the metaphorical knowledge provide a link that makes it possible to relate the literal meaning to the idiomatic meaning: women are evil, they cook up complicate intrigues, and schemes in order to deceive men, who fall into their traps. Men are the victims. Thus, the transparent comparison to the supreme evil

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corresponds to information sent under the form of an implicature. Purposely, the maxim of quality is violated here in order to emphasize the destructive power women have over men.

The same process takes place with the Romanian version.

There are two Romanian equivalents, both very colorful, as they are structured by a well-defined set of conceptual metaphors although they reflect a considerable degree of variation on the level of specific lexical implementation: *"Muierea este ochiul dracului"/Muierea e dracu, numai coarnele îi lipsesc".* In this case, the very replacement of the neutral term "*femeie"* with the pejorative synonym, prepares us from the very beginning for the negative connotation of the idiom. The lack of the comparison lexical constituent *"ca"* (as in: *Femeia este ca ochiul dracului)* gives greater force to the statement as the woman is simply identified with the devil by means of a synecdoche. Being aware that this is only a starting point in analyzing the conceptual metaphor in idioms, we can conclude however, that it influences the judgement about its appropriate use and interpretation in particular discourse situation and that people are sensitive to the supposed coherence of the conceptual metaphors underlying particular idioms, as these presented above. The conceptual view of idiomacity suggested here offers "a motivated reason for why idioms mean what they do and are used in specific kinds of discourse situations." (Gibbs 1993).

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