CULTURAL MODELS AND CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN TRANSLATING IDIOMS

Daniela Lucia Ene, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University of Iași

Abstract: As idioms are often expressions of national identities through the reflection of traditions and specific social economic and psychological features of linguistic communities, making them adaptable to other cultures is generally a difficult and debatable issue for translators, writers and linguists. The traditional view on transferring idioms from the source text to the target text is based on the dichotomy of the word for word translation versus free adaptation, a dichotomy which may be facilitated by the cognitive linguistics and semantics. One major difficulty in understanding and subsequently, in translating idioms is that they are not viewed in their conceptual complexity. Most idioms are not just fixed linguistic expressions whose meanings are independent from the meanings of their constituent parts, but they emerge from our universal understanding and general knowledge of the world which are framed in conceptual systems and cultural patterns. Idioms reflect coherent systems of conceptual metaphors and the figurative meanings of their components are determined by the conceptual knowledge of the world. Exploring the connection between the conceptual metaphors and idioms and researching the cognitive mechanisms which motivate idioms in a source language may help the translator find the right solution for adapting the source text in a target text and culture. When, in most cases, the speakers in the source language perceive reality differently from the target language users, the translator's role is to restructure reality through the selection of the most significant conceptual metaphors for both categories of community members. Regarded from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the activity of translating idiomatic patterns represents a complex effort in adapting the specific cultural models of the target language to the expressive and comprehensible requirements of the source language.

Keywords: translation, idiom, conceptual metaphor, mapping,

The traditional view on idiom translation generally fails to take into account their idiomatic complexity and to provide satisfactory solutions for interlinguistic transfer; over time, many researchers have concluded that phraseological units are untranslatable and that their transfer from the source language into a target language is a daunting endeavor, often, devoid of purpose. At least, this is the opinion that theorists of cognitive linguistics and semantics express when considering traditional theories, in order to demystify the "untranslatability" of metaphors and idioms. In classic research, linguistic meaning is not perceived through the human conceptual understanding of the world and through the encyclopedic knowledge that speakers of a language possess. The main problem in understanding and translating idioms is that they are linguistic expressions, independent of any conceptual system and that they are isolated from each other at conceptual level.

In the syntactic and semantic analysis of the English and Romanian phraseological units, it is quite obvious that, by understanding the meaning of each word in a fixed group composition, one cannot infer the meaning of the whole unit. For example, if we comparatively examine the Romanian idiom *a da colţul* with the English idiom and *to kick the bucket*, we conclude that the general meaning of both idioms, that of "dying", cannot be inferred from the literal components of phraseological units (the verb "a da" and the noun „colţul" in the Romanian language, the verb "to kick" and the noun "the bucket" in English). Therefore, idioms are perceived in this situation, as complex vocabulary items that do not belong to a conceptual system.

However, we have selected more examples which can express the same or similar concepts. For example, for the idea of doing something useless, meaningless, the Romanian

BDD-V45 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:49:53 UTC)

language records several phraseological units: *a căra apa la puţ, a căra apă cu ciurul, a căra soarele cu oborocu, a merge la vie cu strugurii în batistă, a vinde castraveţi grădinarului.* For the same idea of meaningless activity, the English language displays the following range of idioms: *to bind the loose sand, to draw water with a sieve, to hold a candle to the sun, to burn daylight, to fan the breezes, to send owls to Athens, to paint the lilly, to plough/saw the sands.* Moreover, there seems to be a similarity of mental images to express the concept of futile effort, in both languages. Cognitive linguistics contradicts the idea that a phraseological unit is just a structure with a meaning different from the meanings of its components and supports the theory that idioms are motivated, not arbitrary. To say that idioms are motivated does not mean they are also predictable, in the sense that their meaning can be inferred from the general constitutive meanings of words. The motivation for the existence of certain words can be understood as a cognitive mechanism that connects domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings (Dungan, 2003: 311). The cognitive mechanisms are related to cognitive metaphors, and are based on the conventional knowledge of speakers. Kövecses and Szabo, describe this mechanism in the following diagram Kövecses and Szabo (1995).

Idiomatic meaning –the overall special meaning of an idiom;

Cognitive mechanisms– metaphor, metonymy, conventional knowledge (= domain(s) of knowledge);

Conceptual domain(s) – one or more domains of knowldge;

Linguistic forms and their meanings – the words that comprise an idiom, their syntactic properties, together with their meanings.

Further on, we shall analyze whether cognitive metaphor and conventional knowledge motivate idiom meanings and how they help the translation process. Metaphors and idioms are in a process of obvious dependency. There are scholars of figurative language who do not perceive idioms as being metaphorical as they are classic examples of "dead" metaphors; they argue that phraseological units were once metaphorical, but they lost this feature and now they exist in our vocabulary as fixed lexicalized items. “Yet a closer look at idiomaticity, one that seeks important generalization across different idiomatic phrases, reveals that idioms do not exist as separate semantic units within the lexicon, but actually reflect coherent systems of metaphorical concepts” (Gibbs, 1997: 142*)*. The ffigurative meanings of idiomatic phrases are determined by the conceptual knowledge of the world, which has a metaphorical foundation. Studies in cognitive psychology and neuroscience have shown that people in their quest to understand idiomaticity, analyze idiom structure, assign meaning to each word and identify the words that make sense for the general interpretation of the phrase. Conventional images shared by a community, play a fundamental role in language, and they are often expressed through metaphors. George Lakoff (1980) is the one who, in his studies on the metaphor theory, has shown that it is not only a linguistic anomaly or a figure of speech, but rather a cognitive mechanism that helps to explain the complex realities, starting with simple familiar concepts. A *conceptual metaphor*, widely used in language, can become, among other things, an idiomatic phrase.

Mappings or conceptual correspondences come from a subconscious process of comparing elements of different domains which have obvious characteristics. Metaphor is a pattern of thought that is based on a systematic mapping of ontological correspondences between the entities from a source domain and a target domain. The conceptual metaphor is a relation between two different concepts, created in such a manner that features of the first concept are transferred to the second one.

Between *conceptual metaphors* and *metaphorical expressions* there is a divergence: the conceptual metaphor is an abstract framework encompassing metaphorical expressions, while the metaphorical expression is a single illustration of conceptual metaphors.

BDD-V45 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:49:53 UTC)

According to Lakoff's definition, a metaphor is a product involving both mappings and individual linguistic expressions and it is important to make a distinction between these two, since generalizations and conceptualizations are relevant for the approach of understanding the metaphor as a phenomenon (Lakoff, 1993: 209).

Lakoff argues that many metaphorical expressions discussed in the literature on conceptual metaphor are idioms. In cognitive linguistics, the meanings of phraseological units are not arbitrary, but rather motivated, because they fit into one of the conceptual systems (Lakoff, 1993: 211). For example, an idiom like "spinning one's wheels", which in Romanian would be translated with an idiom like or *a merge în gol*, is associated with a conventional mental image, that of the wheels of a car caught in a substance such as mud or sand, so that the car does not move even if the engine runs and the wheels turn. Our knowledge about this picture is the fact that more energy is used without making progress and that the situation will not change, even if efforts are made to remedy the problem. When we associate conventional images to idioms, it appears that their formation is motivated by the existence of the conceptual metaphor that maps knowledge of the source domain to the target domain.

We pointed out that the connection between metaphor and idiom is not explained only by formal and semantic arguments. An idiom is not just a lexical and semantic unit, where the overall meaning appears to be different from the meanings of its components, but is a product of human knowledge expressed through concepts. Metaphors are actually language, expressive forms with an aesthetic role, and also mappings of the human perception on reality. Whether they are understood as figures of speech or as illustrations of our conceptual thinking, metaphors are premises for the existence of idioms.

Thus, we acknowledge that the presence of conceptual metaphors motivate why certain phraseological units refer to specific types of images and experiences. Gibbs conducted a psycholinguistic experiment that investigated the existence of images in the minds of English speakers, which are based on a tacit knowledge of conceptual metaphors. For example, the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER, translated into Romanian by MÂNIA ESTE UN FLUID ÎNCĂLZIT ÎNTR-UN LICHID, seems to justify the existence of such idioms: *blow your stack, flip your lid, hit the ceiling, get hot under the collar*, *lose your cool*, and *get steamed up* (Gibbs, 1997*:* 142*).* In English, these idioms referring to anger are related to a general scheme involving the release of pressure in a violent manner. Participants' answers to questions about the causes and consequences of the actions described in the phraseological units were very similar: pressure, translated by stress and anxiety is causing the action; the human being has no control over his emotional state; pressure release is unintentional and the person is unable to repair what he did. The logical explanation for the fact that people have identified the same causes and the same effects in image analysis is in the existence of conceptual metaphors: for "anger", people select from their knowledge physical events connected with heated fluids escaping from the container, the container being often associated with the head. The metaphorical mapping of knowledge from a source domain – the heated fluid in a container in a target domain - the state of anger, helps conceptualizing emotion in concrete terms. This experiment demonstrates that the creation of idioms is not arbitrary, and that they incorporate mental images and are motivated by metaphorical mapping.

To support this hypothesis, we analyzed the Romanian idioms that we had selected as equivalents for the English examples and noticed whether the same type of conceptual metaphor motivates idioms creation in Romanian mentality. For the speaker of both languages and particularly, for the Romanian translator, it is obvious that anger is illustrated by the same types of images in Romanian, although the Romanian idioms were not borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon linguistic area: *blow your stack – a-şi ieşi din fire ; flip*

BDD-V45 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:49:53 UTC)

your lid – a-i sări capacele; hit the ceiling – a sări în sus până în tavan; get hot under the collar – a-i sări ţandăra/muştarul; lose your cool – a-şi pierde sărita. In Romanian, idioms are also based on images expressing uncontrollable frustration that emerges in a violent and unexpected form. As the two languages do not have close genealogical links, and these expressions are not borrowed from one language to another, we can only conclude that the general knowledge of physical events is common to all European languages and that the metaphorical knowledge based on images illustrates the universal unity, beyond linguistic and cultural differences.

Therefore, the conventional knowledge is a cognitive mechanism that includes information that people have about a particular conceptual domain in a given culture. It is inextricably linked with people's perceptions of the surrounding reality, subconscious perceptions of which people do not remember when expressed through language.

This knowledge includes standardized information about the forms, functions, elements of human experience; it is called by Lakoff (1980) *idealized cognitive model* and by Holland and Quinn (1987) *cultural model* or *folk theory.* Cultural knowledge has a decisive role in human understanding and seems to be organized in prototypical events - schemas called *cultural models,* which are themselves related to other frames of cultural knowledge (Dungan, 2003: 315). These cultural models are the dominant patterns of certain historical periods: people express what is relevant, ordinary in their daily existence at certain times. Based on these models, the speakers of a particular culture identify their own experience with the speakers of other cultures; they find confirmation for their beliefs and actions in other communities. Through this theory, the act of translation becomes an opportunity to explore cultural models, common cognitive elements that express similar thinking patterns and the universals of knowledge. The translator explores the source and target language speakers' culture and thought patterns in order to find equivalent structures and to look for the connection between what is specific and universal in both languages.

When speakers of the source language perceive reality differently from the speakers of the target language, the translator has to restructure reality by selecting those conceptual metaphors which have meaning for the members of both cultural and linguistic communities. By exploring the cognitive mechanisms (the conceptual metaphors and conventional knowledge) which motivate the existence of idioms, the translator is able to find the most suitable equivalents to transfer idioms from one language to another. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the translation of phraseological units is a complex process through which the translator explores the fundamentals of the cultural reality specific to his community in order to adapt them to the needs of cultural and linguistic knowledge of the receptors in the target language.

Bibliography

Gibbs R. W. Jr., Bogdanovich J. M., Sykes J. R. & Barr D. J. (1997). Metaphor in Idiom Comprehension. *Journal of Memory and Language,* 37, 141-154

Dungan O. (2003). Idioms between motivation and translation. *Annales Universitatis Apulensis,* Series Philologica, 4, tom 2, Alba Iulia: Universitatea 1 Decembrie 1918, 309-318

Quinn N., Holland D. (1987). Culture and Cognition. *Cultural Models in Language and Thought,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-39

Kövecses Z., Szabo P. (1995). A View from Cognitive Semantics. *Arbeiten aus dem Forschungskolloquium cognitive linguistik. Seminar für Englische Sprache und Kultur,* No. 8, Budapest: Universität Hamburg & Department of American Studies Eötvös Loránd University

BDD-V45 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:49:53 UTC)

Lakoff G., Johnson M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Lakoff G. (1993). The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor. *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony (2nd ed.) , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 202-251

BDD-V45 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 13:49:53 UTC)