THE CORRELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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Abstract

The researchers have shown that each community exists through language and culture and therefore, the linguistic competence is fundamental for human existence. In this paper, we accomplish an analysis of the linguistic competence and we point out that language is not only a product, but a dynamic and creative activity. The anthropocentric studies demonstrated that language is a reflection of the surrounding world and a manner of representing and reproducing culture. The correlation between language and culture is elloquently illustrated by the domain of phraseology and for this purpose, we exemplify the cultural specificity of language units by discussing a number of English and Romanian idioms. Some of the idioms are common to the two languages, generated by the same historical and psychological factors. Other idioms are specific to the Romanian or the English language, and are structured on traditions, social and political aspects, economic relationships and cultural values, unique for the identity of the two cultures.

Keywords: language, linguistic competence, culture connotation, phraseology, idiom

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The ability to produce and understand specific signs provides a privileged status for human beings, making them different from other creatures of nature. By producing and interpreting signs, the individuals permanently organize their reality and their acting into the world reveals itself through language. The human beings express their identity only inside a community, in a social framework; the language structures the reality and this fact is reflected in the human mentality and in the manner in which each national community perceives the world. Each human community exists through language and culture and therefore, one may assert that the linguistic competence is fundamental for human existence. The linguistic competence has been extensively discussed by linguists; we mention the Saussure's famous concepts of *langue/parole* or Chomsky's *competence/performance*, but in this paper we will specifically refer to E. Coseriu's[2] approach on linguistic competence with three distinct levels:

1. The *general linguistic competence* expresses the general principals of thought and knowledge of extralinguistic reality manifested in language. This knowledge valid for all languages is called *elocutional* knowledge and it gives us the possibility to interpret meanings, to understand coherent things and to reject incoherent things, to make sense of a deliberate incongruence, etc. This is the *designation* level, which illustrates the reference content, the extralinguistic.
2. The *particular linguistic competence* refers to *idiomatic* knowledge and it is represented by the particular rules of a given language, rules that turn a deviation into a mistake in one language, but not in another. This corresponds to what we generally designate as being grammar. The corresponding content to this level is *meaning* defined by the particular organization of the designation in a certain language.
3. The *textual linquistic compentence* is represented by the *expressive knowledge* and it corresponds to the textual or discursive level. It is defined by the faculty of applying appropriately communicative factors according to the situation, interlocutors or communicative act. In this case, the content corresponds to sense, which goes beyond meaning and designation and expresses the attitude of the speaker, his/her intention, verbal expression.

The following table shows that at the universal level, the elocutional competence means to be able to speak in general; at the individual level, expressive competence illustrates the knowledge of making a discourse, while at the historical level, idiomatic competence is related to the traditional knowledge of the community.

Levels	*enérgeia* *Activity*	Dynamis Competence/Knowledge	*érgon* product
Universal	Speaking in general	Elocutional competence	Totality of utterances
Historical	Concrete particular language	Idiomatic competence	(Abstracted Particular Knowledge)
Individual	Discourse	Expressive competence	Text

Language is a universal activity, produced individually, according to some established techniques, but it is generated as a result of acquired knowledge[3]. Coseriu adopts, as Humboldt did before, the terminology created by Aristotle. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1787-1835) is the first one to make the vital connection between language and culture, language and human behavior. For the philosopher, language is a dynamic process, an activity (*enérgeia*), and not a static inventory of elements perceived as products of the activity (*érgon*). Hence, language becomes an illustration of culture, as much as an expression of the individuality of the speaker, who perceives the world through language. For Coseriu it is also activity (*enérgeia*) and product(*érgon),* which goes beyond the learnt technique; but

[2] Coşeriu, E. *Lecţii de lingvistică generală*. Editura Arc, Chişinău, 2000.
[3] Coşeriu E., op. cit, p. 233.

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the author insists that language is more a creative activity and not a product which is more related to the abstract language deduced from speech, represented in a dictionary or a grammar book[4].

These competences are also relevant in the field of phraseology, as the interlocutors are capable to designate realities from the surrounding world through idioms specific to their language; the usage of these types of units of speech fulfills the need to individualize their discourse. Phraseology is the only domain of the linguistic study which eloquently illustrates the correlation between language and culture[5]. Recently, the new drections in the phraseological research involved a linguistic, as well as a cultural analysis, by interpreting idioms as relevant cultural data. The specialists agree that phraseology can be perceived as "a testing ground for the anthropomorphic paradigm in linguistics, whose fundamental assumption is that the linguistic world-picture is commensurable with the mental attitudes and culture of a speech community"[6]

The anthropological approach in linguistics aims at elucidating language as a reflection of the surrounding world. It is stipulated that the figurative meanings of common utterances expresses the reflection and the expansion of what Humboldt and Weisgerber named as *Weltansicht*[7] or, as it was translated in English, world-view[8]. The world view of all the members of a linguistic and cultural community imposes the generation and the understanding of metaphorical meanings through a subconscious process of perception. The first author who postulated explicitly that language represents and conceptualizes reality in a cultural manner was Edward Sapir (19640); the idea of linguistic reality was developed by Whorf (1956), although it was interpreted as a more philosophical concept, rather than a linguistic one and only in recent decades it received practical applications. In the anthropocentric paradigm, the linguistic relativity is reformulated from a cultural perspective through the idea that language is a manner of representing and reproducing culture. Culture is rendered through linguistic expression, reproduced by the act of denomination and transmitted from generation to generation through cultural common norms. Therefore, it is concluded that: „Thus, language can be looked upon as a crucial mechanism contributing to the formation of a collective cultural identity"[9].

The cultural identity is expressed through the capacity of the individuals of a linguistic community to orient themselves in the large spectrum of social, moral, political values of their mental and empirical experience. Cultural categories such as Time and Space, Good and Evil, etc., are conceptualized in the subconscious knowledge of standards, stereotypes, rituals, general habits and other cultural models. When the linguistic symbols interpret cultural models and categories, they become forms of a culture of a community, and the linguistic units acquire the status of quasi-stereotypes and quasi-standards.

It is beyond doubt that language is a form of culture; what is uncertain is the process through which the cultural data is incorporated in the lexical meanings. Language is penetrated by culture through cultural sememes, cultural concepts, cultural connotations and stereotypes. The cultural sememes indicate words or combinations of words specific to a linguistic community. The cultural concepts are abstractions forming the world-view in a culturally particular manner; their specificity is implemented at cognitive level, not semantic. The cultural concepts may coincide in all European languages, but in some aspects of their meanings, words and phraseological units which are similar in various languages show a relevant degree of specificity[10]. The cultural connotations refer to the relaltion of interpretation between the linguistic signs and the symbols of non-verbal cultural codes. The relation between the image contained into the form of the linguistic sign and the content of a cultural model forms the cultural connotation[11]. The discourse stereotypes are presented as follows: "The development of cultures involves the repetition, reinterpretation, and multiplication of texts, as

[4] Ibidem, p. 237.
[5] Cowie, A. P., *Phraseology. Theory, Analysis and Applications*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 55.
[6] Cowie, A. P. (ed.), op. cit., p. 56.
[7] Weisgerber, L. (1929) *Muttersprache und Geistesbildung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
[8] Cowie, A. P. (ed.), op. cit., p. 56.
[9] Idem.

[10] Cowie, A. P., op. cit., p. 58.
[11] Idem.

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well as the creation of new ones. These texts, pertaining to different discourse types exert a powerful influence over culture, while cultural change causes the reproduction and reinterpretation of discourse stereotypes in speech practices"[12].

The process through which the cultural information is inserted into language is eloquently illustrated in phraseological units and we are going to exemplify the cultural specificity of language units by discussing a number of English and Romanian idioms. Some of the idioms are *common* to the two languages, "that is they were generated by the same factors of logical and psychological nature, or they were borrowed from common sources, cutting their way into language, most often through similar channels" and a series of idioms "*specific* to the Romanian language or to the English one (that is "indigenous"), at least until a contrary proof states differently"[13].

The common idioms, at the beginning, were free constructions of words with an objective communicative function, expressing sequences from the daily life of the main professional categories. Gradually, as a consequence of a merging process of the component meanings, they cut their way into the common language, thus becoming idioms. For example, the human body becomes an inspiring source for many of the idioms from both languages, as here the resemblances are extremely evident: *a-şi băga nasul în – to poke one's nose into, a întoarce şi celălalt obraz – to turn the other cheek, a avea mâinile curate – to have clean hands.* Fauna and flora are basic components of the environment, so that the human being frequently found inspiring sources in them to characterize different life situations, individual or community aspects. Earth, water and air illustrate the fundamental vital domains and everything populating these spaces (animals, birds, fish, insects) is subject to phraseology: *negru ca pana corbului – as black as a raven, a tăia găina care face ouăle de aur – to kill the goose that lay the golden eggs, ca peştele pe uscat – like a fish out of water, ca peştele în apă – like fish in water, a avea o păsărică – to have a bee in one's bonnet, a munci ca un bou – to work like a bear, a tresări ca o pasăre speriată – to give a start like a frightened sparrow, a tăia crengile unui copac – to lop away the branches of a tree, a căuta acul în carul cu fân – to look for a needle in a haystack, a ploua cu găleata – to rain cats and dogs, pe faţa pământului – on the face of the earth*. At the same time, we notice that the convergence points do not always suppose a perfect equivalence of idioms from one language to another, as the individuals from each community select different elements from their habitual environment in order to create units with a significant degree of expressivity; there are animals, instruments, objects which for the Romanians have a specific reference in their immediate universe, as there are environment components, important and illustrative for the life of the English community. If, for the Romanians, the *hen* is the one *laying the golden eggs*, in the English case, the *goose* is the domestic bird valuable to this extent; if the Romanian makes a prolonged effort and affirms that he works like an *ox*, the Englishman does not emphasize the sustained activity and resigned patience, but rather the strength, by comparing himself to the *bear*. Therefore, we find equivalents at a logical and semantic level, although sometimes the terms can be selected from another lexical area.

On the other hand, we will focus our attention on large collection of idioms which are specific to the Romanian or the English language, and are structured on traditions, social and political aspects, economic relationships and cultural values, unique for the identity of the two cultures. C. Zaharia, in her approach of the problem of cultural specificity in phraseology, asserts that, from the point of view of the genesis of idioms, there are two main groups of such phraseological units.

First, we identify idioms which do not have an equivalent in the linguistic system, in the culture or the mentality of the other community[14]. Therefore, both the Romanian and the English language comprise semantic elements relevant for their own cultures and reflecting specific realities for each linguistic area.

- *a umbla teleleu Tănase,* which means to move about without a definite destination or purpose, is a considerably debated idiomatic expression; *teleleu* comes from the Turkish borrowing *telal* which was used in the Romanian language with the meaning of public crier or

[12] Ibidem, p. 62.
[13] Avădanei C., *Construcţii idiomatice în limbile română şi engleză*, Editura Universităţii „Al. I. Cuza", Iaşi, 2000.
[14] Zaharia C., *Expresiile idiomatice in procesul comunicării,* Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iaşi, 2004, p. 194.

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announcer, especially in the case of auctions; at the same time, the word acquires the meaning of a traveling salesman who trades clothes or antiques. The occupation implies moving and wandering and hence, the significance of the phraseological unit as such[15].

- *satul lui Cremene* involves a place without any security, where no rules or legal constraints are obeyed and illustrates the primitivism, the late enforcement of the rules of modern society. *Cremenea* and *Cremenari* were village names (no longer existing) from the mountain areas of Bacău and Mehedinţi county[16].

-*born within the sound of Bow Bells*, meaning in literal translation *a fi născut în sunetul clopotelor Bow*, designates a *cockney* person, inhabitant of London, in the Eastern part of the city. Bow Bells are the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow church, Cheapside, London. A true cockney seems to be born within the sounds made by these bells, although they did not function between the Second World War and 1961.

On the other hand, there is the category of idiomatic expressions whose logical and semantic model is identical for the two cultures, but they are rendered through different cultural components. The idioms combine the universal mental patterns with an unrepeated lexical nature, unique for each linguistic area.

- *carry coals to Newcastle,* meaning in literal translation *a căra cărbuni la Newcastle*, is an idiom which involves doing something utterly superfluous, useless or wasteful. Newcastle on Tyne in England was a well-known mining region and it was considered to be the most famous harbor in coal transaction. To carry coals in a region which produced such substances naturally appears to be a useless activity and hence, the whole significance of the expression. Although the Romanians do not have an equivalent for Newcastle, as this is a cultural sememe specific to the British socio-historical reality, we still can identify a common mental pattern; thus, the Romanian language records idioms such as: *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 wasteful activity, the English language preserves the following: *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.*

-*on Saint Tib's Eve,* meaning in literal translation *în ajunul Sfântului Eve*, is an idiomatic expression which exemplifies the idea of never, at no time, on no occasion. Saint Tib, that is actually a transformation of Saint Ubes, cannot be found in any calendar; therefore this holiday does not exist. In Romanian, as well as in English, the concept of *never* is expressed through a rich class of idiom, some of them common to more European languages (*la calendele greceşti – on the Greek calends, ad calendas Graecas*), others with a lexical content selected from the culture of each linguistic area; in the case of the Romanian language, we selected the following examples: *la Paştile cailor, când o face plopul pere şi răchita micşunele, când o face plopul mere şi tânjala viorele, la moş aşteaptă;* for the English language, we found idioms such as: *when two Sundays come together, (call) tomorrow come never, when the cows come home, when the devil is blind, when the hell freezes over, at the blue moon, when the Ethiopian changes his skin;* we indicate a similar unit for the two languages: *când o zbura porcul – when pigs fly.*

Although we admit that, in many cases, we deal with similar logical and semantic patterns, identifiable in the idioms of both languages, we can assert, on the basis of the previously mentioned examples, that there are unique phraseological units in the culture and the mentality of each linguistic community, determined by different economic, socio-historical and psychological contexts. The images of the spiritual and material lives of both communities are mirrored in idioms *concordantly,* because of the existence of a human universal spirit, of a resembling ontological experience, of a common European identity, as well as *differently* through the geographical and historical peculiarities. In phraseology, one can find historical facts, social and political aspects, traditions, customs, cultural

[15] Dumistrăcel S., *Lexic românesc. Cuvinte. Metafore. Expresii*, Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1980, p. 397.
[16] Ibidem, p. 397.

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values which create similar thematic domains in both languages: environment, economic and social life, feelings, character features, ethics, etc. More or less expressive, circulating with lower or higher frequency in the current language, idioms are based on psychological and linguistic diagrams which vacillate between *specific* and *universal*, as they have become real cultural symbols of the two nations.

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