VERBAL SOMATIC IDIOMS – A COGNITIVE MODEL OF IMAGINARY PROJECTED WORLDS

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to explain the relationship between somatic verbal idioms, composite multi-word phrases, as they are traditionally considered, and the architecture of the human cognitive capacity proving that actually, these idioms which will also be briefly defined, are complex mental representations that associate the literal and the target scenes. Based mainly on Langlotz's work, "Idiomatic Creativity: A cognitive-linguistic model of idiom-representation and idiom-variation in English" (2006) this paper argues that somatic verbal idioms should be perceived as dynamic cognitive structures with various degrees of complexity activated by means of "idiomatic activation-sets" (Langlotz, 2006: 95). Moreover, as this fact is closely linked to Mel'čuk's belief that "not only every language, but every lexeme of a language, is an entire world in itself" (Mel'čuk in Langlotz, 2006: 93) the paper proves that idioms depend on the interactional mappings of various conceptual structures.*

Keywords: *somatic verbal idiom; cognitive representation; idiomatic activation-set.*

1. Introduction

How can a translator have a unitary perspective on idioms given their idiosyncrasy and heterogeneity? Could their taxonomic character reveal aspects if not even outright parameters in the sense of distinct features, which could be considered as rigorous criteria for a better understanding of their irregular nature?

Unfortunately, so far linguists have agreed to disagree as far as idioms' characteristics are concerned mainly because they could not unanimously accept a certain definition as having covered these phrases' most significant aspects. For this reason, in the present paper we will examine only somatic verbal idioms from a cognitive-linguistic perspective in an attempt to show that underneath their atypical semantic features lays a cognitive model of imaginary projected worlds.

However, this issue does not entail that only conventional images explain an idiom's figurative meaning and its heterogeneous nature as a linguistic multi-word construction, rather that the images support the activation of conceptual source-domain knowledge, which is then mapped metaphorically onto the target-domain of the idiomatic meaning.

2. Methods and materials

The data for the analysis is extracted from the "Oxford Idioms – Dictionary for learners of English" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010) and the paper uses deductive and descriptive methods of analysis concentrating on proving that somatic verbal idioms are based on a cognitive model of imaginary projected worlds, a multi-dimensional web of significant representations linked through meaningful symbolisation.

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Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to consider a working definition of idioms that will allow us to understand somatic verbal idioms as mental representations of concrete scenes linked to empirically-abstract domains of experience, in other words, factual scenarios which evoke conceptual associations.

3. Somatic verbal idioms in cognitive-linguistic terms

Thus, for the purpose of this paper, I assume, in line with Everaert (2010: 81) that idioms are "conventionalized linguistic expressions which can be decomposed into potentially meaningful components and exhibit co-occurrence restrictions that cannot be explained in terms of rule-governed morpho-syntactic or semantic restrictions".

Within the class of "verbal idioms" (Huddleston, Pullum, 2002: 273) or as they are sometimes called "verb phrase idioms" (Nenonen, 2007: 313) or "verb + noun idiomatic combinations (VNICs)" (Fazly, Stevenson, 2006: 337), frozen verb-noun combinations this paper focuses only on idioms commonly defined as "simply idioms (phrasemes), or idiomatic (phraseological) combinations of various functions containing at least one obvious body-part name" (Čermák, 1999: 110). By examining several somatic verbal idioms, we try to test the hypothesis of a possible cognitive model of imaginary projected worlds, evoked by "a rich literal scene related to a complex architecture of alternative metaphorical, metonymic and emblematic mental network" (Langlotz, 2006: 288).

At this point, it is necessary to briefly evince the characteristic features of somatic verbal idioms because they help establish these idioms' cognitive value:
+ compositeness in the sense of multiwordiness
+/- compositionality
+/- morpho-syntactically and/or lexically restrictions
+ conventionality in the sense of institutionalization
+ figurative meaning in the sense of "complex symbolic units" (Langlotz, 2006: 286) activated on the conceptual level.

Firstly, idioms are multi-word syntagms, a linguistic convention used mainly to exclude compounds and other word strings that are arbitrary by nature. Nenonen (2007: 309) argues that idioms should be perceived only as multiword lexical units and thus, distinguishes them from collocations, which consist of independent words that tend to co-occur because only idioms are sequences of word forms which function as single grammatical units with their own meaning.

Secondly, Nenonen (2007: 309) believes that idioms are non-compositional in the sense that besides the fact that the meaning of a multi-word syntagm is not decomposable on the basis of the meanings of its parts, also, the form of that syntagm may not be isomorphic with the referential form. Moreover, nowadays, non-compositionality is perceived as a much more comprehensive notion and recent studies show that the idea of compositionality should no longer be a controversial feature defining idioms because it has been proven that idioms do not form a homogeneous non-compositional class but rather a highly heterogeneous community which is based on "a continuum of compositionality" (Vega-Moreno, 2003: 85).

Thirdly, Nenonen (2007: 309) highlights that idioms are regarded as "morpho-syntactically and/ or lexically restricted expressions". This feature is based on post hoc analyses, in other words, on looking at idioms, after a thorough investigation, for patterns that were not specified a priori. To shed more light on this aspect, we deem it necessary to mention that "lexico-grammatical fixedness, or formal rigidity, implies

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some degree of lexico-grammatical defectiveness in units, for example, with preferred lexical realizations and often restrictions on aspect, mood, or voice" (Moon, 1998: 7).

The last feature that Nenonen (2007: 309) mentions is conventionality in the sense of institutionalization. But, these conventions may be (relatively) fixed meanings or structural conventions, namely, constructional idioms. Moreover, Nenonen (2007: 309) argues that "the same conventions should also rule the formation of new idioms and, in this view both language speakers and linguists should recognize them as idioms and separate them from other, non-idiomatic expressions". Therefore, most idioms have fixed and conventionalized meanings that result from years of repeated use and for this reason they are sometimes referred to as "prefabricated units of language" (Dobrovol'skij in Brown *et alii* 2006: 514).

To these four features that Nenonen (2007: 309) discusses we would also like to add that idioms should not be dismissed with an over-simplistic association with simple devalued dead metaphors. They are not at all plainly automatic, entrenched devices which lack originality and/ or creativity and consequently, their semantic complexities and grammatical restrictions should not be ignored, even if idioms are widely viewed as conventionalized language forms.

On the contrary, idioms, in this case, somatic verbal idioms, should be regarded as non-literal phrases whose figurative or idiomatic meaning may be motivated by conceptual knowledge. In other words, as idioms go beyond the literal meaning of lexemes, they are better explained in terms of the basic principles of cognitive grammar. In line with this viewpoint, Langlotz (2006: 286) characterizes idioms as "complex symbolic units" which connect the surface sense of the words, the literal meaning, and their real individual meaning, the figurative one. To explain their complex symbolic nature as well as the notion of idiom motivation, Langlotz coins the notion of "idiomatic activation-set" to refer to "the mental network that can be potentially activated when an idiom is used" (Langlotz 2006: 95). Each idiomatic activation-set is made up of various symbolic and semantic substructures associated with that particular idiom and their coordination and activation triggers the idiom's behaviour and use in a certain context.

4. Discussion

Furthermore, after explaining what somatic verbal idioms stand for and which are the main features that determine their cognitive functionality, we argue that "idioms function more like mirrors" as Keysar and Bly emphasize, because "they reflect structures that are projected onto them by the native speaker" (Keysar, Bly, 1999: 1572). Hence, instead of serving as a linguistic window onto conceptual structure, somatic verbal idioms mirror the content put into them and thus, reflect their conceptual mappings. However, "just like mirrors, they might be mistaken for windows" as Keysar and Bly (1999: 1560) argue, but to avoid this possibility we will provide appropriate examples and explain that "idioms which 'make sense' are motivated by two things: an image and a relevant conceptual mapping" (Lakoff, 1987 in Keysar, Bly, 1999: 1564) both of them tightly connected.

For instance, consider the somatic verbal idiom which is also mentioned by Keysar and Bly (1999: 1560), namely, "to keep somebody at arm's length" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 10) translated as "a ține pe cineva la (o anumită) distanță/ departe/ la respect, a fi distant cu cineva" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 122). It makes intuitive sense and it is not arbitrary as the image in the target language is quite relevant, and the link between the factual and figurative scenes mirror the idiom's

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meaning. Exactly the same is the case of the idiom “to know something like the back of your hand” (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 206) rendered into Romanian as “a cunoaşte pe cineva/ ceva ca pe tine însuţi” (Trofin, 1996: 250); it is also a motivated phrase due to the image of a person who knows himself/herself very well. This meaning extends to various activities or/and other persons, to show precisely a close connection and/or resemblance to another humans or objects.

Therefore, conceptual structures are useful tools to investigate the mind’s strategies of making sense of seemingly arbitrary idioms, that is conventionalized expressions, motivated by a suggested conceptual image or scene, as Langlotz (2006) calls it. According to Lakoff (1987) the motivating elements make the connection between the idiomatic expression and its meaning sensible and, ultimately, understandable. To illustrate, take into account the idiom “to have one’s head in a tar barrel” (Trofin, 1996: 262) translated as “a da de bucluc; a fi la ananghie” (Trofin, 1996: 262) which is motivated by a conventional image that explains and stands for the figurative meaning of this particular construction.

However, Lakoff (1987) does not claim that conventional images stand for the figurative meaning of an idiom, “rather the images are seen to support the activation of conceptual source-domain knowledge, which is then mapped metaphorically onto the target-domain of the idiomatic meaning” (Langlotz, 2006: 51). In this way, most idioms (we will not refer to opaque ones, here), in this particular case, somatic verbal ones, bring together the interpretation of two rather opposite dimensions: the figurative and the literal meaning because as Langacker (1991: 133) argues “an expression requires the co-construal of two very different conceptions, its literal sense and its figurative value”. Otherwise stated, idioms “constitute conceptual routines that are evoked to group a target-scene relative to an alternative source-scene” (Langlotz, 2006: 135) reflecting the speaker’s alternate construal of a complex scene. Furthermore, according to Langlotz (2006: 106) “a complex scene is a cognitive representation that does not reduce to a single, constituent conceptual configuration”.

Consider, for example, the idiom “to get/ have itchy feet” (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 194), in Romanian as “a-l mânca tălpile (pe cineva); a nu avea astâmpăr; a fi nerăbdător să plece” (Dobrescu, 2008: 418) because it emphasizes the link between the literal and the figurative scenes. More accurately, the literal scene rendered by this somatic verbal idiom refers to some kind of skin condition such as a fungal infection which may lead to an irritating skin sensation causing a desire to scratch. However, the conventional idiomatic meaning, namely, to work very hard to achieve something, evokes a figurative scene, and, in this way, “the literal scene establishes the conceptual background against which this figurative scene is compared” (Langlotz, 2006: 107).

Exactly the same complex scene can be identified in case of the following somatic verbal idioms: “to break one’s back doing something” (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 41) translated as “a munci pe rupte; a se speti muncind; a se cocoșa de atâta muncă” (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 112), “to turn the other cheek” (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 58) in Romanian, “a întoarce și obrazul celălalt” (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 518) and “to put one’s head on the chopping block” (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 395) conveyed into Romanian as “a-și pune pielea la saramură; a-și lua o (mare) belea pe cap; a-și băga capul în ștreang; a-și pune singur ștreangul de gât” (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 395).

Thus, from this perspective, idioms represent cognitive micro-models of imaginary projected worlds “mapping conceptual entities from an empirically-concrete

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to an empirically-abstract domain of experience" (Langlotz, 2006: 136) as all the above-mentioned examples of somatic verbal idioms accurately demonstrate.

Moreover, on the mental plane the somatic idiom "to have a finger in every pie" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 126) which means to be involved in everything that happens, and rendered into Romanian as "a fi amestecat/ băgat în ceva; a nu fi străin de ceva; a-şi vârî/ băga coada în ceva" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 92) is more than the sum of its parts and includes various symbolic substructures which are associated with this particular idiom but this feature does not exclude the fact that the key – in this case "finger" and "every pie", these immanent parts, must not be first recognized and only afterwards, activated. If this were not the case this following somatic idiom "to have a finger in the pie" (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 244), conveyed into Romanian as "a fi băgat/ amestecat în ceva; a păstra/ avea cuiul lui Pepelea" (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 244) would have the same meaning which obviously is not the case. In this way, the notion "idiomatic activation set" raises awareness about the symbolic and semantic substructures that shape the idiom, the connections between these substructures and the variable ways in which they can be activated in a certain context. Additionally, it explains why idioms are "lexically-rich, constructionally-complex and semantically-complex symbolic units" (Langlotz, 2006: 97).

5. Somatic verbal idioms' global analytical dimensions

Interestingly, in cognitive-linguistic terms, the differences between various idioms are reflected in the quality and richness of the activation-set which can be triggered with a given idiom. According to Langlotz (2006: 100) to clearly examine the quality of an idiomatic activation-set, we must first of all examine the characteristics of the mental substructures which form the cognitive network that may be disclosed in actual usage events. Thus, he identifies the following "global analytical dimensions" (Langlotz, 2006: 105):

(1) Internal structuring, namely the links between the substructures of the idiomatic activation-set, for example, the relationship between the components of the idiomatic meaning in the following somatic idiom "to put one's money where one's mouth is" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 249) where "to put" stands for "to support one's intentions" because the whole construction means "to show that you really mean what you say, by actually doing something rather than just talking about it" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 249) and in Romanian is rendered as "a-şi susţine intenţiile cu fapte" (Trofin, 1996: 250) or "a trece la fapte; a fi (un) om de cuvânt" (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 395).

(2) Transparency, more precisely, the ways in which the motivating connections between the conceptual substructures can be recognized by speakers. For instance, consider transparency as the association between the literal scene and its figurative interpretation in case of the following somatic idioms, namely, "to put one's hand into one's pocket" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 162) translated as "a-şi dezlega băierele pungii; a-şi scutura punga" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 191) and "(not) put/ lay one's finger on something" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 126) rendered into Romanian as "a (nu) pune degetul pe rană; a (nu) arăta exact unde este buba; a (nu) arăta care este necazul" (Trofin, 1996: 201) or "a (nu) găsi buba, a (nu) pune punctul pe i" (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 394).

(3) Conceptual backing that is, the conceptual patterns, the figurative notions which help recognize a motivated idiom structure from a transparent one, more

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accurately, those patterns of semantic extension (metaphor, metonymy, blending, emblems). For instance, the following metonymic somatic verbal idioms: "to give a helping hand" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 177) translated as "a da o mână de ajutor" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 179) or "to keep your eye on the ball" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 112) conveyed into Romanian as "a fi cu ochii în patru (pentru); a sta cu ochii deschişi (după); a sta cu atenţia încordată (ca să)" (Săileanu, Poenaru, 2007: 300) "a nu pierde din vedere scopul principal; a fi atent/cu ochii în patru" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 121) emphasize the physical ability that constitutes the central part of the idiom's figurative meaning.

6. Somatic verbal idioms' idiomatic activation-set

Langlotz (2006: 95) argues that the term "idiomatic activation-set" is "a complex mental configuration that consists of several coordinated symbolic and conceptual units that constitutes its immanent substructures".

As already stated, a concrete scene serves as a model for a conceptually more abstract meaning because proverbiality in the sense of "describing a habitual situation based on its resemblance with familiar experiences", as Nunberg (1994: 493) perceives it, in cognitive-linguistic terms, must be understood as a process of conceptual modelling where the literal meaning expresses a concrete scene which is a model for a conceptually more abstract idea.

For example, in case of the somatic verbal idiom "to pull the carpet/ rug out from under somebody's feet" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 308) translated into Romanian as "a lăsa pe cineva în pom" (Nicolescu, Pamfil-Teodoreanu *et alii* 1999: 450) the concrete scene depicts a carpet which is unexpectedly moved from its usual place and thus, leads to an unstable situation. This image of a usually common experience which is brought out of balance evokes conceptual associations that make the abstract idea of suddenly taking the help, support or confidence away from somebody totally understandable because moving something from its supposed well-established place, and, thus, disturbing a set order of things spoils a balanced configuration and brings about a different outcome.

Moreover, the following idioms "to be a thorn in your flesh/ side" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 407) and "to fly in the face of something" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010: 133) emphasize how concrete images are projected onto more abstract target-events and how "the literal scene with all its image-schematic and conceptual entailments thus works as a rich and accessible micro-model that can be projected onto more abstract target-events" (Langlotz, 2006: 137). In this way, the encyclopaedic knowledge associated with the lexical constituents makes it possible to describe and explain a more abstract target scenario.

As obvious from the above-mentioned examples, the function of mapping a concrete literal-scene onto a more abstract target-scene can only be fulfilled if the idiom literal meaning is concrete. Consequently, Langlotz (2006: 138) argues that the role of idioms as micro-models is subject to two qualitative parameters, namely, "the semantic quality of the literal scene and the quality of the connection between the literal scene and the target scene" and as a result, in accordance with these criteria idioms range between the two opposite poles of zero-models and full-scale explanatory models.

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7. Concluding remarks

To conclude, taking everything into account, in cognitive-linguistic terms an idiom is "a cognitive micro-model – a mental network that can be evoked to organize and communicate the abstract conceptual relationships in a target conceptualization figuratively" (Langlotz, 2006: 290). As already stated, this is based on the fact that the idioms' motivation and isomorphism emerge from the speaker's ability to relate the association between the literal and the idiomatic meaning to complex patterns of conceptual metaphor and metonymy. In light of the above arguments, all the afore-mentioned examples illustrate that most of the conventionalized phrases, in this case, somatic verbal idioms, are motivated by certain conceptual mappings, depending on the global analytical dimensions. Contrary to this, if "the association between the literal scene and the idiomatic meaning is not motivated, idioms do not fulfill any other cognitive function than to reconceptualise the target as something else" (Langlotz, 2006: 141) which is the case of a distinct subclass of idioms – opaque idioms – that have not been considered in the current paper.

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