WATERY IDIOMS. A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

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Abstract: Water per se hardly needs any presentation at all, since it is as common, yet as vital as the air we breathe. It is viewed as a fundamental element in a wide range of domains, among which chemistry, physics, biology, geography, agriculture, industry, philosophy, religion and even food processing. The present study aims to survey – from a linguistic perspective – certain idioms based on water, thus coined 'watery idioms', in English and Romanian idiomatic languages. They will be approached progressively, from the most frequent to the less recurrent ones, compared in the two languages and, if necessary, provided with concrete examples. As further illustrated, such English and Romanian 'watery idioms' have typically followed the same semantic pathway, but sometimes diverge due to various social and cultural aspects.

Keywords: idiomatic,meaning,rain,semantics,water

Motto:

"I want to be like water. I want to slip through fingers, but hold up a ship."

(Michelle Williams)

In a plain definition (and in a world governed by rules), idioms are "anomalies of language, mavericks of the linguistic world. [They] break the normal rules […] semantically, with regard to their meaning, and syntactically, with regard to their grammar" (Flavell and Flavell 1994: 6). Categorized as informal, idioms, also called 'fixed expressions' or 'frozen collocations' (in Moon 1998: 2), are particularly used for emphasis, agreement, comments, eye-catching headlines and advertising slogans (see O'Dell, McCarthy 2010: 8), as well as for "humorous effect or to make something more memorable" (O'Dell, McCarthy 2010: 16).

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Technically described, an idiom is viewed as "a conventionalized multi-lexemic expression – once a complex expression is assigned construction status, it will automatically be positioned somewhere on an idiomaticity continuum" (Wulff 2008: 2). In other words, an idiom should be composed of at least two lexemes, which acquire a certain new sense by their being placed together, different from their separate denotations. Thus, the newly constructed idiomatic meaning passes over the literal meaning of the constituents. In a dictionary description, an idiom stands as "[a] form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one" (OED, in Wulff 2008: 8).

For instance, the highly idiomatic expression *to kick the bucket* has the seemingly far-fetched significance of dying, but its origins can be grimly traced to pig slaughtering, suicide and lynching, all connected by the use of a bucket (for further details, see Flavell and Flavell 1994: 117, 119). Once the etymology explained, such expression appears no longer fanciful – the present construction was conventionally shaped by the speakers throughout the time: "Phrases have literal meanings, then they generally develop metaphorical uses and ultimately, in typical cases, acquire an idiomatic sense that is separate from the literal one" (Flavell and Flavell 1994: vi).

In what regards the symbol of water, it is a multi-faceted emblem, a prime matter, a life-provider and -preserver element, "circulating throughout the whole of nature, in the form of rain, sap, milk and blood. Limitless and immortal, the waters are the beginning and the end of all things on earth" (Cirlot 1990: 364). As a matter of fact, "ancient cultures made a distinction between 'upper waters' and 'lower waters'. The former correspond to the potential or what is still possible, the latter to what is actual or already created" (Cirlot 1990: 364); in addition, "the upper and lower waters communicate reciprocally through the process of rain (involution) and evaporation (evolution)" (Cirlot 1990: 366). The two categories of water will be analysed through this study, namely rain and (the concrete) terrestrial water.

In Jungian terms, water reads as "a symbol of the collective or of the personal unconscious" (in Cirlot 1990: 366), "an expression of the vital potential of the psyche, of the struggles of the psychic depths to find a way of formulating a clear message comprehensible to the consciousness" (Cirlot 1990: 366). In the religious act of baptism, "[i]mmersion in water signifies a return to the preformal state, with a sense of death and

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annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other" (Cirlot 1990: 364). Obviously, as further demonstrated, all the idioms connected with merely plunging into water and ignoring the following stage of revival refer to conflicting and problematic cases.

The present analysis of watery idioms in English and Romanian is basically descriptive, not theoretical. Moreover, I make no claims for comprehensive coverage of idioms based on water, my intention being to analyse and compare the most frequent *watery idioms* – such coinage epitomizes the streamlined expression of idioms revolving around this vital liquid. Besides the criterion of frequency and on account of space limitations, only typical idioms have been chosen for this article, the proverbs and maxims centred on water being omitted.

In what concerns the research methodology, eclecticism is the preferred method, mostly empirical methods – the direct observation and analysis of the respective watery idioms, as they are described in monolingual dictionaries, followed by the contrastive exploration of the English expression and its Romanian counterpart, both lexically and semantically. Sporadically, certain idioms (those which "have a tale to tell" - Flavell and Flavell 1994: vi) will be explained from an etymological viewpoint. Furthermore, irrespective of the numerous articles on idioms in general, as well as of the different idiomatic analogies among languages, a similar contrastive study on watery idioms could not have been found.

For the sake of preciseness, the water and rain idioms will be classified into two broad categories, namely: challenging conditions and threatening circumstances, and, secondly, appeasing and smooth situations. Before exploring them in turn, some further theoretical remarks should be made.

Idioms ought to meet some criteria, such as institutionalization (recurrence/acceptance), 'lexicogrammatical fixedness' and non-compositionality (see Moon 1998: 7-8). According to SIL, an idiom "behaves as a single semantic unit", resisting "interruption by other words whether they are semantically compatible or not" and also repelling "reordering of its component parts" (SIL online). Secondly, an idiom "has a non-productive syntactic structure. Only single particular lexemes can collocate in an idiomatic construction. Substituting other words from the same generic lexical relation set will destroy the idiomatic meaning of the expression" (SIL online). For example, the idiom *raining cats and dogs* (to rain heavily), in order to retain its idiomatic sense, can

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never be altered to **raining big/lots of cats and dogs*, **cats and dogs are being rained* or to **pouring down cats and dogs/*raining kittens and puppies*. However, the origin should be found in the inadequate street drainage which caused the drowning of numerous stray cats and dogs (see Flavell and Flavell 1994: 150). Rather seldom, (raining) *cats and dogs* is replaced by (raining) *pitchforks* (*and hammer handles*)(see *TFD*) or by the colloquial North of England expression (raining) *stair-rods*, the allusion being "to rain which is so heavy as to appear like falling stair-rods" (see *PF*). In a punning tone, if we are to combine the previously discussed bucket with the above-mentioned rain, the Romanian watery idiom *a ploua/a turna cu găleata* (to rain/to pour by the bucket, thus heavily) is given rise to. Probably the difference between the two idioms accounts for the social backgrounds, the Romanian society being typically agricultural (villages were hardly flooded, due to hills and forests), while the bucket was the most common object in the Romanian households, mainly used for (rain) water keeping and animal feeding.

A. *Challenging conditions and threatening circumstances*.

In a gradually displayed presentation, probably *to be in deep water* (similarly to Rom. *a înota în ape adânci, a fi în primejdie* – swim in deep water) should come first, thus attempting to deal with a difficult situation. Equally, *get in(to) deep water*, as the initiator of any challenging state, signifies "to put or find oneself in a dangerous, vulnerable, or troublesome situation or position, especially that which could be beyond one's abilities to resolve" (*TFD*). The next (or a parallel) stage could take into account *to be in hot water*: "if someone is in hot water, people are angry with them and they are likely to be punished" (*TFD*). Similarly, *get in(to) hot water* means "to provoke or incite anger, hostility, or punishment against oneself; to cause or encounter trouble or difficulty, especially that which will result in punishment or reprisal" (*TFD*):

e.g. *He got into hot water with his straightforward speech*.

The Romanian counterpart may be *a da de dracul, a fi în bucluc*, thus encountering the devil, the common point of the two idioms possibly being the abode of evil (on the one hand, the heat of the inferno cauldrons and, on the other hand, the main embodiment of such a realm).

The desperate efforts of escaping the water depths or boiling could end into the stance of *a fish out of water* (Rom. *ca peştele pe uscat*), the Romanian idiom emphasizing the idea of the fish actually lying on the ground, rather than its being out of water.

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Naturally, fish are supposed to live in an aquatic environment, any other change triggering disastrous events. When applied to people, this idiom refers to an awkward, out-of-place behaviour, or to someone completely unfamiliar with a new surrounding:

e.g. *She really felt like a fish out of water when she entered that gloomy house.*

Following the same pattern, water – ground, the English *to blow something/someone out of the water* translates as *a face ceva/pe cineva una cu pământul, a face ceva/pe cineva praf*, namely knocking something/someone down to the ground or turning something/someone to dust. However, the first idiomatic expression has the water – ground variant, too: *a (se) face o apă şi un pământ* or *a se duce pe apa sâmbetei* (*dexonline*), hence destroying something or someone/oneself.

Additionally, *to be dead in the water* needs no further explanation than being hopeless and with no future, "unable to function or move, inoperable" (*dictionary*); something "has failed, and it seems impossible that will be successful in the future" (*TFD*):

e.g.*So how does a government revive an economy that is dead in the water?* (*TFD*)

Another negative idiom, yet also formally, not only semantically negative, is *not to hold water* (Rom. *a nu sta în picioare*, thus not standing on own feet), which signifies "to be inadequate, insubstantial or ill-conceived" (*TFD*), lacking logic or validity:

e.g. *The prosecution's case won't hold water, so the defendant was released.* (*TFD*)

Two idioms sharing the same meaning are *to rain on one's parade* and *to pour/throw cold water on something*, the first Romanian equivalent being *a-i strica ploile (cuiva)* – ruining one's rains or *a băga pe cineva la apă* – getting someone under water, while the second onereplaces water and rain with a cold shower: *a fi ca un duş rece pentru (cineva/ceva)*, the explanation for all these expressions being to spoil one's plans/happiness or "to discourage doing something, to reduce enthusiasm for something" (*TFD*):

e.g. *Her thoughtless remark threw cold water on their plans.*

Whenever he wanted to surprise his family, his uncle tried hard to rain on his parade.

To sum up, not only (too) deep, cold or hot water bear ill-omened significance, but also high water, as in *by hell or high water* – "by any means necessary, regardless of any difficulty, problem or obstacle" (*TFD*). Perhaps the best Romanian idiom for such an

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expression is *până în pânzele albe* – up to the white masts, still suggesting a nautical term. A parallel idiom is *come hell or high water*, completely replaced with the more concrete thunder and lightning in the Romanian correspondent: (*şi*) *de tună şi fulgeră/trăznește* – come thunder or lightning:

e.g. *Come hell or high water, I am going to make her change her lousy job!*

The last idiom to be examined under this category is *be as/like oil and water* (identically with *a fi ca apa şi uleiul*), whose significance lies on the semantic borderline between the two categories, conflicting and conciliatory cases. Yet, taking into account that the two substances are always separate, "unable or unwilling to mix together easily or readily" (*TFD*), and, at the same time, they figuratively refer to people's incompatibility or inability "to interact or coexist easily, as due to fundamental differences in personality, opinions, beliefs, etc." (*TFD*), I consider that the contradictory forces prevail over the potential mollifying aspect:

e.g. *They are like oil and water whenever they talk about politics.*

B. *Appeasing and smooth situations*.

Preserving the same lexical elements, oil and water, the first peace-making idiomatic expression is *to pour oil on troubled waters*, having a religious origin and signifying "to soothe a quarrel, to calm a heated argument" (see Flavell and Flavell 1994: 140). In a dictionary definition, its meaning is "to do or say something in order to make people stop arguing and become calmer" (*TFD*):

e.g. *She was furious with Dave for forgetting her birthday so I tried to pour oil on troubled waters by offering to take them both out for a meal.* (*TFD*)

In Romanian idiomatic language, there are two frozen collocations semantically akin, namely *a calma apele* – to calm the waters and *a pune ulei pe rană* – to put oil on the wound, the pacifying meaning staying unchanged.

Once the peace made, any past event troubling no longer becomes *water under the bridge* or *water over the dam* (American English). In other words, "if a problem or an unpleasant situation is water under the bridge, it happened a long time ago and no one is upset about it now" (*TFD*):

e.g. *They were once the worst enemies, but that's all water under the bridge now.*

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Romanians would say *a curs multă apă pe râu/gârlă de atunci* – a lot of water has flowed on the river since, the bridge not being present/important, the expression merely emphasizing the idea of time passing and of reconciliation with past occurrences.

Another watery, yet rather financial, idiom is *to keep one's head above water* (Rom. *a se menţine pe linia de plutire/la suprafaţă* – to keep floating), staying out of financial trouble or having the right amount of money in order to survive:

e.g. *With such monthly expenses, his parents hardly keep their heads above water*.

If we are to continue the story from the same economic perspective, his parents hardly keep their heads above water because of a careless son who *spends money like water*. The Romanian counterpart is more suggestive, since it only retains the idea of money flowing (water-like)/slipping through one's fingers – *a-icurge banii printre degete.*

Going back to the world of animals, besides the previously mentioned fish, the duck is another presence of the aquatic environment; *as a duck takes to water* or *take to something like a duck to water* means doing something "easily and naturally" (*TFD*), translated into Romanian as *ca peştele în apă* – like a fish in the water. Interestingly enough, the Romanian idiom is slightly different, by considering the fish the representative element of water, rather than the duck, which shares both the terrestrial and the marine environment:

e.g. *She has taken to her new job like a duck to water.*

In order to literally and figuratively *get our ducks in a row* – for a better lexical organisation, the idiom *be (like) water off a duck's back* (Rom. *cum stă apa pe gâscă, ca gâsca prin apă* – a goose instead of a duck) should come next: "if criticism is water off a duck's back to someone, it has no effect on them at all" (*TFD*):

e.g. *He's always being told he's lazy and incompetent, but it's just water off a duck's back to him.* (*TFD*)

A similar idiom, in what regards the ineffectiveness and futility of certain words or actions, is *apă de ploaie* – (plain) rainwater, usually used about something happening/being uttered with no consequence or change at all over the present state of things. Moreover, in Romanian, *a se face că plouă* – pretending it is raining is a common familiar expression for ignoring an unpleasant/straightforward thing or trying to avoid an inconvenient action.

The last 'smooth' idioms refer to someone's well-being or unhappiness, even if misery or grief can scarcely be described as smooth; still, the conflicting aspect is absent.

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The alliterative idiom (*be*) *as right as rain* symbolises someone's feeling well, Romanian idiomatic language lacking a similar lexical counterpart, based on rain, but preferring the fish instead: *ca peştele în apă*, discussed above. As a replacement for such an idea, yet quite the opposite, since the affirmative form is hardly ever used, is *a nu se simţi în apele sale* – not feel in one's own waters/one's own familiar background, specifically *be in low water, be down in the dumps/mouth*, thus depressed, ill-humoured or miserable. The pessimism of Romanians is furthered to *parcă îi tot ninge şi îi plouă* – s/he always seems under snow and rain, when referring to a constantly unhappy and discontent person. On account of the fact that unhappiness is closely related to poverty, another Romanian watery idiom should be mentioned here: *a nu avea* (*nici*) *după ce bea apă* – (not eating anything, so) not having any reason to drink water afterwards, namely *poor as a church mouse*.

However, if we are to finish in a quite positive tone, *make one's mouth water* (matching Rom. *a-i lăsa cuiva gura apă*) could end the list of watery idioms. The water in one's mouth is the result of delight, especially when seeing food, but also when "wishing something very much" (*dexonline*), "cause one to eagerly anticipate or long for something" (*TFD*):

e.g. *The sight of that chocolate cake made her mouth water.*

Those travel folders about Nepal make my mouth water. (*TFD*)

To conclude with, my hope is that the present study of English and Romanian watery idioms *did hold water*, and that I was not *ploughing water*. As illustrated above, English idiomatic language seems to count more water idioms than the Romanian vocabulary, the reason possibly being linked to the earlier social and cultural differences between the two countries: the United Kingdom, traditionally, "a seafaring nation" (Flavell and Flavell 1994: 138), and Romania, basically a farming, rural country. The idiomatic dissimilarities between the two languages and, naturally, between the two national identities are rather slight, usually on a lexical level, since they have found the common point semantically, due to the universal life events and human feelings. "Psychological construct[s]" (Wulff 2008: 3), "real in the head of the [speakers]" (Wulff 2008: 3), thus used by the speakers of a certain language on the strength of a linguistic convention, idioms are the proof that "Words have a longer life than deeds" (Pindar) – born out of concrete, real events, they were moulded in time up to the point of becoming

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frozen collocations. Nowadays, idioms frequently trigger smiles because of their seemingly bizarre lexemic combinations, but, in fact, they mirror the *homo-ludens* feature of humankind and highlight the typically social side of people.

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