CONTRASTIVE REMARKS ON THE COLOUR IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN[1]

Abstract: *The present article is based on a contrastive analysis of colour idioms in English and Romanian, given the high degree of idiomaticalness in both languages. In order to meet the requirements of the study, we have based our arguments on a few objectives. The first one aims at a general description of colour idioms in English and Romanian, with a view to establishing both similarities and differences. The second explores the difficulties of translation, while the third objective emphasizes the wealth of semantic nuances that both languages comprise in order to highlight the expressiveness of colour idiomatic constructions.*

Key words: *idiomaticalness, semantic nuances, color idioms, expressiveness.*

The psychological approach of colours

Whenever we talk about colours, we must be aware of their psychology, and implicitly their significance on our personality. Colours are part and parcel of our existence, and they have a high influence on our state of mind, storage capacity or even the taste of food. As a valuable instrument of psychodiagnosis, they convey useful information about the structure of our personality. The choice of a certain colour is definitely influenced by our feelings and inner experiences. The lexical area of colours has been chosen because it can provide an impressive picture of a human individual's states, emotions and attitudes towards the surrounding world.

Depending on culture and circumstances, colours form a non-verbal silent language, changing from one day to another with each individual. Except for words themselves, whose evocative force is unquestionable, the power of the colour manipulates human mind, and it seems that such unconscious reactions have been inherited from our ancestors.

Described as passive and active, warm and cool, colours and their connotations are deeply rooted in culture while also transcending cultural borders. Although the chromatic spectrum does not substantially differ from one language to another, there are some differences in terms of their meanings.

Colours are quite often associated with positive and negative aspects of our existence, and this triggers variations in interpretation, meaning and perception between cultures. Whether a colour grabs our attention to a higher or smaller degree depends on our apprehension and our ability to communicate. The symbolism of colours is so overwhelming, that the human brain can hardly cover

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the vast gamut of tinges. Corresponding to the rich psychology of chromatic hues, there is a profuse inventory of colour idioms that both English and Romanian make use of in everyday language.

Conceptualization of color idioms

Despite their often obscure etymology, idioms in general, and colour idioms in particular, frequently defy logical and grammatical rules; still they make up a rich inventory in both spoken and written discourse, due to their diversity and humour.

In their attempt to find a unified terminology for idioms, different authors have resorted to various terms: *complex expressions* (Weinrich, 1969: 26), *multi-word items* (Moon, 1997), *phraseological units* (Gläser, 1984) or *frozen semantic units* (Gibbs, 1993). Irrespective of the wide range of expressions, we have generally used the regular term *idioms* to describe either arbitrary constructions, independent of each other, or structures underlain by three basic mechanisms: metaphor, metonymy and conventional knowledge (Kövecses, 2002).

In both English and Romanian, most colour idioms convey metaphorical meanings and are closely related to our general knowledge of the surrounding world, as the examples below can demonstrate.

To be green with envy (a fi mort / verde de invidie), a colourful term, first used by Mark Twain in the late 1800's, designates feelings of jealousy or covetousness of somebody or something, whereas the person using it expresses a negative emotion or temperament. Unless *green* had been associated with jealousy or envy, it would have become incomprehensible for the native or non-native speaker.

Therefore, connections are useful in order to make the difference between what *green* means in collocation with *envy*, and *green* taken separately, the meanings of which denote life, vigour, fertility, renaissance, stability, intelligence, etc.

This contrast of connotations explains the broad horizon of our conceptualization of the environment. Despite the generally accepted idea that idioms are frozen elements, we believe that they are well stored in the lexicon and benefit from an internal linguistic structure in terms of semantics, morphology and syntax.

A more accurate analysis shows, for instance, the behaviour of the idiom *to be in the red* (a fi în deficit) in terms of morphology, where the verb form can be changed without altering the general meaning of the structure: *The bank is / will be / has been in the red*. The different forms of the verb indicate the existence of an internal structure of the idiom.

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Colour idioms in British and Romanian cultures

Both English and Romanian abound in colour idioms. The same concept of these idioms may be expressed by a different word in another language, and these two concepts may be equivalent culturally but not lexically. As a powerful tool of communication, colours convey either positive or negative connotations which people usually perceive in various ways. For instance, although *red* stands for love, passion or energy, it can also be interpreted in negative terms as in *to see red* (a vedea roşu în faţa ochilor), or *to be in the red* (a fi în deficit).

In our attempt to classify and analyse English and Romanian idioms, we have resorted to some criteria that are worth mentioning. Following the colour spectrum, we have noticed some interesting issues related to their distribution, wealth of semantic nuances, translation and cultural differences. Colour expressions have been categorized according to certain concepts.

Negative emotion idioms

Black mood (proastă dispoziţie) suggests irritability, anger or even depression; *a black day* (o zi neagră, când se întâmplă ceva trist sau neplăcut), *blue around the gills* (a părea bolnav, a avea o mină proastă), *blue in the face* (foarte supărat, mânios), *get the blues* (a fi deprimat), *green with envy* (mort de invidie), *brown smb. off* (a înfuria, a enerva), *red in the face* (stânjenit), etc.

All these idioms bear the same significance in Romanian and generally express irritability, anger or embarrassment. A slight difference is, however, observed with Romanian constructions such as: *a scoate peri albi* (lead smb. a dance, worry the life out of smb., to be the death of smb.), *a-i face cuiva zile negre* (to play hell and tommy with smb., to make a place too hot for smb.), *a vedea verde înaintea ochilor* (to get it hot), which generate translation difficulties among English learners, due to the lack of correlation between the component elements or their semantic opacity.

Obstacles in translation frequently arise from the differences between TL and SL, in terms of stylistic, emotive or cultural characteristics. Such translation impediment can be easily overcome, although, as Baker (1992: 72) states: "it depends on the style, register or rhetorical effects of the SL and TL texts."

Positive emotion idioms

This category includes structures such as: *in the pink* (în formă, în perfectă sănătate), *paint the town red* (a se simţi foarte bine, a petrece), *a red carpet*

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treatment (a fi primit cum se cuvine / regeşte), *red hot* (plăcut, vioi, proaspăt), etc. *Pink* and *red* are suggestive of optimism, warmth and comfort.

The inventory of positive emotion idioms is highly similar in both languages, and the translation of such phrases generally poses no problems whatsoever, since learners make logical associations, thus obtaining the appropriate meaning.

A short history of the idiom *to paint the town red* reveals an interesting semantic shift from ancient times up to the present. It dates back to the 19th century, when a notorious hooligan and a group of friends ran riot, painting in red the town of Leicestershire. Although people nowadays associate it with joy and having a good time, it was first meant as a riotous event with much bloodshed. The idiom is definitely specific to the area of British culture.

Market-related idioms

Black market (piaţa neagră) conveys the same information in English and Romanian, and makes reference to a system of buying and selling officially controlled goods illegally.

Blackmail (şantaj) or *white mail* (bani de argint) was first used in the 16th century by the Scottish farmers who paid rent to English landlords in the form of produce or livestock. Nowadays, the term has a negative connotation in both English and Romanian cultures.

Although the idiom *in the black* initially implied that someone is in debt, nowadays it expresses just the opposite, i.e. a person or organization that is financially sound and has a positive balance.

Black gold (aurul negru) is an informal term for oil, and the collocation is suggestive for the high value of oil, and the social status of those owning oil companies.

Black Friday is another market-related term and stands for a crucial source of profit to retailers on the day following American Thanksgiving. Romanian culture has successfully borrowed the concept with the same meaning, marking the official opening of the shopping season for the winter holidays.

Interestingly enough, in addition to the above connotation, the idiom also has a theological significance. Displaying a meaning specific to the Orthodox Church, it denotes the day when Jesus Christ was judged, crucified and laid to rest in the catacomb. On *Black Friday* evening, the priests officiate Jesus' burial, while the flock go round the church three times.

A blue chip company (companie solidă) is known for its solid reputation, the quality of its products and the stability of its growth and earnings. In spite of the cold nature of colour *blue*, it incorporates both positive and negative semantic nuances. Very much like English, Romanian has most of the corresponding

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meanings of the term *blue*, which is mainly associated with stability, peace, optimism and hope on the one hand, and sadness or dejection on the other hand.

A grey area (o zonă de piaţă gri) delineates another concept that is not clearly defined and does not conform to a set of rules. Covering the same connotation, both languages make frequent use of this idiom, especially in the economic area.

Generally correlated with bravery, happiness, good luck, energy and emotions, *red* comprises a wide range of semantic meanings, mainly in British culture. Such meanings are clearly expressed in the following colour expressions: *to be in the red* (a fi în deficit), *out of the red* (a acoperi deficitul), *red tape* (birocraţie), etc. The concrete meaning of *red tape* in the 16th century, used to refer to the large amount of paperwork that accompanied official matters, became much more figurative in the 19th century, thus describing an official routine marked by excessive complexity. Although originating in Britain, the idiom is nowadays specific to most governments which are notorious in terms of bureaucracy.

Similes

Among colour-related idioms, there are several similes that are prevalent in the English language. As figures of speech, they are used in both general and specialized language, in literary and journalistic texts. A simile involves a semantic figure based on comparison, a mental process playing a key role in the way we perceive the world.

Phrases like *as black as coal* (negru ca smoala), *as brown as a berry* (foarte bronzat), *as red as a cherry* (rumen ca un bujor), *as red as a lobster* (roşu ca racul), *as red as a rose* (roşu ca un trandafir), *as red as blood* (roşu aprins), *as red as fire* (roşu ca focul), *as white as a ghost / sheet / ashes / death* (alb ca varul), *as yellow as a crow's foot / as a guinea / as gold* (galben ca aurul), *as green as a gooseberry / as grass* (tânăr şi fără experienţă) convey a semantic wealth of colour idioms. Their use is marked by a powerful meaning and effectiveness in language use.

Such linguistic devices as similes have the role to create concise and efficient communication, also conveying a cognitive function in that they can generate relations of similarity.

According to Gotti (2003: 296), "similes serve to establish a direct link with the reader's general knowledge, which makes the topic easier to identify." They are evocative, add interest to the description and illustrate something in a very surprising way.

There are not significant or essential differences in terms of translatability of colour-related similes from English into Romanian, since both languages abound in such structures with similar connotations.

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There is another category of idioms that characterize only Romanian culture, whereas their English equivalents do not include any idea of colour. However, one can easily notice the rich inventory of the English counterparts.

Negru pe alb is usually rendered as *unquestionable, beyond any question*; *a strânge bani albi pentru zile negre* has the following correspondents: *feather one's nest, lay against a rainy day, a nest egg, lay by for a rainy day*, etc.; *a scoate peri albi* is translated as *to lead smb. a dance, to worry the life out of smb.* or *to be the death of smb.*; *nici albă, nici neagră* is another phrase which generates a wealth of synonymous structures both in English and Romanian: *nici cal, nici măgar, nici călare, nici pe jos, nici în car, nici în căruţă*, and, respectively, *neither fish, flesh nor fowl, blowing hot and cold*, etc. In either form, it expresses the idea of indecision, doubtful quality or ambiguity; *a-i face cuiva zile negre* is generally problematic for learners, in their effort to find an English equivalent. The slang idiom *to play hell and tommy with smb.,* on the other hand, is difficult to render into Romanian, unless further connections with the word *hell* are made.

Things are simpler with *a vedea lucrurile în negru*, whose English equivalent is easier to decipher, due to the more understandable nature of its component elements: *to look on the dark side of everything / see the dark side of things.*

Another obstacle in translation can be observed with idioms such as: *a îndruga verzi şi uscate* (to pull the long bow), *a visa cai verzi pe pereţi* (to chase the wild goose). They are both specific to the Romanian folk register; the former describes a commonplace conversation or trivial things, while the latter suggests unreal, imaginative things. The latter structure arouses our curiosity by its lack of transparency, unclear origin or illogical association, since there are no *cai verzi pe pereţi* in the natural world of colours.

Utopian actions such as *a visa / umbla după cai verzi pe pereţi* follow a kind of logic specific to fantasy. It is a lexicalized colloquial form meaning *fantasy world, fairy-tales, lies*, and is frequently used to denote the irony of an utterance. Both structures are suggestive and characterized by a significant affective weight, thus highlighting the Romanians' preference for figurative language.

Conclusions

As the strongest tool of communication, language is deeply rooted in the reality of the culture, the life and customs of the people. The chromatic spectrum analysed in the present contribution stands for a rich treasure of idioms and interpretations, which help us to broaden our horizon of knowledge, arouse our curiosity and interest.

The symbolism of colour idioms should be approached in accordance with their psychological dimension, their impact on our perception of the surrounding world and their richness of semantic values. It has been shown that both English

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and Romanian abound in colour phrases, without disregarding their similarities and incongruities. Some colour-related idioms share the same semantic meaning in both languages, while others characterize only one culture.

Their tentative classification has emphasized various connotations, which helped us to establish cross-linguistic comparisons.

In terms of translation, the study has shown that learners may find it difficult to render colour idioms both in SL and TL, due to the high degree of formality or informality of the discourse. However, learners cannot be hindered from adopting the best strategies of translation as long as they take into account cultural and lexical diversity.

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