CONTRASTIVE APPROACH ON VERBAL IDIOMS OF COMPARISON IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

Dan Mihai BARBULESCU[*]
Ioana Mariela BARBULESCU[*]

Abstract: *As a sequel to a previous study on idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives in English and Romanian, this paper continues the contrastive analysis of comparing idioms functioning as verbs in English and Romanian, with a focus on structure, semantic fusion and translation issues.*

Keywords: *phraseological units, verbal idioms of comparison, phraseology.*

This paper represents a continuation and an extension of the research made by the authors in the vast field of phraseology[1]. For this reason, we will not insist upon theoretical and practical considerations of this study; suffice it to say that scholars always find themselves facing a linguistic area which is permanently exciting and has a generous and substantial starting point for the issue. Neither will we emphasize again on the large variety of definitions and concepts operated in phraseology; such a variety permanently arouses disputes between scholars, as each one insists on the personal point of view regarding both form and content of the terminology in the field.

Nevertheless it is worth highlighting that an atomist approach of such a complex and controversial topic is, as a matter of fact, impossible because, if in morphology or syntax a quasi-mathematical taxonomy may be set up, well, phraseology represents the field where you can easily prove that natural languages are *not* mathematical systems and *cannot* be subject to rules displayed in mathematical figures.

Sailing over such a huge linguistic area we decided to limit this study to verbal phraseological units and to approach this time only units expressing a comparison.

As a result of the survey of two idiom dictionaries for each language, two general dictionaries for each language and of two bilingual idiom dictionaries, the collected expressions numbers 104 units for the English language and 144 for the Romanian language. We will hereinafter call these units *verbal idioms of comparison*.

∗ The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest, Romania. barbulescu.tnx@gmail.com
∗ The University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, Bucharest, Romania. barbulescu.tnx@gmail.com

[1] Dan Mihai Barbulescu, Ioana Mariela Barbulescu, *Contrastive approach on idioms of comparison functioning as adjectives in English and Romanian* / *O abordare contrastivă a frazeologismelor adjectivale-comparaţii în limbile română şi engleză* in LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE, European Landmarks on Identity, the 12th International Conference of the Faculty of Letters, Piteşti, Romania, June 12-14, 2015.

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

The first thing worth specifying is the definition of the term itself: *verbal idioms of comparison* are considered such phraseological units with a unitary and fixed character, where the verb is used with its literally meaning[1] and the second part of the comparison (the noun phrase) with a figurative one, and which express potential actions that may be compared with:

- persons: *feel like Daniel in the lions' den; a o nimeri ca Ieremia cu oiştea-n gard*
- animals: *feel like a fighting cock; a mânca precum porcii*
- imaginary beings: *write like an angel*; *a fugi ca dracul de tămâie*
- disabled persons: *a se înţelege ca mutul şi orbul prin gaura cheii*
- ethnic representatives: *to talk like a Dutch uncle; a spune drept ca neamțul; a mânca de parcă se bat turcii la gura lui*
- various objects: *to sink like a stone; a vedea ca prin ciur*
- diseases: *to avoid like a plague / a pest; a se feri ca de ciumă*
- fruits, vegetables or other plants: *drop like a hot potato; a apărea ca ciupercile după ploaie*
- natural phenomena: *to look as black as thunder; a zbura ca vântul*
- parts of the body: *know someone or something like the back of one's hand/ the palm of one's hand; a da/a arunca (pe cineva) ca pe o măsea stricată*
- geographical names: *a o întoarce ca la Ploieşti* etc.

The features of such objects, beings or phenomena represents a reference system in the comparative structure of the phraseological units and they intensify the meaning of the verb.

As already known, the phraseologisms in general and the ones analzyed in this study in particular are the result of typical circumstances imagined both by English and Romanian speakers starting from an analogy with the surrounding reality or events (the cultural, social and natural environment) in which the community lives.

These units present (partially or totally) the same morphological categories as the verb and have the same syntactical functions.

Structure and component elements of verbal idioms of comparison

Having analyzed the phraseological units from the view point of the constituent words, we conclude that such units have rather various structures:

<u>Similar in both languages:</u>

1. verb (phrasal verb) + like (ca) + noun (zero article in English): *to avoid like poison, avoid like the plague, blow like a grampus, breed like rabbits, feel like a million, go like clockwork, spring like mushrooms, drop like flies; a fuma ca un şarpe, a înjura ca un birjar, a mânca ca porcul, a râde ca prostul, a plăti ca popa, a tremura ca varga, a cădea ca muștele*
2. verb (phrasal verb) + like (ca) + noun + preposition + noun: *get on like a house on fire, go like a lamb to slaughter, sit like a bump on a log, cut/go*

[1] Sometimes the verb may be used with a figurative meaning and consequently the degree of idiomacity of such expression is higher: *turn out like a bad penny*; *a da ca câinele prin băț.*

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

through (smth.) like a knife through butter, go round like a horse in a mill; a trăi ca frunza pe apă, a trăi ca găina la moară, a trăi ca peştele în apă, a trece ca gâsca prin apă, a fugi ca dracul de tămâie, a răsări ca ciupercile după ploaie.

3. verb (phrasal verb) + like (ca) + noun + preposition + noun + adjective: *be like a bird in a gilded cage; a sta ca viţelul la poarta nouă*
4. verb (phrasal verb) + like (cât) + noun + noun in G.: *go down as mother's milk, look like a dog's dinner, go through like a dose of salts, fight like Kilkenny cats; a trăi cât zidul Goliei*
5. verb + as (ca) + preposition + noun: *tread as on eggs; a sta ca pe ghimpi, a sta ca pe mărăcini, a fugi ca din puşcă, a călca ca pe ouă*
6. verb + like (cât) + sentences: *look like a cat who swallowed the canary, look like smth the cat's brought/ dragged in, suit smth as saddle suits a sow; a fugi cât îl ţin picioarele*

Only in English:

1. verb (phrasal verb) + like + adjective + noun: *to sell like hot cakes, blush like black/blue dog, drop like a hot potato, feel like a fighting cock, feel like a box of birds, go like greased lightning, hang/hold on like grim death, stagger like a drunken man, stick out like a sore thumb*
2. verb + like + noun + conjunction + noun: *live like husband and wife, agree like cats and dogs*
3. verb + (smb)+ as + noun + preposition + possessive adjective + noun: treat smb. *as the mud beneath one's feet*
4. verb + like + noun + possessive adjective + noun in G.: *know (someone or smth.) like the back (palm) of one's hand*
5. verb + prep. like + noun in G. + noun + preposition + noun: *look like death's head on a mopstick*
6. verb + like + (proper) noun + preposition like + noun in G. + noun: *feel like Daniel in the lion's den*

Only in Romanian:

1. verb + ca + preposition + noun + preposition + noun: *a striga ca din gură de şarpe*
2. verb + ca + preposition + noun + noun in G.: *a scăpa ca din gura lupului, a trăi ca în pântecele mamei, a trăi ca în sânul lui Avram, a mânca ca in targul lui Cremene*
3. verb + ca + preposition + noun + adjective: *a fugi ca de popă tuns*
4. verb + ca + noun + preposition + noun + noun in G.: *a fi ca lutul în mana olarului*
5. verb + reflexive pronoun in A. + ca + noun: *a se bate ca orbii/chiorii, a se usca ca scândura, a se îngâmfa ca un păun*
6. verb + reflexive pronoun in A.+ ca + preposition + noun + adjective: *a se întinde ca o pomană ţigănească, a se vinde ca pâinea caldă*
7. verb + reflexive pronoun in A.+ ca + preposition + noun: *a se aduna ca la mort, a se feri ca de foc*
8. verb + reflexive pronoun in A.+ ca (precum) + noun + preposition + noun: *a se îneca ca ţiganul la mal, a se vârî ca musca-n lapte, a se ţine ca mânzul de iapă, a se uita ca mâţa-n calendar, a se potrivi ca nuca în*

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

perete, a se dedulci ca (precum) calul la tărâţe, a se înţelege precum câinele (ca șoarecele) cu pisica

9. verb + reflexive pronoun in D. + noun + ca + noun: *a-i merge gura ca o meliţă*
10. verb + negation nu + reflexive pronoun in D. + nici + cât + adjective + preposition + noun: *a nu-i păsa nici cât negru sub unghie*
11. verb + pronoun „o" + ca + noun + preposition + noun: *a o nimeri ca nuca în perete*
12. verb + ca + proper noun + preposition + noun + preposition + noun: *a da ca Ieremia cu oiştea-n gard*
13. verb + cât + numeral: *a munci cât șapte, a mânca cât patru.*

Semantic fusion and translation

As we consider that idioms are an important element in the acquisition of proficiency in a foreign language, it is compulsory to analyze the level of equivalence and the rendering of verbal idioms of comparison in Romanian or in English.

From this point of view, we remark as follows:

Similar situations and experiences in a similar environment have led speakers to give rise to similar phraseological units in both languages: *drop/ sink/ fall like a stone = a se duce la fund ca un bolovan/ pietroi, drop like flies = a cădea ca muștele, agree like cats and dogs = a se avea precum câinele cu pisica, eat like a bird = a mânca ca o păsărică.*

Consequently, such fully equivalent phrases are easily understood and remembered by learners.

Another category is represented by phraseological units in which the latter term of comparison refers to different animals, objects, various persons, and yet, the meaning of the expression is similar in both languages: *eat like a horse = a mânca ca omizile, live like a fighting cock = a trăi ca un nabab, work like a bear/ nigger/ slave = a munci ca un bou / cal/ hamal, live like pig in clover = a trăi ca găina la moară.*

Transparency in such cases is very high and, consequently, the meaning may be easily figured out even if the imagery does not correspond in the two languages.

The third category is represented by phraseological units that are specific for each language and consequently opaque for those who learn either English or Romanian. There are situations in which the comparison refers to an event or a circumstance familiar to the native speakers only: *grin like a Cheshire cat*[1], *come on like gangbusters*[2]*; a mânca ca în târgul lui Cremene*[3].

[1] According to Linda and Roger Flavell, (pp 68-69), "the actual phrase is first found towards the end of the eighteenth century, a hundred years before Lewis Carroll's powerful image ensured its popularity".

[2] *Gangbusters* was a radio program in the US about police who went after criminals with much energy and success.

[3] This is a phrase used to figuratively evoke a fabulous place, a sort of a Romanian *Far West* land, where no rule is observed. http://ziarullumina.ro/satul-lui-cremene-50537.html

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Morphological and syntactical categories of verbal idioms of comparison

In English:

Voices: It is well known that the passive voice in English has a stronger representation in comparison with the Romanian language. This is due to the fact that, in Romanian, only transitive verbs (i.e. verbs requiring a direct object) can be used in passive voice. And yet, scarcely is the passive voice used for the analyzed phraseological units (*to be built like a brick outhouse*)

Moods: We may consider that the infinitive mood belongs implicitly to the academic environment; consequently there might be no mistake in stating that almost all phraseological units are used in the infinitive mood (both in English and in Romanian). Neither appropriate though. And this – because language usage draws our attention and notifies that in colloquial speech (which is the occurence zone preferred by phraseologisms), such units are almost *never* used in an infinitive form.

- Indicative: most cases
- Conditional: *If he told me, I **would dropped the idea like a hot potato***.
- Subjonctive: *If you **dropped the idea like a hot potato**, you would get fired.*
- Imperative: (restricted, of course, by the semantic level): ***Run like the wind*** *!* But more often with negation: Don't ***strut like a turkey-cock*** **!**
- Infinitive (see comment above)
- Gerund: ***Watching him like a hawk***, Mother could know everything about the little boy.
- Past Participle: as this mood is directly related to the voices – we found no examples.

Tenses: Proportionally, English phraseological units are much more used in all tenses than the Romanian ones.

Aspect: This verbal category representing the opposition *simple-continuous* does not exist in Romanian. In English, it represents one more rule of restriction as to the semantic level of the phraseological unit:

Past: He ***was talking to me like a Dutch uncle***.
Present: Just look at that dog, ***coming back again like a bad halfpenny/ penny/ shilling***.
Future: He ***will be sleeping like a log*** after this supper.

Person and Number are hardly represented in English, therefore such features can be scarcely traced in phraseological units, too.

In Romanian:

As for the Romanian language, we conclude as follows:

Voices: Active voice (most cases);

- In some cases – the reflexive voice (dynamic: *a se învârti ca un titirez* or reciprocal: *a se înţelege / iubi precum câinele şi pisica*)
- Passive voice – extremely rare (*a fi învăţat ca mâţa la lapte*; nevertheless, although it seems a passive form, the unit is currently used in reflexive voice: *s-a învăţat ca mâţa la lapte* and not: *a fost învăţat ca mâţa la lapte*.)

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Moods: But for the above mentioned statement referring to the infinitive mood in English, phraseological units can be used in Romanian as follows:

- Indicative: most cases
- Conjunctive: Present conjunctive: *Să **meargă treaba ca pe roate** şi om vedea ce-om face mai departe*. Perfect conjunctive: *Ce era să fac ? **Să fi stat ca pe ghimpi**, de fraier, când toţi chefuiau dincolo?*
- Conditional-Optative: *Dacă ar plăti bine, toţi cerşetorii **s-ar strânge ca muştele la miere**, iar hoţii **ar răsări ca ciupercile după ploaie**.*
- Imperative: (in most cases, with negation): *Ia, **nu** mai **sta** tu acolo **ca un ţap logodit** şi **nu** mai tot **trage nădejdea ca ursul de coadă**; mai bine du-te şi **ţine-te** şi tu de el **ca mânzul de iapă** / **ca scaiul de oaie**; poate ţi-o da ceva de lucru.*
- Infinitive (see comment above)
- Gerund: ***Trăind ca un bimbaşă** / **trăind ca în sânul lui Avram** nu avea ştiinţă de necazurile celorlalţi.*

  *Îi răspunse repezit, **uitând ca pământul** ce îi promisese cu o seară înainte.*

  *Şi unde nu-l vezi pe Ionuţ, **fugind cât îl ţin picioarele**...*
- Participle: *Toată lumea asta, **adunată ca la mort** / **adunată ca la urs** venea în fuga mare.*

*Deschise ochii şi îl văzu **întins ca o pomană ţigănească**, drept în mijlocul camerei...*

- Supine: (rare cases) *...Iar poliţaiul, fericit că găsise pe cineva **de bătut ca la fasole**, îi căra acum pumni şi palme...*

Tenses: Generally speaking, due to their meaning, the phraseological units may be mainly used in a certain tense form.

In Romanian, in most cases we can trace imperfect forms (a past tense which shows a past and unfinished action with reference to a continuing or repeated action, with the meaning corresponding to the English "*was/were working*" or "*used to work*", as opposed to perfect tense (preterite forms – *worked*) which refers to completed actions before the moment of speaking. In the Romanian language this tense is frequently present in narrative texts and phraseological units may be used in such tense forms – especially the ones that can be met also in the narrative present tense (also called *historical present tense* – the tense that uses present forms to express past actions in an epic context).

Others (*a răsări, a ieși, a se ivi ca din din pământ /din iarbă verde*, a *trăi cât zidul Goliei*) are generally used in preterite forms.

Many of the phraseological units may also have future tense forms – in case their meaning allow it; still, there are situations where future tense is not accepted – for instance: *a scăpa ca din gură de tun*, where the phrase shows clearly a result that cannot be projected on the future axis.

An interesting case is the phraseologism *a pica ca din cer*, which, used in the future tense form, modifies also the voice: *ai picat ca din cer în mijlocul lor* (preterite, active voice); *vei fi picat ca din cer în mijlocul lor* (future, passive voice)

The unit *Voia dumitale ca la Banul Ghica* (= at will) represents a rare case of a phraseologism that can be used only in the present tense form, although it suggests a future intention.

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

Person: verbal forms of person are almost completely represented in Romanian – in comparison with English. With the exception of such units which, due to their meaning cannot accept other persons (*a se vinde ca pâinea caldă* – only III-rd person singular or plural), or: *Voia d-tale ca la Banul Ghica* – the imperative form accepts only II-nd person singular or plural, or: a *se aduna ca la urs / ca la mort* – only III-rd persons), all other units can be used in all person forms.

Number: it is the most restricted category, limited by the meaning: *au răsărit ca ciupercile după ploaie*/*a se răspândi ca puii de potârniche* – such phrases cannot be used in singular.

Syntactically such units are in most cases verbal predicates.

Semantical criteria classification

Should we take into account the semantic criterion – i.e. the meaning of the verbal idioms of comparison under study in English and in Romanian – we can notice that the units may express (as any verb does) an action or a state. The difference is that the action expressed by the verb is performed by the subject either very well, or totally inadequately.

Thus, when someone *works as a beaver* that means that he/she works hard. When people are *dropping like flies* that means large numbers of persons dying or becoming ill or injured within a short period of time. The following actions or states are expressed by the phraseological units:

- Every day actions and behaviour: *cut through smth like a (hot) knife through butter, drink like a fish, swim like a fish, give as good as you get; a mânca cât șapte, a fuma ca un șarpe, a se îneca ca țiganul la mal*
- Emotions and feelings: *feel like a fish out of water; a i se face cuiva pielea ca de găină, a iubi (păzi, îngriji) pe cineva ca ochii din cap, a se uita la cineva ca la soare*
- Anger, annoyance: *come down like a ton of bricks, to be like a red flag to a bull; a se face negru ca pământul*
- Anxiety, fear: *to shake like a leaf; a tremura ca varga*
- Arguments, disagreements, disputes, violence: *fight like cat and dog; a se bate ca chiorii*
- Beauty, appearance: *look like a million dollars; a se înfoia ca un păun, a trăi ca un bimbaşă*
- Efficiency and diligence: *work like a charm /beaver / horse/ slave; a munci ca un bou/ salahor, a munci cât șapte*
- Happiness, sadness: *grin like a Cheshire cat, feel like a box of birds; a-i sta cuiva ca un ghimpe la (sau în) inimă, a plânge ca o mireasă*
- Health and physical condition: *look like death warmed up, drop like flies, feel like fighting cock; a fi (a se usca) ca scândura*
- Social, personal, working relationships: *get on like a house on fire, drop like a hot potato; a da afară (pe cineva) ca pe o măsea stricată.*

There are units which are used ironically or derogatorily – as the latter element of the comparison aims right at the reversed quality as to the reality (both in English and in Romanian): *to blush like a black dog, go over like a lead ballon*; *a fi cunoscut ca un cal breaz.*

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)

In conclusion, after having analyzed 104 units for the English language and 144 for the Romanian language – all mentioned in dictionaries – we registered 6 common structural patterns and the most productive ones are: verb (phrasal verb) + like (ca) + noun (zero article in English) and verb (phrasal verb) + like (ca) + noun + preposition + noun. English language numbers 6 specific structural patterns while Romanian has 13 patterns.

Most idioms in question belong to the group of motivated transparent or semi-fixed (partially fused) phraseologisms, but examples of unmotivated, totally fused ones can also be found. This feature of the phraseological units plays an important role in learning a foreign language as well as in correctly translating them from one language into the other.

The third important conclusion is that these verbal idioms have (partially or totally) the same morphological categories and the same syntactical functions as the verb.

References

Arnold, I. V., *The English Word*, Moscow, 1973

Avădanei, C., *Construcţii idiomatice în limbile română şi engleză*, Iaşi, 2000

Breban, V., Bulgăr, G h e., Grecu, D., Neiescu, I., Rusu, G., Stan, A., *Dicţionar de expresii şi locuţiuni româneşti*, Bucureşti, 1969

Brock, S., *Idiom's Delight / Spanish, French, Italian, Latin*, Random House, 1988

Colţun, Gh., *Frazeologia limbii romane*, Chişinău, 2000

Cowie, A. P., (coordonator), *Phraseology. Theory, Analysis and Applications*, Oxford, 1998

Dicţionarul explicativ al limbii române, ediţia a II-a, Bucureşti, 2016

Supliment la dicţionarul explicativ al limbii române, Bucureşti, 1988

Dicţionarul limbii române literare contemporane, Editura Academiei, 1955

Duda, G., ş.a. *Dicţionar de expresii şi locuţiuni ale limbii române*, Bucureşti, 1985

Dumistracel, S., *Lexic românesc - Cuvinte. Metafore. Expresii*, Bucureşti, 1980

Flavell, L., Flavell, R., *Dictionary of Idioms and Their Origins*, London 2006

GläSer, R., *The Stylistic Potential of Phraseological Units in the Light of Genre Analysis*, in "Phraseology", Oxford, 1998, pp. 125-143

GläSer, R., *A Plea for Phraseo-Stylistics*, Berlin, 1986, p. 41-52

Leviţchi, L., Bantaş, A., Gheorghiţoiu, A., *Dicţionar frazeologic român-englez*, Bucureşti, 1981

Macmillan English Dictionary for Advance Learners, Oxford, 2006

Nicolescu, A., ş.a., *Dicţionar frazeologic englez-român*, ed. a II-a, revizuită şi adăugită, Bucureşti, 1982

Spears, R. A., *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*, National Textbook Company, Illinois, USA, 1994

Electronic resources

http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/ last accessed on June 20, 2016.

http://ziarullumina.ro/satul-lui-cremene-50537.html last accessed on June 6, 2016.

BDD-A29833 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:28 UTC)