# *ON THE TRANSLATION OF IDIOMATIC PHRASES IN THE MEPs' DISCOURSE. A CORPUS-BASED INVESTIGATION*

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***Abstract:*** *The "Verbatim Reports of Proceedings" containing transcripts of the speeches held by the MEPs during plenary sessions, which are translated into all EU official languages, offer valuable insights into meaningful aspects of linguistic imaginary. These semi-formal discourses conveying the speakers' standpoints on various issues are often dotted with language-specific idioms that flavour and imprint them particular tones in rendering the intended messages.*

*The present paper aims at analysing the official Romanian translations of such linguistic features identified in the original English transcripts of proceedings. The translation of idioms can be considered a process that involves "an architectural shaping of information" as the translator is faced with several choices: to use a target language equivalent idiom, to provide a literal translation, to make use of a paraphrase, to borrow it or even to leave it out. The paper also attempts to explain the reasons lying behind these choices and to provide alternatives, where applicable.*

***Keywords:*** *idiomatic phrases, translation choices, MEPs' discourse.*

## Introduction

The plenary sessions of the European Parliament gather all the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), who are directly elected by the citizens of the Member States, in order to debate and vote on EU legislation. The transcripts of the MEPs' speeches held during these sessions are included into the *Verbatim Reports of Proceedings*. They appear in the languages used by the speakers at first, but they are subsequently translated into all EU official languages.

Taking into account that the MEPs communicate their thoughts orally during the plenary sessions, their language creativity and spontaneity influence the level of communication. Thus, their discourses often contain various idioms that flavour and imprint them particular tones in rendering the intended messages. The ways in which such idiomatic expressions are translated offer valuable insights into the translator's ability to shape information, namely to choose the best solution so that the translation may achieve a similar effect.

In this paper, we attempt to analyse several cases of idioms that were translated from English into Romanian. To this end, the corpus under analysis is made up of transcripts of MEPs' speeches originally delivered in English and their official Romanian translations available online on the website of the European Parliament.

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According to the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms (1997), an idiom is "a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually". These special kind of phrases are considered to be metaphorical being analysed in terms of the degree of their semantic transparency and opacity (Moon, R., 1998: 19, 22-23).

Whenever language-specific idiomatic expressions are subjected to translation, notions such as *equivalent* idiom and *equivalence* come into play. The scholars of translation studies have tackled and classified the notion of *equivalence* in translation from various perspectives. *Equivalence* is defined by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995: 342) as the translation procedure which "replicates the same situation as in the original, whilst using completely different wording". As a result, it is considered that the two texts become equivalent. They also discuss *semantic equivalences* which are usually fixed and include idioms, clichés, proverbs, nominal or adjectival phrases, etc. They arise from "the same process of global recognition", which is based on a very good knowledge of both source language and target language, concentrating on the situation (*ibidem*: 38, 256).

Nida (1964) discusses two important types of equivalence: *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence.* According to the author, *formal equivalence* is focused on the form and content of the message; the message in the target language "should match as closely as possible the different elements in the source language" (*ibidem*: 159). Therefore, *formal equivalence* is oriented towards the source text structure, determining accuracy and correctness. On the other hand, *dynamic equivalence* is based on the principle of *equivalent effect*. The message has to meet the receptor's linguistic needs and cultural expectations, aiming at "naturalness of expression", as the author considers that the goal is to find "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message". This receptor-oriented approach involves adaptations of grammar, lexicon and cultural references with a view to naturalness and reduction of the source text "foreignness" (Nida, E. A., 1964: 166-168 qtd. in Munday, J., 2001: 42).

Baker (1992: 6) considers that equivalence is relative, since it always depends on various linguistic and cultural factors and classifies it into *equivalence at word level*, *equivalence above word level*, *textual equivalence* and *pragmatic equivalence*.

Equivalence above word level is concerned with several difficulties that translators come across because of the source language and target language differences with respect to collocations, idioms and fixed expressions. Firstly, translators must be able to recognize and interpret idioms accurately and then opt for a translation solution. The difficulties that arise at this point include the lack of equivalent idioms in the target language, the occurrence of source text idioms in both their literal and idiomatic meanings, as well as differences in discourse conventions, context and frequency of use. Therefore, the translation of idioms is influenced by many factors such as: the existence of an idiom having a similar meaning in the target language, "the significance of the specific lexical items which constitute the idiom" and the target language register constraints of using them. Likewise, factors related to context, style and rhetorical effect must be considered.

The author suggests several strategies for translating idiomatic expressions. The first strategy, *using a TL idiom of similar meaning and form*, seems to provide the perfect solution but it is rarely possible as it must contain equivalent lexical items and, at the same



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time, comply with the factors previously mentioned (e.g. the English idiom "break the ice" can be rendered into Romanian by means of the idiom "a sparge gheaţa" which is similar as regards its meaning and form). The second strategy, *using a TL idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form*, is used more often (e.g. the English idiom "make hay while the sun shines" and the Romanian one "a bate fierul cât e cald" convey the same meaning using different lexical items). The most frequently applied strategy is the third one, namely *translation by paraphrase*. It occurs each time there is a lack of target language equivalent idioms or when the target language stylistic choices do not allow the translator to use idiomatic language (e.g. "A penny for your thoughts, my friend!" can be paraphrased as "La ce te gândeşti, prietene?"). The fourth strategy*, translation by omission of SL idiom*, is mainly triggered by the lack of a target language equivalent idiom, the inability to paraphrase its meaning or by stylistic reasons. The last strategy, *translation by compensation*, occurs in a larger context as it consists of making up for the omission or minimization of an idiom at a certain point in the source text by inserting a different idiom with similar impact in other parts of the target text (Baker, M., *op. cit.*: 68-78).

Drawing on the aspects presented above, we attempt to identify the strategies associated with translating idioms in our corpus, to reveal the reasons lying behind them and, if it is the case, to suggest other functional alternatives.

**Corpus-based analysis**

The first example that we are going to analyse comprises the literal translation of an English idiom, which leads to an awkward way of expression in Romanian.

> 1. *(EN)* ***Worse****, the Commission has decided to move from zero tolerance to tolerable risk.* ***To add insult to injury****, the recent revelations about members of this House who agreed to amend or write legislation in exchange for payment further erode the credibility of this Parliament, particularly in its efforts to fight fraud and corruption.*
>
> *(RO)* ***Mai rău****, Comisia a decis să treacă de la toleranță zero la risc admisibil.* ***Pentru a adăuga insulta la aceste prejudicii****, dezvăluirile recente referitoare la deputații în acest Parlament care au acceptat să modifice sau să scrie legislații în schimbul unor plăți deteriorează și mai mult credibilitatea acestui Parlament, în special eforturile acestuia de a combate frauda și corupția.* [1]

The idiom *to add insult to injury* means "to do or say something that makes a bad or displeasing situation even worse" (ODI, 2004: 153). As it appears from the example above, it had not been identified as an idiom by the translator who rendered it by means of a literal translation combined with the addition of the demonstrative adjective "aceste" having anaphoric value. The English idiom is quite transparent, so the translator could have grasped its meaning in this particular context. The translation "*pentru a adăuga insulta la aceste prejudicii*" sounds rather strange to the Romanian readership at first sight, although the figurative meaning of the noun "insultă" can be revealed by the context.

Analysing the whole paragraph, we can see that the adverb "worse" had already been rendered as "mai rău", so the translator could have linked the two situations by using an intensifying adverb *(chiar) mai rău* ("even worse"). We consider that the most



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straightforward translation would have been the paraphrase *pentru a înrăutăți şi mai mult situația* ("to further worsen the situation") which could accurately describe the meaning of the English idiom. Moreover, the Romanian idioms of similar meaning *a răsuci cuțitul în rană* ("to twist/turn the knife in the wound"), *a pune sare pe rană* ("to put salt on the wound") or *colac peste pupăz*ă ("to make matters worse"/"on top of it all") might have been put aside on the grounds of their degree of informality.

> 2. *(EN) I think the Commission needs **to go back to the drawing board** and come up with the right proposal, one that is not just about supporting performers and artists, (...).*
> *(RO) Cred că Comisia trebuie **să se întoarcă la planşeta de desen** şi să revină de data aceasta cu propunerea corectă, una care să nu vorbească doar despre susținerea artiştilor şi a interpreților, (...).* [2]

The second example shows an inappropriate Romanian translation choice. The source text idiom *to go back to the drawing board* indicates that "an idea or scheme has been unsuccessful and a new one must be devised" (ODI, 2004:12) or, in other words, to return to the planning stage and come up with a better solution. In this context, it refers to the members of the Commission who have to find the right proposal as the existing one has failed. This English idiom was unskilfully translated into Romanian by means of the literal translation *a se întoarce la planşeta de desen*, making it rather amusing in this particular context. The English idiom is again a transparent one, so its meaning could have been easily understood. We consider that paraphrases such as *să revizuiască propunerea şi să revină cu cea corectă* ("to re-examine the proposal and come up with the right one") or *să se întoarcă la etapa de proiectare şi să revină cu propunerea corectă* ("to go back to the planning stage and come up with the right proposal") would have been suitable translation solutions.

According to our analysis, the paraphrase is the most frequently used translation strategy in the case of idioms due to various reasons. We are going to discuss several examples.

> 3. *(EN) Overnight, we have had the economically calamitous, but unsurprising, news that another country **has bitten the dust** and that Portugal is going to have to be bailed out.*
> *(RO) Aseară am primit ştirea catastrofală din punct de vedere economic, dar nesurprinzătoare, că Portugalia **şi-a declarat falimentul** şi că va trebui salvată.* [3]

*To bite the dust* refers to something that "fails or ceases to exist" or even to someone's death (CDI, 1997:114). Even though this idiom is opaque, by looking at the whole sentence and with reference to the phrase "the economically calamitous news", we can realize that Portugal has failed from the economic point of view. Given the context and by extension to the meaning of the English idiom, the Romanian translator preferred to make its meaning clear by providing a paraphrase *şi-a declarat falimentul* ("it declared/announced its bankruptcy"). Thus, the noun "faliment" achieved a coherent link with the phrase "the economically calamitous news".

On the other hand, in Romanian there is also the idiom *a muşca pământul* ("to bite the ground") having a close form and meaning. Although it only refers to a person who falls down injured or dead (DEX, 1998: 664), this idiom might also function in the figurative



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sense, just like the English one. However, as it is rather informal in style and has a low frequency of use in Romanian, it would not have been a good translation choice.

> 4. *(EN) Can I ask whether you have received any request from the Commission to make a* ***statement*** *on Portugal today? (...) Does he think that the bailing-out of Portugal is not important enough for this Parliament to discuss, or* ***is*** *he just* ***burying his head in the sand****?*
>
> *(RO) Aș dori să vă întreb, ați primit astăzi vreo solicitare din partea Comisiei pentru a face o* ***declarație*** *privind Portugalia? (...) Crede că salvarea Portugaliei nu este suficient de importantă pentru a fi discutată în Parlamentul European sau doar* ***se ferește să facă vreo declarație****?*[3]

Further on, in the same paragraph, another English idiom was rendered by means of a paraphrase into the target text. *To bury one's head in the sand*, which means "to refuse to face facts" (ODI, 2004: 42), was translated into Romanian through the phrase *a se feri sa facă vreo declaraţie* which actually explains the meaning of the English idiom in this particular context by using a word which had been mentioned previously ("declaraţie"/"statement"). In this way, a logical link between the internal structure of the paragraph and its overall meaning was made. In order to preserve the same stylistic image, the translator might have chosen the similar phrase *a adopta/a face/a practica politica struţului* which is increasingly used in Romanian media nowadays.

> 5. *(EN) He* ***makes no bones about*** *the fact that he believes in further political and economic integration;*
>
> *(RO) Domnia sa* ***nu se sfieşte să afirme*** *că el crede într-o integrare politică şi economică mai extinsă;* [4]

The English idiom *make no bones about*, which means "to have no hesitation in starting or dealing with something, however unpleasant, awkward or distasteful it is" (ODI, 2004: 33), was paraphrased into Romanian. In this example, it is said that a certain person speaks frankly and directly about his belief in further political and economic integration. The idiom was rendered into the target language by the verb "a se sfii" in the negative followed by the verb "a declara" which somewhat emphasizes the fact that the person's belief and desire are delicate/sensitive subjects to talk about and yet he does not feel embarrassed or self-restrained to speak them out. Although the translator's choice is suitable and it complies with a high degree of formality, we consider that the Romanian idiom *a spune verde-n faţă*, which means to put it bluntly or to speak sincerely (DEX, 1998: 1156), or the common adverbial phrase *a spune pe faţă* ("tell somebody straight out") could have been other translation solutions in this context in order to preserve the language flavour.

> 6. *(EN) In fact, Commissioner Barnier* ***went the extra mile*** *to reconcile conflicting views and tensions and to incorporate different priorities of the various stakeholders.*
>
> *(RO) De fapt, dl comisar Barnier* ***a făcut un efort suplimentar*** *pentru a reconcilia opinii contradictorii şi tensiuni şi pentru a încorpora diferitele priorităţi ale diverselor părţi interesate.* [5]



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In the sixth example, the meaning of the idiom *to go the extra mile*, namely "to make a special effort to do or achieve something" (CDI, 1997: 259), was conveyed by the paraphrase *a face un efort suplimentar* into Romanian. The goals that the doer of the action strives to reach are clearly indicated being "the reconciliation of conflicting views and tensions and the incorporation of different priorities of the various stakeholders". The Romanian phrase *a-şi da osteneala* or the idiom *a face un tur de forţă* ("to trouble oneself to", "to take pains to") could have successfully reproduced the meaning of the English idiom. Yet, taking into account that it refers to a particular commissioner, the translation requires a more formal approach.

7. *(EN) I think it is entirely* ***putting the cart before the horse*** *for any Member of this Parliament to talk here about establishing a minimum corporation profits tax across the European Union without also talking about a common fiscal policy, (...).*
*(RO) Consider că este total* ***inoportun*** *pentru orice deputat în acest Parlament să discutăm aici despre instituirea unui impozit minim pe profit pe teritoriul Uniunii Europene fără să luăm în considerare o politică fiscală comună (...).*[6]

In the example above, the idiom *to put the cart before the horse* has the form of a gerundial phrase that acts as a predicative inside the nominal predicate. It is used in order to disapprove of the wrong order of several actions that are further mentioned in the paragraph. The Romanian idiom *a pune carul înaintea boilor*, having the same meaning and almost the same form, cannot be used in a similar syntactic structure, thus the only solution was to replace it by the mere adjective *inoportun* ("inappropriate") that could also function as predicative. This translation solution preserved the syntactic structure of the source text and it clearly conveyed the meaning of the English idiom at the expense of the linguistic flavour.

Our corpus also provides frequent examples of English idioms that were translated by means of Romanian idioms having similar meanings but dissimilar forms.

8. *(EN) We should not think going to 30%* ***will be a piece of cake****, although we must know what the potential would be, (...).*
*(RO) Nu trebuie să credem că a mări ţinta la 30 %* ***va fi floare la ureche****, cu toate că trebuie să cunoaştem care ar fi potenţialul, (...).*[7]

In the eighth example, the well-known English idiom *to be a piece of cake*, referring to something "very easy to do" (CDI, 1997: 296), was translated by the idiom *a fi floare la ureche* having the very same meaning but a different form. It represents a common example of a rooted equivalence between the two languages, as this Romanian idiom is usually used in translation when the English one occurs.

9. *(EN) Those extremists* ***met their match*** *last Friday.*[8]
*(RO) Aceşti extremişti* ***şi-au găsit naşul*** *vinerea trecută.* [8]

The idiom *meet one's match* was rendered into Romanian by the idiom *a-şi găsi naşul*. The translation seems to attain a perfect equivalence of meaning at first sight, but if we take a look at their dictionary definitions we can see that the Romanian idiom refers to someone who is stronger than the person in question (DEX, 1998: 669) and is able to bring



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him/her to his/her level, not to someone who is one's "equal in strength or ability" as suggested by the English idiom (ODI, 2004: 185). However, this slight difference in meaning is not necessarily relevant since this Romanian idiom is given as equivalent of the English one in most bilingual dictionaries.

10. *(EN) Much as I love the Member States, I am afraid they often adopt a practice of '**I'll scratch your back and you scratch mine**', which means they do not criticise each other, (...)*
*(RO) Oricât aş iubi statele membre, mi-e teamă că adesea ele adoptă o practică de tipul „**o mână spală pe alta**", adică nu se critică, (...)* [9]

The tenth example also contains two idioms which make use of different words but express a similar meaning. *You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours* is considered to be a proverb and can be rephrased as "if you do me a favour, I will return it" (ODI, 2004: 254). The Romanian equivalent idiom *o mână spală pe alta*[1], which comes from the Latin phrase *manus manat lavat*, refers to a situation in which two persons help each other in order to hide bad or unlawful things. This negative connotation is supported by the fact that the speaker disapproves of such tacit collaboration between the Member States that avoid criticizing themselves. The use of this idiom, which is known to the Romanian readership, is welcome being necessary after the anticipatory phrase "o practică de tipul".

11. *(EN) I certainly do not believe that we can **put all our eggs in one basket**: we must have a wide range of technologies.*
*(RO) Eu, cu siguranţă, nu cred că putem **să mizăm totul pe o singură carte**: trebuie să beneficiem de o gamă largă de tehnologii.* [10]

The idiom *to put all one's eggs in one basket* means that someone puts "all their efforts and resources into one course of action" having "no alternatives left if it fails" (CDI, 1997: 121). The same transparent meaning, which involves the idea of risking to lose everything by resting on only one thing, action or situation, is conveyed by the idiom *a miza totul pe o singură carte*.

Generally speaking, idioms having the same meaning and form in both languages are rather few. We have come across an example which might be considered such a case, only that it also involves an adaptation.

12. *(EN)(...) because **pigs will fly**, **as we say**, before Ecofin ministers agree on EU-level fuel taxation.*
*(RO) (...) deoarece, **aşa cum se spune**, **porcii vor zbura** înainte ca miniştrii Ecofin să fie de acord în privinţa taxării combustibilului la nivelul UE.* [11]

As mentioned previously, in the twelfth example, the original English idiom *pigs might fly* is adapted by the speaker in order to fit in with the structure of the sentence. The use of the future, instead of the modal verb "might", emphasizes the fact that the speaker is sure that Ecofin ministers will not agree on EU-level fuel taxation. Consequently, the Romanian idiom *când o zbura porcul*[2] was also adapted here. Thus, in *porcii vor zbura*, we

[1] https://dexonline.ro/intrare/mână/32439
[2] https://dexonline.ro/definitie/cand o zbura porcul



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can see that the order of the words is different, the noun is used in the plural, the adverb "când" is omitted and the form of the future tense called "viitor popular" is replaced with a formal form called "viitor I". Likewise, we can observe that the translation of the whole sentence is close to the original. However, although being a little changed, both idioms refer to something completely impossible, to a situation or action that will never happen (LDCE, 2004: 1442). If the translator had chosen to make use of a paraphrase, then the entire structure should have been changed, including the omission of the adverbial clause of manner *aşa cum se spune* (*as we say*) which signals the use of a generally known idiomatic expression.

Finally, we have not encountered any situation in which the source text idiom, or just its meaning, was not rendered at all in the target text, probably due to the fact that translators were aware of the fact that they could not overlook its significance in the discourse.

**Conclusions**

When one translates texts containing idioms, the prerequisite is, obviously, to identify them and understand their meaning. The first two examples that we have discussed reveal the fact that if translators fail to recognize source text idioms, they usually render them literally into the target text. However, in such cases, if the literally translated English idiom is somewhat transparent and if the context helps, then the readership can grasp the right meaning.

The most frequent translation strategy that we have come across in our corpus is represented by the use of paraphrases triggered by the lack of appropriate target language equivalent idioms or just due to the translator's wish to make sure that their meanings are clearly rendered into the target text. Sometimes the need to achieve lexical cohesion, through repetition, accounts for the use a paraphrase that contains a previously used word. We have also encountered numerous cases of translating the source language idiom by means of a target language idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form. Whenever there are two or even three idioms of such kind in the target language, the translator's choice for one of them is influenced by its frequency of use (familiarity to the target language receiver), by its compliance with the register/style or by the fact that the source language and target language idioms represent a well-known pair of equivalent idioms that are listed in most bilingual dictionaries. We have also noticed that some translation choices are triggered by the wish to achieve formal equivalence between the two texts by using the target language expression which matches as closely as possible syntactic structure of the source text.

Furthermore, taking into account that there are rare situations when two languages can provide idioms having the same form and meaning, our corpus of texts does not contain such examples. Likewise, cases of borrowings and omissions have not been encountered since the former would estrange the text from its target language readership and the latter could reduce the intended impact.



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Translating idiomatic phrases might seem an easy thing to do, but in fact it is a complex task that is influenced and, especially, restricted by various aspects which must be dealt with altogether so that the translation can achieve the desired equivalent effect.

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