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ON THE USE AND MODIFICATION OF ENGLISH IDIOMS TO ACHIEVE EXPRESSIVITY AND HUMOUR

Resume: Au cours des dernières décennies, une grande attention a été accordée aux expressions fixes et sémantiquement opaques généralement appelées idiomes. Comme cela arrive souvent, les spécialistes n'ont pas trouvé de définition qui puissent illustrer le mieux la nature multiforme de ces modèles et ils ne sont pas parvenus à un consensus concernant les types de combinaisons de mots fixes qui se qualifient pleinement comme idiomes. Bien que la forme ou la structure des idiomes soit importante, ce fait a souvent souligné que leur opacité sémantique distingue les idiomes des autres types de modèles lexicaux fixes. Du point de vue stylistique, la signification métaphorique cachée des idiomes transforme ces schémas en moyens plus expressifs et divertissants de restituer les pensées, les sentiments et les émotions, en particulier dans la communication orale. C'est pourquoi les idiomes ont tendance à être évités dans des contextes formels et neutres et sont généralement choisis dans des contextes informels et stylistiquement marqués dans lesquels les locuteurs doivent communiquer leurs idées de manière expressive et/ou divertissante. Une approche diachronique des idiomes montre clairement que de tels schémas lexicaux fixes sont étroitement influencés par des changements pertinents dans la langue, la culture et la société, deux idiomes ou plus étant simultanément disponibles dans certaines langues pour donner le même sens. L'utilisation fréquente des idiomes dans la communication et leur mise à jour constante aux réalités linguistiques, culturelles et sociales explique pourquoi de tels modèles lexicaux sémantiquement difficiles représentent une ressource précieuse qui mérite d'être exploitée et étudiée.

Mots clés: expressivité, humour, sens opaque, contextes stylistiquement marqués.

Introduction

Although specialists interested in the evolution of species have demonstrated that a series of the so-called inferior animals are capable of showing emotions, the fact remains that humans are the only superior animals capable of laughing and crying with tears.

Along the centuries, poets have transferred, occasionally, human characteristics to animals and animal characteristics to humans. But did they have any scientific data to support their actions? Do crocodiles really

cry to attract their prey in a trap? Do dolphins laugh when they make those chirping noises? They have funny faces, indeed, and the shape of their mouths may make you think that they are constantly smiling, but is this really what they are doing? The only more systematic study on this topic, a survey among people who work with animals professionally, including veterinarians and zookeepers failed to yield even a single observation of a weeping animal (Frey 1985). Murube (2009) states that generally animals do not produce emotional tears, although he admitted that several anecdotal reports deserve serious attention by investigators. Consequently, the conclusion must be drawn that

there is not sufficient evidence to document weeping in nonhuman animals. If weeping does occur, it is extremely exceptional. The apparent uniqueness of human weeping suggests that tears might represent a functional response to adaptive challenges specific to the hominid lineage, which is crucial for understanding both the evolved functions and the proximate mechanisms of this complex behavior. (Gračanin et al 2018: 1)

Despite the fact that crying with tears has not been observed in certain animals, primates, dolphins and mice are reported to be capable of producing sounds which may be interpreted as laughter. There are researchers who came to the conclusion that some animals are capable of laughing when being tickled. Their behaviour is considered to be almost human, the sounds produced by their normal outward-flowing airstream being a piece of evidence in this respect:

[...] [A]lthough tickling-induced human laughter, which is deeply grounded in human biology is acoustically and perceptually distinct from homologous great ape sounds, the evolutionary changes occurred along existing dimensions of variation, rather than being de novo inventions. This inference is potentially significant for language evolution as well, because human speech is also marked by consistently regular vocal-fold vibration and sustained, consistently egressive airflow. Although both aspects have been argued to be uniquely human traits it appears unlikely that such is the case. Regular voicing has now been documented in a large number of nonhuman primate calls. [...] [G]orillas and bonobos were able to sustain egressive airflow 3–4 times longer than the total likely duration of the normal breath cycle, which for comparison is approximately 3.1 s in human children while showing expiration proportions longer than the value of 0.61 reported for human children. (Ross et al 2009: 1107)

Considering the aspects above, the conclusion may be drawn that inferior animals do not cry from sorrow and a limited number of this species representatives produce sounds which may be interpreted as laughter. From this point of view, laughter may be said to transcend species. However, even if some animals are able to laugh, they do not do it

as a response to being told a joke, but strictly as a response to physical stimuli. It is also true that some animals can understand simple words and carry out simple commands, but understanding abstract notions rendered by speech is exclusively human.

Focusing on human beings, people often combine words creatively, especially in oral communication, in order to tell stories and jokes. The people's need to laugh is, probably, a genetic trait and people use any occasion to laugh, even when it comes to tragedies. One's tragedy can be another's reason to laugh. For instance, when people fall and hurt themselves, the immediate impulse of bystanders is to laugh. Humans have an appetite for laughing at other people's mistakes and imperfections. They use metaphorical structures and irony to entertain themselves and the others, but they are not happy to be the subjects of the others' irony. People say about those who are ugly that they were *hit with the ugly stick*, about the individuals who are not very smart that they *are not the quickest bunny in the forest*. Moreover, people who avoid saying what they mean *beat around the bush*. Why do people prefer using such metaphoric, semantically opaque patterns rather than the semantically transparent equivalent structures? It might be because people prefer using *idioms* in order to express reality by means of funny and sometimes absurd images and because they want to entertain their audience by making them smile or even laugh.

Considering possible idiom typologies, specialists in the field commonly refer to the existence of semantically opaque, semi-transparent and transparent idiomatic patterns and to fixed word combinations which are non-compositional, partially-compositional or fully-compositional. Since such classifications are not envisaged in the present paper, special attention will be devoted to the fact that idiomatic patterns, in general, and idioms, in particular, represent a means of communication selected when speakers want to express their thoughts and feelings in a more expressive and entertaining manner. The following four types of idioms may be relevant from this point of view:

1. Idioms describing animals found in unusual situations.

EN: *like a bull in a china shop, like a cat on hot bricks, happy as a puppy with two tails, the monkey on one's back, shooting fish in a barrel* etc.

RO: *a se uita ca boul/vițelul la poarta nouă* (lit. to look at something like the ox/veil at the new gate), *a se uita ca mâța-n calendar* (lit. to look at something as the cat at the calendar), *a se uita ca melcul la sudură* (to look at something as the snail at the welding mark) all of them meaning 'to look at something without understanding it at all', *a umbla cu pisica-n traistă* (lit. to roam with a cat

in the bag, meaning to try to fool people), *a trage nădejde ca ursul de coadă* (lit. to pull hope like a bear by its tail, meaning to hope in vain) etc.

2. Idioms in which humans are attributed features of inanimates:

EN: *to go around with blinkers on, to have a short fuse, the elevator does not go all the way to the top, the engine is running but there's nobody behind the wheel* etc.

RO: *a-i lipsi o doagă*, (lit. to have a missing stave – about barrels), *a fi într-o bujie* (lit. to work on one spark plug, about malfunctioning engines), both of them meaning 'not to be totally sane', *a-i bate tacheții de foame* (lit. to make a noise like a motor which has been running on poor quality fuel because of hunger, meaning 'to be very hungry'), *a-i fila o lampă* (lit. to have a lamp which flickers), *a fura curent* (lit. to steal electricity) both of them meaning 'to be a little crazy' etc.

Some of the idioms in this category are obviously influenced by technology, their semantic content being more complex and metaphorical.

3. Idioms in which people perform unusual actions:

EN: *to shoot the breeze/bull, to hit the hay, to jump the gun, to hit the ceiling, to drive someone up the wall, to drive someone nuts, to go bananas* etc.

RO: *a bate câmpii* (lit. to beat the fields or the plains), *a vorbi aiurea-n tramvai* (lit. to say uninteresting things in a tram) both of them meaning 'to talk nonsense', *a scoate pe cineva din pepeni* (lit. to take someone out of the melon field meaning to drive someone crazy), *a fi plecat cu sorcova* (lit. to be gone caroling meaning to act and talk in a strange way), *a-și lua picioarele la spinare* (lit. to take one's legs on the back meaning to walk away fast) etc.

4. Idioms used to express orders, commands, requests in a funny, ironic or mean way, e.g. telling someone to leave:

EN: *take a hike, beat it, buzz off, get lost, take a long walk of a short pier, go play in traffic, make like a tree and leave* etc.

RO: *tai-o* (lit. cut it!), *șterge-o* (lit. erase it), *tunde-o* (give it a haircut), *întinde-o* (lit. stretch it), *plimbă ursul (că ruginește lanțul)* (lit. take the bear for a walk, or the chain will get rusty), *caută-mă-n altă parte* (lit. look for me some place else), *cântă la altă masa* (sing at another table) etc.

Many of the idiomatic patterns above are semantically opaque, their literal or non-metaphorical interpretation by culturally unaware speakers resulting in 'amusing' equivalents. In fact **taking idioms literally** is one of the main means of achieving humour in communication. This is in line

with, Beeman's (2001) opinion that humour involves "a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, **language**, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management" (Beeman 2001: 98).

The same humorous effect may be achieved when speakers intentionally **modify the structure of idioms** either by replacing one of their constitutive elements, or by adding new elements to a root, easily recognizable structure.

Taking idioms literally

The fact that idioms may be taken literally has been pointed out by numerous specialists in the field, but the internet is a valuable source in this respect, as well. There are many funny videos on YouTube (www.youtube.com) with children who take idioms literally and there are sites (e.g. www.quora.com) where people may find useful information about the meaning of specific idioms and relevant contexts in which such patterns may be used.

The question of taking idioms literally was answered by two people, one of the answers being worth mentioning here. (<https://www.quora.com/Is-it-possible-for-someone-to-take-idioms-literally>, last visited on December 16th, 2019, at 10:43 a.m.). This phenomenon is very close to what Partington names "delexicalization pun" (Partington 2001: 242).



Is it possible for someone to take idioms literally?



Connor Morris, Always been keenly interested in words and their uses.

Answered Feb 4, 2019 · Author has 69 answers and 24k answer views

I once had a conversation with my Spanish boss about how we use language, he couldn't get his head around some of our idioms, especially the saying 'no room to swing a cat', Saying "Why would you want to swing a cat?"

I explained to him the origin of that particular idiom and within that, what it initially meant, and his response was "I'll stick to saying a space is small"

As far as the video representations of people taking idioms literally are concerned, two distinct categories may be commonly identified on the internet: 1. videos in which little children genuinely take idioms literally (e.g. a child is told to “keep his eye on the ball” and he literally goes to the ball and puts his eye on it - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtRWeaBQZGE>, last visited on December 16th, 2019, at 10:57 a.m.); 2. videos in which people intentionally take idioms literally for the sake of a good laugh (e.g. *crack somebody up, hit the hay, cut the cheese* etc. at **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**, last visited on December 16th, 2019, at 11:04 a.m.).

Those who will write “English idioms taken literally” in the search bar of YouTube will be provided with a seemingly endless list of relevant and entertaining videos. A rather interesting aspect, which is worth mentioning here, is that only two videos, as a matter of fact, two animations no longer than ten seconds each, may be found when searching “Romanian idioms taken literally”. Apparently, this subject is not attractive enough to encourage the Romanians to produce more video representations of Romanian idioms.

Modification of idioms

Modified idioms appear in written communication, especially in newspapers, and such fixed patterns have been classified by various specialists in the field. For instance, Alenka Vrbnic and Marjeta Vrbnic (2011) mention six main methods used for altering idioms: 1. *word substitution*, 2. *expansion*, 3. *shortening*, 4. *grammatical modification*, 5. *coordination* and 6. *combination of different types of modification*.

Leaving aside the examples which can be found in English newspapers, there are hardly any other examples discussed outside the context. However, what people need in order to demonstrate the 6 means of modifying idioms mentioned above is a little imagination and an illustrative idiom to support their exercise. Let us consider the idiom *a skeleton in the closet* meaning ‘a secret which may cause embarrassment if it were known’. *Word substitution* would turn it into *a skeleton in the drawer*, if that secret were found in the drawer; *expansion* would add one or more words, e.g. *the sweet skeleton in the new closet*, if the secret were, for instance, sweets hidden in different places and eaten in secrecy in the context of an interdiction; *shortening* may appear in titles, where omitting words from various expressions is common, *Skeleton in Closet Makes Politician Resign* being a possible title; *grammatical modification* may refer to turning a part of speech into another one, as in *one’s skeleton-like secrets*; *coordination* would imply combining two idioms which have one identical part, e.g. combining *the skeleton in the closet* with *let the cat out of the bag* into *let the skeleton out of the bag, let the skeleton out of the closet* or even *let the cat*

out of the closet; and *combination of different types of modification* is self-explanatory.

Apart from the classification above and the examples made on-the-spot to show how easily idioms may be modified, there are numerous examples, especially in sports, political and satirical newspapers and magazines, which are relevant for the ways in which the structure of an idiom may be intentionally changed. There seems to be an appetite for puns and play upon words involving well-known idioms, expressions and even proverbs in the kind of newspapers and magazines mentioned above. The explanation for this phenomenon is simple: the authors in the respective newspapers and magazines feel that they are closer to people in the sense that they use the spoken language more than other printed publications. The Internet can no longer be avoided in language studies. The millions of people who post billions of comments in various languages are the tendencies in those languages. Spoken language is the new "intruder", and the unlimited Internet access is responsible for that. The examples below are meant to illustrate that article authors and their readers *have a knack for* using idioms and other expressions to obtain humor.

However, the palace has hit back at reports that an alleged picture of the Prince wiping sweat from his brow with a \$20 note, stating that the hand had clearly been photoshopped **as the hands were not nearly red** enough. "As we all know, pictures of the prince generally depict him **red handed**," read the press release (*Royal physician confirms Prince Andrew is definitely having no trouble sweating now*, by Asha Leu, in The Chaser, at <https://chaser.com.au/world/royal-physician-confirms-prince-andrew-is-definitely-having-no-troublesweating-now/>)

Red handed is a part of the idiom *to be caught red handed*, meaning 'to apprehend someone in the course of wrongdoing' (www.dictionary.com), and it is skillfully used in the example above to give the article a sarcastic tone. It shows creativity and a sense of humor, as well as a strong command of the language. Liviu Groza (2005) calls such play upon words *variații frazeologice intenționate* (intentional phraseological variations). He considers that

„using some well-known means of expressing oneself, such as expressions and fixed phrases, the speakers have the opportunity to manifest their creativity in the domain of language, their sense of irony and the inclination towards making jokes” (our translation) [1].

Altering the inner structure of an expression without changing the initial meaning gives birth to something new: i.e. carrying the genes of the parents, but having their own personalities: "Turismul și protocolul **nu fac... vilă bună**" / "Tourism and Protocol do not make good..."

villa" (Jurnalul Național, Wednesday, 12th of March, 1997, in Groza 2005 - our translation). "To make good villa" is an alteration of a Romanian idiom meaning 'to go along with each other': *a face casă bună cu cineva* (lit. to make good house together).

Sometimes, the authors push the envelope and, as a consequence, make mistakes. For example, in "Dar Arghezi (...) versatil cum a fost tot timpul s-a dat pe brazda conformismului" / "But Arghezi, versatile as he had always been, gave himself on the furrow of the conformity" (*România literară*, XXV, 1992, 26, p. 56 - our translation) the author alters the expression *a se da pe brazdă* (to give oneself on the furrow meaning 'to comply with the rules') into *a se da pe brazda conformismului* (to give oneself on the furrow of conformity) thinking that the newly born expression is at least interesting, if not funny. Well, it is neither. It can be, at most, an example of how somebody, who does not know the meaning of an expression, adds a pleonastic word because the original expression already means *a se conforma, a se înregimenta, a face ce face restul lumii* (to do normal things, to line up with the others, to do what the rest of the world does). Adapted to the English language, saying that somebody *s-a dat pe brazda conformismului* is like saying that someone 'came to their normal senses', the adapted title sounding not too well in English, either: "But Arghezi, versatile as he had always been, came to his normal senses."

Conclusions

People like laughing and they do it whenever they have the chance to, probably in an attempt to forget that they are mortals. For thousands of years, people used words to entertain themselves, having no other means to do that. There were no Internet, television and radio. It is not known exactly when people started creating idioms, but it must have happened early in the history of the humanity. What tells us that? Surprisingly, not a manuscript written in a lost language thousands of years ago and not the oldest "book" of proverbs in the world, which seems to be 1,000 years 'younger' than the "Book of Proverbs" in the Bible (**Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**, last visited on December 17th, 2019, at 6:33 a.m.), but the oldest cave paintings in the world, discovered in Indonesia, which are dated approximately 35,400 years ago. They are older than the world-famous wall paintings found in France, which are only ones between 32,000 and 28,000 years old. Why are ancient wall paintings important for philological research? Representing aspects of life by using drawn images shows a higher level of understanding of the world as well as the capacity of thinking by using symbols:

"Hidden away in a damp cave on the "other" side of the world, this curly-tailed creature is our closest link yet to the moment when the human mind,

with its unique capacity for imagination and symbolism, switched on” (Marchant 2016).

Before there were any tools used for drawing, the humanity had the ultimate tool for creating images: words. The world’s first abstract images must have been made of words. From those first mental images, mainly simple similes, spoken out loud with the probable intention of entertaining, of creating sophisticated idioms and of modifying them later, in order to find new ways of amazing and amusing, the humanity has come a long way. We have become the masters of words, using them to build metaphorical images.

NOTES:

- [1]. „Folosind unele mijloace de expresie consacrate în uz, cum sunt expresiile și locuțiunile frazeologice, vorbitorii au ocazia să-și manifeste creativitatea în domeniul limbii, spiritul ironic și înclinația spre glumă”. (Groza 2005)

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