Some remarks on lexicographic treatment of idioms

Anna Włodarczyk-Stachurska

University of Technology and Humanities in Radom, Poland
 a.stachurska@uthrad.pl

Abstract

Phraseology is a domain of linguistic study which, to a certain extent, demonstrates the correlation between language and culture. At the same time, it is a source of information concerning the speakers' world view. However, different phraseological units are used in different languages. Hence, when it comes to their understanding, it becomes particularly difficult to comprehend their meaning without the reference to their lexicographic description. The aim of this paper is to outline the treatment of selected idioms in several dictionaries in order to:

- (i) identify how idioms are lexicographically presented,
- (ii) find equivalence of some expressions of that kind in English/Polish,
- (iii) investigate how the recorded parallels correspond with the functional view of idioms proposed by Dobrovol'skij (2000).

Keywords

phraseology, idiom, monolingual/bilingual lexicography, functional equivalence

Introduction

The category of phraseology in general, and idioms in particular, may be treated from different perspectives: cognitive, linguistic as well as psychological. There is also a so-called cross-linguistic perspective advocated, among others, by Dobrovol'skij (1992, 2000, 2005). The aim of the present paper is to evaluate the lexicographic treatment of selected idioms in order to outline the basic properties of an ideal reference work proposed to provide the purpose of translation.

Let us open the discussion of this subject with the definition of what actually is meant by the term idiom as various definitions of the term have been proposed. What emerges from the different contributions is a list of characteristics, such as the following:

- An idiom is a complex expression (Weinrich, 1969, p. 26).
- Idioms are a complex of linguistic expressions, in which the essence is inseparably connected with some metaphorical meaning. The reason why they are mostly untranslatable is their metaphorical meaning. Moreover, the significance of the whole phrase does not correspond to the meaning of the components that are the parts of the idiom (Gajda, 1993, p. 5)¹.
- An idiom or idiomatic phrase is a developed expression with a meaning that cannot be readily analysed into the several semantic elements which would ordinarily be expressed by the words making up the phrase (Rayevska 1979, p. 265).
- The term refers to the groups of the words from which the meaning differs from the

¹ Translation mine (A-W-S).

individual significance of the parts (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 53).

- Idioms of a given language reflect the culture, illustrating the correlation between language and culture (Teliya et al., 2001, p. 55).

All in all, the term idiom is used to denote “a multiple word lexical item, whose meaning is not a compositional function of its constituents” (Burkhanov, 1998, p. 107). The idea that idioms are clearly motivated by a collective memory of a given nation is by far not new. As indicated in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, idioms are “the form of speech peculiar to a people or country, also peculiar to a language”. Therefore, a question that arises is whether dictionaries provide the dictionary users with succinct lexicographic data that serve the purpose of enabling the user to understand the idiom in a proper way. At the outset we will investigate the way idioms are presented on the monolingual dictionary canvas.

1. The way idioms are presented on the monolingual dictionary canvas

To bring the problem to the fore, it seems reasonable to stress that the roots of the idea regarding the tendency of writers and speakers to store, retrieve, and process language very largely in chunks are dated back to the times of the work by Palmer and Hornby in the 1930s. According to Cowie (1999, p. 10), their research revealed the prevalence of ready-made sequences in everyday speech and writing, and helped pave the way for the strong upsurge of interest in phraseology of the 1980s and 1990s. According to Rundell (1998, p. 317) the concern for describing and explaining phraseology has been one of the key features of the MLD ever since.

As Stein (2002, p. 77) succinctly puts it, one may speak of three types of lexical units with which *EFL* lexicographers usually have difficulties as to where to place them within the bodies of their dictionaries, and this lot includes verb + particle combinations, idioms and affixes. Note that the practice employed by the editors of the *LDCE* seems to be highly complicated. In the Preface (2003, p. XIV) it is said that:

Idioms and phrases are shown at the first important word of the phrase or idiom. For example, *have egg on your face* is shown at *egg* and *have a nice day* is shown at *nice*. Idioms and phrases are listed together with the other senses of the word in frequency order. Phrasal verbs are listed in alphabetical order after the main verb. If the phrasal verb has an object, this is shown as sb (=someone) or sth (=something). The symbol ⇔ means that the object can come before or after the particle.²

Note that the non-native speaker of English is supposed to know whether or not a word is important or not in order to find the fixed meaning of an idiom or a phrase. Unfortunately, non-native dictionary users have no criterion to decide about the importance of the words and – therefore – they are consequently at a loss. A much more satisfactory solution is the practice adopted by the editors of *CALD* (2005, p. IX) where the subentry policy has been adopted:³

If a word or meaning of word is always used in a particular grammatical pattern or with particular words, this is shown at the beginning of the definition. Idioms (phrases which have a special meaning that is not clear from the separate words)

² Underlines mine (A-W-S).

³ The complicated way of finding a lexical unit can also be found in *OALD* (where the user is supposed to state which word is more important). As far as *CCAD* is concerned phrasal verbs are assembled as subentries under the main verb, in case of idioms *CCAD* does not tell the user under which headword idioms are listed where they consist of several open-class lexical items.

and other fixed phrases are shown separately with their own definitions. Idioms and fixed phrases are usually listed at the first important word. If you are not sure where to find them, look in the 'Idiom Finder' on page 1515.

Much along similar lines, there is the practice employed in OALD (2005), where we find out that: "Idioms are defined at the entry for the first 'full' word (a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb) that they contain. This means ignoring any grammatical words such as articles and prepositions. Idioms follow the main senses of a word, in a section marked IDM". A bit more cryptically is the way of explanation given by the editors of CCAL (2009). In the guide to key features we read as follows: "Natural English definitions guide the user to discover words as they appear in everyday English".

2. Idioms in bilingual lexicography

Our key goal in this section is to highlight how idioms are presented in bilingual lexicography. As explained by Burkhanov (2004, p. 22): "a bilingual dictionary should offer not explanatory paraphrases or definitions, but real lexical units of the target language which, when inserted into the context, produce a smooth translation. This is a perfectly natural requirement". In the late 1970s, scholars paid attention to the need of more specific dictionaries as far as idioms were concerned (Nida and Taber mentioned the problem in 1969). Since then, more emphasis has been put on translation and the lack of awareness of some of translators who exclude idioms when translating. Simultaneously, the discussion of the helpful work of reference started. In the words of Baker (1992, p. 65): "The main problems that idiomatic and fixed expressions pose in translation relate to two main areas: the ability to recognize and interpret an idiom correctly; and the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that an idiom or a fixed expression conveys."

As already indicated, particular cultural community have idioms pertaining to different semantic fields. What is more, there is also history of a given nation that plays a crucial role, along with customs and traditions that may be useful for translator looking for an equivalent (cf. Toury, 1980; Heylen, 1993). Piotrowski (1994) is of the opinion that although there are plenty of publications concerning bilingual lexicography, the notion of bilingual equivalence has not been clarified. Simultaneously, there is the commonly held view that the term is pertaining to cross-linguistic correlations between lexemes. Wiegand (2003) made an attempt to outline the lexicographic treatment of L1 and L2 lexical items, where their semantic/pragmatic equivalence is to be settled on at a very beginning of lexicographic description.

The above brief outlook shows that there is a need to review the lexicographic treatment of idioms in order to find a well suited functionally satisfactory idiom equivalent for bilingual works of reference.

3. The notion of equivalence

The lexicographic analysis of bilingual descriptions of idioms needs to shed some light on equivalence of general character. As indicated by Dobrovolskij (2000a), "some well – known types of phraseological equivalence are discriminated: (i) full equivalents, (ii) partial equivalents, (iii) phraseological parallels, (iv) non-equivalents".

- (i) As far as full equivalence is concerned it takes place when two idioms are identical with regard to their meanings as well as syntactic and lexical structure. As an example we can take English *have nerves of steel* and Polish *mieć stalowe nerwy*.
- (ii) Partial equivalents have near identical meaning, but do not match in compositional structure. Let's take for example English *to get out of bed on the wrong side* and Polish *wstać z łóżka lewą nogą*.
- (iii) Phraseological parallels are idioms that correspond in their core meaning, but totally different

in image component. For example, English *white elephant* and Polish *biały kruk*.

- (iv) Non-equivalents are when a given idiom has no idiomatic counterpart in the other language. For instance, English *be over a barrel*, *be over the hill* (cf. Glaser 1986; Award 1990).

Clearly, cross-linguistic equivalents are divided according to their structural properties. According to Dobrovol'skij (2000b) this approach neglects conceptual foundations and consequently puts forward the so-called "functional oriented typology". In his words: "[...] the new typology is necessary in order to enable the speaker to find real, functionally adequate L2-equivalents to given L1-idioms". The reason advocated is that the established conventions are "[...] of no interest either for linguistic theory or for a practically oriented description of idiomatic expressions" (Dobrovol'skij, 2000b, p. 372). In the long run the key property promoted as far as the cross-linguistic comparison is concerned, it is the semantic semblance. At the stage of lexicographic description of idioms, both their contexts of usage and combinatorial setting need to be taken into account. As to the procedure, Dobrovol'skij (2000a, p. 169) clarifies:

The procedure of finding functionally adequate equivalents, as I see it, breaks down into three stages. At stage one, we have to group the idioms of both L1 and L2 into semantic fields postulated on the same principles, in order to get semantically comparable groups, which can then be analysed in more detail. At stage two, we have to identify near – equivalent idioms in those languages. To be able to do this, we must not stop at the lexical structure (looking for idioms with similar key constituents) but focus on the shared conceptual metaphors and/or culturally relevant symbols. At the stage three we have to investigate the combinatorial properties of the near-equivalent idioms discovered at stage two. Even when we have identified the shared underlying metaphors [...] and/or shared symbols [...], the most we can hope for is small classes of near-equivalents in the L1, none of which can precisely translate all of a group of near-equivalents in the L2. We have to go a step further and identify the combinatorial possibilities of each item. Only if these are identical may we speak of fully equivalent idioms in the L1 and L2.

4. Polish-English idioms: state of the art

The present paper takes a closer look at some body parts idioms in English and their Polish equivalents. The intention is to evaluate their recorded equivalents with the functional approach. The idioms in question will be: "apple of one's eye"; "to do in the eye"; "to have head in the clouds"; "to bury one's head in the sand"; "make one's mouth water"; "to be light-fingered"; "to have something at one's fingertips"; "to twist somebody round one's little finger". The bilingual dictionary that has been consulted is *Słownik idiomów angielskich* (1999).

Let us investigate the equivalents of the aforementioned:

- "apple of one's eye" in the indicated work of reference is "oczko w głowie". It is also given the following explanation: "osoba lub rzecz bardzo przez kogoś kochana".
- "to do in the eye" – no equivalent given within the body of the dictionary. Although, there is the Polish counterpart: "nabić kogoś w butelkę" (Konieczna, 1998, p. 168).
- "to have head in the cloud" – „chodzić z głową w obłokach”; „marzyć o niebieskich migdałach”; „nie widzieć niczego dookoła”. Polish functional equivalent is obviously "chodzić z głową w chmurach".
- to bury one's head in the sand" – "chować głowę w piasek", "uchylać się od czegoś" (no idiomatic); "unikać czegoś" (no idiomatic); "nie chcieć o niczym wiedzieć" (no idiomatic).
- "make one's mouth water" – no equivalent (neither at mouth, not at water), while there is Polish functionally adequate idiom: "ślinka komuś leci".

- “to be light-fingered” – no equivalent recorded (Konieczna, 1998, p. 172, indicates “mieć lepkie ręce”).
- “to have something at one’s fingertips” – “mieć coś w małym palcu”; „znać coś na wylot”; “być w czymś bardzo dobrze zorientowanym” (the first one seems to be the most adequate).
- “to twist somebody round one’s little finger” – “okręcić sobie kogoś wokół małego palca”; “sprawić, że ktoś postępuje tak jak chcemy” (no idiomatic).

The above examples confirm that the bilingual dictionaries under scrutiny tend to provide parallel idioms in the target language. However, there are also existing gaps in the amount of feedback provided (as there are no counterparts provided in some cases). Moreover, a closer examination shows that except the supposed equivalents, there are also given no idiomatic expressions as their corresponding items (although a more advanced study is needed in order to check if an apparently parallel idiom can be used as more functionally adequate).

As brought up earlier, the problem of equivalence has theoretical as well as practical significance for phraseology. Consequently, the question that arises concerns the reasons for expressing certain ideas by the means of idioms in one language and no idiomatic expressions in the other. The problem seems to be of a prime importance especially when particular differences (here: semantic/pragmatic/collocational) are to be illustrated. Also, it should stand for language – specific expressions. In the words of Zgusta (1989, p. 3):

[...] since language is embedded in culture, cultural data are important to the learner not only for steering his linguistic behavior but frequently for choosing the correct lexical equivalent. Such cultural information can be understood in a broad way, so that it can pertain to political and administrative realities of the country or countries whose language is being learned, and so on. Undoubtedly a good part of this information is of encyclopedic character; be this as it may, it belongs to what the learner has to learn.

In general, however, it appears that functional equivalence advocated by Dobrovolskij (2000) is the type of equivalence most useful from the bilingual lexicography perspective. Thus, there is a need for a dictionary to provide contemporary English idioms along with carefully selected Polish counterparts, along with explanations showing the appropriate use of them.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of lexicographic description of idioms delivers a number of conclusions. First of all, one may assume that as far as language phraseology poses a rather problematic aspect of dictionaries compilation, the aim here was to cast some light on the question of how lexicographers encode the evidence of phraseological patterning. Yet, before looking at dictionaries, it is important to consider why idiomatic information should be recorded at all. Obviously, idioms and other fixed phraseological expressions must be taken into consideration, as the primary role of a dictionary is to list and account for the lexical items of a given language. There is also a need to show phraseology when senses or items are restricted co-textually (for example, when verbs are followed by exact prepositions or related to particular kinds of objects).

What is more, phraseology has a purpose in clarifying sense differentiation, if the information appears as part of the definition or contained by illustrative example (it can – at the same time – clarify the definition itself). Another reason for including phraseological information is linguistic, or – to put it differently – the ultimate objective exists to create a record of lexical behaviour as a part of an entire and incorporated description of a language. However, only very large-scale dictionary projects with

unlimited funding would be in position to do this for all words. What is more, average users are unlikely to find the information useful enough to be worth the extra work, while interactive corpus/tools provide the information both more economically and effectively.

Additionally, to be classified as monolingual, a lexicographic work of reference must display the feature explained; in the words of Hartmann and James (1998: 95): “[...] the words must be explained by means of the same language”. No matter whether it is done by means of synonymous equivalents, a definition, antonyms in negation or a combination of these, all are relatively space consuming. That means that the space left for other information categories is scarce. As a consequence, the compiler may be forced to reduce the amount of phraseological information to the bare minimum. Another thing is that monolingual definitions are more difficult to process than native language equivalents. When dictionary consultation repeatedly involves finding the meaning relatively fast, and the students’ assignments concern many new vocabulary items, such difficulties may result in the learner switching back to a bilingual dictionary.

The present period of *EFL* dictionaries, that is the corpus era which began with *CCAD* (1987), led to a special focus on corpus evidence and the typological lexico-grammatical patterns revealed.⁴ The truth is that within the body of *EFL* dictionaries one may find merely limited reference to phraseological phenomena other than collocation. Yet, from even this narrow focus, there are clearly important points to consider, apart from the quality, range and information provided. It seems that of essential importance is the function of phraseological information in relation to the needs and interests of the target users. The compiler’s task here is to estimate what learners might want to know about the phraseology of an individual lemma, form or sense, as well as identifying which patterns to record.

Another aspect here is the challenge of the move from the position where the release of phraseological information is considered from the perspective of linguistic research, to the situation when the needs of the user become the primary objective. It appears that particularly crucial is the function of phraseological information in relation to the needs and interests of the *EFL* students. The lexicographer’s task here is to second-guess what users might want to know about the phraseology of individual lemma, form, or sense, as well as identifying which patterns to record.

Here, the discussion concerning electronic lexicographic products inevitably emerges. Of course, the challenge here has been to move from the position where the retrieval and delivery of phraseological information is designed from the perspective of linguistic research, including the provision of data for lexicography, to one where the users’ needs are prioritised. Yet, it seems arguably even more difficult to identify what these are than in the case of traditional printed dictionaries. In the past, dictionaries simply provided raw corpus data, encouraging users to work empirically, observing patterns for themselves. Nevertheless, there are disadvantages, including time factors, and difficulties with interpreting the evidence found. Furthermore, extensive corpora are too large to be used effectively; small corpora are subject to skewing from constituent texts especially relevant where phraseological patterning varies according to genre.

It seems obvious enough that tools should be dynamic and provide filtered data, organized in terms of significance, word class, syntagmatic positioning, genre and meaning, but overly filtered data may be misleading and may become under-informative entries in printed dictionaries at the same time. The major conclusion that seems to be emerging from the above considerations is that lexicography – although the science has been recently developing at an unprecedented pace – still suffers from

⁴ Landau (1989) presents the lexicographical methodology, Klotz (1999), Mittmann (1999) the methodical comparisons of the treatment of complementation and collocation in the 1990s editions of *EFL* dictionaries. Siepmann (2006) discusses the presentation of collocational information in dictionaries. Recently, Osuchowska (2007) examines the collocational value of *EFL* dictionaries in a great detail.

numerous problematic issues. It sets up a number of indispensable requirements that any lexicographical description is to observe if it is hoped to be somehow satisfactory.

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Contact

dr Anna Włodarczyk-Stachurska
 Department of English Studies, Faculty of Philology and Pedagogy
 University of Technology and Humanities
 Chrobrego 31, 26600 Radom, Poland
 a.stachurska@uthrad.pl