

## TRANSLATION OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS (IDIOMS AND PROVERBS) IN LITERARY TEXTS

As the title suggests, our study examines the process of translation of phraseology. It focuses mainly on two types of units – idioms and proverbs – and works with three languages – English, Spanish and Romanian. The topic of our research is particularly significant due to the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation, its interdisciplinary character, as well as to the combined theoretical and methodological tools that derive from phraseology, translation studies and corpus-based studies.

Moreover, to our knowledge, this topic of research has been quite little explored so far, although the issue of the translation of phraseology is not new. Among the professors and researchers with important contributions are Gloria Corpas Pastor (2000; 2003), Fernando & Flavell (1981), Julia Sevilla Muñoz (1997; 2000), Werner Koller (2007), Mona Baker (1992), Maryse Privat (1998), etc.

One of the main contributions of our thesis to current research in phraseology is the formation of significant links between phraseology and translation studies, by making use of a conceptual framework and methods of analysis deriving from both disciplines. On the one hand, this involved highlighting areas of symmetry and asymmetry between English, Spanish and Romanian at the phraseological level. On the other hand, an entire chapter (Chapter 5 from the first part) is dedicated to the study of translation strategies that translators use when dealing with phraseological units in literary texts. At a more practical level, this presentation of translation strategies was complemented by detailed analyses of the idioms and proverbs from the four - English and Spanish - literary works and their Romanian counterparts, which form our corpora: Charles Dickens - *David Copperfield* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Miguel de Cervantes - *Novelas ejemplares* and *Don Quijote*.

Another very important contribution of our thesis is represented by the four glossaries in the Appendix, which contain all the idioms and proverbs that we have found in the four literary works, plus their (published) Romanian translations. On the one hand, the glossaries can

function as indexes of the idioms and proverbs that appear in the works by Dickens and Cervantes, and can thus turn into useful tools for future research. Though such reference works exist for proverbs, there are none with Romanian translations, and there are no such publications for idioms. On the other hand, the glossaries form small phraseological dictionaries English - Romanian and Spanish - Romanian. Besides the translations in the Romanian editions, we have suggested additional – and alternative – Romanian equivalents whenever the translation solution in the published translation was regarded as inaccurate or could simply be improved. Obviously, these glossaries can form a basis for future more extensive dictionaries, or can be employed as such by translators.

Our thesis is structured into two main parts: a more theoretical and a more practical one. **The first part**, ‘*Theoretical considerations on phraseology and translation studies*’, consists of five main chapters, besides the preliminary conclusions.

**Chapter 1**, ‘*Linguistic and pragmatic directions in translation studies*’, examines some basic notions from translation studies, which are particularly relevant for our topic of investigation. The first part deals with the process of translation in general, offering several definitions of translation. Then two very important concepts are discussed, namely equivalence and translation unit. Another aspect which we examine here is the cultural dimension of translation.

**Chapter 2**, ‘*The discipline of phraseology*’, deals with the concept of phraseology, as this domain constitutes the focus of the thesis, together with translation studies. Phraseology is first considered as a discipline, and issues such as origins, scope and definition are discussed. A significant aspect tackled here is the terminological diversity, since phraseology is a young field of research, and there is still no agreement among scholars as to the most ‘appropriate’ terms for the main concepts. Alison Wray, for instance, found over fifty different terms used to describe the broad concept covering all prefabricated units. A similar terminological diversity exists in other languages as well, and the main cause is the fragmentary evolution of the research done in phraseology. In Romanian, for example, we employ such terms as: idiotism, locuțiune, îmbinare stabilă de cuvinte, expresie,

frazeologism, etc. ‘Unitate frazeologică’ in Romanian and ‘phraseological unit’ in English seem to be the most frequently used terms by specialists, and have consequently been adopted in our thesis. Two separate sub-chapters deal with the relationship between phraseology and terminology, between phraseology and culture, which is as important as that between translation and culture. Another sub-chapter analyses and clarifies issues related to the definition, classification and characteristics of the main concept of phraseology, i.e. phraseological unit. Finally, the last sub-chapter briefly examines specific translation problems that phraseological units may raise.

**Chapter 3**, ‘*Phraseological units: Idioms*’, studies idioms, with the aim to clarify some aspects, like the definitions and classifications proposed, for which there is still no agreement among scholars. For instance, there are classifications of idioms based on their semantic or syntactic characteristics, or their discourse functions. The classification proposed by Jennifer Seidl and W. McMordie (2003: 13) is the most relevant for our topic of investigation and has consequently been employed in the analyses of the corpora in the second part of the thesis. They distinguish between four types of idioms: with regular form and transparent meaning (*give someone the green light*), with regular form and opaque meaning (*bring the house down*), with irregular form and transparent meaning (*do someone proud*), with irregular form and opaque meaning (*go great guns*). An important part of the chapter is devoted to the individual study of the idioms from the two corpora, in order to compile a list of main features. The four most representative characteristics of idioms that have been identified are: semantic non-compositionality, lexical integrity, institutionalisation and compositeness. One last sub-chapter makes the very important distinction between idiom and metaphor, as the two are intimately related and so often confused.

**Chapter 4**, ‘*Phraseological units: Proverbs*’, mirrors quite closely the previous chapter, but focuses on the study of proverbs. The purpose is to research and clarify such aspects as origins, definitions and terminologies. Both in English and Spanish and in Romanian, there are series of terms which are partial synonyms, making reference more or less

to the same concept, with very blurry boundaries between them. For instance, in Romanian we employ the following terms: *adagiu*, *maximă*, *aforism*, *apotezmă*, *epigramă*, *motto*, *zicătoare*, *proverb*. The most general and probably the most comprehensive term is ‘*proverb*’, which has a direct correspondent in English and Romanian, and which is employed in our thesis. Since there are no classifications of proverbs in the traditional sense of the word, except for the thematic ones, which are not relevant for our research, one sub-chapter makes the distinction between the so-called universal and cultural proverbs. By universal proverbs we understand those proverbs which are globally-disseminated, i.e. proverbs that are identical or very similar in many European languages, and not only. Cultural proverbs are specific to the culture of a community of people, and have different meanings, structures, vocabulary, metaphors, etc. As in the case of idioms, an important sub-chapter is dedicated to a detailed study of the proverbs from the two corpora, in order to compile a list of main features. Depending on the level of language where they function, the characteristics were grouped under phonetic, lexico-semantic and morpho-syntactic features.

**Chapter 5**, ‘*Strategies for the translation of phraseological units*’, makes the connection between the two parts of our thesis. The classifications of translation strategies from translation studies and phraseology are correlated with the four corpora under investigation. The first sub-chapter deals with the concept of translation strategy in general. The following sub-chapters offer a selection of the strategies that can be applied to the translation of phraseological units. The strategies are mainly taken, but not exclusively, from Jean Paul Vinay & Jean Darbelnet (1995) and Andrew Chesterman (1997). For practical reasons, the strategies are organised into three main groups, following Chesterman’s classification (1997): syntactic, semantic and pragmatic strategies. Each strategy is illustrated with various examples from the bilingual corpora of both idioms and proverbs, and from both English and Spanish.

**The second part**, ‘*Idioms and proverbs in Romanian translations of English and Spanish literary texts*’, makes corpus-based quantitative and qualitative analyses of several aspects concerning the translation of idioms and proverbs. The analyses are done separately for the two pairs of

languages, but the final conclusions rest on a comparison between the three languages involved.

**Chapter 1**, '*Compilation of the database*', presents the four corpora in terms of the actual steps taken in their making. It also justifies the choices made in the selection of the types of phraseological units, the two authors and the literary texts. The last sub-chapter justifies the importance of the context in the translation of phraseology, as the reason behind the choice to analyse the idioms and proverbs in literary texts and not in bilingual dictionaries. As we have already shown, the database was compiled from two literary works by Charles Dickens (*David Copperfield* for idioms and *Martin Chuzzlewit* for proverbs) and two by Miguel de Cervantes (*Novelas ejemplares* for idioms and *Don Quijote* for proverbs).

**Chapter 2**, '*Translation of phraseological units: English – Romanian*' and **Chapter 3**, '*Translation of phraseological units: Spanish – Romanian*', mirror each other, as they deal with the same issues, but with different pairs of languages. Both present corpus-based quantitative and qualitative analyses of several aspects concerning the translation of idioms and proverbs. These analyses of the corpora study aspects related to different types of idioms and proverbs, specific types of translation problems and strategies for the translation of phraseological units. A first problem is failure to identify the idiom or proverb in the target text, and usually appears in the first stage of the translation of phraseology. This problem can be caused by the existence of a plausible literal interpretation of the phraseological unit in that particular context, by certain manipulations of the units with a view to create special effects, by fragmentary quotations of the units, etc. The second problem is misinterpretation of the meaning of the phraseological unit in context. In this case as well there are certain aspects that can create difficulties in the interpretation of the sense, such as the existence of different phraseological meanings, 'false friends' which can easily mislead the translator, etc. These two aspects are particularly important in the translation of phraseological units because they can directly influence the translation solutions the translator will adopt, leading to more or less satisfactory results. Another problematic issue which we examined is the clarity of the phraseological

meaning in the target text, namely the degree to which the target reader can understand the meaning of the original unit. We have also analysed the correlation between the types of idioms and proverbs and the problems they pose in translation, with a view to establish which types of units are the most problematic ones. The translation strategies (which were thoroughly presented in Chapter 5 from the first part of the thesis) are examined in terms of frequency, distribution, efficiency, etc. Such a study may be a useful source of information for anticipating the challenges in the translation of phraseology between these two pairs of languages. The results from these analyses are organised in statistics and tables, on which the conclusions are based.

The **Final conclusions** offer a synthesis of the research and its main results, which are accompanied by illustrations. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation and also to the variety of angles from which it was approached, the conclusions are very numerous and diverse. Consequently, in what follows, we will outline a selection of the most important ones.

- Based on the results from both the English and Spanish corpora, it would seem that **idioms** are not so peculiar in terms of structure as they are sometimes believed to be. This relies on the fact that the idioms with regular form were consistently more frequent than those with irregular form. In terms of meaning, semantically opaque idioms ranked higher in both corpora, but especially in the Spanish one.

- It appears that the idioms with regular form are the most problematic in terms of issues of non-identification in both languages. This situation confirms the assumption that the more regular the form of an idiom, the more difficult it is to spot it. However, it does not seem true that the more opaque the meaning of an idiom, the more it stands out and is thus easier to identify. On the contrary, semantically opaque idioms had more instances of non-identification than those with transparent meaning.

- The results in the two corpora confirmed the prediction that semantically opaque idioms are more prone to misunderstandings. Moreover, it would seem that these two types of problems are connected, so

whenever the translator failed to identify an idiom, he also misinterpreted its meaning.

- An interesting fact is that there was not much variation of percentages with respect to the types of translation problems between the two pairs of languages. This situation could lead to the conclusion that the closeness between the pair of languages involved in translation – like the case of Spanish and Romanian - does not necessarily aid the translation when dealing with idioms.

- In both corpora of idioms “equivalence”, meaning paraphrase and literal translation were the most used translation strategies. “Equivalence”, indirect translation procedure which replicates the same situation in the target language by using completely different stylistic and structural methods (Vinay & Darbelnet 1995: 38), rendered very good results in both corpora. However, literal translation worked better in the case of the two Romance languages (Spanish and Romanian).

- The results concerning the level of idiomaticity (translation of idiom through idiom) that the translators preserved in the target texts were strikingly similar in the two corpora of idioms. This could lead to the conclusion that, on the whole, in the translation of idioms the relatedness between the languages in the language pair is not such an important factor. More precisely, the English idioms were kept in 40% of the total number of cases, and in 44% of the Spanish instances. Consequently, in 55% of the cases there was loss of idiomaticity in English and in 54% in Spanish, the rest of them accounting for omission. These results are not extremely encouraging, as in more than half of the instances the original idioms from both languages were lost in translation. Nonetheless, these results not only reflect the inherent difficulties of this type of translation, but they are also a consequence of the translators’ competence. So, based on the additional equivalents that we suggest in the Appendix, we can assert that these figures could be improved: in English, the loss of idiomaticity could be lowered to 35% from the total number of idiom occurrences, and in Spanish to 29%. It has to be mentioned that, in both cases, the translators introduced a very high number of compensatory idioms in the target text. They account

for almost half of the source text idioms, and thus they achieved an impressive balance of idiomaticity.

- The results in the two corpora seem to suggest that in English the universal **proverbs** occur more frequently in discourse, while in Spanish the cultural proverbs have a higher rate of occurrence.

- Problems of non-identification occurred in both languages only in the case of cultural proverbs, while the universal ones raised no such issues. In the case of meaning misinterpretation, cultural proverbs again raised the majority of problems, but universal proverbs were not so problem-free at this level.

- The situation in the two corpora of proverbs contradicts the general assumption that relatedness between the source and receptor languages facilitates clarity of expression in translation. Although the difference was not very striking, there were better results in terms of clarity of meaning in the target text in the case of English and Romanian than of Spanish and Romanian.

- The results from the analyses concerning translation problems confirm the general assumption that cultural proverbs raise the biggest difficulties to non-natives. Cultural proverbs were more problematic than universal ones both in the case of identification and correct interpretation of meaning, and the possibility to clearly render the meaning of the proverb in the target text.

- Paraphrase and literal translation were the most widely used translation strategies in the two corpora. However, paraphrase was more frequent in English, whereas literal translation was dominant in Spanish. Unlike in the case of idioms, with proverbs literal translation yielded much better results in the case of the less related languages and cultures (English and Romanian) than when it came to more related ones (Spanish and Romanian). So in this case language relatedness was in fact more problematic than helpful, most probably due to superficial similarities, which can be very misleading (the so-called ‘false friends’). Although “equivalence” was not very much employed in either the English or the Spanish corpora of proverbs, when translators used it, it constantly led to very successful solutions.

- The level of proverbiality (translation of proverb through proverb) was substantially low both in the English and the Spanish corpora of proverbs. More precisely, in English, the proverbs were kept in 30% of the cases and in Spanish in only 21%. This means that in 68% of the English cases and in 79% of the Spanish ones there was loss of proverbiality in translation. These results are very discouraging, as the percentages are very high, in English reaching two thirds and in Spanish more than three quarters. But like in the case of idioms, this situation not only reflects the inherent difficulties of this type of translation, but is also a consequence of the translators' competence. Once again, the additional equivalents that we suggest in the Appendix clearly show that these figures could be improved: in English, the loss of proverbiality could be lowered to only 30% from the total number of proverb occurrences, and in Spanish to 54%. In this case, however, the scarcity of compensatory proverbs did not make much of a difference as to the level of proverbiality. This situation seems to point out that proverbs pose serious challenges to translators, regardless of the pairs of languages involved. Nonetheless, our statistics indicate the fact that these challenges appear to be further compounded in the case of languages belonging to the same family, most probably due to superficial formal similarities that conceal different meanings.

As we have shown, the translation of phraseological units represents a real challenge, which can conceal many pitfalls. And, in most cases, the translator can only count on the help of monolingual and bilingual phraseological dictionaries (quite scarce, in fact, and most of which rather concise) and of his own resourcefulness. We hope that our thesis will help to complete, nuance and refine the (still insufficient) research carried out on this topic of investigation. Our investigation may become an additional help for translators, although not exclusively for them, offering both theoretical and practical guidelines that will contribute to the improvement of the quality of translations in the area of phraseology.