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THE SEMANTICS OF PURE IDIOMS
IN ITALIAN AND ROMANIAN

- ABSTRACT OF THE PHD THESIS -

Scientific guides:

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is the comparative analysis of Italian and Romanian pure idioms, from the semantical point of view. This subject is characterized by a few novelty elements: the comparative approach of Romanian and Italian phraseology, the analysis of pure idioms, the most expressive and at the same time the least studied category of phraseological units, the semantic approach, essential aspect considering that the semantic union is the main characteristic of idioms.

The first part of the study tries to clarify some aspects regarding the definition of pure idioms and the identification of their place within phraseology. This preliminary part is necessary because phraseology is a new domain and it does not have a clear statute within linguistics, registering different opinions as far as the specific terminology, the range of its subject matter, the classification and delimitation of phraseological units are concerned.

Naturally, I began with the comparative study of the literature regarding the Italian and the Romanian phraseology: I realized that, while phraseology imposed itself within Romanian linguistics as an autonomous field and an ever increasing number of studies about phraseology were published in the last decade, in Italian linguistics the idea of phraseology as possible linguistic branch is not even amongst the interests of scholars, since they consider it only a distant “fashion” of Slavic countries, and systematic studies about stable word groups (except a rather limited number of articles) can be counted, unfortunately, on the fingers of one hand.

Also, both Italian and Romanian linguistics register an impressive number of terms that designate the same notions or very similar notions: *locuțiune, expresie, expresie idiomatice, idiotism, idiomatism, izolare, sintagmă, perifrază, clișeu, formulă fixă, unitate sintagmatică, grup sintactic stabil, colocație, frazem, frazeolexem* etc. for Romanian, and *modo di dire, frase fatta, frase idiomatica, frase fissa, locuzione, espressione idiomatica, idiomatismo, idiotismo, polirematica, collocazione, luogo comune, lessema complesso, frasma, stereotipo, formula, clichè, metafora lessicalizzata* and so on., for Italian language; this terminological richness indicates, in both cases, major difficulties first of identification and then of classification of phraseological units.

Moreover, there are also controversies in as far as phraseology's subject matter itself is concerned: while some linguists narrow the field of study of the new discipline to idioms and phrases – sometimes exclusively to idioms! –, others consider phraseology an all-inclusive discipline, that amongst idioms and phrases also comprises proverbs, famous quotes, aphorisms, maxims, clichés, circumlocutions and so on.

Getting closer to the object of my research, I tried to define pure idioms, and to settle the boundaries between them and other fixed word groups, such as proverbs, and especially phrases and idioms. I insisted upon the identification, according to the consulted bibliography, of the boundaries between pure idioms and idioms, on the one hand, and of the boundaries between idioms and phrases, on the other hand. The problem of the separation of phrases from idioms turned out to be one of the most controversial in phraseology, many times linguists having totally different opinions in this respect. Amongst the criteria most frequently used by scholars in their attempt to differentiate the two types of phraseological units, I

identified: the possibility/impossibility of being equated with a single word, the possibility/impossibility of being decomposed in parts of speech, the capacity/incapacity of forming derived words, the translatability/untranslatability, the presence/absence of lexico-grammatical abnormalities, the degree of expressiveness, the relationship between the component elements and the meaning of the whole (compositionality), the degree of fusion of the component elements and the type of semantic transfer that gave birth to the phraseological unit. Among these, however, only the last three turned out to be really applicable in the separation of phrases and idioms.

Less debated in phraseological literature, but of interest for my work, is the problem of the separation of idioms and pure idioms. After analysing the concept of “idiomaticity” – concept that is vaguely presented in linguistic studies, although they often mention *idioms*, *idiomatisms* and *idiotisms* –, I reached the conclusion that idiomaticity seems to be a rather undefined mixture of several “ingredients”: specificity for a certain language, untranslatability, fixity, semantic unity, expressiveness, non-compositionality, semantic transfer. This state of doubt is caused by the fact that the term “idiom” can be used both broadly, designating all phraseological units that are more or less characterized by idiomaticity, and narrowly, referring only to those phraseological units that are “totally” idiomatic. Some scholars even talk about the two main categories of phraseological units using the terms “total” and “partial”: idioms “with total semantic fusion” and idioms “with partial semantic fusion” (Colțun, *Frazeologia*, p. 30); “totally idiomatic idioms” and “partly idiomatic idioms” (Zaharia, *Expresivitate*, p. 127-128); phraseological units totally subject to a semantic transfer and phraseological units partly subject to a semantic transfer (Munteanu C., *Sinonimia*, p. 110-115).

Thus, idiomaticity turns out to be a scalar concept, and the distinction between the two main categories of phraseological units, no matter how we call them (phrases, expressive phrases, idioms or phraseological idioms on the one hand, and idioms or pure idioms on the other hand) should be made in terms of the degree of idiomaticity.

Trying to define idiomaticity we can say that it derives from the unitary semantic structure of the phraseological unit – or, in other words, it depends on the unity of meaning of the phraseological unit – and consists of three main aspects: non-compositionality of meaning, that refers to the relationship between the meaning of the component elements and the meaning of the whole, semantic cohesion, that reflects the degree of fusion of the meaning of the component elements into a whole, and semantic transfer, that reflects to what extent the meaning of the component elements changed within the phraseological unit.

The maximum degree of idiomaticity is reached by pure idioms, which are characterized by a totally non-compositional meaning, a higher degree of semantic fusion and a significant change of the initial meaning of all their constituents. Therefore, pure idioms are characterized by the total loss of the initial identity of their component elements and their re-acquisition, together, of a new identity; this radical change of content can only be the result of the trope par excellence, the metaphor. Thus, this type of phraseological units is the result of a “total” metaphorical process that “affects” all the component elements. The second part of my study is dedicated mostly to the analysis of this deeply metaphorical side of pure idioms.

I started the comparative analysis of the semantics of pure idioms in Romanian and Italian taking into account some “shallow” aspects, regarding the meaning of pure idioms in the two compared languages and the possibility of identifying areas of equivalence of meaning. I analysed the cases of total and partial phraseological equivalence, and particularly the cases (much more interesting in as far as the cultural mark is concerned) of lack of equivalence at idiomatic level – when a pure idiom in one language does not have as equivalent in the other language another pure idiom, but a different kind of linguistic unit – and the cases of false equivalence – when an identical or similar form has a totally different meaning.

I then passed on to the profound aspects of the semantic analysis, in order to compare not only the most obvious aspects (such as form and significance), but also the deeper issues and especially the way a certain form acquired a certain meaning, the way in which the metaphor that “gave birth” to the pure idiom was formed. In order to do this I started from the conceptual theory of metaphor, analysing pure idioms from a cognitive point of view. Cognitive theory, proposed in 1980 by the American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their work, *Metaphors We Live By*, and subsequently developed by several researches, considers metaphor to be not just a mere “decorative” trope, but the fundamental mechanism of everyday language and of human thought itself; according to this theory, metaphors should not be viewed as surface manifestations, at language level, but as deeper structures, as instruments that are organising our conceptual system. The advantage of adopting the cognitive theory in my work is that it gives the possibility of identifying the rules and the principles of formation of many pure idioms.

Starting from the results obtained by the Italian linguist Federica Casadei regarding the relationship between idioms and conceptual metaphors, I studied Italian and Romanian pure idioms registered in phraseological dictionaries and I concluded that most pure idioms are the result of a conceptual metaphor. Therefore, I was able to group and analyse numerous pure idioms according to a rather limited number of conceptual metaphors such as TO KNOW IS TO SEE, LIFE IS A PERFORMANCE, DESIRE IS HUNGER/THIRST, TO ACT IS TO TRAVEL, INTENSE EMOTIONS ARE HEAT/FIRE etc., some of them extremely productive not only at phraseological level but also at lexical level. The source domains of the identified conceptual metaphors refer, particularly, to senses (sight, hearing, smell etc.), to physiological processes that are essential to survival (breathing, eating), to various occupations (hunting, fishing, trade, fighting), to recreational activities (game, music, show), to plants and animals, to all kinds of objects and to their characteristics, while the target domains refer mostly to abstract notions: understanding, knowledge, intuition, desire, suffering, liberty, emotions, difficulties, human relations and so on.

Although many pure idioms can be associated to conceptual metaphors, the use of this rather limited number of common “patterns” in order to create an impressive number of such metaphorical constructions, does not mean that these phraseological units lack originality. On the contrary, the metaphorical patterns are extremely flexible and “malleable”, and can be adapted to the expressivity needs of the creator and, implicitly, of the community he/she is part of. Thus, conceptual metaphors can be decomposed in numerous correspondences and can be dealt with from various perspectives in order to achieve the desired effect; this explains how examples that are very different from the point of view of the idiomatic meaning, of the literal meaning, of the factors generating metaphors and even of the expressiveness – such as *aprire gli occhi ~ a(-*

și) *deschide ochii* and *pescare nel torbido ~ a pescui în apă tulbure* – can be analysed together within the same metaphorical pattern.

Not all pure idioms can be analysed according to a conceptual metaphor; however, I was able to find, for these as well, a series of common forming principles. We can, therefore, distinguish between:

- “*ideal examples*” *pure idioms* (cf. Casadei, *Metafore*, p. 99-100), whose literal meaning represents an ideal example of the action described by the idiomatic meaning (for instance, for the meaning “to make things the wrong way” we can identify several pure idioms: *a pune carul înaintea boilor ~ mettere il carro innanzi ai buoi, a încăleca pe coada calului, legare l’asino per la coda* etc.).
- *pure idioms with symbolic value*, which denominate gestures that acquired in time a certain semiological meaning or which are based on a series of beliefs and superstitions (for example *a bate în lemn, toccare ferro, a se naște cu căiță/tichia pe cap ~ essere nato con la cuffia* etc.).
- “*generalised exceptions*” *pure idioms* (cf. Dumistrăcel, *Lexic*, p. 237-238), that refer to precise, actual happenings, that cannot be repeated and generalised and thus cannot be included into predefined thought patterns (for example: *far fiasco, a da din gardul Mântulesei* etc.).
- *pure idioms that have undergone a process of folk etymology*, which changed their form and, although initially might have been constructed according to a certain metaphorical model – as happened to *a rămâne pe jantă/geantă și a trage catarga/targa pe uscat*, constructed in base of the conceptual metaphor TO ACT IS TO TRAVEL –, this model can no longer be identified (for example: *fare la cresta* etc.).
- *pure idioms that are the result of combining metaphor with other tropes*, which usually have a conspicuous metaphorical side (for example: *conciare per le feste, a petici cuiva cojocul* etc.).

Considering the above classes of pure idioms, we can assume that many examples that seem to defy every attempt to be placed in one category or another are either the result of a process of folk etymology not yet identified, or were born as “generalised exceptions”, the author and the circumstances of the action described remaining unknown.

Since, from Coșeriu’s point of view regarding the general structure of language, up to this point my study only analysed pure idioms at a historical level within two precise languages, Italian and Romanian, I dedicated a last section of the work to the analysis of pure idioms at individual level: the use in certain circumstances, in texts. Thus, starting from the remarks of the Romanian scholar Stelian Dumistrăcel regarding the repeated speech, I analysed to what extent the pure idioms *cadere dalla padella nella brace* and *a cădea din lac în puț*, equivalent from the point of view of the meaning and of the structure, are present in current language, not only in canonical form but also in de-structured form. Analysing the multitude of variants and contexts in which the two idioms are found on Internet, I noticed, on the one hand, the high frequency of use of this type of phraseological units in current language and, on the other hand, the tendency to “refresh”, to change them in order to respond to certain communication needs.

A first conclusion of my study is that the theory of phraseological universals proposed by the Romanian scholar Stelian Dumistrăcel, according to which idioms with identical or similar meaning and form which are the result of simple observations, at everyone’s hand, should be explained non in terms of

loans but in terms of polygenesis (Dumistrăcel, *Universaliile*, p. 200-201), turns out to be applicable not only in individual cases of identical or similar pure idioms, but also in the case of some groups of idioms which are not necessarily equivalent, but which were constructed resorting to the same metaphorical pattern. Because of these common models we can therefore say about a pure idiom that cannot be found in one of the compared languages, that it exists, however, in that language, as possibility.

The existence of a common area of thought which organises and gives rise to phraseological units is confirmed not only by the cases of pure idioms that are identical in meaning and form – often explained by monogenesis –, but especially by the examples which are similar or even totally different in form, but which have the same meaning and were constructed according to the same metaphorical model; this happens, for example, with the pairs *avere il compasso negli occhi* – *a măsură din ochi*, *avere gli occhi cuciti* – *a avea orbul gănilor*, *essere sul candeliere* – *a fura ochii* (cuiva), all related to the conceptual metaphor TO KNOW IS TO SEE.

Another conclusion of my study is that, although constructed broadly according to common metaphorical patterns, pure idioms reflect the cultural peculiarities of the people using them. Thus, some metaphorical patterns, although present in both languages, have slightly different connotations; sweet taste, for instance, has for both Italians and Romanians, positive meanings: Italians view it rather as a sign of content, of satisfaction (*avere il cuore nello zucchero*, *andare in giulebbe*, *andare in un brodo di giuggiole*), while for Romanians sweetness mostly means wellbeing (*a-i curge numai miere*, *a înota în miere*, *a scâldea în lapte dulce și în miere pe cineva*). Moreover, I identified a series of metaphorical patterns that do not exist in one of the compared languages: for example, the conceptual metaphor SALTY IS INTELLIGENT (*avere molto/poco sale in zucca*, *essere battezzato di domenica*) is not present in Romanian language, while the metaphor THE NOSE (UP) IS ARROGANCE/BOLDNESS (*a nu-i ajunge cuiva cu prăjina la nas*, *a da cuiva peste nas*, *a cădea cu nasu-n terci*) does not exist in Italian phraseology.

Thus, the phraseology of one language turns out to be a beautiful blending of specific and common elements: phraseologisms constructed according to specific culture elements are turned into metaphors using “moulds” common to human thinking, and are then used over and over again, are modified, reconstructed or re-motivated, “lose” their origin but maintain their expressiveness.

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