

Motivation and Etymology of Phraseological Units in English and Albanian Language

Lediana Beshaj

PhD Candidate, Lecturer at Tirana University Albania
beshajlediana@hotmail.com

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n1p189

Abstract

"The notion of phraseology implies much more than inventories of idioms and systems of lexical patterns. Phraseology is a dimension of language use in which patterns of wording (lexicons- grammatical patterns) encode semantic views of the world, and at a higher level idioms and lexical phrases have rhetorical and textual roles within a specific discourse. Phraseology is at once a pragmatic dimension of linguistic analysis, and a system of organization which encompasses more local lexical relationships, namely collocation and lexicon grammar" (Gledhill 2000, p.202). The reason why I decided to write this paper is the fact that apart from investigating the phraseological units thoroughly, of a great challenge would be the discovery of their meaning, their etymology and their motivation, specifically in the Albanian language, a language which according to the "Fjalorit të sotëm të gjuhës shqipe" – "The Dictionary of the today's Albanian language", over 50% of the word have more than one meaning, i.e. they are poly-semantic words. On the other hand we have the English language which is spoken by 400 million people as a mother tongue and it is a worldwide international language where phraseological units play an integral part of the language .In this paper we aim to see the similarities and the differences between the two languages.

Keywords: phraseological units, motivation, etymology, conceptual metaphor

1. Introduction

In a language it is rooted the whole collective memory, traditions, customs and culture thus it is portrayed the whole human being. A certain language is the best bearer of the society stereo- type in a community and the best tool for its reconstruction (Rrokaj 2007). The word is a fundamental unit in the linguistic structure which helps humans to express themselves in a creative way. Far from being a static repository of memorized information, a human vocabulary is a dynamic system. We can add words and ready-made chunks of words into our vocabulary. In terms of communicative competence, all words and phrases help in the fluency when speaking a certain language. In terms of cultural competence, the learner should be integrated into a particular culture in order to use word and phrases accurately and effectively. The acquisition of a formulaic, phraseological competence is somewhat different from the mastery of other components of communicative language proficiency in that formulaic language is so closely linked to the everyday reality of the target language culture that it cannot be learnt effectively unless the learner integrates, at least partly, into the particular culture (Dorney 2004). Phraseological units were considered an arbitrary phenomenon and their meanings as unpredictable in a language. In the past the only way to learn these phraseological units was to memorize them, a way which made students less attracted towards the figurative language. Meanwhile nowadays new insights to cognitive science in linguistic theory show more appealing pedagogical approaches to figurative idioms. Firstly, the language was considered as a list of words which act according to the grammar rules. Phraseological units did not fit here and they were considered as a problematic issue of a language. Later on this concept was replaced by a more realistic one where language is seen as a continuum from simple units to more complex ones (Langacker 1991). Mastering ready- made chunks help learners produce fluent language and a have a better understanding and be integrated into their culture and psychology.

Secondly, idioms are present in everyday language and the figurative expressions such as metaphor is not considered just as an optional ornament figurative expression but they also help us in understanding the meaning of many idioms as Lankoff and Johnson (1980) say " describing some idioms it is very difficult without resorting to metaphor".

We must employ etymological reasoning as a tool in interpreting data of actual linguistic usage, in order to establish a coherent world history. This will necessarily involve analysis of both change in word form and change in word meaning. What is suggested to foreign language learners in order to help them to comprehend and remember figurative

idioms by raising their awareness of the literal origins or source domains of these expressions. This technique is called etymological elaboration. Information about the origin of an idiom often enables learners to figure out their idiomatic meaning independently, and that giving learners explanations about the origin of etymologically opaque idioms can have the same mnemonic effect as applying this technique to transparent idioms.

What would be helpful in our study would be the classification of phraseological units according to the degree of motivation.

2. Motivation and Etymology in Phraseological Units

Motivation is very important and plays a great role in discovering the meaning of phraseological units, in explaining different changes in the meaning of a phraseological unit from a free word group to a phraseological one, as well as in finding the grounds of its formation etc. Motivation of phraseological units is related in many directions with the etymological and historical tracing, following the chains of the semantic development of the words.

Motivation has somehow to do with the way in which we interpret a given mental image, coming from a certain phraseological unit, which describes it. This image is accompanied by our knowledge of the world, history, culture. The way a given language is organized determines the way we perceive the world. Johnson (1981) claims that "cultural background can lead the reader to misinterpretation, due to the cultural images related to the words." The existence of motivating links between the form and the meaning is accepted by traditional studies in phraseology and recent cognitive linguistic. This link is necessary (by form we understand the lexical structure of a phraseological unit and by meaning the conceptual representation in the lexicon) as it leads to linguistic relevance of the image component of an idiom.

Etymological description cannot be excluded from the studies of the motivation of figurative units according to Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij and Elisabeth Piirainen (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2005). They think that etymology helps to get to the meaning and to describe the cultural context from which a phraseological unit derives especially from the cultural semiotics view. On the other hand Lankoff (1987:451) says that "the idioms' etymology it is often "folk etymology" and only these folk etymologies are worth for the language users. The term 'folk etymology' was first introduced in historical linguistics where the aim was to approach as much closer to the real 'true' etymology as possible; to the real history of every word and every idiom. However, the real history of an idiom is hardly known thus the linguist need to rely on the folk etymology to continue their work. Furthermore, for the ordinary people there are hardly any chances to know the real origin of the phraseological units and be sure about it, in this case they make use of the folk etymology that people create automatically in an unconscious way and which is true for them not historically but psychologically.

3. Classification Based on the Degree of Motivation

According to the Albanian linguist Jani Thomai (2006) there are two types of phraseological units based on the motivation

1. Motivated phraseological units (the motivation helps in discovering their meaning, semantic transformation, the way how it formed)
2. Unmotivated phraseological units (the meaning of these phraseological idioms is very hard to be understood even if we know the meaning of its components).

3.1 Motivated phraseological units

Motivated phraseological units are very common and many of them have derived from the transformation of the free word combination where the link between the meaning of the figurative phraseological unit and the free word group is obvious and helps in understanding the meaning of it. For example in the Albanian language "iku me bishtin ndër shalë" – "left with the tail between the legs" we picture in our mind a dog walking with the tail between the legs and this is the literal meaning of it. However, according to the Albanian phraseological dictionary it means 'left ashamed and humiliated' (Thomai 2010). It is the same in the English language "she left with her tail between her legs. According to the (ODEI) it means be weak, ashamed or humiliated. In the book of Nicholas Sparks "The Notebook" p. 51 we have "Noa motioned her away, and she left with her tail between her legs. We notice that the conceptual relationship between the meaning and the mental image are visible and obvious. The free word group has gained a new meaning, the phraseological one. The phraseological unit 'to turn over a new leaf' is motivated through the image expressed in the whole construction, the metaphors on which they are based are transparent.

In the motivated phraseological units we have some units which are even more motivated as one of its components has a literal meaning and the other a figurative meaning. Like "kam dyschim, marr masa, shpërthen në lot,

shpërthen në të qeshura - have doubts, take measures, burst into tears , burst into laughter. These kind of idiom are called by the well known linguist, Vinogradov as phraseological combinations because of the fact that we mentioned before that one of the components has a direct meaning and the other can be used figuratively for example: bossom friend, to get in touch with. However it is generally accepted that there are three different types of motivation:

3.1.1 Metaphorical motivation

The meanings of idioms may be motivated by people's conceptual knowledge which has a metaphorical basis. As many idioms have a metaphoric nature, significant differences take place in the processing of literal and idiomatic meaning. Some idioms are considered dead metaphors, as it is difficult to get to their meaning, however people find a way to get to them because they "tacitly recognize the metaphorical mapping of information from two domains that gives rise to idioms in the first place" (Gibbs, 1994).

According to Lakoff & Johnson, (1980) when processing idioms, people's assumptions about how the individual components of idioms refer to the metaphorical concepts underlying their figurative referents result in different information than when literal language is used. This is applicable particularly to idioms that have a higher degree of analyzability, because it is easier for people to map their individual components onto different kinds of metaphorical concepts for these particular expressions. For example, the idiom *John spilled the beans* maps the speaker's knowledge of someone's tipping over a container of beans – the source domain – onto a person revealing a secret – the target domain. For English speakers *spill the beans* means 'reveal a secret' because there are underlying conceptual metaphors, such as the mind is a container, and ideas are physical entities, that structure their conceptions of minds, secrets, and disclosure. Experiments could not prove that people actually form mental images of idioms as a normal part of the process of understanding of idioms. The data demonstrate only how people's common metaphorical knowledge provides part of the motivation for why idioms have the figurative meanings they do (Gibbs, 1994). Analyzing some Albanian and English equivalent idioms it is impossible not to notice that equivalent idioms in the two languages are, very often, motivated by the same metaphorical concept: ~ **Feel like a fish out of water – ndjehem si peshku pa ujë**

E.g. With my working-class background I feel like a fish out of water among these high-society people.

In both languages we picture in mind a fish out of its natural habitat i.e. it is hard for a fish to survive without water. In our example we compare "I" with "fish" and "out of water" the environment "among these high-society people" which is not appropriate.

3.1.2 Motivation based on symbols

Phraseological units appeal to our recognition of underlying symbolisms. "My hat's off to you" alludes to a gesture which has a particular social meaning, even in a time when nobody wears hats. Here we are dealing with a special kind of *symbolic motivation*. The symbolic motivation means that a person uses cultural convention based on the ability of material objects to "stand for" some non-material entity (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2010). Symbolic motivation is based on the peoples' "cultural knowledge especially cultural symbolic knowledge." (Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen 2005) Hence, the difference between the metaphoric motivation and the symbolic motivation lies on the relationship between the literal interpretation and the figurative one. Metaphorical motivation is based on metaphor and the symbolic motivation it is mostly based on the metonymy. A sly fox/ an old fox – skile e vjetër/ dhelbër plakë (a very clever person or a cunning one). This idiom cannot be understood by ones knowledge of the zoology and especially on the fox, but it has to do with the semiotic of the word fox. The concept towards the fox comes from different experiences of the people which later on, was used in the fables and tales considering the fox as clever and cunning. We notice that in Albanian and English it is the same kind of motivation, the symbolic motivation. There are some idioms which are based on the same symbol in both these languages like:

~ **As black as coal** – i zi si qymyri, i zi sterrë

Look at your hands, boy, they're as black as coal – you can't come to the table like that.

~ **As busy as a bee** – si bletë punëtore

The children are busy as bees, helping their mother in the garden.

My wife never has time to get bored. She is as busy as a bee from morning to night.

~ **As clear as crystal** – i pastër, i qartë, i tejdukshëm si kristal

The river ran as clear as crystal and if you watched closely you could now and then catch a glimpse of a trout hovering over the pebbles on the bottom.

~ **As clear as day/daylight** – si drita e diellit

The matter was as clear as daylight and would be disposed of in half an hour or so.

~ **As cold as ice** – akull i ftohtë

The central heating had been switched off and the room was as cold as ice.

~ **As deep as well** – i thellë pus

"I never knew Harold could handle a boat!" "There's a lot we don't know about Harold. He's deep as a well."

3.1.3 Motivation based on intertextuality (semantic type of motivation)

By intertextuality is understood the relationship of a conventional figurative unit (such as an idiom) with an already existing text as its cultural historical origin (Dobrovolskij & Piirinen 2010). There are a great number of figurative units whose image components can be traced back to an existing (mostly identifiable) textual source. Intertextuality is a result of the etymology of idioms (e.g. idioms taken from the Bible, Shakespeare, classical literature etc). The connection between the lexical structure and the meaning of the idiom is not thoroughly understood without the knowledge on the special literary-historical relationship. Without such knowledge the function of the word is unclear. For example: paper tiger – tigër prej letre became popular in the west when the communist leader of China Mao Zedong was interviewed in 1946. He expressed his view on the new reactionaries that they were just "paper tiger" In the English language there are a great number of idioms from Shakespeare. Shakespeare was very observant to the common expressions of the time and used them in his works. Later on these expressions became well known and were turned into phraseological units.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be (*Hamlet*),

Brave new world (*The Tempest*),

Break the ice (*The Taming of the Shrew*),

Breathed his last (*3 Henry VI*),

Brevity is the soul of wit (*Hamlet*),

Come what come may ("come what may") (*Macbeth*)

Crack of doom (*Macbeth*),

Dead as a doornail (*2 Henry VI*)

In Albanian language this phenomenon is rare. Many of the phraseological units found in the literary texts can be motivated through the conceptual metaphor or the symbolic one.

4. Unmotivated Phraseological Units

Unmotivated phraseological units are historically the more ancient ones. A specific characteristic of this type of units is the inability to understand them as the meaning they have does not derive from the meaning of its components. The way they are formed is not clear and it could be traced only by historical and etymological research. These phraseological units are called according to Vinogradov as phraseological fusions and he considers them as idioms under which linguists understand a complete loss of the inner form. To explain the meaning of idioms is a complicated etymological problem (*tit to tat* means "to revenge", but no one can explain the meaning of the words *tit* and *tat* or kick the bucket – died).

Under unmotivated phraseological units we distinguish:

- a) phraseological units where one of the components is not motivated even up to the present like: in Albanian *bëj pallë, i jap dum, vë re* etc. In English: to make an attempt, to make haste, to offer an apology. Here we may even include those phraseological units which are formed just because they rhyme like: *me laçka e me plaçka, me lecka e pecka* etc. In English these are called archaisms which are not that frequent in use now: e.g. to and fro, kith and kin,
- b) phraseological units which have derived from an anecdote, an event or an historical event in Albanian we have: *ne kohën e baba Qemos, sa frëgu pulën, u zunë për mustaqet e Çelos* etc. In English we have: cut the Gordian knot, the Achille's heel, to kiss the hare's foot etc.
- c) phraseological units which are called borrowings, or foreign phrases; they have entered the Albanian language as formulas and as having an international character. However they are used in specific field and belong to a specific stylistic use. These phraseological units are mostly from the Latin or neo-Latin languages like: *casus belli, condition sine qua non, honoris causa, modus vivendi, mot a mot, salto mortale*. It is the same even in English, where we would often find: *status quo, persona non grata, de facto, de jure, alter ego, ad hoc*

etc.

- d) phraseological units which are called calques are those which are translated literally, word by word from a foreign language into the Albanian and English at the same time like : u preftë në paqe, rest in peace – comes from the Latin language *requiescat in pace* , , avokat i djallit, devil's advocate – comes from the latin language *advocātus diaboli*, referring to an official appointed to present arguments against a proposed canonization or beatification in the Catholic Church , rruga e qumshtit, milky way comes from the latin language via lactea gjak blu, blue blood- calques from the Spanish language *sangre azul* etc. The list here goes on and on and the number is even greater and from many languages. We need to mention the fact that the unmotivated phraseological units which are from foreign languages or calques are used without an emotional connotation and they belong to a bookish style.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we aimed to see different types of motivation in phraseological units and what is more to see the differences and the similarities between two different languages, one which is considered as a lingua franca and the other one which is used in minority. However, people's knowledge of their images for idioms is due to the conceptual metaphors motivating the figurative meanings of idioms. From what it is mentioned above we support the view that idioms are not "dead" metaphors which have arbitrary meanings, on the contrary the meanings of many idioms are motivated by speakers' tacit knowledge of the conceptual metaphors underlying the meanings of these figurative phrases. We noticed that in both languages Albanian and English there are many phraseological units that are based on the same symbols seen from the examples above and that in the third type of motivated phraseological units based on intertextuality we hardly find any in the Albanian language. Furthermore, similarities were seen also in the unmotivated types of idioms like in the calques ones and borrowings, while differences were seen on those idioms that refer to the history and culture which make up the peculiarities of a language.

References

- Dobrovolskij, D& Piirainen, E.(2010) "Idioms: Motivation and Etymology" in the Yearbook of Phraseology 2010 edited by Koenraad Kuiper
- Dobrovolskij, D& Piirainen, E. (2005) " Figurative language: Cross- cultural and Cross- linguistics Perspectives". Pp. 253
- Dorney, Z (2004) "Motivational Dynamics and Second Language Acquisition" at the In N. Schmitt (Ed.), *Formulaic sequences*. pp. 87-106. Amsterdam
- Gibbs, Raymond.W. (1994) "*The Poetics of Mind. Figurative thought, language and understanding*" Cambridge University Press
- Johnson, P. (1981). "Effects on reading Comprehension of Language Complexity and Cultural Background of a Text" *TESOL Quarterly* p. 169- 81
- Lakoff, George, Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, [1980].
- Langacker Ronald, W. (1991) " Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: descriptive application. Volume 2 pp. 3
- Rrokaj, Sh. (2007) "Çështje të gjuhës shqipe" Albatros Tiranë, pp. 206
- Thomai, J. (2006) "Leksikologjia e gjuhës shqipe" pp. 222- 226
- Thomai, J. (2010) " Fjalor frazeologjik I Gjuhës Shqipe" pp. 29

Dictionaries

- Oxford "Learner's dictionary of English idioms" 1994
- Stefanllari,I "Fjalor frazeologjik Anglisht Shqip", Tiranë 1998
- Thomai,J. " Fjalorë frazeologjik I gjuhës shqipe", Tiranë 2010

