

ZOOLOGY AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

ZOOLOGIA ȘI EXPRESIILE IDIOMATICHE

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Abstract: *An expression is an idiom, if there are things that speakers may know about its form or its meaning, which they wouldn't be able to figure out by simply knowing everything else about the language. The paper deals with the lexical idiomatic expressions in the context of teaching English. These are expressions the meaning of which cannot be understood simply by putting together the meanings of the words making them up. The purpose of the paper is to draw some attention on them, and on the importance of teaching them at the English classes, because making use of ready-made expressions creates a sense of group solidarity. The interest of the paper lies in the idioms containing names of animals. We will see that there are several possible classifications of idioms: according to the animal they name, according to meaning, the function or the form they have. We will compare some English expressions with possible Romanian translations, paying attention at the same time to the differences that appear in the attitude of the English and the Romanians towards one animal or another.*

Rezumat: *O expresie este un idiom dacă există lucruri pe care vorbitorii le cunosc despre forma sau înțelesul acesteia, pe care nu au de unde să le intuiască din simpla cunoaștere a unor cuvinte sau structuri aparținând limbii respective. Lucrarea studiază doar expresiile idiomatiche lexicale, adică acelea la al căror înțeles nu se poate ajunge prin simpla adunare a înțelesurilor cuvintelor care le compun. Scopul lucrării este acela de a atrage atenția asupra lor și asupra importanței predării lor la orele de limba engleză, inclusiv datorită faptului că folosirea lor creează un sentiment de apartenență la un grup. Lucrarea de față tratează expresiile idiomatiche englezești care au în componență nume de animale. Se va vedea că există mai multe posibile clasificări ale acestor expresii, în funcție de diferitele criterii luate în considerație. Astfel, putem vorbi despre categorizarea lor după animalul care intră în alcătuirea lor, după înțeles, funcție sau formă. Se urmărește compararea unor expresii englezești cu posibile traduceri în limba română, observându-se diferențele și similitudinile de atitudine existente între cele două popoare în ceea ce privește un animal sau altul dintre cele numite de expresiile respective.*

Key words: *idiomatic expressions, language, vocabulary, meaning*

Cuvinte cheie: *expresii idiomatiche, limbă, vocabular, înțeles*

INTRODUCTION

Every time I teach a new class, I ask the students what they expect to learn at the English classes during the next semester. What they answer is more or less the same. More often than not, they let me know that they expect to study “grammar and vocabulary”, by this meaning that they think they will “learn a lot of new words” and “how to use them together in order to convey coherent meaning”.

Little do they think of the fact that when dealing with the vocabulary of a target language, learning new meanings of already-known words is equally important as new words proper. English being a highly polysemic language, the problem of multiple meanings is not to be overlooked. I tackled the subject of polysemy in another paper. In the present one, I think of another related subject, namely idiomatic expressions. One cannot claim to know a foreign language without understanding idioms, too. It is not enough, for instance, for one to understand the meaning of “put” and “bee” in order to grasp the meaning of “to put the bee on

something”, which is to be understood as “to ask for money”. In the same way, it is quite difficult to realise that “a stare cat” is a curious neighbour.

This is why, when teaching students the basic vocabulary they are supposed to know in their field as future engineers dealing with agriculture, I find it necessary to tell them also about the idioms they are likely to encounter in every-day conversations. Naturally, there is no way I can teach them all such expressions, but at least I draw their attention towards them, I make them aware that such expressions exist. In what the words naming animals are concerned, there are a set of idiomatic expressions commonly used in every-day life, and which I classified according to various criteria, as shown below.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The method used for the research is the lexical analysis. The paper is based on a corpus of 1237 expressions, which I organised with the help of some dictionaries and glossaries including what we might call “general” idioms, i.e. expressions containing names of animals, or objects, parts of the body or other items. Of these, I studied only the expressions of interest for my research, namely those containing animal names. Some of the books I used were written by Romanian researchers, others by foreign ones. As the paper-based publications containing such lists are scarce, the internet proved to be a good source for compiling the list of expressions to use in the paper.

For the general theoretical subject of idioms and idiomaticity, some books proved to be particularly useful. Of these, *Idioms. Processing, Structure and Interpretation*, written by Cristina Cacciari and Patrizia Talbossi was helpful in setting the theoretical frame for the paper. The same holds true for Fernando Chitra’s *Idioms and Idiomaticity*. In addition, my ideas found support in Mu Fengying’s article on the problem of teaching idioms in the foreign language class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The dictionary meaning of an idiomatic expression is that of “a phrase, construction or expression that is recognised as a unit in the usage of a given language and either differs from the usual syntactic patterns or has a meaning that differs from the literal meaning of its parts taken together” (WEBSTER, p 707). In other words, an expression is an idiom, if there are things that speakers know about the form of the expression, its use, or the meanings of the parts making it up, which they wouldn’t be able to figure out by simply knowing everything else about the language. Or, as Fillmore puts it, “we don’t understand what the expression means by computing its meaning from information about its form or parts: that’s something we just have to know, by linguistic convention.”

However, the aim of the present paper is not to deal with both already mentioned types of idiomatic expressions. Thus, we will not discuss here the structural expressions, but only the lexical ones. That is, the purpose of the paper is to draw some attention on them, because “making use of ready-made expressions creates a sense of group solidarity, since each member of a language community can depend on the others to pick up allusions, to recognize familiar ways of thinking, and so on.” (FENGYING: p. 9). People can say they belong to a group if they can master the language of that group, and the specific lexical conventions used by its members.

The expressions that are of interest here are those in which there is not a predictable relationship between the meaning of an expression and the meanings of its parts. For instance, although we know what the meaning of all the words is in “*to whip the cat*”, the meaning of the whole expression is not that which we might predict. It certainly does not refer to beating a cat up with the help of a whip. It actually describes the action of throwing up. The

words not having semantic independence, the expression cannot be translated word by word. Usually we have to paraphrase, or, in the more fortunate cases, we may even find idiomatic correspondents in Romanian. This is the case with an expression like the one presented above, which has the Romanian equivalent “*a da la rate*” (the literal translation of this would be “to feed the duck”). Although in this particular case, the Romanian equivalent also makes reference to an animal, giving such a well-matching counterpart is not always easy, or even possible.

One possible way of classifying these expressions is according to the animal they make reference to. Thus, we can find all sorts of animals in expressions: the cat (if someone is “*a bag of cats*”, s/he is extremely agitated), the dog (a “*hangdog*” is a mean person), the beaver (an “*eager beaver*” is someone always ready to do any work in order to be appreciated by their boss), the pig (“*to buy a pig in a poke*” means to buy something without seeing it first). If someone “*goes ape*”, then s/he becomes very excited.

It is true that the mammals seem to be the category most used in such idioms. Nevertheless, not only the mammals occur in such expressions. The snake is also present (a “*snake in the grass*” can be either a hidden danger or a false friend, depending on the context), as are the birds: if we say about somebody that s/he has “*got the bird*”, that means that s/he got fired or dismissed. A “*wild goose chase*” is a vain pursuit of something, which would be worthless, even if reached at. The well-known saying “*birds of a feather flock together*” means that people tend to associate with others who have the same character or the same preoccupations. It can be translated into Romanian by “*Spune-mi cu cine te insotesti ca sa-ti spun cine esti*”, the literal translation of which is “*tell me who you keep company with and I will tell you who you are*”.

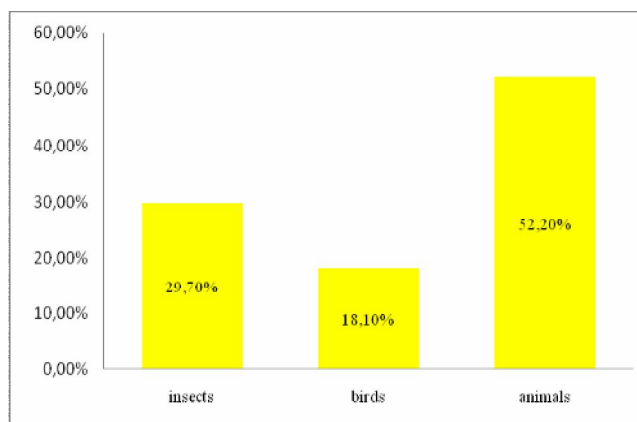


Figure 1 – Categories of animals used in idioms

There are a great number of expressions (367) in the corpus containing names of insects. One of the expressions in this category is “*to make a beeline for*”, meaning to go straight towards something. Another expression referring to the bee is “*to put the bee on something*”, meaning “to ask for a loan”. If two people are “*bitten by the same bug*”, they have the same hobbies or interests. A quite often used expression is “*Don’t bug me*”, meaning “Leave me alone, do not bother me”.

Of all the animals, the domestic or the farm ones are the most used in such expressions. There are on the average 25 expressions containing each of them. It seems natural for this to happen: the more frequently people met with the animal, the more likely it was for

them to use it in everyday speech. Thus, the dog appears in the greatest number of expressions (267), followed by the cat (149).

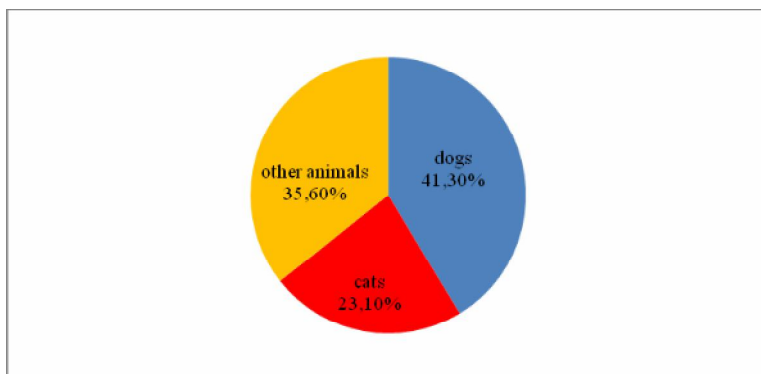


Figure 2 – The large representation of dogs and cats in idioms

Some of the expressions referring to dogs are listed in the table below, in order to illustrate the rich variety of meanings and connotations it can bring:

Table 1.

Expressions related to dogs

No	Expressions	Meaning
1.	Top dog – under dog	Winner - loser
2.	Dog days	Extremely hot days (esp. in July and August)
3.	Black dog	Hangover
4.	To blush like a blue dog	With no shame
5.	Hang - dog	Mean
6.	To die dog for somebody	To be very devoted
7.	To be an old dog at something	To be very good in a certain field
8.	Sea dog	Pirate
9.	Dog my cats!	Expression of surprise or irritation
10.	Dog and pony show	To put on a performance to impress somebody
11.	In the dog house	In trouble
12.	The hair of the dog that bit you	The alcohol you drink in the morning to get rid of a hangover
13.	A dog eat dog world	A vicious world
14.	To put on the dog	To act in an ostentatious manner
15.	Puppy love	A juvenile crush on somebody
16.	To bitch up something	To spoil something
17.	Raining cats and dogs	Pouring rain

One interesting aspect related to this is that most animals present in expressions seem to appear with only one or two main characteristics. The rat for instance always has negative connotations, as in “to rat on somebody”, meaning to leave someone when they most desperately need you, or “rat race”, meaning “fierce, even unfair competition”. In the same way, the bull helps depicting either stubbornness or strength: someone can be “bull-headed” or s/he can be forced to “take the bull by the horns”. However, this is not always the case. A dog can have positive, as well as negative connotations, as seen in the table above. To be an old

dog in the expression “*to be an old dog at something*” is a good thing, which is not the case in “*you can’t teach an old dog new tricks*”. Again, the explanation for this is that people seem to have kept the closest emotional contact with dogs out of all animals. Therefore, they transferred their own character traits onto dogs, personifying them.

Another possible classification of expressions is according to meaning. In this case, we will see that the same meaning can be conveyed by two or more different expressions or by the same expressions where there is variation in what the animal named is concerned. Thus, instead of saying that someone is restless and impatient, the English may say that someone has “*ants in his pants*”, or “*a bee in his bonnet*”, or even “*bats in his belfry*”. Or somebody can act “*like a chicken on June bug*”, “*like a bat out of hell*”, “*in two shakes of a lamb’s tail*”, i.e. very quickly. You can have “a cat nap” or a “dog sleep”: they both mean that you “*dormi iepureste*” in Romanian.

There can be variation in the same expression. This means that the same characteristic can be expressed by two or even more animals. We can say about somebody that s/he is “*busy as a bee*”, or “*busy as an ant*”, or even “*busy as a beaver*”. The meaning is the same, although the animals differ: the person is working hard. The idea that something goes smoothly can be rendered by using the expression “*slick as bear grease*”, or we can make use of the variants “*slick as goose grease*” or “*slick as owl grease*”. The literal translation into Romanian is hilarious (although Romanians do have the expression “*totul merge ca uns*”), as is the literal translation of the Romanian counterpart “*totul merge snur*” or “*ca pe roate*” – “*everything is going cord*”, “*as on wheels*”.

There is a special class of expressions in regard to meaning that we mention here. Most expressions in the corpus have some expressive function, too. They add some colour to language. It is certainly not the same thing if we say about someone that he has the favourite position or if we say that he is *sitting in a catbird position*. Although they mean the same thing, “*it’s the details that make a thing good*” and “*fine feathers make fine birds*” are totally different from an expressive point of view. However, there are some expressions the role of which is purely that of expressing the feeling of those who utter them. Such an idiom is “*Rabbit it!*” meaning the same as “*Rats!*” or “*Dog my cats!*”, or even “*I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!*”. All of them are expressions of irritation or surprise, having nothing to do whatsoever with the meaning of the words making them up.

Idiomatic expressions can also be classified according to their form. Thus, we have compound nouns, such as “*rat race*”, “*monkey business*”, “*cat calls*”, or noun phrases as “*in a pig’s eye*”(=never), “*a bird’s eye view*”(=seen from above), or expressions in which there appear verbs: “*to have a bear by the tail*”(=to have a difficult problem to solve), “*to let the cat out of the bag*”(=to disclose a secret).

CONCLUSIONS

Much as predicted, the idiomatic expressions containing names of mammals represent the largest category of the total. However, what came as a surprise was the large number of idioms containing names of insects. These proved to be more numerous than the ones with birds.

Another characteristic of these expressions is that the closer to home the animal, the more idiomatic expressions referring to it were created. Thus, there are significantly more expressions with pigs for instance than with crocodiles. The animal most present in idiomatic expressions is the dog, probably due to the fact that it is the earliest tamed animal, and present throughout history in the company of people.

Concerning their translation, the best way is to do it by a Romanian idiomatic expression, in order to keep the flavour and the colour of the English words. We found that this

is possible in most cases, although the Romanian idiom does not always contain the same animal. Sometimes, it doesn't contain an animal at all (raining cats and dogs – ploua cu galeata). Still, the effect is kept in translation. Nevertheless, there are cases when one cannot find such an equivalent, and in these cases, the translation resembles more an explanation.

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