DOMESTIC MOTIVATION IN METAPHORICAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Dalibor Kesić
Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost
Filološki Fakultet, Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci
bore@blic.net

Summary
The main focus of this paper is a comparison of cultural perceptions and motivation in metaphoric constructions reflected through phraseology used in American English and Serbian languages. Phraseology used in these languages is seen as collective wisdom shaped through centuries. The premise of the analytical methodology used in the paper is that there is a strong correlation between cultures and phrases that they use, or, in other words, the phrases used in a culture are not mere linguistic creations but an archetypal engendering of beliefs, thoughts, history and cognitive horizons and limitation.

The paper is comprised of three main parts whose sequence is arranged so that the first part elucidates the basic concepts underpinning the function and notion of phraseology. Different views are provided in an attempt to induce a comprehensive framework theory which would encompass and reflect all the properties of phraseology and usher the reader into the next part.

Part two looks closely into a substantial number of American English common phraseologisms and almost as many Serbian ones. They are compared and segregated into groups in a way that makes the inference that follows easier and more exact.

The phrases having been analyzed and statistically processed, conclusions are laid out in the last part about the most apparent similarities and differences existing in the two languages.

Key words: phraseology, American English, Serbian, culture, metaphor, semantics, motivation

I.

We all now that words are symbols and signs that help us mark and comprehend the world around us. But we are also aware that apart from these two dimensions of words there is a third one, one that is not easily explained and serves to convey messages whose meaning surpasses the mere aggregation of the meanings of constituent lexemes. Nowhere is this illusive role of words so well manifested as in phraseology. In phraseology, words merge in syntagms, larger groups, in meaningful units, whose real meaning resists the literal comprehension of their lexical constituents and offers us a new creative language that is easy to use but not so easy to explain in all its complexity.

In each cultural context, there are typical modes of expression that assemble words in order to signify something that is not limited to the sum of the meanings of the single words that compose them; an extra meaning, usually metaphorical, becomes part and parcel of this particular assembly. “To find oneself between hammer and anvil” does not literally mean to be in that physical condition; it means rather to be in a stressing or very difficult situation. In our everyday life we seldom find the hammer or anvil in our immediate vicinity.

For decades now, phraseology has been a part of linguistics that has never been decidedly defined. Definitions of phraseology are everything but consistent. There are a few reasons for that. A phraseologism is seen by some as anything that has a solidly molded form with no variations in lexical composition regardless of the usage, argot, expressiveness, poetical note or frequency as long as it has an invariable lexical composition known as such to speakers of the language. This would imply that phraseology encompasses proverbs, sayings, idiolect and every other form of collocated wording used to denote an object, advice, idea or anything else with a meaning that, to some extent, deviates from the exact meaning of the words used in them. Others are far stricter in their understanding of phraseology and believe that only those language constructions whose meaning is clearly different from the sum of meanings of the secluded words, can be called phraseologisms.
Phraseologisms – or expressions that would aspire at becoming so – are formed in huge quantities, but do not always succeed. Sometimes, they are formed and disappear almost simultaneously. The only instances that create problems for the translator are the stable, recurrent lexical idioms, that for their metaphorical meaning do not rely only on the reader’s logic at the time of reading, but also, and above all, on the value that such a metaphor has assumed in the history of the language under discussion.

A frequently encountered definition of phraseologisms is that they are metaphorical linguistic constructions existing in one language and untranslatable in others. Indeed, phraseologisms sometimes pose a nightmare to the translator. The first obstacle for the translator consists in recognizing phraseologisms. If unrecognized, they are translated interpreting the meaning of the single words to the letter, with doubtful outcome, to say the least. The translator is always on alert in order to catch a passage that is marked, they form a particular sensitivity allowing them, hopefully, to stop and think about an unusual formulation even when, in their experience, they have never run across that particular idiomatic expression. Comparing and contrasting phraseologisms existing in American English and Serbian, we shall see that almost a half of them are mutually translatable. Of course, there will always be those locally generated, such as “kruži kao kiša oko Kragujevca” or “no joy in Mudville” that will have to be left to translators’ own devices.

Once the expression is identified, the next problem consists in decoding it. All authors agree that dictionaries are not always reliable tools in this sense. First, they do not contain all phraseologisms, partly because every day new ones are formed and partly because they add considerably to the dictionary’s physical volume and it is often not practical to include them all. The second problem consists in the identification of a phraseologism under a given entry: “to be between hammer and anvil” can be found under the words “between”, or “anvil”, or “hammer”, or “be”, but usually if it is present under one entry it will be absent in all the others; otherwise, the dictionary would be too redundant.

The latter problem is avoidable to some extent if one has an electronic version of the dictionary, and its software for the dictionary data management allows the so-called “full-text search”. A searchable dictionary of phraseologisms should offer our phrase when either “anvil”, “hammer” or “between” is searched for. One would, of course expect to have to filter through other phraseologisms containing these words (“what is said stays between these four walls”, “between the rock and a hard place”, “using a sledge-hammer to crack a nut”).

The third problem is the use of bilingual dictionaries. In this case, the provided solutions are not explanations of meanings of phraseologisms that, in the compiler’s intentions, should serve to translate them into the other language. Since there is seldom a good coincidence of meaning between phraseologisms, there is a very high risk of finding others that have different metaphors, a different meaning, and are not at all fit for specific cases.

There are phraseologisms that are arguably universal. Some of them are taken over from other languages in a form that is conspicuously foreign, but have nevertheless become popular. Such are “all roads lead to Rome”, “carpe diem/seize the day”, “veni, vidi, vici”, “Pyrrhic victory”. Others are felt as if they have always belonged to the language, such as the “žito i kukolj” ("wheat and chaff") proverb, whereas, in fact, they were also taken form another language. The source of this last one is in the Bible, and it appeared in a Serbian charter as early as XII–XIII century.

In the most fortunate cases, in two cultures the same phraseologism has formed based on the same metaphor. It is the case of the mentioned example, "being between hammer and anvil", existing also in Serbian: “između čekića i nakovnjica” and I would be little surprised if it were found in many other languages. This paper aims to explore the proportion of phraseologisms that are literally translatable without any loss of their expressiveness. In other cases, the translator opts for a different idiom, based on a different metaphor, that, in the translator’s opinion, conveys the same kind of contextual meaning.

In a connotative text the choice of a translating idiom can be a big problem, because the author’s intention can be to use a given metaphor, that is functional to the network of intertextual references, and to the clues willingly distributed by the author for the model reader inclined to make given conjectures, and the replacing idiom can radically shift the metaphor’s tenor, misleading the reader of the metatext. If, on the other hand, what counts most is only transporting the denotative meaning, for example when the notion of “never” is expressed through a phraseologisms such as “when the moon turns to green cheese”, one can use different metaphors without great difficulties “kad navrbi rodi grožđe”.

287
There is, moreover, the possibility of a non-phraseological translation of an idiom. This choice is preferred when the denotative meaning of the translation act is chosen as a dominant, and one is ready to compromise as to the presentation of the expressive colour, of the meaning nuances, of connotation and aphoristic form.

In the case of non-phraseological rendering, there are two possibilities: one can opt for a lexical translation or for a calque. The lexical translation consists of the explication of the denotative meaning of the phraseologism through other words, giving up all the other style and connotation aspects. In the case of the "to have a bigger fish to fry" idiom, a lexical rendering could be "to have a more important matter to attend to".

The calque, on the other hand, would consist of translating the idiom to the exact letters into a culture where such a form is not recognized as an idiom: in this case the reader of the recipient culture perceives the idiom as unusual and feels the problem to interpret it in a non literal, metaphorical way. The calque has the advantage of preserving intact all second-degree, non-denotative references, that in some authors’ strategies can bear an essential importance. It is true that the reconstruction of the denotative meaning is left to the recipient culture’s ability, but it is true as well that the metaphor is an essential, primordial semiotic mechanism, which therefore belongs to all cultures.

II.

In order to segregate phraseologisms existing in the two languages, a breakdown is suggested which is based on their mutual translatability. Conforming to the intricacy of the issue described above, I propose that the most logical way to do this is to split phraseologisms into three groups. The first group includes those American English phraseologisms which have exact equivalents in Serbian in terms of their meaning and lexical composition. The second group includes those American English phraseologisms that do not have exact equivalents in Serbian in terms of words used therein, but there are Serbian phraseologisms that have near the same meaning, notwithstanding the lexical difference. The third group includes those American English phraseologisms that have neither semantic nor lexical equivalents in Serbian, and, as such, have to be interpreted in a less metaphorical fashion. The following examples of American English phraseologisms are taken from a book on the most commonly used American sayings and proverbs, which contains over one thousand phraseologisms, and they have been grouped in accordance with the segregation described above.

**GROUP I – Lexical and Semantic Congruence**

Examples:

All’s well that ends well – Sve je dobrošto se dobrosvrsi
Havesomething up the sleeve – Imati nešto u rukavu
No smoke without fire – Gdje ima dima ima i vatre
To pour oil on fire – Dolijevati ulje na vatru
Attack is the best form of defense – Napad je najbolja odbrana
Barking dogs never bite – Pas koji laje ne uđe
Birds of a feather flock together – Svaka ptica svome jatu leti
Black sheep – Crna ovca
It makes my hair stand up on the end – Diže mi se kosa na glavi
It's the tip of the iceberg – To je vrh ledenog brijega
The end justifies the means – Cilj opravdava sredstva
Looking for a needle in a haystack – Tražiti iglu u plastu sijena
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – Oko za oko, zub za zub
A fault confessed is half redressed – Ko prizna pola mu se prašta
A friend in need is a friend indeed – Prijatelj u nevolji je pravi prijatelj; U nevolji se prijatelj poznaje
To go through the mill – Proći sito i rešeto

Overmy dead body – samo preko mene mrtvog
One swallow does not make a summer – Jedna lasta ne čini proljeće
He who laughs last, laughs best – Ko se zadnji smije najslade se smije

Neverlook a gift horse in the mouth – Poklonj enom konju se ne gleda u zube

---

Prevention is better than cure – Bolje sprječiti nego liječiti
Let the dust settle – Nek’ se slegne prašina
The last drop that makes the cup run over – Kap koja je prelila čašu
Read between the lines – Čitati između redova
Silence is golden – Čitanje je zlato

GROUP II - Lexical Incongruence, Semantic Similarity

Examples:
Talk of the devil – Mi o vuku, a vak na vrata
The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree – Iverje ne pada daleko od klade
You can’t eat your cake and have it too – Ne možeš imati i jare i pare
The cat is out of the bag – Došlo djelo na vidjelo
Get up on the wrong side of the bed – Ustati na lijevu ногу
The game is not worth the candle – Skuplja pita od tepise
A great tree attracts the wind – Za dobrim konjem prašina se diže
Might makes right – Sila boga ne moli
Long absent, soon forgotten – Daleko od očiju, daleko od srca
Give him an inch and he will take a mile – Daš mu prst a on hoće ruku
Birds are not a barrel of laughs – Koga su zmije ujedale taj se i guštera plaši; Ko se o mlijeko opekao duva i u jogurt; Ko se opeko i u hladno duva
Out of the blue – Kao grom iz vedra neba
Comparing apples and oranges – Porediti babe i ţabe
Have a screw loose – Fali mu daska u glavi
To reinvent the wheel – Izumiti toplu vodu
Kick against the pricks – Ići uz dlaku; Bosti se s rogatima
In his shoes – Na njegovom mjestu
The early bird catches the worm – Ko rano rani dvije sreće grabi; Ko prvi djevojci njegova djevojka
It’s the last straw that broke the camel’s back – To je kap koja je prelila čašu
Fight fire with fire – Klin se klinom izbija
It’s a piece of cake – To je mačiji kашalj
Make hay while the sun shines – GvoţĎe se kuje dok je vruće

GROUP III - American English Phraseologisms without Equivalents in Serbian

These need to be interpreted less metaphorically

Examples:
Put your money where your mouth is – Start doing as you say
Marching to a different drummer – To disobey authority and pursue own principles
Close but no cigar – Almost right, but still insufficiently so
Curiosity killed the cat – Curiosity can be dangerous
A rising tide will lift all boats – An overall improvement will affect all individual segments
Don’t cry over spilled milk – Regrets are not productive and bring no avail
Don’t judge a book by its cover – Essence and real quality lies within
Don’t throw out the baby with the bath water – Do not be overly critical and neglect positives things
Everything is coming up roses – Positive developments and the feeling of joy related therewith
The fat is in the fire; The genie is out of the bottle – Events have started and their course cannot be reversed
To have a bigger fish to fry – To have a more important matter to attend to
A shot in the arm – An influx of energy, financial or another kind of assistance
Scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours – Mutual help results in synergy
It’s all smoke and mirrors – It is a fallacious and deliberate illusion
Keep a low profile – Do not attract much attention
Keep your powder dry – Be ready and alert
III.

Staying with the said book and continuing the segregation of the phraseologies in line with the above listed examples, one eventually ends up with larger and more representative figures and percentages. Out of 1005 analyzed American English phraseologies, 321 or 32.94% of them have exact equivalents in Serbian, both in terms of lexical composition and meaning, 269 or 26.76% of them, do not have exact lexical matching with Serbian phraseologies that convey the same meaning, and 415 or 40.30% of them have neither lexical nor semantic equivalents in Serbian, and, as such, they need to be interpreted in a less metaphoric fashion.

Chart 1. Participation of the three groups of American English phraseologies in accordance with their semantic and lexical congruence with Serbian phraseologies

---

Reading and analyzing the phraseology of the two languages, and conceding that the above elaboration is somewhat one-sided as it does not really consider the logical fourth group of Serbian phraseologies without American English equivalents (obrati bostan; biti deveta rupa na svirali), one still gets the impression that American English phraseology is far more embedded in the language, at least in terms of its presence in literature, both belles-lettres and science. There are dozens of English phraseologic dictionaries as well as theoretical books aiming to elucidate the phenomena of phraseology, whereas those that tackle the same issue in Serbian are few and far between.

American phraseologies are also very present in everyday speech, covering all kinds of topics and referring to different spheres of life. They have a very pragmatic function and are useful tools in all kinds of situations. They convey orders, feelings of dismay or jubilance. Serbian phraseologies, on the other hand, lack the pragmatic facility so abundantly present in American English. What they have to offset that shortcoming is their evident poetical note. Rhyme is far more present in Serbian phraseology. In fact, 2.5 more Serbian phraseologies rhyme than is the case in American English, even though English morphology is more convenient for rhyming. This can be explained by centuries of oral tradition is Serbian, which prefers rhyme and preserves it better.
References


