A multilingual didactic approach to idioms using a conceptual framework

LOUISA BUCKINGHAM
Sabanci University

1. Introduction

Idioms are widely recognized to be a stumbling block in the acquisition of a foreign language; it is often maintained that their 'arbitrary', language-specific nature makes them difficult for learners to understand and acquire, and resistant to translation. Notwithstanding, the contribution of phraseological language in general to achieving a high level of communicative competence is widely recognised (Lattey 1986; Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992; Howarth 1998; Littlemore & Low 2006) and proficient non-native speakers of any language may be complimented on their command of appropriately idiomatic language. Indeed, lexical and phraseological competence may be claimed to make a greater contribution to achieving proficiency in a foreign language than grammar. Littlemore & Low (2006) demonstrate how metaphoric competence contributes to all aspects of communicative competence (grammatical, textual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence) and argue in favour of its incorporation in language syllabi from the low levels. The current question is thus not so much whether but how to incorporate idiomatic language.

2. Classifying idiomatic expressions for didactic purposes

Idioms may be approached from a didactic or lexicographic perspective which focuses on their linguistic elements, semantically incongruent, and occasionally ungrammatical. This would entail an examination of surface-level features, and invite a classification of idioms according to a key word in the expression; thus, for example, the idioms *to eat like a pig* and *a pig-headed person* may be grouped together under the key word *pig*. Indeed, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries usually take this approach to recording idioms, which does seem to cater for the needs of decoding language. A second possible approach involves identifying the underlying function expressed and recording idioms under this category; for example, the two previous examples would be classified under the function *to insult someone*. This approach favours the encoding of language, as it is conceivable that a learner would search for a target idiom through

associating it with its function. Neither of the above mentioned approaches, however, attempts to address the valid query a learner might voice regarding the motivation for a particular expression and how the images expressed might relate to those in other languages. In other words, what association can learners make between obstinate people conceived as *pig-headed* and those conceived as *donkeys* or *goats* (S: *Qué burro eres*! [what a donkey!], T: *Inatçı keçi gibi* [stubborn as a goat])[1]? According to Dobrovol'skij & Baranov (1996:428) "Idioms differ from all other lexical phenomena only to the extent to which their inner form allows one to reconstruct the cognitive procedures involved in paradigmatic knowledge ontologization, which in itself is a reflection of their mutability." Thus, ignoring the underlying conceptual framework of idioms entails neglecting the very characteristic that differentiates idiomatic language from so-called literal language: the insight that idioms allow into our conceptual world.

In the following paragraphs, I wish to outline an approach to understanding and recording idioms which invites learners to associate idiomatic expressions in a foreign language with those in their L1 (or a strong foreign language), on the basis of the underlying concept expressed by particular idioms. Thus, using the previous examples, the following analysis can be made: the source of the metaphor is an animal, the image evoked suggests humans are like animals, and finally, the target expression embodies the idea that to overeat is to eat like an animal, or, to be obstinate is to be like an animal. This conceptual approach to understanding the motivation of metaphors, that is, the conceptual reasoning, is largely based on the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), although more recently, Pamies (2002), Iñesta & Pamies (2002), Pamies & Cortina (2006) have revised Lakoff and Johnson's original framework. This paper explores how Iñesta & Pamies' (2002) conceptual framework of idioms may be employed to encourage the recording and teaching of idioms from a multilingual perspective. The general motivation for such an approach in the area of applied linguistics is of a practical nature: grounding idioms within a conceptual framework attempts to demonstrate that idioms are both motivated and that they lend themselves to a systematic classification which encourages cross-linguistic comparison at a conceptual level rather than at a surface lexical level.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) posit that the source of metaphoric imagery is essentially that of embodied experience, that is, the perception of

---

[1] Throughout this paper, the following symbols are used to identify languages: E: English; S: Spanish; G: German; SC: Serbo-Croatian; T: Turkish.

the world through our perceptive faculties and physical domain of experience. Thus, metaphoric expressions provide a means to understand concepts which, owing to their abstract nature, may be difficult to describe linguistically. In a procedure the authors term *grounding,* we use our physical understanding of the world as a blueprint to help shape our understanding of that which is more distant and intangible. For example, the authors maintain that our metaphoric conceptualizations of abstractions such as *marriage* or *anger* guide our understanding of these phenomena[2]. The existence of an image or concept motivating the metaphor, termed a source domain, facilitates the classification of metaphoric expressions, while the metaphor structure (the interrelationship between synonyms and antonyms from the same metaphoric domain) sheds light on the connotations that certain phenomena have, and even expectations regarding human behaviour that may be culture-specific or shared cross-culturally (for example anger is commonly associated with images of insanity or heat).

In this line, Pamies (2002:9) maintains that if our conceptual framework is based on our biological and psychological characteristics, then the study of metaphoric expressions has the potential to contribute to our understanding of language universals[3]. Wierzbicka (1999) discusses the validity of emotional universals at length and, after an analysis of the most disparate languages, defends the probable existence of a universal tendency to express emotions and 'cognitively based feelings' "by referring to externally observable bodily events and processes" (p.54) and "in terms of figurative 'body images'" (p.56). Similarly, Luque Durán (2001:511) discerns that, despite the apparent existence of sufficient terms to talk about emotions in non-metaphoric ways (anger, hate, disappointment, envy, etc.),

---

[2] "...many aspects of our experience cannot be clearly delineated in terms of the naturally emergent dimensions of our experience. This is typically the case for human emotions, abstract concepts, mental activity, time, work, human institutions, social practices etc. [...] Though most of these can be *experienced* directly, none of them can be fully comprehended on their own terms. Instead, we must understand them in terms of other entities and experiences, typically other *kinds* of entities and experiences" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:177).

[3] There have been various alternative attempts to classify idioms for linguistic or pedagogic purposes; Dobrovol'sky & Baranov (1996) based their analysis on the cognitive model of metaphoric analysis posit that idiomatic meaning of idioms is based on our cognitive structure of the event or phenomenon expressed based, in turn, on our knowledge of the scripts and frames for the typical situations and actions. Lattey (1986) posited a pragmatic classification scheme for the meanings of idioms based on whether the idiom focused on the individual (show one's true colours), focused on the world (something is touch and go), focused on the relationship between individuals (lend someone a helping hand), or the relationship between the individual and the world (not know the first thing about something).

speakers seem to prefer to express themselves through any one of the plethora of idiomatic expressions that exist to express the same emotion in a metaphoric manner which tends to give prominence to bodily sensations and physical movement, and this preference appears to be a linguistic universal. The examples proffered confirm the expressive power of the imagery used: *Sentirse con el corazón desgarrado (broken-hearted); estar descorazonado (lose heart; disheartened); tener el corazón encogido (with a bleeding heart); llegar con la corazón en la boca (with one's heart in one's mouth).*

3. A framework for recording multilingual idiomatic expressions

Kovecses and Szabc (1996:331) posit quite coherently that emphasising the cognitive motivation for idioms should favour their learning and retention[4]. Naturally, learners seek meaning and system in language input, and this is, of course, where idioms diverge from other aspects of language which are more easily explained in terms of rules and semantic characteristics. If meaning cannot be found in the surface elements of idioms due to the incongruity of their surface structure, where are learners to discern meaning? However, speakers do not randomly assign meaning to idioms; indeed, it is no coincidence that languages frequently coincide in general terms, or even very closely, in how they express an abstract concept metaphorically. Such likeness may or may not involve similarities on the surface level (as in Iñesta & Pamies proposal), such as:

> Iconic Model: FEAR / SHOCK
> Archimetaphor: BODY + CHANGE OF COLOUR
> Individual metaphors: S: *empaliderse [to turn pale]; G: blass werden [to turn pale]; E: to turn pale, as while as a sheet; SC: probijediti [to turn white]; T: bembeyaz olmak [to turn white]; sararmak [to turn yellow]; korkdan rengi atmak [to change colour from fear].*

According to Dobrovol'skij (2000), such similarities play only a minor role in the grouping of idioms cross-linguistically[5], and this can be seen in the

---

[4] "We would like to suggest that one major stumbling block in understanding the nature of idioms and making use of this understanding in the teaching of foreign languages is that they are regarded as linguistic expressions that are independent of any conceptual system and that they are isolated from each other at the conceptual level" (Kovecses and Szabc 1996:327).

[5] "The grouping of idioms on the basis of their kernel lexical constituents cannot be used for explaining relevant similarities and contrasts between L1 and L2" (Dobrovol'skij 2000:173).

Turkish expression *sararmak* [to turn yellow], which conceptualizes the same emotion in terms of a different colour. Of greater relevance is thus not the choice of colour itself, but rather the fact that *fear* is conceptualized as a change of skin tone, as is captured by the more general Turkish idiom *to change colour*. Dobrovol'skij (2000:172) demonstrates the same idea by contrasting the conceptualization of *anger* in Russian and German; where Russian focuses on the body exploding (*kto-libo vzorvalsja*), German has expressions which identify the neck as the point of pressure: *So einen (dicken) Hals haben [to have a thick neck]; mir platz der Kragen [my collar explodes]*[6] From our own data we may add examples from the Iconic Model AFFECTION, and Archimetaphor BODY + CHANGE OF TEMPERATURE:

Individual Metaphors: E: *my heart warmed to him; T: kanım kaynadı* [*my blood boiled*].

The application of conceptual frameworks to the teaching of idioms is not entirely new, although it has yet to find widespread acceptance. Moon (2004:207) outlines the approach taken by the recent edition of the Macmillan learner's dictionary to organise idiom entries conceptually:

Metaphor: A conversation or discussion is like a journey, with the speakers going from one place to another.

1.   *Let's* **go back** *to what you were saying earlier.*
2.   *I can't quite see where you're* **heading**.
3.   *The conversation took an unexpected* **turn/direction**.
4.   *I'm listening –* **Go on**!
5.   *We eventually* **arrived** *at a conclusion.*
6.   *It's a* **roundabout** *way of saying she's refusing our offer.*
7.   *We* **wandered** *off the topic.*
8.   *The conversation* **drifted** *rather aimlessly.*
9.   *We kept* **going round and round in circles**.

The original terminology employed by Lakoff and Johnson (AN ARGUMENT IS WAR, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, etc), seen today also in the work of Moon (2004), has been criticised by Pamies (2002) for being too detailed to employ as a framework for interlinguistic description. Pamies et al. (Iñesta & Pamies 2002, updated in Pamies & Cortina 2006) suggest the inclusion of a higher level of analysis, the Iconic Model, which would allow for a greater degree of comparison. This is demonstrated with the example of

---

[6] English also conceives the neck/collar as a point of pressure in times of anger: *to be hot under the collar*.

the metaphor S: *encogerse el ombligo ([one's navel shrinks/cringes] to cringe with fear)* which is used to describe *fear* (target domain) and which receives its motivation from the image of the source domain, the Iconic Model, of MOVEMENT + BODY. As Pamies (2002:12) stipulates, the different metaphors expressed by an Iconic Model such as this one (i.e. MOVEMENT + BODY) may be grouped according to the type of movement they involve (up, down, into etc.), a level termed the Archimetaphor; thus a three-tiered system is established: *Iconic models > Archimetaphors > individual metaphors*. In this manner, all metaphors that express *fear* and involve the metaphoric movement of some body part may be grouped in a manner that underscores their closely knit conceptual relationship, highlighting simultaneously the productivity of the Iconic Model. As Pamies (2002:13) points out, if the upper node of the Iconic Model were absent, numerous, seemingly unconnected *structural metaphors* (Lakoff and Johnson's terminology) would be needed.

Thus, through the same Iconic Model BODY + MOVEMENT, metaphors expressing physical movement (Archimetaphor: BODY + SHAKING/JUMPING MOVEMENT): E: *to tremble with fear; G: vor Angst zittern [to tremble with fear]; S: temblar de miedo [to tremble with fear]; me dio un vuelco el corazón [my heart gave a jump]; SC: drhati od straha [to tremble with fear], E: my heart skipped a beat; T: kalbım hop etti [my heart hopped],* and physical temperature (Archimetaphor: BODY + DROP OF TEMPERATURE): E: *my blood ran cold; S: la sangre se me heló [my blood froze]; G: mir frierte das Blut [my blood froze]; T: buz gibi oldum/buz kestim [I became like ice]*), can be easily associated with metaphors which represent the same Archimetaphors, but which belong to a different Iconic Model. Hence, one may easily discern that the Iconic Models BODY + MOVEMENT; BODY + TEMPERATURE recur across other target domains such as *anger* (E: *my blood boiled; S: encendérsele/ calentarséle/ hervirle/ quemársele la sangre [*various ways of expressing *blood boils]; G: mir kocht das Blut in den Adern [the blood boils in my veins])*, and *disappointment* (E: *my heart fell; S: se hundió el corazón [one's heart plunges], caérsele el alma a los pies [one's soul falls at one's feet], G: mir rutscht das Herz in die Hose [my heart slid into my trousers]*). As Pamies states (2002:12), the economy of the model as well as the ease of its cross-linguistic applicability makes it particularly amenable to work with. In addition to the reinforced structural coherency of adding the higher tier of Iconic Model, Pamies & Iñesta's framework also contributes the necessary level of abstraction. The terminology CONVERSATION IS A JOURNEY is too detailed in addition to being potentially misleading, as the term *journey*

is specifically used to refer to a type of goal-directed movement rather than journey in the sense of an activity involving baggage and transportation.

Cross-linguistic comparisons arguably propitiate the process of language learning, a view that questions the conception that languages are generally best learned through complete immersion in the target language without reference to other known languages (see Auerbach 1993). Learners can benefit from measured comparisons not only to the morphosyntactic and lexical relationships of other known languages, but also to the commonalities of the conceptual systems that underlie the metaphoric expressions so prominent in idioms. An emphasis on general conceptual frameworks underlying metaphoric expressions (e.g. the conceptualization of an argument or a discussion within the conceptual framework of a war), and inviting cross linguistic comparisons, are of greater didactic benefit than the mere memorization of isolated idioms, linked at the most by a common lexeme (e.g. a body part or an animal). A didactic approach to idioms which foresees such cross linguistic comparisons and which underscores the commonalities in our conceptual systems lends itself particularly well to multilingual material development.

In the European education system, certain languages such as English, French and German tend to be learnt as an L2 or an L3, whereas other languages such as Spanish, Portuguese and Russian are generally acquired subsequently as an L3 or L4. It would seem logical that languages either learnt simultaneously or at later stages should benefit from the general knowledge of the language systems acquired throughout one's personal language learning history. This suggests that connections between new information in one language with previously assimilated knowledge in a different language should be made explicit. For instance, a learner of English as an L2 who knows that in this language, "A conversation or discussion is like a journey, with the speakers going from one place to another" (Moon, 2004:207) is likely to find that this awareness facilitates the acquisition of corresponding figurative expressions in an L3 which are derived from the same conceptual framework.

To encourage such cross-linguistic conceptual awareness and to facilitate retention, idioms in a selection of languages can be presented in didactic materials grouped according to conceptual frameworks. The following example has been selected to illustrate this proposition. The target domain *conversation* may be represented by the Iconic Model CONVERSATION + MOVEMENT (in accordance with Pamies & Iñesta's model of analysis), which in turn is represented by the Archimetaphor CONVERSATION + FORWARD MOVEMENT TOWARDS A TARGET.

Although it might be too optimistic to hope for functionally equivalent expressions in all four languages, the cross-linguistic similarity of the imagery in the expressions that we have identified is striking[7].

1.S: Regresemos a lo que decías anteriormente. Podemos volver al tema / punto anterior *[let's return to what you were saying before]*
SC: Možemo li se vratiti na prijašnju temu *[can we return to the previous topic?]*
G. Kehren wir zurück zu dem, was du früher gesagt hast / Um darauf zurückzukommen *[let's return to what you said before]*
T. Kaldığımız yerden devam edebilir miyiz? *[can we continue from the point we were at before?]*

2. S: No veo a dónde quieres llegar [*I don't know where you want to arrive*]
SC: Ne mogu baš vidjeti čemu to vodi/ čemu vodi tvoja priča [*I don't know where you are going / the talk is going*]
G: Ich weiss nicht genau, worauf du hinaus willst [*I don't know where you want to get to*]
T: Bu sohbet nereye gidiyor anlayamadım [*I don't know where this conversation is going*]

3. S: La conversación dio un giro inesperado [*the conversation took an unexpected turn*]
SC: Razgovor je poprimio neočekivan zaokret/pravac [*the conversation took an unexpected turn/direction*]
G: Die Unterhaltung nahm eine unerwartete Wende [*the conversation took an unexpected turn*]
T: Bu sohbet aniden farklı beklenmedik bir yön kazandı/aldı [*the conversation took an unexpected direction*]

4. S: Te escucho – sigue! [*I am listening - continue*]
SC: Slušam – nastavi! [*I am listening - continue*]
G: Ja, und? Weiter! [*Go on!]*
T: Hadi devam et! Dinliyorum [*Go on! I'm listening*]

5. S: Por fin llegamos a la conclusión *[finally we reached a conclusion]*
SC: Na kraju smo došli do zaključka *[finally we reached a conclusion]*

---

[7] Due to space limitations, we refrain from repeating the English version; the equivalent multilingual versions are numbered in a parallel manner.

G: Endlich sind wir zu einem Ergebnis gekommen *[finally we reached a result]*

T: Nihayet/sonunda, bir yere ulaşabildik *[eventually we arrived somewhere]*

6. S: Andándose con muchos rodeos, rechazó nuestra oferta *[going with many turns, she refused our offer]*

SC: To je zaobilazni način da kaže da odbija našu ponudu *[that is a roundabout way to say you refuse the offer]*

G: Sie könnte es ohne Umwege sagen, Sie lehnen unser Angebot ab *[you could say it without alternative routes that you reject our offer]*

T: Ne söyleyeceksen söyle, lafı dolandırma öyle *(what you want to say, don't turn the talk around)*

7. S: Hemos salido del tema *[we have left the topic]*

SC: Skrenuli smo s teme *[we have turned from the topic]*

G: Diskussion schweifte vom Thema ab / Wir sind vom Thema abgewichen *[we have turned from the topic]*

T: Konudan uzaklaşıyoruz *[we have distanced ourselves from the topic]*

8. S: No estamos avanzando. Estamos dando vueltas sobre lo mismo [*we are not advancing. We are turning circles around the same thing]*

SC: Razgovor je tekao prilicno besciljno [*the conversation is drifting aimlessly]*

G: Das Gespräch führt zu nichts; wir kommen nicht voran [*the conversation is going nowhere; we are not advancing]*

T: Bu sohbet amaçsız sürükleniyor / bu sohbet bir yere varmıyor [*the conversation is drifting aimlessly / is not arriving at any place*]

4. Conclusion

As can be seen in this brief discussion concerning the conceptual images underlying metaphors, cross-linguistic commonalities can be found which illustrate the seemingly universal tendency to conceptualize the abstract in terms of our understanding of our bodies and our physical environment. For this reason, we find it possible to identify common Iconic Models which serve as source domains for idiomatic expressions, which in turn allow us to classify idioms according the underlying image expressed. Differences at the surface level, that is, in the choice of words, can be ascribed either to the different perspectives from which a phenomenon may be viewed, or to cultural or environmental differences between different linguistic

communities (for example, vegetation varies geographically, and imagery associated with religious beliefs and cultural practices displays regional distinctions) (Bragina 2000; Luque Durán 2001; Wierzbicka 1999).

Not only should idiomatic expressions be taught embedded in the conceptual frameworks of which they form part, thus reinforcing the view that idioms are motivated and respond to an identifiable logic, but explicit cross-linguistic links need to be established between idioms for didactic purposes, leading to the development of multilingual didactic materials that reflect conceptual metaphoric commonalities. Bi- or trilingual collections of idioms organised in terms of how we conceptualize human activities and characteristics, whether they be conversations, expressions of anger or love, are likely to enhance cross-pollination in multilingual idiomatic competence.

Bibliography

AUERBACH, E. R. (1993) "Reexamining English Only in the ESL Classroom". *TESOL Quarterly,* 27/1:10-33.

BRAGINA, N. (2000) "Phraseology and the context of culture". *International Journal of Lexicography*, 13/I:29-34.

COLLINS (2005): *Collins Universal Español-Inglés, English-Spanish* HarperCollins.

DOBROVOL'SKIJ, D. O. & BARANOV, A. N. (1996) Cognitive modelling of actual meaning in the field of phraseology". *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25:409-429.

DOBROVOL'SKIJ, D. O. (2000) "Contrastive idiom analysis: Russian and German idioms in theory and in the bilingual dictionary". *International Journal of Lexicography*, 13/3:169-186.

DUDEN (2002): *Redewendungen: Wörterbuch der deutschen Idiomatik.* Duden.

ERNST KLETT SPRACHEN (2001): *Pons Grossworterbuch: Spanisch-Deutsch.* Ernst Klett.

HOWARTH, P. (1998) "Phraseology and Second Language Proficiency". *Applied Linguistics* 19/1:24-44.

IÑESTA MENA, E.M. & PAMIES BERTRÁN, A. (2002) *Fraseología y metáfora: aspectos tipológicos y cognitivos*". Granada: Método.

KÖVECSES, Z. & SZABC, P. (1996) "Idioms: A View from Cognitive Semantics". *Applied Linguistics*, 17/3:326-355.

LAKOFF, G. & JOHNSON, M. (2003 [1980]) *Metaphors we Live by.* University of Chicago Press.

LATTEY, E. (1986): "Pragmatic classification of idioms as an aid for the language learner". *IRAL,* 23/3:217-233.

LITTLEMORE, J. & LOW, G. (2006): "Metaphoric Competence, Second Language Learning, and Communicative Language Ability". *Applied Linguistics,* 27/2: 268–294.

LUQUE DURÁN, J. de D. (2001): *Aspectos universales y particulares del léxico de las lenguas del mundo*. Granada: Método.

MOON, R. (2004): "On specifying metaphor: an idea and its implementation". *International Journal of Lexicography*, 17/2:195-222.

NATTINGER, J. R & DeCARRICO, J. S. (1992): *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.

PAMIES BERTRÁN, A. (2002): "Modelos icónicos y archimetáforas: algunos problemas metalingüísticos en el ámbito de la fraseología". *Language Design,* 4.:9-20.

PAMIES, A. & CORTINA, B. (2006): "Idioms on drunkenness and drunkenness on idioms (Spanish, English, French)", paper presented at *Europhras 2006*, Veszprem: Pannon Egyetem, 9-11 june 2006. Published in Csaba Földes (ed.): *Phraseologie disziplinär und interdisziplinär. Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Phraseology*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2007 [forthcoming].

SCHEMANN, H. & KNIGHT, P. (1995): *German-English Dictionary of Idioms*. Routledge.

SECO, M., ANDRÉS, O. & RAMOS, G. (2004): *Diccionario fraseológico documentado del español actual*. Madrid: Aguilar.

SPEARS, R.A. & KIRKPATRICK, B. (2003): *Ingilizce Deyimler Sözlüğü*. Istanbul: Alfa.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1999): "Emotional Universals. *Language Design,* 2: 23-69.