

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 from 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 nakovnja" 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 phraseologism such as "when the moon turns to green cheese", one can use different metaphors without great difficulties "kadnavrbi rodi grožde".

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.³⁶

GROUP I – Lexical and Semantic Congruence

Examples:

All's well that ends well – *Sve je dobro što se dobrosvrši*

Have something 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 ujeda*

Birds of a feather flock together – *Svaka ptica svome jat u 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*

Over my 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*

Never look a gift horse in the mouth – *Poklonjenom konju se ne gleda u zube*

³⁶Titelman, Gregory (2000). *America's Most Popular Proverbs and Sayings*. New York: Random House.

Prevention is better than cure – *Bolje spriječiti 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 – *Ćutanje je zlato*

GROUP II - Lexical Incongruence, Semantic Similarity

Examples:

Talk of the devil – *Mi o vuku, a vuk 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 nogu*
The game is not worth the candle – *Skuplja pita od tepsije*

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 on a fence fear all bushes – *Koga su zmije ujedale taj se i guštera plaši; Ko se o mlijeko opekao duva i u jogurt; Ko se opekao i u hladno duva*

Out of the blue – *Kao grom iz vedra neba*

Comparing apples and oranges – *Porediti babe i žabe*

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 kašalj*

Make hay while the sun shines – *Gvožđe 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 positive 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*

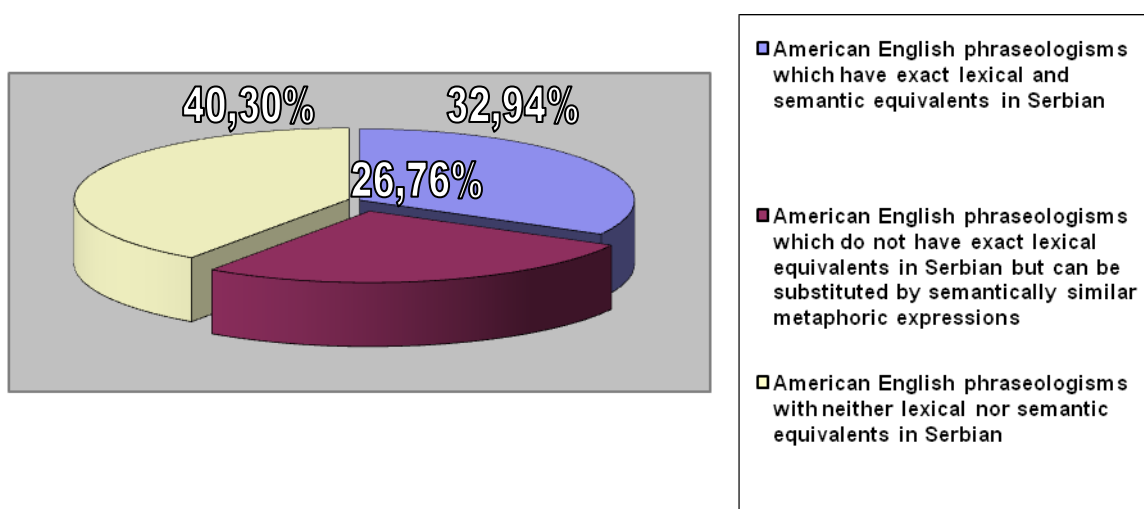
Keep a low profile – *Do not attract much attention*

Keep your powder dry – *Be ready and alert*

III.

Staying with the said book and continuing the segregation of the phraseologisms 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 phraseologisms, 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 phraseologisms 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 phraseologisms in accordance with their semantic and lexical congruence with Serbian phraseologisms



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 phraseologisms 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 beletristics 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 phraseologisms 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 jubilation. Serbian phraseologisms, 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 phraseologisms 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 in Serbian, which prefers rhyme and preserves it better.

References

- Ammer, Christine (1997) *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company
- Babić, S. (1978-1979) *Zašto se kaže: naći se u nebranom grožđu*. Zagreb: Jezik
- Baz, Patros D. (1963) *A Dictionary of Proverbs*. New York: Philosophical Library
- Black, M. (1962) *Models and Metaphors*. New York: Cornell University Press
- Bugarški, R. (1996) *Uvod u opštulingvistiku*. Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek
- Collis, Harry. (1992) *101 American English Proverbs*. Lincolnwood, IL: Passport Books
- Donne, John (1975) *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. Edited by Anthony Raspa. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Funk, Charles Earle (1948) *A Hog on Ice and Other Curious Expressions*. New York: Harper & Row
- Funk, Charles Earle (1955) *Heavens to Betsy and Other Curious Sayings*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Gavrilović, A. (1900) *Pogled u životsrpskih narodnih poslovice XIX veka*, Aleksinac: Karadžić.
- Gordon, W. J. J (1966) *The Metaphorical Way of Knowing*. Cambridge MA: Porpoise.
- Hawkesworth, C. (1998) *Colloquial Croatian and Serbian*. London: Routledge
- Kovačević, Živorad (2002) *Engleskosrpski frazeološki rečnik*. Beograd: Filip Višnjić.
- Matešić, J. (1980) *Frazemkaoprevodilački problem* (referatna X međunarodnog sastanka slavista u Vukovodane) Beograd, 1980.
- Matešić, J. (1982) *Frazeološki rečnik hrvatskog i srpskog jezika*. Zagreb: Školska knjiga.
- Menac, A. (1970-1971) *O strukturi frazeologizama*, Zagreb: Jezik, god. XVIII. Br. 1.
- Mršević-Radović, Dragana. (1987) *Frazeološke glagolsko imeničke sintagme u savremenom srpskohrvatskom jeziku*. Beograd: Filološki Fakultet.
- Titelman, Gregory 2000. *America's Most Popular Proverbs and Sayings*. New York: Random House