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# Contrastive analysis of somatisms in English and Italian<sup>1</sup>

Ângela Costa

Keywords: *phraseology, somatisms, contrastive analyses, English, Italian.*

## Abstract

Within the vast and complex theme that is phraseology, my work will focus on somatisms: phraseological units that contain a reference to at least one part of the body. All human beings share this common instrument to perceive reality, so it is not surprising its influence upon language. To confirm if the body is seen and treated the same way by different languages, my work will address a phraseological corpus of English and Italian. On this work we will first present a survey of the most productive parts of the body in somatisms in English and in Italian and afterward we will analyze the differences and similarities between the two languages to finally draw some conclusions. I should also add that having just used the standard Italian and English, meant leaving aside many other phraseologies closely linked to culture of each region, but that alone could be the subject of another work.

## 1. Introduction

Within the vast and complex theme that is phraseology, this work will focus on phraseological units containing a reference to one or more parts of the body - the somatisms. As one would expect, it is very easy to find various examples of this sort of structures, since the body is an instrument common to all human beings, source of enormous symbolism, and so it is not surprising its influence on language. To confirm if the body is seen and treated in the same way by different languages, this work will address a phraseological corpus in English and Italian. This corpus was collected in the *International Dictionary of English* from Cambridge, the *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana Treccani* and *The English Idioms in Use*.

I will start this study by defining phraseology and describing its characteristics, after I will focus on the definition of somatism. I will base by theoretical considerations in authors, like Cermák and Uwe Nissen.

On section 3, I will focus on the survey of the parts of the body that are more productive in English and Italian somatisms. Then I will present on the somatisms found on both languages and consequently proceed to their contrastive analysis. On the final section of this work, I will draught some conclusions from the comparison between the English and Italian structures. I should mention that having only taken into consideration standard English and Italian, many expressions connected to the regional varieties were left out. This on its own could be the topic of another research.

## 2. Definitions

### 2.1. *Phraseology*

The enrichment of languages does not only happen through the creation of neologisms, the introduction of foreign words to the lexicon, derivation or conversion, but also through a phraseological process, this means through the combination of free phrases. Phraseologies are multiword fixed or semi-fixed structures that the speaker saves safes as a whole on the short-term memory. These structures are available as pre-fabricated blocks in the human mind. Although produced as a whole, when heard they have to be decoded.

Besides from the multiword aspect that all phraseologies share (the inferior limit is

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two words), we should mention their fixity. Fixity has many levels: some expressions are totally frozen, for instance idiom expressions, like *cry over spilt milk* and others are less, for example *brush ones teeth*.

Another characteristic worth mentioning is the idiomacity. Some idioms are wholly idiomatic and the words constituting the idiom seem to have no meaning of their own as a unit without the idiomatic meaning, some idioms have both literal and idiomatic meanings (metaphorical meanings), which are used alongside; some idioms are only partially idiomatic, i.e. one word of it can be taken literally and the rest of them idiomatically (semi-idioms).

Although idioms are very close connected to a specific language, sometimes we come across universal characteristics common to all individuals and therefore their language. Somatismos can certainly be an example of this.

## 2.2. Somatismos

In *Somatic Idioms Revisited*, Cermák (1998: 110) emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between the parts of the body that constitute phraseologisms, since the human body is the same for everyone and it is in itself segmented into parts, this leaves very little room for linguistic variation. Cermák continues saying that the body parts that are part of phraseology are used with their traditional roles and symbolism. The nose is an instrument to sniff, but also to feel the danger. The heart is seen as a generator of love, courage and other feelings. The author also speaks of the value of anthropomorphic language and how somatismos are proof of it. An example is the different meanings in the vocabulary of the human sphere based on metaphor and metonymy, as *the leg of table*, *the head of the pin*, among others. The body part acts as a mediator between man and the object nominated (Salah, 2003).

Uwe Nissen (2006) in her article *Contrastive Analysis of Metaphors and Metonymies for the "eye"*, says that the thought arises from bodily experience, so the core of conceptual systems is based on perception and physical and social experience. Thus the human body is an ideal domain for the origin of metaphors, figures such as synecdoche or metonymy. The human body has a key role in the rise of metaphorical meanings, not only in Western cultures, but in all the languages of the world.

## 3. Somatismos in English and Italian

### 3.1. Corpus collection

My English and Italian corpus was collected in the International Dictionary of English from Cambridge, the Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana, The English Idioms in Use and the various sources on the Internet, like Google, English Italian Dictionary WordReference. Finally, the final corpus was presented to a native English and a native Italian. Finally, I only took into account phraseologies in British English and in standard Italian.

Besides body parts, it is also possible to find in phraseologies physical abilities/ characteristics/ deformities. On this paper, however we will analyse only human body parts. Thus in English we found: *hand(s)*, *heel*, *arm*, *head*, *face*, *eye*, *ear(s)*, *foot*, *mouth*, *teeth*, *heart*, *mind*, *blood*, *brain(s)*, *finger*, *toe(s)*, *lips*, *flesh*, *back*, *tongue*, *skin*, *hair*, *fist*, *thumb*, *shoulder*, *neck*, *guts*. And in Italian we found: *mano/i*, *tallone*, *braccia/o*, *testa*, *faccia*, *occhio*, *orecchi*, *piede*, *bocca/e*, *dente/I*, *cuore*, *mente*, *sangue*, *cervello*, *lingua*, *pelo/i*, *muso*, *carne*, *ossa*, *spalla*, *naso*, *ditto*, *schiena*, *gola*, *fegato*, *spirit*, *cappello*, *viso*, *vene*, *pancia*, *gambe*.

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### 3.2. Contrastive analysis

For the contrastive analysis we decided to take into consideration the semantic of the expression (meaning), morphosyntax (syntactical and morphological aspects) and lexical aspects (number of components and their order). According to these criteria the relations between the expressions in both languages can be of:

1. Total equivalence: the expressions convey the same semantic content and have structural similarities. It has been taken into account that there are idiosyncrasies in each language, in particular in Italian the subject non-zero is allowed while in English no.
2. Partial equivalence: in this type of relationship the synonymy remains, but the structure is slightly different. Since there may be variations in the lexical component, for example changing the order or a morphosyntactic variation. However, according Larreta Zulategui (2001) a difference in number or factor is regarded as a case of total defective equivalence.
3. Synonymic expressions: in this case there is only a denotative semantic equivalence and there is no morphosyntactic or lexical matching.
4. Absence of semantic equivalence: it is a phenomenon that occurs when a phraseology of a language does not have an equivalent coded in the other language. So you have to use a free paraphrase to express that specific meaning.

According to these criteria, the relations between the 154 expressions of both languages that we found were of: total equivalence (23%), partial equivalence (50%), synonymic expressions and absence of semantic equivalence (10% in English and 8% in Italian).

### 4. Conclusions

From the lexical point we can conclude that variation between languages is done through synonyms (*Bird brain/ Cervello di gallina, Cut to the heart/ Ferire al cuore*), but there are also some relations of similarity (*Eagle eye/ Occhio di lince*). Semantically speaking the somatisms meaning is constructed by metaphors (*Wash one's hands/ Lavarsene le mani*), metonymies (*Be all ears/ Essere tutto orecchi, To have mouths to feed/ Tenere bocche da sfamare*) and synecdoches (*Ask for one's hand/ Chiedere la mano, To have a forked tongue*). In what concerns morphosyntax, most of the phraseologies are built with the verb *To be/ Essere* e *To have/ Avere* (*To be a hot head/ Essere una testa calda, To have a heart of stone/ Avere un cuore di pietra*). There are also some cases of divergence, for instance, possessives in English are usually substituted in Italian for a definite article (*Under your nose/ Sotto il naso, Lose your head/ Perdere la testa*), in other cases the preposition changes (*Back to back/ Schiena contro schiena*).

Finally, it is important to say that the differences and similarities between languages come from extra linguistic cultural factors. The way we conceive reality is reflected in language, grammar and lexicon segment it and influence our way of thinking the world: language has a representative function, but also a cognitive function, as it is through language that we think. Although there are social and cultural differences between Italian and English, there are traditions and worldviews shared by both cultures, which reflect themselves at the

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language level. Concerning somatisms we can say that the two cultures see and relate themselves with the body in a very similar way.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been reviewed and accepted as a poster presentation to Euralex 2012. However, the author was not able to attend the congress and present it.

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