

## Pseudo-equivalents in English, Italian and Polish Faunal Phraseology

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### Abstract

The paper presents the phenomenon of faunal phraseological pseudo-equivalents, i.e. units containing an animal term in a contrastive perspective: in English, Italian and Polish. The pseudo-equivalents, 'traditional' idioms and combinations of the copular verb *be* and an animal name used figuratively, were excerpted from various lexicographic sources, both mono- and bilingual dictionaries, in order to gain an insight into the problem. The focal issue is the complicity of relations existent between phraseological pseudo-equivalents, which results in difficulties in linguistic as well as bilingual lexicographic descriptions of such units.

### 1 Pseudo-equivalents in Phraseology

In Polish bilingual lexicography some Polish linguists focused on false friends, defined as 'a term in language teaching for a word that has the same origin and general appearance as a word in another language, so that learners mistakenly assume that both have the same meanings and uses (...)' (McArthur 1996: 366), present in the vocabulary of the languages analyzed, especially in Polish compared with English (Szatek 2002; Rudolf 2003; Szpila 2003), German (Lipczuk 1990) and Russian (Kozielewski 1959) as well as Bulgarian (Karpaczewa et al. 1994), Czech (Orłoś 2003) and Croatian (Tokarz 1998).

The terms *false friends*, *apparent equivalents* or *pseudo-equivalents* are also applied to phraseological units and used in research on Czech and Russian phraseology (Cieślińska 1988; Daszczyńska 1987; Orłoś 2003). The phraseological pseudo-equivalent is defined as a structure whose external similarity to the units present in another language causes non-native language users to understand it to be an equivalent of a given unit (Daszczyńska 1987: 9). As to comparative studies on Polish, English and Italian phraseological false friends, hardly any studies have been conducted, which leads to the conclusion that the research area has been neglected so far. Therefore, it is worth analyzing phraseology in a comparative perspective in order to search for pseudo-equivalents so that it could be possible to enable learners and users of foreign languages to avoid confusing phraseological units, which in fact are not equivalent.

One group of units has been selected for the analysis, which is faunal phraseology, i.e. phraseological units, whose at least one component is an animal name. The group was chosen, since faunal phraseology is particularly rich in most European languages. Idioms tend to

reflect the observations of particular species made by language users of each ethnic area. The occurrence of animal terms in phraseology is closely connected with the eco-significance of a given animal in a particular culture (Fernando 1996: 93). Moreover, numerous idioms are of international character, especially those of biblical or mythical origins. Therefore, the question arises whether faunal pseudo-equivalent units exist in the languages compared or not, if yes, what relations are between them.

## 2 Research Method

Faunal idioms have been excerpted from various lexicographic works, i.e. dictionaries of Polish, English and Italian, dictionaries of Polish, English and Italian idioms, bilingual dictionaries of the languages as well as bilingual dictionaries of idioms. Then their meanings have been analyzed in order to find those units, which might potentially function as false friends. The constructions composed of the verb *to be* and a faunal term, which is an animal name, are included in the corpora excerpted for the needs of the analysis, since numerous lexicographic works register such word combinations as idioms (Lapucci 1990; Gulland, Hinds-Howell 1994; Quartu 2000).

## 3 Analysis

The phraseological units, likely to function as pseudo-equivalents, are of various characters, since their potential deceptiveness, analyzed in the contrastive perspective, can be discussed in different perspectives, since numerous criteria may be taken into consideration. Therefore, false friends can be classified in certain groups, presented below, which constitute a typology of faunal phraseological units, whose apparent similarity may result in misusing them by non-natives due to the mother tongue interference.

### 3.1 Idioms whose components and structure are identical in L1, L2 and/or L3, but the meanings are different in either language

Certain idioms, whose components and structure are identical in the languages compared, differ significantly or completely in meaning. For instance, the idiom *Balaam's ass*, included both in Polish and Italian lexicographic works, has different meanings in either of the languages compared, i.e. in Polish *oślica Balaama*, used depreciatively, means "a thoughtless, unintelligent woman", or "a shy, non-talkative man who spoke or protested suddenly" USJPI1333, 179, while in Italian the idiom *asina di Balaam* L48 is used ironically and means: "an animal which does not want to walk", "a speaking, prodigious animal". It is worth adding that the English dictionaries of idioms consulted do not contain the phrase, yet, it is included as a subentry in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* revised by A. Room (2002: 86).

Numerous idioms belonging to the group are those realizing the pattern 'be + a faunal term', which is observed especially if Italian and Polish are compared, e.g. lit. "be a lizard", respectively: *essere una lucertola* "love basking in the sun" DeM1409, *być jaszczurką* USJPI1275 "be a malicious woman". It is worth stressing that the linguistic image of the world is reflected in the language (Anusiewicz 1988; Grzegorzczkowska 1999), for instance in

the conventional metaphors, many of which are animal names (Tokarski 1999: 74-76). The way the nation perceives a given species is reflected in the language (Nowakowska 1991; Nesie 1995). Elements of axiology are also present in the figurative applications of faunal lexis in the above constructions, i.e. the lizard is evaluated negatively in the Polish culture, which is reflected in the language, while in Italian the name carries no negative connotations. In a contrastive perspective differences are observed if units, for instance faunal lexicalized comparisons (Wysoczański 2005: 126197) or other phraseologisms are compared.

It should be emphasized that it is the difference in meaning that functions as the dominant factor in classifying the unit as belonging to the above group, yet, a set of differentiating elements of minor importance ought to be included in the analysis in order to give a detailed description of the idioms. For instance, a complex relation, observed in a bilingual perspective, exists among the Italian phraseologism *essere un (vecchio) gallinaccio* DO881 (lit. "be an (old) turkey"), used regionally. "be a very sly person", the phraseologism existent in the American variety of the English language, i.e. *be a turkey* W378, whose meaning is the opposite of the Italian one, i.e. "a stupid man", used mostly in slang, and the standard English item *be a turkey-cock* ST71, meaning "be a huffy person".

### **3.2 Idioms whose components and structures are identical L1, L2 and/or L3, but are composed of fewer/more components in L1, L2 and/or L3 and have a different meaning in each language**

The group is composed of units, which have different meanings, while having identical structures and components. What distinguishes them from those idioms presented in the first group is the fact that in one language the idiom contains more components. To illustrate this relation the following pair of idioms has been selected: English *buy a pig in a poke* and Italian *comprare un porco*, lit. "buy a pig". While the former idioms means "buy something unsatisfactory, bought unseen by a buyer" P59, the meaning of the latter is "leave quietly, without saying goodbye, take a French leave" L203, moreover, the Italian idiom can be described as archaic (Lapucci 1990:203).

### **3.3 Idioms whose components are similar in L1, L2 and/or L3, but structures and meanings are different in either language**

This group is composed of units, which, as a result of the similarity of components, may be considered to be equivalent, despite differences occurring in their structures. For instance, the English idiom *send somebody with a flea in one's ear*, i.e. "to snub or rebuke a person" P75, due to the composition of its components, bears certain resemblance to the Italian idiom *mettere la pulce nell'orecchio*, lit. "put a flea in somebody's ear", i.e. "make somebody doubt or suspect something" Q430.

### **3.4 Idioms whose components are similar in L1, L2 and/or L3 and whose structures are identical and meanings differ in either language**

The Italian idiom *dire l'orazione della bertuccia* DO293, lit. "make the Barbary ape's speech", i.e. "swear under one's breath", realizes the same pattern as the English fossilized

expression *say an ape's paternoster* B16, yet, its meaning can be expressed as "chatter one's teeth from cold". The relation of similarity between the components of the above mentioned idioms, i.e. *l'orazione: an ape's paternoster* and *betruccia: ape*, can lead to the misusage of the idioms by non-natives, respectively the English learning Italian and vice versa.

### **3.5 Idioms whose components are similar in L1, L2 and/or L3 are identical, but which are polysemous in L1, monosemous in L2 and/or L3**

The Italian idiom, composed of the copular verb *to be* and a faunal term, *essere un montone*, lit. "be a ram", has two meanings in Italian, i.e. "be a stupid man", "be a man who is very active sexually" DeM1575. In Polish and English the equivalents of the Italian units are monosemous, respectively the unit *być baranem* means "be a stupid, limited, especially dependent man" USJPI195, while the English phrase *be a ram* is used solely in the following meaning: "be a man of great sexual activity" W265. Therefore, such word combinations are particularly likely to be confused, since in both languages the animal terms are used figuratively.

### **3.6 Idioms whose components and structures are identical L1, L2 and/or L3, but which differ in their stylistic markedness**

In the material analyzed certain idioms, whose meanings are identical in each of the languages compared, yet, the units differ in stylistic markedness, which results in them being false equivalents. For instance, both in Italian and in English lexicographic sources contain faunal idioms meaning "completely bald". The Italian idiom *pelato come il culo della scimmia*, lit. "be as bald as the monkey's ass", described as vulgar, has an English equivalent of non-vulgar character, i.e. *as bald as a coot*. Moreover, there is also a slight difference in the meanings of the Italian and English idioms, respectively: "be bald, have very little hair with the scalp completely bald" L325, "be completely bald" ODEI17. As to meaning, the idioms bear a great resemblance, however, their stylistic markedness, different in either example, is the decisive factor taken into consideration in classifying them as false friends.

### **3.7 Idioms whose components and structures are identical L1, L2 and/or L3, but which differ in meaning and register**

Another group, which can be singled out, is composed of phraseological units, whose structure is very similar, but which differ both in terms of meaning and register. Both in Polish and Italian the animal term *seal* is used figuratively in the combination 'be + a faunal term'. While in the Italian language the unit *essere una foca*, lit. "be a seal", i.e. "be a fat, awkward and slow person", used in the informal variety, registered in the dictionary of standard language (DeM953), in Polish *być foką* or *być foczką*, lit. "be a seal", "be a young seal", i.e. "be an attractive girl", belongs to the youth jargon and is registered only in the dictionary of substandard language. Moreover, the Polish phraseologism *być foką* can be used in the meaning "play cards badly" SPLPII468, but the usage is rare.

The difficulty in classifying a given unit as belonging to one of the groups singled out for the purpose of the analysis results from co-occurrence of a variety of factors differentiating

pseudo-equivalents of the idioms compared. Therefore, within the classes pseudo-equivalents can be further divided into subgroups, so that the relations between units could be presented in details.

#### 4 Conclusions

First of all, it should be stressed that the phenomenon of pseudo-equivalents in phraseology should by no means be neglected in contrastive research, since the findings of such studies are of great importance for lexicography and teaching foreign languages. The dictionary entries should include information of false friends. Moreover, lexicographic works devoted to the problem of apparently equivalent phraseological units containing faunal components, accompanied by exercises, would greatly facilitate the process of teaching foreign languages, increasing the linguistic awareness and developing learners' metaphorical competence.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the relations between pseudo-equivalents are of different character, so the simplification of the phenomenon should be avoided, since the issue ought to be analyzed as multi-aspectual. Therefore, it is more proper to discuss faunal pseudo-equivalents in terms of typology, not classification. So far the dominant elements in the studies have been the meaning and the structure of two apparently equivalent more units, while other factors, such as stylistic, register, frequency of usage etc have not been analyzed sufficiently and such factors also need to be taken into consideration in the analysis of the linguistic phenomenon.

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