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PRAGMA-SEMANTIC DIMENSIONS OF COLOUR IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

Introductory remarks

Typically considered as one of the most complex aspects of a language, idioms, generally definable as

“an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (such as *up in the air* for “undecided”) or in its grammatically atypical use of words (such as *give way*)” (Merriam-WebsterDictionary),

often prove challenging to EFL learners, especially when they are related to the colour domain.

In regard to comprehension, if one takes into account that

“an idiom is ‘a group of words which has a different meaning from the sum of its parts’ ” (Cullen et al, 2000:iii),

it is not surprising at all that its rendering in another language is supposed to be accurate in point of overall meaning, and not form.

If an idiom is considered

“as a constituent or a series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed” (Fraser, 1970:22),

the fact that one of these constituents is a colour term only increases the comprehension and interpretation difficulty for non-native speakers. Although idioms have fixed structures and are definitely recognized by native speakers, they elude overt structure explanations and interlocutors have to resort to decoding the non-literal, often metaphorical manner in which language is used, with the additional support of the pragmatic dimension provided by the communication situation and/or context and co-text. According to Cacciary and Tabossi,

“idioms are transparent to native speakers, but a course of perplexity to those who are acquiring a second language. If someone tells me that Mrs. Thatcher has

become the queen of Scotland, I am likely to say *That's a tall story. Pull the other one*" (1993: vii).

The rather restricted corpus that was examined for the purpose of the present article considers around 90 set phrases in English containing a colour or colour-related component, and possessing the prototypical features that idioms normally exhibit, viz. conventionality, inflexibility, figuration, proverbiality, informality, affect (Nunberg, Sag and Wasow, 1994:492-2).

The semantic dimension of idioms

From a semantic point of view, the most striking aspect is that idioms cannot possibly be interpreted literally, so the translator should focus on rendering their meaning, and only secondarily preserving, to the extent to which it is possible, the form containing the colour term. Since their meaning is mostly metaphorical, starting out as an implied simile, learners are supposed to first decode the figurative meaning, and subsequently use the specific means of the target language to come up with a similar metaphor or at least a similarly-functioning explanatory paraphrase. More often than not, idioms are culture-bound, and may be specific to a certain age group, a professional group, or even a gender, which increases the decoding difficulty and requires additional skills of cultural competency and a sense of the language close to that of natives in some instances. Thus, by adopting fixed structures in a given culture, some metaphors produce idioms that have no counterparts in another language (apud Leah, 2014).

The pragmatic dimension of idioms

Pragmatics, whose area of interest focuses on language in its dimension as a tool enabling communication, plays a central role in the accurate interpretation of idioms in general, and of colour-related idioms in particular. Taking into account Grice's cooperative principle, according to which

"participants will be expected to make their contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged",

interlocutors are forced to include context, co-text, and the entire communicative situation in the accurate decoding of the idiom, along with additional clues provided by logic, common sense, knowledge of the world,

various sociocultural factors. In other words, the hearer has to “make sense” of the idiom.

In regard to the metalinguistic dimension, it may be stated that more often than not, idioms “push” the limits of reality by describing hyperbolic or downright fantastic images and situations, thus forcing the hearer to re-interpret the entire pragma-semantic context in order to adequately decode them. When colour is among the constituents, an entire array of semantic and pragmatic factors are triggered by the associations it enters, adding a particular flavour to what is being communicated. Therefore, idioms often compel the interlocutor to acquiesce a “fantastic realism” and adopt a different conceptualising paradigm.

Remarks on colour symbolism as a cultural construct

It is quite noteworthy that the colour component provides idioms with an overt symbolic load which plays a crucial role in their overall interpretation. However, this intrinsic symbolism is extremely varied, and it is closely dependent on the cultural identity of the speaker, which is does not necessarily overlap the cultural competency of the hearer. While some colours seem to have a more universally accepted symbolism (usually the focal ones), others may be quite puzzling in this respect, as shown in the following table:

COLOUR	ASSOCIATED SYMBOLISM
red	life, passion, aggression, impulsion, strength
black	death, sadness, annihilation, mystery, but also the minimalist chic (Western countries)
white	purity, youth, innocence, virginity, but also mourning (China), death and the supernatural
grey	indecision underground, subversive
pink	platonic, young love, compassion, femininity, playfulness naivety
yellow	vitality,happiness, joy, also royalty or eroticism (China), also cowardice (the US)
brown	reliability, stability, honesty, comfort
green	growth, hope, fertility, rejuvenation, also jealousy (Shakespeare) or sickness (Western countries)
blue	calmness, serenity, peace, also authority and spirituality
orange	vitality, effervescence, enthusiasmbut also frivolity, amusement (Western Europe), Halloween (the US), spirituality (Buddhism)

purple	mystery, mysticism, spirituality, imagination, creativity also royalty
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Table 1. General colour symbolism

Thus, it is easy to see that colour symbolism is not universally shared, even in the case of focal colours, which makes it very likely for idioms to make use of rather unexpected associations resisting decoding and triggering complex semantic relations. So, it is imperative for the hearer to have a keen cultural awareness and pay particular attention to all the factors involved in the communicative situation.

Peculiarities of colour idioms in English

Nine groups have been identified in the English idioms containing colour terms which are part of the present corpus consisting of 93 units: 'black', 'blue', 'brown', 'green', 'grey', 'red', 'pink', 'white' and 'yellow'. It is no surprise that these colours are focal colours (Rosch, 1975), (Wierzbicka, 1992), (Regier, Kay, Richard, 2005). In addition, 'orange' and 'purple' have also been found in English phraseological units, although they are characterized by lower distributionality.

From the very start it may be said that they exhibit an obvious cultural disparity in translation, although there are some occurrences when the identity of symbolism results in a quite linear equivalent in Romanian. But more often than not the translator is faced with the lack of equivalence leading to the need for linguistic calques in an attempt to preserve the intrinsic flavour of the unit in the source language. However, according to Fernando and Flavell (1981:85),

“idioms and fixed expressions which contain culture-specific items are not necessarily untranslatable. It is not the specific item an expression contains, but rather the meaning it conveys and its association with culture-specific contexts which can make it untranslatable or difficult to translate”.

As a result, the interpretation and accurate rendering of an idiom into the target language should take into consideration the existence of different realia in English and Romanian, as well as the inequality of cultural contexts. Today's “inflation” of English unnecessary borrowings and awkward, alien-sounding calques is a sign of the Romanian language's attempt to “catch up” with the latest trends, linguistically and not only.

The undeniable “colour” of colour-idioms

As shown previously, more often than not idioms are stylistically-marked and normally resort to powerful imagery in order to convey meaning in a concise, yet very suggestive manner, triggering cultural associations and allowing for a context-dependent interpretation.

They are quite frequent in common language, particularly in the oral register, but not only, as speakers try to increase their expressivity and thus make their contribution more memorable for the interlocutors. In Brenner’s words,

“people use idioms to make their language richer and more colourful, and to convey subtle shades of meaning or intention. Idioms are used often to replace a literal word or expression, and many times the idiom better describes the full nuance of meaning” (2003:34).

It is much easier to convey positive or negative connotations by means of idioms, such in the following examples:

a) positive connotation

to be tickled pink = a fi foarte încântat

to be in the black = a fi pe plus, a avea bani în cont

b) negative connotation

to be in a blue funk = a fi deprimat

to be beaten black and blue = a fi rupt în bătaie, bătut măr

to see red = a vedea roșu/ negru în fața ochilor, a se înfuria

to be blue/ white about the gills = a-i fi rău, a arăta rău

black money = bani murdari

Special mention is also due to the **ironic or jocular designations**:

the grey population = populația vârstnică, vârsta a treia

to green-wash = a simula o abordare ecologică

blue-eyed boy = băiat bun, favoritul profesorilor

white bread = băiat bun

the old grey mare = marotă

the blue boys = poliția

bluebottle = gabor, caraliu

From these it only takes a step in order to reach taboo and offensive words/phrases that are solely suitable in certain contexts and registers, and are usually restricted to slang:

black cat with its throat cut = vulvă

Classification of colour idioms

The classification criterion that comes in handiest in categorizing idioms of colour is their degree of comprehensibility, which decisively influences the accuracy of their translation in the target language. The existence of the colour component seems to increase the difficulty of interpretation, and it is no rare occurrence that it is eliminated in translation. In the increasing order of the difficulty in decoding their overall meaning, idioms are divided into the following classes:

❖ transparent

to give the green light = to allow for the commencement of sth. = a da undă verde

red alert = obvious warning = alertă de gradul I

black magic = sorcery = magie neagră

❖ semi-transparent

black list = list of undesirables = lista neagră

black gold = oil = petrol, „aurul negru”

❖ semi-opaque

to be in the black = to have money in the account = a fi pe plus, a avea bani în cont

to be in the red = to be in debt = a fi pe minus

black spot = area where adverse living conditions are prevalent = zonă defavorizată

❖ opaque

to burn blue = to be a bad omen = a fi de rău augur

blackleg = an individual who keeps working during a strike = spărgător de grevă

blue stocking = woman more interested in studying than partying and *fashion* = sufragetă, intelectuală

This classification is by no means definitive, as the transparency/opacity scale is undoubtedly a highly subjective matter, depending on the linguistic competency of the participants in the communicative situation. As Fernando and Flavell put it,

“using idioms requires that the translator should be not only accurate, but also highly sensitive to the rhetorical nuances of the language” (1981:85).

Metonymysation and metaphorisation in colour idioms

It is quite a common occurrence to find that nominal colour idioms are in fact cases of metonymy and/or metaphor, where motivation is normally obscured, and the language register is familiar, if not downright slangy:

blackleg = spărgător de grevă

green hand = începător, novice

brown shirt = fascist

the black sheep = oaia neagră

red neck = mitocan, țărănoi

yellow belly = fricos

white hat = băiat bun, pifan, răcan, licean (New England)

There are also instantiations which exhibit a lack of established equivalence in Romanian, although the part-for-the whole-metonymy is obvious in their formation. However, in these cases the cultural load of the idioms do not quite overlap, which creates further issues in translation. In this respect, the strategy used in rendering them is translation by cultural substitution and adaptation, the colour term being downplayed or utterly omitted in the target language.

grey suits = eminențe cenușii/oamenii din umbră

blue stocking = sufragetă, intelectuală

Source semantic fields

In point of the semantic fields that constitute the source domains for the instantiations of the colour-related idioms, the following have been identified:

EMOTIONS: *to see red* (a vedea roșu/negru în fața ochilor, a se înfuria), *to turn blue* (a se învineți de frig), *to turn white* (a păli, a se albi la față), *to see through green lenses* (a avea o abprdare ecologistă), *to look through pink glasses* (a vedea totul în roz, a avea o perspectivă optimistă asupra vieții);

INDEXICAL SIGNAGE: *to give the green light* (a da undă verde), *red alert* (alertă de gradul 1), *red herring* (diversiune);

NATIONALITY: *red skin* (piele roșie), *orange pip* (gălbejit/asiatic);

PROFESSION: *blackbeetle* (popă), *orange peel* (lucrător la drumuri și poduri), *blue coats* (politiști);

TOXIC SUBSTANCES: *white lady* (alcool metilic, heroină), *white dove* (cocaină), *white angel* (morfină), *white lightning* (LSD, bătură spirtoasă de proveniență dubioasă), *blue baby/ star/ barrel* (LSD), *black beauties/ birds* (amfetamine).

It is worth noticing that this final domain almost exclusively pertains to the slang and familiar use of language, being almost completely opaque to the uninitiated, despite the obvious similarity of colour with the referent.

In addition, the nationality domain almost entirely consists of offensive and derogatory terms, while the profession domain contains predominantly pejorative and/ or ironic or jocular denominations which are unsuitable for certain more formal contexts.

Translation methods and procedures

Regarding the Romanian equivalents of the idioms in question, it seems that literal translation is hardly ever possible, in cases where the source domain is similar, the colour symbolism is identical, and the cultural background overlaps. Since these requirements are very rarely met at the same time, it is no surprise that the translator makes use of other methods and procedures of indirect translation, as follows:

- ❖ Explication: *pink slip* (preaviz, tipărit de obicei pe hârtie roz); *red-letter day* (zi de sărbătoare religioasă, marcată de regulă cu roșu în calendar);
- ❖ Paraphrase: *red light* (trecerea oprită);
- ❖ Modulation: *to whitewash* (a mușamaliza, a băga sub preș, a pune batista pe țambal);
- ❖ Adaptation: *to see pink elephants* (a vedea cai verzi pe pereți, a i se năzări);
- ❖ Image replacement: *as white as a sheet* (alb ca varul), *pitch-black* (beznă ca-n nucă);
- ❖ Loss of idiomaticity: *white lie* (minciună nevinovată); *to be browned off* (a fi plictisit de moarte) etc.

Statistically speaking, most equivalents do not preserve the colour term, resulting in a decrease of rhetorical value, making the discourse more neutral and devoid of the initial stylistic markedness.

Conclusions

It is quite obvious that the intrinsic symbolism of colour idioms renders them quite opaque to deciphering by EFL learners, which may often be unfamiliar with the cultural dimensions they contain. Thus, decoding is necessary not only in point of semantic content, but also in regard to

pragmatic and metalinguistic aspects, which are typically underrated by Romanian learners. However, the Romanian counterparts of such English idioms are the result of indirect translation methods and procedures, like explicitation, paraphrase, modulation, adaptation, image replacement and loss of idiomaticity, often omitting the colour constituent altogether, and thus diminishing the rhetorical content of the original.

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DIMENSIONS PRAGMA-SÉMANTIQUES DES IDIOMES DE COULEUR EN ANGLAIS ET EN ROUMAIN

Résumé: L'article se donne pour but d'examiner les idiomes qui contiennent des termes désignant des couleurs, car ils posent bien des problèmes aux étudiants roumains de l'anglais à cause de leur multiples dimensions sémantiques et pragmatiques, qui doivent être décodées avant d'être rendues dans la langue cible. Leur valeur symbolique intrinsèque, qui les place sans aucun doute dans la catégorie des culturèmes, à côté d'autres éléments de nature subjective, accroît la difficulté de leur acquisition et de leur traduction adéquate. De plus, il y a bien des cas où l'équivalence est obtenue par adaptation, et le mot désignant la couleur est omis, étant compensé par autres moyens linguistiques. Le présent article examine une série d'expressions construites autour des termes désignant des couleurs et leur équivalents roumains, en commentant sur leurs caractéristiques pragma-sémantiques et leur rôle dans le processus de la traduction.

Mots-clés: *langue source, langue cible, symbolisme, adaptation, équivalence Culturelle.*

Abstract: Idioms, most notably the colour-related ones, pose numerous problems to Romanian learners of English due to their multifaceted pragmatic and semantic dimensions, which have to be decoded prior to their adequate comprehension and subsequent translation in the target language. Their intrinsic symbolic value, which decisively includes them into the category of culturally-bound elements, together with other subjective factors, makes their acquisition and accurate translation even more challenging. Moreover, there cases where equivalence is achieved by adaptation, and the colour-designating word is omitted and compensated for by other linguistic means. The present paper explores a number of colour idioms in English and their Romanian equivalents, commenting upon their pragma-semantic characteristics and their role in translation.

Keywords: *source language, target language, symbolism, cultural adequacy, adaptation.*