Idioms as a Microstructural Component: A History of Bilingual Italian-English Dictionaries (1749-2009)

Chris Mulhall

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to look at the evolution of microstructural design in bilingual Italian-English Dictionaries, with particular emphasis on the positioning on idioms, from the period 1749-2009. Idioms, which can be described as phraseological units whose overall meaning is greater than the sum of their individual semantic parts, pose a variety of difficulties for lexicographers. Probably the greatest challenge comes in the form of lemmatisation, which requires a lexicographer to choose a suitable headword under which to insert an idiom. An equally important consideration is their positioning within the entry as this can enhance or impinge on the dictionary user's ability to access the desired information. Although the past 150 years have witnessed an evolution in the design of entries in Bilingual Italian-English dictionaries, some reference works in this category remain deficient and inconsistent in their methods of recording and positioning idioms. This paper charts the development of the microstructure component of bilingual Italian-English dictionaries since 1749 and details their diverse approach to dealing with idioms, while also trying to reconcile their unique semantic and lexical features.

1. An Overview of Idioms as a Microstructural Element of Bilingual Italian-English Dictionaries

Microstructural design of bilingual Italian-English dictionaries has increased significantly in sophistication since the sixteenth century. The following section presents an overview of different types of microstructures, by means of illustrating the entries for the verb **cogliere**, used in bilingual Italian-English dictionaries and discusses their merits and demerits with particular reference to idioms. Early bilingual Italian-English lexicographers, such as John Florio, Fernando Altieri, and Giuseppe Baretti, organised their entries according to a straight line alphabetic arrangement (Figure 1).

Listings for *COGLIERE* in *Dizionario Italiano ed Inglese* (1749)
CO'GLIERE [corre] *to gather. pres.* colgo. *pass.* colsi.
Coglier fiori, *to gather flowers*.
Coglier il frutto delle sue fatiche, *to reap the fruits of one's labour*.
Coglier [prendere, pigliare] *to take*.
Coglier il suo tempo, *to take the proper time*, *to nick the time*, *to time a business*.
Coglier il viaggio, *to vend*, *to take one's way*, *to go*.
Coglier in iscambio, *to be mistaken*, *to take one thing for another*.
Coglier l'animo adosso ad uno, *to take one in friendship*, *to love him*.
Cogliere [giugnere, trovare, sopragiungere] *to catch*, *overtake*.
La notte ci colse a mezza strada, *the night came upon us at half way*.
Coglier all'improviso, *to catch one in the deed*, *to surprize him in the fact*.
Cogliere [avvenire, accadere] *to happen*, *to befal*, *to come to pass*, *to fall out*.
Temo che qualche disgrazia non me ne colga, *I am afraid of coming to some misfortune by this*.

Figure 1.

Fernando Altieri's listing structure in his *Dizionario Inglese ed Italiano* (1749) was particularly appropriate for idioms: it treated them equally to words, accurately reflecting their equal status in the lexicon; however, it was too primitive to account for semantically and lexically complex idioms, such as those with polysemous meanings or lexical variants. To overcome this problem, some idioms had to be listed twice in order to record an alternative meaning or lexical variety,

burdening the dictionary with unnecessary additional listings. On the whole, the advantage of correctly profiling idioms as independent semantic units greatly outweighed the anomalies created by the unsophisticated design, but this positive feature was later eroded as bilingual Italian-English dictionaries adopted a new entry layout to keep pace with advances in dictionary compilation.

John Millhouse's *Nuovo Dizionario Italiano e Inglese* [First Edition] (1849-1853) was one of the first dictionaries in the field to organise its entries into a macrostructure-microstructure format. The implementation of this more compact schema was largely motivated by the need for dictionaries to accommodate the burgeoning lexicon as widely as possible. While it was successful in this regard, its design and presentation were not always user-friendly and at times prevented an efficient retrieval of information (Figure 2).

The entry *COGLIERE* in *Nuovo Dizionario Italiano e Inglese* (1870)
Côgliere, *va.* 2. *irr.* (*pres.* côlgo, côlgono; *past.* côlsi; *part.* côlto) to gâther, take, càtch, hit; – il témpo, to choose the pròper time; – in iscámbio, to mistáke; – sul fátto, to catch in the deed; – cagióne, to find a pretènce, an excúse; – il frútto delle sue fatiche, to réap the frûit of one's lábour; se mi avêsse a côgliere quálche disgrázia, should any misfòrtune befãll me; la nôtte ci côlse a mêzza stráda, we were overtáken by the night at hâlf-way; per la rosa spésso la spína si côglie (*prov. exp.*), the thorn is often plùcked for the rose.

(*Nuovo Dizionario Italiano e Inglese* 1870:146)

Figure 2.

Millhouse decided to standardise the presentation format of his entries. Although he could not draw on the advanced technological resources available to modern-day lexicographers, the use of a single typeface reduced the accessibility of its content and overall practicality of his dictionary. A lack of alphabetic order within the microstructure further exacerbated these problems, resulting in users having to consult the entire entry to see if a particular expression was listed. Implementation of this entry structure also signalled the end of bilingual Italian-English dictionaries presenting and recording idioms in a way that correctly represented their semantic status. In contrast to the straight line alphabetic method, their inclusion in the microstructure communicated them as lexical derivates, rather than semantic equals, of the lemma. Technological advances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries equipped bilingual Italian-English dictionaries with a variety of typefaces to distinguish different types of information contained within them, which represented a much more modern approach.

Bilingual Italian-English dictionaries compiled in the latter half of the twentieth century devoted more attention and space to idioms. Monolingual Italian lexicographical works also newly sought to reflect the progression of linguistic culture in Italian from an outdated written and literary code to a more practical and modern medium of communication. This was, to some degree, supplemented by the use of specialist compilation teams by dictionary publishing houses in Italy, which brought a more balanced and diversified approach to the selection of their dictionaries' content. The *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary* (1961) embodied this new linguistic outlook by giving "careful attention" to idioms, a claim unprecedented in bilingual Italian-English lexicography.[1] It achieved this in two ways. Firstly, its division of the microstructure into semantic and phraseology sections gave a dedicated position to idioms, phrases and other expressions in entries, thus increasing their visibility for users. Secondly, its detailing of the more subtle features of idioms, such as lexical variation within them, also distinguished it from previous works. However, its superiority in this respect was short lived as the publication of *Il Ragazzini* (1967) (Figure 3) set a new benchmark for the organisation and coverage of idioms in bilingual Italian-English dictionaries.

The entry *COGLIERE* **in** *Il Ragazzini* **(1967)**
cògliere, *v.t.* **1** (*fiori, frutta*) to pick (*specialm. fiori*); to pluck (*specialm. frutta*); to gather. **2** (*sorprendere*) to find*; to catch*; to come* upon: **La notte ci colse ancora lontani dalla meta,** night found us (*o* came upon us) still far from our goal; – **Non lasciatevi c. dal temporale!,** don't get caught by the storm! **3** (*colpire*) to get* (sb.) : **La pallottola lo colse alla spalla destra,** the bullet got him in the right shoulder. **4** (*in fallo*) to catch* (out): **L'hanno colto che rubava,** they've caught him stealing; – **c. q. in flagrante,** to catch sb. in the act (in the very act). **5** (*capire*) to understand*; to grasp; to catch*. **6** (*una fune*) to coil. ♦ **c. un cavo (una cima),** to worm a rope; – **c. nel segno,** to hit the target (*o* the bull's eye); to score a point; (*fig.*) to hit the nail on the head; – **c. l'occasione,** to take the opportunity; to seize one's chance: **Colgo l'occasione per dirle quanto le sono riconoscente,** I am taking this opportunity of telling you how grateful I am; – **c. la palla al balzo,** to take advantage of an unforseen opportunity; – **c. q. alla sprovvista,** to catch sb. unawares; **c. q. di sorpresa,** to take sb. by surprise; – **c. il senso,** to gather the sense (*o* the meaning).

(*Il Ragazzini* 1967:1084)

Figure 3.

O'Connor (1990) remarks that the stock of idiomatic and illustrative phrases in *Il Ragazzini* (1967) was so extensive that it provided sufficient syntactic and morphological information to non-Italians despite it being compiled primarily for native Italian speakers. Along with this, its more methodical arrangement of idioms also set it apart from the *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary* (1961). Its consistent use of the typographic indicator ♦ to denote the location of phrases improved the structure of entries, in contrast with the sporadic use of the less immediately noticeable label *fraseologia* by its earlier competitor to fulfil the same function. This elegance in entry design, coupled with its robust idiomatic content, raised the standards for the treatment of idioms in bilingual Italian-English dictionaries. However, one area in which it did not prevail over the *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary* (1961) was its general coverage of idioms. A comparative analysis of the empirical evidence obtained from the two dictionaries reveals that a fewer number of idioms in *Il Ragazzini* (1967) had multiple listings than in the *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary* (1961).

The dynamism that characterised bilingual Italian-English lexicography in the 1960s continued into the following decade with further improvements in both the organisation and content of dictionaries. Within this period, the growing importance of idioms as a dictionary component became apparent not only in their increasing coverage, but also in regular references to them in dictionary prefaces. Possibly the most iconic bilingual Italian-English publication to appear in the 1970s was the *Sansoni-Harrap Standard Italian and English Dictionary* (1970-1975), whose four-volume format offered an unrivalled scope for recording both languages. Its voluminous structure also eliminated the spatial restrictions encountered by earlier comparable works and facilitated a divided microstructure format, which was used particularly for verb lemmas with a high number of phrasal derivatives (Figure 4).

The entry *COGLIERE* **in** *Sansoni-Harrap Standard Italian and English Dictionary* **(1970-1975)**
cǫgliere *v.* (cǫlgo, cǫgli, cǫlsi, cǫlto) **I** *v.t.* **1.** (*staccare*) to pick, to pluck: ~ *una mela da un albero* to pluck an apple from a tree; (*raccogliere*) to gather, to pick: ~ *i fiori* to gather (*o* pick) flowers. – **2.** (*profittare di*) to grasp, to seize, to take, to avail o.s of: ~ *l'occasione per fare qc.* to take the opportunity of doing s.th. – **3.** (*capire*) to grasp, to understand, to catch, to gather: ~ *il senso di una frase* to grasp the sense of a phrase. – **4.** (*sorprendere*) to catch, to take, to surprise, to come upon: *non mi cogli più!* You won't catch me again. – **5.** (*colpire*) to hit, {*fam*} to get: *gli sparò contro e lo colse a una gamba* he fired at him

and hit him in the leg. – **6.** {*Mar*} to coil. – **7.** {*ant*} (*riscuotere*) to collect, to take. – **II** *v.i.* (*aus*. **avere**) (*colpire*) to hit the mark, to strike home.

☐ {*fig*} ~ **allori** (*acquistarsi gloria*) to reap (*o* win) laurels; ~ *in* **fallo** to catch out; ~ *sul* **fatto** to catch in the act; {*fig*} ~ *il più bel* **fiore** (*scegliere il meglio*) to pick the best; ~ *in* **flagrante** (*delitto*) to catch red-handed (*o* in the act); {*fig*} ~ *i* **frutti** *della propria fatica* to reap the fruits of one's labours; ~ *qd. con le* **mani** *nel sacco* to catch s.o. red-handed; *la* **morte** *lo colse nel fiore degli anni* death took him in his prime; {*fig*} ~ *la* **palla** *al balzo* (*afferrare l'occasione favorevole*) to seize the opportunity, to be quick off the mark; ~ *in* ⌐**pieno**⌐ (*o* *nel segno*) to score a bull's-eye, to hit the target; {*fig*} (*indovinare*) to hit the mark (*o* nail on the head): *mi colse il* **sonno** sleep overtook me; ~ *qd. di* **sorpresa** to take s.o. by surprise; ~ *qd. alla* **sprovvista** to take (*o* catch) s.o. unawares. – *Prov*.: *cogli la rosa e lascia star la spina* gather the rose but leave the thorn, take only the best.

<div align="right">(<i>Sansoni-Harrap Standard Italian and English Dictionary</i> 1970: 249)</div>

Figure 4.

The principal difference between this layout and the more conventional arrangement found in earlier dictionaries, such as the *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary* (1961) and *Il Ragazzini* (1967), was the division of entries into two distinct sections, one treating lexical semantics and the other treating phraseology. Although the use of this format received criticism in a later publication it was an appropriate presentation strategy for idioms.[2] Its separation of the lexical semantic and phraseological sections conveyed a disconnection between both parts, which also was an accurate representation of the semantic role of the lemma as a stand-alone semantic constituent and an idiomatic component. However, the inclusion of compositional and non-compositional expressions in the phraseology section meant that it viewed and treated different phrases with varying levels of compositionality as being a semantically homogenous group.

  The microstructure format of current bilingual Italian-English dictionaries differs little from those of 40 years ago. The majority continue to organise listings into lexical semantic and phraseological sections, but some dictionaries still fail to order this information alphabetically. For example, in Figure 5, which illustrates the entry **Cogliere** from *Il Nuovo Oxford Paravia* (2006), the typographic indicator ♦ enables the user to go directly to the phraseology section, but the dispersed arrangement of canonical and phrasal citation forms prevents users from following a logical sequence to the information they want.

The entry *COGLIERE* **in** *Il Nuovo Oxford Paravia* **(2006)**
cogliere /'kɔʎʎere/ [28] tr. **1** to pick, to pluck, to gather [*fiori*, *frutti*]; *~ il frutto di 20 anni di lavoro* FIG. to reap the fruit of 20 years of labour **2** FIG. (*capire*) *~ il senso di ciò che qcn. dice* to catch the drift of sb.'s argument; *~ il nocciolo della questione* to see *o* get the point; *non ha colto il senso dell'osservazione* he lost *o* missed the point of the remark; *ha colto l'allusione* this allusion was not lost on him, he caught the hint **3** FIG. (*afferrare*) to capture, to catch* [*atmosfera*, *spirito*, *sentimento*, *sguardo*]; to capture, to seize [*momento*] **4** (*sorprendere*) to catch* [*delinquente*]; [*emozione*, *terrore*] to overtake* [*persona*] *essere colto da un temporale* to get caught in a storm; *~ qcn. impreparato* to catch sb. off balance *o* off guard; *la notizia mi coglie impreparato* the news takes me by surprise **5** (*colpire*) *~ nel segno* [*freccia*, *tiro*] to find its mark; FIG. [*critica*, *osservazione*] to be right on target, to find its mark; *hai colto nel segno!* that was a good guess! ♦ *~ la palla al balzo* = to seize the opportunity; *~ qcn. in fallo* to catch sb. on the wrong foot, to catch sb. out; *mi hai colto in fallo!* you've got me there! *~ qcn. in flagrante o sul fatto* to catch sb. red-handed *o* in the act *o* at it COLLOQ.;

> *~ l'occasione* to take one's chance; ***cogli l'attimo*** seize the day; *~ qcn.*
> ***alla sprovvista*** o ***di sorpresa*** to catch *o* take sb. unawares, to take sb.
> aback *o* by surprise; *~ al volo* to grab, to seize, to jump at [*opportunità*];
> to seize on [*suggerimento*, *offerta*].

<div align="right">(Il Nuovo Oxford Paravia 2006:1754)</div>

Figure 5.

Although the entry layout illustrated above is widely accepted as the most conventional and efficient, it does not represent the microstructure format adopted by all current bilingual Italian-English dictionaries. In some cases, the difference is quite superficial: for example, *Il Ragazzini* (2009) and *Il Sansoni Inglese* (2006) use different colour typefaces to distinguish source language from target language listings, whereas others vary their entry structure depending on the type of lemma in question. The *Grande Hoepli Dizionario di Inglese* (2007) and *Garzanti Hazon Inglese* (2009) are two dictionaries that tailor the design of their entries to suit verb and noun lemmas. Verb entries in the *Grande Hoepli Dizionario di Inglese* (2007) follow a different format in comparison to other similar publications with their microstructure subdivided into syntactic divisions and the listed idioms inserted in the relevant section. Conversely, idioms recorded under noun component lemmas are typically inserted into the designated phraseology section of the entry. By contrast, the *Garzanti Hazon Inglese* (2009) alternates between one of two microstructure formats; using a clearly separated lexical semantic and phraseology for high frequency verb lemmas and the more conventional type for those with a lower phrasal usage. Therefore, Marello's (1989) claim that keeping a consistent microstructure layout is a very difficult task still has a large degree of validity when considering both internal and external comparisons of entry structures in both past and current bilingual Italian-English dictionaries.

2. Conclusion

Advances in the understanding of idioms as a complex lexical and semantic unit, coupled with improvements in the microstructure design have afforded idioms a more prominent role in bilingual Italian-English dictionaries, but certain aspects of their microstructural treatment remain unsystematic. A potential solution to this problem is to position idioms in their own individual phraseological section at the end of each individual entry, which would recognise both their unitary meaning and semantic distance from the headword. Adopting this structure would not only make bilingual Italian-English dictionaries more reflective of the lexical and semantic networks of the lexicon, but also more accurate in their recording of idioms.

Notes

[1] *Garzanti Comprehensive Dictionary*, 1961: v.

[2] The preface of the *Cambridge Italian Dictionary* Volume II (1981) makes a veiled reference to the organisation of phrases in the *Sansoni-Harrap Dictionary* while outlining its own method of organization: 'phrases are entered under the headwords or derivatives to which they are subsidiary, not, as sometimes in English-Italian dictionaries, as separate items. This avoids the nuisance of finding phrases separated from the parent headword by several pages, as inevitably occurs in a large bilingual dictionary' (*Cambridge Italian Dictionary* [Volume II] 1981: xii).

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