

The Comparison of the Motivation of English Idioms and their Hungarian Equivalents

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Abstract

Based on cognitive linguistic research exploring the conceptual motivation behind the most frequently used English human body idioms and their Hungarian equivalents, the present paper discusses the major similarities and differences of conceptualization in English and Hungarian. A category system for classifying English human body idioms and their Hungarian equivalents is proposed, in which six different types of equivalency categories are reported, ranging from the most ideal translation equivalents to the least ideal ones.

1 The idiom database

This paper focuses on certain results of a cognitive linguistic research exploring the conceptual motivation of the most frequently used English human body idioms and their Hungarian equivalents. On the basis of a survey of a specific corpus, the present paper proposes a category system for classifying these expressions. According to the analysis, six different types of equivalency categories are possible, ranging from the most ideal translation equivalents to the least ideal ones.

The corpus of the analyzed English idioms is taken from the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (CDI, for short), which gives frequency data about each idiom. As a result, the conceptual metaphors and metonymies motivating these frequent and conventional idioms can be legitimately claimed to be popular and deeply entrenched, as well. The largest group of the most frequent English idioms according to the author's statistical analysis concerning CDI is the group of human body idioms, i.e., idioms containing human body part nouns. The 122 human body idioms in the database contain keywords referring to various human body parts including *hand, eye, face, head, feet, heart, back, and blood*. The translation equivalents of the English metaphorical linguistic expressions are taken from English-Hungarian idiom dictionaries (Kövecses 2001; Nagy 1996/2002) and concise general dictionaries (Országh et al. 1999). The English idioms usually have 1-3 (in rare cases even 6 or 7) Hungarian equivalents in the database.

In the cognitive linguistic tradition, idioms are claimed to have conceptual motivation (cf. Lakoff 1987). This means that the meaning of many idioms seems natural and transparent to us because conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, and/or conventional knowledge link the non-idiomatic meaning of the constituent words to the idiomatic meaning of idiom. As the analysis shows, the meanings of English body part idioms and their equivalents can be organized according to their motivation by conceptual metaphors and metonymies as well as our conventional knowledge concerning especially the specific body parts. In addition, it is often the case that several metaphors, metonymies, and/or pieces of conventional/cultural knowledge together motivate the meaning of a particular expression. For instance, conceptual metaphors motivate English idioms such as *get/gain the upper hand of something*, *before one's eyes*, and *close to one's heart*. Some Hungarian examples are *azonos állásponton vannak*, lit. "they are on identical standpoint", which is the equivalent of *see eye to eye with someone*; and *szívére vesz*, lit. "take something to one's heart", the equivalent of *take something to heart*.

2 The comparison of the motivation

2.1 The basic types of possibilities

Conceptual metaphors and metonymies can be culture-specific as opposed to universal. The bodily basis can indicate the existence of possible metaphors, which have the potential to become universal. However, cultures can differ as to whether these potential metaphors are in fact selected in specific languages or not. The selection process depends to a large extent on the culture using the given language. Thus, different metaphors can often be used to conceptualize the same target domains in different cultures. Cognitive linguistics favors the position that there are certain conceptual mechanisms that constrain conceptualization in different languages. Although there may well be differences in the way the same situation is conceptualized, each and every means of conceptualization may have independent motivation (more on the issue of cultural variation in Kövecses 2005).

Several parameters, such as form and meaning as well as the conceptual mechanisms providing motivations, have to be taken into consideration when studying the motivational similarities and differences of English and Hungarian idioms. Kövecses's (2005) categorization system, which is used as a starting point for the comparative analysis of the given database, differentiates between word forms, literal and figurative meanings, and the underlying conceptual mechanisms. With the help of a modified and adapted version of this categorization system, the similarities and differences between specific linguistic expressions of different languages can be examined in detail.

The English idioms and their Hungarian equivalents can thus be systematically described by the specific patterns that arise on the basis of the analysis of the idiom database. Generally, in the case of each idiom-equivalent pair, the word forms are necessarily different in each case, and their figurative meanings are always the same. Thus, variation can only be expected to occur in the literal meaning or the underlying conceptual mechanisms of the given idioms. As the analysis of the 122 English human body idioms and their Hungarian equivalents shows, the following major categories can be found concerning the different types of equivalency.

Possibility 1 consists of English and Hungarian equivalents with *different word forms* and *same literal meanings* which are motivated by *the same conceptual metaphors*, and *the same or different conceptual metonymies and conventional/cultural knowledge*, and have *the same figurative meaning*. The majority of the idiom-equivalent pairs (30,04%) belong to the category of ideal translation equivalents in which most of the features of the pairs correspond in the two languages. For example, in the case of *a free hand*, control is conceptualized via the human hand: the metonymy THE HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL and the metaphor CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE HAND motivate the idiom. In addition, the metaphor FREEDOM TO ACT IS FREEDOM TO MOVE is extremely important in grasping the meaning of the idiom. Similarly to the English idiom, the Hungarian equivalent *szabad kéz*, lit. “free hand”, is motivated by exactly the same mechanisms, and uses the same body part.

Possibility 2 consists of equivalent pairs with *different word forms* and *different literal meanings* which are motivated by *the same conceptual metaphors*, and *the same or different conceptual metonymies and conventional/cultural knowledge*, and have *the same figurative meaning*. This category includes equivalents that are less ideal translation equivalents since only half of the features correspond in the different languages. Possibility 2 is the second most frequent case in the idiom database. There is only a small difference between the number of pairs in Possibility 1 (30,04%) and Possibility 2 (28,98%). For instance, the idiom *turn a blind eye to something* is motivated by the metaphor ATTENTION IS LOOKING. The metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING and its entailments additionally motivate the meaning of the idiom. Ignorance is conceptualized as blindness, and not paying attention to something important as having an impaired vision. As our conventional knowledge tells us, if somebody does not want to see something, the person will not know about that thing in a proper way, maybe he/she will know nothing at all. The Hungarian idiom *szemet huny valami felett*, lit. “close the eye over something”, also implies the planned action of the agent, since it refers to deliberately closing the eyes when learning about something. In addition to ATTENTION IS LOOKING, KNOWING IS SEEING is definitely operational here, too, just like its entailment that not paying attention to something important is having an impaired vision.

Possibility 3 consists of English and Hungarian equivalents with *different word forms* and *different literal meanings* which are motivated by *different conceptual metaphors*, and *the same or different conceptual metonymies and conventional/cultural knowledge*, and have *the same figurative meaning*. This category comprises equivalents that are the least ideal translation equivalents since most features do not correspond in the different languages. This possibility occurs most often when Hungarian equivalents are not body part idioms, they use different body parts, or they refer to bodily actions and not to body parts. Thus, idiom-equivalent pairs in this group often utilize different source domains to achieve the same figurative meanings. This is the third largest group of idiom-equivalent pairs (23,32%). For example, *get out of hand* is also motivated by the control metonymy-metaphor pair THE HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL – CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE HAND. In addition, a further control metaphor, CONTROL OVER SOMETHING IS THE PHYSICAL MANIPULATION OF AN OBJECT, works here. The Hungarian equivalent, *elveszti az uralmát valami felett*, lit. “lose one’s power over something”, is primarily motivated by the metaphor CON-

TROL IS A VALUABLE POSSESSION, focusing on control as an object which can thus be lost unintentionally. The metaphor CONTROL IS UP is also at work, since the idiom is about having control *over* something.

Possibility 4 contains equivalents with *different word forms* and *different literal meanings* which are motivated by *different conceptual metaphors*, and *the same or different conceptual metonymies and conventional/cultural knowledge*, and have *different figurative meanings*. The analyzed idiom database does not contain any data that belongs to Possibility 4 since this category is mostly present in literary works (Kövecses 2005), which the present database is not concerned with.

Possibility 5 consists of idiom-equivalent pairs with *different word forms* and *different literal meanings*, which are motivated by *the same or different conventional/cultural knowledge* and not by conceptual metaphors or conceptual metonymies, and have *the same figurative meaning expressed by means of literal meaning*. This category shows that literal expressions can in some cases express figurative meanings. The fourth largest group of idiom-equivalent pairs is the group of Possibility 5 (12,01%). Most English idioms in this group may have figurative equivalents in Hungarian which are not present in the database (e.g., *hús-vér ember*, lit. “flesh-blood man” for *in the flesh*), thus these cases are suggested to be shortcomings of the idiom database and the dictionaries used. For instance, in the idiom *out of hand*, the hand again is seen as the instrument for control in accordance with the metonymy THE HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL and the metaphors CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE HAND and POSSESSION IS HOLDING SOMETHING IN THE HAND. In addition, the hand is conceptualized as a container, into and out of which entities (both physical and abstract) can enter and leave. Due to THE HAND STANDS FOR THE ACTIVITY/ACTION, the decision to let something go from the hand-container is referred to via mentioning only the hand, and not the activity itself. The literal equivalent, *gondolkodás nélkül*, lit. “without thinking”, focuses on the rapidness of the action, which is done without thinking about any precedence or consequence of the action.

Possibility 6 is a new category which does not occur in Kövecses’s (2005) categorization system. This group consists of equivalents which are motivated not by conceptual metaphors, but by *conceptual metonymies*. In the database, metonymical motivation is always similar in this category, whereas the literal meanings can be similar, partly similar, or different. The fifth largest group of idiom-equivalent pairs is this group (5,65%). Since the conceptual mechanisms motivating the idioms and their equivalents are the same, although only metonymical and not metaphorical, this group strengthens the positions of Possibilities 1 and 2. For example, the motivation of the idiom *come face to face with someone* is provided by the metonymy THE FACE STANDS FOR THE PERSON, thus the body part can stand for the whole person since the face and mimics provide direct contact with the person. The Hungarian idiom *szemtől-szemben*, lit. “from eye in eye”, uses another significant body part, the eye, for this purpose. Here, the metonymy EYES FOR THE PERSON is important in the motivation. Nonetheless, both metonymies belong to the general metonymy THE BODY PART STANDS FOR THE PERSON.

The findings of the present research confirm Kövecses’s (2005) claim that Possibility 1, with the least differences, is the largest group. It is also reinforced that the second most fre-

quent case is Possibility 2, where slightly more differences occur. Possibility 3 is also reinforced as the third largest group of idiom-equivalent pairs. Besides, the findings demonstrate the need for Possibilities 5 and 6, as several examples of the idiom database indicate the presence and importance of these categories. Possibility 4 is not present in any of the studies since the analyses do not concern literary language.

In sum, the majority (87,99%) of the expressions belong to the first four groups, namely, Possibilities 1, 2, 3, and 6, where conceptual mechanisms provide motivation for the figurative meanings of the expressions. There are only a small number of idiom-equivalent pairs that lack metaphorical and metonymical motivation, and whose meanings are expressed by means of literal meanings. The similarity on the level of metaphors is great. The same or partly similar metaphors motivate the figurative meanings in almost 60% of the cases (cf. Possibilities 1 and 2). Different conceptual metaphors occur in 23,32% of all cases (cf. Possibility 3). No metaphorical motivation is provided in 17,67% of the cases (cf. Possibilities 5 and 6). Frequently, metaphors and metonymies together provide motivation to idioms and their equivalents. However, it is also possible in a small number of cases (5,65%) to have conceptual metonymies only (cf. Possibility 6). Conventional/cultural knowledge most frequently goes together with conceptual metaphors and metonymies, but in few cases they happen to be the only motivational mechanisms (cf. Possibility 5).

2.2 Causes of variation

Causes of variation and alternative conceptualization can be manifold, including the cultural context, social concerns, cognitive preferences and styles and coherence (cf. Kövecses 2005). Differences in the cultural context include the different governing principles and key concepts in different cultures. Thus, culture-specific actions can be referred to in some cases, as a result of which culture-specific content is provided for the similar generic structure. Also, different specific-level metaphors and metonymies can be used in English and in Hungarian. Regarding social concerns, on the basis of the differing frequency of human body metaphors, Hungarian appears to use more diverse domains in addition to the human body as sources for the shared target domains. Differences in cognitive preferences/style include differences in the experiential focus and metaphor and metonymy preference. Although the universal bodily basis can, it does not have to, be utilized in the same way in different languages. This is due to the differences in the experiential focus, as different people may highlight different aspects of their bodily functioning in relation to a specific target domain. Differences in metaphor and metonymy preference mean that different cultures can choose between equally well motivated ways of conceptualization. Thus, in addition to the human body, Hungarian equivalents make use of further domains as well to express the same figurative meanings as the English idioms. Idioms and their equivalents in the database reflect the coherence of the universal relationship among the human body, conceptualization, language, and real-world objects and events.

3 Conclusion

The embodied view of linguistic meaning emphasizes the importance of people's ordinary, kinesthetic experiences in understanding the relations between the mind and the body

(cf. Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Gibbs 2003). Bodily experience is thus extremely important for us, humans, since it serves as the experiential basis of our cognition. It is argued that embodiment shapes why particular words and expressions convey the specific meanings they do. It is also maintained that embodiment shapes people's intuitions about, and understanding of, the meaning of linguistic expressions (Gibbs 1999). Concerning the database, on the one hand, the potentially universal metaphors are based on shared human experiences, in harmony with the embodiment hypothesis. On the other hand, because of the interactive nature of embodiment – the interaction between our bodily experience and the physical, social or cultural environment – cultural variation is present in English and Hungarian.

In general, the study supports and provides evidence for the view according to which conceptual mechanisms such as conceptual metaphor, metonymy, and conventional/cultural knowledge play an extremely important role in motivating English and Hungarian expressions. On the basis of analyzing the idiom database, it is found that similarity most often exists on the generic level, whereas differences tend to exist on the specific level. Cross-linguistic differences can concern the literal meanings of expressions, and the choice of specific conceptual mechanisms. On the basis of the idiom database, the most frequent case for the expression of the same figurative meaning is using different word forms, similar literal meanings, and similar conceptual mechanisms in English and in Hungarian. Idiom-equivalent pairs in which an increasing number of differences occur with respect to literal meanings and conceptual mechanisms rank lower as they are less and less frequent. Although the figurative meanings are shared, the literal meanings of the Hungarian equivalents can be either similar or different from those of the English idioms. Altogether, in almost 60% of all cases, Hungarian uses body part terms in the equivalents.

On the one hand, the similarities between English and Hungarian are the result of a universal motivation provided primarily by embodiment and the common experiential grounding of the specific linguistic expressions. Thus, the commonality between English and Hungarian is rooted in the common knowledge about, and the common bodily experiences with, the specific body parts. On the other hand, the differences between English and Hungarian are mostly the result of cultural preferences. Thus, different aspects of domains can be singled out in different languages, which can result in cross-cultural differences. In sum, universal embodiment can, but does not necessarily have to, lead to potentially universal metaphors since differences in the cultural preferences can also influence the emergence of metaphors used by specific languages and cultures.

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