

## **Incomprehensible Languages in Idioms: Functional Equivalents and Bilingual Dictionaries**

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*Phraseology is a source of interesting information on the speakers' world view and different fixed expressions are used in different languages when one does not understand the message. Lack of understanding of what is said or written is often associated with the inability to comprehend the language, which is proved by the use of idiomatic expressions containing names of different foreign languages considered to be particularly difficult in a given society. In this paper several bilingual dictionaries are consulted in order to: 1) find equivalents of some expressions of that kind in English, Polish and Spanish; 2) review their lexicographical treatment; and 3) see how the recorded parallels correspond with the functional view of idiom equivalents proposed by Dobrovol'skij (2000a, b).*

### **Introduction**

The aim of this short paper is to review the lexicographic treatment of selected idioms with a view to finding functionally adequate idiom equivalents in bilingual dictionaries. Language, and phraseology in particular, is a great source of cultural information, showing the community's beliefs, mentality and world view (Teliya et al. 1998). Often based on historical or cultural events, idioms sometimes prove particularly problematic when it comes to finding an equivalent in the target language. Nevertheless, Corpas Pastor (2000: 483-489) notices that even though translating phraseology can sometimes be a really challenging task, the majority of phraseological units, especially those within European languages, can be easily translated due to an "extraordinary parallelism" that exists between languages. In this study I am going to look up several English, Polish and Spanish idioms referring to the inability to understand what is said or written. Lack of understanding is often associated with the incapacity to understand the language as such and reference to some foreign language considered particularly difficult to understand is made in order to convey this meaning. The phrases to be discussed feature names of different languages as their constituents. Each English phrase has been looked up in two Polish and two Spanish bilingual dictionaries in order to indicate any similarities and differences between those languages. Next, Polish and Spanish idioms were consulted to check if their recorded English equivalents coincide with those previously found.

### **Functional equivalence**

Traditionally, cross-linguistic equivalents were divided on the basis of their structural properties and the similarity of their constituents into full or absolute equivalents, partial equivalents and non-equivalents. Dobrovol'skij (2000a, b) notices that the traditional view ignores conceptual foundations and claims that most of those full equivalents are not equivalents at all and suggests a functionally oriented typology. It searches for adequate equivalents that can be used in the same contexts both in source and target language, even though the traditional view would consider them non-equivalents due to differences in their lexical structure. The new typology is necessary "in order to enable the speaker to find real, functionally adequate L2-equivalents to given L1-idioms", since the traditional one distinguishes only pseudo-equivalents and the research based on it is "of no interest either for linguistic theory or for a practically oriented description of idiomatic expressions" (Dobrovol'skij 2000b: 372). He argues that it is the semantic resemblance that should be the basis of the cross-linguistic idiom comparison because the language user is interested in the meaning of an idiom and not its lexical structure. He notices that bilingual dictionaries record parallel expressions which cannot be considered

functional equivalents due to their discrepancies in semantic, syntactic or pragmatic properties. In the description of idioms, all of their combinatorial settings, contexts in which they can be used, have to be taken into account.

The present paper will take a closer look at some idioms used to express the lack of understanding in the three languages and which refer to another language in their lexical structure. The aim is to compare their equivalents recorded in selected bilingual dictionaries with this functional approach. The idioms in question are *It's all Greek to me* and *double Dutch* in English, *być/ siedzieć jak na tureckim kazaniu* (be / sit like on a Turkish sermon) and *to dla mnie chińszczyzna* (it's Chinese to me); *mówić po chińsku* (speak in Chinese) in Polish and *ser chino* (be Chinese), *sonar a chino* (sound like Chinese) in Spanish. The bilingual dictionaries which have been consulted are the following: *Wielki słownik polsko-angielski / angielsko-polski* (PWNO), *The Kościuszko Foundation The New Dictionary English-Polish / Polish-English* (KFND), *The Oxford Spanish Dictionary Spanish-English / English-Spanish* (OSD) and *Larousse gran diccionario inglés-español / español-inglés* (LGD).

### English-Polish / Polish-English

The translation of *It's all Greek to me* recorded in both English-Polish dictionaries, PWNO and KFND, is *to dla mnie chińszczyzna*. It seems that English speakers associate the Greek language with the difficult and incomprehensible one and the speakers of Polish have the same idea about the Chinese language. However, when we look up the entry *chińszczyzna* in the Polish-English part of PWNO we can find that it records the English translation as *double Dutch* accompanied by an explanation in brackets saying that it refers to something obscure, incomprehensible. Tomaszczyk (1988: 289) emphasises that “use should be made of meaning (sense) discriminations” and the subentry includes the above mentioned idiom *to dla mnie chińszczyzna* as *it's all Greek to me / double Dutch to me*, without any differentiation in meaning between the two expressions. The dictionary user can understand that they can be used interchangeably, whereas *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines *it's all Greek to me* as “a way of saying that you do not understand something that is said or written” and *double Dutch* as “spoken or written words which are nonsense and have no meaning”, additionally labelled as used disapprovingly. The treatment of the word *chińszczyzna* in KFND is similar, with *double Dutch* as something incomprehensible, but here only *it's Greek to me* is provided for the expression *to dla mnie chińszczyzna*. When we consult the idiom *double Dutch* in its English-Polish part, KFND again translates *double Dutch* as *chińszczyzna*, with the explanation in brackets saying that it refers to incomprehensible language. As shown in the definition above *double Dutch* means nonsensical and meaningless language and the word *chińszczyzna* does not have to imply any kind of chaos or lack of sense in what is being said or written, even though it is difficult to understand. The most extensive dictionary of the Polish language, *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego*, records two figurative meanings of the word *chińszczyzna* used in reference to language. The first one means the convoluted, unclear way of speaking and the second one, in the separate subentry, means something not known, not understood, so the addressee's failure to understand the message can result from the lack of his or her knowledge of the subject matter or vocabulary, not the inability of the speaker to express himself or herself properly. When we look up *double Dutch* in the English-Polish PWNO we can find it translated as *belkot*, which means gibberish, language without meaning; *to talk double Dutch- gadać bez sensu* (to gab without meaning); *It's double Dutch to me! – to dla mnie belkot* (it sounds gibberish to me). Although those parallel expressions in Polish are not idiomatic, the translation offered in that dictionary seems more adequate. Additionally, the use of informal words such as *gadać* or *belkot* maintains the informal character of the English expression.

Among various principles of the bilingual lexicography, Berkov (1990: 104-105) indicates numerous errors related to adequate equivalents, which are emphasised as the central problem. Here one of those problems has to be mentioned: “The compiler of a bilingual dictionary has to foresee and prevent mistakes a reader is apt to make”. In the entries *kazanie* (sermon) and *turecki* (Turkish) in KFND we can find a sentence in the past tense *siedział(am) jak na tureckim kazaniu* (I was sitting like on a Turkish sermon) and the translation *it was all Greek to me*. The

user is offered only the past form of both idioms, so it is not clear how to use them in the present tense correctly. The Polish idiom means to listen to something without understanding it, while *it is all Greek to me* does not necessarily mean that the speaker has continued listening for a certain time without understanding the message. The English one can be used in reference to both spoken and written language, so one can say *I don't want to read it because it's all Greek to me* but a similar sentence in Polish with the recorded parallel idiom is not possible. The Polish-English part of PWNO is not consistent and records different translations of *siedzieć / czuć się jak na tureckim kazaniu* depending on the entry. In the entry *kazanie* it is *to not have a clue about what is going on (around one)* and in the entry *turecki* it is *to not make head or tail of things*. Although both of the translations can be used to express the inability to understand something, it does not have to be the language that is not understood, and if it is, it can be both spoken and written so they can be used in far more contexts than the Polish idiom, not only when you listen to something that you do not understand.

### English-Spanish / Spanish-English

The Spanish *sonar a chino* is very similar to the Polish expression *to dla mnie chińszczyzna*. Here the two languages coincide to refer to Chinese as the difficult, incomprehensible language. Nevertheless, Spanish dictionaries tend to recognize some differences in meaning and offer more than one translation. In LGD the phrase *me suena a chino* is translated in two ways, simply as *I've never heard of it* with the explanation in brackets that it is used when we talk about something we do not know and the idiom *it's all Greek to me* when we do not understand something. Nevertheless, one's failure to understand the message can result from the fact that it conveys something new, never heard of before, so the two explanations provided overlap and that distinction is not fully justified. The entry *chino* in the Spanish-English OED records the expressions *es chino para mí* and *me suena a chino* and their translations into English are the following: *it's all Greek to me* (when we talk about the subject matter) and *it sounds like double Dutch* (when we talk about the language), so the translation is different depending on what we refer to, the subject matter or the language. After consulting only those two dictionaries an average dictionary user can feel slightly confused about which translation to choose.

In the English-Spanish part of the OED, *it's all Greek to me* is translated as *para mí es chino* and in LGD as *me suena a chino*. *Double Dutch* in OED is translated as *chino* and the idiom *that's double Dutch to me* as *para mí eso es chino*. In the LGD dictionary to *talk double Dutch* is translated as *hablar en chino*. In those Spanish dictionaries, similarly to the treatment of *chińszczyzna* in one of the Polish dictionaries discussed above, *chino* is treated as gibberish, language without any sense, whereas *Diccionario de la lengua española RAE* translates it only as a “lenguaje incomprensible” (incomprehensible language), and the definitions of the expression *sonar a chino o parecer chino* found in some phraseological dictionaries are “ser algo muy difícil de entender” (to be something very difficult to understand) (Buitrago Jiménez 1997: 383) or “resultar incomprensible” (to turn out to be incomprehensible) (Seco, Andrés, Ramos 2004: 275), which does not mean that the language as such is nonsensical.

### Conclusions

The above discussion shows that bilingual dictionaries tend to provide parallel idioms in the source and target language, so idiom equivalents can seem to be easily found. However, differences between dictionaries and inconsistencies within them do not facilitate the task of choosing the best equivalent. A closer analysis of recorded parallels discovers some subtle differences in meaning or other properties, which discredit most of them as functionally adequate equivalents. Sometimes offering a non-idiomatic translation to an idiomatic expression can prove more appropriate and functionally adequate than providing an apparently parallel idiom whose combinatorial properties do not coincide with those of the idiom in the source language.

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