

> **Telling it straight: A comparison of selected English and Polish idioms from the semantic field of speaking**

ARLETA ADAMSKA

**1 Introduction**

This paper looks at the problem of providing idiom equivalents in bilingual dictionaries. The departure point is the common situation where one L1 idiom is translated by several L2 idioms (and vice versa), often within the same dictionary. We believe that greater precision in the provision of idiomatic equivalents can be achieved through implementing the methodological instrument devised by Dobrovolskij and Piirainen (2005).<sup>1</sup> D&P (2005) are proponents of the so-called Conventional Figurative Language Theory, an approach which differs from the better-known Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT) in terms of its goals:

For the CMT, it is important to discover quasi-universal conceptual metaphors that underlie each single metaphorical expression (...) For the Conventional Figurative Language Theory, however, the level of the very general metaphor is mostly of no interest. The Conventional Figurative Language Theory has to explain how the characteristics of figurativeness (above all, the image component) influence semantic and pragmatic specifics of CFUs [conventional figurative units] (D&P 2005:130).

In the following, Conventional Figurative Language Theory will be combined with those basic elements of CMT to which D&P themselves make frequent reference.

**2 Sources and types of idiom equivalence**

The idiomatic content plane is built of two elements: the actual meaning and the mental image. The fact that these are relatively independent of each other results, as D&P (2005:68) put it, in 'the existence of idioms which have (nearly) the same image, but differ with regard to their actual meanings, as well as the existence of idioms which have (nearly) the same actual meaning, but differ with regard to their images. Hence, these two major types of non-equivalence and their different combinations can be distinguished.' Establishing whether two idioms are equivalent (either within one language or cross-linguistically) requires a systematic

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1 Henceforth D&P (2005).

comparison between their respective actual (i.e. figurative) meanings and underlying images (literal readings). The possible configurations of differences constitute the semantic parameter of idiom equivalence, the other two dimensions being the syntactic and the pragmatic parameter.

For reasons of space, we shall only consider four candidates for equivalence: two idioms each for English and Polish.

### 3 Analysis

#### 3.1 – *not mince (one's) words* (variant: *without mincing words*)

##### 3.1.1 – *Semantics*

actual meaning:<sup>2</sup> to use direct, forceful words when speaking your mind, to say what you mean without trying to be polite

The positive form, *mince (one's) words* is not an exact antonym, as it includes a pejorative component:

CIDE: *She found herself irritated by the interviewer's mincing (=too delicate and not direct enough) way of asking questions.*

BYU-BNC:<sup>3</sup> In a very real sense, then, the Big Bang Universe has existed forever. Some scientists --; and we should add hastily that they are in a small minority --; feel that this is mincing words: they feel that by 'forever' we should mean an infinite number of billions of years rather than a period whose duration can be estimated.

##### mental image

Holt (1961) relates *mince* to Latin *minutia* 'smallness, fineness', offering the analogy with the mincing of meat as a motivating link. The idea is repeated in Brewer: '[f]rom the mincing of meat to make it more digestible or pleasing.' Apparently, the image is that of words (which

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2 The actual meanings we postulate for all analysed idioms have been synthesised from the dictionaries cited in the References.

3 <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc>

contain ideas)<sup>4</sup> being cut into small pieces so that they can be received without discomfort. ‘Unminced’ words are gross and indigestible. The secondary meaning of the adjective *indigestible* (‘not easy to understand’) constitutes part of the linguistic evidence for the metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD, with its submappings: ACCEPTING IS SWALLOWING and UNDERSTANDING IS DIGESTING (Kövecses 2002:72-74). The mental image highlights the manner of serving the ‘food’ (words/ideas).

### 3.1.2 – Syntax

The idiom adopts two major patterns: [Neg (*not*) +V (*mince*) + (det) (*one’s*) N (*words*)] or [prep (*without*) + gerund (*mincing*) + N (*words*)]. It takes both human and, less frequently, non-human subjects (2 out of the 37 hits in the BNC):

Auto Express did not mince its words: ‘It’s difficult to see how much more Ford could have done to improve a car that was already very good.’

The introductory leaflet did not mince its words: ‘It was a period when words contradicted deeds, propaganda realities, and when everyday life was full of fear, hypocrisy, and people felt helpless, having been at the mercy of those in power.’

### 3.1.3 – Pragmatics

#### degree of familiarity and/or textual frequency

The expression appears to be commonly known; it is marked as a key idiom in CCID2.

#### illocutionary function

First, the idiom acts metalinguistically, preparing the addressee for the harsh words they are about to hear (occasionally with an implied negative assessment of whoever utters them):

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4 In accordance with Reddy’s (1979) Conduit Metaphor, (i) THE MIND IS A CONTAINER (FOR IDEAS), (ii) IDEAS (OR MEANINGS) ARE OBJECTS, (iii) COMMUNICATION IS SENDING, (iv) LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS (FOR IDEAS-OBJECTS) (Krzyszowski 1997:170). As further noted by Krzyszowski (1997:174), component (iv) of this conceptual metaphor ‘can also be instantiated by more specific source domains since (...) containers may be of various kinds. There are numerous linguistic expressions coherent with such instantiations. Thus, words can be ‘soft’ or ‘hard’, ‘light’ or ‘heavy’, ‘delicate’ or ‘rough’, ‘sharp’ or ‘blunt’, ‘heated/hot’ or ‘cold/cool’. They can be ‘cracked’ (like nuts), ‘coined’ (like medals), distorted (like practically anything), ‘minced’ (like meat), ‘borrowed’, though practically never returned, ‘played on’ (like musical instruments), ‘broken’ (like fragile objects), and ‘weighed’.

COBUILD2: *Never one to mince words, Carlie told her daughter that her looks were fading.*

LDOCE3: *He's a brash New Yorker who doesn't mince his words.*

BYU-BNC: They did not mince their words. One developer said his speech was 'as welcome as a bad smell in a space capsule'.

Secondly, mincing one's words is generally regarded as undesirable:

BYU-BNC: You don't have to mince your words for my benefit, Harry

BYU-BNC: Can you promise you won't be mincing your words? No way --; we'll tell the truth when it's needed to be told.

BYU-BNC: It is unkind --; perhaps I should not mince words --; it is cruel to keep albino fish under bright lights; with a fish like the Oscar, often kept in a tank with no shade to escape into, this detail is particularly important.

3.2 – *not beat about/around the bush* (variant: *without beating about/around the bush*)

3.2.1 – *Semantics*

actual meaning

It is convenient to start the analysis with the definition of the opposite: *beat about the bush* 'approach a matter cautiously, indirectly, even over-cautiously or circuitously, because it is unpleasant, embarrassing, or delicate' (Brewer, CIDE, LDOCE3). *Not beat about the bush* is the exact antonym: 'approach a matter directly and immediately, without unnecessary delay, get to the point quickly.'

mental image

The expression is believed to have originated in hunting: 'one goes carefully when beating a bush to find if any game is lurking within' (Brewer). The image of carefully circling a bush in search of game corresponds to the cautious manner of approaching the subject as if it were a dangerous or skittish animal. The opposite, *not beating about the bush*, evokes the image of not bothering to be very careful in approaching the game (or the subject of conversation).

3.2.2 – *Syntax*

The idiom is sometimes preceded by *(there is) no point in ...* (5 times out of 35 in the BNC). Two major patterns are attested: [Neg (*not*) +V (*beat*) + prep (*about*) NP (*the bush*)] or [prep (*without*) + gerund (*beating*) + prep (*about*) NP (*the bush*)]. The expression typically takes a human subject:

BYU-BNC: I mean, let's not beat about the bush here...

BYU-BNC: I won't beat about the bush about creeping privatisation because...

In the version without *not*, it is often preceded by other elements of negation:

BYU-BNC: He never beat about the bush when something was annoying him.

BYU-BNC: Seeing no point in beating about the bush, she spoke directly.

The positive form, although less frequent, is by no means rare:

BYU-BNC: ...well we could beat about the bush but...

BYU-BNC: She winced at their infelicities, at the clumsy way they beat about the bush.

### 3.2.3 – *Pragmatics*

#### stylistic properties

The idiom can be encountered in informal as well as formal contexts. Examples of the former include:

BYU-BNC: ..., and let's not beat about the bush, 'drop the dead f\*\*\*\*\*g donkey' and play Wallace and Forrester up front.

BYU-BNC: You know, the one that gets on your nerves! Not very nice! Well Well she was! Not worth beating around the bush is there? Well are there single rooms there or Yeah! they're single, the accommodation is single then is it?

In formal contexts, the expression seems to stand out and, as such, is sometimes marked graphically by inverted commas. The use of the familiar idiom presumably serves to make a difficult message more accessible:

BYU-BNC: The reason that Jesus talked with this woman was that he wanted to save her. That is, to say, he wanted to reveal to her, her sinful condition and need, and this he did when he speaks to her, about her sinful life. He doesn't beat about the bush. He doesn't come soft with it.

BYU-BNC: That is to say, the important international conference to take place at Darlington Hall was by then looming ahead of us, leaving little room for indulgence or 'beating about the bush'.

degree of familiarity and /or textual frequency

The BNC total frequency is 35 (per 100 million words), that is, similar to that of *not mince (one's) words*.

cultural component

The background knowledge pertains to hunting customs, in particular to the fact that the hunter was required to walk carefully around any vegetation suspected of hiding a fox or a game bird.

illocutionary function

The idiom functions as a veiled comment on people's verbal behaviour. While *beating about the bush* tends to be condemned, the opposite is praised as a token of the speaker's openness and directness:

BYU-BNC: She winced at their infelicities, at the clumsy way they beat about the bush. She saw that it had been a mistake --; an evasion perhaps? --; to hamper herself with the abstractions of that cryptic poem

BYU-BNC: He was often charming, sometimes rude, but always straight. He never beat about the bush when something was annoying him, he was never afraid to give it to you straight, to say exactly what he thought.

### 3.3 – *nie przebierać w słowach*

#### 3.3.1 – *Semantics*

actual meaning: to use direct, forceful, often crude or vulgar words when speaking your mind, to say what you mean without trying to be polite

The use of crude words is foregrounded in all dictionary definitions; in the examples found in the National Corpus of Polish,<sup>5</sup> words of this kind often feature in the co-text:

Do du... z taką demokracją – nie przebiera w słowach 46-letni Kazimierz Świdroń. [Sod such democracy – 46-year-old Kazimierz Świdroń doesn't pick and choose words]

...sąsiadka przystępuje do ataku. Nie przebiera w słowach. Wyzywa mnie od najgorszych i wciąż grozi... [the neighbour launches an attack. She doesn't pick and choose words. She calls me names and keeps threatening me...]

mental image

The verb *przebierać* is defined in SJP online as follows:

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5 <http://www.nkjp.pl>

- 1 oczyścić coś, wybierając to, co właściwe, a odrzucając to, co uszkodzone, zepsute [clean something, choosing what is appropriate, and rejecting what is damaged, rotten]
- 2 nie móc się zdecydować na coś, rzadziej na kogoś [be unable to decide on sth, rarely on sb]

SSJP further specifies the latter meaning as: wybredzać, grymasić ‘be choosy, fussy’. The verb *przebierać* is also encountered in expressions such as *przebierać jak w ulęgalkach* lit. ‘sort sth like wild pears’, meaning ‘pick and choose’; *nie przebierać w środkach* ‘do sth by fair means or foul’. Accordingly, the emerging image of the idiom under analysis is that of someone not caring to separate the good objects (words) from the bad. If one is not ‘choosy’ about words, one does not care whether they are appropriate or polite.

### 3.3.2 – Syntax

*Nie przebierać w słowach* [Neg (*not*) + V (*pick and choose*) + prep (*in*) +Nloc (*words*)] typically takes a human subject, which is sometimes expressed by a collective noun, such as *załoga* ‘crew’ or *opozycja* ‘the opposition’. The verb component can take the present participle form, e.g.:

NKJP: ...choć pismo nie przebierając w słowach atakuje i Cimoszewicza, i także jego samego. [...although the magazine, not picking and choosing words, criticizes both Cimoszewicz and himself.]

There are also examples of the adjectivised expression [Neg. (*not*) + Adj (*picking and choosing*) + prep (*in*) +Nloc (*words*)] modifying a nonhuman subject such as *polemika* ‘polemics’, *debata* ‘debate’, *atak* ‘attack’ or *krytyka* ‘criticism’, e.g.:

NKJP:...obok dawnej, często totalnej i nie przebierającej w słowach krytyki, dostrzeżemy również elementy...[side by side with the old, often total criticism which did not pick and choose words, we can also discern elements of..]

The idiom is only occasionally used without the negative:

NKJP: ...sympatyczny, przyjemny, łagodny. Mówi najwyraźniej przebierając w słowach, jest cukierkowaty. [...likeable, pleasant, gentle. He evidently speaks picking and choosing his words, he is sugary...]

*Przebierać w słowach* is not a simple antonym of the canonical form. It means: 'to use excessively mild terms to express your opinion', rather than: 'not to use rude words when expressing your opinion'.

### 3.3.3 – *Pragmatics*

#### stylistic properties

The dictionaries are silent on this point. In the corpus, the idiom is found in both informal and formal contexts.

degree of familiarity and /or textual frequency

The idiom is commonly known. It appears 146 times per 350 million words.

#### illocutionary function

The expression is used to prepare the addressee for the unpleasant words which are about to follow. It can also act as a (negative) metalinguistic comment on someone's way of speaking.

### 3.4 – *nie owijać w bawełnę* (variant: *bez owijania w bawełnę*)

#### 3.4.1 – *Semantics*

actual meaning: to speak or write about something openly, without using euphemisms, e.g.:

NKJP: Mówi prosto, dosadnie, nie owija w bawełnę...[He speaks simply, bluntly, doesn't 'wrap it in cotton'...]

NKJP: Jak coś mi leży na wątrobie, to mówię. Na ogół nie owijam w bawełnę. W związku z tym mam dużo wrogów. [When something bothers me, I speak out. I do not normally 'wrap it in cotton'. As a result I have many enemies.]

NKJP: Nie ma co owijać w bawełnę – chciałem uciekać. [No use 'wrapping it in cotton' – I wanted to run.]

The truth being told is usually difficult and/or unpleasant, e.g.:

NKJP: Dąbrowski patrzy smutnej prawdzie prosto w oczy i nie owijając w bawełnę mówi: – Nie myślałem, że będzie aż tak źle. [Dąbrowski faces the sad truth and says without 'wrapping it in cotton' – I did not expect it to be that bad.]

NKJP: Nie ma co owijać w bawełnę. Spisujemy się słabo... [No point in 'wrapping it in cotton'. We are doing poorly...]



### mental image

As Professor Długosz-Kurczabowa explains,<sup>6</sup> ‘the image of the burgeoning white fluff coming out of the cotton seed forms the basis for metaphorical meanings of this word [*cotton*]. Thus, the idiom’s underlying image is that of wrapping something in the threads of the cotton plant. Even if the surface of the object is rough, the layer of white cotton makes it look soft, deceitfully safe and innocent: cotton hides the real nature of the thing it envelops. Here it is, of course, the objectified hard words that are (not supposed to be) wrapped in cotton. The motivating metaphor seems to be KNOWING IS SEEING (Kövecses 2002:59).

#### 3.4.2 – Syntax

The idiom is frequently accompanied by *nie będę* ‘I’m not going to...’, *nie ma co...* ‘There is no point in...’. It often combines with *mówić* ‘speak’. Adverbials of manner such as *szczerze* ‘sincerely’, *otwarcie* ‘openly’, *uczciwie* ‘honestly’ are frequently found in the immediate co-text, echoing and reinforcing the meaning of the phrase.

The idiom occurs both in the negative and positive form. The latter, less frequent, has the meaning ‘express yourself indirectly, use euphemisms’. The Agent is always human. The following patterns are attested:

*nie owijać coś/nie owijać czegoś w bawełnę* [Neg (*not*) + V (*wrap*) (*sth*)+ prep (*in*) + Nacc (*cotton*)];

(*mówić*) *nie owijając w bawełnę* [(V)(*speak*) +Neg (*not*) + PresParticiple (*wrapping*) + prep (*in*) + Nacc (*cotton*)];

(*mówić*) *bez owijania w bawełnę* [(V)(*speak*) + prep (*without*) + Ngen (*wrapping*) + prep (*in*) + Nacc (*cotton*)].

In the corpus there are only two examples of the idiom without negation:

NKJP: Pisałem, naturalnie, bardzo ostrożnie, owijając w bawełnę.

[I wrote very carefully, of course, ‘wrapping it in cotton’]

NKJP: Przez długi czas wszelkie nasze zabiegi kampanijno-prewencyjne odwoływały się do aluzji i ‘owijania w bawełnę’.

Ich przesłanie było słabo czytelne, zwłaszcza dla młodzieży. [For a long time all our campaigning-preventive efforts relied on allusion and ‘wrapping it in cotton’. Their message was unclear, especially to young people.]

There is also a maximally reduced nominalised form, the relatively new (and infrequent) creation:

*bez bawełny* [prep (*without*) + Ngen (*cotton*)]

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6 PWN online information service: <http://poradnia.pwn.pl/lista.php?szukaj=bez+ogr%F3dekandkat=18>.

### 3.4.3 – Pragmatics

#### stylistic properties

The expression is definitely informal, although none of the consulted dictionaries labels it as such.

#### degree of familiarity and /or textual frequency

The idiom is commonly known. The corpus search yields 182 hits (per 350 million words).

#### cultural component

The knowledge involved is that of cotton growing on plantations, especially the appearance of cotton seeds surrounded by soft white threads, with their connotations of delicacy and innocence.

#### illocutionary function

‘Wrapping (sth) in cotton’ is synonymous with being devious, and the behaviour in question is generally condemned, as evidenced by the frequent occurrence of the negative imperative (‘Don’t wrap (it) in cotton’). Speaking ‘without cotton’, on the other hand, is assumed to characterise a straightforward, honest person:

NKJP: ...jest człowiekiem prostolinijnym, nie kluczy, nie owija w bawełnę tego, co ma do powiedzenia. [...he is a straightforward man, he does not hedge, does not ‘wrap in cotton’ what he has to say]

NKJP: ...nie boi się mówić wprost, gdy coś mu się nie podoba, nie owija niczego w bawełnę, tylko przedstawia swój punkt widzenia. [...he is not afraid to speak out when he doesn’t like something, he does not ‘wrap anything in cotton’ but presents his point of view]

As a rule, this way of telling the truth is appreciated:

NKJP: Potrzebujemy kogoś, kto powiedziałby nam brutalnie, bez owijania w bawełnę kilka ważnych prawd o naszym stanie zdrowia [We need someone who would tell us with brutal honesty, ‘without wrapping in cotton’, a few truths about our state of health.]

NKJP: Jego siła polega na tym, że nie owijając w bawełnę, mówi ludziom o tym, co ich naprawdę interesuje i boli... [His strength lies in his ‘not wrapping it in cotton’; he talks to people about what they are really interested in and concerned about...]

Still, isolated contexts can be found when such an open way of speaking is evaluated negatively:

NKJP: ...zawsze rąbał swoją prawdę nietaktownie, bez owijania w bawełnę. [...he would always give it straight, tactlessly, without 'wrapping it in cotton']

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 – *not mince (one's) words vs. nie przebierać w słowach*

The actual meanings of both idioms involve the component of verbal aggression. The difference lies in the level of that aggression and in the resulting degree of perceived rudeness. The English idiom implies that the speaker does not bother to use euphemisms ('minced' words), so that neutral words are used where more delicate ones might be appropriate; the Polish expression stresses that, instead of neutral words, rude ones are used. The ultimate effect is, of course, the same: perceived tactlessness and, possibly, offence.

Both idioms include the lexical component *words*. Words are objectified, which makes it possible to handle them manually. Though in one case the mental image is that of the mincing of objects and in the other of choosing them carefully, both idioms hinge on not doing something because of disregard for another person's feelings, and both are motivated by the combination of the ontological metaphor IDEAS ARE THINGS and the structural conduit metaphor LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS FOR IDEAS. There are also syntactic analogies: the subject can be human or not; the patterns have a common element [Neg+V+(...)+N]. Neither idiom is subject to any special stylistic restrictions, and both can serve the purpose of pejorative evaluation in discourse. The implications of their opposite (but not exactly antonymous) forms are also similar: *przebierać w słowach* 'to use excessively mild terms to express your opinion' corresponds to the sense present in *mincing manner* 'a prim manner, one of affected delicacy' (Brewer).

### 4.2 – *not beat about the bush vs. nie owijać w bawełnę*

Despite their divergent images, the idioms are semantically close. Superficially very different, the actions of circling a bush and of wrapping something in cotton share the circular movement. The two images evoke slightly different connotations: we circle the bush because we are afraid of scaring away whatever it hides; we wrap an object in cotton in order to hide it or to make it appear more acceptable on the outside. *Beating about the bush* entails more hesitation on the part of the speaker, caused

by apprehension in approaching the subject, whereas ‘wrapping (sth) in cotton’ seems to require more control and premeditation. Nonetheless, these are nuances of emotive meaning, so the actual meanings can be regarded as equivalent. Additionally, the syntactic patterns and combinatorial properties are the same. Although the Polish idiom may be slightly more informal than the English one, both carry a positive evaluation in discourse.

## 5 Conclusions

The important question of bilingual lexicography: whether to give a verbatim translation of a SL phraseological unit or always aim at a TL phraseological unit of the same kind as the SL item, does not have an agreed upon answer. Still, the general preference for idiomatic equivalents seems clear. Thus, e.g., Svensén (1987 [1993]:156) claims that ‘[i]dioms in the source language must as far as possible be paralled in the target language by idioms with the same content.’ Roberts (1996:193) recommends idiomatic translations whenever possible; only in cases where an idiomatic equivalent is clearly lacking is she willing to accept a literal translation.

We are inclined to agree, with the important proviso that, to start with, a microanalysis along the lines presented here should be conducted in order to ascertain the degree of similarity between the candidates for equivalents. Admittedly, this kind of fine-grained comparison may not be a realistic requirement for general-purpose dictionary projects, but it should definitely feature as a crucial step in the compilation of bilingual dictionaries of idioms. Ideally, such dictionaries ought to include in their entries both TL paraphrases and idiomatic equivalents – provided, of course, that the latter can be identified, i.e. in cases such as those presented above.

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