

Phraseological False Friends in English and Slovene and the Metaphors behind them

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The interest in false lexical equivalence reflects the interest in language contact, the observation of which always leads to the conclusion that formally identical and similar words and word combinations in different languages do not necessarily overlap semantically. Dictionaries of false friends deal with one-word lexical items, but false-friend relationship can also be established in phraseology. The aim of this paper is to look at phraseological components of English and Slovene lexicons with a view to identifying and describing the false semantic equivalence between idioms in these two languages.

When studying false lexical equivalence, the closeness or sameness of form has been made tertium comparationis. Several phraseological units that are the same or similar in form but different in meaning in English and Slovene are analysed in the paper. Some of these pairs of idioms show certain common features, such as comparison, emotion, spoken or written communication. Phraseological false friends are illustrated by examples and similarities and differences between the idiom in English and the phraseological false friend in Slovene are commented upon.

Since phraseological as well as lexical false friends represent a great problem in communication, translation and lexicographic treatment, it is necessary to first raise awareness of the lexical traps into which non-native speakers of English as well as any other language may easily fall, regardless of their level of linguistic knowledge. It is, therefore, essential to find and treat these pairs of idioms appropriately and acquaint learners with them by including them in course books, in bilingual, general and especially phraseological dictionaries.

1. Introduction

When comparing lexical and semantic systems of two languages, we come across lexical items that are the same or very similar in form but different in meaning, which leads to false interpretation in bilingual communication. In linguistics, such pseudo equivalents are referred to as false friends.

False friends have been of linguistic concern at least since 1928, when the term ‘false friends of the translator’ was introduced to refer to an occurrence that must have been known much earlier (Koessler and Derocquigny 1928). Therefore, the interest in false friends cannot be called a novel occurrence.

False friends have drawn the attention of linguists and lexicographers for two reasons: firstly, from the point of view of practice, it is necessary to translate them appropriately to avoid being misunderstood; and secondly, from the theoretical and linguistic aspect, it is necessary to explain the origin of the semantic difference by an adequate methodological process (cf. Matešić 1995: 239, 240). The explanation of phraseological false friends (PFFs), however, should not be based only on etymology. On the contrary, the images behind many phraseological units can very often be attributed to folk etymology, which means that the images trigger certain associations in native speakers who try to explain the origin of a phraseological unit in this way.

The interest in false lexical equivalence reflects the interest in language contact, the observation of which always leads to the conclusion that formally identical and similar words and word combinations in different languages do not necessarily overlap semantically. This has inspired linguists to scrutinize the vocabularies of different languages with an eye to identifying false cognates and then to provide a lexical description of their form and meaning in dictionaries (cf. Szpila 2006: 74).

As a rule, dictionaries of false friends deal with one-word lexical items, which is logical because they are more numerous and more frequently used, the consequence being that they represent a more common trap for a non-native speaker. However, false-friend relationships can also be established in phraseology but these are far less frequent. This is because fixed expressions, especially highly colourful and metaphorical idioms and proverbs, are comparatively infrequent. According to Moon (1994: 117), they appear to be more frequent in spoken than in written text, although to date there have been few extensive studies of their actual distribution. In *Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms*, 2nd edition (CCDI2), the most frequent idioms and meanings of idioms, as they are found in the *Bank of English*, are marked with a special symbol. Those idioms represent only about a third of the idioms in this dictionary. It should also be noted that only a few high-frequency idioms in this dictionary are as common as the items in the *Collins COBUILD English Advanced Learner's Dictionary* that are marked with a single black diamond (a symbol marking the frequency of headwords in this learner's dictionary; in this dictionary, there is a three-scale marking of frequency, where one diamond indicates the words that are least frequent out of those that are marked; it should be noted that not all words are marked by frequency) (cf. CCDI2: xiv).

However, most linguists dealing with false friends focus on lexemes, while studies on PFFs are not numerous. One study concerns German-Russian PFFs (Rajxštejn 1980), PFFs in French and German are the subject of Ettinger's research (Ettinger 1994), German and Dutch PFFs are discussed by Piirainen (1997, 1999), and the same author also considers other language pairs (Piirainen 2001, 2004a, 2004b). English and Polish PFFs are studied by Szpila (2000), whereas Croatian and German PFFs are dealt with by Matešić (1995).

Since we will not deal with false friends in general but rather focus on PFFs, let us first try to define the phenomenon in question. It must be stressed that PFFs pose more subtle and complicated problems than one-word false friends because they resemble each other on the level of mental images and lexical constituents, i.e., on the level of inner form, whereas they display significant differences on the semantic level. PFFs evoke different images, and their identity does not, as is the case in words (e.g., *aktualen* 'topical' vs. *actual*), concern the form. Therefore, Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2005: 109) define this lexical phenomenon by focussing on mental image and meaning: 'False friends in conventional figurative language are two or more expressions that evoke almost identical or very similar mental images but show significant differences in the actual meaning'. Szpila (2000: 79), on the other hand, concentrates on formal characteristics and meaning and defines PFFs as 'phraseological units in two or more languages whose lexical and syntactic structure is identical or similar but which differ in the scope of their extension'.

Very often linguists concerned with false friends from a theoretical point of view publish dictionaries as the outcome of their efforts to describe and register false cognates, but PFFs are not usually dealt with in dictionaries of false friends. Szpila studied twelve dictionaries of false friends, only one of which included PFFs (there designated as phraseological traps or misleading phraseologisms) (Szpila 2006: 82, 83).

The aim of this paper is to look at phraseological components of English and Slovene lexicons with a view to identifying and describing the false semantic equivalence between idioms in these two languages. The term 'idiom' is here understood as a linguistic unit comprising two or more items whose meaning does not represent the sum of meanings of its

individual components, i.e., it is characterized by semantic irregularity. In other words, an idiom is complex as regards its form and simplex as regards its meaning.

2. Idioms in English and their phraseological false friends in Slovene

When studying false lexical equivalence, the closeness or sameness of form has been made *tertium comparationis*. Several phraseological units that are the same or similar in form but different in meaning in English and Slovene are analysed in this chapter. First, a table is included giving details about each individual idiom. In the left-hand column, the idiom in English is followed by the definition of its meaning and its appropriate semantic equivalent in Slovene with a gloss in brackets indicating a literal translation of the Slovene equivalent. The right-hand column lists the PFF in Slovene, which is also followed by the definition of its meaning and its appropriate semantic equivalent in English. Then, the similarities and differences between the idiom in English and the PFF in Slovene are commented upon.

Some of these pairs of idioms show certain common features, whereas many of them have nothing in common.

The examples below represent a comparison in Slovene but not in English:

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
apple of one's eye	used only in combination with the verb 'paziti': paziti na koga kot na punčico svojega očesa
<i>Definitions:</i>	
a person or thing that is loved more than any other	take care of somebody very much
<i>Translations:</i>	
ljubljenček koga (= 'one's favourite')	guard with one's life

In the time of the great West Saxon king, Alfred (848–99), the pupil at the centre of the eye was known as the *apple*, since it was erroneously thought to be an apple-shaped solid. (Indeed this use, if not the concept behind it, persisted into the first half of the nineteenth century.) Since the delicate pupil of the eye is essential for vision, it is a part that is cherished and protected at all costs. Thus *apple of the eye* was used as a figure for a much loved person or thing. King Alfred used the phrase in this sense in his translation of Gregory's *Curia Pastoralis* (c. 885). When the Bible was translated into English, William Tyndale used the phrase to render a number of texts such as Deuteronomy 32:10, where the Lord's care for Israel is described thus: *He found him in a desert land, and in the waste, howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye* (Flavell, Flavell 2006: 8–9). (Note: This passage contains the verb 'keep' meaning 'have or take charge or care of', which closely resembles the meaning of the verb 'paziti' in the Slovene phraseological unit.)

Interestingly, a comparison of the King James Version of the Bible from 1611 (column 1 below), the Slovene Standard Translation from 1997 (column 2, paragraph 1 below) and Dalmatin's Bible from 1584 (column 2, paragraph 2 below) reveals that all the occurrences of 'apple of one's eye' correspond in the Standard Slovene Translation to 'punčica svojega očesa' or to the shortened form 'punčica', where the meaning of 'svojega očesa' is implied, and to 'sèrkala njegoviga ozhešfa or 'sèrklu' v'ozhefsi' in Dalmatin's Bible. In the older Slovene translation of the Bible, the noun 'zrklo' (as it is spelt in standard modern Slovene) is used as opposed to 'punčica' in the contemporary translation (these two Slovene nouns are

identical in meaning). Thus, in both English and Slovene versions of the Bible, they are identical as far as lexis is concerned.

For example:

Zech 2,8

For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth *the apple of his eye*.

Kajti tako govori GOSPOD nad vojskami, ki me s svojim veličastvom pošilja k narodom, ki so vas plenili, kajti kdor se vas dotakne, se dotakne *punčice njegovega očesa*:

Sakaj taku pravi GOSPVD Zebaot: On me je poflal k'Ajdom, kateri fo vas obrupali: nyh muzh ima konez. Kateri fe vas dotakne, ta fe dotakne *sèrkala njegoviga ozheffa*.

Sir 17,22

The alms of a man is as a signet with him, and he will keep the good deeds of man as *the apple of the eye*, and give repentance to his sons and daughters.

Človekova miloščina je pred njim kakor pečatni prstan, na človekovo dobroto gleda *kakor na punčico*. (Svojim sinovom in hčeram daje možnost spreobrnjenja.)

On téh ludy dobru djanje hrani, kakòr en pezhatni pèrtan, inu dobra della *varuje, kakòr sèrklu v'ozhefsi*.

It is evident from the above Slovene versions of the Bible that this phraseological unit as used in modern Slovene is similar in lexis to the Slovene Standard Translation from 1997, whereas Dalmatin's Bible from 1584 uses a noun that is not present in the phraseological unit today. This means that the development of the phraseological unit in Slovene went in a direction opposite to that in English. In English, the lexis in the phraseological unit resembles that in the King James Version of the Bible from 1611 (i.e., the older version) and not that in the Contemporary English Version from 1999 (i.e., the more recent version).

The Biblical meaning of the lexical item in question is 'something that is treasured/protected/loved greatly', which means that the original meaning corresponds neither to the current meaning in English nor to that in Slovene (or maybe to a certain extent to both). In the Contemporary English Version from 1999, 'the apple of one's eye' is nowhere to be found. If we study the translation of the above extracts in the Contemporary English Version, we can see that some other metaphorical expressions are used (see the underlined parts in the examples taken from the Contemporary English Version below).

Zech 2,8

Then the glorious LORD All-Powerful ordered me to say to the nations that had raided and robbed Zion: *Zion is as precious to the LORD as are his eyes*. Whatever you do to Zion, you do to him.

Sir 17,22

The Lord *values our gifts to the poor as much as we value fine jewelry or a most prized possession*.

By comparing the King James Version and the Contemporary English Version, we can establish that the semantic meaning is retained, although it is realized by different lexical items. In both examples taken from the Contemporary English Version and quoted above, the comparison is expressed by the structure 'as precious [...] as' and 'as much as', whereas King James Version uses 'the apple of the/his eye'. Here, a parallel can be drawn between the Contemporary English Version and the Slovene Standard Translation, since in both versions

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of the Bible comparison is expressed in these passages. Comparison is, however, also preserved in the current meaning of the idiom in Slovene.

Interestingly, the idiom in English and its literal counterpart in Slovene both originate from the Bible. One would therefore expect full semantic equivalence, but strangely enough, this is not the case. The reasons for this deviation should be sought in the history of language development: at one point the meanings in English and Slovene diverged and acquired the connotations we know today. In English, the idiom refers to a person or thing that is loved greatly, whereas in Slovene the focus is on comparison; thus, the meaning of the verb which is the obligatory component element of the phraseological unit is emphasised by ‘kot na punčico svojega očesa’ (‘like the apple of one’s eye’). The part of the Slovene phraseological unit that corresponds to the English idiom has the adverbial meaning, which is strongly emphatic, implying ‘very much’. It should be stressed that the meaning of the phraseological unit in Slovene is closer to the original meaning as found in the Bible. In English, however, the meaning of this expression has undergone more drastic changes and, in addition it does not include the element of comparison.

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
walk on eggs/eggshells	hoditi kot po jajcih
<i>Definitions:</i>	
be very careful how you behave around someone because you might easily make them angry or upset	walk with careful, soft steps
<i>Translations:</i>	
ravnati s kom v rokavicah/z rokavicami (= ‘deal with sb in gloves’)	walk carefully

The common feature of the English idiom and the Slovene PFF is the ‘carefulness’ component. The nominal slot can be filled with two nouns in English and just one in Slovene (jajce = egg). However, egg as well as eggshell is associated with thinness and delicacy, with something that is very brittle or fragile. Consequently, eggs should be handled with care. In Slovene, the verb is used in its literal meaning (hoditi = walk) and ‘kot po jajcih’ (= as if on eggs) expresses comparison, implying ‘in a careful way, carefully’. In English, the idiom indicates careful behaviour towards somebody else in order not to upset him/her, which means that the phraseological unit is demotivated to a greater extent than in Slovene, where it is the very way of walking that is implied (i.e. walk softly, quietly).

Among the collected PFFs in English and Slovene, another common semantic element has been identified in some idioms, i.e., phraseological units expressing strong emotion. An in-depth analysis has indicated that a very different emotion is involved when comparing the meaning of the English idiom and that of its literal counterpart in Slovene. For the sake of more thorough elucidation of the ‘emotion-meaning’ relation, I have chosen one pair to show the difference in meaning:

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
jump out of one’s skin	skočiti iz kože
<i>Definitions:</i>	
move violently because of a sudden shock	be very excited or angry
<i>Translations:</i>	
zdrzniti se od groze/strahu (= ‘recoil in horror/fear’)	go up the wall

In both the English idiom and its PFF in Slovene, strong emotions are expressed: in English, surprise, unpleasant shock or a feeling of being frightened are implied, whereas in Slovene, the underlying feelings are those of excitement and anger. It should also be stressed that the Slovene phraseological unit is often used in the conditional.

A subclass of this type of relation is represented by idioms that express emotion in one language but not in the other. The following example represents emotion on the Slovene side:

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
lose one's nerve	izgubiti živce
<i>Definitions:</i>	
lose courage to do sth difficult or dangerous	become angry or excited
<i>Translations:</i>	
srce komu pade v hlače (= 'the heart falls into sb's trousers')	lose one's cool

The reason for the false friend relationship in this pair of expressions should probably be sought in the metaphorical meaning of the noun 'nerve' in English and 'živce' in Slovene. The noun 'nerve' implies 'courage', whereas the plural form of the noun 'živce' in Slovene implies various kinds of strong emotion (such as excitement, anger, nervousness or irritation) in different fixed expressions. There are, however, some more or less isolated cases of phraseological units in Slovene where the noun 'živce' could imply 'courage' (e.g., 'imeti (dobre) živce', meaning 'have the courage to do sth'), which is certainly not the case in 'izgubiti živce'. It is interesting to note that the appropriate translational equivalent for the English 'lose one's nerve' is the idiomatic expression 'srce komu pade v hlače', where the noun 'srce' (= heart) symbolizes courage. It should be stressed that idiomatic expressions containing the noun 'srce' with the semantic component 'courage' are also relatively infrequent in Slovene.

In the next example, emotion is expressed by the English idioms:

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
with one's tail between one's legs	used only in combination with the verb 'stisniti': stisniti rep med noge
<i>Definitions:</i>	
feeling ashamed or unhappy because you have been defeated or punished	move away, escape, give up
<i>Translations:</i>	
ves osramočen (= 'ashamed')	turn tail

This idiom refers to the way a dog behaves when it is punished – it goes off with its tail down. Regarding the etymology, this idiom has the same roots in English and Slovene, but the semantic meaning differs. In Slovene, it relates to ducking responsibility like a frightened dog that puts its tail between its legs and runs away. Here, a parallel can be drawn between the English idioms 'with one's tail between one's legs' and 'turn tail' because they both contain the lexical element 'tail', thus implying canine behaviour and suggesting the same origin.

The next idiom contains the nouns 'word' and 'beseda', which indicate a kind of spoken or written communication:

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<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
put words into sb's mouth	polagati komu besede v usta
<i>Definitions:</i>	
suggest that sb has said sth when in fact they have not	help sb say sth that is expected or needed
<i>Translations:</i>	
obračati besede koga (= 'turn sb's words')	put words into one's mind

The idiom in English and its idiomatic translational equivalent in Slovene as well as the PFF in Slovene and its idiomatic equivalent in English all contain the noun 'word' (= beseda) in its plural form. This noun certainly refers to something that is said or written, i.e., to communication in general, which is also a common feature of the English idiom and the Slovene false friend equivalent. The difference is that the English idiom implies that something is deliberately not understood in the way it was uttered (negative connotation), while the Slovene false friend implies that somebody tells the speaker what to say and how to say it (positive connotation). On the other hand, it can be claimed that in both cases putting words into somebody's mouth has the same underlying idea, i.e., suggesting what somebody has said (idiom in English) or should say (idiom in Slovene).

There are also some idioms that do not have any common feature, such as comparison or emotion. For example:

<i>Idiom in English and False Friend in Slovene:</i>	
lead sb by the nose	vleči koga za nos
<i>Definitions:</i>	
control someone and make them do exactly what you want them to do	make sb believe sth which is not true
<i>Translations:</i>	
plesati tako, kot kdo gode (= 'dance in the way somebody fiddles')	lead sb up/down the garden path

The concept of the English idiom is relatively easy to understand. We can imagine that if somebody leads somebody else by the nose, it means that the person leading the other person by the nose grabs his/her nose, which means that he/she cannot breathe properly. Moreover, this person can be pulled into a certain direction without being able to offer resistance. The situation itself suggests that this person does everything the other one wants. The metaphorical meaning of this idiom evolves from the situation in which bulls and other animals sometimes have rings through their noses so that a rope can be tied to the ring in order to lead them along. The purpose of leading an animal was transferred to a human being, but the underlying image was retained. This expression is also used in Shakespeare's play *Othello*, when Iago says Othello 'will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are' (Act I, Scene 3). In Slovene, however, the idiomatic expression 'vleči koga za nos' has not been extensively etymologically researched, but it seems that its motivation is similar: lying results in the fact that the person who is told a lie goes in the direction suggested by the liar, i.e., the liar leads him/her in a certain direction, which is, of course, not the right one. Since the idiomatic expression implies 'lying', it has a negative connotation.

The noun 'nose' and its corresponding Slovene noun 'nos' frequently express the semantic component of lying, especially in combination with the adjective 'long' (= dolg). An absurdly long, extended nose has become the visual symbol of a liar. The same metaphor is used in a number of children's stories, the most famous one being that of Pinocchio.

3. Conclusion

This contribution focusses on a topic that has not so far been the subject of numerous linguistic studies. Phraseological as well as lexical false friends represent a great problem in communication, translation and lexicographic treatment. It is therefore necessary to first raise awareness of the lexical traps into which non-native speakers of English as well as any other language may easily fall, regardless of their level of linguistic knowledge. As a small-scale experiment carried out within the framework of a seminar intended for professional translators has shown, even experienced language users do not even think of such idioms as being problematic; consequently they translate these units word for word, which results in incorrect translation and incorrect comprehension of a text. To avoid this, it is essential to find and treat these pairs of idioms appropriately and at the same time to acquaint learners with them in the course of learning a foreign language. The best way to achieve this is to include them in course books and, of course, in bilingual, general and especially phraseological dictionaries.

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