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IDIOMATIC PHRASES AS A BRIDGE FOR QUALITY INTERCULTURAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Abstract: The paper provides the theoretical background for a case study on idiomatic expressions building on the lexical and conceptual domains of food and health. The study was conducted in a collaborative effort between two universities (The University of Life Sciences 'King Michael I' from Timisoara and the 'Victor Babeș' University of Medicine and Pharmacy from Timisoara, Romania). The participants are learners of English or Romanian as a foreign language who study medicine and the life sciences in the two universities. Mixed groups consisting of international students from both universities were included in the case study presented in an additional paper we also propose on the topic. This preliminary discussion explores ways in which idiomatic vocabulary in our fields of interest might be used in teaching foreign language classes. Additionally, the follow-up we are elaborating for an in-depth study focuses more on particular types of activities to kindle language learners' interests.

Keywords: Idioms, Foreign languages, Intercultural competence, Communication, Conceptual metaphor.

1. Introduction

The paper takes an intercultural approach to idiomatic language related to the conceptual area of food science, health, and life sciences in comparative academic contexts. We pondered on the most efficient modalities of making language learning attractive by means of cognitive conceptual schemas, phrases, and idiomatic expressions related to the topic of food and health, so as to remain consistent with our mixed groups of students. The target group consists of international students from the USVT 'King Michael I' from Timisoara studying in the fields of food scienceand, food services, biology, biotechnologies, genetic engineering, etc., and foreign students from the UMFTVB studying medicine and pharmacy. The case study discussed in the forthcoming follow-up paper (Boc-

Sînmărghiţan & Dragoescu Urlica, 2023) may be regarded as the practical component of this preliminary research, which puts forth an illustration of situational contexts involving these particular target groups of learners. It includes practical didactic scenarios and interaction opportunities which have been put to test in our foreign language classes (Romanian, English, and French) held in tandem during the academic year 2020-2021.

Given the characteristics of our target groups and the complexity of the intercultural dimension in teaching environments, two essential aspects need to be taken into consideration: the strategies proposed by the intercultural approach to language learning and the relevance of decoding metaphorical language in this particular context. The intercultural approach to foreign language

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teaching and learning focuses on building intercultural competence by employing a methodology which takes into account cognitive and affective processes focusing on diversity and empathetic interaction (Borghetti, 2011). For that purpose, this model supports transformative learning and understanding the diversity of perspectives, by helping language learners "to decentre from their linguistic and cultural world to consider their own situatedness from the perspective of another" (Hanukaev, 2022, p. 33; Byram, 1997; Kearny, 2021;).

2. Methodology

From the perspective of conceptual linguistics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; 2003; Even & Green, 2006), the study addresses multimodal approaches to conceptual metaphor (Gibbs, 1994; 1996), cognitive semantics (Kövecses & Szabó, 1996), textual meaning and meaning-making (Adami & Kress, 2014; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009), as well as intercultural and contrastive methods. This approach aims at activating the model of 'cultural synergy' proposed by Jin & Cortazzi (1995) as a working model for processing foreign languages and acquiring ESP communication skills.

From a qualitative educational approach, metaphor analysis is also useful as a means for qualitative educational inquiry (Jensen, 2006). The material we have collected consists in a linguistic corpus of proverbs and phrases which contain food-related words or are relevant to the topic of food and health. These will be presented in the case study accompanying this theoretical preliminary research, along with illustrations in exercises devised specifically for students having an interest in these areas (Boc-Sînmărghițan & Dragoescu Urlica, 2023).

Lastly, the process of designing courses and activities for language learners for specific purposes (ESP) requires interdisciplinary research, including socio-cultural and intercultural studies, special terminology, comparative, and contrastive applied linguistics. For this purpose, the present study also relies on these approaches and the qualitative methodologies they provide.

3. Discussion

The discussion explores food-related conceptual schemas, expressed by vectors such as proverbs or figurative expressions, which were successfully employed as a means of intercultural exchange in our foreign language classes, as presented in detail in our follow-up case study, *Proverbs and idiomatic phrases in foreign language classes – A Case study* (Boc-Sînmărghițan & Dragoescu Urlica, 2023).

A qualitative needs analysis was conducted during 2020-2021 academic year with students and language teachers from both universities in order to collect feedback and determine what type of content would best fit the students' interests.

As a result of the feedback analysis, we devised several types of tasks designed specifically for specialized language learners (ESP and languages for foreign students), which we hypothesized and then confirmed would improve the students' linguistic and communicative performance. The students' responses indicated that they were highly interested not only in accumulating specialized language vocabulary, but also in acquiring communicative abilities in order to expresses cultural, as well as figurative meanings.

Therefore, we decided to lie more emphasis on figurative language and to elicit this type of highly complex meaning-understanding from our terminological corpuses based on semantic fields. This research is a continuation of more practical insights we had already put in practice during classes and it is meant as a theoretical framework justifying our endeavor from a conceptual point of view, as well as sharing best practices among foreign language educators.

The study of idiomaticity highlights the metaphorical root of idioms, as well as reflecting the learners' socio-cultural codes (Quinn, 1991; Celik, 2021). By looking into the best modalities of developing idiomatic competence in language learners, the findings of Khoshnevisan (2019) suggest the preference by the majority of participants in the study of using visual-based learning through video and pictures to infer the figurative meaning of idioms, as well as benefiting from translations in the learners' native language.

The issue we point to in this regard, however, is that idiomatic expressions often have imperfect equivalents and sometimes completely lack any equivalent in other languages we may wish to translate them in. In this case, paraphrasing and providing descriptions of idiomatic meanings may serve to tap into the mental representations of the learners' understanding of particular idioms across languages, thus bridging closer insights into the other learners' cultural system.

According to Littlemore and Low (2006a, p. 3), it is difficult to grasp metaphorical meaning in complex phrases while learning a foreign language precisely because learners lack cultural competence that a native speaker would master in the target language. It is for this reason that foreign language courses need to take into account corpora of figurative expressions to be processed according to metaphor semantics, in order to acquire real language proficiency. Besides being a decoding tool, metaphor is also useful to explain abstract ideas and to convey feelings, based on making connections and analogical reasoning (Cameron, 2003; Littlemore & Low, 2006b). Moreover, metaphoric competence acquisition largely depends on building skills such as 'associative fluency' and 'metaphor fluency' (Littlemore & Low, 2006a). These are closely interconnected and their activation would certainly benefit from multicultural contexts of learning.

The use of phrases in language teaching can serve different purposes, including: illustrating a topic from common contexts of life, developing grammatical skills, understanding cultural phenomena or merely for the purpose of drawing comparisons between literal and figurative meaning or across languages. Thus, a contrastive approach to languages in contact has the potential to help students better understand not only aspects limited to language, but also language use and connotative implications on the level of phrases. These may contribute to the consolidation of newly acquired linguistic elements which are introduced in context, based on specialized vocabulary focusing on specific topics.

Regarding the objectives we propose to guide our intercultural language teaching courses, there are several target points we have in view for an upper intermediate level of proficiency:

- developing interest in paremiology and metaphorical expression in an interactive manner (cf. Dragoescu, 2011);
- acquiring extensive knowledge of proverbs/sayings/idiomatic and metaphorical expressions through acting out dialogic scenarios;
- developing intercultural communication skills by translating cultural codes across languages in contact;
- developing qualitative sociocultural competence through paremiology and the use of non-literal language.

Based on these objectives, the meetings in tandem pointed to the conclusion that sharing verbal and visual metaphorical representations does have the potential to lead language learners to decode meanings and gain access to common perspectives in language learning (Kearney, 2015). What is more, the use of figurative phrases and idioms has certainly proved a successful tool kit in acquiring foreign languages and intercultural communication competence, based on the learners' positive reactions and enthusiastic

attitudes towards the playful discovery learning process.

Among the tools we have found the most useful in our combined groups of medical students and undergraduates studying the Life sciences/Biotechnology/Food engineering, we mention the following types of activities: group work to solve missing word puzzles ('An ... a day keeps the doctor away'), matching two halves of a proverb/idiom ('Too many cooks/spoil the broth'), matching idioms to their corresponding meaning, fill in gaps, multiple choice exercises, finding the closes equivalent in other languages, acting out the scene described by the proverb, etc. Some of the most successful interactive activities revolved around developing real-life scenarios, starting from the following game-like tasks: a) Choose three of the given phrases/proverbs and make up dialogues to illustrate their meaning; b) Choose three pictures and create your own proverbs, then use them in appropriate contexts; c) Find equivalents of the idioms/proverbs in your language.

As we illustrate in the case study we are also elaborating for an additional forthcoming paper, some proverbs and expressions are highly original, which makes them untranslatable verbatim. For instance, one example from the exercise above, *a-i umbla gura ca o moară* (*stricată*) would have no meaning if translated as such into English: 'one's mouth is running like a (broken) mill'. For that reason, we have to resort to equivalent counterparts that encapsulate a similar meaning, bringing the conceptual domain of the target language as close as possible to that of the source language, for instance: *to chew the fat/to run off at the mouth*. In cases where students are able to find cross-cultural similarities, we point to the commonalities, while in the other cases, we point to the originality and picturesque aspects of English or, in this case, Romanian culture.

For instance, the translation of an example such as *şi sătul, şi cu punga plină nu se poate,* would be: 'one cannot have both a full belly and a full purse', which presents a perfect conceptual equivalency. However, the literal translation would present the major disadvantage of not being a paremiological equivalent in English, so that the cultural and witty aspects are completely lost. We would rather have to come up with the English equivalent, based on reading the provided meanings in the second column of the exercise, in this case: *You can't have your cake and eat it*.

In many other cases, although idioms and phrases may have obvious commonsensical implications, they have very different equivalents far from a literal translation, which would not provide any degree of accuracy. In such cases, foreign students have worked together with Romanian students on comparing languages and identifying the meaning and they seem to enjoy it profusely whenever they are able to use their creativity and provide accurate equivalents in their respective languages, or at least expressions which may refer to the same underlying meaning.

Students from other countries have often provided equivalents from their respective languages and they were pleased to discover numerous similarities and variations on the same underlying meaning. At the USVT University, Erasmus students from Erçyies University in Turkey have confirmed the existence of equivalent variants for the proverb *Cine s-a ars cu supă, suflă şi în* iaurt (lit. 'Who got burnt with soup blows even into yoghurt'), the Turkish equivalent being along the same lines: *S/he who has burnt his/her tongue by eating soup will blow into yogurt*. There seems to be an Arab equivalent, too, as far as Medicine students could recall: *After you got burned with hot milk, you'll blow on your yogurt*. We have decided to introduce these collaborative findings not only in our study, but also in our textbook activities, given they enable a more interactive approach.

One commonality would be the fact that proverbs and idiomatic phrases may often be similar or even perfect equivalents in different languages. Some examples of such proverbs would be: *It's no use crying over spilt milk* or *One man's meat/food/medicine is another man's poison* – meaning 'what may be good for somebody might not be as good for somebody else'. The overall meaning is self-evident despite small variations across languages. It is therefore exciting for students to spot degrees of variety and make cross-cultural comparisons between conceptual as well as linguistic aspects of their respective mother tongues versus the second language they are studying – English, Romanian, or French, in our case. In other cases, phrases are different in Romanian/English/the learners' mother tongue, but meaning remains self-evident, given the general connotation which is commonsensical and graspable behind the literal meaning. For instance, in proverbs like *It's no use crying over spilt milk*, students usually guess correctly that circumstances cannot be changed and there is little use focusing on negative aspects which have already happened.

For these reasons, the use of paremiology and idiomaticity are very good methods for developing language skills, as well as socio-cultural and intercultural competence in language learners. Based on the collection of proverbs and phraseological expressions we have included in our curricula, we hope that our foreign students, as well as Romanian students who are foreign-language learners will be able to better understand each other's culture and make valuable exchanges of their cultural and linguistic experience. The joint cooperation between foreign medical students and Romanian Life/Food Science students has proved to be an efficient learning strategy. Both parties have gained new perspectives by means of intercultural exchange, as a result of exposure to authentic facts or contexts typical of other cultures. The study is relevant with a view to designing specific activities that that would serve the foreign language learners' interests and needs.

4. Conclusion

This contribution seeks to support the students' intercultural awareness through language teaching and learning, employing interactive modalities which maintain genuine dialogue open. In order to enhance communicative efficiency with groups of mixed students from various countries, our syllabus has drawn on an initial specific needs analysis. Thereupon, we employed a corpus of expressions based on specialized vocabulary that we have collected in our foreign language classes. This approach has proved efficient in motivating learners, which resulted in enhanced communicative effectiveness.

As a result, learning and practicing according to the proposed comparative and joint methodology, students will not only enrich their linguistic database, but also develop social/cultural competence, as they better understand the relationships (similarities and distinctive differences) between the countries they come from and the richness of their respective linguistic communities. All in all, the cultural commonalities we have thus discovered by using paremiology in our language classes point to universal human values and the fact humanity shares a rich common heritage that students may build on in order to develop intercultural relationships. Based on this working hypothesis, we pondered on the most efficient strategies of making language learning attractive through proverbs and figurative expressions related to food and health. Our teaching experiments in tandem have confirmed that this approach is appealing to students interested in nutrition at the University of Medicine 'Victor Babes' in Timisoara and students in food science, biology, bioengineering, etc. from the University of Life Sciences 'King Michael I' from Timisoara.

This study also highlights the relationship between the language learning environment and the potential of perspective taking to enhance intercultural competence. In sum, the research is inscribed within the aims of our

general language curricula, which places great emphasis on developing intercultural awareness. In this context, it is highly relevant to build an understanding of different ways of conceptualizing cultural aspects revolving around food, as well as figurative ways of speaking about health-related issues, as these are conducive to communication pathways which are at the heart of culture and the meeting points between cultures.

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