

French and German Idioms: Treatment and Translation by Italian Students

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse the processing of idioms by Italian students of French and German as foreign languages. In L2 acquisition of idioms, it is important to stress the difficulties a learner can encounter in both in comprehension and in translation. We focus on the cognitive operations made by learners in order to give an interpretation of a selection of idioms which do not allow a word-by-word translation. We asked the students to give either an Italian translation or interpretation. This paper will analyze the idioms from two different angles: cognitive and acquisitional. Those approaches can analyze idioms in order to show the conceptualization of fixed expressions and their treatment by non-native speakers, which could help to gain insights into the conceptual frames structuring the acquisition process.

Key words

idioms, lexicalisation, cognitive linguistics, L2 acquisition, translation.

1. Introduction

Not much has been written on conventionalized language forms, especially idioms, even if this does not reflect their importance in communicative competence. Idioms play an important role in second language learning since they are used by native speakers in spoken and written mode. The use of idioms is characteristic of advanced foreign language learners. It seems that due attention is not given to the learning of idioms, and students' competence in these forms is not appropriately developed, not only on the recognition level but also on the production level. Idioms are difficult to learn and teach for many reasons. Firstly, they are not literal. Moreover, idioms are frequently omitted in the speech addressed to second language learners. Native speakers tend to use simple, concrete, everyday vocabulary when they address second language learners. In an article on the use of idioms by Russian students, Kabakchy (1980) isolated one main factor responsible for learning idioms which is their accessibility to students. According to Kabakchy, idioms can be classified into four groups. First, idioms which have exact counterparts and these are the easiest; second, idioms which have semantic counterparts but are differently worded or structures; third, idioms which have no counterparts, although their meaning can be derived from the conjoined

meaning of their constituents. These are easier than those in group two where language interference can be expected; fourth, idioms which have no counterparts and which meaning cannot be derived from the conjoined meaning of their constituents, and these are the most difficult ones. Irujo (1986) investigated whether second language learners use their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in the second language. Subjects were 12 Venezuelan advanced learners of English. Results showed identical idioms were the easiest to comprehend and produce, while similar idioms were comprehended almost as well but showed interference from Spanish. The study also showed that the most difficult idioms to comprehend and produce were the different idioms which showed less interference than similar idioms.

The process of foreign language learning implies interdependence among many elements, such as the socio-cultural situation of the learner, his previous awareness and competence of linguistic phenomena and the cognitive means developed during his learning. At the same time, the learning process also includes the necessity to develop some tools suitable to comprehend the semantic opacity of some foreign words. In this sense, the L2 learner has to face the proper and the figurative sense of a word and he has to realize that the transition from the motivation to the opacity and from the lively figure to the lexicalised figure is a question of use and of language history (Gardes-Tamine, 2011: 18). From this perspective, it is interesting to analyse the treatment of ten idioms, taken from dictionaries and given in context, by advanced Italian students of French and German as foreign languages. The figurative dimension of lexicalised expressions required us to interview advanced students of L2 because the comprehension and the access to a figurative meaning characterise allophones in an advanced acquisition level. This study proposes to analyse the interpretation and translation processes of these fixed expressions given in a phrasal context. In particular, we focus on the cognitive operations made by learners in order to give an interpretation of lexicalised expressions not literally translatable into Italian. In this paper, we will use both a cognitive and acquisitional linguistic approach. On one hand, a cognitive linguistics approach can be useful to analyse the cognitive projections activated during the comprehension, translation and motivation process. On the other hand, an acquisitional linguistics approach can be used to analyse the identification and isolation processes made by the students and to identify the elements that act in the interpretation and translation processes. This analysis not only allows us to better understand the interpretation process of a figurative expression, but also makes it possible to identify the system of conceptualisation of some fixed expressions used by the L2 students. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of German and French lexical expressions can be useful to understand some cultural and cognitive dynamics in the learning process.

2. Lexicalisation and projection-analogical processes

The study of lexicalised expressions involves a digression on phraseology, a field that includes the analysis of formulaic sequences of words characterised by

a high degree of conventionalisation. Hudson (1998: 9) claims that the lexicalisation process depends on grammatical block and syntactical restrictions; in contrast, Gross (1996: 154) takes into consideration both syntactical block and semantic block. Another relevant and obligatory criterion in the lexicalisation process is the conventionality that appears when a group of words is considered as a unit (Nunberg et al. 1994: 493). According to Gross (1996: 9), criteria can include the “polilexicality” or the autonomy of the fixed sequence, the “semantic opacity” or the figurative aspect hidden in the words sequence, the “block of the transformational properties” and the “block of the synonymic paradigms”. A lot of approaches (Hudson 1998; Moon 1998: 19-25; Norrick 1985: 72; Brinton and Traugott 2005) point out that there are various categories of lexicalisation. An idiom is “basically a fixed multi-word unit whose meaning cannot be computed from the meanings of its components” (Fontenelle 1994: 43). According to Moon (1998: 4), an idiom is an opaque sequence of words and “narrower uses restrict idiom[s] to a particular kind of unit: one that is fixed and semantically opaque or metaphorical, or, traditionally, 'not the sum of its parts', for example, 'kick the bucket' or 'spill the beans'”.

Certain peculiarities of the fixed expressions have been analysed by cognitive linguists in recent years. In particular, some cognitively oriented tasks seem interesting in idioms analysis, such as the explication of the cognitive basis of motivation phenomena, the study of the function of underlying mental images for idiom usage conditions, or the exploration of culture-specific phenomena in idiom semantics (Burger 2007: 790). Moreover, the motivational relations among the lexical structure of an idiom, its conceptual representation in the lexicon and the actual meaning of figurative units allow us to recognize the image component of the idiom (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 2005). However, to justify a cognitive based theory of fixed expression, it is necessary to draw from the cognitive theory of metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) consisting of the conceptual frames' analysis. In the case of metaphorical motivation, the cognitive process is developed by the projection between a source frame and a target frame; in contrast, in the case of metonymical motivation, the process is within one frame. Projection can be useful to gain insight into the process of translation and interpretation of fixed expressions made by L2 learners. In order to give a clear and exhaustive description of the treatment of fixed expressions, we will also consider the analogy. The analogical process gathers the understanding of a new situation by a similar known situation. Analogy is based on a constitutive resemblance between two entities in which two essential aspects emerge: an identity and an otherness (Monneret 2004: 14).

3. Idioms in second language acquisition

According to Hudson (1998: 139), phraseology responds to a principle of economy: learners repeat the expressions they have already heard instead of creating new ones. This activates a memorisation process with psycholinguistic implications. In foreign language learning, the treatment of those lexical units is completely different: according to Gibbs (1986), native learners do not activate the

literal meaning of the lexicalized phrases, except when the figurative meaning is not pertinent. In contrast, foreign learners attempt to activate a figurative meaning only when the literal meaning is perceived as non-pertinent.

As we pointed out, idioms have an ontological and a cultural motivation. For foreign language students, the cultural sphere is not always directly accessible. It is useful to distinguish second language learning from foreign language learning: in the first case, learners are more in contact with second language and culture, like in the case of immigrants. In second language learning, idioms can only be acquired in the classroom, so that the role of teachers and methods become primary. Our purpose is to investigate the proceedings students put into practice to interpret idioms that are not directly translatable into Italian. This could be useful to develop efficient methodologies in foreign language teaching as well as in foreign language learning.

4. Methodology

For our study, we chose 15 advanced students of French as a foreign language, and 15 advanced students of German as a foreign language (students study at the University of Palermo). Each one of them has studied the foreign language for at least eight years, and they all have an undergraduate degree in foreign languages and cultures. For the task, we selected 10 idioms which cannot be translated word-by-word. These were embedded into typologically different contexts including newspapers, internet forums, novels, magazines. We then asked students to translate or orally interpret the texts. We never specified that our study was about idioms. The conversations have been recorded and transcribed.

First, we focused our attention on how students isolated the idioms in the given context. We observed that, in most cases, they were perfectly able to isolate the idioms even without knowing them at all. Next, we tried to understand the strategies the students used to make sense of the idioms. Finally, we analysed the translations made by the students and the number of correct answers and mistakes.

We also considered the interferences taking place during the treatment of the idioms. In some cases, students had recourse to their mother tongue, but in other cases they were able to avoid interference showing a high degree of consciousness concerning the cultural peculiarity of idioms in a foreign language. We are particularly interested in interpreting strategies having recourse to metonymic or metaphoric proceedings, in which students abandoned the peculiar cultural sphere to engage themselves in the ontological sphere, trying to reactivate symbolic processes starting from the literal meaning of the single words composing the idiom.

5. Data analysis

Interpretation processes start with an analytical approach, allowing students to individuate and isolate the idiom in the text. Given the semantic opacity

of the lexical units, in most cases isolation was based on process of semantic pertinence: in the given context, the units composing the lexical phrase could not keep their literal meaning; so, compositionality being excluded, students proceeded with the interpretation of the idiom. The interpretation of the idiom is made following different proceedings, which are, moreover, combined by the students in different ways:

- Reference to the context
- Analogy with mother-language or other foreign languages
- Metaphorical and metonymical processes
- Analogical processes

In some cases, students renounced to interpret the figurative meaning of the expression and just gave a literal translation or no translation at all, as we can see in the tables below:

Table 1: interpretation processes of French idioms

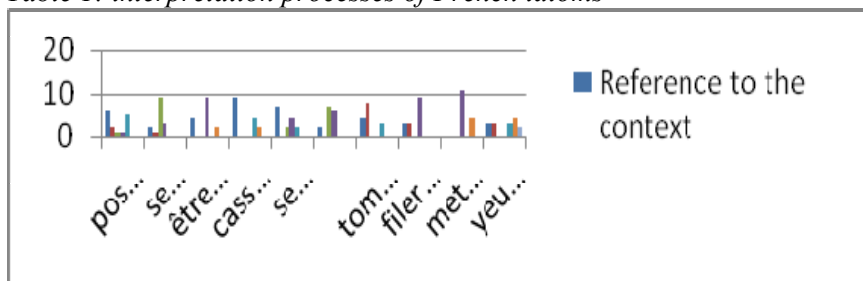
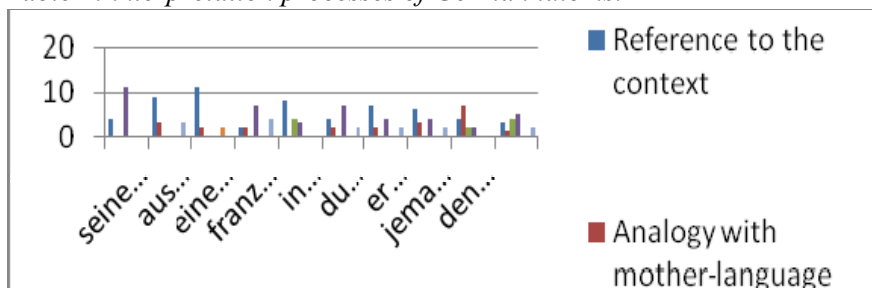


Table 2: interpretation processes of German idioms.



5.1 Analogy with mother-language or other foreign languages

Interlingual transfer (i.e. transfer from the mother tongue or any other previously learned language) in foreign language learning is a major cognitive strategy that learners fall back on when their linguistic means falls short of achieving their communicative ends. Needless to say, the mother tongue is an additional source for hypothesis formation that the first language learner does not have. The influence of the mother tongue and the pervasiveness of interlingual transfer is indisputable. Thus, interlingual transfer is a strategy that is readily available to the learners to compensate for the inadequacies when attempting to communicate in the foreign language.

The French expression *avoir la grosse tête* (lit.: having a big head) is translated with *montarsi la testa* (lit.: to have a swollen head, to get a swelled head; it means “be arrogant”), where in both expressions the idea of a big head is involved.

In German the expression *aus den Latschen kippen*, meaning literally “falling off one’s slippers”, is translated with *cadere dalle nuvole* (lit.: falling down from clouds, meaning to be flabbergasted) focusing on the meaning of the verb.

An interesting case emerges when a similarity is found with another foreign languages like in this example: *einen französischen Abschied nehmen* (lit.: to give a French goodbye, meaning to leave without saying goodbye) is translated with the help of the similar Spanish expression *despedirse a la francesa*.

5.2 Reference to the context

When compositional meaning is impossible, students recur to the context to give the expression a coherent meaning. One of the texts we gave to the students was a French comic strip in which the expression *poser un lapin*, literally “to put a rabbit (to stand somebody up). The meaning can be deduced from the context: the last image of the strip showing a lonely and sad boy sitting on a bench, waiting for someone while it’s raining.

Concerning German, we proposed the expression *Eulen nach Athen tragen* (to carry owls to Athens). The idiom’s figurative construction is generated by the oddity of the action “to carry owls to Athens” meaning “to do useless or senseless things”. This expression was given in the context of a blog in which users were giving comments on a post. The interpretation is made by students through the analysis of the context. Indeed, one of the blog users says, addressing the blogger, “*Du trägst im Grundsatz Eulen nach Athen. Anmaßend finde ich jedoch die Art deines Urteils, insbesondere der Hinweis auf den “Zwang zum Spaß”*”; some students infer from the context that the blogger is trying to *bring grist to his mill*; some others interpret it as *not paying attention to other’s advice*.

5.3 Metaphorical and metonymical processes

These cases are particularly interesting because students try to reactivate the semantic processes involved in idioms. For example, the expression *ne pas avoir la grosse tête* (lit.: not having a big head and meaning *not being presumptuous*) is correctly interpreted by most students. Only a few interpreted the expression as *being stupid*, basing their interpretation on a conceptual metonymy: the head of football player is not just a part of their body but a metonymy for their intelligence. From this perspective students take into consideration the conceptual metaphor *more is up* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). So, according to this process, the bigger is the head, the more intelligent is the person. This interpretation also reflects the cultural value of translator about the stereotype that football players are not intelligent.

In *se metre sur son trente et un* (lit.: to stand on one’s thirty-one, fig.: to overdress) students conceptualise time. In the text, the idiom is related at the

moment in which the town of Greenville is preparing for its first presidential debate. Students based on the conceptual metaphor *time issituated in space* (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), and they considered the event to be taking place at the end of the month, the 31th.

Some cases of metaphoric reactivation are also present in German. Most of the students interpreted the idiom *sich in Schale werfen* (lit.: to flow into peels, fig.: to overdress) through a metaphor processing: one part of students conceptually considered *peel* as a protective surface. We can understand this metaphorical processing through the container metaphor (Ibid.) where the peel is the external part of something and it protects the content. Students interpreted the German verb *sich werfen* (lit.: to flow into something) as *to take off peel* and thus *to take away a protective wrapping*. So, they obtain the figurative meaning *to take a risk* and, basing on the context, *to take a chance* in the casino of Bregenz town. Some other students gave *peel* a negative connotation. The word was also semantically associated to some slots such as rubbish, dirt, stink and, consequently, *to throw oneself into peels* was interpreted as *to throw oneself into rubbish* with the target frame *looking for fortune in a unlikely place*, in this case, a casino.

5.4 Analogical process

Concerning analogical processes, it is important to distinguish semantic analogy from linguistic analogy. In the first case, students start from the literal meaning of the components and draw a rank of analogies to try to deduce the meaning of the idiom. In the second case, analogy is found between the linguistic structures of the target language and the linguistic structures of the source languages, at a semantic level and at a formal level as well. In this section we will focus on the first kind of analogy, the second having already been analyzed in the previous section.

Let's look at some examples: in the French comic strip we mentioned previously, we can see the idiom *yeux de biche*. One of the students started from the formal analogy of the French *biche* (doe) with the Italian *biscia* (grass snake) translating with: *snake eyes*. From this similarity, by analogy, he attributes to the person some negative characteristics that are usually attributed to the snake (viscid, creeping) and, by a process of conceptual metaphorisation, he finally translated with *yeux de salope* (bitchy eyes). Nevertheless, after reading the whole text and considering the global context, he changed his translation by referring to a similar Italian expression (*occhi da cerbiatta*, lit.: little doe eyes fig.: sweet eyes).

In *mettre de l'eau dans son vin* (lit.: to put some water in one's wine, fig.: to calm down), a native speaker wouldn't need to activate the literal meaning and would interpret immediately with to calm down or tone it down. For a foreign speaker, having no access to the figurative meaning of the expression, it is necessary to activate a compositional interpretation, *putting water in one's wine* meaning *to make wine less strong*, and by analogy to calm down. The analogies allow the speaker to get a correct interpretation by reactivating the metaphor that originated the fixed expression.

In the third example the lexical phrase *filer à l'anglaise* (lit.: to leave in an English way, fig.: to leave without saying goodbye) draws a parallel between the way France President Hollande leaves and the way English people leave. Students started, at first, with a literal interpretation and then activated a delexicalisation process, trying to explain how English people leave. To do this, they referred to their social and cultural representations and stereotypes about English people. From each of the interpretations given, students drew a different translation. Stereotypically, English people are:

- the historical enemy of France (with a strong negative connotation) and the interpretation of the fixed expression was *to leave on the sly*;
- very discreet and for this reason the translation was *to leave unnoticed*;
- snobbish, so they leave with a private plane;
- punctual, so *filer à l'anglaise* is translated with *to leave perfectly on time*.

Some examples are also present in German: The idiom *seinen Senf dazu geben* (lit.: to give one's mustard on something, fig.: to mettle without being asked) is interpreted by the students through positive and negative analogies: in the first case, they analogically connected mustard with something conferring a good taste to food or with something used to trim dishes. Those students justify this choice through context because the user of the forum has to give his contribution in a positive way. So, mustard is food in the same way that opinion/contribution is mapped into the domain argument, and the analogical parallel is drawn between mustard and opinion/contribution. Some other students gave a negative interpretation of this expression, reading mustard as something acid or looking like faeces. So, the user of the forum is a person that gives a negative contribution.

6. Conclusions

The examples have shown how the semantic analyzability of idioms is developed by the students. In French language a higher degree of homomorphism between the structure of the actual meaning and the structure of the underlying metaphor seems to appear. Indeed, students are able to associate easily the constituent parts of the idiom with its actual meaning. In contrast, in German language, students are not able to handle the idiom because of the difficulties found in the analysis. These difficulties concern not only the general structures of the idioms, perceived as more familiar in French than in German, but also the interpretation of the context, which is more difficult in German. From this perspective, the semantic role of particular constituents can be understood through the comparison of different languages that are semantically similar, but not identical (Burger 2007: 809). In some cases, students have reconstructed the relations among the conceptual structures involved in the idiom through the understanding of the general figurative meaning. From this perspective, it is useful to define the motivation transparency of conceptual relations between source and target frames because it can help to gain insights into the actual meaning of the

idiom. Moreover, we have noticed that the motivation relation is provided by lots of general conceptual metaphors standing behind the idioms.

In foreign language acquisition, learners are confronted with a connotative and a cultural gap when they try to understand idioms. Like in natural context, they are forced to interpret the idiom in order to interpret the whole message. When the meaning of the idiom is opaque, they have usually recourse to the general context, exactly as they would do in a spontaneous conversation. Nevertheless, sometimes the context does not provide sufficient clues to coherently interpret the idiom. In those cases, learners try to activate metaphorical processes, as we observed in our examples, as well in French as in German. The differences in the treatment of idioms concern mainly the general level of opacity of the two foreign languages, which is higher in German than in French. Nevertheless, the strategies put to use are identical in both languages. Learners are perfectly conscious that the idiomatic units are based on metaphors which are culturally motivated. They try to activate all of their knowledge about the culture, religion, and history of the target language in order to translate the idiom, and they sometimes push their analysis to an ontological level. Kövecses and Szabo (1996) affirm that the presence of underlying conceptual metaphors in the mind is not enough to activate the use of idioms in foreign language learners. According to Gonzalez Rey (2007: 28), it is necessary to show the learners that a lot of phraseological expressions have a metaphorical motivation; the explication of the underlying metaphorical projections can help students to acquire the equivalences between the conceptual frames activating the idiom. The analysis of those processes confirms that, in order to acquire idioms, it could be useful for learners to understand and explicit the underlying metaphors, as they would try to do in a natural context. The efforts in order to negotiate the meaning of the idiom, in relation to the context as well as to the general meaning of its components, would certainly facilitate the stocking of the idiomatic unit as well as its further processing.

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