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"WIDESPREAD IDIOMS IN EUROPE AND BEYOND": BENEFITS FOR LANGUAGE WORLDVIEW?

The starting point of this paper is new insights into the uniformity of European standard languages in the realm of phraseology. Recent multilingual research has shown that cross-linguistic similarities are much greater than previously known. There are many *widespread idioms* (WIs for short), i.e. idioms that occur in a large number of languages in almost the same lexico-semantic structure. These are results of the long-term project "Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond" which now has been brought to an end for the time being.

The present paper intends to relate these new insights to the general theme of the International Conference "The Universal and the Culture-based in the Language Worldview". The idea that the world is principally perceived through the medium of language, which determines the speakers' worldview (proposed by W. v. Humboldt and later reformulated by Sapir and Whorf as the theory of "linguistic relativity") can be found in several branches of phraseological research. This conception is usually accompanied by postulates that the analysis of figurative language allows insight into the speech community's own culture and mentality, if not into its "national character". My paper wants to point to some points of contact between the two research directions – widespread idiom research and language worldview research – although it will not be able to answer general questions as to what extent phraseology may be involved in constituting a worldview of a language community. Therefore, there is a question mark in the title of the paper.

In the following, I first want to discuss the terminology used here and briefly outline the project "Widespread Idioms", especially with regard to the causes of the wide distribution of idioms across a number of languages. Subsequently, we will have a look at the opposite, at two lesser-used languages at the edge of Europe, which differ fundamentally from the standard European languages in terms of their phraseology. Along with this the question arises as to whether connections to the problem of language worldview can be established.

Terminology

For the object-language units discussed in this paper, I prefer the term *figurative lexical unit* to *phraseme* or *phraseologism*, because the definition of the latter terms requires the criterion of polylexicality. Phrasemes must consist of more than one word. This term is unsuitable for a multilingual approach, as a figurative multiword unit of one language may well correspond to a figurative compound or figurative one-word of another language. The term *figurative lexical unit* (FLU) includes the following definition criteria: Firstly, FLUs have the characteristic of *conventionalization*. They are elements of the mental lexicon. Their form and meanings are fixed (within a certain standard variability), that is, they are lexicalized – in contrast to freely created figurative expressions, such as poetic or ad-hoc-metaphors. Secondly, FLUs have the property of semantic ambiguity. They consist of two conceptual levels: they can be interpreted at the level of their literal reading and at the level of their figurative meaning – which both can be activated simultaneously. In most cases, the primary reading is connected with fragments of world knowledge and evokes a mental image. *Idioms* are the prototypical units of the group of figurative lexical units. What is most important: FLUs such as idioms differ from non-figurative units (it means: from all other elements of language) by these two conceptual levels. We will return to this peculiarity when it comes to uncovering the causes of the wide spread of idioms.

Let us illustrate this ambiguity by an example, the idiom *to swim against the current/stream*. The literal reading evokes an image: one can imagine how a person is swimming against the current of a river or the like. This image is a good basis to compare a person's behavior and is mapped onto a more abstract concept. The figurative meaning of the idiom can be formulated as 'to go against prevailing opinion or thought; to think or act contrary to the views of the majority at the time (*as if* the person was swimming against the current of a river or the like)'.

We need yet another definition, that of the term *widespread idiom* which has been introduced into linguistics only recently. The working definition is: "Widespread idioms (WIs) are idioms that – when their origins and particular cultural and historical development is taken into account – have the same or a similar lexical structure and the same figurative core meaning in various different languages, including geographically distant and genetically unrelated languages" [1, p. 62]. Our example *to swim against the current* is such a widespread idiom. It is reported to exist in about 58 European and several non-European languages; cf., for example, Icelandic *að synda móti straumnum*, North Frisian *töögen di Stroom swum*, Romanian *a înnota împotriva curentului*, Lithuanian *prieš srovę plaukti*, Russian *плыть против течения*, Estonian *vastuvoolu ujuma*, Tatar *агымга каршы йозу*, Mongolian *урсгал сөрж сэлэх*, Vietnamese *bói ngúóc dòng*, Korean *sorui-reul geoseureu-da* , etc., all translating literally as "to swim against the current/tide" and figuratively meaning roughly the same as outlined above.

Wide dissemination of figurative lexical units: possible causes

Let me summarize the main points of the project "Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond". The main objective was to identify as many WIs as possible

by means of systematic investigation. An important step was to build up a network of competent participants for many languages. A wealth of questionnaires has been designed. They were sent in several stages to the growing number of respondents who patiently completed them for their native languages. 78 European and 20 non-European languages took part in the project. Indo-European languages make up the largest group, followed by Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages, Maltese, Georgian and Basque. Among the European languages there are about 40 major languages and about 38 varieties that can be subsumed under the term *lesser-used languages*, due to their sociolinguistic status.

Clear results have emerged, all of which came as a real surprise. About 500 WIs were identified so far. From the beginning, the goal has been to examine these idioms in their cultural context and to clarify their origin. Now we know which Europe-wide common idioms actually exist and which chronological layers they may be assigned to. By far not all widespread idioms are of ancient or biblical origin, as has often been claimed. In many cases there were unpredictable results in terms of which figurative units actually are common and which ones fell short of our criteria. The results are published in the two volumes "Lexicon of Common Figurative Units" [1; 2].

At this point we should look at the potential causes of the spreading of figurative units across many languages. It should be noted that the 500 WIs are quite a heterogeneous group and each idiom has its individual history. First of all, there are *loan translations* and *borrowings*. They take place constantly, across language boundaries, and especially in situations of bilingualism. A language may adopt a new idiom by using it first as a loan translation, before it becomes transformed into a unit of the lexicon of the new language. This concept explains restricted regional borrowings, but cannot explain the wide dissemination of an idiom in total. There is no center from which all languages of Europe and beyond could have borrowed it. The increasing influence of English is a modern phenomenon and can be neglected here. Secondly, *polygenesis* would have to be considered. By this term is meant that lexically and semantically "similar idioms" have come into being independently in several languages, due to common human experiences and common perceptions of the world. This concept may apply to some cases, but cannot explain the totality of widespread idioms.

There is yet one further attempt of explaining the wide spread of idioms, namely *the independent recourse* of various individual languages to *the same textual source*. As for idioms of biblical origin, there is usually no doubt that most of them go back to direct access to one of the diverse translations of the Bible into individual languages. Many other WIs also go back to once well-known texts, to stories told by classical authors, to fables, folktales, literary works, etc. For these WIs it may be true as well, that they are not primarily borrowed from one language into another in each individual case. Rather, a conclusion may be that it is not only the idioms that are spread across many languages, but the texts themselves were widely disseminated so that they both *caused* and *supported* the wide spread of the idioms.

This explanation of the causes of a wide distribution of idioms is closer connected with the specifics of idioms than all other explanations. As outlined above, CFUs such as idioms are processed on two conceptual levels and it is precisely their "literal reading" which is connected with text knowledge or fragments of world knowledge that were widespread themselves and allow an independent recourse by individual languages. However, there is no monocausality. In view of our idiom *to swim against the current* all these causes must have come together: borrowings since the Middle Ages, polygenesis due to the relevant image and, above all, independent recourse of various languages to the once well-known textual sources. The idiom can be traced back to a verse of the Bible; it was already in circulation in antiquity and used by prominent persons throughout the centuries. Erasmus of Rotterdam included it in his influential "Adagia" (1500ff.) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicted it in his famous painting "The Netherlandish Proverbs" (1559). All these facts may have contributed to the wide dissemination.

Language worldview: Eurolinguistics and cross-linguistic research

The data gained by widespread idiom research could now be questioned about their relevance for the worldview problem. There are some opposing opinions on this topic. I would like to briefly mention two of them. One interpretation comes from *Eurolinguistics*, a quite young linguistic discipline which does not try to emphasize the differences but rather the similarities of European languages, including genetically unrelated languages. Representatives of Eurolinguistics postulate a "common European worldview" which is different from the worldview of all other languages. Allegedly, this common worldview manifests itself in proverbs and idioms which are spread across many European languages.

In his *Handbuch der Eurolinguistik* Uwe Hinrichs used our example in order to prove this postulated common European worldview. He claims that phrases like *to swim against the stream* are – with slight variation – common in almost all languages of Europe and show a common conceptualization of perception [3, p. 943]. The author did not study widespread idioms himself but adopted some results which were available on the homepage of the widespread idiom project at that time. From the perspective of widespread idiom research everything is wrong with this assertion. The idiom's history has not been taken into account. Such a popular idiom could easily be incorporated into many other, non-European languages. As stated above, equivalents are well-known in various languages outside of Europe. The idiom is by no means a proof of any "common European conceptualization". We want to distance ourselves from such biased Eurocentric ideas.

My second instance comes from the realm of *cross-linguistic phraseology*. According to certain research traditions, figurative lexical units were considered to be a highly distinctive part of a language, which led to the idea that idioms were unique to a particular language, had no parallels among the idioms of other languages, and even provided the basis for an "idiosyncratic worldview", like a mirror of national culture or mentality (cf. works of Russian linguo-cultural research, e.g. [4; 5]. A number of representatives of these ideas can still be found

in the field of contrastive phraseology, especially bilingual studies. I want to illustrate the problem by an example, deputizing for similar cases. I am referring to a trilingual study on English, Russian and Tatar idioms [6]. The author discovers a wide range of similarities between idioms of these three languages. She writes about the idiom *by the sweat of one's brow*: "When a Russian works very hard his face sweats (*в поте лица*), whereas sweat will be on the Englishman's brow and the Tatar's forehead (*мангай тире белэн* – with sweat on the forehead)." What is striking from this trilingual viewpoint are the differences of the three constituents *face*, *brow* and *forehead*, and the author has an explanation for this: "Such differences in the componential structure of interlingual phraseological equivalents cannot be due to any other factor than people's differing mentalities, linguistic images of the world, or the associations speakers of these languages make" [6, p. 51].

This statement is all wrong. Rather, the three idioms are a good example of an independent recourse to the same textual source outlined in section 3 (they go back to the well-known passage in the Old Testament, *Genesis* book 3). The "differences in the componential structure" clearly refer to the different Bible translations and have nothing to do with a "mentality" or "images of the world". It is a widespread idiom which has equivalents in at least 60 European languages. The point is here to illustrate this kind of indifference towards the real cultural, historical and multilingual background of idioms in bi- or trilingual studies. Results of the project "Widespread Idioms" should be included in a modern phraseography from now on. A reference to the WI status, i.e. to the fact that an idiom is spread across a large number of languages in idiom dictionaries would be sufficient in avoiding such errors.

Lesser-used languages at the edge of Europe

Up to this point, we looked at the similarities of the European languages as they resulted from the widespread idiom project. However, there are also languages that reveal significant contrasts to these consistencies of standard written languages. Let us consider two small languages at the edge of the European continent, Sami and Basque. Both languages belong to the oldest layer of European languages and both existed for a long time primarily in oral form. Both languages have been well investigated with regard to their figurative lexicon. These studies reveal images and concepts which are truly unparalleled by all other European languages studied so far.

For reasons of space we can only briefly touch on the pioneering work by Anna Idström [7; 8; 9] on *Inari Sami*, a declining language spoken by about 350 people in North Finland. Until the 1900s Sami culture was fundamentally different from that of other societies in Europe; it was based on reindeer-husbandry, fishing and hunting in the arctic living conditions. Accordingly, the Sami figurative lexicon has its own images which do not comply with the system of conceptualizations known from other European languages, reflecting the traditional culture and way of life of this indigenous people, their knowledge of nature, weather conditions, animal behavior, etc. This does not mean that similar

images could not occur in other languages, for example, in languages of the Arctic region with the same climatic conditions, such as the Komi languages or Tundra Nenets spoken in northern Russia. However, there are no studies on the figurative lexicon of these languages.

Basque is an isolate, spoken on both sides of the Western Pyrenees. Basque has also preserved some outstanding concepts, which are completely unknown in other European languages [10; 11]. This can be illustrated by conceptualizations of body parts. All European standard languages have the same semiotizations of HEAD and HEART, without exceptions. HEAD is seen as the location of intellectual activities and HEART is the imaginary organ of positive emotions. This is due to the "Cartesian duality" of HEAD and HEART in Western culture (cf. [12]). Hundreds of idioms of all European standard language reflect this division into "intellect" and "emotions" as two separate entities. Among them are some widespread idioms, e.g. *to lose one's head* or *to take something into one's head* (with HEAD as the center of rationality) and *to have a heart of stone, to have a heart of gold, from the bottom of one's heart, to break someone's heart* (where HEART is seen as the center of emotions).

In contrast to this uniformity, the pre-Indo-European Basque has a pre-Cartesian concept: GOGO which comprises both intellect and emotions at the same time. As Ibarretxe-Antuñano [11, p. 267] puts it: "… *gogo* harmoniously unites these two apparent contrary concepts in one; in a way, *gogo* is a kind of *primitive thought* or *rational soul*, where there is an intellectual reasoning process, but one based on intuition and emotion; or to put it in another way, an intellectual reasoning process prior to any distinctions between feelings and thought – which, in fact, implies that reason and feelings are not differentiated at all." Examples show the wide scope of meanings of GOGO in Basque CFUs. On the one hand, intellect and thought can be in the fore, comparable to the functions of HEAD in other languages, as in the expressions *gogo argi* "gogo light" 'bright mind', *gogamen* 'intelligence', *gogoeta* 'thought' or *gogo-an izan* "gogo-LOC be.PFV" 'to remember'. On the other hand, emotions and feelings can be the focus, similar to functions of HEART, cf. Basque *gogoalai* "gogo.happy" 'jovial, cheerful', *gogo-a berotu* "gogo-ABS heat.PFV" 'to encourage', *gogo-ak izan* "gogo-ABS.PL have.PFV" 'to feel like', *gogohandi* "gogo.big" 'magnanimous, generous' and the like [Ibid, p. 266].

Again, this phenomenon is not uncommon when we turn our attention to languages of distant continents and cultures. Various languages worldwide have conceptualizations of "unusual" inner organs (like gall bladder, liver, abdomen, belly) which are seen as location of the mind and the emotions at the same time – a fact that distinguishes them from semiotization of body parts in the European standard languages.

Conclusions

We have put forward various data from the figurative lexicon of several languages, which should be discussed within the framework of the general topic about "the universal" and "the culture-based" in language worldview.

Nevertheless, we would need more empirical material. Only less than one percent of the about 7,000 languages of the world have been investigated in terms of their phraseology. In view of such a small empiric basis we never may speak of *phraseological universals*. On the other hand, all people are culturally determined and it is widely accepted that figurative lexical units such as idioms reflect important aspects of the culture, history and environment of a language community: a fact that makes terms like *culture-specific, culture-based* or *culturally bound* in the context of phraseology almost empty.

The idea that the figurative lexicon of a given language provides the basis for an idiosyncratic cultural worldview that mirrors some national-cultural character and mentality originated in national romantic thinking, which thought of nations as being identical to languages or cultural communities. However, the supposition that the analysis of idioms can contribute to uncovering information about a specific mentality or worldview of a language community is largely disputed since terms like *national culture* or *national mentality* lack any operational definitions in phraseology. The main objections come from the fact that most of the empirical data are taken from one single language. Compare the above mentioned "linguo-cultural studies" mainly carried out by a group of researchers in Russia, who start directly from Humboldt's or Sapir's and Whorf's idea of linguistic relativity. For this group, "[p]hraseological material can help reveal the universal and the culturally peculiar in the mentality of this or that linguocultural community. Moreover, these data can serve as an empirical basis for verifying the linguistic relativity hypothesis" [4, p. 792].

What has been overlooked was the fact that – in no region and at no time – a language community can be equated with a people, a nation or a cultural community. Overlooked was also the fact that such ideas are based on the assumption that linguistic and cultural features develop in parallel ways. However, the emergence of idioms in a given language and the development of a mentality do not represent parallel processes. Data of the widespread idiom project provide many examples of this finding. For example, we now can answer the question whether there may be a connection between the existence of biblical idioms in certain languages and the speaker's affiliation to specific religious communities and confessions. Several idioms of characteristically biblical origin are popular in East Asian languages, for example equivalents of "to bear one's cross" in Korean, Chinese and Japanese. This is also true for European languages whose speakers are predominantly Muslim. Conversely, idioms that go back to Hinduism or Buddhism are quite popular in European languages, cf. the WIs *the/a sacred cow* or *to contemplate one's own navel.* This is an important result. It is precisely the strangeness that has made the use of these idioms so popular, and not a relation to the uniqueness of the speakers' culture and/or mentality.

What is certain is that we need much more empirical data, especially from languages outside the Western cultural area and from languages that are predominantly used in oral form. Already two declining minority languages,

geographically belonging to Europe, are able to show that certain images and concepts of their figurative lexicon may well be "idiosyncratic", it is to say: are completely unknown in the languages which have been examined so far. This paper would like to encourage linguists to carry out new empirical research on conventional figurative units in order to expand the theoretical framework of phraseology and language worldview theory.

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МНОГОКРАТНОСТЬ ДЕРИВАЦИОННЫХ АКТОВ ИЛИ ШИРОКОЗНАЧНОСТЬ МЕТАФОРЫ

Опора в ходе номинативных процессов на уже имеющиеся в системе языка лексические единицы и выбор из вокабуляра в первую очередь тех слов, за которыми закреплено знание об объектах, явлениях или свойствах, типичных для окружающей носителей языка среды, доступных для восприятия, выделяющихся своей практической значимостью и т.п., с одной стороны, а также богатство известных носителям языка характеристик данных объектов, с другой, предопределяют возможность неоднократного использования имени в номинативных целях и, как следствие, открытость семантической структуры производного слова.

Существует принципиальное различие между многократным использованием имени в различных его значениях (ср., например, англ. *meaty* ‘мясной; информационно насыщенный’), ведущим к возникновению отраженной полисемии дериватов, между неоднократным использованием имени в качестве производящей базы в одном и том же ее значении с целью передачи различных смысловых модификаций (ср., например, *colicky* ‘страдающий от колики; вызывающий колику’) и актуализацией из репрезентируемой концептуальной структуры, к которой имя открывает доступ, не одной, а многих ее характеристик. Свободный выбор из общего знания, например, о лисе сведений о ее внешнем виде (*One of his friends was, indeed, heavy around the hips and bottom, almost bellshaped, the third was small and* ***foxy***)[1], своеобразной форме головы (*his* ***foxy*** *face*), о хитрости и интеллекте (*the long line of those men and women of experience and the most* ***foxy*** ***i****ntelligence*), о специфическом (рыжем) цвете меха (*a straight mass of red-gold hair, in cold King's Chapel, more golden than* ***foxy*** *Frederica's*), запахе (*its* ***foxy*** *breath*) и других качествах позволяют говорящим многократно использовать сравнение с данным животным для выражения специфических качеств человека, значительно расширяя выразительные возможности данного языка.

[1] Все примеры взяты из Британского национального корпуса английского языка (BNCE).