Proposal for a Cross-linguistic and Cross-cultural Research Project on Idioms of Food in Europe

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Abstract: Terms like “cross-linguistic” or “cross-cultural” are often used in phraseology research but the main question as to what idioms actually constitute the so-called “phraseological uniformity of Europe” has never been systematically studied. The present paper describes our first steps of a research project which aims at creating a collection of European idioms containing those units structures regarding the human being's nourishment and feeding, which exceeds the perspective of a simple compilation of phrasemes that are separately treated and alphabetically ordered, but organised as organic elements associated to a coherent system.

Key-Words: European idioms, onomasiological field, human nourishment, systemic organization

1 Introduction
The present article concerns idioms of food that are found across various languages in Europe. The idioms are seen as the central category of phraseology, distinguished from other categories. Unlike proverbs, sayings and quotations which differ from idioms by always making up an entire sentence, an idiom is a structure in which the meaning of the entire word formation does not correspond with the sum of the meaning of the individual words.

Phraseology researchers appear to have some vague knowledge about a cross-linguistic approach of idioms, but the set of problems connected with this perspective has never been methodically studied. There is no tradition of idioms studies that could be comparable to the rich tradition of international cooperation in the field of proverb research, represented by Abquilina [1], Kuusi [2], Paczolay [3], [4]. All these authors present extensive collections of proverbs that are common in many languages, but which are not primarily set in linguistics but in a wide-ranging ethnological-folkloristic and cultural framework. However, some researchers interested in making collections of the idioms in Europe and beyond have especially noticed common aspects. Matti Kuusi, in his important book “Regen bei Sonnenschein. Zur Weltgeschichte einer Redensart” (“Rain in the sunshine. Toward the world history of a saying”), published in 1957, succeeded in recording more than 3,000 variants of the saying mentioned in the title, taken from hundreds of languages and dialects spoken in various countries and continents, which represents an impressively extensive research material without modern media of today [5]. Menac, in 1987, also presents an inventory of several dozens of common European idioms, extracted from six languages of diverse genetic relationships, namely two Slavonic (Croatian, Russian), two Germanic (German, English) and two Romance (French and Italian) languages [6]. Korhonen, in 1991, realizes a comparative study of idioms which covers nine European languages: German, Finnish, French, Italian, English, Swedish, Russian, Hungarian and Estonian [7]. Other attempts to analyze idioms across several languages fall far behind the above-mentioned studies.

2 Problem Formulation
The cross-linguistic similarities of idioms have never been systematically studied. Regarding an onomasiological approach of units structures,
research are much less convincing. Several “cross-cultural” studies start from the traditional grouping of idioms into “thematic groups” (e.g. idioms with body parts, animal or garment constituents), mistakenly referred to as “onomasiological” approach as well.

3 Problem Solution

In response to the current situation of onomasiological cross-linguistic studies of idioms, our project’s main objective is the elaboration of an European dictionary containing those idioms regarding the human being’s nourishment and feeding, a dictionary which exceeds the optical of a simple collection of phrasemes that are separately treated and alphabetically ordered, but organised as organic elements associated to a coherent system. This dictionary is aimed at taking profits from current linguistic space, providing an answer to Eugeniu Coșeriu’s challenge regarding the study of language from the perspective of culture’s universality and having in mind the various demands of linguistic research which, as compared with other subjects, entails “the most numerous connections with the man’s way of being and with all the human activities in general” [8].

This task requires substantial empirical preliminary work, which cannot be carried out by one single researcher. An international, multilanguage cooperation of linguists will be necessary to organize the corpus of idioms in as many European languages as possible.

3.1 Argument for an European phraseological dictionary of field of human nourishment

According to Dubois [9] and Rey [10], the dictionaries can be compiled by authors who are not linguists, but this does not mean that the dictionary does not assume a particular perspective on language, even if lexicographers are not aware of it. Béjoint argues that the most important currents of theoretical linguistics had echoes in practical lexicography, even if this happened after a certain period of time [11].

Obviously, lexicography, as an independent discipline, benefits from the evolution of linguistic research, though the focus in current lexicographic work has shifted to the structure and functions of dictionaries.

A method and a linguistic discipline with valuable results in the current research is onomasiology. Designed by German linguists as a discipline studying the names of concepts in a certain language, onomasiology combines with the fields method to delineate lexical class (paradigm) within which they can rigorously analyze the semantic relationships. These methods contribute to the delimitation of our corpus dictionary, including the European idioms founded on images of human nutrition. A dictionary of an onomasiological field which is exclusively made up of a phraseological corpus it’s a <cultural dictionary>, in the sense that A. Ray and S. Delesalle give to this phrase, a dictionary to answer socio-cultural questions [12]. This approach also subsumes the ethno-linguistics, the European version of what Anglo-Saxons called linguistic anthropology. In Eugen Coșeriu’s terms, this linguistic discipline is aiming at “the study of language variety and variation in close contact with civilization and culture of a community” [13] while for A. Duranti “is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice” [14].

In the modern lexicographical theory of functions, cf. Bergenholtz-Tarp [15], it is considered that dictionaries have to meet the communicative needs and the cognitive needs of the users. By satisfying the communicative needs it is meant the help in solving a problem with text production, reception, translation, while by satisfying the cognitive needs it is meant the help in achieving systematic knowledge about a linguistic phenomenon or a non-linguistic phenomenon or context. An European phraseological dictionary of an onomasiological field obviously responds to the cognitive needs. It can be an instrument of great utility not only for linguists, but also for the anthropologists considering that language, at the level of idioms, preserves the deepest structures of the folk mentality.

3.2 The methodology and expected results of the project

In the former part of the dictionary the corpus of phrasemes based on images of feeding will be structured on onomasiological nuclei of the type NOURISHMENT/FOOD, BEVERAGES, CHARACTERISTICS, ACTIVITIES, ORGANS, INSTRUMENTS, PROCESSES regarding feeding, which are in turn divided into subcategories reaching the level of the food image which is phraseologically exploited. At the level of each image we will identify the signifying directions of phrasemes.
The choice of human nutrition as the topic for study will be the occasion to reveal some essential mechanisms of the reflection of history which is not strictly related to the description of events in the language, because in order to illustrate the linguistic specificity of an idiom we must study the representation forms of the quotidian structures in the language, feeding being one of them, together with housing and clothes-making [16].

Concerning the project submitted here, the methodology is specific to a lexicographic approach, which entails the following stages:

1. Inquiring into the works on general and European linguistics regarding the study of phraseology, as well as into the lexicographic sources of the European languages;
2. Selecting the phraseological corpus of the onomasiological field of nourishment in the European languages and organising it into phraseological nuclei;
3. Identifying the structure of each phraseological nucleus;

We will elaborate a map of the onomasiological field of human nourishment, in the European languages, making reference to all the subordinating levels up to the food image which is rendered by a title-word.

In order to accurately illustrate the role of the food image at the level of the phraseological structure we will identify the subsections of the phraseological nuclei. For instance, the NOURISHMENT/FOOD nucleus will be composed of the categories Edible plants and plant dishes, milk and milk dishes, honey, meat and meat dishes, eggs, spices. In its turn, the section Edible plants and plant dishes can be subdivided into Vegetables and fruits and Cereals and cereal dishes. This subdivision can be motivated by the nature of the two items. The phraseological units based on images of fruits and vegetables illustrate the picker’s perspective, while units referring to cereals demonstrate the grower’s perspective. Even these preliminary delineations are illustrative of the degree of expression of the primary mental patterns related to general human or regional structures at the level of idioms based on food images.

4. Elaborating each dictionary article;

At the level of each section we will register the food images which present phraseological illustration. Each food image, for instance EAT, incorporated into the section ACTIVITIES regarding human feeding, is investigated in a separate chapter where all its phraseological units organised on signifying directions will be presented. For example:

EAT „to take into the body by the mouth for digestion or absorption”
1. To overwhelm or defeat thoroughly
Eng. eat somebody alive
Eng. eat somebody for breakfast [17]
Fr. il veut le manger tout cru [18]
It. mangiarsi vivo (qcn.)
It. mangiarsi in insalata (qcn.)
It. mangiarsi in un bucone (qcn.) [19]
Rom. a mânce pe cineva de viu
Rom. a mânce fript pe cineva [20]
Rus. съесть живьем кого-л. [21]
2. To desire/ want someone physically someone physically
Fr. dévorer des yeux (qcn.)
It. mangiare con gli occhi / sguardo (qcn.)
Prt. comer com os olhos [22]
Rom. a mânce (pe cineva) din ochi (cu ochii)
Rus. пожирать глазами
Blg. поглядът с очи [23].

The above example holds that feeding phraseology enables the discovery of mechanisms of interaction between man and environment. Negative relationship with otherness is best expressed through violent act of ingestion. But from the digestive womb to the sexual womb it is only one step, confirming the connection between greed and sexuality [24].

These homologous idioms in different languages demonstrate the existence of phraseological universals, in fact, the general form of representing the world in direct correlation with human experience. In this context, the study of European idioms regarding the human being's nourishment and feeding is a form of highlighting the deep structures of collective mentality.

5. Elaborating the contents, the title indexes for food images, the bibliography;

The usage of this dictionary is meant to be an accessible and productive one. By continuously citing the bibliographical resources we aim at guiding the reader to the essential works in the domain of European lexicography. The elaboration of the contents and the appendix with title indexes
we intend to overcome the common difficulty of the reader when turning to dictionaries whose material is alphabetically organised.  

6. Formulating conclusions regarding the specific character of the dictionary, some guidelines for usage, the abbreviations list employed in the dictionary;

Having in view the fact that this book is set to organise the phraseological material, and not to record it alphabetically, we need to present the general parameters for conceiving the dictionary, as well as some guidelines for its usage.

7. Publishing the Phraseological European Dictionary: The Onomasiological Field of Human Nourishment at one of the internationally acknowledged publishing houses.

4 Conclusion

As a condition of existence, food is one of the most important chapters in human development. Feeding is defined by what is generally human nature, characterized by a spontaneous automatism. This belongs to nature. And, also, it is subject to restrictive rules, being relative and individual. By this, feeding is a part of culture. Both dimensions of the food act, relate to nature, as source needed to revitalization, and cultural dimension, as way of knowledge and understanding life, are valued by language. Idioms are the language section where the food pictures show the true relationship between culture and nature in the popular mentality. Our project tries, in the process of meaning of idioms, to highlight food, as a cultural sign, in the specific elements of European culture and of human culture generally.

The outcome of this project, an European phraseological dictionary of the onomasiological filed of human nourishment, represents the first attempt of this kind. This dictionary is not organised as a simple collection of phraseologisms that are separately treated and are alphabetically ordered, but as organic elements associated to a coherent system. The former part of the dictionary entails the structuring of the phraseological material on onomasiological nuclei, reaching the level of a food image corresponding to a series of phraseological valorisations, organised on signifying directions.

The volume ensuing this project, European Phraseological Dictionary: The Onomasiological Field of Human Nourishment, will constitute a philological resource-tool which will promote the scientific activities in the domain of ethno-linguistic research. The analysis of idioms could transgress the level of language as a system, as it focuses on their importance at the level of speech, but also at the level of discourse, as a method of identifying language acts as performance acts. Studies in semantics, stylistics and even pragmatics centred on phraseology based on human nourishment at the level of discourse, could prove their productivity in the space of contemporary linguistics.

Considering the established objectives and the results which are expected, the project provides answers to some requirements related to the strategies of developing and improving European science, in order to increase the visibility and prominence of cultural research at an international level.

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