PHRASEOLOGICAL COMPETENCE
AND THE TRANSLATION OF PHRASEMES

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Abstract: In this article, that is based on my contribution to a workshop on Multilingual phraseology and translation, I’ll focus on the aspects and the role of language competence in the translation of phrasemes, i.e. the phraseological competence. At first, I’ll describe the context of language competence in translation. Secondly, I’ll define and illustrate some aspects of the phraseological competence that are relevant in the act of translating, and finally, I’ll discuss the difference between phraseology in system and the conception of the translation as a text in relation to the phraseological competence as an integral part in the act of translating phrasemes.

Key words: phraseological equivalence, contextual translation.

1. Introduction: resources, texts and the translator

In this article the perspective lies on the role of the linguistic – especially phraseological – competence in the translation of phrasology. This perspective is to be seen in relation to the other contribution to the workshop Multilingual phraseology and translation, that were organized as in figure 1 (cf. Annette Sabin's contribution to the workshop):

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resource (1):
(multilingual) phraseological dictionary
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source text   translator   target text
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resource (2):
linguistic competence (e.g., phraseological and linguistic competence)
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Figure 1: Thematic organization of the workshop Multilingual phraseology and translation.

A focus on the language competence automatically places the translator in the centre of my observations as indicated in figure 1. The translator acts as the interface between a source text and a target text. He or she can make use of external resources like dictionaries (resource 1), cf. Elena Arsent’eva workshop contribution) whereby he or she is dependent on his/her own cognitive resources, i.e. the language competence (cf. also the workshop contribution from Gloria Corpus) and decisions to be made during the translation. In other words, the translator
cannot simply “look up” a dictionary entry, but has to decide, on the basis of a number of considerations, on how to translate a phrase in a text, the dictionary entry being only one element in this decision process. (cf. claim 3 in Annette Sabban's workshop contribution).

I differentiate between the translation as a decision process (the act of translation) and the translation as the target text that is the result of the translation process. The phraseological competence is one aspect that influences the decision process and it overlaps with phraseology in dictionaries and the translators competence to use dictionaries when dictionaries are used as a tool to translate phrases.

In order to illustrate the linguistic relation between the aspects of translation in the workshop I use the theoretical approach introduced in Hallsteinisdottir/Faro (2010). They propose that there are at least three dimensions of language constitution. Therefore linguistic research has to develop three different approaches to language and thereby also phraseology (cf. figure 2):

1. phraseology in the language system, which i.e. corresponds to the lexicographic treatment of phrases in dictionaries;
2. phraseology in texts, which corresponds to the use of phrases in the source text and the target text;
3. phraseological competence (cognitive aspects), which is a part of the overall cognitive abilities of the translator.

Figure 2: The linguistic relation between the aspects of translation discussed in the workshop and the theoretical approach in Hallsteinisdottir/Faro (2010)

This differentiation aims to define the research object language in its different constitution. Only the translation competence – also known as the “black box” in translation theories – will be further explored here.

2. Phraseological competence

2.1. Intralingual phraseological competence

The native language competence consists of the overall linguistic, i.e. phonetic, morphosyntactic, grammatical, lexical-semantic, textual, situational, pragmatic and cultural knowledge and the communicative competence. The communicative competence is thereby seen as the ability to use language appropriately in communication (a definition that goes back to Dell Hymes in the early seventies).

The phraseological competence is often defined as a complex part of the general linguistic and communicative competence in L1, L2, L3 etc. It can therefore be defined as the ability to adequately use phrases, that is, the phraseological competence includes everything a speaker needs to knew in order to be able to understand and use phrases appropriately in communication (cf. a detailed discussion of the phraseological competence in Hallsteinisdottir 2001, 11 ff). The next logical step in order to more precise outline some concrete aspects of the phraseological competence would then be a definition of “everything” analogous to the definition of the language competence above as:

1. **Linguistic competence** is a) the amount of phrases that is a part of an individual speakers vocabulary and b) the knowledge of phraseology specific aspects in language processing:
   - Phrases have a non-continuous form and therefore a phrase can’t be identified as a lexicalized unit by its visual form in a written text (and most translation tasks include written texts).
   - Phrases consist of components that also function as autonomous linguistic signs and therefore all phrases have a complex lexical-semantic nature – a semiotic complex meaning potential – based on their complex structure.
   - Phrases often underlie morpho-syntactic and grammatical restrictions.
   - Compared to compositional word sequences, phrases can differ in pronunciation (an aspect of the phraseological competence, though hardly relevant for written texts).
   - The formal and semiotic complexity is the basis for several phenomena in the language processing, such as the involvement of the meaning of the components, literal interpretation, construction of images, etc.

2. **Textual competence** covers the adequate usage of a phrase in relation to a text (coherence potential), incl. textual functions of i.a. layout, multimodality, modifications (cf. Ptasnycz 2009 for functions of modifications).
3. **Communicative competence** is the ability to recognize the function of a phrase in a text and adequately use a phrase in relation to the communicative situation.
4. **Conceptual and cultural competence** contains the knowledge of how the conceptual structure of the world incl. cultural specificity is manifested in phraseology.

2.2. Interlingual phraseological competence

As the act of translation (almost) always is an interaction between two languages, an exploration of the interlingual interplay in the phraseological competence is essential. Although there still is only very little research in this field, it has been verified, that the mother tongue and thereby the aspects of the native phraseological competence demonstrated above play an important role in the understanding (cognitive processing) of phraseology (Hallsteinisdottir 2001; Reder 2006, 2008). Some approaches in foreign language research even propose that everything that can be transferred from L1 into L2 will be transferred from L1 into L2. My observations in teaching German–Danish translation on both BA- and MA-

1 Brian MacWhinney in a workshop talk at Syddansk Universitet in Kolding on June 17th 2010
2.3. Phraseological competence in translation

Analog to my previous definitions I define the phraseological translation competence here as the ability to use (decode and encode) phraseemes appropriately in the translation of a L1-text into a L2-text. This means knowing words and phraseemes and knowing how to use (understand and produce) words and phraseemes in texts in L1 and L2 in relation to the aim of the translation and the communicative functions of the source and target text.

There has been a quite strong focus on problems in translation of phraseemes in phraseological research and a my hypothesis was, that this research might expose some aspects of the phraseological competence. Most of this problem oriented research relates to the so-called phraseositivity (Phraseosaktivität) and the additional (semantic) value (semantisches Mehrwert) of phraseemes (cf. Koller 2007), that is
die textuell-konnotativen Werte von Phraseemen, die nicht nur die denotative, sondern
auch die konnotative, die textnormative, die pragmatische und die formal-ästhetische
Äquivalenz betreffen (Koller 2007: 607).

Those textual-connotative values of phraseemes are described as a meaning or textual potential (potentielle Werte) that can be activated in a text and they correspond roughly to the aspects of the phraseological competence described here. Above I stated that images, symbolic value, conceptual structures, etc. can play a role in the usage of phraseemes. The following examples of the use of phraseological values, i.a. visualizations, links to conceptual structures not included in the phraseological meaning and intertextuality, show some of the interrelations that can be realized with the Danish phraseeme taking the bull by the horns.

The visualization of taking the bull by the horns in Danish in figure 3 uses the literal meaning of the components and the concept of a rodeo with a bull riding cowboy (that is wearing a plumbers overall referring to the company activity plumbing and piping). This concept indicates that the reader will have great fun if he or she attends the open house of the company in the advertisement:

![Visual Illustration](image-url)

**Figure 3:** Example of visualization in Danish Open house: Fyns VVS Klima takes the bull by the horns together with Grohe and Ifo.

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2 For further references cf. Hallsteinsdóttir 1997; Koller (2007).
Another example of the visualization of *taking the bull by the horns* is demonstrated in figure 4, where the phraseme is used as a title of a Spanish grammar for beginners and the book is illustrated with a part of a picture of a bull fighter in a colorful costume. Here, the association to the traditional Spanish bullfighting is clear and it even activates a kind of metaphoric relationship between a student mastering Spanish grammar and a matador defeating a bull.

![Figure 4: Visualization of a bull fighter on the cover of a Spanish grammar for Danish learners with the title Take the bull by the horns.](image)

The journalistic text (review of a motorbike) with the headline *Take the motorcycle-bull by the horns* in figure 5 explicitly motivates the use of the phraseme by a picture where the Buell 1125 CR is called a *boasting bull* and by an explanation in the following lines: *I had never really thought about how close the Buell name is to the English word for a bull. At least not consciously*. In this explanation the journalist links the English name of the motorbike to the English word *bull* and from there to the Danish phraseme *tag tyren ved hornene*.

![Figure 5: Headline: Take the MC-bull by the horns (and caption: Buell 1125 CR is a big and strong street fighter that demands a firm grip on the horns of the somewhat boasting bull).](image)

![Tag MC-tyren ved hornene](image)

In the last example to be discussed (cf. figure 6), a cover from the weekend magazine of a national Danish newspaper, the Danish phraseme has been modified by replacing the component *bull* with *Iceland* in the title *Iceland taken by the horns*. The modified phraseme is accompanied by a picture of a young billy goat with two hands holding it by its horns. The title is followed by the headline *Once a year the inhabitants of the island take nine days out of the calendar to live like in the times of the sagas.*

![Figure 6: Visualization of the modification Iceland taken by the horns based on textual motivation.](image)

Both the title and the headline as well as the picture refer to a detailed report on the annual gathering of free grazing sheep in the Icelandic mountains in the autumn. The modification is based on an intertextual relation between the cover and the article inside the magazine and it cannot be fully understood without knowing the content of the article.

In the modifications shown above, the translation of the Danish *phraseme tag tyren ved hornene* will probably cause no fundamental problems in target languages with a similar phraseme like English: *take the bull by the horns* German: *den Stier bei den Hörnern packen* and Spanish: *coger el toro por los cuernos*. Most of the additional information (the "Mehrwert"), visualizations and modifications are based on a global knowledge of what can be done with bulls in rodeo (hanging on the bull as long as possible by holding on to the horns, cf. figure 3) and bull fighting (figure 4). The example in figure 5 is motivated by the English word *bull* and in figure 6 the modification is motivated by a text inside the magazine and therefore understandable and translatable in relation to the information in that text. Problems will occur in languages like Icelandic that do not provide the possibility to encode the modification with a similar phraseme or where the readers do not know the concepts that the modification is based on. The translation possibilities are thus determined by the language

system: the existence of a similar linguistic item in the target language and the language knowledge of the translator respectively the estimated knowledge of the potential readers of the target text bias the outcome of the translation process.

3. “Translation as text” and the dogmatism of equivalence

I’ll now come back to an aspect touched upon in the beginning of this article, where I defined translation as a process (the act of translating) on the one side and as a product – the target text – on the other side. The act of translating and the competence needed to accomplish a translation task are the aspects of translation that can be explored from a cognitive perspective. The act of translation is a decision process and the result of this process depends highly on the cultural, textual and linguistic competence of the translator (Neubert/Shreve 1992). According to figure 2, this view implies that the translator uses his/her linguistic competence in L1 and L2 that is based on the language system in L1 and L2 to construct a new text in L2 that is based on a text in L1 and given instructions from the client.

In a holistic perspective, translation can also be seen as an intersection of the translation situation (inclusive client demands), the translation competence of the translator, the source text, and target text-to-be (cf. Neubert/Shreve 1992). Neubert/Shreve argue that in this perspective, the text and its socio-cultural situations always define the translation process. In the case of phraseology, the text defines the role of a phrase and hence, the text dominates the decision of an equivalent in L2 (cf. Mellado Blanco 2009; cf. also Hallsteinsdóttir/Fare 2010). The translation of phrasemes is dominated by the textual equivalence and the L2-text textuality as defined in Neubert and Shreve (1992), and not by the potential equivalence in the language systems in L1 and L2 (cf. Hallsteinsdóttir 2006; Mellado Blanco 2009).

In his results of a study on translation strategies in translations of phrasemes, Fare (2006) states a kind of a phraseological dogmatism. This dogmatism is defined by a more or less implicit rule saying that a phraseme in L1 should be translated by a phraseme or at least by the use of the L1 phraseological image in L2. This kind of dogmatism, that is not only found in translation but also in lexicography and phraseological studies, seems to be wide spread amongst translators (cf. Fare 2006). The perception of an obligatory equivalence within the linguistic category of phraseology focuses solely on linguistic items in the source text as objects of the language system and it disregards other aspects of translation, both seen as a process and as a text. As a consequence, it generates and maintains an illusion of a mandatory systemic equivalence of phrasemes in translation.

4. Conclusion

Summing up, the phraseological translation competence includes conceptual and metalinguistic knowledge as well as decoding and encoding strategies (cf. Hallsteinsdóttir 2001) and not linguistic items only. By metalinguistic knowledge, I understand an awareness of what phraseology is and what role it plays in a given source text in relation to different functions of language in texts in communication. The strategies consist in knowing how to decode the meaning(s) and function(s) of a phraseme in a given L1-(con)text – and adequately reconstruct those or alternative functions in the socio-cultural L2-(con)text. And, of course, the phraseological translation competence also contains the knowledge of phraseological items, that is, the cognitive representation of (all?) phrasemes of the mastered languages (source and target language). The phraseological competence is hence a part of the general communicative, cultural and linguistic competence, that enables a speaker/translator to communicate successfully in a given socio-cultural context.

7 I’m aware of the very different approaches to equivalence in translation theories, those are not the subject of this article.
PLACING ITALIAN IDIOMS IN A FOREIGN MILIEU: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Written literature is usually considered to be ideal for the study of phraseological units. Rossana Campo's novels are not just one more source to analyse the translation of phraseology, but a perfect combination of both written and spoken language: it is not possible to refer to her style without mentioning orality. She aptly reproduces in writing the typical conversational styles of Italian youngsters in a vivid, lively way. Campo's literary productions are an unmistakable mixture of inner thoughts, narrations and dialogues, all amalgamated with interjections, swearwords, and unfinished, chaotic discourses. Her novels include a variety of idioms, colloquialisms, informal turn-takings, and elaborate—but apparently spontaneous—conversational exchanges. Despite the key role that phraseology plays in Campo's writing, there is still a surprising scarcity of studies devoted to this topic. This paper sets out to explore the translation of phraseological units in Mentre mia nina duerme, the Spanish version of Rossana Campo's sixth novel, Mentre la mia bella dorme (1999). This paper is mainly concerned about the translation strategies applied to render the various aspects of meaning that a phraseological unit conveys in the foreign, social and cultural target community.

1. Rossana Campo, a conversation-novel master

Rossana Campo (Genoa, 1963) has been called by some critics, such as Walter Pedullà, as the only living Italian female writer that has a prominent sense of humour. Hers is a caustic, ironic and unpretentious writing —unpretentious in the sense of her writing not wanting the reader to see her writing proficiency, but showing disinterestedness an astonishing dominion of language. The language she uses is direct, hasty, almost a transcription of spoken discourse, and this is the reason why she avoids any evidence of writer-made invention. Her language within the novels therefore consists of elements that belong to a low-class, colloquial tone, but surprisingly accompanied with countless references to literary, cinematic and musical works, what makes of her writing an amalgam that is, just apparently, natural, not elaborated.

The so-called “ragazza terribile della letteratura” (Romani, 1997: 27) writes about women. Her writing is, therefore, a female —but nor feminist—one due to her being a woman (Barilli, 1999), because “uno scrittore o una scrittrice non possono non descrivere situazioni legate al proprio sesso” (Campo, in Tagliabue, 1992). Hers is, in short, a female writing which is understood in a different way, since it is conceived countering female narrative and, in general, nowadays’ novel writing. (Caserza, 1992)

2. Mentre la mia bella dorme and its translation into Spanish

As usual in her novels, the main character of Mentre la mia bella dorme is a wild and ironic, marginal but autonomous, romantic but feminist Italian girl (L. Guglielmi, 1999), whose name, besides, is kept unknown for the reader. Unlike in other novels, where the general impression was that Rossana Campo was ruled by a writing for writing’s sake, now Campo