

THE TRANSLATION ASPECT OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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Contrastive linguistics, in describing pairs of languages on various linguistic levels synchronically, provides essential preconditions for translation theory. There are, however, differences between the two disciplines. Whereas contrastive linguistics in the past used to analyse the simple or complex word (lexeme) or the word-group only within the framework of the linguistic system and chiefly *free from its communicative context*, translation theory studies the word or the word-group *context-bound*, because of their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic interrelations with their textual and situational environment. We must bear in mind that in the translation process the linguistic unit of the source language does not always coincide with that of the target language; a word-group may be paraphrased by a sentence; a clause may be condensed in a wordgroup, but the invariance of content of the text in the source language and the target language remains the ultimate criterion of translation. An essential factor for an adequate translation is the socio-cultural setting of the text and its pragmatic function. For the purpose of this paper, translation is defined as the cognitive and linguistic process the translator performs in decoding a text which is the result of a communication act in the source language, and in encoding it as a speech product in the target language by preserving the content and achieving the stylistic quality of the source language text. Thus translation is both a process and its linguistic result.

So far, the favourite units of contrastive analysis have been words and their semantic orderings in word fields, which were often described as conceptual or thematic classes. Comparatively little research work, however, has been bestowed on phraseological units, neither by comparing their constituent structure, their semantic stability and idiomaticity in two language nor their occurrence in the texts of the source and target languages. In this respect, the

aspect of the language system should be supplemented by that of its communicative function, which is manifest in texts.

My study will deal with phraseological units in English and German in two respects:

- a) their semantic similarity or diversity against the background of the two linguistic systems (cf. Gläser (1981); Fleischer (1982));
- b) their form and function in texts of prose fiction. (This comparison will be based on samples from an English/American/ and a German novel and their German and English translations respectively.) The contrastive analysis from the two angles leads to interesting results.

At the outset, before turning to a bilingual analysis of the phraseological units, I shall give a definition of the terms phraseological unit and idiom and a brief outline of the scope of the phraseological system in English. By definition, a phraseological unit is a lexicalized word-group which has syntactic and semantic stability and optionally an intensifying function in the text. This definition holds for word-like phrases and for the phraseological system in the narrower sense. Cf. *the wear and tear of time* (=obsolescence); *shipshape and Bristol fashion* (=orderly); *to grease sb's palm* (=bribe sb.); *before you can say Jack Robinson* (=rapidly). These examples belong to the principal parts of speech and may be substituted by other simple words in the text. Besides, these word-groups are also idioms, because their referential meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of their constituents. In terms of quantity and semantic variation, the idiom may be regarded as the prototype of the phraseological unit. Semantically speaking, an idiom is characterised by a specific choice and combination of semantic components (or semantic markers or senses) carried by the constituents which form the word-group. In the extreme case, an idiom may comprise such semantic components as have no representation in the semantic components of the constituents of the phrase at all, but are added, so to speak, "from outside". This well-known fact has been described as "exosememic meaning" (Pilz (1978)) or "external" or "exocentric meaning" (Rothkegel (1973)).

To describe the phraseological system of Modern English according to its internal hierarchy I should decide in favour of the *model of centre and periphery* which modern linguistics owes to the Prague School and which has proved its applicability to a number of fields of the linguistic system. Thus I distinguish between the centre, which comprises phraseological units in nominative function (word-groups designating phenomena, objects, processes, actions, states, qualities, relations etc. in the outside world), the transition area which is adjacent to the centre and includes at the same time phraseological units which are nominations, but which are also parts of propositions (i.e. parts of a sentence, such as fragments of proverbs (*a fool and his money*); proverbial sayings (*to see how the cat jumps*); literary allusions, fragments of quotations (*Mrs*

Grundy); irreversible binomials (*hit or miss*) and stereotyped comparisons (*as old the hills*), (*to behave like a bull in a china shop*). The periphery of the phraseological system covers set expressions which are chiefly propositions and function as sentences, although their idiomatic character greatly varies. These include proverbs, quotations, slogans, commandments, phatic and rhetorical formulas. Phatic formulas contribute to establishing and maintaining the contact among communication partners, e.g. *how do you do? don't mention it; come again? what's cooking?*, whereas rhetorical formulas often serve as 'fillers' in speeches or accentuate the speaker's standpoint, e.g. *as a matter of fact; let's face it; like it or not; last but not least; needless to say that; there can be little doubt that; I daresay*. This system has been fully developed in my students' coursebook, *Phraseologie der englischen Sprache*, Potsdam 1981.

In terms of contrastive analysis, a comparison between this textbook and that of Wolfgang Fleischer, *Phraseologie der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, Leipzig 1982, which is also designed for students, but also for a wider audience, would reveal striking similarities and contrasts between the phraseological systems of either language, not only in terminology and internal classification of the lexical material, but also in the equivalence relations which exist among the idioms and other phrases which are not idioms, but set expressions only. In this respect we can speak of three types of lexical equivalence when we compare English and German phraseological units, and apply the categories set up by the Soviet linguist L. Barchudarov (*Sprache und Übersetzung*, Moskau/Leipzig 1979) for translation theory. He distinguishes between 1. *complete*; 2. *partial* and 3. *zero equivalence* in the target language. This distinction is chiefly of theoretical interest, but in translation practice, which is always based on the text, zero equivalence can generally be compensated by a circumscription of the denotational meaning of the word or the word-group from the source language, so that there is no deficit of information in the target language.

With a view to phraseological units, there are plenty of examples of *complete equivalence* in English and German. The following phrases show a close correspondence in their constituent structure and their complex meaning; they are not idiomatized.

nouns:	<i>the Lost Generation</i>	— <i>die verlorene Generation</i>
	<i>the Glorious Revolution</i>	— <i>die Glorreiche Revolution</i>
	<i>receipts and expenses</i>	— <i>Einnahmen und Ausgaben</i>
adjectives:	<i>null and void</i>	— <i>null und nichtig</i>
	<i>numb with cold</i>	— <i>erstarrt vor Kälte</i>
	<i>to commit a crime</i>	— <i>ein Verbrechen begehen</i>
verbs:	<i>to take into account</i>	— <i>in Betracht ziehen</i>
	<i>to have a walk</i>	— <i>einen Spaziergang machen</i>

adverbs: *of one's own accord* — *aus eigenem Antrieb*
once and for all — *ein für allemal.*

Complete equivalence, of course, is also possible among idioms. This may include a congruence or identity of the denotational (in this case transferred) meaning, and also of the connotational, expressive (or emotive) and stylistic meanings of the idioms compared. In a number of cases, the metaphor or metonymy which has brought about the transferred meaning of the idiom in either language, comes from a different referent in the outside world, and the two idioms vary in their figurative character and motivation. Since we are dealing with lexicalized idioms, this fact does not impair the translatability of a text, because the target language (German) offers an equivalent with the same denotational meaning, although a different "picture" in the idiom, which is faded anyway. As in simple or complex words, most metaphors and metonymies in idioms are no longer stylistic devices. There are, however, examples where the metaphor underlying the idiom still has some cultural or historical connotations in one of the languages compared, so that the concept of complete equivalence does not hold any longer and there is only a relation of partial equivalence.

The following idioms agree in their denotational meaning and their sources of the metaphors:

nouns:	<i>apple of discord</i>	— <i>Zankapfel</i> (slight connotations: the judgement of Paris)
	<i>lame duck</i>	— <i>lahme Ente</i> (the German idiom, however, refers to human agents only, whereas the English may also denote an enterprise)
adjectives:	<i>cold war</i>	— <i>kalter Krieg</i>
	<i>as proud as a peacock</i>	— <i>stolz wie ein Pfau</i>
	<i>as white as snow</i>	— <i>weiß wie Schnee; schneeweiß</i>
verbs:	<i>to run the gauntlet</i>	— <i>Spießruten laufen</i> (in both languages historical connotations)
	<i>to slip through one's fingers</i>	— <i>durch die Finger rinnen</i>
	<i>to tighten one's belt</i>	— <i>den Gürtel enger schnallen</i>
	<i>to throw out the baby with the bath water</i>	— <i>das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten</i>
adverbs:	<i>like a bolt from the blue</i>	— <i>wie ein Blitz aus heiterem Himmel</i>
	<i>out of joint</i>	— <i>aus den Fugen.</i>

Where idioms strikingly differ in their referential base of a metaphor or metonymy, their connotational and stylistic meanings, they are to be considered as cases of *partial equivalence*. On the whole, there seem to be more cases of different metaphorized referents than of identical ones, and certain connotational differences in the languages compared. In the following examples, however, there is agreement in the stylistic meaning, as the idioms in either language belong to the neutral level of usage.

nouns:	<i>a Jack-of-all-trades</i>	— <i>Hans Dampf in allen Gassen; Allerweltskerl; Faktotum</i> (the German equivalent is not a fragment of a proverb and hence has no connotations "and a master of none" which is often implied in the English idiom)
	<i>dog in the manger</i>	— <i>Neidhammel</i>
	<i>a storm in a teacup</i>	— <i>ein Sturm im Wasserglas</i>
	<i>a bull in a china-shop</i>	— <i>ein Elefant im Porzellanladen.</i>
adjectives:	<i>green with envy</i>	— <i>bläß vor Neid</i>
	<i>spick and span</i>	— <i>geschniegelt und gebügelt</i> (the alliteration of the English idiom compares favourably to the assonance in the German one)
verbs:	<i>to make no bones about</i>	— <i>nicht viel Federlesens machen mit</i>
	<i>to buy a pig in a poke</i>	— <i>die Katze im Sack kaufen</i>
	<i>to keep a stiff upper lip</i>	— <i>die Ohren steifhalten</i>
adverbs:	<i>according to Cocker</i>	— <i>nach Adam Ries(e)</i>
	<i>once in a blue moon</i>	— <i>alle Jubeljahre</i>
	<i>from pillar to post</i>	— <i>von Pontius zu Pilatus</i>
	<i>before you can say Jack Robinson</i>	— <i>im Handumdrehen</i> (the latter is colloquial in English and German).

Partial equivalence also applies to English idioms which have no idiomatic counterparts in German, but a compound or a simple word which seldom has an emotive meaning and which may be situated on a different stylistic level. Here we are faced with difficulties in establishing "word equations" for the two languages compared, because every pair of idioms would require a careful analysis of the whole range of meaning (including the semantic markers that express connotations or stylistic shades).

nouns:	<i>white lie</i>	— <i>Notlüge</i>
	<i>wet blanket</i>	— <i>Spielverderber, Spaßverderber</i> (the English idiom is polysemous, which the German is not)
	<i>bread and butter</i>	— <i>Lebensunterhalt</i>
	<i>red tape</i>	— <i>Bürokratismus</i>
	<i>cock-and-bull story</i>	— <i>Ammenmärchen</i> (similar connotations in German)
adjectives:	<i>full of beans</i>	— <i>lebhaft</i> (the English idiom is colloquial, the German is neutral style)
	<i>down in the mouth</i>	— <i>niedergeschlagen</i>
	<i>dyed-in-the-wool</i>	— <i>waschecht</i>
	<i>as thick as hailstones</i>	— <i>knüppeldick</i> (a similar metaphor in German)
verbs:	<i>to jump the queue</i>	— <i>sich vordrängen</i>
	<i>to grease sb's palm</i>	— <i>jmdn bestechen</i>
	<i>to send sb to Coventry</i>	— <i>jmdn schneiden</i> (in German without military connotations)
	<i>to take to one's heels</i>	— <i>ausreißen; sich aus dem Staube machen</i>
adverbs:	<i>by leaps and bounds</i>	— <i>sprunghaft</i>
	<i>by fits and starts</i>	— <i>ruckweise</i>
	<i>once and for all</i>	— <i>endgültig</i> (as opposed to the German equivalent <i>ein für allemal</i> , which is a case of complete equivalence because of its intensifying function in the text)

Zero equivalence of English idioms in German is comparatively rare, but in no way does it question the translatability of a sentence. Even if there is no approximate expression in the target language, in the last resort a paraphrase of the denotational meaning of the idiom of the source language is possible, although its pragmatic meaning (in L. Barchudarov's terms, the connotations, the register and the stylistic meaning of the lexical unit) may not be represented adequately in the target language. The following examples are verbal idioms which designate professions of social prestige in Britain, but for

socio-cultural reasons have no counterpart in German and no idiomatic equivalent which is based on a metonymy. Cf. the following examples:

<i>to eat one's dinners/one's terms</i>	— the equivalent given in the dictionary by Muret/Sanders resembles a definition: "seine Studien an den Inns of Court absolvieren (und an den vorgeschriebenen Essen teilnehmen)"
<i>to be called to the bar</i>	— "als Barrister oder Advokat oder plädierender Anwalt zugelassen werden"
<i>to take (holy) orders</i>	— "die heiligen Weihen empfangen, in den geistlichen Stand eintreten".

There are also cases of idiomatic nouns which so far only occur in monolingual English dictionaries, but are not even listed in the dictionary by Muret/Sanders so far, so that the German translation will be a circumscription which cannot imitate the special flavour of the English idiom. Cf.

a/the golden handshake — according to the *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (London 1979) is "a large payment given to a person leaving a company or organization" — the German equivalent could be "ein finanzielles Abschiedsgeschenk"; *green fingers* has only a paraphrastic equivalent in German, according to Muret/Sanders "geschickte Hand für Gartenarbeit, gärtnerische Begabung".

Semantically speaking, zero equivalence does not mean a gap in the notional or conceptual system of a language, but a different ordering of reality in linguistic items. The target language is able to express every state of affairs by exploiting all linguistic means inside the sentence and beyond its boundaries.

The three types of equivalence occurring in the phraseological system discussed so far, only refer to isolated, context-free examples drawn from dictionaries. In daily communication and translation practice, however, it is the text that matters most of all. It is the material result of communication and determined by the sender's intention and the function of the message, the situational setting of the message in time and space, and the special features of the recipient. In this social context, those phraseological units belonging to the transition area and the periphery of the phraseological system acquire their communicative relevance. Proverbs tend to give a text, be it a public speech or a popular article on a rather specific subject, more colour, vividness and emotive value.

In the field of proverbs, which, being propositions, belong to the periphery of the phraseological system and touch upon folklore studies, we come across the same relations of equivalence as in the centre of the phraseological system, which comprises word-like phrases and idioms.

Complete equivalence:

All roads lead to Rome. — Alle Wege führen nach Rom.

No man can serve two masters. — Keiner kann zweien Herren dienen.

A burnt child dreads the fire. — Gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer.

Partial equivalence:

A friend in need is a friend indeed. — Freunde in der Not gehn tausend auf ein Lot.

Make hay while the sun shines. — Schmiede das Eisen, solange es heiß ist.

Look before you leap. — Erst wägen, dann wagen.

Charity begins at home. — Ein jeder ist sich selbst der Nächste.

(The English proverb originally meant that the child must learn to practise charity at home, in the family, and not selfishness.)

Zero equivalence:

Fine words butter no parsnips.

A stitch in time saves nine.

The fish will soon be caught that nibbles at every bait.

In this case, the target language will offer a circumscription of the denotational meaning or a word-by-word translation. The problem of equivalence becomes even more crucial when we are faced with idiomatic book titles and phatic formulas in direct speech. This aspect of the phraseological unit will be demonstrated in the following part of this paper.

The examples are taken from two novels and their English or German translations. The sources are: Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*, Halle/Saale 1968, and its English translation by Christopher Middleton, *The Quest for Christa T.*, London 1971; and Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, repr. London 1979, translated into German by Irene and Günther Danehl under the title *Der IKS-Haken*, Frankfurt/Main 1964, licensed edition for the GDR, Berlin 1975⁸). We must take into consideration that a literary translation requires a considerable amount of experience, artistic skill and socio-cultural background knowledge on the part of the translator.

A striking example of a complicated book title is *Catch-22*, a fictitious coinage by its author, Joseph Heller, who described in his novel the absurdity of military action in World War Two. The title is ambiguous because it is also an idiom. The motto of the novel reads: "There was only one catch, and that was *Cath-22*."

The German translation of the title reads *Der IKS-Haken* (which may be read as an abbreviation, a cryptic code), and the motto has been translated as

"Es war nur ein Haken dabei,
und das war der IKS-Haken."

(The underlying English idiom "there is a catch in it" corresponds to the German saying "die Sache hat einen Haken").

In the translation itself we come across many idiomatic phrases which may be classified under the headings of complete, partial and zero equivalence. The examples from Joseph Heller's novel will be supplemented by those taken from the English translation of Christa Wolf's novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* In some cases the translator has used the idiom which the reader who knows languages could anticipate, but in other cases, the translator has preferred a completely different version by either substituting the phraseological unit by a simple word in the target language or even leaving it untranslated when he thinks it appropriate.

Examples of *complete equivalence*;

Catch-22

It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain *he fell madly in love with him.* (p. 13)

Es war Liebe auf den ersten Blick. Als Yossarian den Kaplan zum ersten Male sah, *verliebte er sich* auf der Stelle *in ihn.* (S. 7)

For a frantic half hour it was touch and go. Then the firemen began *to get the upperhand.* (p. 17)

Eine aufregende halbe Stunde hing alles an einem Faden. Dann *bekam die Feuerwehr die Oberhand.* (S. 12)

Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.*

Ich fühlte die kostbaren Wochen mir durch die Finger rinnen... (S. 16)

I felt the valuable weeks slipping through my fingers... (p. 11)

Ums Leben verpaßt ist soviel wie um Haaresbreite, wir hatten es erfahren... (S. 34)

To have missed something by a lifetime is the same as missing it by a hair's breadth, we had found out about that;... (p. 27)

(This example illustrates the author's individual variation of the German phrase "um Haaresbreite". Such a "play with words and phrases" is rather frequent in poetry and prose fiction as the writer is always in search of ways of expressing himself/herself in an original, unpredictable way.)

Phatic formulas, i.e. sentence-like phrases, require special attention, because they depend on the communicative situation, chiefly the dialogue in direct or represented speech (interior monologue). They are typical examples of *partial equivalence*.

Catch-22

"Oh, shut up," Dunbar told Clevinger. (p. 26)

"Oh, halt dein Maul," sagte Dunbar zu Clevinger. (S. 21)

(These expressions are on the same colloquial level)

"Who gives a shit?" he asked tiredly, and turned over on his side to go to sleep. (p. 16)

"Na, und?" fragte er müde und legte sich auf die andere Seite, um einzuschlafen. (S. 10)

(This translation may count as an example of *partial equivalence*, because the

stylistic level has been shifted from vulgar in the source language to colloquial in the target language.)

We find similar examples in Christa Wolf's novel.

Na und wenn schon. (S. 12)

So what? (p. 8)

Eichholz — du lieber Himmel! (S. 11)

Eichholz — good heavens! (p. 17)

Kurz und gut: Die Liebe hatte den Günter zu Fall gebracht. (S. 83)

Anyhow: love was Günter's undoing. (p. 65)

These exclamations and emphatic formulas have the character of interjections. They are used by the author in inner represented speech (*erlebter Rede*). (This term is used by Galperin (1977:236).

Partial equivalence of phraseological units in the source and target language may also be illustrated by examples, where the idiom of the source language is translated by a simple word which has no transferred meaning in the target language. The result may be a loss of expressiveness.

Catch-22

Yossarian *made up his mind* to keep his mouth shut and did. (p. 30)

Yossarian *beschloß*, den Mund zu halten, und tat es auch. (S. 25)

Christa T.

War es möglich, hätte sie *mit den Brauen gezuckt*, als unsere Lehrerin sie duzte. (S. 10)

Was it possible, had she *frowned*, just for an instant, when our teacher used the familiar form of address. (p. 7)

Links liegenlassen. (S. 12)

Ignore her. (p. 8)

There are also opposite examples that the target language uses an idiom where there is none in the source language.

Catch-22

... and it wasn't long before he *donated* his views, (p. 15)

... und es dauerte nicht lange, da *gab* er bereits seine Ansichten *zum besten*. (p. 9/10)

The case of *zero equivalence* is also possible, but its reason is not a gap in the vocabulary of the target language, but the translator's decision to leave out the idiom in the text of the target language or to render it in a different way. Here we must make allowances for stylistic considerations.

Christa T.

Schularbeiten *kamen* seit langem *nicht in Frage*, Sonne schien auch keine. (S. 13)

We hadn't been given any homework for months, and the sun wasn't shining either. (p. 8)

Catch-22

How could they *cope with* a Major like Major Major? (p. 98)

Was sollte man mit einem Major wie Major Major *tun*? (S. 94)

Milo was *gone like a shot*. (p. 434)

Sogleich war Milo *verschwunden*. (S. 438)

"*All right, gee wiz*. Stop rubbing it in, will-you?" (p. 446)

"*Also schön*, nur reiben Sie mir das nicht immer wieder unter die Nase." (S. 450).

(*gee wiz!* is an exclamatory slang word in American English, corresponding to the German expression "Donnerwetter! Mensch (sowas)!" cf. Muret/Sanders. Although the translators have deleted it, the conversation does not become politer, because the following sentence is rather rude.)

A rare example of zero equivalence in the phraseological system is the following:

He was rocking the boat, Milo said, and Yossarian nodded once more. (p. 429).

Er gefährde das Vaterland, sagte Milo, und Yossarian nickte wieder. (S. 432)

(This translation is an example of a text-bound equivalent, as there is no similar idiom in German. The translator has derived the correct meaning from the general mood of the conversation and the plot of the novel. The German equivalent of *to rock the boat* according to Muret/Sanders is rather unspecified "die Sache ins Wanken bringen.")

CONCLUSION

The problems arising from the stylistic aspect of literary translation in which the phraseological unit is only one item in a whole set of linguistic features to be rendered in the target language, reach far beyond the scope of phraseology and contrastive linguistics, since several functional aspects come into play:

1. The textual embedding of a phraseological unit in particular text types (e.g. novel vs. leading article in a newspaper);
2. The preference or avoidance of phrases or idioms by the individual author and different stylistic choices in the source language;
3. The personal stylistic choice made by the translator in using an equivalent of a phrase or idiom in the target language may differ markedly from that listed in the bilingual dictionary (English-German, German-English). The literary translator, however, does not primarily rely on "word equations" in the dictionary, but on his own command of the source and target languages, and on the text itself which — in the case of a verbal work of art — is usually to be translated into his/her mother tongue — and not in the opposite direction.
4. The comparison between two or more translations of a verbal work of art is a special field of translation theory and involves also aesthetic and stylistic criteria. It has also some bearing on applied text linguistics.

5. The stylistic and translation aspect of the phraseological unit as a constituent of the text (of all varieties of usage) as illustrated in this paper, seem to corroborate the concept of a phraseological level inside the stylistic system, which has been tentatively called "phraseo-stylistics".

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