

THE INTRICACY OF IDIOMATIC MEANING
AND THE COMPREHENDING MIND YET EXTANT

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Idiomatic meaning in a modern language derives from several kinds of units in it and from a still greater number of sources behind them. Without claiming perfect exhaustiveness, this paper will review the intricacy of idiomatic meaning in English, i.e. the meaning of idioms proper, the meaning of historical words, and the idiomatic meaning of culture-bound and cross-culturally-bound words, as it is encountered by a reader and a translator with inadequate and adequate philological knowledge. Different aspects of the problem thus stated have been touched upon and may be traced in numerous works on English words to date (cf. but the best known: Barfield (1924); Ellis (1939); Greenough – Kittredge (1961); Kent (1963); Vallins (1970); Brook (1981); Partridge (1982); Christiano – Beardsley (1996) and many others). A few contemporary authors have also considered the problem pragmatically, but the Western authors from whose works the concept of the vertical context has originated have also to be borne in mind.

Meaning in English may be idiomatic because of the precise use of some ordinary words. For instance, a translator who uses *bit* in the following phrase, *I know now where every bit of thread is*, shows that he is ignorant of the use of the word *inch* in this and similar contexts. ... *where every inch of thread is* would be idiomatic in English and acceptable as a genuine version of the same statement. Similarly, the use of *ocean* may be preferable to the use of *sea* in the following fixed hyperbole – *a drop in the ocean*, because it is this expression that is customary in English rather than *a drop in the sea*. Though examples of this kind of the use of English words might be increased, they suffice to illustrate the point of the inherent cultural idioms in English, of the subtlety of such expressions and of the idiomatic meaning of the simplest English words.

Idiomatic meaning is not limited to routine uses of language. It is as intricate in poetry, too. Though it has been assumed that “literary discourse is dissociated from an immediate social context” and that poetry never reads literally (Widowson 1975: 69, 78-79), a cautious contrary assumption has also been made. Considering the expressiveness of the language of poetry, Professor Leech happened to generalize thus: “If all words were deprived of cognitive content in poetry, they would be reduced, in communication power, to the level of exclamations like ‘alas’, ‘ouch’, and ‘tally-ho’” (Leech 1969: 40). Indeed, extending the meaning of the word ‘poetry’ on to imaginative prose, the proof of Professor Leech’s words would not be far to seek. Extralinguistic knowledge related to the meaning of *Franklin stove*, for example, in Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is required to have the adequate impression of the scene observed by the child. The currency and meaning of the words like this is far denser in Anthony Powell’s novel *A Buyer’s Market*. For example: “The minutes passed: conversation flagged. *The Louis Seize* clock standing on the wall-bracket gave out a threatening tick-tock.” In fact, culture-bound names are so frequent in this novel by Anthony Powell, that an advanced learner of English as a foreign language has to admit his own lack of familiarity with the culture-bound words and culture-bound objects to get the full impression of such and similar names and to be able to read the novel with real pleasure.

The meaning of present-day idioms is still more intricate in English. Understanding and translating them may sometimes be beyond the competence of a single learner of English as a foreign language. A couple of instances of phrasal verbs in Margaret Drabble’s novel *The Needle’s Eye* might illustrate the point. For example:

- (1) ... he had noticed that they ... were always pretty *quick off the mark* to ask him round whenever his wife was away.
- (2) ... (they) laughed at themselves with great good nature as though their simple wit ... *could buy them off*, *could buy them off* from judgement.

Although the entry for the noun *mark* in the LDOCE explains *not very quick off the mark* as ‘not clever’, it does not specify the thematic field of the noun. The respective entry in the OALD and the native speaker’s explanation of this idiom as belonging to the sphere of race are very helpful in translating sentence (1), because they open up the exact sphere of knowledge and the comparison which rests behind it to a foreign user of English. It is not until the foreigner gets a clear idea of the thematic field of the idiom that he starts feeling at home with the sense of the sentence.

The idiomatic meaning of the phrasal verb in sentence (2) is as hard. Given the explanation with resort to the verb *bribe* in the LDOCE, the foreign user of English as a foreign language encounters another difficulty, that of the assumed point of view. The new difficulty lies in the sorting out of the passive

or active transitivity of relations and the active subjects that sentence (2) conceals. Again, a native speaker’s explanation of the action coming from other people significantly eases the foreigner’s understanding of the meaning of the reiterated idiom in the passive voice. Equipped though with the dictionaries the foreign user of English may be, the intricacy of the meaning of the present-day English idioms not infrequently requires the assistance of the native speaker’s linguistic instinct to help him out with their meaning, and to make it quite real.

Names and, especially, proper names is a no simpler point of idiomatic meaning in modern English. A few names from the same novel by Margaret Drabble may be considered. *Dandys and Beans* are not to be found in any dictionary of British culture, and it takes again a native speaker of English to supplement the meaning of these names to the foreigner. Like the matter denoted by Apollinaris in Benson’s novel *The Worshipful Lucia*, these titles of the children’s comics are quite important in getting the sense of the text right. But the above mentioned novel by Margaret Drabble contains proper names which no dictionary nor the native speaker can explain. It is *Rookes v. Barnard* in : “... trying ... to persuade him to explain the elements of *Rookes v. Barnard*”. It was only the author herself who kindly took the time to write to the author of the present paper and state that “It is either a real or a fictitious legal case to do with Trade Union law – I think a real case, perhaps to do with the Closed Shop and the Union Membership – it is so long since I wrote that book and I have parted with all my trade union library.”

The meaning of proper names and their sense in respective contexts is always idiomatic because it is always individual and peculiar, especially as denoted by cross-culturally-bound names, which are classical names. But there are yet historical words which are as difficult to understand and translate to the foreigner. One great source which requires familiarity with the historical meaning of English words is Shakespeare’s plays. To understand and read Shakespeare with pleasure, one does not only have to remember the meaning of archaisms proper, such as *methinks* or the interjection *marry* with its meaning of surprise, asseveration or indignation, but also the meaning of such words as *utter darkness*, which is ‘outer darkness’ in Shakespeare, not ‘complete darkness’, which is its modern meaning, or *protest*, which means ‘proclaim’ or ‘vow’ in Shakespeare (cf., Sierz 1984: 239), and not ‘express or record objection’ or ‘make solemn affirmation’, which are its modern senses.

The archaic and historical meaning of English words is idiomatic in the sense that it is not only different from their present-day meaning, which a foreign reader or a translator has simply to know, but that it has no clues to their meaning as it accumulated from different contexts of the occurrence of the words. The meaning of historical English words apart, we approach the question

of the intrinsic meaning of cross-culturally-bound words, which are classical names and quotations.

Classical names, allusions and quotations are ample in English classics, while some modern classics, such as Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats or James Joyce have based their entire works on classical texts. Since the culture of the classical antiquity is relatively static, the initial impression is that the meaning of classical names and allusions and of the respective texts therefore is accessible to the foreign user of English to a higher degree than the meaning of contemporary English idioms, which has tentatively been discussed above. Indeed, in understanding and translating *Canto IV* by Ezra Pound, for instance, the translator has to familiarize himself with the background sources, and with this his problems become less severe. In other words, a foreign user of English may be at an advantage with texts based entirely on classical allusions rather than with fairly simple contemporary texts in which present-day idioms proper occur. When the foreign user of English familiarizes himself with all the myths and mythical names, which appear in *Canto IV*, he has a ready understanding of the text of this poem. None of the difficulties connected with English idioms proper beset him. Besides, he is significantly aided by the dictionaries.

With "the culture defined and relatively static" (Brumfit 1995: 2), the problem with classical names and allusions seems to be simpler than with the present-day English idioms proper. It is true, in this case the foreign user of English encounters no difficulties like those in tackling contemporary English idioms which at first sight are empty and above him. All the classical names and allusions acquire meaning to him provided he is familiar at least with the stories of the classical myths retold as stories. But this is only a part of the problem. Again, focusing on the same poem, *Canto IV*, it has to be noticed that allusive references to the mythical heroes and troubadours' poetry are so dense in this poem, that the translator requires familiarity not only with the dictionary explanations, but also with all the texts with which the allusions are associated. *Canto IV* contains not only allusions by names to the classical and medieval texts. It contains allusions to the scenery of the respective myths descriptively. In translating lines 35-50 in this poem, a translator has to describe the shady dark valley, in which the nymphs and Diana bathed. It is this and a few other parts of *Canto IV* that test the translator's philological knowledge. A translator who is proficient only in English is at a disadvantage or, worse, may err in translating this text, i.e. to overdo or underdo the epithets, the words denoting darkness and the motion of the air. It finally takes a classicist to read the translation really adequately, because it is only a classicist who is familiar with all the texts in which, for example, the myth of Acteon appears and who can assess whether those lines are given the equivalent verbal expression in translation. As the lines span the centuries and the texts, it is a classicist who can assess

whether the description of the shady valley and the lightness of the bodies of the nymphs and Diana are given an adequate rendering, and whether the translated text reads without embarrassment.

However sad, it has to be noted that the translator whose knowledge only of English is good, at best performs the function of an average teacher in the classroom. The average student who had become a teacher may be satisfactory because, as the saying goes, he has the excess of knowledge, which, if mishandled, may be an extra load to the pupil, naturally trimmed in him. The translator well-versed only in English can approximate the average teacher, because he makes do with the safe minimum of philological knowledge. The final appreciation of his work and an assessment of the quality of the translation of the texts based entirely on classical allusions can be given today only by classicists.

But there is the problem of the meaning of quotations, which is especially challenging when their original sources have become obscure and the quotations become shared by several languages or even become clichés. The intricacy of the meaning of *sententiae* which originally had always been 'quotations' is most difficult. Some authors (cf., Bradley 1919: 227-236) have noted the heritage of the English vocabulary from its early authors, such as Shakespeare and Milton. The heritage from Shakespeare is abundant in the English language, while from Milton is sparse. The reader's ability to identify the Miltonic vocabulary and its fragmentary integration in English ensures "the effectiveness of literary allusions" (Bradley 1919: 233). Besides, the Miltonic vocabulary exposes a considerable amount of Latin borrowings which, however, were used sparingly by this author, and "the Miltonic expressions that have really become part of the language are extremely few" (Bradley 1919: 232). But the question of the intricacy of the idiomatic meaning of certain expressions as their meaning became enriched through their currency in the works of several authors is not exhausted, especially when we turn to quotations (*sententiae*) proper from the classical languages. There are numbers of originally Latin quotations which have become *sententiae* and whose English equivalents are ascribed to definite British or American authors. For example, *a word to the wise is enough* as a quotation is ascribed to Benjamin Franklin. But it should be borne in mind that there exist at least two variants of the same expression in Latin: *verbum sapienti sat est* comes from an unidentified Latin source, and *dictum sapienti sat est* is ascribed to Plautus. And there is an equivalent saying in French and even in Lithuanian. A question arises how effective literary allusions may be when a learner of English gets familiarized with the meaning of such quotations and *sententiae* only from the dictionaries.

In as much as they become *sententiae*, the question of the meaning of quotations extends so much that the ability to understand them by the perceiving

person(s) becomes challenged. "Like stylistic devices, *sententiae* = γνομαι function in oratory. They contain a philosophic view point or shared opinions and so *sententiae* involve the listener into the reflection on the content of the speech, because the listener is familiar with them" (Zabulis 1995: 7). The familiarity of the listener with *sententiae* is assumed as given by the classicists, because it is expected as a *conditio sine qua non*. However, the number of people who can understand *sententiae* fully gradually decreases as does the effect of oratory based on the classical languages. The problem of understanding classical allusions in reading might also be restated in this context. A learner of English as a foreign language stops to ponder time and again on the meaning of the *River* in the closing sentence of the life of John Galsworthy, which runs as follows: "Then at last, at 9.15 – in trouble as in happiness, in illness as it had been in health – *Aequam rebus in arduis servare mentem* – thus passed a Stoic ... Over the River!" (Marrot 1935: 649). This simply means that the mind of the modern learner of English as a foreign language is entirely extricated from the world of the Classical Antiquity. The proper name of the River, which is Styx, if added, would probably resolve the problem sooner or make it instantaneously insurpassable to the modern reader of this text in English.

To conclude, it must be said that English literary works in which classical allusions and quotations are abundant may be read, understood and translated only by scholars who are well versed in the classical literature rather than only in modern English literature. The problem of the intricacy of idiomatic meaning in literary texts based on classical allusions and quotations is *d i f f e r e n t* from that which challenges the reader and translator when he encounters the meaning of present-day English idioms. Nevertheless the problem is there and it remains.

The problem discussed has so far concerned the advanced foreign learner of English, whether a reader or a translator, with adequate and inadequate philological knowledge. But the problem may be seen as part of teacher training in EFL. It has, in fact, been given some attention (Rusiecki 1995), with the teachers' opinion unsettled on questions of the comprehension of culture-bound concepts. This problem may also evolve when quality in teaching and learning English as a foreign language comes to be discussed (cf., Essen 1995: 4-7).

Two thousand years almost to a day have passed since the moment when "the golden bowls on the high table of the gods trembled" and the holiday gods were silenced to "dissolve away altogether in mist" (Grant 1962: 61-62). Gone was the palpable, all-encompassing idea of beauty of the blessed ancients and their confidence in humanity, for gone were their powerful minds and senses when man felt "to be closest to divinity when he was most completely himself", leaving a touch of joy and beauty wherever he passed, modest in word, with the Sun, too, over two millennia younger. With the classical heritage alive only

among a few classicists and among almost as small a group of conscientious students of languages and literatures today, while unrest vigorous even at the old Universities, accompanied by the demands on endless cuts in the curricula and syllabi, from the uninitiated in the new democracies, one wonders whether we really have the right to contribute to the peace of the blessed ignorance and satisfy the one-dimensional man of today, mainly because he has lost all sense of balance and beauty. For the Universities to withstand or not to withstand, while they yet can: that is the question.

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