

On Verb Phrases and Idioms in Romanian and English*

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Abstract:

This article introduces a comparative approach to the structural patterns of verbal phraseological units in English and Romanian as they often raise serious problems to the non-native speakers due to their translation. The aim of this study is to draw the attention to the phraseological similitudes between the two languages but it will also point out the differences and the difficulties when it comes to equivalence.

Keywords: verb phrase, verb, syntagm, phraseological unit, cognate, meaning, language

Idioms are treated as figures of speech, which are defined in the Collins English Dictionary (2006) as “expressions such as a simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning, but are categorized as multiword expressions that act in the text as units”, The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms (2001) defines them “as a combination of words with a special meaning that cannot be inferred from its separate parts”, while Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2000) considers them “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words”.

The difficulties raised by the study of the verbal phraseological units from the perspective of the contrastive analysis start from the very terminology used in the two languages, Romanian and English. The Romanian language uses terms such as: *expresie*, *locuțiune*, *perifrază*, *idiotism*, while English calls them: *phrase*, *idiom*, *collocation*, *set phrase*, *syntagm*, *phrasal verb*, etc. We chose to use as an „umbrella” term that of *phraseological unit*, because we intend to refer in this study to the combinations that raise one of the biggest contrastive problems, namely *the idioms*.

The *idioms*¹, present in both Romanian and English, are fixed combinations, consisting of a verb and different parts of speech, which

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¹ S. Pușcariu (1940: 254) calls phrases “fixed groups of words, from two words to sentences and phrases”, while F. Dimitrescu (1958: 154) defines the phrase as “a set of

together have a unitary meaning. There are certain morphological and syntactic concordances between idioms in Romanian and English. Generally, not only idioms but all fixed word combinations raise serious problems for non-native speakers because they can not be transposed but equivalent in the respective language, not having a precise correspondent. Constanța Avădanei (2000: 7) analyses these fixed combinations of words (or idioms in English) from a Romanian-English perspective, referring to the verbal field, apart from idioms, to verb phrases, idiomatic expressions of the English language. There are also mentioned a series of general features which may be applied to idioms:

- *equivalence with a synthetic word;*
- *fixed form (refusal to allow synonymous substitutions);*
- *the impossibility of displacing component parts;*
- *invariable topic;*
- *the impossibility of literal translation, etc.*

If in Romanian the idioms include along with the verb, nouns (*a sparge gheața, a face cu ochiul, a bate câmpii*), adjectives (*a o face lată, a face gura mare*), adverbs (*a o lua razna, a-i merge bine*), numerals (*a merge pe șapte cărări*), in English, what is commonly called “verb phrase” is almost always built with a noun.

Moreover, in English, the verbs that appear in verb phrases, called *functional verbs*, are not as numerous as in Romanian (Măciuca: 135), most of the verb phrases are built in English with the verbs *to have (a avea), to make (a face), to give (a da), to take (a lua), to come (a veni), to put (a pune)*. H. Esau² explains this tendency by saying that: “the more semantically concrete the verbs are, the less likely they are to be productively used as functional verbs.” There is a certain tendency in English to create, together with a significant number of verbs that denote familiar actions (or even to replace them), similar verb periphrases consisting of a functional verb and a noun to assume the notional content of the basic verb:

- to take a walk = to walk (a face o plimbare, a se plimba)*
- to make a move = to move (a face o mișcare, a mișca)*
- to give a try = to try (a face o încercare, a încerca)*

more or less welded words with a determined unitary meaning, grammatically acting as a single part of speech”, D. Irimia (1976: 21) designates them as “fixed groups of words with a lexical and grammatical unitary meaning” and L. Mihuț (1995: 142) calls the verb phrases “sets of words with fixed position, more or less welded, with unitary meaning and a verb behavior from a grammatical perspective”.

² *apud* Gina Măciucă, *op. cit.*, p. 136. In this respect, M. Avram (1986: 198) points out: “The verb from the verb phrase has, in particular, a grammatical role, expressing voice, mood, time, person and number, and the words with which it combines have especially a lexical role, contributing more than the verb to the overall meaning of the verb phrase.”

In her extensive study of idiomatic constructions in Romanian and English, Constanța Avădanei reveals that most types of verb phrases/periphrases present a structural identity in the analyzed languages, in accordance with the existence of what the author calls “the logical and linguistic universals” (2000: 170). In both languages, the best-represented combination is that of the verb with the noun, singular or plural, accompanied by a definite or indefinite article:

(1) verb + noun

a sparge gheața – to break the ice

a da mâna – to shake hands

a-și lăsa barbă – to grow a beard

(2) verb + preposition + noun

a ieși la lumină – to come to light

a juca la curse – to bet/gamble at the races

a vorbi la subiect – to speak to the question

(3) verb + (preposition) + noun + preposition + (noun)

a face o comparație cu – to make a comparison with

a căuta acul în carul cu fân – to look for a needle in a haystack

to let the cat out of the bag – a da în vileag un secret

(4) verb + two nouns

a alerga de mama focului – to run like a rabbit

a avea o inimă de aur – to have a heart of gold

to smoke the peace pipe – a se împăca după o ceartă

(5) verb + noun phrase

a da bătăi de cap – to cause /give trouble

a i se pune un nod în gât – to feel a lump in one’s throat

to kiss something goodbye – a-și lua adio (de la ceva)

(6) verb + reflexive pronoun + others

a-și pierde capul – to lose one’s head

to make a fool of oneself – a se da în spectacol

to put oneself forward – a se pune în evidență

(7) verb + adjective (+ noun)

a privi cu ochi buni – to view with a friendly eye

a pune o vorbă bună – to put in a good word

to give the cold shoulder – a trata cu răceală

(8) verb + numeral (+ noun)

a alerga după doi iepuri – to hunt two hares

a se pune la patru ace – to trim oneself out

a fi în al nouălea cer – to be in the seventh heaven/sky

(9) verb + adverb/adverbial phrase

a merge drept înainte – to go/keep straight on

a merge prea departe – to go too far

a întoarce pe dos – to turn inside out

The verbal combinations in the formation of periphrases/verb phrases are in fact much more numerous. Constanța Avădanei (2000: 60 et seq.) describes not less than 28 combinations of this kind, emphasizing their common typology in Romanian and English. The associations between the two languages are therefore much more numerous than dissociations when talking about verb periphrases. A contrastive perspective on verb periphrases in the two languages must take into account the following features:

- The verb-noun combination is best represented in both languages when the noun is accompanied by a definite or indefinite article, singular and plural;

- The verbs accompanied by nouns in singular, they may be accompanied by definite or indefinite article, both in Romanian and English:

(non-articular) *a lua cu împrumut* – to borrow, to make room –
a face loc

(definite article) *a face patul* – to make **the** bed, to bite **the** dust
– *a mușca țărâna*

(indefinite article) *a primi o lecție* – to learn one's lesson, not to
sleep **a** wink – *a nu putea închide un ochi*

- As in the above case, plural nouns that accompany a functional verb can be articular or non-articular in both languages:

a-i purta sâmbetele *cuiva* – to have a rod in pickle for
somebody

to pull (the) strings – *a trage sforile*

- In many cases, the noun in the phraseological unit can be articular in one language and non-articular in the other:

a jongla cu cifrele – to juggle with figures

a se juca cu focul – to be playing with fire

- When the verb is followed by two nouns, most often the elements are linked by prepositions. There are cases, relatively frequent, where the nouns are linked by conjunctions in both languages, and the case where the verb is directly followed by two nouns is very rarely present in English:

a-și croi drum prin mulțime – to make/push one's way **through**
the crowd

a avea pâinea și cuțitul – to rule the roost

to rain cats and dogs – *a ploua torențial*

a face capul calendar – to talk one's head off

- Verbal syntagms can also be constructed with the adjective, most often accompanied by a noun. Their incidence seems to be higher in English than in Romanian:

to turn red – *a se înroși*

*to be on **good** terms with somebody – a se înțelege bine cu cineva*

- Verb phrases containing a numeral are quite infrequent, even though they appear to be more numerous in English:

*a fi în al **nouălea** cer – to be in the **seventh** heaven*

*to dress up to the **nines** – a se îmbrăca elegant/la patru ace*

- The Romanian language presents a considerable number of reflexive verbal syntagms. In the case of the English language, reflexive “oneself” constructions are quite rare compared to Romanian; they “correspond in Romanian [...] to the verb periphrases with reflexive verbs in the accusative: *to make a fool of oneself – a se da în spectacol*” (Avădanei: 2000: 69–70).

a-și purta crucea – to bear one’s cross

a se spăla pe mâini de ceva – to wash one’s hands of something

*a se da de gol – to give **oneself** away*

- According to Constanța Avădanei, in English, there are extremely numerous constructions with possessive pronouns or possessive pronominal adjectives, which appear in the dictionary with the neutral form “one’s” and which they correspond in general to “the Romanian verbal periphrases with personal or “reflexive” pronoun in the dative case or, less often, in the accusative “(2000: 70):

*to lose **one’s** temper – a-și ieși din minți*

*to hang up **one’s** axe – a se lăsa păgubaș*

*to be down on **one’s** luck – a-i merge cuiva prost*

Constanța Avădanei (2000: 72) distinguishes other types of verbal phrases specific to only one of the studied languages:

- In Romanian, a type of well-represented verbal periphrases is the one containing a personal pronoun in dative. This category corresponds most often in English to a verb phrase with the possessive forms: *one’s, someone’s, somebody’s*:

*a-i da în gând – to cross **one’s** mind*

*a-i îngheța sângele în vine – to make **one’s** blood freeze*

a-l răzbi somnul – to be overcome by sleep

- There are specific expressions in English built with the pronoun “it”, which usually appears between the verb and the other elements, and rarely, in the final position. Just as in the case of constructions with the pronoun “o” in Romanian, the pronoun “it” has only a functional role:

*to get **it** in the neck – a primi o săpuneală*

*to spit **it** out – a-și slobozi gura*

*to play **it** cool – a se comporta*

Verb phrases with the verb “to be” are significantly numerous in both Romanian and English. The grammars of the Romanian language distinguish, in general, when the morphological criterion is taken into consideration, between the verbal phrases and the *impersonal and unipersonal expressions* (see Irimia: 1976, Mihailescu: 1995, Pop: 1998, Iliescu: 2006). In English, they are not a separate class, being treated along with other verbal idioms.

D. Irimia (1976: 20) defines the *verb phrases* in Romanian as “lexico-grammatical groups, consisting of several terms that gravitate around a verb, with which they enter into different relations more or less definable”. Verb phrases have in their structure the verb “to be”, with a syntactic auxiliary function, and a *free or mobile element* (which differentiates them from idiomatic phrases).

The *impersonal expressions* in Romanian are made up of the intransitive copulative verb *to be*, followed by a noun (*e un păcat, e cu putință, e o nenorocire*), an adverb (*e bine, e clar, e frumos*) or the Romanian “supin” (*e de dorit, e de preferat, e de înțeles*).

The *unipersonal expressions* in Romanian are built with the verb *to be*, the unaccented form of personal pronoun and a noun (*a-i fi foame, a-i fi dor, a-i fi rușine, a-i fi teamă*). Even if they have a jointly meaning, the elements that are part of the impersonal and unipersonal expressions are analyzed separately.

As we have already said, idiomatic expressions with the word *to be* in English do not form a distinct class. However, there is a constant concern for classifying them according to their non-verbal elements. I. Galea (1981: 477 et seq.) mentions the following types of constructions:

- **verb + adverb:** *to be about – a fi gata să*
- **verb + preposition + noun:** *to be off the beam – a nu avea dreptate*
- **verb + preposition + pronoun + preposition + noun:** *to be beside oneself with excitement – a fi copleșit de emoție*
- **verb + preposition + noun + infinitive:** *to be at pains to do something – a-și da osteneala să facă ceva*

Along with the types mentioned above, we also identified the following constructions:

- **verb + preposition + noun + adverb:** *to be at one’s wits end – a fi la capătul puterilor*
- **verb + preposition + adjective + noun:** *to be at loose ends – a fi abandonat (despre treburi)*
- **verb + preposition + noun + preposition + noun:** *to be at the end of one’s tether/rope – a fi la capătul puterilor*
- **verb + adverb + infinitive + preposition:** *not to be much to look at – a nu arăta cine știe ce*

- **verb + adverb + participle + preposition:** *to be over and done with – a fi terminat odată pentru totdeauna*
- **verb + adjective + conjunction + adjective:** *to be black and blue – a fi vânăt*

Of course, these possibilities are much more numerous and even if, according to some authors (cf. Avădanei: 72), the number of verb phrases with the verb “to be” in Romanian is lower compared to English, the combinatorial possibilities, as it can be seen in the examples above, are also extremely varied in Romanian. But the structural analysis we have applied above is not the only way to compare verb constructions in the two languages.

Starting from the contrastive theory of R. Lado (1957), we will further refer to both the similarities and the semantic differences between the Romanian and English languages. E. Iarovici (1972: 8 et seq.) focuses on the *theory of cognates* (related words), applying it to stable verb phrases and distinguishing in the verbal phraseological approach in Romanian and English the following types of cognates: *complete cognates, partial cognates, false cognates (partial or complete) and different forms (with identical or similar meaning)*.

This approach highlights the degree of difficulty in equivalence (and implicitly of translation or assimilation by non-native speakers) of idiomatic phrases in the two languages. From this point of view, verb phrases can be classified according to the degree of difficulty expected to be met by the speakers in accordance with the degree of closeness between the two languages.

Based on these considerations, we can distinguish between the two languages at the level of the verb phrases, the following typologies:

- *complete cognates* are those constructions that have the same or similar form and whose meaning is identical or similar in the two languages:

a face cuiva un serviciu – to do somebody a service

a-și pierde capul – to lose one’s head

a întoarce spatele cuiva – to turn one’s back on somebody³

- *partial cognates* refer to the similar phrases in the two languages with a similar partial meaning, when, due to polysemy, an expression in one language can have two equivalents in the target language:

³ E. Iarovici (1972: 9) explains the slight differences in form or meaning between the complete cognates of the two languages by applying lexical, grammatical or even etymological criteria. Thus, the author explains the difference between *hold one’s tongue* and *a-și ține gura* referring to the French loan word in English *tenir sa langue*. The observation regarding the differences determined by the cultural specificity of the language under scrutiny is also interesting, for example *a pune carul înaintea boilor – to put the cart before the horse*, regarding the traction animal used for the work of the field.

a se da cu capul de pereți – to smash one’s head against the wall

to be at one’s wits’ end

a o termina cu cineva – to be through with somebody

to break off/up with somebody



• *false cognates* raise much more problems than previous categories. However, a distinction must be made between partial and false cognates, the latter causing the biggest number of mistakes made by the speakers.

• *partial false cognates* are those constructions that have an identical or similar form in both languages, but which have multiple meanings in both languages due to polysemy. Among the meanings they express, one is identical or similar in the two languages and the other or the others are very different:

a lua partea cuiva – to take somebody’s share of something

to take sides with somebody

to look after somebody – a se uita în urma cuiva

a avea grijă de cineva

• *total false cognates* have the same or similar form in Romanian and English, but have completely different meanings:

to take after somebody ≠ *a se lua după cineva*

(a semăna cu cineva) (to follow somebody)

a lua masa ≠ *to take the table*

(to have a meal) (a lua masa cu sine)

a se omori după cineva ≠ *to kill oneself for somebody*

(to be crazy about somebody) (a se sinucide pentru cineva)

• *different forms* are those constructions in the two languages that have a more or less different form and identical or similar meanings:

a ploua cu găleata – to rain cats and dogs

a plăti oalele sparte – to make up for the damage

a fi ca și pierdut – to be dead and done

To conclude, not only idioms, but all verbal phraseological units raise serious problems for non-native speakers because they can not be transposed but equivalated in the respective language, not having a precise correspondent. Consequently, verb phrases can be classified according to the degree of difficulty expected to be met by the speakers.

There are certain morphological and syntactic similarities between idioms in Romanian and English. Therefore, the associations between the two languages are much more numerous than dissociations when talking about verb periphrases.

It has been revealed in this study that most types of verb phrases/periphrases present a structural identity in the analyzed languages. In both languages, the best-represented combination is that

of the verb with the noun, singular or plural, accompanied by a definite or indefinite article. Verb phrases with the verb “to be” are numerous in both Romanian and English, however, in Romanian, the number is lower compared to English.

The Romanian language presents a considerable number of reflexive verbal phrases. In the case of the English language, reflexive “oneself” constructions are quite rare compared to Romanian.

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