Abstract

One of the central tasks of the Meaning-Text-Theory (MTT) and the Moscow Semantic School (MSS) was the development of concepts to describe and represent paradigmatic semantic relations between lexical units. In this article I would like to apply these ideas, as well as some new ones developed within cognitive semantics, to the analysis of idiom quasi-synonymy (both within a given language and cross-linguistically) as well as idiom polysemy. This can be regarded as an endeavour to continue the line of research initiated by MTT and developed by MSS, which is aimed at the elaboration of appropriate formats for the representation of relevant relations within the lexical system. It is especially interesting to note some regular and systematic semantic relations in the field of idioms because this part of the lexicon has traditionally been regarded as irregular per se. In fact, paradigmatic semantic relations between idioms as well as concrete results of semantic derivation are often unpredictable in this field, but in most cases they are explainable in terms of backward reasoning.

Keywords

idioms, quasi-synonyms, quasi-equivalents, semantic differences, cross-linguistic differences, idiom polysemy, regular polysemy, image component, conceptual metaphor

1 Preliminary remarks

One of the central tasks of the Meaning-Text-Theory (MTT) and the Moscow Semantic School (MSS) was the development of concepts to describe and represent paradigmatic semantic relations between lexical units. Compare Lexical Functions such as Gener, Syn, Anti, Conv, Sing, Mult, S₁, S₂ and the like. The systematic organisation of the lexicon manifests itself in the regular nature (to some extent at least) of semantic paradigms and “backbone” semantic components (cf., for example, Apresjan, 1995; 2005).

In this article I would like to apply these ideas, as well as some new ones developed within cognitive semantics, to the analysis of idiom quasi-synonymy (both within a given language and cross-linguistically) as well as idiom polysemy. This can be regarded as an endeavour to continue the line of research initiated by MTT and developed by MSS, which is aimed at the elaboration of appropriate formats for the representation of relevant relations within the
lexical system. It is especially interesting to note some regular and systematic semantic relations in the field of idioms because this part of the lexicon has traditionally been regarded as irregular per se. In fact, paradigmatic semantic relations between idioms as well as concrete results of semantic derivation are often unpredictable in this field, but in most cases they are explainable in terms of backward reasoning.

2 Quasi-synonyms and quasi-equivalents

In every language which has been investigated up to now with regard to idioms many cases can be found in which some semantically very similar idioms are still not identical in use, i.e. they demand special contextual conditions to be accepted as semantically and pragmatically adequate expressions. The reason is often that the two idioms are based on different mental images which apply relevant restrictions to their use.

2.1 Near synonymous idioms

To illustrate the role of the image component in discriminating near synonymous idioms let us take some expressions denoting FEAR. In (Dobrovol’skij & Piirainen, 2005, 145ff.) it has been shown that idioms from various languages taken from the semantic field FEAR display specific individual semantic features related to the specific properties of their image components. For example, *to have cold feet* is not quite the same as *to have one’s heart in one’s mouth*, though both idioms can be roughly paraphrased as ‘to be scared’ or, in certain contexts, ‘to be afraid’ (for the difference between *scared* and *afraid* see Wierzbicka, 1990). It has been shown that idioms of FEAR are heterogeneous in terms of their metaphorical nature, and that these differences influence their usage. Let us now consider some textual examples from the British National Corpus containing quasi-synonymous idioms from this semantic field and discuss the question as to which specific features of the underlying image are responsible for the relevant semantic differences. Contexts (1) and (2) contain idioms which are obviously not interchangeable.

(1) “<...> Can’t you stay to tea?” “I’m afraid not, thank you. I’ve got to call in somewhere on my way home,” Breeze explained, as she took her leave. *With her heart in her mouth* she entered the imposing portals of Mon Ré, and rang the bell. In a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to control it, she asked if she could see Mrs Blessington-Dalrymple.

(2) A club notorious in the area as a hang-out for the criminally inclined was suggested as a place where someone might know of them or their whereabouts. Before the return to Northern Ireland, John and Derek went to it. On opening the door, Derek saw two of them drinking at a table. John walked across to them. He *was shaking in his shoes*, but said as calmly as he could, “You roughed up a man from Belfast a few nights ago.”

The expression *with her heart in her mouth* in (1) denotes an emotional state which combines fear with uncontrollable excitement. To use the expression *shaking in her shoes* in this context would be possible in principle, but the sense of the whole would not remain the same. The emotional state denoted by *with her heart in her mouth* correlates with the inability to calmly speak that is significant in this context. Compare the phrase indicating this: *In a voice that shook in spite of her efforts to control it*. Using any other expression from the semantic field of FEAR in this context would suggest a (slightly) different emotional state of the subject.
of the situation and, therefore, change the given situation. On the other hand, the subject of
the situation described in (2), though scared, is able to control his emotional state or, at least,
its external manifestations, in particularly his voice (but said as calmly as he could). If the
idiom *with his heart in his mouth* was used here instead of *shaking in his shoes* it would rather
contradict this idea.

These examples show that it is not adequate to reduce the semantic structures of such idioms
to their core component, namely ‘afraid’ or ‘scared’. This would be not sufficient from the
viewpoint of practical needs, such as lexicographic representation of idioms or language
learning. Moreover, this would be absolutely wrong from the point of view of semantic
theory. Idioms such as ones used in contexts (1) and (2) are semantically much richer than
words like *fear* or *afraid* or *scared*. Their actual meanings inherit some conceptual elements
from the underlying image and include them in their semantic structures as relevant
components. In case of *fear* (as in other semantic fields of emotions), most images point to
corresponding physiological symptoms. This is the reason why idioms can differentiate
between various types of fear much more fine-grained than words like *afraid* or *scared*. What
we subsume under notions like *fear* is, in fact, a cluster of various emotions that have
something in common, but that also differ from each other. Using an idiom with the image
component pointing to a relevant symptom, we can denote the emotional state we mean much
more exactly than using a general term. This reminds us of the situation when patients
describe their symptoms to the doctor. To describe the kind of pain they feel, they normally
use metaphors most of which are lexicalised, cf. *shooting pain*, *cutting pain*. The reason is
that the non-metaphoric vocabulary lacks the necessary specific terms. In the domain of
lexical units denoting emotions we are dealing with a similar situation. Here the idioms, to a
large extent, take over the function of the fine-grained discriminating between individual
emotions from the same field. The exact description of quasi-synonymous idioms may be not
just a matter of theoretical accuracy, but an issue which is crucial for investigating the
question of how people conceptualize certain entities.

2.2 Quasi-equivalent idioms

As for quasi-equivalents, the task of their exact description and semantic discrimination is not
very different from the issue of quasi-synonyms. The only difference is that in this case, the
relations of semantic resemblance and semantic contrasts operate across languages. Let us
illustrate this by an example.

The German idiom *Eulen nach Athen tragen* lit. “to carry owls to Athens” is traditionally
described as an equivalent of the Russian idiom *ezdit’ v Tulu so svoim samovarom* lit. “to go
to Tula with one’s own samovar” (cf. also the English idiom *to carry coals to Newcastle*).
Although the cultural specifics of the Russian idiom (due to the constituents *Tula* and
*samovar*) as well as that of the English idiom (due to the constituent *Newcastle*) have often
been pointed out, the semantic equivalence of these idioms has never been questioned.
However, this assumption turns out to be an erroneous one, which can be easily proved by
taking into consideration the contextual embedding of these idioms. Compare newspaper
contexts such as German *Sie tragen, was den Neuigkeitswert ihrer Mitteilungen betrifft, Eulen
nach Athen* “They carry, as far as the informative value of their messages is concerned, owls
to Athens”, on the one hand, and Russian *v Japoniju so svoim videomagnitofinom, kak v Tulu
so svoim samovarom* “to Japan with his own video recorder like to Tula with one’s own
Dmitrij Dobrovol’skij

samovar”, on the other. The possible objects of this idiom are physical entities such as goods, commodities, but also people (cf. a context where a husband planning holidays with his wife says to her I začem ja edu v Tulu so svoim samovarom? “What for should I go to Tula with my own samovar?”). Hence, this Russian idiom means something like ‘to bring something to a place that already has an abundance of it’ or ‘to bring somebody to a place where there are many persons of that kind’.

On the other hand, the German idiom Eulen nach Athen tragen lit. “to carry owls to Athens” is mainly used to point out that it is unreasonable to present certain mental entities (ideas, artistic achievements, etc.) as being new if they are already well-known at a given place. These differences seem to be connected with the image component of the idiom’s semantic structure: samovar as an artefact predisposes the usage conditions to a certain extent. It is also significant that the noun samovar is used here in the singular form, combined with a possessive. This impedes the interpretation of the Russian idiom in the abstract sense. According to the newspaper corpora analysed, the English idiom to carry coals to Newcastle seems to be used in both readings with nearly the same frequency.

This example also shows the role of the pragmatic component of the idiom’s plane of content. Even in those contexts in which the semantic differences mentioned above are neutralized, it is not possible to translate the idiom ezdiť v Tulu so svoim samovarom into Eulen nach Athen tragen (or into to carry coals to Newcastle) because of significant differences in the cultural specifics. For further detail see (Dobrovol’skiij, 1998).

This case is not unique. Let us consider the idiom-pair (3-4).

(3) German: den Bock zum Gärtner machen (lit. “to make the ram a gardener”) ‘to entrust a person with control over a certain field of activities whereas this person is able to do much harm in this field of activities’

(4) Russian: puskat’ kozla v ogorod (lit. “to let the he-goat into the kitchen-garden”) ‘to entrust a person with control over a certain field of activities whereas this person is able to do much harm in this field of activities and to derive benefit for himself or herself’

Subtle semantic differences, which become evident as a result of contrasting idioms, such as (3) and (4), need to be analysed in more detail. The semantic interpretations of (3) and (4) differ with regard to the semantic element ‘to derive benefit for himself or herself’, which is part of the meaning of the Russian idiom (4) but not part of the meaning of the German idiom (3). Compare also the English idioms to put the cow to mind the corn, to put the wolf in charge of the sheep, to put the fox to guard the henhouse/the chickens, which are equivalent to (4) rather than to (3). Since the meaning of (3) is less complex this idiom can be used in a broader range of contexts than (4). Cf. example (5), which cannot be translated into Russian with the help of idiom (4).

(5) Zehn Jahre nach der Aufnahme Russlands in den Europarat ließ sich der russische Vorsitz <...> nicht mehr verhindern. Doch <...> sagen viele Europapolitiker, man habe den Bock zum Gärtner gemacht. Kein Staat wurde vom Europarat so oft wegen Menschenrechtsverletzungen an den Pranger gestellt, wie Russland unter Präsident Putin <...>. (tagesschau.de)
“Ten years after Russia’s joining the Council of Europe, it was no longer possible to prevent a Russian presidency. However, many European politicians say they *made the ram a gardener*. No state has been reproached by the Council of Europe so many times because of human rights violations as Russia under Putin’s presidency.”

As this example shows, the German idiom (3) occurs in contexts dealing with an inappropriate appointment, i.e. with a wrong decision to appoint a person (or a group of people, a country, and the like) to the position for which they are not competent and where they will not be able to work properly. The given cross-linguistic differences can, at least to a certain extent, be explained in terms of the image component. The image underlying the Russian idiom (4) is based upon the metaphor of permitting the “potential harm-doer” access to a resource whereas it is known that the “harm-doers”, by virtue of their nature, are likely to use this resource for personal gain. The image underlying the German idiom (3) does not profile the idea of resource access, and is based upon the metaphor of an “absurd appointment”.

Since near-equivalents of this kind traditionally were treated as “full equivalents” it seems especially important to draw attention to them from both a theoretical and a practical point of view.

3  Idiom polysemy

3.1  Semantic derivation and image component

The emergence of a new reading is never quite arbitrary. Therefore, it is reasonable to speak of semantic derivation rather than of a random set of meanings attached to the same form. There must be some conceptual links between the readings, otherwise we would be dealing with homonymy rather than polysemy. Relevant conceptual links are often rooted in knowledge about the similarity of typical situations (frames or scripts) associated with particular readings, rather than in the semantic structure itself. Often, such a conceptual link is provided by a knowledge structure which is not part of the meaning in question (cf., for example, Zaliznjak, 2004).

The specific feature of idiom polysemy is that the conceptual structure mediating between particular readings can be provided not only by a frame standing behind one of the actual meanings of a given idiom, but also by the source frame, i.e. this conceptual structure can be part of the underlying image. Let us illustrate it by an example from (Dobrovol’skij, 2007). Consider the Russian idiom *koronnyj nomer* lit. “crown number”. It has three readings, which, incidentally, dictionaries to date have not made clear:

(a) the most interesting and technically sophisticated part of a performance (e.g. *this famous old song was the crown number of the concert*)

(b) a field of activity in which the given person is most successful, what is compared to the perfect execution of a difficult circus feat (e.g., *cooking pasta is his crown number*)
(c) an instance of behaviour typical of the given person which attracts general attention and disapproval, and which is described as an old circus act that annoys the audience (e.g. writing denunciating reports on the colleagues is his crown number)

The source frame is provided by a typical situation of a circus performance. The actual meaning (a) is a weak-idiomatic reading based on the source frame: in (a) koronnyj nomer is seen not as a difficult circus act, but as a highlight of entertaining performances of any kind.

Meaning (b) is a result of applying a conceptual metaphor (in the sense of Lakoff, 1993), such as PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS A CIRCUS PERFORMANCE. The idea of professional skills is profiled. The highlighted part of the mapping is a specific conceptual metaphor such as A SKILFUL PERSON IS A PROFESSIONAL CIRCUS ACTOR.

Meaning (c) arises from applying a different conceptual metaphor to the same source frame, i.e. from mapping the same source domain on a different target domain, namely LIFE IS A CIRCUS PERFORMANCE. A profiled feature in this case is the idea of following some traditional patterns quite unoriginally, the idea of the constant reiteration of stereotypes. In the structure of the source frame CIRCUS PERFORMANCE, the “evaluative” slot is highlighted, i.e. the widespread disparaging attitude towards the circus, in the sense that a circus is something not serious but frivolous, the opposite of High art, i.e. something BAD and TASTELESS. These conceptual features are constitutive for the actual meaning of koronnyj nomer (c).

In many cases, the image component is responsible for constraints on semantic derivation. Consider this example. The Russian idiom konca ne vidno (čemu-l.) lit. “no end is to be seen for something” has both a quantifying meaning (“there is extremely much of something”) and a temporal meaning ‘something lasts extremely long’, whereas its variant konca i kraja ne vidno (čemu-l.) lit. “no end and edge are to be seen” has only one meaning, namely ‘there is extremely much of something’, at least, in the standard literary language. The reason for this is obvious: the word kraja ‘edge’ is too “spatial” to allow for temporal reinterpretation. The word konec ‘end’, also taken in its literal readings, can be interpreted as both a spatial and a temporal concept (cf. the end of the rope and the end of the year), whereas the word kraja ‘edge’ has only a spatial reading.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to derive all relevant properties of idiom polysemy from the underlying image. There are also other factors governing semantic derivation. It is always a result of historical development of each particular lexical item, so semantic derivation can be considered rule-driven only to a certain extent. Every overgeneralisation in this field leads to incorrect assumptions and conclusions. Every particular case of polysemy (especially in the field of idioms) is unpredictable, but in most cases it can be explained ex post factum. Predictions, if any, are possible only in form of very general tendencies and constraints. The prospective unpredictability of the derivation of every individual reading (in contrast to its retrospective interpretability) can be exemplified in an especially clear way while comparing idioms from different languages that have (nearly) identical image components, but differ with regard to their polysemantic structure. Compare the Russian idiom na každom uglu lit. “at every corner” (for details and discussion of its semantic structure see Baranov & Dobrovol’skij, 1998) and the German idiom an allen Ecken (und Enden) lit. “at all corners (and ends)”. In their first reading both of them mean ‘(something takes place) in very many places of a built-on and lived-in space’. This meaning is a fully inferable from the underlying image. Additionally, the German idiom an allen Ecken (und Enden) is encountered in
contexts of lack or shortage of certain resources – incl. human resources – or in contexts which deal with resources that are sparingly used (6). Most frequent co-occurrences that can be found in the text corpora are etwas fehlt an allen Ecken (und Enden) and an allen Ecken (und Enden) sparen.

(6) Seitdem die Stadt an allen Ecken und Enden spart, fehlt in vielen städtischen Einrichtungen selbst für nötigste Ausgaben das Geld. (Frankfurter Rundschau)

“Since the town has been sparing at all ends and corners many town institutions lack money even for most urgent purposes.”

Contexts of this kind are absolutely impossible for the corresponding Russian idiom na každom uglu. This can have various reasons: from purely conventional usage rules to significant differences in conceptual interpretation of similar mental images. The most accurate solution is to postulate two different readings for the German idiom an allen Ecken und Enden: one of them being identical to the meaning of the Russian idiom na každom uglu, and another one, namely a kind of “resource-specific” reading, something like ‘lack or shortage of given resources or their economising) to a very high degree’. It is conceivable that these cross-linguistic differences may be described in terms of conceptual interpretations of the image components, though it appears rather unlikely that the differences in both lexical structures (cf. quantifiers ‘every’ vs. ‘all’, and noun phrases ‘corners’ vs. ‘corners (and ends)’) can be made responsible for the differences in semantic derivation. The metaphoric inference is, per definitionem, no mandatory logical entailment. The underlying image is a complex conceptual structure, parts of which can be profiled. The semantic result of the actual meaning depends on which particular facets of this conceptual structure are profiled in a given case. Thus, what can be described in terms of conceptual regularities is the relevant potential, rather than every particular realisation.

In general, what is achievable as a theoretical result in this field is discovering the inventory of productive patterns of polysemy. Patterns of polysemy are expected to be universal (because cognitively based) to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the degree of their productivity can vary from language to language. This is not a specific property of idioms, but a general principle (cf., e.g., Padučeva, 2004, 153-154). These issues lead us to the notion of regular polysemy and its specific features in the domain of idioms.

### 3.2 Regular polysemy

As is well known, regular or systematic polysemy is based on systematic conceptual correspondences between certain domains (cf. Apresjan, 1995). Most cases of regular polysemy are based on metonymic shifts (cf., for instance, the metonymic transfer from ‘vessels’ to their content in sentences such as he ate the whole plate or he drank the whole bottle), but also cases of metaphorically based regular polysemy can be found. Regular polysemy in the domain of metaphor is mostly governed by conceptual mappings. For example, idioms denoting ‘punishment’, ‘disapproval’ or ‘criticism’ often come from the semantic fields such as BEATING, HITTING and the like, following the conceptual metaphor PUNISHMENT/DISAPPROVAL/CRITICISM IS PHYSICAL ABUSE. On the other hand, the apparatus of conceptual metaphors helps to explain not only the links between the lexical structure and the actual meaning, but also the links between various actual meanings of a given idiom, i.e. the
links within its polysemic structure. So idioms with the actual meaning ‘to abuse physically’ based on various images (such as Russian dat’ po sopljam komu-l. lit. “to give someone on the snot”, razmazat’ po stene kogo-l. lit. “to spread someone on the wall”, dat’ po šee komu-l. lit. “to give someone on the neck”) tend to be used also with the meaning ‘to punish’ or ‘to express verbal disapproval’, ‘to strongly criticise’. The same mechanism can be used in the language for both deriving the actual meaning from the source frame and deriving secondary actual meanings from primary ones. Here we are dealing with a universal potential. The question is as to what extent languages really make use of this potential.

Consider an example. Idioms with the actual meaning ‘to die’ often develop a secondary meaning, something like ‘to vanish, to disappear, to fail’ (of quite different things like organisations, ideas, devices, etc.). The underlying cognitive mechanism is the metaphor of personification, which is very general in nature and seems to be universal. So, theoretically it can be expected that every expression denoting ‘dying’ sooner or later develops the secondary meaning of ‘extinction’ or ‘fading’. Compare the following textual examples from the British National Corpus.

(7) a. The explosion, seconds later, bowled us all over. The truck was blown to kingdom come. Miraculously nobody was hurt. b. The landowner was letting the buildings return to dust, but no doubt he would be grateful to have them restored at no cost to himself. c. Happily, Paddington still stands but a number of other great London stations are under threat and the list of great British stations to have bitten the dust is already too long.

In the British National Corpus, the idiom to bite the dust is encountered also in combination with names of projects, ideas, proposals, etc.; compare the new course would not bite the dust; another proposal <...> will also bite the dust; the hundreds of small businesses biting the dust every day; all my romantic ideas about marriage being special and forever had bitten the dust; her last vestiges of good humour had finally bitten the dust.

The ability to develop regular polysemy of this kind is the conceptual potential of the expressions from this semantic field, including idioms. Of course, not all idioms realise this potential. Whereas some idioms having both meanings can be found in various languages, there are also idioms from the same semantic field which resist developing a secondary meaning. The selection criteria used by different languages to implement this kind of semantic derivation remain opaque. For instance, the German counterpart of the English idiom to bite the dust, which readily develops the secondary reading denoting ‘extinction’ or ‘fading’, i.e. the idiom ins Gras beißen lit. “to bite into the grass” is biased against such semantic extension. I found only one context in the Internet where the idiom ins Gras beißen does not refer to human beings or groups of people, and this context does not ring true: <...> hat mein MAC ins Gras gebissen “my MAC has bitten into the grass”. This does not mean that the idiom ins Gras beißen is not polysemous. Besides the meaning ‘to die’ it has developed the readings ‘to be closed, to be ruined, to go bankrupt’ (with the names of companies and enterprises), ‘to lose, to be out’ (with the names of sportsmen and teams), or even ‘to lose one’s job’ (cf. Stasti 2006).

Another example: The German idiom den Geist aufgeben lit. “to give up the spirit” can be used almost exclusively in combination with devices. The primary meaning ‘to die’ is perceived as obsolete today. (Compare also the English idiom to give up the ghost.) On the contrary, its Russian counterpart ispustit’ dux lit. “to give up the spirit” has preserved the
primary meaning ‘to die’, and besides has developed a secondary meaning, which, however, combines with institutions, organisations, projects and ideas rather than with devices, cf. (8).

(8) Dejstvitel’no, stol’ uspešnomu kinoproektu ispuštit’ dux nelegko <...>. (Moskovskij komsomolec)

“Indeed, such a successful film project cannot give up the spirit so easily.”

It is obvious that cross-linguistic differences of this kind cannot be explained in terms of the image component. The consequence is that the task of the theory of idioms in this field is to develop instruments for explaining general ways of semantic derivation, potentially possible for idioms from a given semantic field rather than to predict the polysemantic structure of each particular idiom.

4 Conclusion

The simple conclusion which can be drawn from this discussion is that the idiomatic part of the lexicon is organised in a systematic way. Systematic semantic relations such as synonymy and polysemy (including some types of regular polysemy) are typical of idioms. From a general perspective, this may sound very trivial because it is to be expected that idioms, like any other lexical units, will show paradigmatic semantic relations and therefore possess certain systematic features. These observations seem to be useful for at least two reasons.

First, most dictionaries still do not pay serious attention to quasi-synonymy, quasi-equivalence or polysemy in this field.

Second (and this is crucial for the theory of phraseology), the semantics of idioms is strongly dependent on the specifics of their image components. Semantic differences between near synonyms and near equivalents are often due to the image component. Also, certain aspects of semantic derivation are driven by the image component which often is responsible for relevant constraints.

In general, the image component, i.e. a specific conceptual structure mediating between the lexical structure and the actual meaning of an idiom, is a relevant element of its content plane. In other words, the mental image underlying the actual meaning of a given idiom is not only an etymological phenomenon but also (to a certain extent) of synchronic relevance. The underlying mental image, which is in general an individual psychological phenomenon, possesses certain elements more or less stable and intersubjective in the sense that they leave traces in the lexicalised figurative meaning of an idiom (i.e. in its actual meaning) or in those parts of its content plane that are traditionally attributed to pragmatics. These elements of the mental image make up the image component of an idiom, which provides motivating links.

These are, though, only evident tendencies (more or less) and with exceptions that cannot always be explained. All regularities in the field of idiom semantics concern the interpretation of a given semantic result (i.e. a given idiom with its lexicalised actual meaning in relation to the underlying source concept) rather than the actual production of idioms, because the semantic results cannot be predicted. All that can be realistically expected in the domain of conventional figurative language are ex post factum explanations.
Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements and thanks are due to anonymous referees for comments on early drafts. Work at various stages was supported by RGNF-grant 05-04-04026a.

Bibliography


