Phraseology translation in fantastic literature

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Resumen

Las unidades fraseológicas (UF) han sido definidas como unidades léxicas formadas por más de dos palabras caracterizadas por su alta frecuencia de uso, su idiomaticidad, afijación y especialización semántica, así como su institucionalización (Alvarado Ortega, 2007; Corpas, 1996). Los refranes o paremias, nuestro objeto de estudio, son el tipo más común de UF (Mira Álvarez, 2010). En este estudio vamos a analizar la traducción del inglés al español de un corpus de cuarenta refranes de los libros Choque de Reyes y Festín de Cuervos, de George R.R. Martin. Nuestro objetivo es explorar las dificultades que se derivan de las características propias de la literatura fantástica. El hecho de que se esté traduciendo un contenido cultural ficticio causa que muchos de estos refranes sean modificaciones (o desautomatizaciones; Zuluaga, 1999) de otros refranes ya existentes en la cultura origen. Para el análisis del corpus, atenderemos a la interpretación que el traductor dé al texto original, la función y contexto del segmento, la existencia/búsqueda de una expresión institucionalizada en la lengua origen/meta, los procedimientos de escritura (uso de símbolos, metáforas, etc) y la atención presentada a la estructura del texto (Molina Plaza, 2003; Zuluaga, 1999). Como consecuencia, los segmentos resultantes pueden presentar distintos niveles de equivalencia con el original: total o parcial. Se hará un balance de las técnicas de traducción más usadas y su efectividad.

Palabras clave: fraseología, literatura fantástica, idioms, traducción.

Abstract

Unidades fraseológicas (UF) and paremias in Spanish –idioms and sayings in English- have been defined as semantically restricted lexical units consisting of more than two words with a high frequency of occurrence and an idiomatic meaning.

In this study we will analyze fifty-two idioms and sayings translated from English into Spanish from Choque de Reyes and Festín de Cuervos, written by George R.R. Martin and translated by Cristina Macías. Our main goal is to explore the main difficulties that fantasy literature presents to translators related to phraseology. The fact that the text presents a fictitious cultural content affects its idioms, which are frequently a modification (or desautomatization; Zuluaga, 1999) derived from other existing idioms in the original language culture.

In order to analyze the corpus, we will attend to the different semantic relations lexical items maintain, and the prevailing meanings that are withdrawn each time. All translating techniques used by the translator and their effect will also be considered. In our conclusions we highlight the importance of lexical choices when translating these expressions, as well as the different techniques which are most useful for the purpose.

Key words: phraseology, translation, fantasy literature, translating techniques
Phraseology is not a solid homogenous block. There are different types of expressions which are more or less dependent on others, and consequently whose idiomatic character varies. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus will be on idioms (unidad fraseológica -UF- in Spanish). Our target expressions are complex lexical units with a fixed set of elements that frequently appear together to convey a single meaning. The meaning of a UF does not come from the sum of the meanings of its parts, but it has a non-compositional interpretation. That is why it is understood as idiomatic (Corpas, 1996; Alvarado Ortega, 2007).

Some authors mention when they describe English idioms their lack of compositionality (non-predictable meaning), which leads to certain degree of opacity; its fixed idiom constituents (they are in close paradigm); and the possibility of making some controlled syntactic modifications (Chang, Fisher, 2000). That makes us think of a similarity between English idioms and Spanish UF.

There are several types of idioms in Spanish. The main difference lay in the degree of dependency on the context. Refranes or paremias are the result of the systematization of a UF into the language as a single lexical unit. They are syntactically coherent phrases that can constitute independent speech acts and present internal and external fixed structures (Marset, 2008; Mira Álvarez, 2010; Molina Plaza, 2003; Timofeva, 2006). It is also characteristic of these expressions the sententious nature of their meaning: when you use a paremia there is a clear communicative intention that cannot be modified. For example, when we use the expression “quien calla otorga” (silence means consent), we are expressing a very specific opinion on someone’s attitude: they don’t disagree, otherwise they would talk. This kind of idioms are the most frequently used in Spanish (Mira Álvarez, 2010). It is important to clarify that all paremias are inherently a phraseological unit (UF), but not all UF are paremias.

The idiomaticity of this type of expressions can be described in terms of a bigger importance of the context over the content when decoding them. In order to explain this better, we will borrow Frege’s Principle of Compositionality and Context Principle (1884). The first one states that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meaning of the simpler expressions that compose it. For example, the sentence (a) “she gave me horns”, compositionally, would depict the image of a woman holding some horns and handing them to someone; unless we take into account the second principle.

Frege’s Context Principle claims that the meaning of an expression depends on the meaning of all the complex expressions in which this expression occurs as a constituent. Consequently, “horns” cannot be interpreted in the same way in these two sentences: (a) “she gave me horns” and (b) “the bull has got big horns”. The context defines the meaning of “horns” in each case. Both principles are complementary as simple expressions acquire their meaning in context and, at the same time, context is defined by the sum of simpler expressions. However, Salguero (2010) uses the concept of active zones by Langacker (2004) and normality profile by Cruse (2004) in order to explain how phraseological expressions consists of semantic deviations produced by a prevailing contextual meaning.

Active zones refer to associated concepts recalled in the speaker’s mind by the presence of a specific sign. For example, the word “horn” can immediately activate the concept “bull”. Normality profiles, on the other hand, establish the different contexts in which lexical items work, from which a general meaning can be extracted. However, anomalies in this contexts may be the result of a change in the semantic zone activated by the expression in a particular context. In the case...
of the word “horns” in both expressions, context (b) would be more frequent, and consequently it would correspond to its normality profile. Consequently, sentence (a) would constitute a deviation from the normality profile which detaches the expression from its compositional meaning. In this case, different active zones would be activated establishing new semantic relations that give the expression a new meaning. That is, whereas in example (b) it is related to the animal and all the concepts associated to bulls; in the first one it is a symbol that represents someone whose partner has not being faithful to him, specially a man (according to Oxford English Dictionary).

All types of UFs usually present an internal structure rather opaque to the current speaker (being the origin of the expression too far in time to be understood). They are usually inserted in the speaker’s lexicon as an image (Kabacoba, 2002; Lakoff, 1992; Timofeva, 2006): in the previous example, the man in question would wear a couple of horns on his forehead. This image tries to make sense to the set of apparently unrelated words that construct the idiom, and it is created on the basis of the speaker’s own experience.

Langacker (1984) describes an image which has nothing to do with visual or sensorial perception, and that constitutes the meaning of an expression. That is, a conceptual content contained into a phonological unit and shaped according to the communicative context. Polysemy is crucial to the interpretation of all lexical items, and it is usually related to the different interrelated meanings that can be associated to a single phonological form. In Langacker 1984:176 it is stated as follows:

“A polysemous expression therefore has for its semantic pole, not a single predication, but rather an array of alternate predications representing the range of conventionally established values it can assume. These predications can be thought of as nodes in a network, some of which bear relationships of semantic specialization or semantic extension to others. They can also differ greatly in cognitive salience, some being more easily elicited than others”.

Fauconnier’s concept of mental spaces (1985) can also explain this phenomenon. When we extract a single item or expression, we are also connecting indirectly to all associated contents due to the action of mapping through mental spaces. These spaces can be understood as the different predications Langacker describes, and Fauconnier’s Access Principle (a single connected element can be extracted by activating its counterpart) would explain the relation between lexical items and concepts, and to other lexical items or concepts.

Thus stated, compositionality in idioms could be explained by the activation of non-primary predicates at the lexical level that refer to relations which are no longer evident to the current speaker. This would take us back to Langacker’s mental spaces: when speakers use a lexical item or expression, there is a series of predicates and other related items that come to the speaker’s mind by association. Those active zones establish relations at different levels: mainly at the semantic and syntactic level.

These semantic relations are metaphorical and metonymical, among others, and they depend on the encyclopedic nature of cognitive semantics. According to Langacker (2009), the meaning of the whole cannot be predicted from the meanings of the parts unless the parts themselves have a limited, well defined meaning. And no part in a phraseological unit has ever been proved to be limited.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) already explored the way in which metaphors help speakers to organize their own vision of the world. According to their perspective, speakers explain abstract
concepts comparing them to objects and substances. The behavior of those objects is extrapolated to the different aspects of each abstract concept. In this way, the metaphorical language, apparently opaque, is based on semantic relations.

These semantic relations are considered to be inherent to the culture of the speakers’ community. The use and understanding of idioms and UF are accomplished a pragmatic function: the speakers who use them are including themselves as part of the speech community as they show their knowledge of the culture (Marset, 2008). Mira Álvarez (2010:223) states about this aspect:

“El cambio semántico originado en una transferencia de base figurativa refleja aquellos principios concernientes a los sistemas de creencias y a las imágenes convencionales en una comunidad, donde se incluyen los mitos y la sabiduría popular, los valores y conocimientos compartidos, las anécdotas y hechos históricos, a través de los cuales se interpreta la realidad presente.”

Lakoff and Johnson (1980:22) also defend the inherent relation between idiomatic expressions and the perspective a community has on the functioning of the world:

“The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture”.

Taking this into consideration, we have to be aware of the fact that differences in the value systems of two cultures may result in differences in their metaphorical expressions, as well as a completely different set of active zones for a same context. This aspect should be taken into consideration when translating.

The first step towards the translation of an idiom should be the identification and classification of the idiomatic expression. Some clues that might evidence that we are in front of an idiom are: the expression is relatively frequent, it is in coherence with other metaphor expressions, and its use is systematic within a context (Martín de León, 2005). It is important that we identify the nature of the semantic change. That means that it is necessary to classify the idiom according to its functioning.

Considering that an idiom show a dissident semantic relation which is new or unfamiliar to the speaker; it is appropriate to treat them as metaphors, metonymies and other figures of speech. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use metaphors to explain non-compositional language.

All metaphors are conceptual if we take into consideration that they use a referential element in order to express an abstract idea. This idea can be subcategorized into different ideas that would correspond to different relations and actions of the referential object in the real world. To illustrate this behavior Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use the image of a war to express the idea of a discussion. Different actions that usually happen in war (attack, defend, win) are metaphorically used to speak about the phases of a discussion. This conception presents two main problems for translators. Firstly, they are inherently linked to the origin culture and they are normally opaque due to synchronic change. Secondly, these metaphorical uses frequently highlight some aspects of the original concept (the referential object) that is typically related to the abstract idea, but necessarily hides other aspects that might be inconsistent with what it is intended to express. Following the example of the war metaphor, the concepts of collaborative effort and sharing present in the concept discussion are set aside. Using Langacker’s perspective, the active zones that metaphors elicit might not coincide in different cultures.

Orientational metaphors associate the abstract idea that wants to be expressed to space or a certain directional movement. For example, happiness is up and sadness is down in the Western culture. Ontological metaphors, on the other hand, relate them to objects and substances that are
linked to our experience and let us refer, categorize, group and quantify those abstract concepts using the selected object as a catalyst.

According to Langacker, most figurative speech is based on metonymic relations understood due to the active zones the different lexical items activate. For example, “the girl heard the piano” would be understood because, although we all know that she heard the sound of a piano being played, the association between the piano and the sound is implicit in our minds. In any case, it is really important to take into consideration the cultural differences when understanding the world in order to translate the same type of relation without deforming the metaphorical system of each culture.

Translating phraseology in the context of the fantastic literature adds a few more obstacles. Most of the idiomatic elements used in that type of literature, especially in George R.R. Martin’s novels, have been modified. When desautomatization (desautomatización in Spanish) occurs, there are some individual external or internal modifications that are meant to create a semantic contrast and/or emphasize their expressive force. When this occurs, the translator should transfer these new semantic relations and the new textual expression maintaining the conceptual relations within the metaphor (Mira Álvarez, 2010; Zuluaga, 1998-1999).

In order to do this, the translator must identify the idiomatic expression and interpret the meaning of the desautomatized element within the context. Only then can he look for lexical units that can work in the same context and finally replace the original word in the idiom (Mira Álvarez, 2010). When other authors have studied translation tendencies in this type of expressions, calque, partial equivalences and modulations were the most frequent techniques to preserve desautomatizations. In the present study we will analyze fifty-two cases of desautomatized idioms and paremiological expressions in order to show whether the translator followed the main criteria theorists advise and if it was effective.

**George R.R. Martin’s prose: characteristics**

Translation is the process by which a subject reads and interprets a text and compose the same text using a different code (with different grammatical and pragmatic values) for others to understand it. If we use Jakobson’s interpretation of the communication process (Jakobson, 1960:353), in a translation there are two authors and one single text, reproduced in two different languages. In this case, Cristina Macías, the translator, needs to make her own interpretation of George R.R. Martin’s words in order to reproduce his own ideas. As epic fantasy texts have a series of fixed characteristics that are part of the genre, those should be maintained by the translator: not just the content but the style is also important.

In the following paragraphs some main characteristics of this genre will be enumerated. These characteristics are the result of the preliminary study of the two novels involved in this study: *A Clash of Kings* and *A Feast for Crows*. The expectation is that the same characteristics will be found in the target language texts (*Choque de Reyes* and *Festín de Cuervos*).

If we focus on the language the author uses to develop the plot, there are several and important features to consider. There is a recurrent use of formulaic language and use of archaisms: semantics frequently refer to the etymology or old uses of lexical items. Language also reflects linguistic variety in the form of different dialects and foreign accents in the dialogues. Syntax is sometimes presented as a complex relation of subordinated sentences, and that corresponds to an
old-fashioned writing style and a solemn tone. The vocabulary in the novels is full of neologisms
and specialized language: when describing wars, transport, cults and social events the author may
introduce technical terms that might be hard to understand for the modern reader. He also uses
words known by the reader that acquire a complete new meaning.

These new semantic relations show the change produced on the conceptual structure of the
western culture metaphorical reign. The novels share a solid semantic base consistent on a net of
concepts linked to new and old metaphorical associations. The most highlighting elements on
this network are natural elements, a mystical wildlife and a series of social relations which are
found in the feudal society. What Martin does –and it is for Macías to reproduce- is to take old
concepts and attach new metaphorical relations –new meanings and connotations- that constitu-
tute his own new universe.

Analysis of the corpus

3.1. Aims of this study

This study has three main objectives. Firstly, it is necessary to define through the analysis of
the original text idioms the ways in which a fantasy novel author transforms known metaphorical
relations to convey new meanings.

Secondly, the Spanish translation of all these expressions will be analyzed in order to state the pre-
ferred (and/or most effective) techniques to transfer these new interpretations in the target language.

Finally, we would like to make a balance of the translation success (or fail) to convey the
new meanings in a similar way, and how was this achieved (or failed to achieve).

Methodology

Fifty-two idiomatic expressions were listed from the two selected books. The same expres-
sions where localized in the Spanish translation edited and published by Gigamesh publishing
firm. In order to localize and check the original expressions, desautomatizations, their trans-
lations and the target language own phraseological background we used Google searches, the
Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española
(DRAE); both in their online versions.

Google was a useful tool to sort out purely desautomatized expressions. Those expressions
from the original version whose first entries were directly related to the novel were considered
unique and added to the corpus. Google was also useful when we were directed to more than one
idiomatic expression. A regular search on the search engine Google gave us a general idea of the
use of certain idiomatic expressions over some other one.

Once the origins and the meaning (within its context) of the English expressions were
cleared, a similar analysis was carried out upon the Spanish translation.

Analysis

Looking closely to the original text, we found four particular types of idiomatic expressions
in Martin’s novels. The most common mechanism he uses to create idiomatic expressions is the
modification of an existing idiomatic expression. For example, from the English expression “all cats are grey in the dark” Martin develops a new expression attaching the same type of relation to a different set of words: “by night all banners are black”. In this way, “banners” –a word much relevant in his novels’ universe- is in paradigmatic distribution with “cats”, functioning similarly. Another example would be the use of the expression “stubborn as a river rock” instead of “stubborn as a mule”. These substitutions are key to the story, as they refer to the most remarkable elements in the culture Martin is describing.

On the other hand, Martin sometimes establishes new metaphorical relations for lexical units that refer to different concepts in Standard English. For instance the word “raven”. In general English, according to the OED, is figuratively related to a person who brings bad news. But in Martin’s novels this animal is the emblem of the Night Watch, a paramilitary institution which recruits thieves, rapists, and lords who have lost a war, as an alternative to death penalty. That is how this term is transformed in this novels, becoming a synonym of “coward”. In the same fashion, “summer” becomes a word designating a period of peace and good harvests, whereas “winter” is a period of bad weather, war and danger in this magical world. These two concepts interfere with idiomatic expressions, which are sometimes modified too: e.g. “smooth as summer silk” instead of “smooth as silk”.

Language in Martin’s novels develop as a real language in any cultural frame. It is even possible to find new idioms which have been created after some existing idiom. In these cases, the new idioms are based on the previous one’s metaphorical base. That is the case of the expression “there is a roach in your pudding”; an opposing idiom to “to be the plum in the pudding”, which is at the same time an alternative version of the current idiom “the icing on the cake” / “the cherry on the cake”. The verb “to bend”, in its figurative use “to bend the body in submission or reverence” (OED), narrows its meaning in the idiom “to bend the knee”, with which Martin refers to a lord who swears loyalty to a king and becomes his bannerman or vassal.

The final type of idioms that are find in these novels are totally new idioms with completely new metaphorical relations which are lexicalized. Continuing with the example of the Night Watch, there is an idiom to refer to a man who enters that institution: “to take the black”. Other unique expressions systematized in Martin’s novels are: “to be eaten by crows” (to die); “to smell of summer” (to look young and inexpert); or “to storm a castle” (to take a castle by assault). Many of these idioms, as in a real life context, are born from the character’s experience and history and little by little become more frequent. Following this “natural” process, the reader finds sayings which have been created in this specific context in a period prior to the current story. Some examples are “to be as mad as Mallawaran’s wife” (equivalent to “as mad as a hatter”, but using a character from the story), and “it is easier to milk a Stone Cow of Faros than to wring gold from the Pureborn” (meaning that the Pureborn and really stingy people and full of references to this fictional culture).

After the process of decoding the original text is finished, it is important to analyze the translation to see if the main elements of each idiom have been maintained. As the origin and target languages belong to relatively different cultures, it is inevitable to find some gaps between the two idiomatic systems. In this analysis, there were established four major relations between both systems. And all of them change in certain manner the way the translator communicated these idioms.

a. Two idioms with the same meaning: In some cases, there is a similar idiom in the target language that fulfills the communicative purpose of the original idiom. In those cases, literal translation was the best choice, as the reader in both languages are familiar with the idioms.
It is necessary to point out that modifications to these idioms have been conveniently translated. Sometimes the translator decides to modify something, maybe because she considers the metaphorical relation is not so evident. For example, when translating the expression “mournful as a puppy”, she makes an explicitation of the meaning of the idiom: “apesadumbrado como un cachorrillo castigado”. However, this expression shows the image of a mournful puppy who feels repentant for its bad actions, which exists in both languages as an idiom: “your tail between your legs” / “con el rabo entre las piernas”.

b. Existing idiom in the target language with a different form: In other occasions, the translator uses a different idiom which shares the meaning to the original one, but differs in its metaphorical relations. In those cases, equivalence and modulation are the most useful translating techniques.

In many occasions the translator has to decide whether it is more important that the idiomatic expression is recognized (a more familiar form) or that the expressive force of the original is maintained (keeping her translation closer to the original). It is usually the case that she prefers a less domesticated version of the text, being the literal translation her key technique. For example, when translating the idiom “that horse has left the yarn” (a new version of “that horse has left the barn”, which is at the same time a retell of the idiom “closing the stable door after the horse has bolted”), she writes “ese caballo ya no está en el establo” rather than “ese barco ha zarpado” (Spanish idiom with a similar meaning). In this case, it is clear that her priority is to keep the lexical form, as horses are more relevant to this context than boats. In a different example, she preferred to keep a Spanish idiom “hurgar en la herida” when translating “salt for his wound”, despite this idiom is (although less frequently used) also found in the Spanish language.
c. No equivalence in the target language: Some of Martin’s idioms are versions of existing idioms in English which have no Spanish equivalents. When this occurs, the translator has several options. Although literal translation is her preferred course of action, sometimes she explains the meaning of the idiom or uses an equivalent idiom in Spanish.

Figure 3: multiple translation techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Martin’s idiom</th>
<th>translation</th>
<th>English idiom</th>
<th>Translating technique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like mushrooms in the rain/ Like mushrooms in the dark</td>
<td>como setas despues de la lluvia / como champiñones en la oscuridad</td>
<td>Mushrooms can figuratively refer to something which has sprung up or grown rapidly.</td>
<td>Literal translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick as a spit</td>
<td>En menos que se tarda en escupir</td>
<td>Quick as a lightening / Quick as a wink</td>
<td>Explicitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To call the banners / to raise the banners</td>
<td>Llamar a sus vasallos / convocar a sus vasallos / mover sus ejércitos / alzar sus vasallos</td>
<td>No reference found: it reflects the metonymic relation banner-bannermen</td>
<td>Explicitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be put to sword</td>
<td>Pasar por la espada</td>
<td>To sword: to strike, slash or kill with a sword</td>
<td>Modulation: it turns a passive action into an active one</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d. The idiomatic expression is new in both languages: that requires always a literal translation, as the proper context to understand its meaning is the novels themselves. Some examples are: “to pack someone off to the silent sisters” / “enviar a alguien con las hermanas silenciosas” (to kill someone), as these silent sisters are the ones in charge of prepping dead people for their burial; “as shy as a maid in her wedding day” / “tímido como una doncella en su noche de bodas” (to be extremely shy). This idiom is especially emphatic in this context as this fictional culture has a specific ritual for weddings in which the bride is seen naked by all male members of the celebration. In this same category will be included all expressions containing the word “raven” as synonym of “coward”, or the opposing terms “summer/winter” as “peace/war”.

Conclusions

In this study fifty-two idioms from George R.R. Martin’s novels and their translations have been analyzed in order to determine the key translation techniques and their effectiveness.

Firstly, it was established the type of desautomatizations the original author carried out upon real English idioms. There are four different types in these books: (1) modified existing idiomatic expressions, e.g. “stubborn as a river rock”; (2) new metaphorical relations, e.g. “raven” to designate “a coward”; (3) the creation of new idioms after existing ones, e.g. “that horse has left the yard”; (4) completely new idiomatic expressions, e.g. “to be as useful as nipples on a breastplate” (not being useful).

Literal translation was, by far, the most frequently used translation technique (67.3%). We think this is due to the fact that staying closer to the original text works in three important
cases: when the idiom exists in both language, when the idiom only exists in English and when it is new in both languages. Modulation and equivalence were more frequently used than explicitation (11.5% each against 7.69%), what displays a clear preference to maintain the existing lexico-semantic relations. The form of the idioms was translated into the target language when possible, and idioms were only lost when comprehension was at risk.

After this analysis, we consider the translation successfully transmit the new lexical relations without forgetting the existing figurative language in both the origin and the target language, what guarantees the transmission of the new fictional culture to the reader, as well as the new uses of the language. However, sometimes the importance of lexical choice is underestimated during translation. For example, when she decided to translate “stubborn as a river rock” as “testarudo” instead of “terco” (Spanish idiom: “terco como una mula”), she broke the connection to the real idiomatic expression in Spanish. Also, her different translations of “pudding” in several idiomatic expressions (“flan”, “pudín”, “natillas”) break the lexical relations in the conceptual structure of those idioms (pudding = something good). Although those are punctual deviations, they might constitute an obstacle in the construction of the fictitious cultural imaginary if lexical choice is not more consistent in future translations.

References


