

# Phraseology as a Mirror of Culture - A Survey with Examples in Esperanto, English and German

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I am very grateful to the University of Liverpool and the Buchanan Committee for inviting me to give the John Buchanan Lecture this year. It is a great honour for me. I am especially delighted because the lecture gives me the opportunity to combine two of my favourite research topics – Esperanto and phraseology.

Phraseological units – commonly known as phrases and idioms – represent one of the most fascinating parts of language, above all because of their colourful authenticity and figurative character, their strength of expression and the insight they provide into a language community's culture and history. It might be difficult to imagine that a consciously created or constructed language such as Esperanto could be rich in phraseology. This is, however, what I intend to show in this lecture. This lecture has the following structure:

- 1 Definition
- 2 Classification
- 3 The Usage of Phraseology in Esperanto
  - 3.1 Phraseological units as text constituents
  - 3.2 The creative and innovative potential of phraseological units
- 4 Summary & Conclusion

## 1 Definition

There are mainly five defining characteristics of phraseological units (PUs) (cf. Fiedler 2006):

a) polylexicity (i.e. they have multiple constituents), b) (relative) syntactic and semantic stability, c) idiomaticity (as a potential characteristic), d) lexicalization (i.e. as ready-made units of the lexicon they are not created productively by the speaker/writer, but reproduced), and e) stylistic and expressive connotations. These features can be verified for the phraseology of Esperanto. Furthermore, the majority of PUs in Esperanto are characterized by euphonic qualities (e.g. rhyme, rhythm, alliteration).

As for b), their stability, we have to consider that this is a relative criterion, i.e., PUs are variable within definite constraints. In Esperanto, the range of variation seems to be larger than in ethnic languages. Structural as well as lexical variants are found, for example:

*froti la manojn/froti siajn manojn/froti al si la manojn* ['to rub one's hands']  
*demeti/levi la ĉapelon* ['to take one's hat off/to raise one's hat']

They are generally accepted, due to the use of Esperanto as a foreign language in an international speech community. There is still a third type of variation – phraseological synonyms, where identical or similar contents are expressed by different expressions based on different images. Because of the various

ethnolinguistic influences on Esperanto, the language is rich in synonyms. Compare, for example, the following Esperanto proverbs whose basic meaning is that 'a trifling cause may have a serious effect':

*unu fajrero estas sufiĉa por eksplodigi pulvon* ('One spark is enough to make powder explode'),

*pro najleto bagatela pereis ĉevalo plej bela* ('Because of a little nail the most beautiful horse perished'),

*ofte de kaŭzo senenhava venas efiko plej grava* ('A trifling cause often has a very important effect'), *unukopeka kandelo forbruligis Moskvon* ('A one-kopek candle burnt Moscow down'), *de malgranda kandelo forbrulis granda kastelo* ('Because of a small candle a great castle burnt down'),

*unu fava ŝafo tutan ŝafaron infektas* ('One shabby sheep will mar the whole flock'), *unu ovo malbona tutan manĝon difektas* ('One bad egg spoils the whole meal').

## 2 Classification

There are different ways to classify phraseological units. The peculiarities of Esperanto as a planned language suggest a need for classification of PUs on the basis of their origin. The following three groups can be distinguished (Fiedler 1999; 2002):

a) The quantitatively largest group is made up of those units that have entered the language through various other languages. These are loan translations, from Greek mythology and from the Bible, which today are some of the most widely disseminated proverbs (e.g. *Mano manon lavas* – cf. Latin *Manus manum lavat*; *Pri gustoj oni dispute ne devas* – cf. Latin *De gustibus non est disputandum*). A unit such as *enverŝi oleon en la fajron* ('to add fuel to the flames') is known in European languages as well as in Chinese (Schue 1985: 93).

Furthermore, individual speakers more or less spontaneously introduce expressions from their native languages which may enjoy international currency (ad hoc loans). These may have the character of occasional formations showing striking similarities to their ethnolinguistic bases, as in the following examples<sup>1</sup>:

1) *En 1867 Usono aĉetis de Rusio Alaskon por 7,2 milionoj da dolaroj. Multaj opiniis, ke tio estis mono ĵetita al la vento.* ("Monato" 4/96, p.22; Russian author) ('In 1867 the USA bought Alaska from Russia for 7.2 million dollars. Many people thought that this was money down the drain [lit. 'money thrown to the wind']'; cf. Russian *бросать деньги на ветер*).

2) *Tiu batalo levis sian kurtenon per akuzoj pri falsaj insekticidoj, semoj, cigaredoj kaj vinoj.* ("El Popola Ĉinio" 12/90, p.23) ('This battle began [lit. 'raised its curtain'] with accusations of false insecticides, seeds, cigarettes and wine'; cf. Chinese *kai mu*).

This group of phraseological units developed, first, because of Esperanto's position as a means of communication in a second-language community which

is in turn in permanent contact with a diversity of ethnic languages, and, second, because of properties of its linguistic structure favouring the adoption of foreign lexical material. There are obvious parallels to language-contact phenomena in bilingual speakers, as they have been described for the phraseology of various European languages.

- b) The second group represents a peculiarity of planned language phraseology: the conscious creation of units. The majority of such 'planned' proverbs go back to Zamenhof, the initiator of the language, who published a collection of proverbs, the *Proverbaro Esperanta* ('Esperanto Proverb Collection') [12] in 1910 on the basis of a collection listed and compared in Russian, Polish, German and French by his father, Marcus Zamenhof. It contains units such as *Ĉio transmara estas ĉarma kaj kara* ('Everything beyond the ocean/far away is charming and dear') or *Neniu estas profeto en sia urbeto* ('No one is a prophet in their own little town'; = is recognized in their own land), which are very popular with Esperanto speakers today. Analyses, however, reveal that only a small part of the 2,630 units in this collection (about 7%) can be considered common knowledge in the speech community. This shows the limitations of planned processes in a functioning planned language.
- c) The third group is made up of proverbs which have their origin in the language and cultural life of the Esperanto community. These reflect communicative history, sociological characteristics, the speakers' collectively held ideals and aims, traditions, and Esperanto literature, as the following examples show:

*esperanto - edzperanto* ['Esperanto - husband-provider/matchmaker'],

*Ne krokodilu!* [lit. 'Don't be a crocodile!' = Speak Esperanto when amongst Esperanto speakers!; friendly admonition at Esperanto meetings as an expression of linguistic loyalty],

*La nepoj nin benos* ['Our grandchildren/descendants will bless us' - a quotation from Zamenhof's well-known poem *La Vojo*].

This type of PUs is especially interesting as these expressions can only be understood by Esperanto speakers on the basis of their sociocultural background knowledge. Therefore, they disprove the thesis that a planned language necessarily 'lacks culture'.

Since it is sometimes difficult to find out whether there is a model structure in one of the ethnic languages, the dividing lines between the three groups a), b) and c) may often appear indistinct.

#### **4 The usage of PUs in Esperanto**

#### **5 PUs as text constituents**

A phraseological unit produces its full communicative effect only in a specific situational context. Extensive text analyses of different spheres of communication, including written and oral texts, illustrate the functions of PUs. They show that a PU is often much more than mere additional ornament

enhancing a text. It constitutes textual meaning and develops textual coherence. This text-constituting function of PUs is based, more than anything else, on their complex structure. Since they are polylexemic (constituting word groups and sentences), isolated phraseological constituents can be reiterated to play a specific role in the text.

Sometimes a PU becomes the main element of the text structure. In the following example, an editorial in the journal *Esperanto* (6/2010, p.123), the phrase *esti en la sama boato* (cf. English *be in the same boat*) is of central importance to the message. It is used in the headline and in the final sentences of two of the paragraphs of the text. Furthermore it is playfully contrasted to another phrase, *Ni fosu nian sulkon!* (lit. 'We should dig our furrow', a traditional Esperanto motto), and, finally, the constituent *boato* ('boat') and other lexical elements from the same word field (e.g. *flosi* ['float'], *veli* ['sail']) are used in isolation to permeate the text and to intensify the metaphorical network. (Following the text the reader will find a literal translation.)

### 3) *Ni estas ĉiuj en la sama boato* kaj devas noveme *kunveli*

*Kiu laŭ vi estis la ĉefa problemo de UEA en la pasintaj 50 jaroj? Ĉu la puĉo en Hamburgo? Homaj bedaŭrindaĵoj. [...] Ĉu la malfrue alvenantaj Jarlibro aŭ revuo ? Ni delonge lernis trateni tion. Ĉu la falanta membronombro? Jes, sed falas la membronombro ankaŭ en la landaj asocioj kaj en la lokaj societoj, kaj ne ekzistas specife universal-asocia solvo de ĉiunivela problem. Se ni problemas kune, ni solvu kune.*

*Por alproksimiĝi al la problemo, ni unue tuŝu la temon de Usono. [...] Usono estas hodiaŭ tio, kio estis hieraŭ Francio. Esperanto rajdis sur franca ĉevalo ekde Bulonjo, kaj estis atentata ; se hodiaŭ reaktuala alvoko al Esperanto estus veninta el la usona kontraŭkulturo, ni estus nun en bona pozicio, kiel... la rokmuzika industrio. [...]*

*Nun ekzistas potenco pli aktuala ol Usono: la reta mondo [...] Malaperis la tradicia rilato inter la mono, la loka sindediĉo de maljunuloj kaj la energio de la junularo. Kaj ni ne sukcesis, en la reta mondo, instali funkciantan maltradician kunligon inter tiuj faktoroj. En tiu malsukceso, ni trovas nin **en la sama boato**, kiel la monda muzika industrio ; kaj ni devos lerni **kunflosi**.*

*Tio signifas iom ekskutimigi la retorikon de senlikva **fosado** (L estas likva konsonanto) kaj **sulkoj**, ĉar tiu retoriko respegulas tion, kio dividas nin kaj malhelpas solvon. En solida mondo de **sulkoj**, ĉiu emas rigardi sin mem la centro de la movado, ĝia plej grava parto. Ĉiu **fosas sian sulkon** kaj ne emas helpi **fosi** alilokajn **sulkojn**.*

*[...] oni devas iamaniere teni la Esperanto-movadon funkcianta kaj laŭeble kreskanta en Germanio, Usono, Japanio kaj samtempe loke kaj internacie. La demando estas, kiamaniere malplej dolore forlasi la **sulko-fosan** racion kaj kolektive fronti al la fakto, ke nun ni ĉiuj **estas en la sama, nova boato**.*

[...]

*Sed ankaŭ en la nuna mondo, nur malrapide oni lernas lingvojn, aŭ konvinkas najbaron pri la lernado de Esperanto, aŭ vartas instituciojn kaj festivalojn tra la jaroj.*

*Por plufari tion efike, por pluirigi la **boaton** de Esperanto, por konvinki la mondon pri la bezono pri lingva justeco, ni bezonas ĉiujn **boatistojn** kaj ili devas kunlabori inter si, estimi unu la alian, helpi unu la alian. Internaciuloj, landuloj, lokuloj kaj retuloj, ni ĉiuj faras ion utilan. Neniu havas en sia poŝo la sekreton por triumfi Esperanton, sed se tio eblas, tio okazos nur se ni kunlaboros.*

*Fiere kaj kunlabore konstruu kun ni movadon de homoj kapablaj **kunveli**. Ni **velu** antaŭen kun kredo, fervor', kiel kantas Grabowski.*

*(‘We are all in the same boat and have to sail together in a new way’.)*

...

As this example illustrates, phraseological units can perform a structuring function: Proverbs and catchphrases are often found in recurrent positions, especially at the beginning and at the end of paragraphs. In an initial position a PU can provide a core reference for textual expansion. Authors like to take general truths expressed in proverbs as a starting point for their reports and arguments, as in the following examples: an article about youth riots in British cities, and an article about language instruction.

#### 4) *La unua leciono*

*Ĉiu scias la proverbon: “Unua paŝo iron direktas.” Sendube la unua E-leciono havas eksterordinaran signifon por la futuro de la loka lingvoinstruado (Internacia Pedagogia Revuo 3/1995, p.14).*

*(‘The first lesson*

*Everybody knows the proverb: “The first step decides the direction.” Without any doubt the first Esperanto lesson is of enormous significance for the future of local language instruction.’)*

When PUs mark the end of a text or paragraph, they can have the function of a comment, as with the passage of Zamenhof’s poem *La Vojo* in example 5), or they are used as an evaluative concluding signal, as in the book review in 6).

#### 5) *Eĉ se oni devus labori vane dum kelkaj jaroj, ŝajnas al mi ke la rezultoj estos ĉiamaniere tre bonaj:*

*“Eĉ guto malgranda, konstante frapante,*

*Traboras la monton granitan.” (“La Gazeto” 6/1997, p.8).*

*(Even though we had to work in vain for some years, it seems to me that the results will be very good: “Even a little drop, constantly falling, pierces the granite mountain.”)*

#### 6) *Ju pli oni legas aŭ aŭskultas tiun eposan verkon, oni pli kaj pli konvinkiĝas, ke ĝi estas gravega kontribuo al la monda literaturo. La temo estas universala, nome la situacio de la homaro en la tempo kaj en la kosmo. Ĝi estis parte inspirita de la verko Cantos de la usona poeto Ezra Pound, kaj ĝi memorigas*

*min pri Canto General de la ĉiliano Pablo Neruda. Ofte grandaj mensoj simile pensas.* ("Esperanto" 3/2011, p.64)

(‘The more one reads or listens to this narrative poetry, the more one becomes convinced that it is a significant contribution to world literature. The theme is universal, it is the situation of humankind in time and space. It was partly inspired by the work *Cantos* by the US-poet Ezra Pound, and it reminds me of *Canto General* by the Chilean Pablo Neruda. **Often great minds think alike.**’)

Another peculiarity of phraseological occurrences in Esperanto communication is the frequent use of metacommunicative signals, which can be interpreted as an expression of the developed linguistic consciousness of Esperanto speakers. The authors introduce a comment on the sayings and proverbs they use; or they apply inverted commas as a means of indication. By doing so, they want to signal that a following or preceding passage differs from the rest of the text and has to be understood metaphorically, e.g.:

- 7) (...) *Kiel vi vidas, mia nomo estas la lasta sur la tagordo. Kiel la germanoj diras: La lastan mordas la hundoj. Do, verŝajne mi devos rezigni aŭ mallongigi mian prelegon.* (‘As you see, my name is the last one on the agenda. As the Germans say: The last is bitten by the dogs. Thus, perhaps I will have to withdraw or shorten my presentation.’) (Zagreb, 27 July 2001; oral example: German speaker)
- 8) *La dojeno de ĉina esperantismo, Laŭlum, kompendias la ĉinan klasikan beletron en Esperanto: la vastecon de lia temkampo montras ke la E-tradukoj de klasikaj ĉinaj verkoj ampleksas jam 7000 paĝojn, sed ke tio egalas, laŭ ĉina diro, al “nur unu haro de naŭ bovoj”.* (Esperanto 11/2010, p.231; The dean of Chinese Esperantism, Laŭlum, gathers together Chinese classical belles-lettres in Esperanto: the range of his thematic interests is such that the Esperanto translations of classical Chinese works already cover 7000 pages, but that these correspond, as a Chinese saying goes, to only one hair of nine oxen.)
- 9) *La Akademio sub nova gvidantaro kompletigas unu jaron da agado, kaj kvankam eble estas tro frue por konstati ĉu “nova balailo bone balaas”, certe montriĝis (...)* (“Esperanto” 12/96, p.213; ‘The Academy under new leadership completes one year of work, and although it is perhaps too early to state whether “a new broom sweeps clean”, it has certainly been shown [...]’)

### 3.2 The creative and innovative potential of phraseological units

A ubiquitous phenomenon in Esperanto communication is the speakers’ ludic linguistic behaviour or ‘language play’ (Crystal 1998). Already in beginners’ courses learners might greet one another saying “Salaton!” (salad) instead of “Saluton!” ([I express a] greeting) and ask riddles such as “Kial gxirafo neniam solas?” (Why is a giraffe never alone?) (answer: “Gxi havas kolegon.” It has a colleague/long neck; “kol-eg-o” from “kol-“ [neck] and “-eg”, a suffix expressing intensification). Philippe (1991) points out that the “linguistic play instinct” is a factor triggering language change in Esperanto.

Due to their characteristics (polylexicality, stability and above all idiomaticity, i.e. the two possible readings of a phrase), phraseological units provide vast opportunities to evoke humour, as can be seen in the following examples.

(10)



Kontakto 145 (1995:1)



(11)

In the Esperanto youth journal “Kontakto” a series of cartoons was used to encourage people to use condoms. In example (10), a young man, who is obviously embarrassed, asks for the way to a pharmacy, and an elderly sitting nearby woman remarks that condoms can be bought from the vending machine in the petrol station. This cartoon would probably work in a number of languages and cultures. What makes it interesting is the title of the cartoon series, “La bona ingo” (the good cover), a euphemism for “condom”, but also an allusion to the book “La bona lingvo” (the good language), a seminal work on the merits of Esperanto.

In the same vein, in example (11) – one man asks the other “Are you full too?” to which he replies, “Yes, and also illustrated.” – the average Esperanto speaker notices the salient elements “plena” (full) and “ilustrita” (illustrated) from the title of an Esperanto standard dictionary, “Plena Ilustrita Vortaro”. The fact that in these two examples considerable background information has to be given in order for non-Esperantists to understand the jokes demonstrates that Esperanto possesses a culture of its own. In addition, the humorous manipulation of titles of highly reputed works of Esperanto literature shows that self-referential and self-

ironic language uses are characteristic of the community; Esperanto speakers are definitely able to laugh about themselves.

#### 4 Conclusion

Research into Esperanto phraseology reveals many of the fundamental characteristics of the nature and function of planned languages. Among these characteristics are evidence of both conscious and spontaneous factors in their evolution, empirical data concerning their dynamic and independent development on the basis of a linguistic norm, and an analysis of cultural features reflected in the languages. The development of phraseology proves to be an important criterion in establishing the transition from language project to actual language.

This investigation has revealed that Esperanto possesses a rich phraseology. This is due to the fact that this planned language has established a sufficiently large and differentiated speech community that uses it as an efficient means of communication in various spheres. The phraseology of Esperanto shares with other phraseologies the attribute of uniting both universal and culturally specific components.

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