The Importance of Origin and Context in Teaching and Translating Idioms

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An idiom is a short phrase whose meaning goes beyond (but is related to) the face value of the phrase. This is how I have defined the term "idiom" in my book, "Using and Learning Idioms", due to come out next month, in which I have suggested several activities for the teaching of idioms based on actual classroom experience.

Idiom is part, an integral part of the language and should be treated as such. But as far as learning idioms is concerned the odds are not in favour of the foreign learner. Native speakers internalise the use of idioms unconsciously; I mean idioms creep into their vocabulary through the medium of their family, friends and workmates. The difficulty for a second-language learner is that his contact with idioms is insufficient because of his relatively limited opportunities of conversing with native speakers. Besides, his exposure to the wider range of language is chiefly through simplified literary texts which, unfortunately, often omit idioms, or leave only a few, so that when the language learner confronts an idiom, he is often unlikely to know how to tackle it. In addition, some teachers postpone the study of idioms with their class or deal with them perfunctorily and unsympathetically.

Therefore, if what I have just been saying is true, I would like to make the following points: First, I believe that teaching idioms at random, in isolation or in multiple choice style is perhaps an old fashioned and obsolete method. At beginning levels the student can encounter some of the commoner idioms with high frequency vocabulary without running the risk of misapplying
or using them in the wrong context. It is rather unlikely that idioms such as, "new blood"=νέο αίμα, "blood-bath"=λουτρό αίματος, αιματοχυσία, "in cold blood"=εν ψυχρώ, "the kiss of life"=το φιλί της ζωής, "right-hand-man"=δεξί χέρι, πολύτιμος, "the lion's share"=μερίδα λέοντος, "in a flash"=στο όψε αβδος, αμέσως, behind my back=πίσω από τις πλάτες μου, κρυφά, εν αγνώρια μου,"here and now"=εδώ και τώρα, αμέσως, will ever confuse students because such idioms are more or less semantically and contextually identical. Second, at intermediate levels, students can add to their vocabulary more difficult (complex), from a semantic, structural and contextual point of view, idioms, such as, "a drop in the ocean"=σταγόνα στον ωκεανό, ασόμαντο, "I'll see you by and by"=θα σε δώ αργότερα, I'll move heaven and earth"=θα κλήσω για και ουρανό, θα κάνω (ότι είναι δυνατόν), το πάν, "a storm in a tea cup"=πολύ φασάρι για το τίποτα, which need very little interference on behalf of the teacher.

Third, at post-intermediate and pre-advanced levels, the student can systematise and consolidate idiom learning through semantic and pragmatic categorisation, because from the moment that we become interested in creating communicative syllabuses, which necessarily imply a semantic categorisation of language, the presentation of idiomatic expressions—like the presentation of any vocabulary items of standard expressions—falls within particular semantic categories. I'm going to illustrate the above mentioned point by categorising the notion of the term "anger" in the two languages:

ANGER

1. He was beside himself
2. He saw red
3. His blood is boiling
4. It makes my blood boil
5. He hit the ceiling
6. He lost (his) control
7. He lost his temper
8. He was blazing (with anger)

Fourth, at advanced levels the procedure becomes complicated because the task of teaching idioms and rendering them from one language into another (from source language into receptor language) very often involves semantic, pragmatic, grammatical, syntactic, cultural and historical comparison of the two languages.

The aim of the present paper is to highlight on the advanced levels and investigate the process of teaching and translating idioms from source language to receptor language. In other words, idioms will be used as a means of comparing two languages.
I would like to begin with the derivation of idioms which, I believe, is of primary importance. Some idioms go back to ancient times and are often (in the eyes of the purists) misapplied, through ignorance of their origin and background. They, for instance, have literary origins in the Greek, or Latin classics, or in the Bible, which still has a certain authority, as far as idioms are concerned.

Let me give you three examples in order to illuminate the point I made earlier.

A) In Virgil there is a famous line about the fall of Troy. When the Greeks were bringing up their huge horse, one of the Trojans (the priest Laocoon) said: "Timo Danaos et dona ferentes" (I fear the Greeks even if they are bringing gifts). The phrase "Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts" is now more or less idiomatic in English, even amongst people who don't know Latin and would not understand the background of the phrase. Some well-educated person who was not getting on well with his next door neighbour might for instance express his mistrust, if that person did him a kindness, by saying "Beware of the Greeks bearing gifts", or "A Greek gift, I suppose".

B) Another example of a classical idiom commonly used in a sense different from that originally intended, is the phrase "A sound mind in a healthy body", "Mens sana in corpore sano". The phrase is from Juvenal's Satires, and what Juvenal meant by it is that as we grow older we must be afraid, we must pray for a sound mind in a healthy body. Nowadays the phrase is used by sports and keep-fit fanatics, who imagine it to mean that you can't have a sound mind without a healthy body. But that is not what originally meant at all.

C) If a certain source of idioms—theology for instance—declines, the group of idioms drawn from that source may become out of date and may well fall out of use. Thus, in the Bible, in The Book of Job, there is the idiomatic expression "With (by) the skin of his teeth". This Biblical idiom is becoming rather rare nowadays and is replaced by "a near miss", "a near thing", "a narrow margin", "a narrow shave", "a narrow squeak", "a close call", "a close shave". Perhaps as technology advances and shaves get closer and closer the image will gain in vividness.

It is important to note that discussion of the origin of certain idioms helps students immensely not only to understand and memorise idioms but to use them in the right context as well. I'm going to illustrate this point by giving two examples: a) "high and dry" εγκοσταλειμένος (μόνος κέρημος). To confront a student learning English with the phrase "high and dry", is to risk his comprehension. But as soon as he becomes aware of its origin—we tell him that Noah's Ark which survived the flood came to rest on Mount Ararat and, and when the waters went down, was left "high" and "dry", that is, stranded, without companions, signifying abandonment to peril—the student will grasp the semantic meaning
and contextual use at the same time. b) Let's take another example, "sour grapes"=όμφακες είσαι, οδα δε φτάνει η αλεπού τα κάνει κρεμαστάρια. It's not worth studying the idiom in isolation. The idiom must be put in it's historical perspective. In other words, the saying refers to a story by Aesop in which a fox stood gaping under a vine, licking his lips at a most delicious cluster of grapes, and then leapt at them hundreds of times until he was exhausted, and still unable to reach them. As he went away, he covered his disappointment by saying, "Hang'em, they are as sour as crabs"."Sour grapes" is said of individuals who want something desperately but pretend not to, by saying that they don't want it, when they have failed to get it. To put it in another way, the idiom expresses feelings of bitterness and disappointment, or unfulfilled wishes caused by failure or inability to get what one very much wants or desires.

It is worth noting that there are common notions in the two languages expressed by idioms whose lexical items form a completely different image because the two worlds have had different experiences, or practised and enjoyed different sports. An instance of this is the idiom "to be neck and neck"=στήθος με στήθος. The phrase is difficult and irregular. The syntax is strange, the combination apparently inadmissible, and it doesn't make sense outside context. But as is so often the case with idioms, the meaning becomes clear as soon as you know the context of the phrase. The idiom derives from racing, one of the most favourite English sports, when two horses run so close together that it is impossible to tell which is ahead, with one neck sometimes in front, sometimes the other. But if the phrase is used for an election for instance in which two parties poll (receive) almost exactly the same number of votes, and it is clear that nobody can tell which side is leading, the context resolves the semantic obscurity of the phrase. In the Greek idiom "racing" stands for "running", "horse" for "athlete", and "neck" for "breast". However, semantically and contextually the two idioms are identical.

Here I would like to point out that there are idioms which, for domestic reasons or traditional habits, have to be studied through their origin and translated by intuition or interpretation when rendered from one language into another. The English idiom "not my cup of tea" is a case in point. Tea drinking was first introduced into Britain in the seventeenth century and has remained popular with English people, ever since. Tea in the morning, tea before lunch, tea after lunch, tea in the afternoon, tea in the evening, and to quote George Mikes "tea for breakfast and tea for tea" but this is not the case with the Greeks. The idiom implies that something is not to one's taste or not what he enjoys, or suited for.
In Greek we might say for example something like "he/she is not my type" "it doesn't express me", or "it is not my favourite" and we would not be very far from the meaning of the English idiom.

There is a further group of idioms which, for environmental reasons, are made of different symbols to express the same idea. I'll give an example to elucidate this point. Both Greek and English use the idiom "One swallow doesn't make a summer", (in Greek it is spring in fact), to show that (literally) swallows are the forerunners of the beginning of summer, and (figuratively, metaphorically) to show that it is unwise to form a general opinion or judgement on the basis of a single event, remark, or ephemeral success. That is to say, the idiom serves as a reminder against the folly of reaching hasty conclusions on the basis of a single piece of evidence. It is important to note that the Greeks have, over the years, replaced the key word "swallow" by "cuckoo" which is not used in English to announce the coming of summer. This is possibly due to the fact that a cuckoo is a migratory bird which lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, and from this point of view its symbol may denote laziness or inactivity. In addition, a cuckoo can be found in hot countries, such as Greece, rather than in cold ones, such as England. So, when the English say "one swallow doesn't make a summer" the Greeks are expected to translate the above saying into one cuckoo doesn't make a spring".

At times we come across simple idiomatic expressions, such as phrasal verbs, carrying suggestions or overtones which are very difficult to transplant without spoiling the language into which they are transferred. The informal English idiom "he sloped off" = ἔφυγε, τὴν ἐκανε κομάνα, is a typical example. If, for instance, we use it of a student it can mean—supposing there was a lecture from two to four o'clock—he left somewhere in the middle, (during the coffee break perhaps), slipping away so that no one would notice. If one says "he went away before the end of the lecture", it is neutral and has no particular overtones, but the idiomatic phrase "sloped off" carries a slight suggestion that the student did it surreptitiously, hoping no one would notice. There is also a suggestion of laziness. In Greek, neither the verb ἔφυγε nor the expression (argot) τὴν κομάνας, ἐκανε κομάνα would do the job because the former would fail to absorb the suggestions and overtones of the English phrase "sloped off" and the latter might sound vulgar. Perhaps, the Greek phrase οὐκόκος could be the closest equivalent, though it seems to carry other overtones in Greek, e.g. "fear" or "guilt".

Having the translation of the previous idiom in mind, we should draw our attention to the fact that, translating an idiom from one language into another
and finding an equivalent, the process doesn't end there because there may be more than one equivalents in the receptor language which require several skills on behalf of the teacher/translator in order to choose the most appropriate one. For instance, if "a good" teacher came across the English idiom "You can't get blood (from) out of a stone" he would normally be able to give several renderings, such as, Όλες ανά λάθος παρά του μη ἔχοντος, δὲν μπορεῖς να βγάλεις από τη μυία ένα πίττα, Ἀρμέγα λαγούς καὶ κούρεμε χελώνες, and choose the most suitable one according to the context.

Finally, there is a number of idioms whose meaning cannot be determined in context or whose equivalent(s) in the receptor language is extremely difficult to be found even if you try to paraphrase or interpret the idiom in question. I'll quote two newspaper extracts in order to make my point clear:

a) It can not be driven away by censorship -- by turning the Cabinet into a troupe of silent monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil. (The Daily Mail).

b) DOG EATS DOG
Dog eats dog might be the headline attached to any review of the press coverage of the Falklands dispute over the last few years. One or two of the more jingoistic tabloids have been attacking some of their rivals for being defeatist to the point of treason. (The Standard)

In the first extract an opposition MP accuses the Prime Minister, namely, Margaret Thatcher of trying to turn the Cabinet into individuals that should not become concerned in any way at all with evil matters. More specifically, she is trying to make them close their eyes, seal their ears and keep (silent) their mouth shut whenever they witness or are to discuss something which is not in the interest of the government (CP). So they are, in a way, asked to see no evil, hear no evil and talk no evil which, could very well be presented in a monkey cartoon with plaster on the lips, cotton wool in the ears and a handkerchief over the eyes. This is the opposite of the democratic principle "βλέπε, άκου, μηλά" = see, hear, talk. A variation of the above idea is "see, hear but don't talk" = βλέπε, άκους αλά μη μιλάς. Now what happens when we come to the translation process? Are we going to give a free translation of the idiom "see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil" and say something like μαριονέτες, ἀβουλα ὄντα, βουβό κολοβούλια, or a literal translation and say κολοβούλια που δὲν βλέπει κακό δεν άκουει κακό και δε μιλάει για κακό?

In the second extract a moderate newspaper is attacking (criticising)
jingoistic newspapers because they obviously hold a diametrically different attitude towards the Falklands crisis, (collective interest). It is very likely that the jingoistic newspapers, in an attempt to survive or sell more copies, are magnifying and exaggerating the facts, are in favour of the war and are, in a sense, mongering war hysteria. Thus, the idiom "Dog eats dog" is used here to show the hard, merciless and, in a way, illegitimate struggle of the accused newspapers to remain in existence, or become successful by selling more copies (personal interest) at the expense of moderate newspapers which have been accused of treason by the jingoistic newspapers. Traditionally, there is friendship or solidarity among dogs (in the English idiom) and ravens (in the Greek idiom). I think the image of the raven is preferable because it denotes more emphatically dirty business or ill transactions. The traditional solidarity among dogs is expressed in English by the idiom "dog doesn't eat dog" and in Greek κόρακας κοράκου μάτι δεν βγάζει. This traditional solidarity may cease to work in cases of personal interest or when we strive for our existence. In such cases the negative form of the idiom can become affirmative i.e. "dog eats dog", κόρακας κοράκου μάτι βγάζει which is extremely unusual in Greek. Again, how are we going to translate the idiom in question and give its exact meaning and intention? We would say something like αλληλοφάγωμα, σκυλικουσάμα, or σκύλος τρώει σκύλο, but had John Dillon been alive he would have said:

"Words in one language elegantly used
Will hardly in another be excused"

Even if we suppose we know all aspects of idioms it is very difficult to render them in another language. Nevertheless, since we have to teach idioms, what I propose is a) to teach them in context and b) when teaching at advanced levels to provide information about their derivation. To conclude, then, it goes without saying that the importance of concept and origin of an idiom becomes more evident when teaching and translating. For it is there that the vivid vignette out of which the idiom was shaped can best be used to advantage.

Each idiom has a story either in myth or in lore, or even in more recent experience, which exhibits a kind of "universal" truth, expressed in common language. And what better way to teach or translate common language than through story-telling (where the idiom is the protagonist), bringing forth the origin and shaping of the concept therein contained!