Idiom Correspondences Across Languages

(homework for 18.May 2010)

May 11, 2010

1 Background

One of the more interesting (and challenging) aspects of idioms is the extent to which they vary across languages. Villavicencio et al. 2004 addresses the problem of encoding correspondences between idioms in different languages, in the context of building a multilingual database of idioms; clearly, such a database could potentially be useful for applications like machine translation. The paper describes both different (monolingual) attributes of idioms and different classes of cross-linguistic correspondences between idioms.

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Aline Villavicencio, Timothy Baldwin, Benjamin Waldron
A Multilingual Database of Idioms
LREC 2004
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1.1 Some monolingual attributes of individual idioms

1. Does the idiom allow internal modification?

2. Is the idiom syntactically flexible?

3. Does the idiom allow morphological inflection only (i.e. not the two previous attributes)?

4. Is the idiom relatively intuitive even to non-native speakers?

1.2 Classes of cross-linguistic idiom correspondence

1. Full correspondence: lexical, syntactic, semantic

2. Syntactically and semantically equivalent, but not lexically equivalent

3. Semantically equivalent but realized with different constructions

4. One-to-many idiom correspondence

5. No corresponding idiom

2   Assignment

The aim of this assignment is to gain a deeper understanding of some of the linguistic aspects of idioms by examining cross-linguistic correspondences. After reading Villavicencio et al., find examples of each of the classes of correspondence listed in 1.2, working between English and one other language, ideally one you know well. For each of the five classes, write a brief description of the correspondence between the idioms.[1] For #4, you can just give a list of the corresponding idioms and their translations; no need for a full description. And for #5 pick one of your favorites, and see if you can answer the questions in 1.1.

Below is a list of (randomly-selected) idioms to consider; try first to use these as the basis for your answers, in the hope that we might be able to see how a single idiom is realized in a number of different languages. But feel free to branch out and use different idioms if necessary.

- spill the beans

- let the cat out of the bag

- kick the bucket

- be/feel blue

- kill two birds with one stone

- speak (someone's) language

- sweep (something) under the rug

- in the middle of nowhere

- in the red (or in the black)

- spring chicken

Bring one hard copy of your responses to class; these will form the core of our in-class discussion.

Finally, feel free to email with any questions: `apalmer@coli.uni-sb.de`.

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[1] Be sure to include the two idioms, their meaning, and a translation of the target-language idiom into English.