

What would one do if they were the black sheep?

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The purpose of this paper is to present how Romanian learners of English process a specific idiom related to colour. In order to do this, I carried out an experiment with three groups of student from the school where I teach English as a foreign language. The experiment was just a small fraction of several others which as a whole make my PhD. Thesis. My research thesis is concerned with how non-native speakers of English process idioms related to weather, anger and colour. To understand their way of processing figurative language I carried out several experiments for each set of idioms. Each experiment consisted of two distinct parts: during the first part I gave my students the idioms in a context free version and asked them to offer translations, whereas during the second part I gave them the same idioms but in a contextualized instance. I assumed that some of my students would be influenced by their linguistic background, by their knowledge regarding English and by their mother tongue – Romanian. Many of my assumptions proved to be right. However, there were instances when students were able to provide proper translations of some idioms even from the context free encounter of them. For others contexts proved valuable instances of vocabulary that actually helped them grasp the figurative meaning. The choice of this specific idiom – black sheep – was taken bearing in mind the existence of a similar idiom in Romanian – oaia neagră. Both in Romanian and English this expression is mainly used with its figurative meaning despite the fact that the literal meaning makes sense as well.

Keywords: *idioms, black, figurative language, meaning*

1. Introduction

Being part of a larger work on the way Romanian learners of English understand specific idioms, the present expression was chosen on purpose. Although at first glance it may seem a multi word expression easy to comprehend it poses difficulties exactly due to the way it is built. Romanian learners of English use the technique of literal meaning first on condition they have not met the expression previously hence understood it from a figurative perspective. Given them the

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expression in a context free version was meant to observe and analyse exactly this potential encounter of it in previous contexts. Otherwise, their translations cannot be considered as a sign of understanding the idiom, since both the literal and the idiomatic meaning make perfect sense not only in English but also in Romanian. The purpose was to observe and analyse whether they shifted from literal meaning towards an idiomatic one when facing the expression as part of a context, context which was in fact meant to lead them towards such an interpretation.

2. Data analysis

BLACK SHEEP – someone who is regarded by other members of their family or group as a failure or embarrassment (<https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/black-sheep>) – oaia neagră (a familiei, grupului); cel diferit

The first stage of the experiment was the context free stage. Students were given the idiom and asked to translate it. There were 41 translations of it:

- more than half (24 to be more precise) translated the idiom – oaie neagră/ oaia neagră/ oi negre. All these translations are versions of the original idiom since all of them can be back translated to English – *black sheep*.
- there were still 5 students who did not offer any translation. In their case this might have been the inability to decide whether to translate the phrase word for word or to try and find a figurative meaning. At this particular stage their lack of translations was to be analysed in accordance to how they were to deal with the phrase during the second exposure to it.
- forma neagră – black shape – a translation that occurred as a result of a confusion between – sheep and shape.
- oaia neagră/nedorit – black sheep/unwanted – a translation that clearly showed the understanding of the idiomatic meaning of the phrase
- a fi diferit – to be different – since the idiomatic meaning of *black sheep* makes reference to being different this translation was taken into account as one that has grasped this meaning
- **to be different in a bad way** – this explanation (instead of a translation) occurred as a result of a better level of English the student has
- **someone marginalized/considered bad** – another proof of a good level of English this student has
- Both this paraphrases of the original phrase showed that the better the level of language a student has the easier to process a phrase it is. This happens not only when the phrase has only a figurative meaning but also when it shares both a figurative and a literal one.

- oaie neagră/capul răutăților – black sheep – in order to prove her understanding of the figurative meaning the student completed her translation thus not referring only to the meanings of the notions involved
- omul exclus/omul diferit/văzut rău de restul grupului – black sheep – although the student offered not one but three translations of the phrase all of them followed that path that led him towards correctly understanding the idiomatic meaning
- o persoană rea – a bad person – in this translation the student moved too far since one may be the *black sheep* of a group or family but this does not necessarily imply that person to be a bad one
- intrus/oaia neagră – intruder/black sheep – two translations offered by the same student both of them showing the student's ability to understand the figurative meaning of the phrase
- oaia neagră/cineva diferit – black sheep/someone different – another student who used two translations of the phrase showing his correctly understanding of the phrase's idiomatic meaning
- ghinionist/diferit – unlucky/different – in this case the student used in his translation the idiomatic meaning of the phrase. However, by adding the translation – *ghinionist/unlucky* – he went too far as one may be very well be different yet this does not necessarily lead to him being unlucky.

Analysing the data gathered during this first stage of the experiment made me understand that the majority of students involved referred their translations to their linguistic background thus resulting translations word for word. Since this phrase has an exact correspondent in Romanian and since both the English phrase and the Romanian one have exactly the same literal and figurative meaning it was impossible to say which of the two meanings they had in mind. This of course does not apply to those students who offered another option besides the word for word translation. And clearly it was not the case of the students who used paraphrasing as a means of explanation.

The second stage of the experiment meant students being given the same idiom but this time in a contextualized version. The context chosen for this stage was – *I have always been the black sheep in my family, I have a completely different personality to all of them and we don't even look the same!* / *Eu am fost întotdeauna oaia neagră a familiei, am o personalitate complet diferită de a tuturor și nici măcar nu semănăm!*

Besides the 6 students who did not provide a translation there were only two more who translated the idiom following the wrong path - ...mereu în haine negre -

...always in black clothes. All other translations can be regarded as reflecting the idiomatic meaning despite the variations present in them:

- oaia neagră a familiei/diferit – black sheep of the family/different
- diferențiat/arătat cu degetul – differentiated/pointed with finger
- cel rău – the bad one – again a translation that went too far. The student who provided this translation kept the path he followed during the first stage.
- care aduce disprețuire – the black sheep
- are un comportament nesatisfăcător – has an unsatisfying behaviour
- persoana diferită, care nu este ca familia – the black sheep

For such an idiom the activation of literal meaning and of the figurative one surely occurs instantly when the idiom appears independently. In order to choose between the two meanings when understanding such a phrase one needs to encounter it within a context. According to specific contexts a learner of English as a foreign language may easily decide which of the meanings to choose for their interpretation to be valuable.

The main issue with such idioms, which have the Romanian correspondent bearing the same figurative meaning in specific instances, is the choice learners have to make at first exposure to them. From this choice or better said from the ability of choosing one of the two meanings results the translation or on the contrary the lack of it. When students translated the idiom – oaie/oaia neagră – at first exposure, no one can actually say for sure which of the meanings they actually had in mind. This is due to the fact that when translating – black sheep as oaia neagră – it makes perfect sense not only in a context free version of the idiom but also in a context where the literal meanings – black (colour) and sheep (animal) – are intended to be used as a requirement of that specific context.

This kind of idiom as well as – *to give the green light, red flag* – which have a perfect correspondent in Romanian that can be used with the same figurative and literal meaning as their English version in accordance to a sequence of discourse or to the lack of it, may be easier understood by Romanian learners of English. This understanding comes exactly thanks to the possibility of getting to the two different meanings at once.

For other idioms the activation of either of the meanings may represent a longer and more complex process and for such idioms a context would definitely be needed.

3. Concluding remarks

Romanian learners of English process idioms in accordance to the sequence of discourse they encounter them. When faced with a multi words expression out of any context there appear several categories under which learners may fall:

- Learners who have not met previously the specific expression and these can be divided in two sub categories according to the way they process the expression
 - The ones who translate the expression word for word in order to understand its meaning and instead of going further they stick with the translation no matter how odd it may seem
 - The ones who notice their word for word translations' lack of meaning and try to find another meaning, i.e. a figurative one
- Learners who have met the expression previously and processed it from a figurative perspective

Since the expression analysed in this study has both a literal and a figurative meaning the difficulties students encountered were as presumed. Facing it out of a context brings the learner in such a situation as not being able to decide over a literal or a figurative meaning. On the other hand, when the expression is part of a context and when there are other notions that influence the specific context, deciding over a literal meaning or a figurative one is far easier.

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