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Phraseology in children's literature: a contrastive analysis

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1 INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units notoriously pose challenges for both translators and language learners. For the former, these primarily consist in grasping the figurative or non-compositional meaning of (partially) opaque phraseological units (PUs)¹ and finding a translant in the target language that covers not only the denotative meaning of the phraseological unit in the source text but also all that exceeds the denotative dimension – what Gréciano (1994) has called *Phraseoaktivität*. For the latter, on the other hand, not only the comprehension but also the production of phraseological units in the target language is a big issue – also if they are semantically transparent².

Although phraseology is a critical component of language, its interaction with second language³ learning and teaching is mainly studied in higher proficiency levels or specific registers. The presence and nature of phraseological units in lower language proficiency levels, on the other hand, have received very little attention. We can assume, however, that there is a “core phraseological inventory” similar to a core vocabulary: which phraseological units occur so

¹ Semantically transparent phraseological units should not cause any particular problems for professional translators, because of their high language proficiency level.

² Language transfer might play a role here, for example when a learner selects a different light verb (e.g. *fare una doccia* > *make a shower).

³ In this dissertation “second language” is used as a hypernym to indicate a non-native language in any learning or teaching context – not only if it is the first language of the place it is learned or taught in, but also outside of the Sprachraum, where “foreign language” would be used.

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frequently that language learners would need them at lower proficiency levels as well? What is the nature of these phraseological units? Do they tend to the compositional or non-compositional extreme of the semantic transparency continuum? Do they tend to have a figurative meaning? Do they tend to be more lexical or more functional? What kind of internal structure do they have? The identification of such a core phraseological inventory remains a desideratum.

In this dissertation, a first attempt will be made to evaluate how Children's Literature (CL) could prove a fruitful corpus for the identification of a core phraseological inventory. While it is true that CL is primarily intended for native receivers and not for language learners, L2 learners do use children's books to advance, either in the classroom or in independent study. Furthermore, authors, translators, and other professional figures involved in the publication of CL are expected to pay particular attention to linguistic difficulty and variety. Both author and translator base their linguistic choices, and their phraseological choices specifically, on the assumptions they have of the still limited linguistic, phraseological, and cultural knowledge of their young receivers (Burger 1997: 233; Finkbeiner 2011: 47–48). Hence Children's Literature might be a valid starting point for the identification of a core inventory of phraseological units.

This research will be conducted contrastively by confronting Dutch and Italian texts. A contrastive approach is not only beneficial from an interlinguistic point of view but could also serve intralinguistic purposes as accurate and adequate descriptions of the single languages are needed to make a comparison. Through that comparison, the similarities and differences in the Dutch and translated Italian phraseological inventories can be identified, as well as the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic connotations that often constrain professional translators to manipulate the source text in order to convey its specific denotative and connotative characteristics to the target text. For those connotative characteristics to become part of the investigation, it is pivotal to study phraseological units in their pragmatic context. A parallel text is needed to

conduct such a contrastive analysis. A literary source text and its translation as a whole can be considered parallel texts – even if, for example, there is no one-to-one correspondence on sentence-level – and thus seem to provide an adequate corpus for the description and analysis of phraseology.

The questions at the base of this research are the following:

- I. What are the similarities and differences between the Dutch and (translated) Italian phraseological inventories?
- II. What equivalence is there between Dutch phraseological units translated into Italian, and translated Italian phraseological units in their original Dutch?
- III. How can a study of phraseology in Children’s Literature contribute to identifying a core phraseological inventory of a language?

In the attempt to answers to these questions, this dissertation is divided into two sections: theoretical-methodological aspects (Chapters 2-4) and empirical analysis (Chapters 5-7). **Chapter 2** addresses the theoretical framework of this research. The first paragraph focuses on contrastive linguistics and the relevant developments in the discipline, while in the second paragraph the attention is directed to phraseology. The paragraph contains a discussion of the discipline in general, and contrastive phraseology in specific, and reviews the commonly proposed criteria for phraseological units. Lastly, terminology and classification issues are discussed. The third paragraph of Chapter 2 sheds light on relevant aspects of Translation Studies, with a special interest in the concept of “equivalence”. In the last paragraph, this study is positioned at the crossroads of contrastive linguistics, phraseology, and Translation Studies.

Chapter 3 sheds light on the issues specifically regarding Children’s Literature, profoundly characterised by asymmetrical power relationships. In the children’s book industry adults (authors, editors, publishers, critics, booksellers, parents, et cetera) make all the decisions, and the primary readership (children) cannot give any input. Furthermore, globalisation and commercialisation cause

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an imbalance in the exchange of Children's Literature between cultures. Translation is a vital part of this industry, and translators are often called on to adapt the source text to reflect the norms, values, and views on childhood of the reader culture, which requires specific translation strategies. In the last part of the chapter, the importance and use of CL in language acquisition and learning are discussed, followed by a review of specific studies on phraseology in Children's Literature.

Our methodology will be outlined in **Chapter 4**, starting with a brief description of the steps taken to carry out the empirical analyses presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. In the first paragraph the corpus is introduced. The second paragraph focuses on the platform used for the annotation of the phraseological units contained in our corpus. The general functioning of the platform and the various search and analysis options are demonstrated, but the main focus lies on the individual parameters used for the analysis of the phraseological units. In the last paragraph, other instruments used for the annotation and analysis are specified.

The empirical part of this research is divided into three chapters. **Chapter 5** sets out the findings of the analysis of phraseological units in a Dutch source text and their translantants in an Italian target text. In **Chapter 6**, this perspective is inverted: the phraseological units in the Italian text are analysed and confronted with the Dutch original text. In **Chapter 7**, these two perspectives are combined, and the differences and similarities between the two phraseological inventories are discussed, as well as the equivalence between phraseological units and translantants.

At last, in **Chapter 8** our findings will be summarised, and prospects for further research will be set forth.