

The **ia** of Idiosyncratic Idioms in Individual Romance and Germanic Languages vs the **Superego** of Universal Linguaculture¹

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Abstract: Inspired by the semantically equivalent series E *talk one's head/arm off* – G *sich ein Loch in den Bauch [= belly] reden* – S *hablar por los codos [= elbows]* – R *a i se duce gura [=mouth] la urechi [=ears; peripheral constituent]* – I *fare una testa [= head] di qualcuno cosi*, the approach at hand is intended to complement the prevailingly language-based one and take the analysis to the more complex, languacultural level, with the aim of bringing idiosyncratic patterns of *forma mentis* in individual languacultures to bear on semantic selection of core constituents in interlingually synonymous idioms, and, while allowing for such factors as sheer frequency, contextual pragmatic clues, salient cultural practices or perceived gaps, also attempt to explore and account for similarities and contrasts both intra-languaculturally (i.e. within language families) and inter-languaculturally (i.e. across language families). The major focus of the present contribution – which merely broaches the topic at issue in this first research phase – is on *ear* and its interlingual synonyms as featured by idioms of English, German, Italian, Romanian and Spanish extraction.

Keywords: idiom, ear, sensory/cognitive perception, languaculture, contrastive phraseology, Romance vs Germanic

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Motto
Auribus teneo lupum
(Terentius, “Phormio”, 3, 2)

I Preliminary Remarks

For openers, some brief preliminary remarks on research corpus, approaches and strategies employed and deployed, respectively.

Showing evidence of cross-fertilization from the psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic and languacultural (s. Agar 1994) approaches, the present multifaceted research is aimed at shedding revealing light on cognitive, linguistic and cultural patterns shared by five languages descended from two different ancestors: West Germanic (English and German) and Latin (Italian, Romanian, Spanish).

With a multilingual subcorpus comprised in this first research stage of more than 450 idioms, extracted from mainstream vocabulary exhibited in such diverse dictionaries as those listed below in the first section under *References*, the contribution at hand zooms in on a host of interlingually synonymous pairs/trios/quartets/quintets which best illustrate the following languacultural categories documented²: the Romance-cum-Germanic languacultural type – further divided in terms of intralingual (within language families) and interlingual (across language families) similarities, respectively – and the idiosyncratic languacultural type, epitomizing a *forma mentis* endemic to an individual languaculture.

² It goes without saying that research conducted in subsequent stages is at liberty to complement, amend or even prove wrong – as the case may be – the findings of this first stage.

Blending with the contrastive-*cum*-comparative approach is the complementary psychological perspective, which contributes three new angles to the main operating duo featuring intralingual and interlingual techniques: the sensory, the cognitive and the emotional.

Our final word in this preliminary section will be on the ear, the leading actor (*scil.* core constituent) of the idioms under scrutiny further below. Viewed primarily as the organ of hearing (i.e. of sensory perception), the ear is in addition a major partaker in the cognitive process of selectively focusing on a certain aspect of information to the detriment of other aspects, i.e. in attention – with attention found to vary also across cultures. A further central function of the ear is that of providing balance. Last but not least, the very fact that they are symmetrically placed on either side of the head, which is the locus of the mind, speaks volumes for the ears' key roles as highly reliable receivers and perceivers of information flowing in via a multitude of channels.

II The Romance-*cum*-Germanic Linguacultural Type

The research corpus is featuring a quite impressive array ranging from idioms lacking emotional overtones and patterning almost alike in terms of their basic syntax, such as E *have an ear for* – G *ein Ohr haben für* – I *avere (molto/buon) orecchio* – R *a avea ureche (muzicală)* – S *tener (buen) oído para (la música)* to emotionally (over)loaded and structurally complex idioms like E *walls have ears* – G *die Wände haben Ohren* – I *(anche i) muri hanno orecchi* – R *(și) pereții au urechi* – S *las paredes oyen*.

A closer look at the first five interlingual synonyms listed above just goes to show that ideal cases of cognitively synonymous words/phrases are only exceptionally encountered in natural languages. With two words referring to the non-linguistic-world entity which the English *ear* picks out – i.e. *oreja*, in its

primary meaning, denoting the organ of hearing, and *oído*, pointing to the corresponding sensory faculty, in its secondary meaning – , Spanish can hardly be expected to provide a case in point here. Both Spanish words, to be sure, can be made the semantic focus of idioms.

As regards the second five-item series, this particular type of idioms can be safely taken to fall under the category which Makkai (1972: 135-179) labels “sememic idioms”. As a matter of fact, most idioms featuring word meanings referring to various body parts as their core constituents are best located, to our mind, on the borderline between “sememic” and “lexemic” idioms as defined and described by Makkai. More precisely, they are more pragmatically based and culture-specific, hence posing no end of difficulties when rendered into another language, particularly when target language and source language inherit their cognitive and linguistic patterns from different ancestral languages. Since, however, of main interest to us here is equivalence of meaning rather than similarity of structure – with the latter otherwise quasiperfect as far as the other four items are concerned – , the Spanish idiosyncratic recourse to the verb *oir* [= hear] did not preclude legitimate inclusion of *las paredes oyen* in the above series, of which the English, German, Italian and Romanian synonyms showcase a nominal core constituent.

II.1 The Intralinguaculturally-Similar Subtype

A fascinating case in point for this subtype when viewed from the sensory-input angle is the Neo-Latin interlingually synonymous series I *duro d' orecchio* – R *tare de urechi/de(-o) ureche* – S *duro de oído*. Except for the article used by the Romanian idiom in the singular, the phraseological trio boasts a perfect morphosyntactic equivalence. The Italian idiom, though, exhibits an added idiosyncrasy, in that, while keeping on this

primary meaning related to senses, it branched out from the sensory to the cognitive perception via metaphorical extension, being thus shifted into an equally derisive interpretation, cf *surd* [= deaf] → (fig.) *prost* [=stupid]. The Romanian synonym *greu de cap* renders the sensory-cognitive perceptual shift even more explicit by substituting the locus of the mind (*cap* [= head]) for the organ of hearing (*ureche* [= ear]). Intriguingly enough, the humorous streak of Romanian natives came to induce over time, as illustrated by *fudul de urechi/de(-o) ureche*, a semantic switchover in the opposite direction to that of the Italian idiom, i.e. from a negative trait (*fudul* [= proud]) to deteriorating or damaged hearing.

English, too, to be sure, has been found to make bold use of a word interlingually synonymous to the adjective *tare* in this particular meaning, but the idiom we have in mind (*hard of hearing*) is featuring *hearing* instead of *ear*, while *a thick ear*, the idiom structurally closest to the series under discussion, is semantically a far cry from it (cf Gulland, Hinds-Howell, p 84: „17. [...] – a swollen ear, the result of being struck hard on the ear [...]”; s. also *get a thick ear* in Clark, Thien, p 399). A further variant, substituting *dull* for *hard* (*dull of hearing*), shows *dull* to be subjected to a semantic transposition similar to that of the Italian *duro supra*, i.e. from the sensory – as in *dull senses* – to the cognitive (*dull* [= unintelligent]).

German, on the other hand, utilises two diametrically opposed variants, both stylistics- and morphosyntax-wise: the rather formal adjectival compound *schwerhörig* – counting the preposition out, a structural lookalike of the English *hard of hearing* – and its colloquial intralingual synonym *auf den/seinen Ohren sitzen*. Admittedly, the latter is featuring the interlingual synonym of *ear*, but it does so by flaunting a highly sophisticated morphosyntactical pattern which differs significantly from that of

the Romance trio above. More commonly used in interrogative and negative sentences, the idiom at issue is apt to completely baffle the listener's/reader's elocutionary competence, in that it blatantly flouts a language norm of congruence – who could ever be credited with such an astounding feat of skill or endurance as sitting on her/his own ears? – , hence also conducive to undeniable comic effects. Which evidence can be safely considered as corroborating its classification with Type III, i.e. the linguaculturally idiosyncratic idioms.

II.2 The Interlinguaculturally-Similar Subtype

An ideal case in point here represents the interlingually synonymous pair *G jdm einen Floh ins Ohr setzen* – *I mettere una pulce nell' orecchio*, which, in addition to adducing a fresh example in favour of the cognitive-affective stance, seems to indicate perfect equivalence at both the structural (verbatim transl. : “drop a flea into s.o.'s ear”) and the semantic levels ([= put (weird/fancy/...) ideas into s.o.'s head]).

In English – British English, in particular – both interlingual synonyms of the above Italian and German core constituents, respectively (*flea* and *ear*), are in idiomatic use, as clearly shown by *send s.o. away/off with a flea in their ear*, which carries intensely negative emotional overtones, but in a quite different area of meaning (cf Gulland, Hinds-Howell, p 75: “snub or rebuke a person”).

Keeping the ball rolling on the same jocular note, Spanish natives, too, have frequent cognitive-*cum*-affective recourse to the idiom *tener alguien/estar alguien con la mosca detrás de la oreja* (verbatim transl. “be with/have a fly behind one's year”), when what they actually mean is that they are harbouring a disquieting suspicion. This time sparkling in the spotlight is a different, if equally ‘evil-spawning’, insect, with a less dim background light

being thrown on the grammatical subject, promoted semantically to the role of Experiencer – from that of Patient in the Italian idiom.

With the noble intention of rounding out the multilingual synonymous series metaphoricity- and humour-wise, we will make so bold as to add to the list the Romanian *ear-free a fi/a se ști/a se simți cu musca pe căciulă* (verbatim transl. “know that or feel that one has/be with a fly on one’s cap”, idiomatic transl. “know that one is/feel oneself guilty”). An all too visible paradox is operating here, which renders the comicality of the idiom even more potent. To wit, while the metaphor of the flea dropped into the ear or of the fly behind the ear – indicative of an acute sensory perception – implies but a slight suspicion, the infinitely more subtle metaphor of the fly on the cap is actually pointing to sheer guilt, and it does so by exposing the absurdity of feeling a fly on one’s cap, as against the normality of feeling it behind one’s ear: the only way you can, so to say, feel it on your cap is when you hear it buzzing, and even so, what is actually at work here is not a sensory, but rather a cognitive perception, since you can only assume, at best, that it is sitting on your cap.

III The Linguaculturally Idiosyncratic Type

It is Spanish, again, that provides a classic example for the type documented in this last section, more precisely of individual human experience drawing on the Jungian collective unconscious via the richly metaphorical *verle alguien las orejas al lobo* (verbatim transl. “to see the ears of the wolf”, idiomatic transl. “sense a danger by recollecting similar prior experience(s)”). Deserving a special mention are the markedly negative connotation(s) assigned by the Spanish national mentality to the wolf as a chthonian symbol of evil or, euphemizing aside, of Hades. In other words, snarling at us here is the big bad wolf

which sorcerers ride on in fairy tales in their sustained efforts to put Beauties to everlasting sleep and thwart valiant princes rushing to their aid.

Interestingly enough, both the ‘evil-spawning’ stereotyping and the metaphorical substitution of the wolf’s ear(s) for danger lurking round the corner have been traced back to the cognitive archpatterns of the Romance common ancestor³, as incontrovertibly demonstrated by the Latin *auribus teneo lupum* (verbatim transl. “I’m holding/I’ve grabbed the wolf by its ears”, idiomatic transl. cf Matei 1998, p 26: “[idiom] which is used when having to face unavoidable danger”, our transl.).

Within the very same language family, on the other hand, Italian is featuring *con la orecchie di lupo*⁴ (verbatim transl. “possessed of wolf-like ears”, idiomatic transl. “be sharp-eared, i.e. able to hear even very quiet sounds”), fascinatingly dissimilar at the connotational level.

Even more disconcertingly dissimilar is Romanian *a avea urechi de lup*, double-barrelled semantically, i.e. taken to mean : a) “sharp-eared”, very much in line with the Italian idiom⁵; b) “be extremely clever” (cf Bilauca), thus shifting the meaning from the literal into the figurative, or better still, from the sensory to the cognitive perceptual area.

³ S. also in this respect the wolf-eared Etruscan death god, a figment of the imagination of a people with a huge impact on the Latin conquerors prior to their assimilation by the latter.

⁴ Far from counting as a regular of colloquial Italian, the idiom is best classed with idiolecticisms (cf Ferraro 2016, *web*).

⁵ Though inviting comparison in terms of both structure and the [+animalia] semantic feature exhibited by the core constituent, German nevertheless begs to credit a different furry creature with exceptional hearing abilities, cf *Ohren wie ein Luchs haben* (verbatim transl. “be possessed of lynx-like ears”).

Of utmost importance at this particular juncture is the overall positive connotation which both the Italian and the Romanian idioms carry – the latter, in particular – , in sharp contrast to the Spanish example above, but paradoxically enough, in perfect agreement with the Norse stance on the wolf as a benevolent, preeminently mind- and spirit-related creature. Romanian collective mentality takes benevolence to extremes by endowing the wolf with a mythical warrior status, as plainly visible in the heraldry of the Dacian flag. Along the Romance-Germanic comparative lines, a most interesting coalescence of negative and positive stereotyping in both ancestral cognitive patterns illustrate the Norse mythology showcasing the wolf as a malefactor preying on stars⁶ – and Roman popular mythology anthropopsychically promoting the female wolf to a symbol of fertility⁷, respectively.

Resuming discussion of idiosyncratic languacultural patterns in the Neo-Latin family, Perrault's extremely clever wolf impersonating Red Riding Hood's large-eared granny is a most enchanting character to both the unsuspecting granddaughter and the spellbound French audience. But the similarities stop right here, because he fails to rise above his 'beastly' condition and as a result is being punished by dying the embarrassingly unheroic death he deserves at the hands, or better still, at the gunpoint of the canonical hunter.

An equally deceitful and ferocious animal, Creangă's protagonist in *Capra cu trei iezi* (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*) meets an even more humiliating end, outsmarted and roasted in

⁶ Hence the dark metaphorically wolfing the light, cf Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 251-252.

⁷ Hence the legendary *wolfian* mother who allegedly adopted and breastfed Romulus and Remus (cf Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 251).

the cleansing fire ignited by none other than one of his biological peers, the justice-seeking and vengeance-wreaking mother goat.

Giving credit where it is due, Romanian folklore is fair enough to show the wolf redeeming himself when invested with the Charon-like authority to transcend earthly boundaries and ferry the shades of the departed to the spiritual province, as clearly audible in numerous funeral laments⁸.

Now then, blending two species steeped in centuries of tradition, lament and ballad, Romanian *forma mentis* has idiosyncratically invested the wolf with the bivalent psychopomp-cum-best-man authority to lead the departed groom down the isle to the heavenly altar or, *mutatis mutandis*, to reunite the heinously slain shepherd with his Miorița, the mythical ewe bride. In so doing, it not only challenges the tenability of the old-fashioned stance on wolves and ewes viewed as *bona fide* archenemies, but it also magically restores the world to its pre-Cain love, confidence and harmony.

And chopping logic even further,

- a) with the wolf converted accordingly from a ferocious beast of prey and archsymbol of basic instincts, to an edenic Charon leading the way for the dead to Heaven and not to the underworld.
- b) with the heinous crime⁹ perpetrated by none other than his Wallachian and Transylvanian fellow Corydons, i.e. by his fellow humans, genetically endowed with reason and divinely infused with spirit,

⁸ S. “Și-ți va mai ieși/Lupul înainte/Ca să te înspăimânte./Să nu te spăimâniți,/Frate bun să-l prinzi./Că lupul mai știe/Seama codrilor/Și-a potecilor/Și el te va scoate/La drumul de plai/La un fecior de crai./Să te duci în rai”, cf C. Brăiloiu, *Opere* (V), Buc., Ed. Muzicală, 1981, p. 113, *apud* Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1994: 252.

⁹ I.e. murdering of the Moldavian shepherd.

the languacultural pattern emerging therefrom shows the archetypal beast – the wolf, in our particular case – and the archetypal human to swap places, or better still, positions, as metaphorical representations of the subconscious and of the (super)conscious, respectively, suggesting therefore a reverse stereotyping of the classic dichotomy submundane *id* vs celestial *superego*.

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