

Idiom variation in English and Croatian

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Studies of idiom variation, especially corpus-based studies (Moon 1998; Langlotz 2006), have shown that a number of idioms have a fairly flexible structure, i.e. they occur in one or more conventionalized variants and may also be creatively exploited in the discourse. Furthermore, it has been shown that similar types of idiom variation occur in different European languages, for example English (cf. e.g. Nunberg, Sag and Wasow 1994), Croatian (Parizoska 2009), Italian (Cignoni and Coffey 1998), Russian (Dobrovolskij 2007), etc. Among these are lexical substitution, adnominal modification, passivization, noun inflection, omission of one or more components, change of word order and perspectival variants (e.g. caused-motion vs. self-motion).

Studies of lexical and syntactic behaviour of idioms (e.g. Gibbs and Nayak 1989; Gibbs et al. 1989; Cacciari and Glucksberg 1991; Glucksberg 1993; Langlotz 2004) have shown that idiom variation is dependent on and constrained by cognitive mechanisms. For example, such mechanisms are the CONTAINER and SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schemas. In English and Croatian they are reflected in idioms which contain a verb, the preposition *into* and *u* ('in') respectively and a noun phrase (which is in the accusative case in Croatian). They describe the movement of a trajector towards a landmark or its interior (e.g. *fall into someone's clutches*; *baciti koga u vatru* lit. throw someone into the fire 'make someone deal with a difficult situation without preparing them for it'). Corpus data show that these idioms undergo similar types of changes in the two languages. For example, in the British National Corpus the expression *fall into someone's clutches* also occurs as a transitive construction with force-dynamic verbs (*drive / push someone into someone's clutches*). In the Croatian National Corpus the verb *baciti* ('throw') in *baciti koga u vatru* is replaced by *gurnuti* ('push') and *poslati* ('send'). Furthermore, the entire event can be construed as self-motion and this expression occurs as an intransitive construction with motion verbs (*ići / ulaziti / uskočiti u vatru* lit. go / enter / jump into the fire).

Even though there is a lot of literature on idiom variation in different languages, there are few contrastive studies (e.g. Cignoni, Coffey and Moon 1999 on English and Italian; Dobrovolskij 2001 on German and Russian; Omazić 2002 on English and Croatian; Jaki 2014 on English, German and French; Parizoska and Novoselec 2014 on English, Swedish and Croatian). Furthermore, cross-linguistic studies rarely deal with the similarities and/or differences among the mechanisms constraining idiom variation in different languages. Given the universality of some mechanisms motivating idioms in different languages (Kövecses 2005), it can be assumed that there are some general patterns underlying idiom variation in different languages.

The aim of this paper is to show that a number of mechanisms underlying idiom variation are common to English and Croatian. More specifically, we will show that the same types of variation of English and Croatian idioms with the structure VP + *into* / *u* + NP have similar properties in the two languages because they have similar functions.

For this study we used English and Croatian dictionaries of idioms to compile a set of expressions with the structure VP + *into* / *u* + NP, obtaining a total of 190 idioms (73 in English and 117 in Croatian). We performed a study of these expressions in the British National Corpus (BYU-BNC) and the Croatian National Corpus (CNC). Since a number of dictionary entries show that the verb varies in these expressions, we looked for occurrences of the pattern *into* / *u* and a noun or two nouns (e.g. *hat* and *ring* in *throw your hat into the ring*), within the span of 5 words.

The results show two things. Firstly, the same types of variation, notably lexical substitution, adnominal modification and perspectival variants, have similar features in the two languages. As regards lexical substitution, it seems that the variance of lexical items is subject to a local constraint – the situation conceptualized as the location. For instance, in some expressions verb variation is restricted to items describing manner of motion (e.g. *go into overdrive* also occurs as *leap into overdrive*; the verb *gurnuti* ‘push’ in *gurnuti glavu u pijesak* lit. push your head into the sand ‘ignore a problem’ is replaced with *ukopati* ‘bury’).

Adnominal modification includes premodification by adjective in both languages, but there is also language-specific variation (premodification by noun and postmodification by an *of*-phrase in English and postmodification by a genitive noun in Croatian). Still, modifiers have the same function in the two languages, namely they qualify properties and relations (Radden and Dirven 2007: 114). For example, the *of*-phrase in English and genitive nouns in Croatian both specify the target domain expressed by the postmodified noun (e.g. *retreat into a shell of indifference*; *gurati u vatru utakmice* lit. push someone into the fire of the match ‘force someone to play in the match’).

In both English and Croatian the trajector-landmark relation may be construed from different perspectives – as self-motion (*come into play*) or caused motion (*bring into play*) – and idioms vary systematically relative to a conceptual core (Langlotz 2006: 277), i.e. the relation between a trajector and a location expressed by the prepositional phrase.

The results also show that changes are subject to general variation constraints. One of these constraints is recoverability: an idiom may be changed only to such an extent that its conventionalized form can be recognized. In other words, what remains unchanged is an idiom’s core – a syntactic pattern containing the minimum number of lexical items which reflect the conceptual mappings that are the basis of idiomatic meaning (e.g. *u prvi plan* in *doći u prvi plan* lit. come into the foreground ‘be given more importance than something else’).

The corpus data also show some differences between English and Croatian, which are predictable from the general structural characteristics of the two languages. For instance, English relies on position where Croatian relies on inflection (e.g. *turn swords into ploughshares* – *swords turned into ploughshares*; *staviti ruku u vatru* lit. put your hand into the fire ‘be completely sure about something’ – *ne može se staviti ruka u vatru* lit. your hand cannot be put into the fire ‘you cannot be completely sure’).

Overall, the results suggest that idiom variation in English and Croatian, both similar variation types and language-specific variation, reflects global constraints. If we take into account Langacker’s claim that lexical items and grammatical structures are symbolic in nature (Langacker 2008), this could mean that similar idiom variation constraints exist in different languages. Therefore, contrastive analysis of other language pairs (both European and non-European) should be undertaken in order to shed more light on the correlations between variation types and underlying mechanisms, particularly in relation to typological similarities/differences (e.g. verb-framed vs. satellite framed languages; synthetic vs. analytic languages, etc.).

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