

CONTEMPLATING JAPANESE LANGUAGE – IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS AS A CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY

RODICA FRENȚIU¹

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE STUDIES: translation studies

ABSTRACT. *Contemplating Japanese Language – Idiomatic Expressions as a Cultural Experience of Linguistic Creativity.* Taking into account the semiotic nature of the language seen as a *datum*, and approaching linguistic *creation* as a fact determined by the needs of verbal communication, the present study analyzes Japanese idiomatic expressions which enable the circulation of cultural meanings. An idiomatic expression resembles the folk saying, as they both experience and highlight the conative function of language, and is a complex syntactic-semantic unit, often replaceable by one single word, which can be interpreted as a semiotic sign within a significant system of an ethnic group's mentality. The Japanese idiomatic structure is a fixed form that belongs to the lexicalized repertory of language, resulting from syntactic linguistic phenomena which capitalize upon the possibilities of the system. The purpose of this process is to achieve expressivity, which works not just through emotional response or perceptual information, but also as encyclopedic knowledge. Both these linguistic and extralinguistic contexts call for a hermeneutic approach, in inter- and multidisciplinary terms.

Keywords: *idiomatic expression, Japanese language, linguistic creativity, cultural semiosphere, individuality of language.*

REZUMAT. *Contemplarea limbii japoneze – expresiile idiomatice ca experiența culturală a creativității lingvistice.* Acceptând natura semiotică a limbajului ca un *datum* și abordând *creația* lingvistică ca un fapt determinat de necesitățile comunicării verbale, studiul de față își focalizează atenția asupra expresiilor idiomatice ca vehiculi ai sensului cultural în limba japoneză. Nu foarte îndepărtată de proverb prin funcția conativă pe care o experimentează

¹ **Rodica FRENȚIU** – Professor habil., Babes-Bolyai University. Rodica Frentiu has published numerous studies and books on Japanese poetics and cultural semiotics: *Chiaroscuro, Vagueness and Ambiguity... Avatars of Contemporary Japanese Literature*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2010; *Poetic Language – Creative Act and Cultural Actuality. The Japanese Cultural Model*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017. Rodica Frențiu has had personal exhibitions of Japanese calligraphy in Romania and Japan. E-mail: rfrentiu@hotmail.com.

și evidențiază, expresia idiomatică, unitate complexă sintactico-semantică, substituibilă adesea cu un cuvânt, poate fi interpretată ca semn cu un caracter semiotic dintr-un sistem semnificativ al mentalității unui grup etnic. Formă fixă aparținând tezaurului lexicalizat al unei limbi, structura idiomatică japoneză, rezultat al unor fenomene lingvistice de tip sintactic ce exploatează posibilitățile sistemului în scopul expresivității, interpretată nu doar ca o reacție emoțională sau informație perceptuală, ci și ca o cunoaștere enciclopedică, impune, prin contextul lingvistic și cel extra-lingvistic cu care operează, o abordare hermeneutică, pe un fundal inter- și multidisciplinar.

Cuvinte-cheie: *expresie idiomatică, limba japoneză, creativitate lingvistică, semiosferă culturală, individualitatea limbii.*

Sweet as honey and bitter as bile is the language.
Romanian folk saying

In an attempt to establish an analytic connection between language and the human experience, Wilhelm von Humboldt (2008, 55-70) emphasizes the congruence between one language's *Weltanschauung* and the history and culture of its speakers. Convinced that language ensures the one and true *a priori* verifiable framework of knowledge, the German philosopher argues that different linguistic systems organize and distinguish sensory perception, thus accounting for the language's status of a "third universe", located halfway between the phenomenal reality of the "empirical world" and the inner structures of the consciousness. Such intermediality, such material and spiritual simultaneity is precisely what makes language the defining "pivot" of man and the decisive "factor" (cf. Steiner 1983, 115) that places him within reality.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (2008, 199), who approaches language as a synthesis of our ways of feeling and thinking, believes that the study of languages provides direct access to the speaking people's view upon the world, and thus works as the people's "inner spiritual" figure. But since culture also works as an "exterior manifestation" of that spirit, language and culture can both be considered "creative acts" tightly connected to a set of inward phenomena that might be called the "spirit" of the people. On the assumption that language draws a circle around its speaking people (cf. Humboldt 2008, 95), in order to learn a foreign language, one needs to transgress the circle of one's own language, and enter the circle of the new language, so as to access a new and different view upon the world. Next to art, religion, myth, or speculative-philosophical thinking, language as *langue* is another cultural-social product, a creative, free and continuous activity meant to shape profoundly the human

being (Coşeriu 1991-1992, 11), while language as *parole* enables man to relate to other human beings, defining man's "humanity", as well as his ability both to reflect upon *being* in an inner and outer world, and to interpret his own manner of *being*.

Since *to speak* a language means, in fact, *to create* it (cf. Coşeriu 2001, 13), any linguistic study should resort to a mainly hermeneutic, rather than a factological-empirical or experimental approach. Only such an approach can highlight the speaker's complete liberties regarding his language, his ability to create the *ad-hoc* forms and meanings he needs in order to be understood. The lexical *creativity* that is illustrative for a language's constant disponibility to forge new means of expression defines a considerable amount of idiomatic expressions, of figurative syntagms, expressions and phrases, but also the metaphorical use of common terms (cf. Munteanu 2005, 236), a phenomenon equally easy to recognize in the Japanese language.

Although it is an extremely difficult task in the case of typologically different languages, I will try in what follows to analyze from a cultural-linguistic and semiotic point of view a corpora of Japanese idiomatic expressions, along with their possible Romanian interpretation. Japanese and Romanian are extremely far geographically and stem from markedly different sensibilities, which makes any attempt at a Romanian translation a convention of approximate analogies. However, I tried, as much as possible, to find a Romanian equivalent for the Japanese idiom, and, when the (pseudo)correspondence could not be established, I further explained the actual meaning.

Japanese is an agglutinative language, whose structure merges the constituents of the utterance in an "incomplete" manner, so that the affixes (prefixes or suffixes) do not merge entirely with the root element, as it is usual in flexional languages. In other words, the Japanese language lacks declension and conjugation, and the grammatical categories of gender, number, case, person, tense, mood, voice are rendered through these root-added affixes. Although traditional linguistic research has often neglected this area, perhaps because of the challenges posed by pluri- and transdisciplinary approaches, idiomatic expressions could make a potent case in the attempt to define the "character" of a language. In his conceptualization of "spiritual individuality", Wilhelm von Humboldt (cf. 2008, 81) argues that the phenomenon is grounded in language through individual acts of speech that create new linguistic forms in a historical context. One might broaden this line of thought by arguing that the linguistic category of idiomatic structures could prove not just the "individuality" of a language, but also the correlation of words and things in that given language.

The lexical function, which is the most important function of language, shapes the basic experience through words and precedes the other functions

required in order to combine words. However, until now, research made upon the lexical function has been mainly fact-focused, taking into account lexematic words, while ignoring the coalesced set of words that forms the idiomatic structure, or in Eugenio Coseriu's words, the "repeated discourse": „Le « discours répété » comprend tout ce qui est traditionnellement figé comme « expression », « phrase » ou « locution » et dont les éléments constitutifs ne sont pas remplaçable ou re-combinables selon des règles actuelles de la langue.” (Coseriu 2001, 235).

Enabling the process of free technique, the "repeated discourse" (Coseriu 2001, 110) highlights the discourse fusion of the potentially combinable with the already-combined. When reworded, this "repeated discourse" seems to process and rearrange the empirical data of reality in an open-style verbal expression, where innovations are accepted at once. Such is the case of lexemes like *geisha*, *samurai*, *kamikaze*, cultural terms whose meaning can be deciphered by knowing the "extraverbal context" (Coseriu 2001, 58) in which they were forged. As a matter of fact, forms of "repeated discourse" like quotations, fixed expressions, sayings, enable us to recover the *study of objects* ("l'étude des « choses »") (Coseriu 2001, 113), in a research meant to reveal how knowledge of things and of the "world" contributes to the speaking activity. Besides the idiomatic context (the language itself) and the verbal context (the discourse itself), the cultural context helps to trace the general context of the speech activity or of the reality around a sign, a speech act or a discourse. Since it sums up the entire cultural tradition of a community, the cultural context becomes a particular form of the historical context (Coseriu 2001, 62).

From a structural point of view, idioms enact two types of relations between adjoining lexical units: internal and external. On the one hand, a concept is integrated in a lexical set whose constituent parts cannot be displaced without destroying the signification of the whole. On the other hand, idiomatic expressions reveal the various degrees in which reality and interiority interact, and work, by their particular nature, as some sort of "common metaphors" (Petrescu 2000, 61). However, since they "reveal" certain things about the human spirit or about historical facts, these expressions are not metaphors *per se*, but rather they (might) acquire a metaphorical function during the speech act.

Complex lexemes, idiomatic expressions consequently become very hard to translate in another language. Current practice indicates two possibilities in this respect: resorting to a neutral, non-metaphorical equivalent, or to a semantic reshaping able to identify an equivalent (but not necessarily identical) metaphor. The most cursory glance from a contrastive point of view upon the Romanian and Japanese languages makes instantly obvious the respective

possibilities. We can thus designate: 1. idiomatic expressions that are (partially or totally) similar in terms of expression and content in Romanian and Japanese: 雨が降ろうと、槍が降ろうと (*ame ga furō to, yari ga furō to*) ‘*tună, fulgeră, mergem înainte*’ / ‘*be it thunder or lightning, we go on*’; 水に流す (*mizu ni nagasu*) ‘*a lăsa lucrurile să curgă la vale*’ / ‘*letting things run their course*’; 肩身が狭い (*katami ga semai*) ‘*a se face mic (în fața cuiva)*’ / ‘*to belittle oneself (in front of somebody)*’; 羽を伸ばす (*hane o nobasu*) ‘*a-și întinde aripile*’ / ‘*to spread one’s wings*’; 人が尻尾を巻く (*hito ga shippo o maku*) ‘*cu coada între picioare*’ / ‘*to keep one’s head down*’; 涙をのむ (*namida o nomu*) ‘*a-și înghiți lacrimile*’ / ‘*to swallow one’s tears*’; 2. idiomatic expressions that are similar in terms of content in Romanian and Japanese: 根も葉もない、風の便り (*ne mo ha mo nai, kaze no tayori*) ‘*gura satului*’ / ‘*the talk of the town*’; 高嶺の花、雲をつかむよう (*takane no hana, kumo o tsukamu yō*) ‘*pasărea mălai visează*’ / ‘*wishful thinking*’; 竹を割ったよう (*take o watta yō*) ‘*om cu coloana vertebrală*’ / ‘*character man*’; 瓜二つ (*uri futatsu*) ‘(a semăna) *ca două picături de apă/ploaie*’ / ‘(to be) *like two peas in a pod*’; すし詰め (*sushi zume*) ‘(înghesuit) *ca sardelele*’ / ‘(packed) *like sardines*’; 花火を散らす (*hanabi o chirasu*) ‘*a lupta pe viață și pe moarte*’ / ‘*to fight to the death*’; 腹が太い人 (*hara ga futoi hito*) ‘*om cu inimă mare*’ / ‘*big-hearted man*’; ウドの大木 (*udo no taiboku*) ‘*om bun de nimic*’ / ‘*worthless man*’; 3. idiomatic Japanese expressions with no equivalent in Romanian: 一人相撲を取る (*hitori sumō o toru*) = < to strive on your own > [lit. to do sumo on your own]; 鶴の一声 (*tsuru no hito koe*) = < the voice of authority > [lit. the voice/ the song of the crane]; 後ろ髪を引かれる思い (*ushiro kami o hikareru omoi*) = *a umbla după potcoave de cai morți / to go on a wild goose chase*; < regret for something left behind > [lit. thought pulled by the back hair]; 朝飯前 (*asaban mae*) = < *o nimica toată / a piece of cake* > [lit. before the morning meal]; 匙を投げる (*saji o nageru*) = < to be brought to despair > [lit. to throw the spoon]; 刺身のつま (*sashimi no tsuma*) = < completely worthless, insignificant > [lit. sashimi side (vegetable pieces)]; 太鼓判を押す (*taikoban o*

osu) = < to support somebody enthusiastically; *a-și scoate toate armele la bătaie / to put one's outfit on the line* > [lit. to seal with a large stamp]. We could easily notice that the idioms quoted for the latter category, which are exemplary for *linguistic creativity*, can be properly understood, in an attempt to set an expressive and code corespondence in a foreign language, by resorting to the cultural *semiosphere* (Lotman 2004, 154). This semiotic space is multidimensional in both synchrony and diachrony, and underpins a semiotic process in which the diversity of possible connections between semantic elements produces a whole meaning that can be properly understood only by tackling the relations among all elements, as well as the relation between each element and the whole. As a logical consequence of that, the latter category lacks a full Romanian equivalent, which proves that cultural “facts” act upon Japanese idiomatic expressions and turn them into primary vehicles of cultural meaning.

Likewise, the idiomatic expression 筆が滑る (*fude ga suberu*), which can be roughly translated by the Romanian *a-l lua mâna pe dinainte / to get out of line a foot or two*, could literally be translated as ‘to slip the brush’, whose explanation is the pre-modern Japanese custom of brush-writing. It is no wonder then that the idiom 筆が立つ (*fude ga tatsu*), which could be translated literally as ‘brush-rising’, actually means ‘to speak in a skillful manner’ or, to use a Romanian idiom, *a o întoarce bine din condei / to spin it*, through an obvious connection to the art of calligraphy that requires the paintbrush be held straight in your hand. The idiomatic expression 水茎の跡 (*mizu kuki no ato*), which is literally translatable as ‘the stem’s trail in the water’, and whose meaning, ‘the traces of the paintbrush, letter’, could be equated to the Rom. *a așterne ceva pe hârtie / to put down in writing*, hints at the same art of calligraphy, which can use a paintbrush made of a young, fresh cane stem. Last but not least, we can also quote here the idiom 弘法も筆の誤り (*Kōbō mo fude no ayamari*), which can be translated literally as ‘and to Kōbō Daishi - misspellings’. The meaning of the expression, which can be approximately translated into Romanian as *calul e cu patru picioare și tot se împiedică / even if it has four legs, the horse can still stumble*, is a perfect example of how knowledge of the extralinguistic world of “things” is necessary for idiomatic expressions to be fully comprehended. The phrase can be understood if one recognizes the reference to the Buddhist monk Kūkai (774-835), known posthumously as Kōbō-Daishi, who is remembered not only as the founder of the sect “Shingon” (“The True Word”), but also as the most important Japanese calligrapher.

Idiomatic expressions result from syntactic linguistic phenomena that capitalize upon the system's expressive possibilities, and coalesce in a fixed form that belongs to the lexicalized thesaurus of one's language. An idiom points, therefore, to intellectual concepts by means of concrete images, or reveals the truth in a concealed manner, its meaning thus becoming harder to grasp outside the extra-linguistic context. For example, お茶を挽く (*ocha o hiku*), which could be translated literally as 'to cut tea', would have as a Romanian equivalent the idiom *a tăia frunză la câini / to twiddle your thumbs*, hinting at the habit of past teahouse hosts to cut publicity fliers for guests when they had nothing better to do. And the idiom お茶の子 (*ocha no ko*), which literally means 'cookies served with tea', but has the sense *floare la ureche / piece of cake*, could not be understood without knowing the detail that tea-served cookies, made from bullets kneaded from various types of flour, then cooked in ash, could be eaten with one hand as soon as they were taken from the fireplace, while the other hand wiped the ash. The idiomatic expression お茶を濁す (*ocha o nigosu*), literally 'to stir the tea', which means 'to get out of an uncomfortable situation', hints at the green tea's clearness, which makes visible the bottom of the teacup unless the poor quality of the tea makes it lose its clarity. In its turn, the idiom 茶にする (*cha ni suru*), whose literal translation is 'to put on a tea' and whose meaning is 'to take a break, to fool somebody, to twist one's words', suggests the pleasant mood enhanced by the green juice, but also the conundrum whether one should rest or rather drink tea. The idiomatic expression 茶腹も一時 (*cha bara mo ittoki*), which means literally 'tea is temporary too in the womb', and can be explained by 'any object, no matter how small, can become a temporary expedient', refers to the fact that even green tea can fill up one's appetite for a while. The idiom 濃い茶目の毒気の薬 (*koicha me no doku ki no kusuri*), which can be translated literally as 'strong tea – poison for the eyes, medicine for the spirit', and has the meaning 'full of vigour, excited, agitated', recalls the green tea's originary sense of strong *matcha*, which could keep one awake all night long.

Idiomatic expressions which make reference to various forms of traditional theatre can also preclude immediate comprehension if one is not aware of their semantic universe. 縁の下の力持ち (*en no shita no chikara mochi*), which means literally 'bearer of the power under the porch', and has the meaning 'man from the shadow', points directly to *bugaku* or the music that accompanied Japanese traditional court dances, which was not heard on the

stage, but in the garden, in a private, hidden space. Although the initial expression was *en no shita no mai* ('dance under the porch'), its form adjusted when the meaning became harder to grasp. On the other hand, the idiomatic structure 花道を飾る (*hanamichi o kazaru*), with the literal translation 'to adorn/to decorate *hanamichi* (= lit. 'the road with flowers')' and the meaning 'to retire in glory', has a key-referent in an underpass called *hanamichi*, meant to connect the stage and the back of the hall, ensuring the entrance and the exit of *kabuki* actors from the stage and through the rows of spectators. Finally, the idiomatic expression 檜舞台 (*hinoki butai*), which has the literal interpretation 'hinoki stage' and the meaning 'to make a name for oneself in a famous place', refers directly to the Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) used for the construction of stages in the same traditional Japanese theatre.

As we well know, the meaning represents the content of a speech act or a discourse (Coseriu 2001, 355), and is produced by designation and by signification completed by the extralinguistic frames of the given discourse, such as "knowledge" of designated things, "knowledge" of the speaking situation or "knowledge" of people involved in the discourse (Coseriu 2001, 165). It is obvious that nobody can erase the reality designated by a group of words, a necessary "landmark" for any semantic approach to language (Coseriu 2001, 101), which not only analyzes reality (Coseriu 2001, 101) but also establishes a connection to it. The idiomatic structure of a language, interpreted as a linguistic expression of the human experience, can be, in its turn, an obvious example of the fact that language belongs to both nature and spirit (cf. Coseriu 2001, 131), to world outwardness and conscience inwardness. This claim is backed by further examples of idioms whose referents are the year's most important Japanese traditional holidays. 盆と正月が一緒に来たよう (*bon to shōgatsu ga issho ni kita yō*), literally 'as if *bon* and *oshōgatsu* came together', whose meaning can be aptly paraphrased by the Romanian idiom *a nu ști unde să-ți pui capul de treabă* / *to have a lot on one's plate*, draws its significance from the Day of the Dead (*Bon*), which is celebrated in the summer, and from the New Year's Eve (*oshōgatsu*), both of which require many thorough preparations. On the other hand, the idioms 耳の正月 (*mimi no shōgatsu*), literally 'New Year's Eve for the ears', meaning 'interesting' and 目の正月 (*me no shōgatsu*), literally 'New Year's Eve for the eyes', meaning 'festive, regal', seem to certify that *shōgatsu* ('New Year') is the year's most pleasant holiday in Japan.

Undoubtedly, as long as the language lives by the people's mouths, its vocabulary is a product constantly renewed by language's word-forming capacity (Humboldt 2008, 132). This idea is brought forth by idiomatic expressions like

煮え湯を飲まされる (*nie yu o nomasareru*), literally ‘to be forced to drink boiled hot water’, meaning *a fi înjunghiat pe la spate / to be stabbed in the back*, whose interpretation is tightly connected to the lexeme *yu*, meaning ‘hot water’, so that *nie yu* gets to be understood as ‘boiled hot water’. Similarly illustrative are idiomatic expressions whose keyword is *hara* (‘belly, womb’). Since in Japanese *hara* also means ‘soul’ (respectively ‘the inside of the heart/ of the soul’), the *harakiri* ritual death (‘ripping the belly/ womb’) should also be understood as cutting open the womb in order to reveal one’s pure soul, a sense that could also be grasped in the idiomatic expression 腹を割る (*hara o waru*), literally ‘to slit the belly/ the womb’, meaning ‘frank, open’, or in 腹を見せる (*hara o miseru*), literally ‘to show one’s belly/ womb’, which might be interpreted as ‘to acknowledge one’s intentions’ and translated by the Romanian idiomatic expression *a-și da dinții din față / to show one’s true colors*. Similarly, one needs to be aware of the symbolic value of the number eight (*hachi*) – an auspicious number in Japanese culture, which hints at perfection by the similarity between the ideogram standing for the number 八 and the shape of the sacred mountain Fuji –, in order to comprehend the idiom 一か八か (*ichi ka hachi ka*), literally ‘one or eight’, meaning *all or nothing*.

As they include emotional responses, perceptual information and encyclopedic knowledge, idiomatic expressions reassert constantly their status of linguistic *creation*, whose interpretation/ comprehension has always to appeal to the cultural *semiosphere*. The idiom 折り紙付き (*origami tsuki*), literally ‘*origami*-attached’, acquired the meaning ‘legitimate, authentic’, which is totally understandable if we are aware that the cultural term *origami* originally meant ‘guarantee certificate written on white, double-folded paper’, although it nowadays designates the Japanese traditional art of manufacturing figurines by folding paper. The idiom 帯に短したすきに長し (*obi ni mijikashi tasuki ni nagashi*), literally ‘too short for *obi*, too long for *tasuki*’, with the meaning close to the Rom. *bun de nimic / good-for-nothing*, builds upon the key cultural term *kimono*, namely the Japanese traditional outfit, bound with a wide belt (*obi*) and having lace-tight sleeves (*tasuki*). The same cultural concept can be also found in the idiomatic structure 袖にする (*sode ni suru*), literally ‘to place inside the sleeve’, meaning ‘to ignore’ or *a trata pe cineva cu răceală / to treat somebody coldly*, which hints at the dangling sleeve of the Edo age (1600-1867) *kimono*, seemingly merged with the body and concealing the arm, as if it did not exist at all. On the other hand, the idiom 大風呂敷を広

げろ (*ōburoshiki o hirogeru*), literally ‘to unfold/ to spread a large *furoshiki*’, whose Romanian equivalent is *a vorbi vrute și nevrute / to tattle*, builds upon the cultural term *furoshiki*, which stands for a piece of linen traditionally used in Japan to wrap and transport various objects. 下駄と焼き味噌 (*geta to yaki miso*), literally ‘*geta* and fried *miso*’, with the Romanian equivalent *seamănă, dar nu răsare/ close, but no cigar*, calls for awareness of the cultural lexemes *geta* (traditional Japanese double-strapped sandals) and *miso* (brewed soybean cream), the latter being prepared on a table whose legs resemble *geta*’s, two objects that remain different in spite of their slight similarities. The idiomatic expression 畳みの上の水練 (*tatami no ue no suiren*), literally ‘to swim on the *tatami*’, meaning ‘useless (in reality)’, resorts to the cultural term *tatami*, which designates the rice mat used as flooring in traditional Japanese households, an object that obviously does not welcome swimming. Likewise, the idiom 三日見ぬ間の桜 (*mikka minu ma no sakura*), literally ‘of-three-days-unseen *sakura* from a *ma* (period)’, meaning that ‘the world changes violently’, refers to the lexeme *sakura* or ‘cherry blossom’, a cultural term that links the cherry blossom to the ideas of beauty and transience and to the concept *ma*, which means literally ‘space’ or ‘interval’ and, from an aesthetic point of view, hints at the space between succeeding objects and thus asserts the value assigned to continuity in traditional Japanese art (Miyoshi 1985, 117), as shown by the “bound-poetry” (*renga*) or the “scroll-painting” (*emaki*).

Language seems therefore to decide the way in which various conceptual groups and patterns have to be “comprehended” and connected to one whole (Steiner 1983, 121). One has to admit accordingly that a community’s linguistic configuration of the world shapes and animates the entire psychological and collective behaviour of that community, enabling the creation of what could here be called the *forma mentis* of “Japaneseness” (Donahue 2002, 3-28). This explains why one language can sometimes “keep” a surprising amount of information from the domain of potential recognition. Such are the dozens of Japanese idiomatic expressions built around the lexeme 気 (*ki*), whose dictionary entries read ‘air, atmosphere, smell, taste/ flavor, feeling, mood, semblance’, and which could also refer to the martial art notion of the vital energy that fills the universe and, thus, the human being. Although it is true that any translation is just a convention of approximate analogies, and a wide-range comparison, holding up on the condition of certain affinities between the two given languages or cultures, but losing ground in case of diverging languages and sensibilities (Steiner 1983, 106-107), I shall quote in what follows several idiomatic expressions focused upon *ki*, which show how the Romanian

equivalent of the Japanese lexeme can alternate between ‘inimă [heart]’, ‘minte [mind]’, ‘înger [angel]’, ‘Dumnezeu [God]’ ...

Idiomatic expression in Japanese	Literal translation	Romanian equivalent
気のいい (<i>ki no ii</i>)	good <i>ki</i>	(om) de treabă
気の弱い (<i>ki no yowai</i>)	weak <i>ki</i>	slab de înger
気が強い (<i>ki ga tsuyoi</i>)	strong <i>ki</i>	tare de înger
気が重い (<i>ki ga omoi</i>)	hard <i>ki</i>	a i se îneca corăbiile
気が小さい (<i>ki ga chīsai</i>)	small <i>ki</i>	inimă cât un purice
気が楽 (<i>ki ga raku</i>)	comfortable <i>ki</i>	a prinde pe Dumnezeu de un picior
気が気でない (<i>ki ga ki denai</i>)	to provide no <i>ki</i> from the <i>ki</i>	a pune la inimă
気がない (<i>ki ga nai</i>)	not to be <i>ki</i>	a umbla de florile mărului
気が狂う (<i>ki ga kuruu</i>)	to drive the <i>ki</i> crazy	a-și pierde mințile
気が合う (<i>ki ga au</i>)	to match the <i>ki</i>	a se potrivi ca două picături de apă
気が勝つ (<i>ki ga katsu</i>)	to be extra <i>ki</i>	a nu avea niciun Dumnezeu
気が緩む (<i>ki ga yurumu</i>)	to weaken the <i>ki</i>	a da din lac în puț

Several specialists agree that Japanese culture is shaped on a completely different pattern than the Western one, as pointed out by the case of idiomatic structures. Research in the field (Ikegami 1998, 1909) has shown that the Nippon cultural mentality seems to favor complementarity against contrast, the subject-object fusion against opposition, the concrete against the abstract, and smallness against vastness. All these features are equally visible in the mechanisms of the Japanese language, given the text’s strong dependence upon context, which demands from the listener/ reader an active involvement in the discourse and the construction of meaning.

Once we assume that language facts should be interpreted as historical and cultural realities, we can understand why the reference to one particular object may be indicated in Japanese by the verb *arawasu* ‘to convey, to represent’, although the directly corresponding Occidental term would be the verb *sasu* (‘to designate, to name’). This can be explained by the fact that the use of the verb *sasu* triggers a direct contrast between the cited word (*kotoba*) and the designated object (*mono*), while the verb *arawasu* places the cited word in contrast not with the designated object, but with the idea suggested, so that the latter type of opposition is in fact established between the word (*kotoba*) and *kokoro* ‘heart, mind’ (cf. Ikegami 2009, 109), thus being

highlighted the particular understanding of the concept of “language” in the Japanese mentality and culture. If Western tradition has assumed from the very beginning the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, acknowledging the essential imperfection of language, the Japanese tradition has, on the contrary, favored the problematic of *kokoro* (‘heart, soul’), instead of *kotoba* (‘word, language’). In other words, if *the heart* is right, then *the word* meant to express it will be equally right, as suggested by the idiomatic expression *kotoba o morasu*, built around the core-lexeme *kotoba*, meaning ‘to speak ceaselessly’ (lit. ‘to let the words spill’).

Although they emerge as individual utterances of linguistic creation, which apparently *deviate* from the correct structure of the language, idioms produced in the Japanese language, and in other languages as well, acquire completely new meanings. During the history of the language, they become fixed either in preexisting forms (through the use of metaphor) or in new lexical forms (through the combination of metaphor with derivation and word formation). In the end, idioms became a collective product of a given language, displaying its particular way of understanding reality. Japanese language idioms have been functioning as mental patterns that mirror the influence of tradition (see Coșeriu 1991-1992, 11) and reflect the principles/values of public utility and humanism, therefore constantly shaping and enhancing the culture's defining Japaneseness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akiyama, Nobuo, and Carol Akiyama. 1996. *2001 Japanese and English Idioms. 2001 日本語慣用句・英語イデオム*. Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron's.
- Breban, Vasile (et alii). 1969. *Dicționar de expresii și locuțiuni românești [A Dictionary of Romanian Expressions and Phrases]*. București: Editura Științifică.
- Coșeriu, Eugen. 1991-1992. Principiile lingvisticii ca știință a culturii [The Principles of Linguistics as a Science of Culture]. *Analele științifice ale Universității A. I. Cuza din Iași XXXVII/XXXVIII*: 11-19.
- Coseriu, Eugenio. 1994. *Lingvistică din perspectivă spațială și antropologică [Linguistics from a Spatial and Antropological Perspective]*. Chișinău: Știința.
- Coșeriu, Eugen. 1995. *Introducere în lingvistică [Introduction to Linguistics]*. Translation by Elena Ardeleanu and Eugenia Bojoga, Foreword by Mircea Borcilă. Cluj: Editura Echinox.

- Coșeriu, Eugen. 2000. *Lección de lingvistică generală [Lessons of General Linguistics]*. Translated from Spanish by Eugenia Bojoga, Foreword by Mircea Borcilă. Chișinău: Editura Arc.
- Coseriu, Eugenio. 2001. *L'homme et son langage*. Textes réunis par H. Dupuy-Engelhardt, J.-P. Durafour et F. Rastier. Paris: Editions Peeters.
- Dumistrăcel, Stelian. 2001. *Până-n pânzele albe. Expresii românești [To the Bitter End. Romanian Expressions]*. Iași: Institutul European.
- Donahue, Ray T. 2002. Guideposts for Exploring Japaneseness. In *Exploring Japaneseness. On Japanese Enactments of Culture and Consciousness*, ed. Ray T. Donahue, 3-28. Connecticut: Ablex Publishing.
- Gheorghe, Gabriel. 1986. *Proverbe românești și proverbele lumii romanice. Studiu comparativ [Romanian and Romance World Proverbs. A Comparative Study]*. București: Editura Albatros.
- Hanada, Shūichi. 2011. *Kotowaza. Kojiseigo. Kanyōku o chūshin shita gakushū shidōji reishū [Proverbs and Sayings. Illustrations for Idiom-Centered Research]*. Tokyo: Meijitoshō.
- Horii, Reiichi. 1997. *Kimari monku gogen jiten [Etymological Dictionary of Phrasal Expressions]*. Tokyo: Tokyodoshuppan.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1988. Fragmente lingvistice [Linguistic Fragments]. *Secolul 20* 1-2-3: 10-90. Translated by Ștefan Augustin Doinaș.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 2008. *Despre diversitatea culturală a limbilor și influența ei asupra dezvoltării spirituale a umanității [About the Cultural Diversity of Languages and Its Influence upon the Spiritual Development of Mankind]*. Translated by Eugen Munteanu. București: Humanitas.
- Ikegami, Yoshihiko. 1989. Introduction. *Text (Special Issue: Discourse Analysis in Japan* 9 (3): 263-273.
- Ikegami, Yoshihiko. 1990. *Fushigina kotoba, kotoba no fushigi [The Wonder of Language]*. Tokyo: Chikumashobō.
- Ikegami, Yoshihiko. 1998. Sign conceptions in Japan. In *Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, volume 2, ed. R. Posner, T. A. Sebeok and K. Robering, 1898-1910. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Ikegami, Yoshihiko. 2009. Haiku and the Japanese Language. *Studii de știință și cultură* V, 1 (16): 109-110. Arad: Vasile Goldiș University Press.
- Izeki, Yoshihisa and Yasuhito Kubo. 2012. *Kenkyū manga. Kotowaza. Kanyōku no himitsu [Cartoons for Research. Proverbs and Sayings. The Secret of Idiomatic Expressions]*. Tokyo: Gakken.
- Kitahara, Yasuo. 2009. *Kotowaza. Kanyōku kuizu [Proverbs and Sayings. Idioms Quiz]*. Tokyo: Kinnohoshi.
- Lotman, I. M. 2004. *Cultură și explozie [Culture and Explosion]*. Translated by George Ghețu and Justina Bandol, Foreword by Livia Cotorcea. Pitești: Editura Paralela 45.
- Maynard, Michael L. and Senko K. Maynard. 1993. *101 Japanese Idioms. Understanding Japanese Language and Culture Through Popular Phrases*. Illustrations by Taki. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group.

- Miyoshi, Akira. 1985. The Silent Beat of Japanese Music. In *Japan as I see it. Japanese Essences*, ed. Shichibei Yamamoto et alii, 99-118. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Munteanu, Eugen. 2005. *Introducere în lingvistică [Introduction to Linguistics]*. Iași: Polirom.
- Nishitani, Hiroko. 2012. *Iitai koto kara hikeru kanyōku. kotowaza, yojijukugo jiten [A Dictionary of Idiomatic Expressions, Proverbs and Sayings Starting from What You Would Like to Say]*. Tokyo: Tokyodoshuppan.
- Petrescu, C. . 2000. *Traducerea – între teorie și realizare poetică [Translation – between Theory and Poetic Achievement]*. Timișoara: Excelsior.
- Shinmura, Izuru. 1991. *Kōjien [Encyclopedic Dictionary]*. Daiyonban. Tokyo: Iwanamishoten.
- Steiner, George. 1983. *După Babel. Aspecte ale limbii și traducerii [After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation]*. București: Univers.
- Tsuchiya, Tetsu. 2014. *Rei de wakarū kanyōku [Understanding Idiomatic Expressions Through Examples]*. Tokyo: Gakken.
- Utaguchi, Hajime. 2014. *Kanyōku. Kojikotowaza jiten [Dictionary of Idioms, Proverbs and Sayings]*. Tokyo: Seibidoshuppan.
- *** 1995. *Nihongodaijiten [Encyclopedic Dictionary of Japanese Language]*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- *** 2006. *Longman English-Japanese Dictionary*. Tokyo: Pearson Education Limited.
- *** 2008. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. The living dictionary*. Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited.
- *** 2009. *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române DEX [The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language]*. București: Univers Enciclopedic Gold.