Iphras as an E-Learning Platform for Idiomatic Competence

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Abstract: The integration of E-learning has expanded in a variety of directions to a degree that its successful application is of great importance to all sectors of education and training. E-learning can offer unquestionable advantages to everyone involved in both the assessment and the knowledge transfer process (Owens and Floyd 2007; Luchoomun, McLuckie and van Wesel 2010; Damyanov and Tsankov 2016). Some of the challenges of e-learning methods rest in choosing the right platform, and in determining the scope of the selected material as well as the adequacy of its user friendly methodology. Among the features of e-learning platforms that are applicable to a wider audience is the criterion of multi-language application.

As regards E-learning in foreign language education, there are three pragmatic and cultural aspects which are often omitted from the e-learning system: 1) the transfer of idiomatic competence; 2) the acquisition of cultural concepts; and 3) the inclusion of small and endangered languages. This is not the case with the elaboration of the e-learning platform IPHRAS - Interphraseologie für Studien-und Berufsmobile. The proposed paper presents its main achievements and focuses on the methodology for foreign language learning in a multilingual electronic environment. The process is facilitated by the incorporation of thematically structured multiword units (idioms and collocations). Its priority is easy access to a variety of languages, including Greek, Turkish, Romanian, Bulgarian, through more popular languages such as English and German. The degree of translation equivalence of its elements facilitates not only multilingualism, but also the initial phase of mastering the vocabulary of additional languages. The IPHRAS platform was elaborated by an international team of Balkan researchers and language instructors and funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong learning program.

Keywords: e-learning platform, foreign languages, multilingualism, idiomatic competence

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that phraseology as a separate linguistic branch is widely popular as a research field, there is still serious scarcity of studies of phraseology in e-learning. The present paper contributes to the overcoming of this scarcity by discussing the data collection and data design techniques for the development of idiomatic competence in the context of the multilingual language platform IPHRAS developed under the project of the same name. The project started in 2013 with a duration of two years. It was conducted under Nr. 530962-LLP-2012-DE-KA2-KAMP in the Long Life Learning Program. Partners were the Thüringer Hochschuleband Jena, the Institute of Slavic languages and Institute for Indo-European languages at Friedrich Schiller University of Jena (Germany), the Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu (Romania), the South-West University "Neofit Rilski" in Blagoevgrad (Bulgaria), the Yildiz University, Istanbul (Turkey) and the Green Institute in Athens (Greece). The Project was funded by the European Commission. The first year was spent building up the design, the methodology and the corpus criteria. The second year was dedicated to the linguistic processing of the multilingual data. For the purposes of this research the analysis has been limited to the design and methodology stages, leaving aside the implementation phase as an opportunity for future discussion.

The development of idiomatic competence, a component of linguistic and communicative competence, in foreign language learning and second language learning (hereafter FLL and SLL) is difficult for the following reasons: 1) idiomatic expressions come from various walks of life, social practices, and culture-specific phenomena, which makes them hard to learn; 2) during teaching, they should be put together in coherent groups facilitating their memorization; 3) learning to use them correctly requires systematic language knowledge and differs from the acquisition of word meaning; 3) they are complex linguistic units which first need to be identified as such, then their meaning can be decoded, and finally their usage context needs to be established; 4) idiomatic or phraseological meaning is often generated not only from the pragmatic context but also from the cultural code; 5) idiom identification is different from the identification of words and their free combinations, which is why learners often fail to comprehend them as semantic wholes. All these difficulties can be illustrated from a comparative perspective by the following example. In Bulgarian the phrase

Желая ти късмет 'Zhelaya ti kasmet' (Good luck) is expressed in German through the formula *Hals- und Beinbruch* 'break a leg', which sounds more like a curse that like a good wish, as can be seen in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Study card of the phrase Hals- und Beinbruch in the IPHRAS e-learning platform

(http://www.iphras.eu/en/learn/topic/routinephrases/25/456)

Additionally, this phrase belongs to the informal register and should not be used in formal situations. This example demonstrates the relevance of the communicative situation to the understanding and restricted use of such idiomatic expressions.

The abovementioned difficulties in learning, using, memorizing, and comprehending phraseological language pose special requirements to the design of e-learning platforms for figurative language and set phrases.

A pragmatic approach to idiomatic comprehension in e-learning overcomes the abovementioned difficulties using the illustration techniques wherein a picture presents the literal meaning of the phraseological unit in its foreground and uses this to symbolically transfer the figurative meaning through an atypical property of the object in the picture. Such image metaphors are also used in picture dictionaries and traditional learning methods to visualize both the literal and the metaphorical meaning. This, according to Marešová (2009), supports the learning in the multi-user virtual environment. Another possibility for achieving idiomatic comprehension, however, is to convey the literal meaning through music. Such effect is further discussed by adopting a musical intelligence in E-learning and occurs especially with e-learning music applications for children (Wu & McMahon 2014).

Another technique used for electronic idiomatic comprehension is based on mobile services and on the fact that learners nowadays prefer using their smart phones to acquire all types of information. The application Short Message Service uses text messages to automatically send three idioms a day (Hayati, Jalilfar & Mashhadi 2013). What makes these difficult to learn is their lack of semantic proximity and the fact that they are not united by any criteria other than their belonging to the phraseological level of language.

An issue that comes up when constructing e-learning platforms for idiom comprehension is the structure and organization of the phraseological unit card. It is very similar to the processing of idiomatic expressions for the purposes of data collecting for dictionaries (common unilingual, bilingual or even multilingual phraseological dictionaries). It is not only an encyclopaedic endeavor, but its success depends to a great extent on the methodological approach to the construction of the dictionary or the platform, respectively. And if Williams (2012:217) notes that bringing data and dictionary together is like "real science in real dictionaries", then the way of how to present the phraseological expression in a data base collection or another type of data processing requires more than the ability to find the most adequate ways of translating the units. The problems of compilation and presentation of idiomatic expressions in a data base for an E-learning platform are similar to the problems of phraseological compilation. The main issues, according to the Russian linguist and phraseologist Arsenteva (2014: 11) occur in designing the phraseological entry, the presentation of the connotation and its potential, the types of definitions, the phraseolgical counterparts and the translation of idioms having no such counterparts. In addition to these problems, there is a prevalence in research papers of contrastive bilingual analyses of set phrases but studies of multilingual databases are still rare (Kűhn 2007:630).

This paper tries to contribute to the solution of these issues through an exploration of a multilingual electronic environment for the enhancement of idiomatic competence.

2.   IPHRAS as an E-learning platform for idiom comprehension

As an e-learning platform for idiom comprehension IPHRAS is yet another attempt to deal with the problems these linguistic units entail in learning and teaching. It sets certain goals which are to be achieved through its content, design and structure.

To start with, the platform needs to be suited to both persons without foreign or second language background and to people with knowledge of a foreign language, as well as to language instructors and experts in the field. Secondly, idiomatic expressions included have to be applicable to specific communicative situations reflecting student and worker mobility in new linguistic environments. In response to these two tasks, IPHRAS has two different thematic spheres: routine formulas with everyday use and set phrases employed in job interviews and job application. The units in both fields have extremely high frequency of use and meet the requirement of practical applicability posed by the situation of living, working, or studying abroad, which entails intercultural dialogue in institutions and in informal context. In addition to this, IPHRAS also offers teaching materials for language instructors. They are presented in an order of increasing difficulty and are aimed at practicing the selected language units in suitable communicative situations. The division between everyday use and formal use still persists, but the more advanced learners can benefit from the beginner exercises as these are more pragmatically oriented and also offer a large variety of synonyms of the units in the main list.

Thirdly, IPHRAS gives equal status to seven languages which belong to different language families and use different types of graphic encoding (Latin, Cyrillic and Greek scripts). Each language can be chosen both as a source and as a target language. This makes it possible for a learner to use the routine formulas and become initially familiar with a language that is completely new to him/her, especially in cases of language contact where more languages are used simultaneously like those from the Balkan Language Union (Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish, Romanian). This property of IPHRAS is of special importance because in a multilingual environment the factor language popularity may not be relevant at all. The equal status of IPHRAS languages is important for yet another reason. It corresponds to the five basic aspects of multilingualism: psychological, social, cognitive, pragmatic, cultural (Riehl, 2006: 6).

Another way to achieve this quality is to base the choice of the presented units on the similarity of their content in all the seven languages, on the correspondence of their components, and on their shared cultural background. Each language, for instance, has set phrases for meeting, greeting, or congratulating people on different occasions. The semantic and syntactic connections between these phrases render their memorization easier. Thus the phrase *Cheers* in English corresponds to the German *Prost* with variants *Zum Wohl* or *Prosit*. They are all used when drinking on a certain occasion. The Bulgarian language uses the formula *Наздраве* 'Nazdrave' both for drinking and for wishing someone health when they sneeze.

Finally, IPHRAS meets the requirement of being user-friendly and effort-saving. Since the acquisition of idiomatic as well as multilingual competence takes hard work and a lot of time, the platform has a simple and clear design. The first step is the choice of one of the seven languages as a source language. On the screen appear four working areas: Learning mode; Practice mode; Teacher materials, Glossary & Help. The content of each area is accessed through a dialogue box. The Learning area contains the thematic groups of idioms comprising the routine formulas and the more extensive field *job application*. The specifically grammatical information is separated in a different rubric. Still, it is one click away in case it is interesting or necessary to the user. This separation of the information for users and for experts saves time and efforts. Another manifestation of the platform's user-orientation is the audio option application. It makes it possible for them to hear the phrase articulated by a native speaker. Additionally, each type of information is designated by a separate symbol, which additionally facilitates working with the platform.

3.   The methodology behind IPHRAS

While idiomatic competence in the first language occurs directly during language acquisition as a result of intuitive use, in FLL and SLL this is a mediated process and requires a minimum of language knowledge and specific instruments. IPHRAS applies such an instrument realized in two phases by transforming FL and SL data

into language input through its data collection (negotiation) and date design (presentation) techniques as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Methodological model for learning idioms in an electronic environment
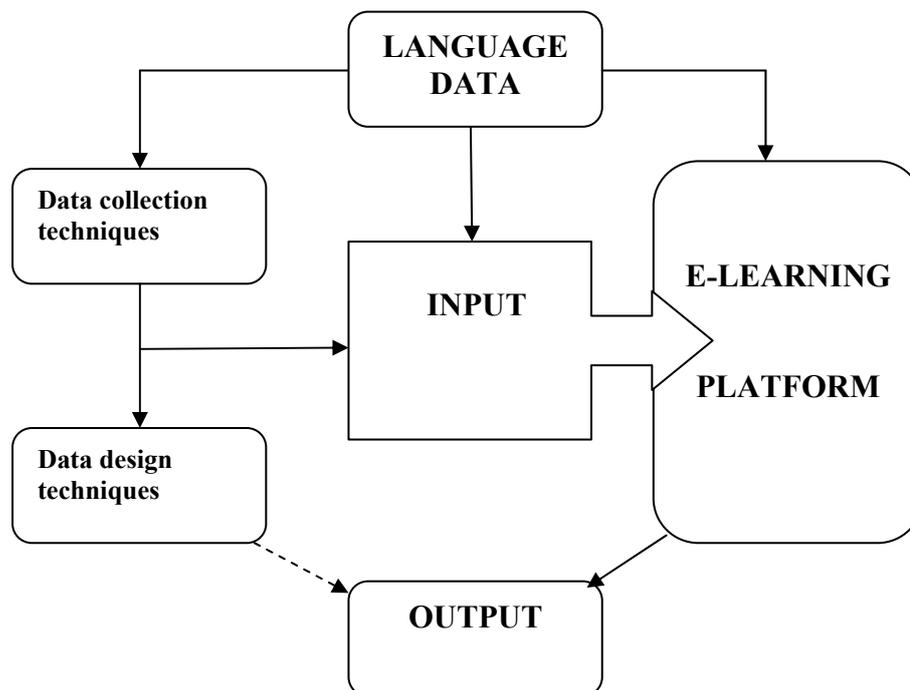
The model presented above consists of four basic and two ancillary components. The component *language data* is independent as a reflection of the existence of natural languages.

The ancillary components are operational and mediate the transformation of language data into language input. The component *e-learning platform* reflects the electronic environment and is the material manifestation of the *input* component. In learning phraseological units in the first language speakers directly transform language input into language output. In learning a second or foreign language this process is indirect and requires additional information such that may take the form of e-learning platforms, mobile services, illustrated materials, the foreign language classroom or any other educational means. The *input* component is a 'container' of accessible knowledge activated through the e-learning platform. The *output* component is a result of the combined activity of the learner as a user of *input* information and the e-learning platform as a provider of such information. This activity leads to the development of (multilingual) idiomatic competence and has different value for each user with regards his/her goals in learning a foreign language therefore the output, unlike the platform, is a dependent variable. Thus the methodological model contains two procedural components (collection and design techniques) and three resultative ones (input, output, platform), superimposed by the independent component *language data.*

3.1   Data Collection (Negotiation) Techniques

The first negotiation technique requires that an agreement on the type of phraseological units be achieved. There are two different conceptions of the nature of idiomatic expressions in language: the narrow view and the wide view. According to the narrow view phraseological units are poly-lexemic expressions whose meaning is not deducible from its components (Burger, Buhofer, Sialm and Eriksson 1982). According to the wide conception of their meaning and form, idioms also include set phrases – units of language whose syntactic form is fixed and they are similar to mono-lexemic forms in this respect. Their meaning, however, is deducible from their form and what is special is only their context of use (Palm 1997). This technique is important because the adoption of only one of the conceptions will be detrimental to the data collection process and will deprive the platform of its integrity and unity. Also, this is a way of choosing the sources for the excerption of the language units, as some of them are not to be found in phraseological dictionaries. Besides, many monolingual explanatory dictionaries lack a good phraseological component.

Since the users of the platform include mobile people and temporary visitors for study or work purposes, the aim of the corpus is to enable orientation and competence in two main domains: everyday communication and communication for administrative purposes. As the field of administrative communication is rather broad, the designers concentrated on the phrase connected with job search and job application in order to avoid indiscriminate inclusion of expressions in the database. Other thematic fields can be added in case of a future extension of the platform.

The next negotiation technique is the agreement on the applicability level of the units in the platform. It should take into account the work/study mobility of the users and the multilingual nature of their target environment. Most importantly, however, it makes allowances for the foreign language level (if any) of the users. This makes it suitable both for beginners and for people who have some familiarity with the target language or languages. What makes the platform unique in this respect is that all languages can serve as both source and target languages in the search process but the collection of the corpus data was first conducted in German, which was used to design a list of the expressions to be included in the database. In connection to this, the retrieval of each phrase can occur from each (source) language into each (target) language.

As to the comparison and status of languages, it should be taken into account that the Romani language has restricted vocabulary. Therefore, in agreeing on the possibility for all languages to serve as both source and target in the platform, it had to be excluded from the option of being a source language because of its limited capacity.

The technique of agreeing on the scope and content of the platform includes the adoption of a variety of criteria as to their arrangement. It often occurs not in alphabetical order but in terms of their semantic proximity. Random choice of units cannot lead to well-structured and resultative entries which can be used for the purposes of education. Complying with the applicability of the platform to people with basic language and/or multilingual competence the authors have chosen to start with routine formulas for greeting, saying good bye, wishing, gratitude, etc. These are widely used in everyday situations and largely equivalent in the languages of the platform. They are a good way to start developing sensitivity to the difference between the structural and the semantic component of each idiom.

Importantly, it can so happen that in one language the phrases expressing thankfulness are much more than the respective phrases in the other languages. Sometimes, the use of a certain expression can be specifically related to a situational context and render additional meaning as a result. For example, the concluding phrase in formal correspondence in Bulgarian is always *С уважение* 's uvazhenie'. In English there is a choice of two basic phrases with regards to whether the author knows the recipient or not: *Sincerely* (recipient familiar), *Faithfully* (recipient unfamiliar). Most often, however, especially in e-mails the phrase is *Best regards, Kind regards* or simply *Best*. Such a differentiation cannot be achieved in Bulgarian, but it does occur in German.

In view of the usefulness of the platform, the scope and content technique described above also needs to follow the phraseological diversity of the input content in the formal use of language in job applications. In other words, the sphere of looking for, finding, and getting a job is reflected in language with a variety of phraseological units and thematic groups of idioms: key job application phrases, letter of application, experience and qualification and CV. Sometimes, as a result of the specific sphere of use, the input includes not only set phrases but also mono-lexemic word forms, such as *reference*, *interview*, *trainee*, *training*, but also *work permit*, *final certificates*, *further education*, *vacant position*, *working hours*.

All the negotiation techniques mentioned above are prerequisites and a necessary condition for the correct execution of the next group of techniques in the methodological model of the e-learning platform IPHRAS which make the data design an efficient tool for educating learners.

3.2   Data Design (Presentation) Techniques

The first data design technique is connected with the establishment of a backup support site which serves only for building up lists of words in two axes. The vertical axis gives the phrases and the horizontal axis – their syntactic and semantic description and their usage. It does not allow for any phrase to be included in the target language until it has been completely processed in the source language, i.e. until its semantic and grammatical information has been presented in the form of special fields retrievable in the actual platform as

study cards. The ultimate goal of these study cards is to facilitate the learning of set phrases especially in the cases when their components in Language 1 and Language 2 differ.

Another problem challenging the conceptual frame of the design of IPHRAS is the differentiation between literal and figurative meaning. In working with traditional dictionaries, the users directly confront the set phrases and their equivalents. The meaning of the components remains unknown and is not directly explicated. Learning phraseological expressions for multilingual purposes, however, cannot neglect this issue. This is especially true if we assume that the platform needs to be comprehensible for people with basic or no foreign language competence. For this reason the question whether a certain set phrase should be presented only with its translation equivalent in the target language is of great importance. Such a presentation does not take into account the juxtaposition between the word for word translation of the components and the meaning of the expression. In accordance with the scope and content negotiation practice of the platform, the differentiation between literal and figurative meaning can be resolved only by means of the platform design. Thus the presentation of the phrase *job advertisement* adopts the following shape: *source language phrase – translation equivalent – word by word translation,* as can be seen in Figure 3:

Figure 3: The opposition *translation equivalent* vs *word by word translation* in the IPHRAS platform

Additionally, the literal translation is visualized with arrows connecting each component of the set phrase with its translation. In addition to these three elements, a fourth element of equal importance is added – the meaning in its context of use. Importantly, in view of the language level of the learner, the phrase and its translation equivalent have an audio option.

The next data design technique optimizes the working screen by making effective use of its two spatial axes – the horizontal and the vertical one. The phrases in each language are arranged vertically and the explanations occupy the horizontal axis. The working screen space has a horizontal control menu which, in addition to the information on the meaning and context of the phrase, presents its application (in sentences), its inflections (the grammatical information necessary for correct sentence use), and the expert data on the concrete item. Another technique that makes the design of the data learner-oriented and efficient is the division between the learning mode of the platform and its practice mode. In the practice mode the users are offered lists of exercise types which they can use in choosing the form of their practice. For example, this mode gives the learners an opportunity to translate an expression from one language to another. The answer can be electronically checked by the system and the platform calculates the user's progress in terms of the number of correct components of the expression and gives the correct answer.

Next, the practice mode also gives them access to study cards of the type 'IPHRAS to go', as Gieseke-Golembowski (2015) calls them. These study cards can be printed with a large variety of content options which can be customized. The learner may tick on any of the following: *phrase, examples, inflection, for experts*. Because the platform is multilingual and since it contains two different thematic fields of phrases, the learner mode also offers 84 lists which reflect all the possible combinations of source and target languages. This makes it possible for learners of languages which are not popular or are endangered, such as Romani, to double-check meanings of idioms easily and without the use of a mediating lingua franca.

4.   Conclusion

One of the requirements to the modern person in the global world is the successful orientation in multilingual environment. Through its seven-language system complying with the general methodology of electronic language learning, IPHRAS contributes not only to the development of multilingual competence, but also to the mastering of specific idiomatic competence (Bock and Gieseke-Golembovski 2014, Sava 2014, Güneş 2016). The usefulness of the platform for its multilingual purposes is facilitated by the systemic use of the techniques of negotiation in the process of data collection and presentation in the data design phase. This makes it possible for the comprehension, learning, and use of the linguistic units to occur as output to the opportunities offered by web-supported education. Thus the methodology of IPHRAS plays a crucial role in overcoming the difficulties learners confront both in traditional and in electronic educational environment.

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