Comparable phrases in English and Italian: the extent of the phenomenon and how well it is documented

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1. Introduction

The Italian and English languages share a great deal of phraseology; that is, their lexicons include many phrases and expressions of comparable form and meaning (e.g. skeleton in the cupboard – scheletro nell’armadio, treasure hunt – caccia al tesoro). In some cases, this is the result of phrasal calquing, either direct or indirect, from one of the two languages to the other. In other cases, both languages have independently borrowed their respective phrases from a third source. Sometimes there may have been no calquing at all: the similarity of phrasal pairs may ‘just’ be due to the similarity of cultures and of the typical processes of lexical phrase creation.¹

In the present paper I give an idea of the order of magnitude of the phenomenon of English-Italian comparable phrases, and, bringing together the linguistic and lexicographical data with which I am familiar, suggest that there is still much work to be done in this particular area of comparative and historical research.

2. A database of English and Italian comparable phrases

Many years ago, I began ‘collecting’ pairs of English and Italian comparable phrases. The motivation was partly one of curiosity, but also a realization that the presence of similar phrases in ‘the other language’ could be exploited in the context of foreign language learning (for some discussion see Coffey 2002). The collection has slowly grown, with data coming in from many different published sources as well as my own ‘sightings’, and the database now contains over 2,900 paired items. The database has also grown ‘qualitatively’, and now contains many different sorts of information about the individual phrases (form, meaning, degree of idiomaticity, origins, etc), as well as information about the published literature in which they are discussed.

3. The many types of phrase and phrasal pair

English and Italian are both highly phraseological languages; that is, their lexicons consist of not only single-word units but also a vast number of phrases. These phrases come in many shapes and sizes, and this variety is also found in the subset of English-Italian comparable phrases. One of the simplest distinctions that can be made is between those phrases which normally function as constituents of sentence-level items and those which themselves constitute sentence-level items. An example of the former is the pair civil rights / diritti civili, and of the latter Time is money. / Il tempo è denaro. In addition to this basic division, there are of course many other categories into which phrases can be grouped, categories which result from morphological, semantic, communicative and grammatical analysis. Thus, for example, we find comparable pairs of:

- idiomitic expressions, e.g. break the ice / rompere il ghiaccio
- subject specific terminology, e.g. games theory / teoria dei giochi
- geographical locations, e.g. the Dead Sea / il Mar Morto
- proverbs, e.g. All roads lead to Rome. / Tutte le strade portano a Roma.
- conversational utterances, e.g. You don’t know what you’re missing! / Non sai cosa ti perdi!

In the context of comparable phrases, we can also include single-word compounds, for example skyscraper / grattacielo.

The two phrases within a comparable pair may differ with regard to specific features; the following are some examples:

- What is a single-word compound in one language may correspond to a phrase in the other, for example centre forward – centravanti.
- The part-of-speech category may differ in some way; for example, in English blacklist can be either a noun or a verb, but its Italian equivalent, lista nera, is only a noun.

3.1 Phraseological calques

In addition to the variables mentioned above, all regarding aspects of form and meaning, there is also the important question of whether or not a phrase can be considered to be a fully integrated part of the language. This relates both to fairly recently coined phrases (probably direct or indirect calques), and to phrases which continue after considerable time to be perceived as ‘loan translations’, often because they denote an aspect of the other language’s culture. An example of the former is the Italian phrase piede d’atlete, the formal equivalent of athlete’s foot. Whereas the English phrase is a perfectly normal lexical item, the Italian phrase, presumably a calque from English and/or French, is not (yet) a widely used phrase. The first record I have seen for piede d’atleta is 1994 (Zingarelli, 12th ed.), and at the time of writing a Google search (for the exact phrase) returns just 13,100 hits; this may be compared with 722,000 hits for the English phrase (for which the first citation in the OED, 2nd ed., is 1928).

An example of a phrase which continues to be perceived as a loan translation is the Italian Cancelliere dello Scacchiere, which translates Chancellor of the Exchequer and refers specifically to the British finance minister. An English loan translation of an Italian item is clean hands, used occasionally to refer to the judicial investigations of the 1990s known as mani pulite (this phrase is also cited in Iamartino 2001).

3.2 Obsolete or obsolescent items

Just as some single words become obsolete, so can lexicalized phrases. For example, while battere i denti is commonly used in modern Italian (e.g. ‘e in inverno si tremava e si battevano i denti’ – this example is from the CORIS corpus at the University of Bologna), its equivalent in English is archaic (see OED 2nd ed. beat 11., e.g. ‘My teeth for cold beating in my head’, 1617). An example of an (English) phrase which is still current but perhaps used less now than it was in the past is the proverbial saying The game isn’t worth the candle. Its equivalent in Italian, by contrast, Il gioco non vale la candela, is still frequently used. The complete inventory of comparable phrases would also include pairs in which neither item is current in the modern language. An example is the pair banco comune – common bench. Here, the former is a calque which served to translate the English common bench, a former name of the now extinct Court of Common Pleas (see OED and Rando, 1970).

4. Sources of information on calquing and internationalisms
Data sources can be divided between those which specifically deal with phraseological calques or internationalisms, and those which are more general but in which we might expect to find some relevant information.

Sources of direct relevance include both descriptive / investigative studies and data which has been gathered together in the form of a dictionary of some sort. Actually, this is not such a clear-cut distinction: some dictionaries contain quite a lot of information about individual items, and some studies contain information about quite a lot of phrases. Some of the more important data sources of relevance to English and Italian are the following:

1987. Rando G. *Dizionario degli anglicismi nell’italiano postunitario*.
1990. Delmay B. *Usi e difese della lingua*.

Some further studies containing relevant data are:


In addition to the various (direct) sources mentioned so far, there are also indirect sources, which either include occasional pieces of information on calquing or which are useful as sources of phrases which need to be investigated. Indirect sources include collections of neologisms, collections of phrases (of one sort or another), and dictionaries which contain historical information. Some of the relevant literature which I have consulted are the following. Collections of neologisms: Cortelazzo and Cardinale (1989), Lurati (1990), Tulloch (1991); collections of phrases: Flavell and Flavell (2004, 2006), Partridge (1978), Pittàno (1992), Quarto (1993), Rees (1990), Strauss (1998), *Take my word* (1996), Turrini (1995); general historical dictionaries: Cortelazzo and Cortelazzo (1999), the OED.

Finally, I will mention a few sources of data regarding phraseological calquing involving the French language, which is an important are of study given that French has often been an intermediary between the two languages: Cabasino (1981), Fantuzzi (2004), Rey-Debove & Gagnon (1990), and Zolli (1976).

5. **Direct sources of information on calquing and internationalisms: some quantitative data**

Let me begin this section by quantifying the data in three (linguistically) specialized dictionaries: Rando (1987), Görlach (2001), and Stammerjohann et al (2008). Rando’s
dictionary, which, as the title says, is concerned with those items which have entered the language since the unification of Italy, includes about 190 phrasal calques, either as headwords or within entries.

Görlach’s dictionary ‘is intended as a documentation of the lexical input of English into European languages up to the early 1990s ... we have concentrated on the modern lexis imported after World War II’ (Görlach 2001, p. xvi). I have gone through the dictionary thoroughly and found a total of 116 phrasal calques from English to Italian; this figure includes 15 items which were not explicitly indicated as being calques. This is quite a low number, given the size of the dictionary, and can be explained by information reported in Görlach (2003), which is a complementary volume to the dictionary itself. Here, we learn that phrasal calques were included in the dictionary only if there was already a main entry for the English item itself (i.e., when the English item is used in untranslated form in one or more of the languages covered by the dictionary).

Stammerjohann et al is also a copious work, with over 4,400 headwords, but again it does not have very many phrasal calques. I have been through the dictionary and found only 27 calques from Italian to English.

If we add to the above dictionary data all those phrases which are discussed in other studies directly concerned with calquing (or rather, those that I myself have consulted, most of which are listed in the present paper), then we arrive at a total of 355 different phrasal pairs. Considering that the total of comparable phrases on my database is currently 2906, then it is highly probable that there are still quite a lot of phrasal calques which have not been discussed in the literature.

6. Historical and etymological dictionaries

Generally speaking, lexical phraseology is very much the poor parent of etymological studies. Dictionaries tend to tell us a great deal about the provenance of single words, but much less about where lexical phrases, usually embedded within entries for single words, come from. This situation has probably come about for a number of reasons. One is that, quite simply, there may not be very much to say about a given phrase: it just took shape within the language through standardized lexico-semantic processes. However, connected to this is no doubt the fact that it is much easier to assume that a given phrase arose of its own accord within a language. The alternative is calquing, and that is much more difficult to identify. To these reasons we might add the fact that lexico-phraseology in general, not just in terms of historical derivation, has for a long time been very much under-rated in linguistic description (at least as regards many languages, among which, English and Italian).

Also, there is the very practical lexicographical problem of ‘space’, and not only in terms of the finite quantity available in the traditional print dictionary but also in terms of how to present different data types without making the page too difficult to read. Here, it should be added that the situation can become quite difficult where calquing is concerned, since there are often quite a lot of uncertainties about how exactly calquing took place, and such uncertainties need to be recorded in the dictionary.

Of the historical and etymological dictionaries I have consulted while looking for information about the origins of the respective items in comparable phrases, the most useful have been the OED and the Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana (DELI)
(Cortelazzo & Cortelazzo 1999). I would add that I found the Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (Battaglia 1961-2002) to be very lacking in this respect.

In the case of the dictionaries which I do judge (relatively) positively, consultation was certainly not 100% successful. With regard to the OED (for which I have precise data), the situation is as follows. Of a total of 1439 items looked for, 1191 were found (excluding cases where they were only present within citations). Of these, 232 were accompanied by some sort of data regarding their origins, though only in 98 cases was the data presented as being fairly certain.

6.1 The OED

The OED, fortunately, is now an electronic on-line resource. This means not only that information can be sought more easily but also that information can be more easily updated. It also means that there is virtually no limit to the amount of data which could be included, as long the manner of presentation is adequate. During my consultation of the dictionary, I have recorded on my database whether I consulted, for a given phrase, the second edition or the ‘draft revisions’ of the on-going third edition. Looking at the statistics, I can report that things are improving. Of those items which were looked for, and found, in the 2nd edition, 5.4% had fairly precise data regarding phrasal origin, and 10.3% had information which was less precise. Of those items looked for in the on-going 3rd edition, the respective percentages were 14.3% and 13.1%.

The following are examples of three recent (partial) entries which include information on phrasal origin and comparison with other languages.

Rocky Mountains DRAFT REVISION June 2010

[< ROCKY adj.¹ + the plural of MOUNTAIN n., after Canadian French regional (Métis French) les Montagnes des Roches (1752) or its model Cree asinîwaciya, plural of asinîwacîy < asinî-, combining form of asinîy stone, rock + waciy mountain. Compare also French les Montagnes Rocheuses (1790 or earlier).

life n. DRAFT REVISION June 2010

With while there's life there's hope at Phrases 8b compare classical Latin ‘Aegroto, dum anima est, spes esse dicitur’, lit. ‘for a sick man, it is said that while he has breath/life, there is hope’ (Cicero Ad Atticum 9. 10. 3; quoted by Erasmus in the passage translated in quot. 1539 at Phrases 8b).

table wine DRAFT REVISION Dec. 2009

[< TABLE n. + WINE n.¹, partly after French vin de table (see vin de table n. at VIN n. Compounds). Compare Italian vino da tavola (see vino da tavola n. at VINO n. Additions) and German Tafelwein TAFELWEIN n.]

7. Comparative phrases: future directions

The examples just cited from the (on-line) OED point the way to future description of comparable phrases. What we need to work towards is a multilingual database containing
information on phrases in a number of different languages. And the information recorded need not necessarily involve only perceived calquing. The very fact that phrases are similar in different languages warrants recording, both as a part of comparative interlingual description, and as data to refer to in case future research suggests the possibility of calquing having taken place.

With regard to the language pair English-Italian, my own database certainly suggests that there are still many phrasal calques which have not been described in the literature. On this point I will also quote Fanfani (1991: 74), who says, while discussing the number of Anglicisms in modern Italian, ‘... and the number is even higher if we include the many Anglicisms hidden in the form of semantic or phrasal calques whose provenance has not yet been clearly established’ – my translation.

Information on calquing does not need to be presented as definite: there can be much speculation as well, especially while further information is being gathered. As Klajn wrote, talking of borrowing in general, ‘lexical borrowing, whether direct or indirect, is not a precise operation. Words are not physical objects which arrive at a precise moment having travelled along well-defined routes, though some lexicographers forget this fact’ (1972:17, my translation).

As an example of the difficulty in arriving at a definite conclusion about (possible) phrasal calquing, I now provide some information about one pair of comparable phrases, contact lens – lente a contatto (Klein, 1972, says that lente a contatto was probably a calque from the English). The following is a much expanded version of discussion I have provided elsewhere (Coffey 2009).

7.1 A sample investigation: contact lens and lente a contatto

At first sight, it would seem that it should be very easy to determine whether the Italian term lente a contatto was coined by analogy with the English contact lens. After all, the referrent is a precise term from a technological field. It is an invention, or at least an extension of already existing technology, and therefore its development and appearance should be documented in scientific writing. And where the referrent is well described, it should be possible to make precise statements about the terms, in any language, which are used to denote it. Let us look, then, at the three most important elements in the equation: the object itself, the English term used to refer to it, and the Italian term.

The idea of the contact lens can be traced back to the Renaissance. It is generally accepted that the first historical reference to the notion is in the work of Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1508 made sketches for such a device. Leonardo was much ahead of his time, however, and actual experimentation in producing contact lenses did not begin until the 19th century. An important date was 1888, when, in the words of The Contact Lens Council’s website ‘two independent researchers, A. Eugen Fick, a Swiss physician, and Paris optician Edouard Kalt, almost simultaneously report using contact lenses to correct optical defects’ («http://www.contactlenscouncil.org/history.htm»). Fick reported on his lens in both the German and English issues of a scientific journal (Fick, 1888). He referred to the lens as a Contactbrille, and this was rendered as contact-lens in the English translation of the article. The use of these two terms can be seen, therefore, as the origin of modern phrases (in various languages) which use a word denoting ‘contact’ to express the notion ‘contact lens’. (As a parenthesis, it can be added that at more or less the same time as Fick and Kalt’s achievements, another lens maker coined the term Hornhaultlinsen, that is, ‘corneal lenses’, but this term did not survive.)
The English version of Fick’s article is also the source of the first two citations for contact lens in the OED: 1888. C. H. May tr. A. E. Fick in Arch. Ophthalmol. XVII. 216 A small glass shell...which I call ‘a contact-lens’. Ibid. 217 The ‘contact-lens’ consists of a thin glass shell, bounded by concentric and parallel spherical segments.

The next major advancements in contact lens technology did not take place until the 1930s and ‘40s. Keeping pace with technology, the OED citations jump from the 1880s to the 1940s. In a 1944 citation from The Times we find the phrase ‘contact lens spectacles’ (‘Squadron Leader Geoffrey B. Warne, D.S.O., D.F.C., a Typhoon fighter leader who wears contact lens spectacles, shot down an enemy aircraft’). This usage (‘contact lens spectacles’) suggests that the noun phrase contact lens had not yet become a commonly recognizable term within society at large, and of course common sense tells us that the English phrase will not have become a commonly used lexeme until the object itself became a significant part of people’s lives. This finally occurred in the 1950s, when contact lenses achieved their first commercial success in, simultaneously, the United States, Great Britain, and Germany.

Let us turn now to the Italian term lente a contatto. In Battaglia (1961-2002) there is a sub-entry for the phrase, but there is no citation or other form of dating. Cortelazzo & Cardinale (1989) include the phrase as a neologism for the period their dictionary is covering (1964-1987), but they do not suggest the origin of the phrase. Their immediate source is the 10th edition of Zingarelli (1970).

Consultation of the relevant Italian scientific literature (issues of the journal Luce e Immagini) confirms that the development of the contact lens was regularly reported in the 1950s. Interestingly, in that period there was parallel use of the forms lente di contatto and lente a contatto, and this seems a strong indication that the term was relatively recent, or at least that it had had no continuous usage. References, in Luce e Immagini, to research outside Italy are above all reports from the specialized English journals The Optician and Optometric Weekly, and this would certainly indicate influence from English. Another important influence may have been the first post-war international optics conference, which was held in Berne, Switzerland, in 1950. This was organized by two Swiss associations together with the editor of the journal The Optician. This would certainly have been an opportunity for German, as well as English, to have an influence on other languages.

Finally, it is to be noted that modern German uses the term Kontaktlinse for ‘contact lens’ (and not Fick’s Contactbrille), and so it would be useful to discover when the German term began to be used in the scientific community, and therefore what influence it might have had on Italian. But this must wait.

8. Conclusions

To sum up, much work still needs to be done in the field of English-Italian comparable phraseology. While this should be easier now than it was in the past, since information can be stored in electronic form, there are still many problems to overcome. To list the more important: 1) there are probably many obsolete phrasal calques which have never been recorded; 2) calquing in general (including phrasal calquing) is a much more difficult phenomenon to identify than direct borrowing; 3) once probable phrasal calques have been identified, it is sometimes difficult to establish the exact path of the calquing. Investigation can lead the researcher into many different fields of human activity, learning, for example, about the history of the ‘contact lens’ or of the ‘suspension bridge’ (ponte sospeso), or why ‘the Red Sea’ (il Mar Rosso) is so-called. This is of course very time consuming, but, fortunately, it is also very interesting.
Notes

1 Throughout this paper, I use the word ‘comparable’ to describe the paired phrases being discussed. Sometimes, but by no means always, the pairs may also be considered to be ‘equivalents’.

2 With regard to my saying that *piede d’atleta* is ‘presumably a calque from English *and/or* French’, it should be remembered that calquing, especially in the modern age of frequent and fast international communications, can be the result of simultaneous influence from more than one language. For some discussion of ‘internationalisms’, see Petralli 1992, as well as the article entitled ‘internationalism (linguistics)’ in Wikipedia.

References


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