



HAL
open science

Zivaisms: the strategy and translation challenges behind proverb and idiom twisting in NCIS

Damien Villers

► **To cite this version:**

Damien Villers. Zivaisms: the strategy and translation challenges behind proverb and idiom twisting in NCIS. 8th Interdisciplinary Colloquium on Proverbs - Proceedings, Nov 2014, Tavira, Portugal. pp.259-273. hal-01698099

HAL Id: hal-01698099

<https://hal.science/hal-01698099>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**ZIVAISMS: THE STRATEGY AND TRANSLATION CHALLENGES BEHIND
PROVERB AND IDIOM TWISTING IN *NCIS***

Damien **VILLERS**, Université de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, *France*

Abstract

NCIS is the most-watched series in the world, and probably the only TV series that gives so much importance to idioms and proverbs by using them as a comical running gag. Yet, this phenomenon called “Zivaisms” has never been studied academically. To do so, a preliminary discussion on the definition of proverbs and idioms will be held. The paper will then describe the different types of twisting, the strategy behind this running gag and its rituals. The main challenge will then be broached, that is the translation of such puns, which contain several “layers” of difficulty and are not compatible with most translation techniques. Several extracts from the French (dubbed) version of *NCIS* will finally be analysed, revealing shocking results.

Key-words: *NCIS*, Zivaism, proverbs, idioms, twisting, puns, ‘anti-proverbs’, translation, equivalence

Zivaisms: “American idioms drive me up the ball!” (3–23¹)

NCIS is an ongoing American TV series broadcast by CBS and created by Donald Bellisario and Don McGill. It follows a team from the Naval Criminal Investigation Services and features an Israeli character, agent Ziva David, portrayed by actress Cote de Pablo. Ziva appeared in season 3 as a Mossad operative and soldier, and joined the *NCIS* team, thus moving to the USA, where the action is set. Although she speaks many languages, Ziva has the very peculiar “habit” of using proverbs and idioms inappropriately, since English is not her mother tongue. These blunders are so prominent in the series that they have been named “Zivaisms” by the fans². There is no doubt today about the importance and the impact of these Zivaisms: they are partly responsible for the character’s popularity and have given birth to websites, Internet memes³ and dozens of merchandising products: they are present on mugs, tee-shirts, calendars, pendants, teddy bears, underwear and many more.

Proverbs, idioms and other phraseological units

This study will focus on ‘phraseological’ Zivaisms, which represent the great majority of Zivaisms. Therefore, those which do not concern a multi-word unit but a single word (such as “porcuswine” instead of “porcupine” in 3–04) will not be studied. But it is at this point necessary to introduce the terms that will be used in this article. The definition of proverbs and idioms has always been a problem because of terminology and perspective: there is no consensus in paremiology and phraseology about the definition of such categories because linguists cannot agree on the terms, the criterion and the angle that must be chosen for such a task (cf. Villers 2014). As a consequence, the terminology or the perspective used by one linguist may be confusing to another, even rejected, which hinders progress. This is why some preliminary definitions will now be provided.

The following table shows that all types of phraseological units fall victim to Zivaisms. The table also shows that some terms are generic, such as “phraseological unit” or “idiom”. It is worth mentioning that many linguists use them as synonyms, but I chose to distinguish between figurative and non-figurative multi-word units (such as *at the wrong place at the wrong time*), as in Mel’čuk (2012: 63-65), but without using pejorative terms such as “clichés”.

Phraseological units	Will be used as a generic term to refer to a group a words that is “stable” or “fixed” or “non-free”, and which, as a result, is “conventional”.
Idioms	Will also be used as a (less jargon-ridden) generic term but only to refer to phraseological units or ‘phrasemes’ that are figurative or “non-literal”.
Collocations	Non-figurative combination of a word and a favoured adjunct. Ex: “I found his bank book” (3–05, <i>cheque book</i>)
Phrasal verbs	Verb + particle: “A murderer tried to throw us up!” (5–15, <i>to throw off</i>)
Idiomatic phrases	Idiom composed of a verb phrase or noun phrase. Ex: “Did she give you the cold elbow?” (4–18, <i>to give the cold shoulder</i>)
Idiomatic sentences	Idiom composed of a complete sentence but lacking generic meaning. Ex: “There lies the scratch!” (9–09, <i>There lies the rub</i>)
Idiomatic interrogatives ⁴	Idiom composed of a question but lacking generic meaning and autonomy. Ex: “Does a bear sit in the woods?” (3–13, <i>Does a bear shit in the woods?</i>)
Proverbial phrases	Noun or verb phrase extracted from a proverb. Ex: “You’re counting your eggs before they are laid!” (6–17, <i>to count your chickens before they’re/ve hatched</i> , proverb: <i>Don’t count your chickens before they’re/ve hatched</i>)
Proverbs	Self-sufficient sentence that has currency (and therefore a “stable” form) and a generic meaning regarding Mankind but that is not attributed to a specific author. Ex: “You can’t make an omelette without breaking some legs!” (6–18, <i>You can’t make an omelette without breaking [some] eggs</i>)

Table 1: terminology and examples with Zivaisms (episode number + *correct form*)

However, my choice may appear arbitrary. Why consider that idioms are figurative but not phraseological units (PUs)? Why not the other way round? It could be said that among linguists PUs are less often described as figurative than idioms are, maybe because the term “phraseological *unit*” encourages us to focus on the fact they are composed of several elements or words, and not on their stylistic or rhetorical properties. Therefore, this term appears to have a broader meaning – although more technical – than the term “idiom”, whose etymology suggests something that is “particular to a language”, and thus more prone to evoke figurativeness. As a result, the terminology presented in the table allows a more complete and precise *system*, but it must be noted that it is not the only choice possible, as some linguists have chosen a different terminology⁵ or different criteria, not only for idioms, but also for proverbs (cf. Villers 2014).

The Ziva/NCIS strategy

Zivaisms have a specific function in the series and belong to a broader strategy. One has to bear in mind that the series was created in 2003, three years after its main “rival” among investigation series: *CSI: Las Vegas* (and its later spin-offs *CSI: Miami*, *CSI: NY* and *CSI: Cyber*). As a consequence, *NCIS* contains more humour than *CSI* and focuses more on character development and relationships. This is why every main character has stereotypical traits that can generate humorous situations, such as the soda-addicted and gothic lab analyst

(Abby), the stern and technologically inept boss (Gibbs), the meek and ‘geeky’ Probie (McGee), the eccentric British forensic surgeon who talks to the corpses he dissects (Ducky), the womanizer who quotes movies compulsively (Tony) etc. Among these characters, Ziva needed a weakness to break her perfect image: she is attractive, smart, with a sense of humour, speaks nine languages, practises martial arts, knows how to use weapons (knives, guns, sniper rifles, and can even kill with a credit card). Besides, her mistakes create situations which have become rituals: Zivaisms are (almost) systematically mocked and/or corrected by Ziva’s partners, which annoys her and sometimes causes her to criticize or reject the wording of some proverbs or idioms.

One interesting example can be seen in episode 4–15: Ziva, Tony and police officer Carson, who is collaborating with the NCIS, are observing from behind a one-way mirror as Gibbs interrogates a suspect. Tony, who thinks the suspect will quickly confess, says that “It’s almost unfair interrogating junkies”. Ziva agrees by saying “It’s like shooting fish in a pond”. Carson laughs and looks at Tony, hoping for support, but the latter ignores him. Carson then corrects Ziva: “I think you mean *barrel*”, to which Ziva replies with confidence: “Why would a fish be in a barrel?”. Carson, puzzled, admits “Hum...it’s a good point, I never really... thought about it before”. Ziva eventually nods with a hint of impudence, as if to suggest that Carson’s remark was inappropriate, although he simply corrected her mistake. In a way, this uncanny situation can be seen as Carson’s failed initiation to the ritual that consists in correcting or mocking Ziva.

Classification of Zivaisms

Zivaisms can be related to proverb and idiom twisting given that they are puns created by the series’ writers, even if they are meant to be mistakes in Ziva’s mouth. As a consequence, it is interesting to wonder if they differ from the other types of twisted proverbs and idioms. Does their special status set them apart? Are they based on the same kind of modifications? Several linguists have studied “twisting”, to which they give different names. Regarding twisted proverbs, the most common term among specialists is “anti-proverbs”, coined by Wolfgang Mieder, who has even compiled a book on the subject of modern “twisted wisdom” – cf. Mieder & Litovkina (2002). The following table aims to provide a summary of these names and classifications of modifications.

While Wozniak (2009: 190)’s classification may seem incomplete, one can argue that Litovkina (2009: 141-143)’s mixes several points of view, which causes overlaps.

Barta (2005) on “Anti-proverbs” or “twisting”	A: Paronomasia, polysemy, literal interpretation, homophony, and adjunction. B: Suppression, addition, permutation, substitution.
Litovkina (2009) “Anti-proverbs”, partly based on Esar (1952: 77)	Adding a tail, replacing, melding two proverbs, reversing word order or sounds, puns on paronyms and homonyms, splitting, merging, linking, puns on personal names, bilingual puns, repetitive puns, double puns, story puns.
Rechtsiegel (1990) “Modifications”	Substitutions, contamination, morphological or syntactic change, quantitative changes (addition or suppression), mixed modifications.
Reznikov (2009) “Anti-proverbs”	Similar form and same wisdom, similar form but new wisdom, Extension of the proverb, new form and new wisdom (new proverb).
Villers (2010) “Metaproverbs” ⁶ or “twisted proverbs”	Substitution (formal or semantic in case of literal interpretation), blending or ‘fusion’, permutation, contradiction, suppression, expansion (includes splitting), mix of several types.
Wozniak (2009) “Deviation”	Substitution, Adjunction. (She denies the existence of other types, such as suppression)

Table 2: Types of proverb and idiom modifications

As for Barta (2005: 139-144)’s classification, it lacks transparency: the author lists 5 types of techniques (listed as A) then states that twisting is based on “stylistic ways” which he names “metaplasms” (listed as B). He also mentions a process named “contamination” (from another proverb), which can cause confusion since it gives the impression of several systems of classifications that are not clearly defined and overlap. The classification chosen by Reznikov (2009) in his dictionary seems deceptive, as the term “form” must actually be understood as “structure”. However, Reznikov (2009: 96) provides a clear overview of the different mechanisms of twisting: phonetic ones (homonymy, paronymy, rhyme), morphological ones (spoonerism, neologism etc.), lexical ones (polysemy, anatomy, synonymy etc.), syntactic ones (restructuring, extension) and stylistic ones (metaphor, metonymy, chiasmus etc.).

It is nevertheless necessary to summarise all these categories, as done by Rechtsiegel (1990) – and described by Arsenteva & Yakumova (2012: 3) – or Villers (2010: 159-161), where a special category was added to refer to twisted proverbs that contradict the original proverbs. The different types of Zivaisms, whose definition could be broadened to more than mere mistakes made by Ziva, may thus be classified as follows:

Substitution: 63% ⁷	Did she give you the cold elbow? (4–18, <i>to give the cold shoulder</i>)
Literal interpretation 10,5%	(after an argument, Tony wonders:) How did we get here? – Ziva: I drove! (4–14)
Metalinguistic comments (7,5%)	(about the idiom <i>like shooting fish in a barrel</i>): Why would fish be in a barrel? (4–15)
Blending ⁸ / fusion (6%)	McGee: You know what they say about a watched pot – Ziva: Calls the kettle black! (6–08, <i>A watched pot never boils + the pot calling the kettle black</i>)
Correct idiom (6%)	You must feel like the red-headed stepchild! (7–24)
Voluntary pun (3%)	He’s a chauvinistic royal pain in the <i>tush</i> (7–12, <i>pain in the ass</i>)
Permutation (1,5%)	Look who’s calling the pot black! (3–08)
Reduction (1,5%)	Did you wake up in the wrong bed? (5–13, <i>wrong side of the bed</i>)
Ziva corrects a mistake (0,5%)	You are very tongue-in-ear... – Ziva: She means <i>tongue-in-cheek</i> ! (8–08)

Table 3: types of Zivaisms and their frequency.

As these examples show, I have chosen to include cases where Ziva corrects a mistake or uses a correct idiom, insofar as they give birth to humorous situations and have the same function (in terms of character development strategy). Zivaisms can be described as any linguistically uncanny situation caused by Ziva, whether it is a mistake, a comment or a voluntary pun. This definition is therefore broader than the one suggested by the Internet websites. One can then wonder how Zivaisms differ from other types of twisting. Two prominent functions are generally attributed to proverb and idiom twisting: humour and argumentation (or a mix of both). The latter function can be divided into two strategies: using proverbial authority to your advantage or contesting it, respectively named capturing –«captation» in French– and “subversion” in Grésillon & Maingueneau (1984: 115). It makes no doubt, given the strategy described previously, that the vast majority of Zivaisms have no real argumentative function (except maybe the 3% of voluntary puns) but function primarily as humour triggers. And it is precisely the importance of Zivaisms in the humour creation process and the character development strategy that makes them such a great challenge when it comes to translating them.

Translation challenges

It is no surprise that Zivaisms are a great challenge for translators. Idioms themselves are a challenge as translating them includes detecting the presence of a phraseological unit, then recovering its standard meaning and identifying its meaning in context. Difficulty grows as several criteria must be taken into account, such as the cultural dimension – as reminded by Larson (1984: 180) or Baker (1992: 68) – since phraseological units are often language and culture specific. Besides, the phraseological category or “class” to which a unit belongs should also be respected if possible, as claimed by Anscombe (2008: 253), just like the concept and symbolism conveyed by its image, as stressed by Zouogbo (2008: 320). Finally, the frequency of a phraseological unit has to be taken into consideration, as suggested by Newmark (1981: 8). There is a second layer of difficulty due to the nature of Zivaisms: they often are twisted units, which requires retrieving the original idiom/PU and its meaning, detecting⁹ the twisted/mistaken part, comparing the two, evaluating the (often comical) effect obtained from the comment or twisted PU, but also identifying the cause of the mistake. The main cause for all Zivaisms is of course the fact that Ziva is not a native speaker, but it is possible to identify more precise causes, such as: homophony or resemblance with another sound (“You look like you’ve seen a *goat*” for *ghost*), fusion or “blending” of two

phraseological units (“Drip it!” for *Drop it* and *Zip it*), and quite possibly confusion due to the form of an idiom in another language (it is nevertheless unlikely the writers went so far as to study Israeli idioms). Another point of view is of course to see these mistakes as puns (made by the writers). Translating puns is equally challenging, since they too are language and culture specific, as highlighted by many pun specialists. A third layer of difficulty is added by the video/episode format. First of all, the mouth movements (lip synchrony) and the duration of the utterances (“isochrony”) have to be taken into account for the dubbing, but also the on-screen actions (“content synchrony”) and visual elements such as gestures (“kinetic synchrony”). These criteria can be decisive (cf. Chaume Varela 2004 for audio-visual translation). Finally, Zivaisms may also be repeated from one episode to another, but in a different context, as will be shown below.

When it comes to translating phraseological units in general, several translation techniques have been proposed by linguists. The most influential classifications can be summarised as follows:

Baker (1992: 71-78) on idioms	1/ Using an idiom of similar meaning and form (total equivalence). 2/ Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form (partial equivalence). 3/ Paraphrase. 4/ Omission.
Gottlieb (1997: 317) on idioms and source / target strategies in general	1/ “Bringing the reader to the text” and transferring all cultural & linguistic elements if the source wording is original and relevant. 2/ If the source wording is not relevant, modifications are possible while focusing on the source meaning (stylistic loyalty) or the intended effect on the reader (conceptual loyalty)
Kunin (1964) on idioms	1/ Complete equivalent. 2/ Partial equivalent. 3/ Loan translation. 4/ Contextual replacement. 5/ Descriptive translation.
Naciscione (2011: 273) on idioms	1/ Metaphorical loan translation. 2/ Replacement of metaphor with another. 3/ Or with a description. 4/ Variants. 5/ Replacement with definition. 6/ Keeping the source language. 7/ Void.
Nida & Taber (1969: 106) on idioms	1/ Translation with non-idioms. 2/ Translation with idioms. 3/ Compensation (add idioms). 4/ Literal translation (excluded by the authors).
Sevilla-Munoz (2008) on proverbs	1/ Based on who does the action (« actantielle »). 2/ Based on real meaning (« thématique »). 3/ Finding an equivalent with the same meaning (« synonymique »). 4/ Using a more general or famous saying (« hyperonymique »).

Table 4: translation techniques for idioms and proverbs

Some classifications may appear more detailed than others: Naciscione’s contains more translation techniques as it focuses more on metaphor and creates sub-categories (it even includes “long delay” translation, which is not a technique, but a case where no translation is found for years). Others, such as Nida & Taber’s, are sub-divided into fewer but more general categories which focus on the presence or absence of idiom in the target language. On the other hand, Sevilla-Munoz’s classification focuses on semantic criteria, while Baker’s and Kunin’s models focus more on the degree of idiomaticity and synonymy in the target

language. Finally, Gottlieb's dichotomy is too general and the simplistic dichotomy of source vs target-oriented translation is not compatible with Zivaisms, as will be demonstrated below. Some of these techniques are similar to those described by Delabastita (1993: 192-225) for the translation of puns. The author lists: using a pun, a non-pun that retains the "senses" or part of them, a related rhetorical device, an omission ("zero"), the same untranslated pun, the introduction of a new pun as compensation, or editorial techniques (such as footnotes). Ultimately, all these models correspond to different criteria and focus on specific angles, so it is at this point necessary to propose a global and coherent model that incorporates them all:

- Translating with a non-idiom ("anti" source-oriented): omission (simply deleting the fragment containing the idiom), explanatory translation or paraphrase of the idiom (as sometimes seen in dictionaries), free form (creating)
- Translating with a non-equivalent idiom ("anti" target-oriented): keeping the source language form in the text's target language (although it may not be understood by the readers), literal translation (often leads to posterous results)
- Compensation "in place" or "in kind" (moving or adding idioms in the target language only, to make up quantitatively for the failure to translate).
- Translating with an equivalent idiom, using various degrees of equivalence, ranging from "maximum" to partial:
 - "Loan" idioms or proverbs current in both source and target languages (*tabula rasa, In vino veritas, Carpe diem* etc.)
 - "Maximum" semantic equivalence between source and target: *to take the bull by the horns* → *prendre le taureau par les cornes*.
 - Partial semantic equivalence (various degrees of compromise between source and target): can include cases such as using an idiom with a more general meaning, using another category of phraseological unit (such as an idiom to translate a proverb), changing a metaphor, using a PU that corresponds to the theme or goal

Rechtsiegel (1990), as summarised in Arsenteva & Yakumova (2012: 3), is probably the only linguist who proposed a classification on how to translate twisted idioms. He lists five different techniques: imitation of the initial transformation, transformation of the equivalent, descriptive translation, word for word translation, and finally, simply ignoring the transformation. This classification could be expanded to create sub-categories that include omission, free-form, and more specific cases of transformation of the equivalent. It would be very similar to the model above but most of these translation techniques are not compatible with Zivaisms.

Indeed, due to the nature of Zivaisms and their very function, most translation techniques are excluded: omission is not possible with a video format. Descriptive paraphrases and creation (free form) are also impossible as this would mean deleting the phraseological unit (PU), whose presence is essential in the target language: PUs are the source of many humorous situations, and are characteristic of Ziva, as they are her “Achilles heel”. Although literal translation of idioms is defended by Lécivain (1994: 144-147) and Wilson (2009: 104-116) – who claim that such blatant flouting of the ethno-linguistic aspect can be revealing from a cultural point of view – it would be impossible, even preposterous, in the case of Zivaisms, for French viewers would then not be able to fully understand the extracts, or the intended idioms, or the mistakes/puns made. I therefore concur with Newmark (1981: 125) and Larson (1984: 116) in excluding as often as possible the use of word-for-word or “literal” translation. As a consequence, the best solution is that of equivalence: finding an equivalent PU and making an equivalent mistake/pun, but that is often not the choice made in French.

Zivaisms in the French version’s dubbing:

The study of specific examples reveals more or less shocking translation choices. Indeed, as explained by Chaume Varela (2004: 37), the dubbing director can decide to modify the work done by the translator in order to favour synchronization. This might explain the following choices. The first one is not fully satisfactory regarding its form in the source language but acceptable vis-à-vis the effect in the target language.

English version, episode 3–14	French version
(About interrogation techniques) Ziva: I’ve learned from Gibbs that in certain cases you can attract far more bees with honey – Tony: Flies – Ziva: What do flies have to do with honey? – Tony: Flies don’t like hum ... vinegar – Ziva (puzzled): Vinegar? – Tony: It’s complicated ...	Ziva: J’ai appris par Gibbs que dans certains cas, on attire bien plus d’abeilles avec du sucre – Tony: De mouches – Ziva: Qu’est-ce qu’elles ont à voir avec le sucre? – Tony: Le vinaigre, elles détestent le vinaigre – Ziva: Le vinaigre ? – Tony: C’est compliqué.

In this scene Ziva intends to use the proverb *You can catch/attract more flies with honey than vinegar*, but she substitutes “flies” with “bees”, probably because of the association of bees with honey. Besides, Ziva has omitted the last part of the main proverb variant, which mentions vinegar. The solution should be easily found as there is an equivalent in French: *On n’attrape pas les mouches avec du vinaigre* (literally “You don’t catch flies with vinegar”). Thus, the French proverb has a different syntax (negative form), uses the verb “catch” and does not mention honey or sugar. However, it was translated literally into French. As a result, the reference to the French proverb is more difficult to detect without its syntax and its lexical

elements, and the viewer may not identify the proverb that Ziva intended to use, all the more so since French Tony does not correct the syntax but only one lexical element. On the one hand, the overall result is acceptable since this scene is meant to be confusing, as illustrated by Tony’s final line. On the other hand, the Zivaism and proverb present in the source language have been slightly lost in translation. The ideal solution would have been to use the actual French proverb with the “bee” mistake – J’ai appris par Gibbs que dans certains cas, on n’attrape pas les abeilles avec du vinaigre – and keep Tony’s lexical correction (flies), after which Ziva could ask what flies have to do with honey (associated with bees). Tony’s final line would be unchanged and still awkward, as required by the extract, all the while respecting the proverb form. Synchronization would not be affected despite the close-up shot on their faces and the extra syllable since the key mouth movements are respected.

English version, episode 3–17	French version
Ziva (in a chalet with a ranger, feeling tired): Do you mind if I grab a bat nap? – Ranger (looks up to the ceiling): Nope, just hang from the rafters (Ziva frowns, puzzled)	Ziva: Ça ne t’embête pas si je dors un petit peu? – Ranger: Non, vas-y et refais-toi une santé

This example is a different case, and cannot be considered satisfactory at all, either in regard to the form or the effect. In the French version, Ziva asks if she can “sleep a little”. Thus, both the idiom (*grab a cat nap*) and mistake (substitution with “bat”, caused by phonetic proximity) have been suppressed. Besides, the sarcastic reply from the local officer becomes flat and strikes as a mere attempt at compensation. The French answer translates as “Go ahead, get yourself back on feet”. The idiom used in the French version, *se refaire une santé* (literally to “make yourself a new health”/restore your health) has a very low level of figurativeness and semantic opacity. Therefore, it can easily be understood, even by a person who does not know the expression. Ziva’s perplexed reaction and frowning then becomes hard to justify. Furthermore, the visual element or kinetic synchrony (the ranger looking up to the rafters, from which bats often hang) has been ignored. As a consequence, the extract does not make sense in the French version and is far from being funny. It would have been possible to use a French idiom, with a mistake and a reply that are compatible with a look to the ceiling. The idiom *être/tomber dans les bras de Morphée* (literally “to be in/fall in(to) Morpheus’s arms”), which means to sleep/ fall asleep, may not seem to be the closest equivalent to *take a nap*. But replacing “be” or “fall” with an inappropriate verb such as “jump” would make it a voluntary and dynamic upward process containing an equivalent mistake («ça t’embête si je saute voir Morphée? »), and the ranger could then answer « Non,

mais fais gaffe au plafond » (“No but mind the ceiling”), which respects lip synchrony, kinetic synchrony and isochrony.

English version, episode 4–15	French version
Tony: It’s almost unfair interrogating junkies – Ziva: It’s like shooting fish in a pond – Carson: I think you mean a “barrel” – Ziva: Why would a fish be in a barrel?	Tony: C’est presque injuste d’interroger des drogués – Ziva: Oui, c’est simple comme bonsoir – Carson: Vous voulez dire « bonjour » – Ziva: le matin ou le soir c’est bien pareil ?

The next extract is an example of an average translation, both regarding the form and the effect. This time, Ziva makes a mistake (substitution) because she finds her own version of the idiom more logical. The French idiom chosen is *simple comme bonjour* (“as easy as good morning/afternoon”) and the mistake is the substitution of *bonjour* with *bonsoir* (“good evening”). Thus, the semantic equivalence and the type of mistake are satisfactory, even if they are rather synonyms for *easy as pie* /1, 2, 3. What mainly causes dissatisfaction is French Ziva’s answer to Carson, when she rejects his correction by saying that “morning and evening are the same, aren’t they?”. Once again, the French line is quite flat and less comical. Besides, the metaphor is less vivid. Because of the context (which includes a junkie that is easily tricked into confessing by the cunning Gibbs) and the vivid image of fish being shot, it would be possible to change the point of view (modulation) and choose the equivalent of *to throw yourself / stick your head into the lion’s mouth*, which translates in French as *se jeter dans la gueule du loup* (“to throw yourself into the wolf’s mouth”), while using “lion” instead of the correct “wolf” in French: « Oui, ils se jettent dans la gueule du lion ». This would preserve synchrony and even improve isochrony (syllable count). After Carson’s correction (off camera, so not difficult), Ziva could then answer something about a wolf having too small a mouth to throw yourself into it (« C’est trop petit pour qu’on se jette dans sa gueule »). Thus, isochrony and synchrony are respected, especially the open vowel in *barrel*, which causes a very visible mouth movement because of Ziva’s sideways close-up.

English version, episode 5–04	French version
Tony: (About girls) I’m not ready to start taking tips from you on this yet Probie – McGee: Tony I think it’s time to get back on that horse – Ziva: Are you getting a pony? (dog adoption was broached seconds before) – Tony: It’s an adage – Ziva: I’m not familiar with that breed	Tony: Je ne suis pas prêt à écouter tes conseils en la matière, le bleu! – McGee: Tony je crois qu’il est temps que tu enfourches ce cheval – Ziva: Tu vas adopter un poney ? – Tony: C’est un adage ! – Ziva: je ne connais pas cette race particulière

This scene is the perfect example of the consequences of literal translation. The problem here is not the actual Zivaism (Ziva understands the idiom literally), but rather McGee’s piece of advice to Tony, who seems to have become less successful with women. The horse metaphor

thus refers to going back to seducing women. The French version contains a literal translation with a slight modification – the verb “to mount” (enfourcher) has replaced “to get back on” – which makes it even more difficult for the French viewer to detect and understand the idiom. As a result, the line does not make any sense and many French viewers, who can’t retrieve the resilience metaphor, are left to wonder what “mount that horse” (enfourcher ce cheval) means. Yet, there is an easy solution here, as French has a very close equivalent that includes a metonymic modulation: *se remettre en selle* (literally “to get back on the saddle”, just like the English variant). This would not affect isochrony or synchrony.

English version, episode 6–08	French version
McGee (to Tony, staring at the phone, waiting for a call): You know what they say about a watched pot Tony – Ziva: Calls the kettle black! – McGee: Never boils.	McGee: Quand on reste assis près de son téléphone – Ziva: Il ne sonne jamais – McGee: Exactement.

This scene contains two phraseological units: McGee’s proverb, split into two parts, and Ziva’s mistaken answer (based on the idiomatic sentence *The pot calls the kettle black*). Both the proverb and the Zivaism have been suppressed and replaced with a descriptive paraphrase: “When you sit near your phone – It never rings – Exactly”. The extract must have been considered too difficult by the French translators or the proverb and idiom may not have been retrieved. It is true that McGee’s proverb has no satisfactory equivalent in French, but given the context (Tony desperately waiting for his phone to ring), it would be acceptable to use *All good things come to those who wait* (*Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre* in French). Ziva’s mistake is due to what has been described above as blending or a “graft” of two idioms, so a second French idiom has to be found, even if its meaning is different, as long as they share a lexical element. *Point trop n’en faut* (roughly “do not use too much of a good thing”) is a good candidate, and would fit as Ziva’s uncanny and inappropriate answer. However, Ziva’s mistake echoes Zivaisms found in episodes 8 and 24 of season 3 and which involve *The pot calls/calling the kettle black*. The second solution is therefore to use the French equivalent for the pot and kettle idiom: *C’est l’hôpital qui se fout de la charité* (literally, “It’s the hospital mocking / taking the piss out of charity”). The only solution for McGee’s proverb in terms of lexical similarity would be *Charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même* (*Charity begins at home*). The meaning may be quite different from the source language proverb, but the context – Tony doing something useless that does not help him – makes it compatible. Thus, « Tu sais ce qu’on dit sur la charité bien ordonnée – L’hôpital s’en fout – Commence par soi-même » is a possibility that does not cancel the Zivaism and the comical effect. Tony’s name is replaced with a part of the proverb in order to obtain isochrony, all the while preserving synchrony.

The second part of the French proverb may seem too long in terms of syllable count, but it is possible to bypass this by starting the utterance before the camera moves to McGee's face.

Overall, the analysis of the translation of 135 Zivaisms in the French version leads to the following figures:

- 33% of the translations are satisfactory as they contain an equivalent that does not change the meaning or connotation / effect too much (cf. example 1)
- 30% of the translations are average: 3% are due to poor lip synchronization, 5% to a significant difference in meaning, and 22% to a lack of coherence or a failure to imitate the type of mistake, resulting in a lack of humour (as in example 3).
- 37% of the translations are not satisfactory. In some cases, the Zivaisms and mistakes have been suppressed or ignored, and replaced with a description or a correct idiom (12%, as in examples 2 and 5). In some cases, the wrong meaning was understood or expressed (10%). In even more cases, a nonsensical word-for-word translation was used (14%, cf. example 4). Finally, in one case, a mistake was added where there is none in the source language.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to shed some light on a fascinating and yet little-studied linguistic running gag in the world's most-watched TV series. Zivaisms concern all sorts of phraseological units and contain many types of twisting and uncanny linguistic situations. The reason for such variety lies in the very strategy developed in the TV series. Zivaisms are indeed a very important cog in a well-oiled machine. They may, however, seem to be a spoke in the translator's wheel, but they should actually be seen as a fascinating challenge. One may naturally wonder if such a challenge is compatible with the imperatives of dubbing and translation agencies. What is certain on the other hand is that the work on Zivaisms should be developed. Owing to quantitative imperatives, only a few examples were analysed, making this study only a foundation stone, but it shall be continued in the future.

Endnotes

1. Refers to the twenty-third episode of the third season. The correct idiom is *to drive somebody up the wall*.
2. Several websites and forums are entirely devoted to Zivaisms or to petitions after the character's departure from the series. I will propose a definition that does not only include Ziva's mistakes.

3. The term “meme”, which was coined in *The Selfish Gene* (1996), written by British biologist Dawkins, refers to a unit of culture that spreads through replication. Most examples on the Internet include an image and a humorous text.
4. I therefore depart from Haas (2013) who chooses to name them “proverbial interrogatives” in her *Proverbium 30* article, which seems to connect them to proverbs, despite their lack of generic meaning.
5. Some linguists prefer to use only the term “phraseological unit” and not “idiom”. Many linguists choose to consider that such units must be figurative (by definition). Therefore, paremiologists with a cognitive approach pay little attention to non-figurative units. My terminology aims to avoid casting them aside.
6. I do not use this term to refer to proverbs about proverbs, but as a synonym for “anti-proverb”, which is a term that seems aggressive and possibly deceptive. “Meta” refers to the metalinguistic function, as described in Russian linguist Roman Jakobson’s classification of language functions (which completes Karl Bühler’s previous classification).
7. This percentage was obtained from a corpus of 135 Zivaisms based on phraseological units.
8. This phenomenon is described in Polguère (2007) and Legallois (2013) and referred to as “grafts”.
9. For more detail on the processing of modified idioms, refer to Omazić (2008: 76-77).

References

- ANSCOMBRE, Jean-Claude, 2008. Les formes sentencieuses: peut-on traduire la sagesse populaire? In *Meta, Journal des Traducteurs* vol 53–2, 253–268.
- ARSENTEVA, Elena & YAKUMOVA, Albina, 2012. Translation possibilities of occasional contextual modifications of phraseological units. In *Proverbium 29*, 1-12.
- BARTA, Péter, 2005. Au pays des proverbes, les détournements sont rois. Contribution à l’étude des proverbes détournés du français (I). In *Paremia* n° 14, 139–152.
- BAKER, Mona, 1992. In *Other Words: a coursebook on translation*. London: Routledge.
- CHAUME VARELA, Frederic, 2004. Synchronization in dubbing, a translational approach. In Orero, P (eds) *Topics in Audiovisual Translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 35–52.
- DELABASTITA, Dirk, 1993. *There’s a Double Tongue. An investigation into the translation of Shakespeare’s wordplay with special reference to Hamlet*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- ESAR, Evan, 1952. *The Humor of Humor*. New York: Horizon Press.
- GOTTLIEB, Henrik, 1997. *Subtitles, Translations & idioms*. Copenhagen: Center for translation studies and lexicography.
- GRESILLON, Almuth & MAINGUENEAU, Dominique, 1984. Polyphonie, proverbe et détournement. In *Langages* n° 73, 112–125.
- KUNIN, Alexander, 1964. *Basic Concepts of English Phraseology as a Linguistic Discipline and Creation of an English-Russian Dictionary of Phraseology*. Doctoral thesis for Moscow University.
- LARSON, Mildred, 1984. *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- LECRIVAIN, Claudine, 1994. La traduction des proverbes: opération langagière ou pratique culturelle? In *Estudios de lengua y literatura francesas* 8–9, 129–148.
- LEGALLOIS, Dominique, 2013. Les greffes phraséologiques – ou quand la syntaxe se compromet. In *Langages* vol 189, 1-14.
- LITOVKINA, Anna, 2009. The pun is mightier than the sword: types of punning in Anglo-American anti-proverbs. *The Proverbial “Pied Piper”*. New York: Peter Lang, 141–154.
- MEL’CUK, Igor, 2012. Phraseology: Its Place in the Language, in the Dictionary, and in Natural Language Processing. In *Selected Papers of the 10th International Conference of Greek Linguistics, 2012*. Komotini: Demokritus University of Thrace, 62–77.
- MIEDER, Wolfgang & LITOVKINA, Anna, 2002. *Twisted Wisdom, Modern Anti-Proverbs*. Hobart: De Proverbio.

- NACISCIONE, Anita, 2011. A Cognitive Approach to Translating Phraseological Terms. In *Focal Issues of Phraseological Studies: Research on Phraseology in Europe and Asia* vol. 1, 269–290.
- NEWMARK, Peter, 1981. *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford: Pergamon
- NIDA, Eugene & TABER, Charles, 1969. *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: Brill.
- OMAZIC, Marija, 2008. Processing of idioms and idioms modifications. In Granger, S & Meunier, F (eds) *Phraseology, an interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 67–79.
- POLGUERE, Alain, 2007. Soleil insoutenable et chaleur de plomb: le statut linguistique des greffes collocationnelles. <http://olst.ling.umontreal.ca/pdf/GreffesColloc2007.pdf>, September 28, 2014.
- RECHTSIEGEL, Eugenie, 1990. Individuelle Modifikationen fester phraseologischer Verbindungen in der Translation. In *Deutsche Sprache im Kontrast und im Kontakt*, 89–98.
- REZNIKOV, Andrey, 2009. *Old Wine in New Bottles, Modern Russian Anti-Proverbs*. Burlington: Proverbium 27 supplement.
- SEVILLA-MUNOZ, Julia, 2008. Les parémies sur le loup et leur équivalent espagnol. In *Traductologie, Proverbes et Figements*, 195–209.
- STRAKSIENE, Margarita, 2009. Analysis of idiom translation strategies from English into Lithuanian. In *Studies About Languages* vol 14, 13–19.
- VILLERS, Damien, 2010. Les modalités du détournement proverbial. In *Modèles linguistiques*, Tome 41 vol. 62, 147–172.
- 2014. *Le Proverbe et les Genres Connexes*. Sarrebruck: Presses Académiques Francophones.
- WILSON, Freeda Catherine, 2009. *A model for translating metaphors in proverbs (French to English): a cognitive descriptive approach*. Master Thesis for the University of Okanagan.
- WOZNIAK, Audrey, 2009. Le proverbe détourné : étude théorique appliquée à un corpus bilingue franco-espagnol. In *Paremia* n°18, 185–196.
- ZOUOGBO, Jean-Philippe, 2008. Traduire le proverbe: à la recherche d'équivalences parémiologiques en bété pour la constitution d'un corpus trilingue allemand/français/bété. In *Meta: Journal des Traducteurs* vol 53, 310–323.

Curriculum vitae

Damien Villers teaches English linguistics and translation at the University of Nice. He did his PhD thesis on the definition of proverbs and published a book entitled *Le Proverbe et les Genres Connexes* (Presses Académiques Francophones, 2014) as well as several articles dealing with proverb twisting or dissemination, the pragmatic use of proverbs and above all, “proverbiogenesis” (in *Proverbium* 2015).

Email: villers@unice.fr