

# English idioms of Scottish origin and their equivalents in Croatian

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**English idioms of Scottish origin and their equivalents in Croatian**

Završni rad

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## **Abstract**

Phraseology is a field of study that investigates a set of linguistic units called phraseological units. These units are expressions which consist of at least two independent words. Such expressions can be idioms, proverbs or any phrase which may carry connotations and have an empathic or intensifying function in a text (Fiedler 2007: 23). Every language has its own idioms and proverbs which enrich it and give the language more colourful and personal note. Standard English language on its own has many such expressions, but there are many different variants of the language. One of these is Scottish English. Scotland, England's first neighbour, has its own history and language which has for many years been fighting for its status as a legitimate language because, as Tom MacArthur says in his book *The English Languages*, it is still not clear whether it is just a dialect, semi-language or a language. Furthermore, learning idioms and proverbs is especially challenging for non-native speakers of a language. From personal experience, when faced with a new idiom or proverb, speaker first tries to translate it literally into his own language in order to understand it. Sometimes that is enough to grasp the meaning, but sometimes translating can be very demanding because some expressions are unavailable in some languages and it is hard to find an appropriate substitute. Also, the original meaning and intended point may be lost in translation. This paper focuses on Scottish idioms and their translation into Croatian. First, an explanation of basic terms and history will be provided. Second, the similarities and differences in chosen idioms will be shown and discussed through various translation techniques to show that, even though these two languages are substantially different, many expressions can find their equivalent and successfully transmit the intended message.

**Keywords:** Scots, Croatian, idiom, translation, PUs

## **1. Introduction**

Translating phraseological units can be very demanding. Though studied through phraseology, they may still be a mystery to a non-native speaker of a certain language but also play an essential role in learning, understanding and successfully using any foreign language. These expressions, which have been moulded throughout the history, carry a very personal note for every language and can sometimes be understood only through language's history and examples of usage. This paper will provide examples of Scottish idioms and give their equivalents in Croatian. The first part of the paper will give the theoretical overview explaining the basic terms of phraseology and explain the difficulties in translating idioms. The second part will provide a short review of Scottish history, a description of Scottish language and problems that Scottish language faces. The third part will consist of examples of Scottish idioms and their equivalents in Croatian. Also, the translation techniques will be discussed. The last part of this paper will draw some general conclusions about translating phraseological units.

## 2. Theoretical overview

### 2.1. *Phraseology*

The term phraseology can be used to name the field of study and to denote the set of linguistic units that are investigated in this field (Fiedler 2007: 15). These linguistic units consist of phraseological units which constitute phrasicon - the block or inventory of idioms and phrases (Fiedler 2007: 15). A phraseological unit is a polylexemic item that consists of at least two independent words and it is conventionalized in content and structure (Fiedler 2007: 17). Phraseology studies such types of multi-word lexical units whose meaning is more specific or not predictable from the sum of the meanings of the words included. Also, phraseology explains the main characteristics of phraseological units such as polylexemic structure (Fiedler 2007: 17); stability (stable semantic and syntactic structure of PU) (Fiedler 2007: 19); lexicalization (PU is retained in the collective memory of a language community) (Fiedler 2007: 21); idiomaticity (the meaning of an expression is difficult or impossible to derive from the meanings of the constituents) (Fiedler 2007: 22); connotations (used to put more emphasis on the speaker's or writer's intention) (Fiedler 2007: 23); transformational deficiencies (e.g. resisting syntactic transformations such as passivization) (Fiedler 2007: 26).

## 2.2. *Idioms*

The word “idiom” can have different meanings but traditionally it is used in a form of expression, grammatical construction or a phrase peculiar to a language and it often has significance other than its grammatical or logical one (Fiedler 2007: 16). Characterised by idiomaticity, they cause many problems for language learners, who usually know the meanings of all the words in a phrase but are unable to grasp the meaning of the expression. Moreover, there are different degrees of idiomaticity ranging from real idioms (fully opaque expressions) to fully transparent PUs (Fiedler 2007: 22). Next, Rosemarie Gläser differentiates between unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral idioms (Fiedler 2007: 23). Unilateral idioms (e.g. *black market*) contain one constituent which has contained its literal meaning and supports the decoding of the meaning of the idiom, bilateral idioms both constituents are used in figurative meanings, while multilateral idioms are units of more than two constituents with complex semantic relationships (e.g. *to burn the candle at both ends*) (Fiedler 2007: 23).

Furthermore, it is very difficult to translate idioms because some expressions are unavailable in some languages and it is hard to find an appropriate substitute. Idioms are used to express metaphorical meaning and mostly paraphrases are used to translate PUs but in that way most of the original meaning is lost. Also, translating PUs requires a lot of translator’s time and the translator must be persistent in finding the right translation.

### 3. Scottish English

#### 3.1. *History of Scottish English*

Scots is the direct descendant of the Northumbrian form of Old English, planted in south-eastern Scotland between 525 and 633, which eventually spread over the whole Lowland Zone up to Morayshire by the 1200s (Britain 2007: 105). While it functions as the localised dialect of Lowland Scotland, it enjoys a special status due to an important aspect of its history – it is the only Germanic variety in Britain besides Standard English ever to have functioned as a full language within an independent state and to have been used for all domains that implies exhibiting a range of genres, styles and registers comparable to any Western European national language (Britain 2007: 105). It underwent the early stages of standardisation about the same time as English did, and there is no question that it would have become as independent from English had not the religious and political turmoil of the 16<sup>th</sup> century changed the course of Scottish history (Britain 2007: 105-106). The use of English religious materials, the increasing political ties between Scotland and England and the rise of a London-based spoken standard in Britain generally were some of the reasons which paved the way for Anglicisation. This left Scots associated only with working-class society. However, Scottish national identity and Scots still remains strong and there are still large regions within Scotland where people of high social prestige speak Scots on a daily basis, at least in casual situations.

Furthermore, the post-1700 Scots literary corpus, which may have set the tone for what dialect literature means in English-speaking world, contains too much diversity and experimentation with language to be defined only as a dialect (Britain 2007: 106). The poet Hugh MacDiarmid aimed to recreate a modern equivalent to the Older Scots literary language by consciously avoiding any association with a dialect-literary tradition (Britain 2007: 106). Many Scottish cultural nationalists followed his philosophy and claimed that Scots is a true minority language just like Welsh or Gaelic.



### 3.2. *Dialect, language, or semi-language?*

The status of Scots has been a topic of a heated argument for years. Linguists cannot seem to agree whether Scots is a dialect of English, an independent language or something in between. However, more and more linguists, like J. Derrick McClure, Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum acknowledge Scots as an independent language.

For many in Scotland and elsewhere, Scots is considered to be an English dialect and many linguists would entitle it as a dialect within English as, for example, American English. Despite its distinctiveness in sound, spelling, syntax and vocabulary it is not different enough structurally and lexically to be an independent language. Also, it has no official status, no significant presence in schools, only a minor role in country's legal system, and no role whatever in its administration (MacArthur 2000: 139).

On the other hand, the reasons in favour of Scots being an independent language are these: it has a highly distinctive sound system, grammar, and vocabulary, dating from over a thousand years ago, long before either Scotland or England was a state as understood today (MacArthur 2000: 139); it has a varied and unbroken literary tradition from the Middle Ages to the present day and writers who have used Scots on its own or with English (Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hugh MacDiarmid and others) (MacArthur 2000: 139); it has dialects on its own, ranging from the Borders to the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland (MacArthur 2000: 139); in 1995 it was recognized as a language by the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages (MacArthur 2000: 139). Moreover, McClure says that Scots cannot be a dialect because it itself has dialects and it has more traits of a full language than other varieties declared independent at the same time, such as Asturianu, Schwäbisch, Limburgs or Venetian.

Finally, the third theory is proposed by A. J. Aitken who says that the "Older Scots" was an autonomous national language, with its own distinctive pronunciations, vocabulary and spelling (MacArthur 2000: 141). Later, the Scots would adopt the Bible in English and not a separate translation into Scots. As a written language Older Scots ceased to exist in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (MacArthur 2000: 141).

Also, Aitken states that a distinguished German scholar once called Scots a "halbsprache" which was translated as "semi-language" (MacArthur 2000: 141).

### **3.3. *Scottish Standard English***

Scottish Standard English (SSE) developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century as a compromise system between London and localised Scots norms (Britain 2007: 108). It co-exist with Scots and has evolved into a continuum of types, ranging from a highly-Scotticised version used by working-class speakers in formal styles, to outright Standard British English with near-RP pronunciation used by some upper-middle-class members in cities like Edinburgh (Britain 2007: 109). SSE also forms the basis of Highland and Hebridean English and functions as a first language in many parts of the Highlands (Britain 2007: 109).

Since the linguistic difference between Scots and SSE is greater than between any English Standard/vernacular pair, there is a distinct sense of a bilingual situation (Britain 2007: 110). Many speakers posses two linguistic codes, each with its own grammar, and which causes code-switching. It can be defined as an alternation between the two poles, but mixing of two systems also happens regularly.

#### 4. Translating Scottish idioms into Croatian

This section contains twenty Scottish idioms and their equivalents in Croatian as well as the explanation of certain words or comments on the technique of translation. The chosen examples are the examples of phrases used more often in everyday life.

(1) To be thick as mince. (CDOS: 88)

- To be very stupid. (He's bound to fail the exam, he's thick as mince.)
- *Biti glup kao stup/guzica/klada/konj(vol, tele)/noć*(HFR: 146.)

In both languages *to be stupid* is connected with something solid or dense like *mincemeat* in English or *stup(pier)* in Croatian. Also, in Croatian it is sometimes associated with animals, like *vol(ox)* or *tele(calf)* who are not known for their intelligence, or with *noć(night)* which can be interpreted as *not very bright*.

(2) To knock yir pan oot. (CDOS: 97)

- To tire yourself out by working extremely hard (I knocked ma pan oot for that firm and they made me redundant.)
- *Pretrgnuti se od posla.* (HFR: 422.)

This phrase is used in the context of hard work and *pan* is another word for skull, but when combined with *knock out* it can be translated as *onesvijestiti se od posla*. However, the phrase *pretrgnuti se od posla* is more commonly used.

(3) Something is the price of someone. (CDOS: 106)

- Something that person deserves and it serves them right (It'll be the price of you if the police catch you.)
- *Obiti se o glavu* (HFR: 143.)

In SE the phrase deals with paying the price for your mistakes, while in Croatian it says that the mistake will come back to you and hit you in the head.

(4) Who stole your scone? (CDOS: 118)

- Why are you looking so miserable? (You look down in the dumps – who stole your scone? My girlfriend's run off with the milkman)
- *Izgedati kao pokisla kokoš – potišteno, utučeno, deprimirano* (HFR: 223.)
  - *Izgeda kao da su mu sve lađe potonule* (HFR: 277.)

Scone denotes a flat round baked cake made of wheat, barley or oatmeal, with baking powder as a leavening agent and baked on sheet pans. In the past, it was an essential part of everyday nutrition and it would make a person sad if someone took away their scone. There are two possible translations in Croatian which deal with being left out in the rain (*pokisla kokoš – chicken left out in the rain*) or losing all your hope (*sve lađe potonule – all ships sank*). However, there is another possible translation which is characteristic only for the Kajkavian dialect – *'Zgleda ko da mu je pura kruha 'zela* (He looks as if the turkey stole his bread) – which would maybe be the best translation, but it is not a Standard Croatian language.

(5) Haud yir wheesht! (CDOS: 152)

- Be quiet! Shut up! (Haud yir wheesht! Ah'm trying to hear what she's saying!)
  - *Začepi gubicu!* (HFR: 168.)/ *Drži jezik za zubima!* (HFR: 196.)

Literally, this would be translated as *hold your silence* and the closest translation in Croatian would be *drži jezik za zubima* (*hold your tongue behind your teeth*) while *začepi gubicu* (*shut your gob*) would be a derogatory term.

(6) A nod's as guid as a wink tae a blind horse. (SAH)

- You cannot get people to take a hint if they're determined not to (I keep hinting to the boss that I deserve a raise, but he doesn't seem to get the point. I'm not surprised. A nod's as guid as a wink tae a blind horse.)
- *Kao gluhom dobro jutro/dobar dan – uzaludno, suvišno, beskorisno* (HFR: 201.)

It does not matter whether you nod or wink, a blind horse cannot see it. In Croatian it says that it does not matter to a deaf person if you say “good morning” because they cannot hear you.

(7) Yer aff yer heid! (SAH)

- You're crazy! (Get down right now, it's very dangerous! Are yer aff yer heid?)
  - *Sići s uma/pameti* (HFR: 638.)

The phrase can be translated literally because the meaning and the form is the same in both languages.

(8) A canna sell the cou an sup the milk. (SLS)

- You can't do or get two good things at the same time (I wanted to work from home so I could be with my family, but a canna sell the cou an sup the milk so I had to quit my job.)
- *Htjeti i ovce i novce/Vuk sit i koza cijela – ne htjeti se ničega odreći; da svi budu zadovoljni* (HFR: 403.)

This Scottish phrase says you cannot sell the cow and sup the milk which is actually an equivalent to the English phrase *you can't have your cake and eat it*. Croatian version would be *you can't buy sheep and keep the money or the wolf satiated and the goat alive*.

(9) That wull be whan the deil's blinn, an he's no bleer-eed yit. (SLS)

- That will never happen. (Mike keeps talking that he will find a job soon but we all know that wull be whan the deil's blinn, an he's no bleer-eed yit.)
  - *Kad na vrbi rodi grožđe – nikada* (HFR: 679.)

The literal translation would be *that will be when the devil is blind, and he has no blurred eye yet* saying it will take a long time for the devil to become blind because his vision is perfect at the moment. In Croatian this phrase says that something will happen *when the willow tree bears grapes*. Of course, willow tree does not bear grapes, therefore something will never happen.

(10) Ti fell twa dugs wi the ae bane/stane. (SLS)

- To solve two problems at one time with a single action. (Ah fell twa dugs wi the ae stane and saw some old frineds when I was in Aberdeen visiting my parents.)
  - *Ubiti dvije muhe jednim udarcem – ostvariti dvostruku korist* (HFR: 629.)

In Scottish version two dogs are killed with the same stone, while in Croatian version two flies are killed with the same blow.

(11) Have a good conceit of yourself. (CDOS: 36)

- To have a very high opinion of yourself (No one thinks he has a chance of winning, but he himself has a good conceit of himself)
  - *Dignuti/dizati nos do neba – ponašati se oholo; imati visoko mišljenje o sebi* (HFR: 371.)
- Translation deals with rising your nose up to the sky which suggest that you look down on other people.

(12) Something is doon the stank./ It's aw by nou. (CDOS: 130)

- It is too late/ Something is lost forever (The money went doon the stank)
  - *Prošla baba s kolačima* (HFR: 25.)

Meaning you lost your chance for something and now it is too late. In Croatian it is connected with the granny selling cakes. If you do not catch the granny when she is at your door, you will not get a cake.

(13) At the hinner end. (SLI)

- In the long run (The work may seem meaningless, but it pays off at the hinner end.)
  - *Na duge staze – na dulje vrijeme, zadugo* (HFR: 563.)

*Hinner* is a Scottish version of *hinder* meaning *rear* or *behind*. It can be interpreted as something that takes a long time to develop and it seems pointless, but when you look back you realize it was important and something good came out of it in the end.

(14) Be on one's tap. (SLI)

- Consistently criticising someone. (She's on the media's tap very often because of her political opinions)
- *Uzeti na zub/Imati pik na koga, što – okomiti se na nekoga, zlonamjerno postupati* (HFR: 711.)

In Scottish *tap* means *top*. This could be interpreted in a way that you are on someone's top; that someone is thinking and talking about you a lot, but in a negative way. In Croatian this phrase is connected to teeth or spade; something sharp and able to crush you.

(15) Cowp somebody's hurlie. (SLI)

- Upset someone's plans (He wants to build a house, but the recent accident couped his hurlie.)
- *Pomrsiti sve konce/račune – pokvariti planove* (HFR: 231.)

Literal translation would be *to capsize someone's basket*, while the Croatian version deals with *entangling someone's strings/bills*.

(16) Haud the stick over. (SLI)

- To dominate. (He wanted to go out with his friends, but his wife said no. She really hauds the stick over him.)
- *Držati pod čizmom/papučom/u šahu/ Staviti pod svoju šapu – strogo upravljati kime; držati u podčinjenom položaju* (HFR: 594.)

*Hold the stick over someone* associates with the image of a coach, conductor, parent, the person who holds the stick is in power. In Croatian this idiom is usually connected with the foot (boot, slipper, paw) where foot can be interpreted as a backbone and therefore imply the strength of something or someone.

(17) Yir eens bigger nor yir belly. (SLI)

- You have taken a larger portion of food than you're able to eat (Why did you leave so much food on your plate? Yir eens bigger nor yir belly.)
- *Imati veće oči od želuca – biti lakom na hranu/imati prevelike ambicije* (HFR: 389.)

The phrase is found in both languages and can be translated literally. Also, besides food, it can also imply that someone's ambitions or expectations are too high.

(18) Keep aye something fir a sair fit/leg. (SLS)

- Save for a rainy day. (Don't spend all your money now. Keep aye something fir a sair fit.)
- Čuvati za crne dane/Čuvati bijele novce za crne dane – štedjeti za nesigurnu budućnost (HFR: 84.)

Literal translation would be *keep always something for a sore feet*. Could be interpreted as keep always something for the times when you will not be able to work. In Croatian the phrase involves keeping your money for *black days*, when the future is uncertain.

(19) Like a slung-stane. (SLS)

- Like a bolt from the blue. (I didn't see the car. It appeared like a slung-stane and hit me)
- Kao grom iz vedra neba – iznenada (HFR: 166.)

The Scottish version deals with the sling-stone suddenly coming out of nowhere. Croatian translation is more closer to the standard English version as they both deal with thunder from the clear sky.

(20) Ye kin mak naither tap, tail nor main o't. (SLS)

- Fail to understand; be confused about something (Ah kin mak naither tap, tail nor main o't that writing on the wall.)
- Ne moći uhvatiti ni za glavu ni za rep – ne moći shvatiti nešto (HFR: 142.)

Two phrases are same in form and meaning.



## 5. Conclusion

Scottish English has its own sound system, grammar, and vocabulary as well as literary works and famous writers who wrote in Scottish English. However, due to great Anglicisation and the fact that it does not have an official status of a language, it is still widely considered only as an English dialect. There have been many theories and arguments to determine what Scots really is and many linguists state that Scots really should receive a status of an independent language but it has not happened yet. Scottish Standard English developed as a compromise system and in order to preserve Scottish identity along with the “Old Scots”. This causes regular code-switching among the speakers. Until it is decided whether Scots is a language or not, maybe the safest way to refer to it is “semi-language” (MacArthur 2000: 141). Even though it is not recognized as a language it is for certain something more than a mere dialect.

In the above provided examples it can be seen that phrases are easily translated into Croatian. Some of them are same in form and meaning while for others, even though they use different words, the meaning shows itself if one is ready to think about possible equivalents and explore Scottish vocabulary.

However, the translator sometimes faces the problem of not finding an appropriate idiom in the target language and losing the original meaning of the PU. But PUs are a part of every language, a part that is different and specific for every language and a part that enriches and presents a language as one beautiful unit. This is the reason why we should keep trying to translate PUs as true as possible and explore new ways of translating and learning about our own language but also about the language we are translating from.

## **List of abbreviations**

CDOS – Concise Dictionary of Scottish Words and Phrases

HFR – Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik

SAH – Scottish at Heart

SLI – Scots Language Idioms

SLS – Scots Language Sayings

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