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Calquing and borrowing of idiomatic noun compounds

Ramón Martí Solano

Abstract

This study examines the calquing and, to a lesser extent, the borrowing of a specific group of idiomatic noun compounds, namely those including a colour term as in *white elephant* or *black spot*. This phraseological contrastive study involves English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. Although most cases are examples of calques of English compounds to be found in these four Romance languages, we will be looking as well into the influence of French not only on English but also on the other languages. Our claim is that an important number of these calques have made their way into these languages, and many others, especially via the international press and media and that they display different degrees of institutionalisation.

1 Loan translation versus semantic borrowing

A clear distinction should be drawn between a multi-word loan translation, or a phraseological calque, as in En. *yellow press* > Sp. *prensa amarilla* and a multi-word semantic borrowing, or a phraseological semantic loan, as in En. *black hole* > Fr. *trou noir*. In the first example the combination as such does not exist in the recipient language whereas in the second example the combination already exists in the recipient language with a well-established, specialized meaning (in the case of En. *black hole* or Fr. *trou noir*, “a region in space where gravity is so strong that nothing, not even light, can escape”) and this is the case not only for Fr. *trou noir* but also for the other Romance languages counterparts such as It. *buco nero*, Po. *buraco negro* or Sp. *agujero negro*. It is therefore, and in the case of phraseological semantic loans, a new sense of the existing multi-word unit, developed in the donor language, which is calqued. This type of semantic borrowing, in the history of Anglo-French lexical intercourse, has been designated by Mackenzie as an *emprunt déguisé* (‘disguised loan’). Early examples are *vers blanc*, a calque from ‘blank verse’ (Mackenzie 1939: 44) or *presse jaune*, from ‘yellow press’ (Mackenzie 1939: 252). Many other examples have been observed and registered in the second half of the twentieth century, as is the case of *donner le feu vert* (< ‘give sb/sth the green light’), first attested somewhere between 1955 and 1960 according to the *Dictionnaire des expressions et locutions* (DEL).

2 Wholly versus partially idiomatic noun compounds

Idiomatic noun compounds, as all compounds, can be either exocentric, or wholly idiomatic, as in En. *white elephant*, or endocentric, or partially idiomatic, as in En. *white lie*. The following quotation points out this difference and establishes two distinct categories:

However, such compounds are generally not regarded as idioms unless the complete lexical item is metaphoricized, for example, *blue blood* ‘noble or royal ancestry’ [...] The referent of *green room* is literally a type of room, so the term does not qualify as an idiom. (Ayto 2006: 404)

Nonetheless, a certain number of lexicographers and phraseologists include the ‘white lie type’ in dictionaries of idioms and phraseology research studies. *White lie*, to take this same example, has its own entry in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (CCDI).

FEIs¹ functioning as nominal groups are problematic since it is not always clear how to distinguish them from noun compounds [...] Defectiveness, whether syntagmatic, inflectional, or collocational, is key in distinguishing between noun compounds and nominal FEIs. In general, fixed nominal groups classified here as FEIs are metaphorical, and they tend to be evaluative rather than simply descriptive or denotative. [...] a dead loss, a clean sheet, a free hand, ivory tower. (Moon 1998: 87-88)

As stated above, distinguishing between a noun compound and an idiom made up of two constituents can sometimes be an arduous task. The compounds chosen by Moon are all exocentric and wholly idiomatic and metaphoricity seems to play a decisive role in establishing both categories. As far as we are concerned and for the purposes of this study, both types, wholly and partially idiomatic compounds, will be taken into consideration and will be the object of our analysis.

¹ The abbreviation FEI stands for ‘fixed expressions and idiom’.

3 Idiomatic compounds with a colour constituent

If we consider institutionalisation as a benchmark for acceptance of phraseological calques or loan translations, we can state that, as far as French is concerned, *feu vert* (green light) is the most institutionalised idiomatic compound of this type whereas *éléphant blanc* (a white elephant)² is certainly the least institutionalised (Martí Solano 2012b: 211). In this context, particular attention should be paid to what has been called ‘phraseological false friends’ (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen 2005: 108), that is a misleading analytical semantic similarity of constituents, as for instance En. *white wedding* versus Fr. *mariage blanc*. A *white wedding* in English is ‘a traditional Christian marriage in a church, at which a woman who is getting married wears a white dress’, whereas the compound *mariage blanc* is used in French to mean either a non-consummated marriage or a marriage of convenience. However, *mariage blanc*, with only 3 occurrences in the online archives of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, is definitely not a well-established borrowing in English if we compare this scanty number with other native combinations such as *sham marriage*, with 88 occurrences, or *fake marriage*, with 22 occurrences, both of them semantically equivalent and much more widely used. The existence of native equivalents to calques or borrowings has to be systematically acknowledged and verified in order to put them into perspective and measure the full extent of the phenomenon.

It seems evident that English shows a tendency to favour direct loans when compared to the other four languages. French is the main source of these loans with examples such as *carte blanche* or *éminence grise*³. The latter has its counterparts in the other languages, not as a direct loan but in the form of loan translations (It. *eminenza grigia*, Po. *eminência parda* and Sp. *eminencia gris*). The same could be said about the English borrowing from French *carte blanche*, usually found within the syntactic frame GIVE + SOMEBODY + CARTE BLANCHE + TO +

² Even though the colour white is usually associated with positive or very positive things, certain combinations such as *white elephant* or *white feather* have clearly developed a negative undertone (Bennett & Bennett 1981: 24).

³ Here are the definitions of these borrowings in the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (CALD): *carte blanche* (‘complete freedom to do something’) and *éminence grise* (‘someone without an official position who has power or influence over rulers or people who make decisions’). English has both *éminence grise* and *grey eminence*. The calque seems to be less widely used than the direct loan if we consider the total number of tokens of the former, 15, and of the latter, 26, in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA).

DO + SOMETHING⁴. The Romance languages have clearly opted for the calque and have come up with It. *carta bianca*, Po. *carta bianca* and Sp. *carta blanca*.

3.1 The ‘black’ compounds

The colour term *black* is, together with *white*, the most prolific constituent in compounds and other types of set phrases and fixed expressions in the five languages of this study. Idiomatic and semi-idiomatic compounds with *black* can be found, for instance, in the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (ODI), which includes *black box*, *the black sheep* and *black spot* or in the CCDI that registers *black box*, *black look*, *black mark* and *black sheep*.

The case of *the black sheep* or *the black sheep in the family* constitutes a representative example of one of the most widespread idioms for which equivalents have been found in 50 different European languages (Pirainen 2012: 185). As for *black box*, this combination is included in the ODI and defined as ‘an automatic apparatus, the internal operations of which are mysterious to non-experts.’⁵, whereas the CCDI defines it not as a noun compound with a physical referent but in its figurative sense as ‘You can refer to a process or system as a black box when you know that it produces a particular result but you do not understand how it works.’

We would like to consider the case of *black spot*, which is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as ‘A place or area of trouble, anxiety, or danger; esp. a dangerous section of a road.’ The first recorded example is from 1937 and reads ‘Road-crossing improvements at ‘black spots’ throughout London.’ Spanish has calqued this sense and has applied it to the already existing native combination *punto negro*. The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (DRAE) registers the compound with two distinct senses⁶ different from the sense of the English combination albeit the fact that the press abounds with this calqued sense as illustrated in (1):

⁴ The equivalent native phrase *free hand* is to be regularly found in exactly the same syntactic frame, which accounts for both semantic and syntactic synonymy. However, a search carried out in the online archives of *The New York Times* has shown that the number of hits of the target combination *a free hand to* approximately doubles that of *carte blanche to* (34,800 vs 17,800).

⁵ After the definition, the lexicographer includes an information box where one can read ‘[...] the phrase is now used in aviation specifically to refer to the flight recorder’, which accentuates even more its non-figurative sense.

⁶ The first sense is defined as ‘*Poros de la piel que debe este color a la acumulación de grasa y suciedad*’ and the second one as ‘*Aquello que resulta negativo, conflictivo o peligroso*’.

(1) *Esta carretera suma otra característica para la reflexión: todos sus puntos negros persisten por tercer año consecutivo entre los más peligrosos de España, de acuerdo con la clasificación que realiza el Real Automóvil Club de España (RACE), que ayer dio a conocer la correspondiente a 2008. (El País, 18 December 2008)*

Another example of semantic borrowing is represented by Fr. *trou noir*, It. *buco nero*, Po. *buraco negro* and Sp. *agujero negro*). As with Sp. *punto negro*, this is another case of calquing of a semantic extension to a pre-existing native combination.

The case of *trou noir* is representative of the phenomenon of calquing of a semantic extension. The compound noun is either used as a specialised term in astronomy or figuratively in the phrase *C'est le trou noir* to indicate a situation of deep unhappiness or depression. The 2009 edition of the LPR⁷ only registers these two senses. The sense that the compound has acquired in English as “an imaginary place in which things are lost” has been calqued in French [...] (Martí Solano 2012b: 206)

3.2 The ‘white’ compounds

White is widely used as an idiomatic compound constituent, with roughly the same amount of compounds as *black*, in the CALD. The English compound *white-collar*, usually instantiated as *white-collar workers* or *white-collar crime*, has been calqued in French as *col blanc*⁸, in Italian as *colletto bianco*, in Portuguese as *colarinho branco* and in Spanish as *cuello blanco*. Strikingly interesting is the nominalization of the calque and the use of the plural form to designate white-collar workers in the Romance languages. Its use is extremely well-established and more or less widespread depending on the language. High numbers of occurrences have been found in different newspaper archives—the Italian plural *colletti bianchi* (white-collar workers) has yielded 247 hits in the online archives of the national daily *La Repubblica* (27/06/12).

⁷ The abbreviation of the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert*.

⁸ The *Trésor de la langue française informatisé* (TLFI) registers and gives a definition of the French calque *col blanc* and provides an example from 1963.

(2) *De leurs côtés, les avocats de ces « **cols blancs** » qui contestent toutes opérations de blanchiment concèdent seulement qu'ils pourraient s'être rendus coupables de fraude fiscale. Ce qui resterait, selon eux, à prouver. (Le Figaro, 16 October 2012)*

(3) *Alle spalle c'è la delega che esclude dal voto chi ha subito condanna definitiva a partire da due anni per reati gravissimi come mafia e terrorismo e per quelli dei **colletti bianchi**. (La Repubblica, 9 November 2012)*

(4) *Há uns anos era praticamente impossível ter '**colarinhos brancos**' sentados no banco dos réus. Os tempos mudaram: hoje há um vasto número de altos quadros sob investigação, mas a Justiça continua lenta, a funcionar a conta-gotas. (O Expresso, 20 April 2010)*

(5) *Las manifestaciones de los **cuellos blancos** son excepcionales y es la más importante desde 1987, el año de apertura democrática de Corea del Sur. Ello da muestra del rechazo a la reforma laboral, cuya principal medida es la ampliación de la semana laboral a 57 horas y el despido libre. (El País, 15 January 1997)*

The extract from the Spanish newspaper comes from a piece of news from an international news agency, the usual gateway to different sorts of borrowings and calques. The use of the scare quotes is a clear typographical sign of the strangeness of the sense that the combination takes in the recipient language used mainly in order not to mislead potential readers. Conversely, other combinations such as *white lie* have not produced calques in the Romance languages for the simple reason that they are not recent creations but compounds with a long tradition in the language. The meaning that the colour term *white* takes in this combination is peculiar to English since the other languages have always expressed the concept by means of a non-figurative adjective meaning harmless or sympathetic: Fr. *mensonge pieux*, It. *bugia pietosa*, Po. *mentira inofensiva* and Sp. *mentira piadosa*.

3.3 The 'grey' compounds

It seems the logical thing to do that the next colour in order should be *grey*, the mixture of *black* and *white*. An interesting example of semantic borrowing is En. *grey area*⁹ that has its counterparts in Fr. *zone grise*, It. *zona grigia*, Po. *zona cinzenta* and Sp. *zona gris*. This is just another case that highlights the fact that ‘[t]he frequency of semantic borrowings in French has been clearly underestimated’ (Picone 1996: 101), as well as in the other three languages. As with the calques of *white-collar*, those of *grey area* are also recurrent in the press of the Romance languages in question.

(6) *Après quelques modifications apportées par le Sénat, les députés se sont accordés ce jeudi 19 janvier sur le cadre juridique des quelque 500.000 ouvrages composant la fameuse « zone grise ».* (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 20 January 2012)

(7) *In quanto tale servirà ad evidenziare in maniera inequivocabile la differenza tra ciò che merita di essere incoraggiato e finanziariamente sostenuto e ciò che invece rientra in quella zona grigia nella quale le risorse si disperdono in mille rivoli [...]* (*La Repubblica*, 20 October 2012)

(8) *Entre as razões alegadas para a vinda deste serviço para o concelho encontra-se o facto de Leiria ficar numa espécie de zona cinzenta em termos de cobertura, entre Coimbra, Tomar e Lisboa, impedindo assim um eficaz combate da criminalidade.* (*Corpus do português*, 12 September 1997)

(9) *Sucede, sin embargo, que la acampada de Sol y otras ciudades acabaron situadas en una zona gris de la legalidad durante la jornada de reflexión antes de las elecciones municipales.* (*El País*, 20 June 2011)

It should be noted that the only combination under study registered in the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* (OCI) is *grey area*. However, and in contradiction with the nature of collocations, which are intrinsically transparent, the example provided to illustrate the *grey area*

⁹ This compound takes on a special meaning in South African English as shown in the following quotation from Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story*: ‘We didn’t need groceries, my school fees were paid; my mother and Baby (after school) were both working and there was no rent owed because when we moved to the city my father had bought that house in what later was called a ‘grey area’ where people of our kind defied the law and settled in among whites.’ (Gordimer 1990: 14). Other unusual colour compounds can be found in specialised languages: ‘One study assessing the effect of selective collection on the remaining household (called “grey waste”) gave the following conclusions: [...]’ (*Official report of the European Commission on Waste Incineration Techniques*, see references).

‘collocation’ is followed by an explanation between brackets stating in a rather succinctly way ‘aspects that are not clear’. This clearly demonstrates that these compounds are not regarded as collocations precisely because they do not tend to have a denotative referent.

3.4 The ‘yellow’ compounds

Yellow is a colour with clear negative tones in English as well as in the other languages. The word *yellow* is used as a constituent for names of diseases, as in *yellow fever*, or to refer to a contemptible, worthless person, as in *yellow dog*, or even to designate pejoratively sensational newspapers, as in *yellow press*. The word *yellow* can also be used in connection with such negative feelings as jealousy or cowardice. As refers to the idiomatic compound *yellow press*, the following is the third sense provided by the OED under the entry *yellow* in which it explains its peculiar and rather unmotivated origin:

3. (orig. U.S.) Applied to newspapers (or writers of newspaper articles) of a recklessly or unscrupulously sensational character. A use derived from the appearance in 1895 of a number of the *New York World* in which a child in a yellow dress (“The Yellow Kid”) was the central figure of the cartoon, this being an experiment in colour printing designed to attract purchasers.

The calque has not really taken root in Romance languages, if we exclude the case of Spanish. In the online archives of the Spanish newspaper *El País* we have found a total number of 397 hits for the loan translation *prensa amarilla* but 1,225 for the native non-figurative compound *prensa sensacionalista*. On the other hand, there are 118 hits for *presse à scandale* and none for *presse jaune* in the French national daily *Le Figaro*. We find the same scenario for Italian and Portuguese. Only 22 hits have been found for *stampa scandalistica* and none for *stampa gialla* in the Italian daily *La Repubblica* and finally 16 hits for *imprensa sensacionalista* and none for *imprensa amarela* in the Portuguese weekly *O Expresso*. These results clearly demonstrate that the association of the colour *yellow* with the head of the compound is little motivated or even unmotivated in most Romance languages. The combination does not definitely carry the same semantic connotation as it does in English.

3.5 The ‘red’ compounds

In English, idiomatic compounds including a colour word can have different levels of opacity and analysability. From the most opaque and least analysable such as *red herring* or *red tape*, which have clearly not lent themselves to any calques in the languages under study, to the most transparent and analysable such as *red carpet* and *red-light*. In each of these cases the colour word is connected with a different concept. Red is the colour of the heart, traditionally associated with love and passion and hence with sex, as in *red-light* which is also of American origin (the first recorded example in the OED is from 1900 and is used attributively in the combination *red light district*¹⁰). In politics, red is associated with the extreme left, especially with communism and the communist party. The idea of danger, found in combinations such as *red flag* or *red alarm*, is also present in *red line*, which is ‘a safety limit, as marked on a gauge, such as a thermometer or a rain or wind gauge’. This sense has extended its meaning to the fields of government, politics and finance to refer to ‘a point beyond which a person or group is not prepared to negotiate’¹¹. It is this sense, widely used by Tony Blair when he was in office, which has been calqued in the other languages, as can be observed when comparing the English and the French examples below:

(10) Mr Blair says he will insist on his **red lines**. [...] We can therefore have no confidence in Mr Blair’s **red lines**. Can anyone believe he will veto the constitution if he fails to protect his **red lines**? (*The Telegraph*, 17 October 2003)

(11) *Le constructeur automobile Renault, susceptible de produire sa Clio IV en Turquie, ne doit pas dépasser une « ligne rouge », à savoir ne faire « aucune fermeture de site, aucun licenciement » en France, a déclaré mardi 12 février le secrétaire d’Etat à l’Emploi Laurent Wauquiez.* (Le Nouvel Observateur, 12 January 2010)

Examples of this particular use can be found in the four languages corresponding to the verb phrase *cross the red line* as in Fr. *franchir la ligne rouge*, It. *varcare la linea rossa*, Po. *cruzar*

¹⁰ The first occurrence of this combination registered by the OED dates back to 1900 and appeared in the New York Journal as ‘Children of the ‘red light district’.

¹¹ The *Dictionnaire culturel en langue française* (DCLF) registers the following expression, extremely close in meaning to *red line* and occurring in the same lexico-grammatical frame: ‘Loc. fig. Franchir la ligne jaune (blanche) : être en infraction, entrer dans l’illégalité.’

a linha vermelha and Sp. *traspasar/atrasar/pasar las líneas rojas*, which seems to be more inclined to use the plural form as illustrated in (12):

(12) *Este documento establecerá “criterios y pautas” que serán de obligado cumplimiento. Fijará las “líneas rojas” que no deberán cruzar las cadenas, aunque éstas podrán determinar sus propias normas siempre y cuando superen los mínimos previstos en el citado código. (El País, 27 October 2004)*

3.6 The ‘green’ compounds

The colour green is traditionally associated in all five languages to inexperience in youth or to the early stages of something. The ever-increasing number of ‘green’ compounds related to nature and the environment, such as *green jobs* or *green energy*, is clearly a global phenomenon and a relatively new one in the long history of these languages.

Green shoots is even a more recent idiomatic compound in English, having been used to designate the first symptoms of economic recovery after the world financial crisis of 2008. The deluge of information from all media concerning this world economic crisis brought about the overuse of the expression *the bubble bursts* and of all its imaginable lexico-syntactic variants and also the springing of *green shoots* to refer to the first signals of a budding economic recovery (Martí Solano 2012a: 139). This idiom (or rather its loan translation), that has spread like wildfire, epitomizes what has been called ‘mass media intertextuality’ or ‘intertextual phenomena’ (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2006: 34). The calques are Fr. *pousses vertes*, It. *germogli verdi*, Po. *brotos verdes* and Sp. *brotos verdes*.

(13) *Anche il Sol Levante oggi intravede i suoi “germogli verdi”, quei primi segnali premonitori di una ripresa che già sono stati avvertiti negli Stati Uniti scatenando il rialzo delle Borse. (La Repubblica, 30 April 2009)*

Two different strategies are put into practice concerning the inclusion of an innovative and rather unusual word combination in (13). On the one hand, the compound is framed by square quotes and, on the other hand, it is followed by an explicit explanation of its arcane meaning in the form of the phrase ‘*quei primi segnali premonitori di una ripresa*’ (those first budding signs of economic recovery).

At any rate, *Green shoots* remains the perfect example of a fleeting buzzword, a sort of evanescent metaphor or phraseological shooting star, extremely bright for a very brief period of time and which then disappears in the darkest of nights.

3.7 The 'pink' compounds

Pink is a colour generally associated with girls and women but also with gay men, as can be seen in compounds such as the *pink pound* or the *pink dollar*. In British politics, this colour has traditionally been connected, sometimes in a rather derogatory way, with the socialist party as illustrated in the following example from the *British National Corpus* (BNC):

(14) Who asked you to butt in Nigel? Always so absurdly liberal, not to say egalitarian. We were having a divine party till you came barging in with your pale **pink politics**. Buzz off back to Fleet Street. (BNC, 1991)

Even though the compound *pink tide* is very well-established in the Anglophone media to refer to the increasing shifting to the left in the politics of Latin American countries, the compound *pink wave* seems to have a different origin, i.e. a loan translation from the Fr. *vague rose*. This is clearly observable in the translation or adaptation of headlines from the international press, as for instance Po. 'Uma **onda rosa** percorre a Europa' (A pink wave sweeps Europe) or in another headline from Brazil which reads Po. 'Mídia francesa vê '**onda rosa**' contra Nicolas Sarkozy' (French media sees a pink wave against Nicolas Sarkozy). In *The New York Times* the compound *pink wave* appears always between inverted commas and is to be found in this sense exclusively in the context of French politics. When contrasting and examining these two compounds one can observe a process of contextual phraseological selection, by which both *pink tide* and *pink wave*, though synonymous or quasi-synonymous in theory, become pragmatically different and contextually selective.

4 Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from the preceding data but we would like to highlight the fact that although calques can be found in all four Romance languages and for nearly all the

compounds analysed, the range of frequency and institutionalisation is extremely varied. To give just one example, the French calque of *white elephant*, *éléphant blanc*, is recorded in the *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* 2009 with the geographic label *région Canada*, which certainly shows the influence of American English on Canadian French in this particular phraseological field. Other expressions such as Fr. *trou noir*, It. *buco nero*, Po. *buraco negro* or Sp. *agujero negro* or Fr. *zone grise*, It. *zona grigia*, Po. *zona cinzenta* and Sp. *zona gris* are not recorded with their calqued idiomatic sense in any of the dictionaries consulted, bearing out the fact that semantic borrowings are harder and take longer to be nativised and therefore recorded in lexicographical works. To compensate for the introduction of idiomatic calques, some metalinguistic strategies can be put into action. Their degree of novelty is signalled by the use of inverted commas, by an explicit reference to its context of use or by the use of all sorts of explanations, definitions or other linguistic formulas. As far as frequency of use is concerned, the most recurrent calques appear to be the different renderings of *black hole* and *white-collar*, whereas the least recurrent are clearly the different renderings of *yellow press*, *green shoots* and *white elephant*.

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