

# Idiom Comprehension in English as a Second Language

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**IDIOM COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH**  
**AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

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## ABSTRACT

Idioms or idiomatic expressions are an important part of a nation's language and its tradition. Furthermore, they are considered the basis of learning a second language since they may indicate one's eloquence in that language, which is why they are worthy of attention. However, due to their complexity they tend to present a great challenge for second language learners. A little or no attention has been paid to the acquisition and comprehension of idioms in English as a foreign language. This thesis will provide definitions of idiomatic expressions, give an overview of the ways according to which they were classified by various authors, introduce and explain the concept of transfer, point to the similarities between the Croatian and English language, and describe how they are comprehended by second language learners. This will be done by examining secondary texts and using the information from these sources by connecting them into a united whole.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to define idioms, explore idiom processing and comprehension in English as a second language, and the problems that their processing may cause, and use the knowledge acquired through the study to provide teachers of English with some conclusions they might find useful when teaching. These goals will be achieved by looking at particular sources and using information from those sources (combining information into a whole, comparing and evaluating).

Not much has been written about idioms. However, this fact does not mean that they are not valuable and significant in everyday communication. Idioms are a part of an immense family of figurative expressions, as well as metaphors, proverbs, indirect speech acts, etc. Idioms, along with proverbs, are as old as hills and can be found in every language and every culture in the world (Zovko, 2006). They are an important part of any language and, according to McDevitt (1993), may be viewed as an indicator of one's fluency in that language. The fact that they are used in everyday speech, newspapers, marketing, literature, politics, etc, indicates that his conclusion is valid. Moreover, McPartland (1981) puts forward that every learner of a foreign language needs to develop competence in idioms since they are used by native speakers in spoken as well as in written language. The significant role idioms play in second language acquisition is brought forward in his article on idioms. McPartland (1981) maintains that the main reason idioms are so difficult to learn and teach is the fact that they are not literal, i.e. they do not mean what they say. The most difficult idioms are those that have no equivalent in learner's mother tongue and whose meaning cannot be obtained from the combined meanings of individual words. To the contrary, the easiest idioms are those whose equivalents are exactly the same in learner's mother tongue. Inasmuch as a native speaker's language is filled with usage of idiomatic expressions, apprehension of idioms proves to be unavoidable in understanding a native speaker's speech. These are just some of

the reasons that demonstrate that teaching idioms to second language learners is a positive idea (Hussein et al., 2000).

## 2. DEFINITIONS OF IDIOMS

There are several definitions of idioms put forward by English linguists, grammarians, lexicographers and pedagogues. Idiom is thus defined as “*an expression whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words in it*”<sup>1</sup>. Trask (2000) defines an idiom as a “*fixed expression whose meaning is not guessable from the meaning of its parts*”<sup>2</sup>. Idiom is viewed as “*a single constituent or series of constituents, whose semantic interpretation is independent of the formatives which compose it*” by Fraser (1976)<sup>3</sup>. In the *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, idiom is defined as “*an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts*”<sup>4</sup>. Bolinger (1975) describes idioms as a “*group of words with set meanings that cannot be calculated by adding up the separate meanings of the parts*”<sup>5</sup>. In addition to this, as pointed out by Baker (1992), idioms “*are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and (...) often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components*”<sup>6</sup>. Idiom is a term that has been used to include an extensive variety of various kinds of multi-word units. Furthermore, multi-word units can be defined as lexical items which are formed by two or more words to bring forth a new idea. They form an inseparable unit of a greater meaning. In her description of idioms, Moon (1997) uses the term in a narrow sense to make reference to multi-words units that are not an organized array of individual elements. She describes idioms as non-compositional phrases, which means that the meaning of the phrase cannot be understood from the meanings of the independent words. In other words, combined

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford wordpower dictionary, edited by Miranda Steel, Oxford University Press, 2000

<sup>2</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

<sup>3</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

<sup>4</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

<sup>5</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

meaning of the separate words is not the same as the meaning of the phrase (Saberian, Fotovatnia, 2011).

Idioms are often held to be frozen in form which means that their word order cannot normally be changed, words cannot be omitted or replaced with other words, and their grammatical structure cannot be changed, unless the user is joking or trying a play on words.

Ghazala (2003) tried to create an all-inclusive definition of idioms; he defines them as “*special, metaphorical, fixed phrases whose meanings and forms are not negotiable*”<sup>7</sup>.

Definitions such as these mentioned above are plentiful. They all, however, agree on two general characteristics: first of all, idiomatic expressions have a fixed word order which suggests that they are socially acceptable expressions; second, it is not possible to guess the meaning of an idiom from the individual words it is comprised of (Saberian, Fotovatnia, 2011). Alexander’s (1987) definition of idioms as “*multi-word units which have to be learned as a whole, along with associated sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatic rules of use*”<sup>8</sup> is a more effective definition of idioms applicable to language learning. According to Barkema (1996), the majority of linguists use the popular definition of idioms as “*lexicalized expressions with idiosyncratic meanings*”<sup>9</sup>; this definition has been used for more than a hundred years. Barkema makes it clear that it all comes down to two things: “*a) idioms are expressions which contain at least two lexical items and b) the meaning of an idiom is not the combinatorial result of the meanings of the lexical items in the expression*”<sup>10</sup>.

On the other hand, idioms do not have to automatically be compound of words. To the contrary, some of the idioms are one-item phrases. Warren (2005) offers examples of such

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<sup>7</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 23

<sup>8</sup> As cited in Saberian and Fotovatnia, 2011, p. 1231

<sup>9</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24

<sup>10</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24

idioms: *cheers* (when drinking in honor of or to the health of a person or an event) and *speaking* (when using a telephone). Barkema (1996) sums up his view in a following way:

*“Although practically all definitions of idioms require them to be “lexically complex”, an exception to this rule is Charles Hockett’s definition (1958:172), which implies – as Hockett admits – that words and morphemes can be idioms too and that all forms which are not idioms themselves, contain them (...). In this sense idioms are the basic semantic units of a language, no matter whether they are morphemes, words, phrases, clauses or sentences”*<sup>11</sup>.

There is one more issue that needs to be summed up here – the violation of the truth conditions and our comprehension of reality is a characteristic of some idioms. Baker (1992) and Homeidi (2004), in order to clarify this matter, presented the following examples: it’s raining cats and dogs (which can be translated into Croatian as: (kiša) lije kao iz kabla), storm in a tea cup (which can be translated into Croatian as: bura u čaši vode – veliko uzbuđenje zbog malog povoda, pretjerana reakcija), throw caution to the wind (which can be translated into Croatian as: kud puklo da puklo – odbaciti svaki oprez, odvažiti se), jump down someone’s throat (which can be translated into Croatian as: skakati komu za vrat, skakati na koga – nervozno, ljutito reagirati na čije izjave).

In addition, Baker (1992) and Homeidi (2004) have exemplified one other type of idioms – those which are identified by being grammatically ill-formed, i.e. those idioms that defy the rules of English grammar: by and large – generally, usually; trip the light fantastic – to dance; blow someone to kingdom come – to destroy someone, especially in a very violent way; the world and his wife – a very large number of people.

Furthermore, Baker (1992) singles out the idioms that start with “like” and form “simile-like structures”, and provides some examples: like a bat out of hell (which can be

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<sup>11</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24



translated into Croatian as: grom iz vedra neba, kao munja – naglo i brzo), like water off a duck's back - you can say an insult or criticism is like water off a duck's back when it is not having any effect at all on the person being criticized (Aldahesh, 2013).

Ghazala (2003) defines idiomaticity as the idioms' "*most special component (which constitutes) their metaphorical aspect*"<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, he defines it as "*the heart of the matter of any idiomatic expression*"<sup>13</sup>.

### 3. CLASSIFICATIONS OF IDIOMS

When it comes to the classification of idiomatic expressions, English scholars were in a great deal of trouble. Their efforts resulted in idioms being grouped in numerous different ways. Some of these include: 1) as determined by their "grammatical type", for example verb-adverb idioms or idioms functioning like a specific part of speech, 2) as determined by the "concept or emotion described", for example the idiom *bite the dust* would be classified under *fail or die*, and 3) as determined by the "image" they express, for example, idiom *weak at the knees* would be classified under the category of *body parts* (Lattey, 1986).

Fernando (1996) draws attention to the involvement of idioms in various aspects of the English language. Idioms may be found to exist in forms such as: proverbs, similes, dead metaphors, allusions, slang, social formulate, and collocations.

In addition, idioms were categorized by Ghazala (2003) into five most important types. These are: 1) full/pure idioms, 2) semi-idioms, 3) proverbs, popular sayings and semi-proverbial expressions, 4) phrasal verbs, and 5) metaphorical catchphrases and popular expressions<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 25

<sup>13</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 25

<sup>14</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24

Aldahesh (2009) claims that phrasal verbs (verb + particle, for example: put up, back off, etc.) make up an essential part of English idiomatic expressions. Other than the above mentioned authors (Ghazala and Lattey), many other researchers have classified phrasal verbs as one type of English idiomatic expressions (Spears, 1987; Alexander, 1984; Urdang, 1979).<sup>15</sup> Elements of a phrasal verb sacrifice their individual meanings and adopt a new idiomatic meaning through the process of combination. For instance: *give up* (meaning: stop trying), *pass away* (meaning: die), *tell off* (meaning: to criticize severely), *iron out* (to resolve by discussion), *clam up* (meaning: to refuse to speak), and *abide by* (meaning: to respect or obey a decision, a law or a rule). Turton and Manser (1985) have pointed out that it is pretty obvious that in idiomatic phrasal verbs, such as those listed above, the meanings of the individual parts tell us little or nothing at all about the meaning of the entire expression. In line with this, Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) state that “*an idiom is a fixed phrase (...) whose meaning cannot be predicted from a knowledge of the meaning of the individual words. An idiom in this respect is similar to a phrasal verb*”<sup>16</sup>.

Among more extensive classifications of idiomatic expressions there are three that should be mentioned. These are Nunberg’s classification, Cacciari and Glucksberg’s classification, and Yoshikawa’s classification. As it has been pointed out by Titone and Connine (1999), semantic classifications, based on Nunberg’s classification, have been put forward to depict the way in which idioms are dissimilar in quality in terms of their compositionality, and how these dissimilarities may insinuate process model of idiom comprehension. A typology for describing how literal meanings of elements of idiomatic expressions provide (or do not provide) a comprehensive interpretation of idiomatic phrases has been proposed by Nunberg (1978). As determined by Nunberg’s system, idioms may be grouped into three different classes, the first of which are normally decomposable idioms,

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<sup>15</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24

<sup>16</sup> As cited in Aldahesh, 2013, p. 24

followed by abnormally decomposable idioms, and finally, semantically nondecomposable idioms. The elements in decomposable idioms contribute to the idiom's figurative meaning. Examples for normally decomposable idioms: *pop the question* (meaning: (for a man) to ask a woman to marry him; could also be used by a woman asking a man), *break the ice* (meaning: to do something to make people feel relaxed and comfortable at a party or meeting, or in a new situation), and *clear the air* (meaning: to get rid of stale or bad air).

Abnormally decomposable idioms are a subgroup of decomposable idioms; they are defined as expressions “*whose individual components have some metaphorical relation to their idiomatic referents*” (Gibbs and Nayak, 1989)<sup>17</sup>. Examples of abnormally decomposable idioms include: *carry a torch* (meaning: to be in love with someone who does not love you or who is already involved with another person), *spill the beans* (meaning: to reveal the truth about something secret or private), *pass the buck* (meaning: to accuse someone of failing to take responsibility for a problem, and of expecting someone else to deal with it instead), and *bury the hatchet* (meaning: when people who have quarreled agree to forget their quarrel and become friends again).

Finally, semantically nondecomposable idioms correspond to the traditional definition, since the meaning of the idiomatic expression is not likely to be derived from the literal meanings of the component words. Examples of semantically nondecomposable idioms include: *chew the fat* (meaning: to chat with someone in an informal and friendly way about things that interest you), *shoot the breeze* (meaning: to talk with other people in an informal and friendly way), and *pack a punch* (meaning: for something to have a very powerful effect).

Apart from Nunberg, Gibbs and his colleagues conducted many studies on idiom decomposability. They came to conclusion that decomposable idioms are syntactically more

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<sup>17</sup> As cited in Abel, 2003, p. 335.

productive, lexically more flexible and more quickly processed than nondecomposable idioms.

In Cacciari and Glucksberg's classification of idiomatic expressions, idioms have been grouped into opaque, transparent and quasi-metaphorical. Opaque idioms are considered to be the most difficult ones because it is impossible to infer the real meaning of the idiom from the meaning of its individual elements. A well known example of an opaque idiomatic expression is *kick the bucket* (meaning: to die). Another one is *to burn one's bridges* (also *burn one's boats*); meaning: commit oneself to an irreversible course. On the other hand, in transparent idioms, idiomatic meaning is very close to that of the literal words' meaning. The phrase *play your cards right*, has been cited as an example. This expression actually comes from card games, and its meaning is to do the correct things to achieve a desired result. Finally, there are idioms known as quasi-metaphorical phrases; they "*convey meaning through their allusional content*" and "*exploit the same communicative strategy as do the metaphor vehicles in nominal metaphors*"<sup>18</sup>. As an example, Glucksberg (2001) offers these phrases: *my lawyer was a shark*, and *my job is a jail*. Expressions *shark* and *jail* refer to the ideal examples of their metaphorical attributive categories – predators and a constraining situation.

As indicated by Yoshikawa's classifications, idioms are grouped into five different categories. These are: A, B, C1, C2, and the last type added by Saberian (2011), D. As the main principle for the categorization of English idioms, Yoshikawa took the measure of native language and second language similarities in terms of structure and semantics. As it was pointed out by Cedar (2004), an idiom from a foreign language is structurally similar to the idiom from the native language if the main content words could be literally translated to the native language. Furthermore, he emphasizes that an idiom from the second language is

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<sup>18</sup> Glucksberg, 2001, p. 75.

semantically similar to the native language one when they share the same central notion, and could be used under the same circumstances.

Under idioms type A, Yoshikawa classifies English idiomatic expressions with structural as well as semantic similarity to native language idioms. Idioms which are in some degree similar to native language idioms in terms of semantics and structure are classified as type B idioms. From another point of view, idioms type C1 are those with structural “similarity”, but semantic “dissimilarity” to native language idioms. Idioms with both structural and semantic “dissimilarity” to native language idioms are categorized under type C2 idioms. Finally, idioms type D are those with structural “dissimilarity”, but semantic similarity to idioms in the native language. This means that they cannot be translated word for word into native language, because literal translation is not intelligible in native language. However, it is possible that their literal translation would give learners some suggestion as to what their real meaning might be (Saberian, Fotovatnia, 2011).

Further categorization has been done by Irujo (1986). She has classified the idiomatic expressions into three types. Her classification is based on the similarities between the native language and the second language (similar to Yoshikawa). Her categories include the following: identical, similar and different idioms. Identical idioms are described as idiomatic expressions in foreign language which have counterparts in the native language. Seeing that a word-for-word correspondence has been found between the native and the second language, it can be concluded that identical idioms are the easiest to understand and produce for the learners of a foreign language. Idioms with similar meaning or form in the native language are classified as similar idioms. Irujo arrived at the conclusion that knowledge of native language may make it easier for learners of a foreign language to understand idiomatic expressions that are similar or equal to counterparts in native language. As one might predict, different idioms

were the most difficult to understand and produce, since there are no similar counterparts in native language.

#### 4. TRANSFER IN THE ACQUISITION OF IDIOMS

The concept of transfer is built on the idea that previous learning influences learning that occurs later on. Politzer (1965) claims that during the 1950s and 60s interlingual transfer was believed to be the most important element in learning foreign language. Recent studies have focused their attention on the question of what is transferred, what the domains of language are, and whether transfer can be predicted or not.

With respect to transfer in the acquisition of idioms in a second language, very little work has been done. Two studies have been conducted in Netherlands, by Jordens (1977) and Kellerman (1977). Their aim was to find out whether structures of a similar kind as idioms, proverbs and slang (– these were called language-specific), are viewed as non-transferable by language learners. In their studies, students were asked to judge grammaticality of correct and incorrect sentences comprising idioms. Some of the sentences contained idioms which had equivalents in the native language of students. Both studies showed that students had a tendency of judging the idioms with counterparts in native language as ungrammatical, which pointed out the unwillingness to transfer language-specific elements. Be that as it may, these studies were concerned with grammaticality judgments only. They did not distinguish idioms in terms of their degree of similarity to the idioms of the native language, nor did they tackle comprehension and production of idioms (Irujo, 1984).

On the other hand, Irujo (1984) in her study was set to analyze the different effects of transfer on the comprehension and production of three types of idioms. These included: idioms from native language with equivalents in second language; idioms that are similar but

are different in a slight way; idioms that are completely different, but have the same meaning nonetheless.

It has to be pointed out that the literature on transfer is connected with the literature on contrastive analysis. Contrastive linguistics or contrastive analysis draws attention to the linguistic description of at least two languages (native and second language), which are equated or differentiated in order to make the aspects of sameness, similarity, or difference prominent. It was thought by many in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s that a comparative analysis of two languages, of their similarities and their differences would be a helpful prognosticator of where second language speakers would most likely come up against problems in learning a foreign language. The speaker would probably experience difficulties if some items of a second language differentiated from the speaker's native language to a high degree (Zovko, 2006).

Lado (1957) claims that the "strong" version of the contrastive analyses hypothesis was able to predict areas of difficulty with respect to the comparison of the native language of the student with the second language. It would be easy to learn similar patterns since they could be transferred from the native language in a successful manner. Interference, on the other hand, would be caused by different patterns, and these patterns would be difficult to learn. Whitman (1970) and Sajavaara (1976) criticized contrastive analysis on theoretical grounds. Moreover, Briere (1968), Buteau (1970), Tran-Thi-Chau (1975) criticized it due to the fact that its predictions were not confirmed. In order to make it more practical, a moderate version was put forward by Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970). It suggested that in cases where differences between languages were minor instead of big, the greater difficulties would occur.

In an attempt to predict the outcome of transfer on the types of idioms mentioned above, it was anticipated by the strong version of contrastive analysis that the greatest

interference would be caused by different idioms, whereas the moderate version anticipated that the greatest interference would be caused by similar idioms. Finally, the weak version did not make any predictions, since it seeks only to include errors after they take place.

The hypotheses brought forward in Irujo's study (1984) were the following: 1) proof of positive transfer with identical idioms will be shown by subjects; identical idioms would be understood and recognized to a greater extent – compared to different idioms, and they would think of accurate identical idioms as well as produce more of them as opposed to similar or different idioms; 2) evidence of negative transfer with similar idioms would be shown by subjects; identification and understanding might be nearly as high as for identical idioms, but interference from the native language would be shown by accurate recall and production; 3) no evidence of either positive or negative transfer with different idioms would be present; different idioms would be recognized, understood and recalled to a lesser extent – compared to the other two types, since there is no positive transfer to help, but interference from the native language would not be present during recall and production.

The results of Irujo's study (1984) offer evidence that positive transfer is used. Furthermore, interference, i.e. negative transfer is also apparent, especially in the case of similar idioms. These results support the hypotheses; identical idioms were comprehended as well as similar ones, and all of them were understood better than different idioms. In the case of similar idioms, interference from the native language was evident; however, they were understood as well as identical idioms. In favor of the last hypothesis, the number of different idioms produced and understood was lower, and interference in the case of different idioms was barely present.

In contrast to Jordens' (1977) and Kellerman's (1977) results, which stated that idioms were considered to be non-transferable by students, Irujo's results defend the idea that



advanced learners of a foreign language whose native language is closely related to the second one, use their knowledge of idiomatic expression in their mother tongue in order to understand and produce idioms in the second language. Moreover, Irujo's study (1984) supports the moderate contrastive study by Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970). It supports the idea that more interference will be produced by more similar structures (which are very similar in the native and second language) than different structures. In addition to this, Irujo's study (1984) showed that, apart from using their native language in order to understand and produce idioms, students used some target-language related strategies. For instance: providing an incomplete idiom, using a different English idiom instead of the expected one, using a figurative expression which is not a familiar idiom, or using a literal expression. Several subjects used the first-language approach – they thought of another idiom which was a counterpart to the given one, and translated it. In the end, it has to be pointed out that these results apply only to the specific subjects and tasks included in Irujo's study (1984).

## 5. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CROATIAN AND ENGLISH IDIOMS

Although there is no unified opinion on what exactly an idiom is, according to the interpretation of many authors (Matešić, Menac, Popović, etc.) idioms are defined with the help of a rather small number of dominant characteristics: 1) reproducibility – idioms are, in fact, being reproduced as predetermined finished creations, as opposed to the free links of words that are being formed during the process of speaking (i.e. during the production of language in spoken or written form); 2) specific formal organization – an idiom generally has a solid structure in which the lexical replacements are very limited and the grammatical ones do not introduce semantic changes. Members of idioms form a group that cannot be divided; they are firmly interrelated, fixed by long-term use; 3) idiomaticity – at least one member of the phraseological alliance has received a new, different allegorical meaning - compared to

the original meaning. Therefore meaning of the entire idiom almost never corresponds to the sum of the meanings of its components. For example, from the individual parts of an idiom *nemati dlake na jeziku* one cannot predict its meaning: “*to speak one’s mind openly*”. Connections between components within each idiom are often explicable only from a historical point of view, at the same time they are often unmotivated from the perspective of contemporary linguistic relations; 4) fitting in context – an idiom, in terms of its structure, is not an individual text, but it appears in a sentence as its free member (Nikolić – Hoyt, 1997).

According to Nikolić – Hoyt (1997), the differences and similarities between Croatian and English phraseology can be classified into three groups:

1) Identical idiomatic phrases in English and Croatian belonging to international phraseology. Therefore, their character is not narrow and national, and their meaning is accessible to the members of different nations. Originating largely from the biblical texts or the ancient world, such idioms are inherited from a common language history of the past, of different but related languages, in this case Croatian and English.

a) Mainly literary, classic, related to specific situations and genres in a synchronic way: *cut the Gordian knot* – translated into Croatian as *presjeći gordijski čvor*, *tooth for tooth*, *eye for eye* – translated into Croatian as *zub za zub*, *oko za oko*; *the end crowns the work* – translated into Croatian as *konac dijelo krasi*; *sit on two stools* – translated into Croatian as *sjediti na dvije stolice*.

b) but also in everyday conversational language: *work like a horse* – translated into Croatian as *raditi kao konj*; *there’s no smoke without fire* – translated into Croatian as *nema dima bez vatre*; *walk on egg-shells* – translated into Croatian as *hodati kao po jajima*; *break the ice* – translated into Croatian as *probiti led*.

2) Conceptually identical or similar idiomatic expressions with various compositions of elements. Identical idioms are those that are comprised of different elements, but have identical or closely related meaning. Identical idioms usually contain semantic, stylistic, and connotative differences. Therefore, at the content level these idioms are completely equal, and in terms of expression, they appear in a number of alternative forms. Examples: *to show one's horns* – translated into Croatian as *pokazati zube*; *to fall on a stony ground* – translated into Croatian as *pasti na neplodno tlo*; *he is all ears* – translated into Croatian as *pretvorio se u uho*; *to walk on air* – translated into Croatian as *u devetom nebu, u oblacima*.

3) Different, culture – specific idiomatic phrases. They refer to idioms that maintain the way in which the two communities of chosen languages perceive and evaluate certain phenomena and the world around them. Inherited from earlier periods of independent linguistic and historical development of the Croatian, i.e. English language, these idioms, for the greatest part, preserve an image of mentality in which they evolved. Different idioms are distinguished in different ways. For instance: *scream/cry blue murdered* is translated into Croatian as *derati se kao jarac*; *to be wet behind the ear* is translated into Croatian as *mirisati na mlijeko*. These idioms are situational equivalents. However, their referential and connotative correspondence is not complete. In cases where there is no translational equivalent of a particular idiom, it is necessary to specify a descriptive meaning: *walk the chalk* – to prove the sobriety (to the police, for instance) by walking between parallel lines chalked on the ground, “*ponašati se ispravno*”. This idiom comes from the sailor jargon. Sailors, in fact, had to walk a line drawn with chalk in order to prove that they were not drunk. Other examples are *to sit above the salt* – “*u povlaštenom položaju*”, and its antonym *to sit below salt* – “*u nepovlaštenom položaju*”. These idioms were created from an old English tradition according to which the sophisticated and influential families had a salt cellar in the center of the dining table, and privileged guests would sit between the salt cellar and the head of the table.

Another example is *a baker's dozen*, which nowadays means “*thirteen*”. This idiom also originates from an old English custom according to which the bakers were fined if they sold bread below the prescribed weight. This is why they would add another one to every dozen (Nikolić – Hoyt, 1997).

## 6. COMPREHENSION OF IDIOMS

A number of psycholinguistic studies have been devoted to the process of idiom comprehension during the last 15 or 20 years. Flores D’Arcais (1993) indicates that there are two questions that have engaged most psycholinguistic studies of idioms: 1) does the reader or listener retrieve both the literal and figurative meaning of the idioms, or only the figurative one; 2) which of the two is figured out first? Bobrow and Bell (1973) offered evidence in favor of the “*literal first*” hypothesis, while Swinney and Cutler (1979) argue that “*both meanings are computed in parallel*” hypothesis. On the other hand, Gibbs (1984/6) and Schweigert (1986) suggest that the figurative meaning is accessed directly, and that the literal meaning may not even be recovered. In his work, Flores D’Arcais (1993) ignores these two questions, and examines some of the features that tend to characterize the process of idiom comprehension (Cacciari, Tabossi, 1993).

### 6.1. PROCESS OF IDIOM COMPREHENSION

In his study, Flores D’Arcais (1993) proposes a few assumptions concerning the process of idiom comprehension. First of all, he claims that the comprehension of an idiom does not demand a special processing mode. Furthermore, an assumption that literal and figurative meanings are assessed separately, submitting two different interpretations may not be supported; figurative meaning of a word in an idiom will presumably be acquired to a great degree as the other senses of the word.

Second, lexical access for independent words, even within idioms, is mandatory. Cacciari and Tabossi (1988) presented evidence which shows that independent lexemes are always accessed during language comprehension, even when they are part of an idiom.

The third assumption brought forth argues that syntactic analysis is obligatory. Although it is not needed to understand the meaning of an idiom, the human parser would conduct a complete syntactic analysis.

In addition to this, Flores D'Arcais (1993) proposes how idiomatic expressions should be understood within the context of a sentence. What he claims is that the process of language comprehension does not distinguish whether the sentences contain idioms or not:

1) the input strings are analyzed by the *syntactic parser* which then produces a grammatical structure with a given representation; 2) the lexical items in the mental lexicon are accessed by the *lexical processor* which delivers a meaning representation of the individual words. Lexical processor and syntactic parser could be taken to be modular, as the former one feeds the results of its analysis to the latter; 3) Flores D'Arcais (1993) defines semantic analysis as being made on the basis of the syntactic structure acquired and the appropriate lexical units associated with their meaning; 4) these different components' processes' results are taken and assessed at the level of *thematic interpretation unit* or *message*. The function of such a unit is basically to collect, compare, and interpret evidence available from the linguistic components; 5) Flores D'Arcais (1993) argues that the syntactic parser and the lexical processor would work as usual throughout the process of analyzing the input even when the sentence contains an idiom. The lexical processor is supposed to recapture the unique lexical representation of the idiom and its matching meaning at the point of idiom identification. However, at this moment, some disagreement could arise between the syntactic processor and the lexical processor – the new information sent by the lexical

processor could become incoherent with the interpretation available up to this point to the thematic interpretation unit. Thus, with regard to the computation, idioms could be more complex due to a possible conflict between the operation of diverse processing components, the lexical processor, the syntactic parser, and the semantic analyzer (Cacciari, Tabossi, 1993).

## 6.2. PROBLEMS

The points brought forward by Flores D'Arcais (1993) have caused a number of questions to come to surface, and he tried to answer some of these questions. The first question is whether the literal meaning is computed during the comprehension process. In the case of literal meaning being computed during idiom comprehension, an additional effort for understanding an idiom should be expected. Moreover, an idiomatic expression could be more complex, with regard to the computation, even if the literal meaning is not estimated, since there is a possibility of a conflict between the operations of the different processing components.

Another question deals with a possible difference between well-known idioms and those with low familiarity. While frequently used terms may be listed in the lexicon, the understanding of poorly known idioms may require a full reckoning.

The third question comes forth at the intersection of the previous two. The problem of literal meaning being computed or not during idiom comprehension is not appropriate without further specification. It seems highly unlikely that the literal interpretation for every familiar idiom is computed. Then again, the story for unfamiliar idioms looks quite different. While at the same time highly familiar idioms should not cause any processing problems, idioms with low-familiarity should present some difficulty – this happens when the reader or listener is still not able to find out whether the phrase that she or he is reading is an idiomatic

expression. Thus, when the literal interpretation becomes no longer possible (for instance, when the context is quite neutral), additional processing problems could arise. Therefore, at the point of idiom uniqueness, some difficulty should be expected in processing idioms of low-familiarity.

The fourth question that arises is whether full analysis of the grammatical structure of the incoming string is taking place even when the understood sentence includes a highly familiar idiom that could be recovered as a multiword unit in the mental lexicon (without any need of syntactic analysis of its internal structure). This hypothesis was tested in a word-by-word reading task. That the inspection time for words at critical points in the string should be longer is an assumption based on the present hypothesis – this should be the case for the point of idiomatic expression uniqueness of an unfamiliar idiom.

The fifth and the last question concerns the semantic analysis of infrequently used or entirely unknown idioms. Idioms are listed in the lexicon, and are not computed, according to numerous theories on idiomatic expressions in linguistics and psycholinguistics. Idioms would be searched in a lexicon as multiword lexical units. In case this position proves to be true, on each occasion a new idiom is encountered, it should act like an entirely unknown word, while the listener or reader would use the context in order to comprehend the meaning of the phrase, or use a dictionary or another external source. On the other hand, since most idioms show some semantic or pragmatic relation to the intended meaning (except for the very opaque ones), listeners or readers should be able to interpret unknown idiomatic expressions and acquire reliable interpretation (Cacciari, Tabossi, 1993).

### 6.3. COMPREHENSION OF AMBIGUOUS IDIOMS IN CONTEXT

The comprehension of idioms depends on several factors. Predictability is one of these factors, already brought up by Cacciari and Tabossi (1988). In her work, Colombo (1993)

considers several components supposedly involved by this factor itself. Frequency of occurrence of an idiomatic expression, i.e. how often has the idiom been met, or how firm the link between the string of words constituting an idiom and its joint meaning is, may be a significant component. That being so, the availability of the stored meaning will in all probability differ, since the superficial form of the string is not the same in each occasion. It is argued by Cohen, Dunbar, and McClelland (1990) that the meaning is more presumable to become accessible if there is a firm connection.

The degree of frozenness, as claimed by Gibbs and Gonzales (1985), is another significant component taking part in comprehension of idioms. Syntactic signs, such as the presence or absence of articles, are crucial in finding out the probability that an expression is interpreted as an idiom instead of literally. Beyond what has been stated, certain idioms' syncratic aspects might be important too. For example, particular idiomatic expressions point out the events that, if they are to be denoted literally, would be highly unlikely. An example of such an idiom is *lose face* (meaning: to lose status, to become less respectable).

When examining the comprehension of an idiomatic expression, one of the most important variables to reflect on is without doubt context. It seems particularly important, mostly when one comes across ambiguous idiomatic expressions, to understand whether and in what way context interacts with other elements to confirm the point at which the meaning of an idiom is activated and incorporated. The meanings of individual words in a phrase or sentence interact locally as well as globally. Colombo (1993) offers examples to further explain these terms:

- 1) The train ran through the country;
- 2) The scar ran through his face;
- 3) The business ran efficiently.



In order to define a semantic domain where the context leads to the selection of the certain sense of the word *run*, the individual words must be combined locally. In the following manner, the sense of the word *run* in 1) is a concrete sense containing a physical and spatial movement, a concrete spatial sense with no real movement included in 2), and an abstract sense in 3). When speaking about the global level, in order to form an interpretation at the whole sentence level, the meaning of the individual words must be integrated. Therefore, cohesion and integration of lower level components (like the phrase in which a word is included) are established by local context. On the other hand, higher level elaborative processes (like interpretation of the whole phrase) are confirmed by and linked to global context. In order to clarify the importance of this differentiation between the local and global levels, Colombo (1993) offers some examples: *break the ice* as an obscure idiom can have an important interpretation at the local level. On the other hand, the interpretation of an opaque unambiguous idiom, such as *shoot the breeze*, which is based on the compositional meanings of its elements, would not be significant, except that it is used in an unusual sense. Then again, the literal interpretation of the idiom *kick the bucket* (meaning: to die; for example: I am too young to kick the bucket), possible at the local level, would not be significant, or at the very least not very credible, at the global level.

The last factor put forward by Colombo (1993) is transparency. Processing strategies required by transparent idioms are different from those required by opaque ones. In a similar manner, it was pointed out by Frazier and Rayner (1990) that different strategies were used by the language processor in order to deal with words with different meanings or different senses. Colombo (1993) concluded that the study of the processes associated with the comprehension of idiomatic expressions seems to be the most important element of the comprehension of the human language processor (Cacciari, Tabossi, 1993).

## 7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, idioms or idiomatic expressions may be defined as phrases whose meaning is somewhat different from the literal interpretation of their individual words (Fotovatnia, Goudarzi, 2014). They are used every day by native speakers, which is why a learner of a second language should acquire at least some basic knowledge of common idiomatic expressions. Idioms pose a number of problems for non-native speakers in terms of their comprehension and production. The fact that even native speakers, who use them on a daily basis, can sometimes get confused, speaks in favor of their complexity. The easiest idioms used by non-native speakers are those that resemble the most those present in the learner's native language, while similar idioms, even though they were understood just as well as the identical ones, tend to show interference from a native language. The different idioms were the most difficult to comprehend and produce. The speakers tend to use idioms from their own native language in order to comprehend and produce idioms in the foreign language (Irujo, 1984). Only when the idioms are to a great extent or completely unfamiliar, problems in terms of their processing occur (Flores D'Arcais, 1993). As a second language speaker of the English language, I have to agree with these statements since I also came across these problems. I would also like to point out that the teachers do not devote enough attention and time to teaching idioms to their students. Students are usually presented with a list of idioms they should learn by heart, without discussing them any further.

I would like to finish with one quote by Searle (1975): "*Speak idiomatically unless there is some good reason not to do so.*"

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