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Synonymy in Idiomatic Expressions

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This paper examines the paradigmatic semantic relationship of synonymy in several sets of different idiomatic expressions with similar meaning. It starts from the hypothesis that no synonyms have exactly the same meaning in all contexts or on all socio-cultural levels of language, and that corrective mechanisms operate to prevent absolute synonymy (such as one of the lexical units falling into disuse or acquiring different connotations in terms of stylistic markedness or register). One of the ways to test this hypothesis is to conduct a survey of native speakers, asking them whether selected idiomatic expressions are synonymous or not, as well as in which contexts and uses their meanings differ. The paper presents the results of this survey, in which 25 native speakers of English participated.

1. Introduction

Synonymy is traditionally defined as sameness of meaning or a semantic relationship of two or more words that have the same or a similar meaning. Consequently, the literature typically defines synonyms as words with the same or almost the same meaning. More recent and more precise definitions avoid using the terms *word* and *lexeme*, as synonymy also occurs between composite expressions. Instead they use *lexical unit* or *expression* since they cover both single words and multi-word units, which include idiomatic expressions, idioms, phrasal verbs, compound terms and so on. In his recent textbook on semantics, Riemer (2010) points to the distinction between single words and multi-word units at the very beginning of the discussion on synonymy, referring to those different kinds of synonymy as **lexical synonymy** (synonymy between individual lexemes) and **phrasal synonymy** (synonymy between expressions consisting of more than one lexeme) (Riemer 2010: 151). Unfortunately, such distinction does not seem

to hold for synonymy between one word and a multi-word expression (e.g. the verb *die* and the idiom *kick the bucket* or the verb *compensate* and the phrasal verb *make up for*). Even though such cross-level synonymy is pervasive and therefore deserves attention in future research, this paper investigates phrasal synonymy, more precisely synonymy between idiomatic expressions.

It needs to be pointed out that the problem of lexical items is not as important in the issue of synonymy as the fact that two lexical items can never be completely the same. The semanticist Lyons, who also took into consideration synonymy between multi-word units, defines two or more expressions as absolutely synonymous only if the following conditions are met:

- “(i) all their meanings are identical
 - (ii) they are synonymous in all contexts
 - (iii) they are semantically equivalent (i.e., their meaning or meanings are identical) on all dimensions of meaning, descriptive and non-descriptive.”
- (Lyons 1995: 61)

Although possible candidates for absolute synonymy have been proposed, such as *sofa* and *couch* (Taylor 2002: 471), one can easily ascertain that their collocational range is not the same. Therefore, it is difficult to find **absolute synonyms**, because it is impossible that all of their meanings are interchangeable in all contexts. The semanticist Ullmann also noted that it is hardly ever possible in actual language:

“It is perfectly true that absolute synonymy runs counter to our whole way of looking at language. When we see different words we instinctively assume that there must also be some difference in meaning.” Ullmann (1972: 142)

Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms (1984: 5-31) discusses the concept of synonymy at length, providing the following definition:

“A synonym, in this dictionary, will always mean one of two or more words in the English language which have the same or very nearly the same *essential* meaning. Synonyms, therefore, are only such words as may be defined wholly, or almost wholly, in the same terms. Usually they are distinguished from one another by an added implication or connotation, or they may differ in their idiomatic use or in their application.” (Merriam-Webster 1984: 24).

The problem with the former definition is that it lacks reference to the collocational range of a word or expression, i.e. interchangeability in all contexts, so this is a definition of synonyms from a non-contextual point of view.

According to Cruse (1986: 267), synonyms are lexical items

“whose senses are identical in respect of ‘central’ semantic traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may provisionally describe as ‘minor’ or ‘peripheral’ traits”.

In most cases, words are synonymous in one of their meanings and in a restricted range of contexts. Some contexts need additional entailments of the

synonym's meaning to be logical, and if one of the synonyms lacks these entailments, it becomes collocationally unacceptable. This kind of synonymy is usually called **partial synonymy** (Lyons 1995: 60) or **propositional synonymy** (Cruse 1986: 270), where two or more expressions are identical in meaning, but they do not satisfy the conditions necessary to be regarded as absolute synonyms. This notion should not be confused with **near-synonymy**, which refers to "expressions that are more or less similar, but not identical, in meaning" (Lyons 1995:60). In other words, all near-synonyms are at the same time instances of partial synonymy, whereas not all partially synonymous lexical items are near-synonymous.

Thus we see that the literature draws a distinction between three degrees of synonymy: absolute synonymy, partial or propositional synonymy and near-synonymy on semantic grounds, whereas on formal grounds we have discussed the distinction between lexical and phrasal synonymy. The next section takes a look at idiomatic expressions and how recent linguistic theories approach their analysis.

2. Idiomatic expressions

Idiomatic expressions comprise an important part of language. They enable us to express our thoughts in a vivid and imaginative manner, showing our degree of proficiency in a certain language. The term *idiomatic expression* is used here because it is less ambiguous than *idiom*, although their meanings overlap in a number of aspects and are often used interchangeably, even in this paper. The term *idiom* is problematic not only due to its polysemy in general use, where it can refer to a manner of speaking, style, a variety of language or language itself, but also due to a range of referents that it has in lexicological studies. The branch of lexicology that studies such lexical units is known as *phraseology* in central and eastern European traditions and the name for this scholarly approach to language has recently also been catching on in Anglo-American linguistics. The term *idiom* can be understood broadly as any phrasal lexeme or multi-word item regardless of its semantic opacity; but it can also be understood narrowly in the sense of a fixed expression whose meaning is not transparent from the sum of its constituent parts.

If we understand idioms broadly, then we are faced with a legion of such lexical units in language, whereas idioms understood narrowly (also referred to as **pure idioms**) are in fact very rare in language. The expressions *chew the fat* – meaning 'have a long friendly conversation with someone' – and *red herring* – 'something that distracts attention from the main issue' – are examples of idioms understood both narrowly and broadly, as their literal meanings give no clue to their idiomatic meanings. On the other hand, the expressions *take the bull by the horns* – meaning 'confront a difficulty' – or *out of hand* – 'out of control' – can be classified only as idioms understood broadly, as they are figurative expressions that do give some clue as to why they mean what they mean (i.e. they are semantically analysable).

The term *fixed expression* is also unsatisfactory, as most of these lexical units are not really fixed or frozen (Moon 1998: 2). Their syntactic and lexical productivity

of idiomatic expressions tends to be limited due to their noncompositional nature, but in fact they can undergo a variety of both syntactic and lexical modifications. Cognitive linguistic research has shown that the degree of their semantic analysability or compositionality is reflected in their lexical flexibility or syntactic productivity (Gibbs et al. 1989, Nunberg et al. 1994).

The category of idiomatic expressions involves a range of types, including idioms (e.g. *shoot the breeze*), metaphors or metaphoric expressions/idioms (e.g. *hit the ceiling*), metonymic expressions (e.g. *give somebody a hand*), sayings (e.g. *that's the way the cookie crumbles*), proverbs (e.g. *every cloud has a silver lining*), binomials or pairs of words (e.g. *live and learn*), frozen similes or idioms of comparison (e.g. *as cool as a cucumber*), phrasal compounds (e.g. *deadline*), phrasal verbs (e.g. *make out*), formulaic expressions (e.g. *be my guest*), grammatical idioms (e.g. *let alone*) and idioms with *it* (e.g. *take it easy*). This list of categories is by no means exhaustive, but only suggests the kinds of multi-word units that idiomatic expressions subsume. It also needs to be stressed that many idiomatic expressions cannot be easily fitted into these categories. Moreover, one and the same expression can often be a member of two or more of these categories. For the purpose of our research, we have chosen mostly metaphorical idioms and idioms of comparison because of their picturesque character, which often evokes a concrete and easily imageable scene.

3. Motivation for idiomatic expressions

An important feature of idiomatic expressions is that they have more specific, complex meanings than do their assumed literal paraphrases, which do not reflect the complexity in people's mental representations for phrases. Idiomatic expressions have complex figurative interpretations that are not arbitrarily determined, but are often motivated by independently existing conceptual metaphors that provide the foundation for much of our everyday thought (Lakoff 1987). For instance, *flip your lid* means 'get very angry'. This metaphoric expression is motivated by two basic conceptual metaphors – THE MIND IS A CONTAINER and ANGER IS HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Lakoff 1987). Speakers metaphorically map their non-linguistic knowledge of heated fluids in containers onto the emotion of anger (from the source domain onto the target domain), which helps them conceptualize in more concrete terms how anger is understood (the target domain). These basic conceptual metaphors are so productive that the same metaphorical mappings give rise to many other conventional expressions, such as *I exploded with anger* (Gibbs 1995: 106) or *I could barely contain my rage* (Kövecses 2002: 97).

Metonymy is distinguished from metaphor in such a way that it is characterized as typically involving one conceptual domain, rather than two distinct ones. Idiomatic expressions featuring body parts as a lexical component are typically metonymic (Radden/Kövecses 1999: 31). For example, *givellend an ear* 'listen, pay attention' or *keep an eye on something* 'watch closely, pay attention'. Human activities such as listening or watching are often metonymically expressed by making references to body parts that are most crucially involved in those activities. In this way *ear* stands for 'hearing' and *eye* for 'watching', both of which can

be subsumed under a more general basic conceptual metonymy BODY PART FOR ITS TYPICAL FUNCTION (Barcelona 2003: 265-6).

Besides metaphor and metonymy, many idiomatic expressions are motivated by conventional knowledge (Kövecses 2002: 207). This cognitive mechanism helps to explain the meaning of those idioms that contain references to the Bible (e.g. *a fly in the ointment* or *forbidden fruit*) or classical mythology (e.g. *Pandora's box* or *a Sisyphian task*). Conventional knowledge is shared information that people in a given culture have concerning a conceptual domain. This conventional knowledge is also called "folk theory" or "cultural model". Speakers of American origin see the expression *work like a nigger* as highly offensive and derogatory because of its negative (racist) connotations. It is worth noting that the nineteenth-century American literature featured uses of the word *nigger* without racist connotations, as for example in Mark Twain's novels.

Motivation for idioms can also be based on image metaphors, also known as *iconic motivation* (Dobrovolskij/Piirainen 2005: 90). For example, whilst we might claim that the idiom *have a finger in every pie* – meaning 'be involved in and have influence over many different activities' – has an underlying conceptual metaphor, it is more likely that its interpretation will arise from the rich imagery evoked by the expression. In this case we have a "superimposition of one image onto the other" (Kövecses 2002: 38), so the image encoded in the lexical structure of that idiomatic expression is superimposed on the situation to which it refers. Dobrovolskij and Piirainen say that there is "'an iconic similarity" between the actual (figurative) meaning and the "inner form" (the imagery evoked by the lexical structure) of the idiom" (2005: 95). The expression *have a finger in every pie* is often used in a way of which people do not approve, also arising from the image metaphor in which several pies have traces of somebody's finger. Based on our conventional knowledge, we know that such a situation is not acceptable in our culture but can often be seen performed by children, who are in turn warned against touching food with their fingers and are encouraged to get a slice of the pie instead.

It is not always possible to find the motivating link between an idiom's form and its meaning. An example of such an opaque idiom is the expression *in a brown study* (meaning 'absent-minded'). This term dates from the late 1500s, and although by then *in a study* had long meant "lost in thought," the reason for adding *brown* is unclear¹.

A set of studies conducted by Gibbs (e.g. Gibbs et al. 1989, Gibbs 1990, Gibbs/O'Brien 1990, Gibbs et al. 1991) showed that most literal paraphrases of idioms are not motivated by the same set of rich conceptual metaphors as are idioms, and readers infer more specific entailments about the causes, intentionality and manner of human actions when they read idiomatic phrases than when they read literal paraphrases of these figurative expressions (Gibbs 1992). This can be exemplified with the following sentence:

¹ The American Heritage Dictionary of idioms online reference

*An easygoing manager won't rock the boat unless it's absolutely necessary.*²

We can easily imagine the manager in a fancy suit capsizing a small vessel, such as a canoe, by moving too violently in it. If we paraphrased this idiomatic expression, we would not get the same vivid image as in the previous sentence:

An easygoing manager won't disturb a stable situation unless it's absolutely necessary.

According to Gibbs, people interpret the figurative meanings of idioms faster than paraphrased or literal uses of the same expressions (Gibbs 1980). Therefore, idiomatic expressions also serve to avoid processing overload (Gibbs 2007: 703).

4. Analyzability of idioms

According to the most common definition, idioms are linguistic expressions whose overall meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts. However, many idiomatic expressions arise from conceptual metaphors and their meanings are not opaque to contemporary speakers. They appear to be decomposable or analyzable with the meanings of their parts contributing independently to their overall figurative meanings (Gibbs/Nayak 1989). An idiom such as *tread on air* – meaning 'to be in a very happy state' – is decomposable because each of its components contributes to its figurative meaning. Other idioms whose individual parts do not contribute individually to their figurative meaning are semantically nondecomposable (such as *in a brown study*) because people experience difficulty in breaking these phrases into their component parts (Gibbs/Nayak 1989).

A series of studies conducted by Gibbs et al. (1989) demonstrate the influence of semantic analyzability on idiom comprehension. Their findings suggest that people attempt a compositional analysis in order to make sense of an idiomatic expression. When an idiomatic expression is decomposable, subjects can assign independent meanings to its individual elements and will quickly recognize how these meaningful elements combine to yield a figurative meaning. The ability to assign the elements of an idiomatic expression with independent meanings makes speakers regard normally decomposable idioms as syntactically productive and lexically flexible (Gibbs et al. 1989: 587). Understanding semantically nondecomposable idioms is more difficult precisely because the overall figurative interpretation of these phrases cannot be determined through analysis of their constituent elements. Most attempts at a compositional analysis of nondecomposable idioms will fail to provide any useful information that would be relevant to an idiom's figurative meaning. In order to understand nondecomposable idioms speakers simply have to learn their stipulated, figurative interpretations (Gibbs et al. 1989: 590). In fact, studies have shown that children experience greater difficulties learning the meanings of opaque idioms, than they do acquiring transparent ones (Gibbs 1987). The analyzability of idioms also appears to influence the acquisition of these figurative phrases.

² The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms online reference

5. Hypotheses and methodology

This paper starts from the hypothesis that no synonyms have exactly the same meaning in all contexts or on all socio-cultural levels of language. Corrective mechanisms operate to prevent absolute synonymy, such as one of the lexical units falling into disuse or acquiring different connotations in terms of stylistic markedness or register. What this paper understands as synonymy is what is in linguistics usually (more precisely) labelled as partial and near-synonymy. In other words, we are testing here how similar in meaning certain idiomatic expressions are.

The second hypothesis of our experiment is that the meanings of idioms are not arbitrary, but motivated by different cognitive mechanisms which provide a link between the idiom and its meaning. These cognitive mechanisms may be different, and as discussed in the previous sections, they include conceptual metaphors, metonymies and conventional knowledge.

Our third hypothesis is that speakers can intuitively apply these cognitive mechanisms in order to make sense of idioms. We expected that subjects would be less familiar with semantically opaque idioms, such as *wool-gathering*, because their individual parts do not contribute to the overall figurative meaning.

Our starting point was to find examples of English idiomatic expressions similar in meaning and dealing with emotions. For this purpose we used *The Croatian-English Dictionary of Idioms* (Vrgoč/Fink-Arsovski 2008) because it lists several English expressions as possible translations for any one Croatian expression. Retrieving examples from a bilingual dictionary of idioms is one of the ways of finding synonymous idiomatic expressions. Bilingual dictionaries are a good source of cross-linguistic synonymy, though we are fully aware that they reflect subjective lexicographic choices. However, the degree of synonymy between idiomatic expressions is also subject to personal judgment. For this reason we expected that by examining a larger sample of informants we would obtain a more objective picture of similarity of meaning between idiomatic expressions.

Once we selected synonymous expressions, we organized them into seven groups. Five groups contained idioms of emotion (for absent-mindedness, insanity, anxiety, and happiness), and the remaining three groups contained idioms of comparison or ordinary idioms (to make our selection more heterogeneous). The heading of each group was labelled with their nonliteral meaning, which is the core meaning that connects all the individual meanings of idioms belonging to the same group, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 The Questionnaire

1) <u>be confused or absent-minded</u>	4) <u>be in a state of anxiety or tense expectation</u>
<i>all at sea</i>	<i>be on pins and needles</i>
<i>all balled up</i>	<i>be like a cat on a hot tin roof</i>
<i>psyched out</i>	<i>be like a cat on hot bricks</i>
<i>wool-gathering</i>	<i>be on the hot seat</i>
<i>in a brown study</i>	<i>be on thorns</i>
2) <u>disturb a stable situation</u>	5) <u>be in a very happy / blissful state</u>
<i>rock the boat</i>	<i>be in seventh heaven</i>
<i>make waves</i>	<i>be on cloud nine</i>
<i>cause ripples</i>	<i>tread on air</i>
<i>create a stir</i>	<i>be on top of the world</i>
<i>kick up dust</i>	6) <u>cry a lot and uncontrollably</u>
<i>fire things up</i>	<i>cry like the rain</i>
3) <u>lose one's mental sanity</u>	<i>cry like a rainstorm</i>
<i>lose your mind</i>	<i>cry like a baby</i>
<i>go over the edge</i>	<i>cry buckets</i>
<i>go off your head</i>	<i>cry your eyes / heart out</i>
<i>go round the bend</i>	<i>sob your heart out</i>
<i>go soft in the head</i>	<i>turn on the waterworks</i>
<i>take leave of your senses</i>	7) <u>work extremely hard</u>
<i>go out of your mind</i>	<i>work like an ant</i>
	<i>work like a maniac</i>
	<i>work like crazy</i>
	<i>work like a slave</i>
	<i>work like a nigger</i>
	<i>burn the midnight oil</i>

We composed a questionnaire with the selected idioms and sent it by e-mail to 25 native speakers of English, taking into consideration their age, occupation and place of origin. We tried to acquire as heterogeneous a sample as possible, which is shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 Age distribution of subjects

Age	Number of subjects	Percentage
Between 19 and 25	10	40%
Between 26 and 45	10	40%
Between 46 and 65	3	12%
Older than 66	2	8%

Table 3 Geographical distribution of subjects

Place of origin	Number of subjects	Percentage
England	7	28%
Wales	1	4%
Ireland	1	4%
Canada	4	16%
USA	9	36%
Australia	3	12%

The task presented to our subjects was to write for each idiom individually whether its meaning can really be paraphrased as the given nonliteral meaning in the heading and to see the degree of synonymy between expressions within each group. They were asked to discuss the meanings, giving examples of contexts and explanations for each expression. In the case of the idioms of comparison, they were asked to arrange them in the order of intensity. Most of these were similes, which often incorporate fossilized, stereotyped beliefs such as undesirable traits in animals (Moon 1998:197), used to conceptualize people and human actions, and they were structured so as to intensify the main verb.

6. Results and discussion

The first five sets of idiomatic expressions tested with native speakers are idioms of emotions. Most of them have underlying basic conceptual metaphors which speakers can intuitively recognize. Lakoff (1987: 380) argued that although they were traditionally considered devoid of conceptual content, emotions have an extremely complex conceptual structure that gives rise to a wide variety of inferences. Individual meanings of very similar emotion idioms inherit some conceptual elements from the underlying image and include them in their semantic structures as relevant components. Most such images point to corresponding physiological symptoms often described by the subjects (which by metonymy stand for the emotions themselves).

6.1 Idioms denoting either absent-mindedness or confusion

all at sea
all balled up
psyched out
wool-gathering
in a brown study

The idiom *all at sea* transfers the condition of a vessel that has lost its bearings to the human mind. Charles Dickens used it in *Little Dorrit* (1855): “Mrs. Tickit ... was so plainly *at sea* on this part of the case.” For some speakers, this idiomatic expression is reminiscent of Melville’s *Moby Dick* and “the image of

the ungraspable phantom of life". Since the sea is an immense powerful mass, it is easy to imagine it bewildering the human soul. In fact, some subjects gave the following explanations: "it's used when you're adrift, lost, with no idea"; "complete lack of information". Two subjects wrote that the right expression should be "out to sea" and one wrote "gone to sea", but according to the dictionary definition, these expressions refer to the actual embarkation on a voyage or to becoming a sailor. Most subjects agreed that it meant to be confused, perplexed, and suggested alternative expressions such as *to be in a quandary* and *spacing out* or *spacey*. Some subjects wrote it would mean "daydreaming", "focusing your attention on one particular thing" and "away with the fairies", which indicate a more pleasant, dreamlike state. One subject wrote this idiom is applied to more people. They were all familiar with it, but used it rarely.

The explanation of the idiom *all balled up* was nicely summed up by one subject who wrote: "this could be used if you don't know which direction to go in out of several possible directions, whether you are speaking, travelling, or in a broader sense, as in which direction to take in a relationship". He gave an example: "I was all balled up inside so I just stood there looking foolish". One subject wrote it was "the type of confusion where you talk yourself in circles, getting yourself increasingly more confused". According to two subjects, it refers to a person "who will not talk about their emotions"; who "has pent up all their emotions inside". The subjects were divided between those who believed that it suggested confusion and those who thought it suggested emotional suppression. One subject wrote "a cat does it" and we concluded that she misinterpreted the idiom. She tried to find the motivation for the idiom by linking the image of a squatted cat to the round shape evoked by the idiom. 44% of subjects were unfamiliar with this expression, which may be due to the fact that when a horse is driven over soft or partly thawed snow, the snow becomes packed into icy balls on its hooves, making it stumble. Another theory is that it alludes to the vulgar term balls for testicles (from the first half of the 1900s, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*).

The subjects gave the following explanations for the idiom *psyched out*:

- intimidated by the task at hand
- to be taken advantage of through ulterior motive by another, as in "I psyched him out", meaning "I understood him in ways he was unaware of, so gained the upper hand"
- when someone 'has your number', when someone has you at a psychological disadvantage
- American English idiom, meaning to be intimidated by an opponent or a situation
- a student who has psyched out a teacher might know what to expect on a test
- to be talked out of doing something
- confusion with a hint of mania or panic, frantic confusion because of information overload
- being very shocked or disturbed by an event (refers to a person)

- context of a competition: "We tried to psyche out our opponents to have advantage in the game"
- when somebody has put you off your game, used in sport
- to be made to lose focus / confidence: "The Welsh Rugby team were psyched out by the All-Blacks' Haka"; used in movies on basketball
- after taking drugs you could be psyched out
- being really excited about something, ecstatic

Basically, it means that someone or something has taken control over you, whether it is a substance or a person. It is interesting that some subjects wrote it is used in team sports, such as rugby, because what is most important in sport is to 'read' your opponents' next move and try to prevent them from scoring. Also, another different meaning was suggested: the state of mania/panic/shock/mental trauma provoked by a disturbing event or information overload.

We expected that many subjects would not be familiar with the next two idioms, as they are not only nondecomposable but also archaic. They are *wool-gathering* and *in a brown study*.

These are the explanations that our subjects gave for *wool-gathering*:

- being in a quiet mental state, doing an activity that does not require thinking; to go into an idle mental state; refers to mental processes
- focusing on an insignificant task while paying no attention to the more urgent task
- confusion associated with old age
- absent-minded because of daydreaming
- being withdrawn into own thoughts, not aware of surroundings

This idiom originates from 1553, and it derives from the practice of wandering to gather tufts of wool torn from sheep caught on thorns and bushes, which was the earliest way of collecting wool (prior to invention of shears). This idiom is remotely reminiscent of the Croatian idiom connected to pasture *pustiti mozak na pašu*, literally meaning "to let your brain graze", which means 'to be in an idle mental state, thinking about nothing'. As many as 68% of the subjects had never heard the English idiomatic expression.

As already mentioned, *in a brown study* dates from the late 1500s. Being in a brown study means deep in thought, and more often than not, deep in unhappy or depressing thoughts. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, it comes from *brown* as in a figurative sense of "gloomy", and *study*, which among many other things can mean "a state of mind or mental absorption". None of our subjects was familiar with this idiom.

From our subjects' responses it is clear that the first three idiomatic expressions could not be used in the same situations. What they have in common is that they all suggest that the person experiencing them has no control over his or her state of mind, but the cause of this state is different in each idiom (whether one is trying to solve a problem; has problems expressing their emotions; does not know which way to take; has experienced a trauma; is manipulated by another person) and, therefore, the behaviour of the person is different as well. One subject

wrote that *all at sea* suggests complete lack of information, whereas, *psyched out* perhaps suggests frantic confusion because of information overload - which are two completely opposite states of mind. The person who is psyched out would be running around, screaming, shaking, whereas, a person who is all at sea would be immobile, lost in thought, staring at a distant point.

The state of mental idleness suggested by *wool-gathering* does not need to be stimulated by anything in particular; most subjects agreed it is fairly synonymous with 'being absent-minded', whereas *in a brown study* most often implies some depressive or worried thoughts.

6.2 Idioms whose nonliteral meaning is 'to disturb a stable situation'

rock the boat
make waves
cause ripples
create a stir
kick up dust / raise dust
fire things up

We wanted to find out whether these expressions implied a positive or a negative change of situation and whether it was caused deliberately or not.

All subjects agreed that the idiom *rock the boat* is the one which most fits the nonliteral meaning. Five subjects wrote it is used in a negative context. Two of them wrote the following examples:

- if someone at work said: "Shall we change the way we handle the post then?", if I criticised their handling of it, I would then say: "Well, I don't want to rock the boat" - I wouldn't say: "I don't want to create a stir", because *create a stir* is used for something more drastic
- "I thought about reporting the minor infraction at my workplace, but since I was new, I didn't want to rock the boat for such a small reason".

One subject wrote this idiom "suggests the person is causing a disturbance deliberately, i.e. it implies intent, whereas *making waves* is more about the effect caused by rocking the boat". Four subjects wrote *rock the boat* and *make waves* are stronger expressions and suggest a greater disturbance than *cause ripples* because waves are larger than ripples. Three subjects wrote that *make waves* is often applied to someone who suggests a novel way of doing things, who brings an innovation into a situation, changing it in a positive way.

According to our subjects, *cause ripples* implies that the person who wanted to disturb the peace / stable situation was unsuccessful, like "a bully at school that has no say", as one subject wrote. Also, they wrote it was about "cause and effect, to set off some string of related events", it implies "the effects could be subtle and far-reaching". One subject (a doctoral student in Linguistics) wrote an interesting observation: "*causing ripples* and *creating a stir* are very similar, and they're less about action than speaking - *causing ripples* implies a slowly spreading murmur that gets picked up and continued by other people, not all from a

central point of origin." Our impression is that a scandal might cause ripples (of gossips), but they would not damage the reputation of the persons involved in it. In fact, several subjects suggested the alternative expression for *create a stir* – "create a buzz", meaning to create 'news that people tell each other that may or may not be true'. However, five subjects wrote *create a stir* can also be used in the positive context of raising awareness, "doing something that gets people's attention and causes a reaction, in a crowd, for example"; "to attract attention, usually in a defined community of some sort". One subject had never heard this idiom; she had only heard of *stirring the pot*, whose meaning is not idiomatic.

The expressions *raise dust* or *kick up dust* are not used much in Australia and Canada, according to the responses of the subjects from the respective countries, and the subject from Texas had never heard of them. One subject wrote it reminded her of a bull getting ready to attack a matador and of the anxiety before the immediate situation, which is a very interesting mental image for this idiom. One subject wrote he would use it to make a negative comment, when the disturbance was a bad thing.

Most subjects wrote that *fire things up* is different than the other idioms from this group, because it has a stronger positive meaning. They wrote these explanations:

- it suggests energising a dull situation
- it seems less about causing trouble and more about inciting interest and getting people activated
- it sounds more like heating a situation up, fuelling the fire
- to make something boring more interesting
- this just means to get people motivated to work harder; it does not mean to upset things, but to stimulate them
- I use this idiom to get ready or get excited for an event or situation
- to do something that adds energy to a boring, dull or stagnant situation
- to increase the intensity of a situation
- this phrase has a positive connotation, while the other phrases tend to have a negative connotation
- to spice up a boring situation or exert some energy to make things more interesting

Here, the idiom *fire things up* is motivated by two conceptual metaphors: ENERGY IS FUEL FOR THE FIRE and ENTHUSIASM IS FIRE. In the first case, where the subjects wrote that they used the idiom for 'energising a dull situation', 'heating a situation up', 'getting excited for an event', 'adding energy to a boring, dull or stagnant situation', 'increasing the intensity' of the situation and 'spicing up a boring situation or exerting some energy to make things more interesting', they metaphorically mapped their knowledge (that adding fuel can stir the fire more quickly) onto the situation of doing something that makes them excited / energetic, (from the source domain onto the target domain). The second conceptual metaphor is seen in examples where they wrote that it is used for 'getting people activated' and 'getting people motivated to work harder', when applied to a community. They mapped their knowledge of fire (which spreads quickly)

to the people who are enthusiastic about something (enthusiasm spreads quickly among people with common beliefs).

The first four idioms from this group imply a change from the status quo. However, each of them brings either a positive change or a negative one, each bringing a bigger change than the subsequent one. The last idiom does not completely fit the given nonliteral meaning. It is based on two conceptual metaphors on the one hand, and it has a definite positive meaning, as distinguished from the others.

The next group contained idioms referring to insanity. Besides the physiological effects of anger (which form the basis of the ANGER IS HEAT metaphor), agitation is also an important part of our folk model of insanity (Lakoff 1987). Since the folk theories of the effects of anger and the effects of insanity overlap, we get the metaphor ANGER IS INSANITY. Therefore, expressions that indicate insane behaviour can also indicate angry behaviour.

6.3 *The idioms denoting 'loss of mental sanity'*

lose your mind
go over the edge
go off your head
go round the bend
go soft in the head
take leave of your senses
go out of your mind

Our oldest subject (aged 69, a Canadian living in California with graduate degrees in Psychology and Theology) wrote: "I use these idioms only in reference to myself, not toward another. I rarely would use any of these because I see them as derogatory – a diminishing of someone's self-esteem or of my own. To lose one's sanity is serious in the psychological realm. I do not take this lightly or use humorously". Also, one of our younger subjects noted that "these expressions are often used flippantly". The present authors also agree with them. Younger generations today really use these phrases lightly, as part of everyday conversation, without being aware of their grave implications.

In the first idiom from this group, *lose your mind*, we have the ontological metaphor THE MIND IS AN ENTITY, according to which we view our mind as a physical object (that can be lost). Ontological metaphors like this one are natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident descriptions of mental phenomena.

This idiom is the one most frequently used by our subjects. They all agreed it means "loss of mental sanity", moreover, it denotes definite loss of sanity. One subject from Australia (State of Victoria) wrote he would add *go nuts* and *lose one's marbles* to the list because they are very common where he comes from. He also wrote these expressions can be used for someone who is very drunk. One subject (England) wrote that *lose your mind* and *take leave of your senses* would probably

be used by upper class whereas they would not use the others. This is the only case where one of the subjects took social class of speakers into consideration.

The idioms *go over the edge*, *go out of your mind* and *go off your head* reflect the way we experience ourselves as containers, with a bounding surface, with an inside and an outside. We conceptualize our mind as a container which holds our capability of reasoning, our common sense, and whenever something causes its opening, we may lose it. The conceptual metaphor *THE MIND IS A CONTAINER* is part of the more general *CONDUIT* metaphor (Reddy 1979), according to which communication between people is structured in terms of ideas (objects) put to words (containers) and sent (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the ideas out of the word / container.

The idiomatic expression *go over the edge* elicited opposite observations, as far as the implied insanity is concerned. One subject wrote it denoted definite insanity, whereas another (his brother) wrote it could mean temporary loss of sanity usually resulting in an undesirable event. Other subjects wrote:

- it suggests a breaking point or a switch
- we use this when someone goes too far, like when they spend too much money, or drink too much or something like that
- it can mean 'lose patience'

Two subjects suggested alternative expressions *go off the deep end*, which is a sudden episode of anger (which reflects the mentioned overlap between expressions denoting insanity and those denoting anger) and *off one's rocker*, which is the state of being insane, not the action of becoming insane (which was our focus).

24% of subjects had never heard the expression *go off your head*, and among those who had, three persons wrote that it meant getting angry, three thought it referred to someone incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, one person that it reminded her of going off on a tangent about something, another that the usual expression is "go out of your head" and all the others simply wrote that it is synonymous with the heading.

28% of subjects had never heard the expression *go round the bend*, and those who were familiar with it, wrote:

- it seems to want to imply a repetition of something, i.e. a constant repetition that could create ennui, insanity
- it is rarely used, and usually humorously, ironically
- if kids are being bold, the parents might say they are being driven around the bend
- it sounds like physically going somewhere

28% of subjects wrote that the idiom *go soft in the head* refers to insanity and that its meaning is pretty synonymous to the other idioms. One of them gave an example of a sentence: "When I crashed my favourite car, I went a little soft in the head". Another subject explained the motivation for this idiom like this: "because of the word 'soft' – you might use this to avoid the suggestion that the person is very loud, raving, exaggerated in their insanity".

More interesting are the other 24% of subjects who indicated that it meant 'to lose intelligence', i.e. it referred to someone who is stupid or dim-witted.

In this case, this expression is used as a euphemism. This is probably why one person wrote that this expression was more insulting than the other expressions in this group.

Two persons thought it meant “going senile” or “having Alzheimer”, which suggests that the brain gets softer as we get older and start losing memory. It is interesting that one person wrote the opposite – that it meant ‘to become more sensitive’, and therefore it was not synonymous to the heading at all. Two persons wrote that they seldom used this expression.

Four subjects indicated that *take leave of your senses* was old-fashioned and rather formal, rarely used outside period drama. One of them also wrote that it was usually used rhetorically – “Have you taken leave of your senses?”, which is more common than “He has taken leave of his senses”. Five subjects thought that it did not denote true insanity, but more some irrational temporary behaviour. They wrote:

- being irrational about some decision, exhibiting some aberrant behaviour, doing something unexpected
- accompanies momentary grief or worry
- used to describe temporary behaviour that is erratic or stupid: “For a minute, he took leave of his senses”
- making bad decisions
- implies an absent mind for a period of time
- used by upper class
- less about going nuts and more that someone has done something illogical

One subject gave an interesting observation: “this could be to fall unconscious”. If the subjects did not already know this idiom’s meaning, the meaning suggested by this subject could make perfect sense to them. According to Keysar and Bly,

“Because of the nature of our interpretive system, once we make sense of an idiom in one way, it may be difficult to conceive of alternative ways to understand it” (Keysar/Bly 1999: 1572).

24% of subjects wrote that *go out of your mind* can be used to express permanent loss of sanity. However, more often it denotes sudden and momentary grief or worry. They gave these examples:

- “I’d gone out of my mind with worry until I saw him at the back door”
- it might be said just if you could not find the keys to your car and looked everywhere
- it says that someone is going crazy due to a situation, i.e. getting stressed about something, but not literally losing their sanity
- used a lot to describe anxiety or worry
- to experience extreme emotion, especially anger

In this last example, again, we encounter the overlap between insane and angry behaviour.

According to the subjects’ responses, the idioms from this group do not carry the same weight, so to say. Most of them do not refer to permanent insanity, but

are used in particular situations in which individuals experience sudden strong emotions, such as worry or grief. They also differ in terms of register, some are formal and some are informal, often used humorously.

6.4 Idioms denoting the state of 'anxiety or tense expectation'

be on pins and needles
be like a cat on a hot tin roof
be like a cat on hot bricks
be on the hot seat
be on thorns

Since the idioms in this group are very picturesque, we expected they would evoke vivid images in our subjects' minds, and also, that subjects would often describe physiological effects of the respective emotions from the heading.

One subject explained the motivation for these idioms in an excellent way, saying: "I feel that all of these expressions imply various stages of anxiety or a tenseness because of the use of something prickly (thorn, needle, pin) or something hot, both of which make you jump or pull away if pressure is applied".

20% of the subjects had never heard the expression *be on pins and needles*, which was surprising, because it can often be heard in movies, songs and on television. Two subjects from North America wrote that they had heard it, but would never use it personally, in conversation. They would rather say: "I'm freaking out". One Australian subject wrote that these expressions are uncommon in his environment (but he had heard *be like a cat on a hot tin roof* used by older people). On the contrary, two Canadian subjects indicated that they used this expression often.

Some persons suggested the expressions *be on tenterhooks*, *wound up* and *bag of nerves*, and one person wrote that it was more colloquial to say "to have pins and needles". The remaining subjects who were familiar with the expression, wrote these examples of its usage:

- sitting quietly and worrying, being in a tense mental state; it can be positive or negative expectation
- it suggests a tingling sensation, fear and anticipation, maybe dread
- a physical sensation caused by loss of blood flow to a limb
- it conveys a particular sensation of physical discomfort
- tip-toeing around someone so that they won't explode
- excitedly waiting for something, usually good / extraordinary

According to their responses, a person who is *on pins and needles* may be excited either because of some positive expectation, or because of a negative one, in fear of something / someone.

The idioms involving cats have replaced one another over time. The original idiom was *like a cat on a hot bake-stone*, which appeared in John Ray's *Proverbs* (1678). Later it was replaced by *like a cat on hot bricks*. This one was replaced by *like a cat on a hot tin roof*, popularized by the 1955 play by Tennessee Williams *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the subsequent 1958 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman.

Six younger subjects (up to the age of thirty) had never heard of *like a cat on a hot tin roof*. Among those who were familiar with this expression, two persons knew it originated from the Tennessee Williams' play. They also wrote that it was an American idiom, not used in the UK. One subject wrote that he thought "the cat's motivation is pain rather than anxiety". He suggested the more accurate synonym 'fidgety'. Another subject explained the behaviour of a person who is *like a cat on a hot tin roof*: "showing nervous activity – biting nails, pacing back and forth, jumping up and down, etc."

60% of the subjects were unfamiliar with the term *like a cat on hot bricks*, which is due to the fact that this is an old-fashioned idiom which was mostly used in the UK. However, some wrote that if someone used it in conversation, they would be able to understand its meaning.

Be on the hot seat gave more rewarding responses. Six subjects wrote that the correct idiom is *be in the hot seat*. According to their explanations it implies a situation in which a person is being questioned or interrogated, under a great deal of pressure and the focus of a great deal of attention from others. They often mentioned TV shows, quizzes or cases in which people are being questioned (and often held responsible for a bad situation):

- later in the show the deputy chairman will be in the hot seat answering your questions on the scandal
- it means that you are in trouble
- getting interrogated or in a position where you are highly accountable for something
- you're in a pressured position, not necessarily feeling the pressure, though
- it means to be put on the spot and expected to do something right now in front of other people
- the police finally got a confession out of the captive after three hours on the hot seat
- on a game show the contestant might be in the hot seat
- being responsible for making a serious decision or being caught in the act of bad behaviour, and suffering the consequences of one's actions
- conjured up Mastermind (a TV quiz show with really difficult questions, where the screen is black and the contestant is the only visible thing, under a spotlight) where you're being quizzed and examined to an uncomfortable level
- when you find yourself the center of attention, as when expected to answer questions in a group

60% of the subjects had never heard the expression *be on thorns*, and those who had heard it wrote that they never use it.

6.5 Idioms whose literal periphrasis is: 'be in a very happy state'

be in seventh heaven
be on cloud nine

tread on air
be on top of the world

The first two idioms are numerical, i.e. they contain numbers. Numerical idioms are mostly based on the culture in which they are spoken. In most cases they are quite transparent; we can easily find the motivating link for these expressions. However, some numerical idioms cannot be semantically decomposed so that it would be obvious why a particular number was used. Such examples are the first two idioms from this group which contain the numbers 7 and 9: *be in seventh heaven* and *be on cloud nine*. They are considered semantically opaque, because we do not know why these numbers were chosen or how these numbers contribute to the meaning of the whole phrase. The only clue to explain the motivation of these numbers is the conventional knowledge of so-called magic numbers which appear in almost all Indo-European cultures – these are the numbers 3, 7 and 9.

All idioms in this group are based on the orientational metaphor HAPPY IS UP. Orientational metaphors give spatial orientation to a concept, the fact that the concept HAPPY is oriented UP leads to English expressions like *be on top of the world*. Orientational metaphors are based in our physical and cultural experience, they emerge from our interaction with the physical environment. Thus UP emerges from the collection of constantly performed motor functions having to do with our erect position relative to the gravitational field in which we live. Our emotional experience is as basic as our spatial experience, but it is much less sharply delineated in terms of what we do with our bodies. Since no sharply defined conceptual structure for the emotions emerges from our emotional functioning alone, there are systematic correlates between our emotions (like happiness) and our sensory-motor experiences (like erect posture), which form the basis of orientational metaphors (such as HAPPY IS UP).

One subject wrote that these expressions are very similar in meaning, but he would not use them unless he had been prompted to do so, perhaps by seeing them written down, and that they are not in common usage.

76% of subjects wrote that *be in seventh heaven*, *be on cloud nine* and *be on top of the world* are synonymous and interchangeable. They suggested that *tread on air* has a different meaning, but we will return to this one later on. One subject made a different division: she wrote “the first two imply acute happiness, but *tread on air* and *be on top of the world* mean to be very successful, but not necessarily happy”.

As far as *be on cloud nine* is concerned, one subject from Australia indicated that it is the most popular one, and another person wrote “if I ate some nice food perhaps I would say ‘I’m on cloud nine eating this’, but not ‘I’m on top of the world’”. So for this subject *cloud nine* would seem to denote happiness caused by the most basic things, such as food; it doesn’t have to be provoked by an event or personal achievement.

Tread on air was unfamiliar to 40% of subjects, because they had heard the more common expressions (especially in the US) *walk on air* and *float on air*. One person wrote that the only expression that uses ‘treading’ that she can think of is ‘tread on thin ice’, which definitely does not mean ‘be happy’ but means tak-

ing risks. One subject suggested that it seems slightly more blissful than *be on top of the world*, like a dream and another wrote that it feels like it involves effort to maintain it.

All the subjects agreed *be on top of the world* is synonymous to the heading; they wrote it suggested happiness due to personal accomplishment, some big success, when you feel you have achieved something great. As already mentioned, only one person thought it implied success, but not necessarily happiness.

6.6 Idioms of comparison

Even though similes and metaphors are both forms of comparison, similes allow the two ideas to remain distinct in spite of their similarities, whereas metaphors compare two things without using “like” or “as”. Unlike metaphors, similes can be as precise as the user needs them to be, to explicitly predicate a single feature of a target or to vaguely predicate an under-determined and open-ended body of features. The similes we selected for this research are quite explicit, but it is still a matter of inference as to what features of the vehicle concept (the object ‘carrying’ the comparison) are predicated.

The most commonplace similes offer a window into the stereotypes that pervade a given language and culture, and often have the status of clichés. An expression is regarded as a cliché only if it is recognized as a conventional expression. Clichés are negatively evaluated because they show a lack of originality on the part of the speaker (Taylor 2002: 546).

6.6.1 Idioms which refer to ‘crying uncontrollably and abundantly’

The subjects found it very difficult to rate these phrases according to intensity, because in their opinion there is not much difference in their meaning. As one subject wrote: “They all say cry like ‘something that is wet and moves downwards’”. We counted how many times subjects had assigned a particular number to a given expression, so this order reflects how most subjects rated these idioms in terms of intensity:

- 1 sob your heart out
- 2 cry your heart out
- 3 cry like a baby
- 4 (cry like a rainstorm)
- 5 cry buckets
- 6 (cry like the rain)
- 7 turn on the waterworks

We have put two expressions featuring rain in parentheses because 56% of subjects did not rate them since they had never heard them, so these are the ratings given by the remaining 44% of subjects.

Most subjects agreed *sob your heart out* is the most extreme idiom in this group. One subject wrote “Sobbing your heart out really rings true as the most

intense one, for I've literally cried so hard that my heart felt like it was breaking / on the brink of escaping my chest". Basically, sobbing sounds more sorrowful than crying. They also commented it was old-fashioned, rarely used and somewhat clumsy.

Cry your heart out is used 'if a love went bad or something'. It implies the crying goes on longer and harder than *cry like a baby*. It is very dramatic, as one subject wrote: "Imagine actually someone's eyes or heart coming out".

Cry like a baby is more condescending, "you might say that if you thought someone's tears were a bit pathetic; it can be said with affection or self referentially, but it suggests that what's being cried about is a minor thing, disproportionate to the amount of tears shed". Another subject wrote "it is an immediate reaction to a very sad event". One subject stated that "it implies the crying is pointless and weak", and another gave the right explanation of this implication: "it doesn't sound too bad because babies cry all the time and it's not that bad". It can be used to refer to a physical injury, not just emotional turmoil.

Crying buckets is slightly less emotional than the previous idiom. It also may denote an injury, not just emotional turmoil. Two subjects were unfamiliar with this expression.

As opposed to the other expressions, *turn on the waterworks* denotes crying which can be controlled, 'switched on and off', to try to gain sympathy or a desired goal. Mostly it is applied to juveniles. The subjects gave these examples:

- 'After the seagull stole little Kevin's ice-cream, he turned on the waterworks'
- like a toddler that cries to get a candy from his grandma
- at a trial, the criminal may turn on the waterworks
- an expression men use to say that women cry a lot needlessly

One subject suggested the expression 'turn on the faucet', as an alternative to this one. Since the crying is faked, the subjects interpreted it as the least intense, so it occupies the last place.

6.6.2 Idioms referring to 'working extremely hard'

In this group, five persons did not rate the idioms, but only commented on them. Among the remaining subjects, an equal number chose either *work like a maniac* or *work like crazy* as the most intense idiom:

- 1 work like a maniac / work like crazy
- 2 work like a slave
- 3 work like a nigger
- 4 work like an ant
- 5 burn the midnight oil

Animal stereotypes provide a rich vein of similes in English, as does a persistent body of ethnic stereotypes. Animal idioms incorporate fossilized, stereotyped beliefs, usually referring to undesirable traits in animals that are used to conceptualize of people and human actions (e.g. *as proud as a peacock*), but not always. Sometimes they reflect positive animal traits, as we can see in the next example.

Surprisingly, ten subjects wrote they had never used *work like an ant* and some of them had never heard this expression either. It comes from the fable *The Ant and the Grasshopper* in which the former works hard to prepare for the winter while the latter wastes the summer and autumn having fun, only to have to beg food from the ant or starve. For this reason, grasshoppers are also sometimes characterized as social parasites (as in the Pixar movie *A Bug's Life*).

The subjects who were familiar with the expression wrote that it implied very ordered, controlled, hard and diligent work and there was also the obvious suggestion of teamwork and being part of the team. It does not carry the implication of working for a long time, but rather working well in the time given. It suggests industriousness but without any panic (as in *work like a maniac* or *work like crazy*), just getting on and doing work. One person indicated that he would also say that someone is *as busy as a bee*. Another subject would add *burn the candle at both ends*.

Work like a maniac does not necessarily describe too much work, just a lot of work done in a rush. It suggests a more frenzied activity or perhaps dangerous levels of work. The oldest subject wrote that she did not like this expression. Two persons wrote *work like crazy* was more common than this one.

Work like crazy has a similar meaning to the previous one. It is used when things are chaotic and busy in the workplace, when someone has been working for very long hours or for an extended period of time.

The most interesting idiom in this group is *work like a nigger*. All subjects distanced themselves from it by saying that they never used it. One subject was so offended by seeing the word 'nigger' appear like this in a questionnaire that he refused to take part in the survey. American subjects specifically warned us that if we ever came to the US, we should never use the N-word as it was referred to in the questionnaire. They made the following comments about it:

- it is a terribly offensive word
- racist
- derogatory; never used by racially sensitive intelligent people
- not politically correct
- very disrespectful
- a strongly racist term

It is interesting that non-American subjects were less upset about this expression, which can be explained by the fact that they are not as burdened by racial issues as the American subjects.

As far as its meaning is concerned, they wrote that it implied very demanding physical labour, especially if it is unrewarding / unpleasant / very unpleasant, and reluctantly done. One subject suggested that it was such a strong metaphor that he would suspect exaggeration. Today this idiom is used only by 'clueless or racist people', and of course, by African Americans among themselves. Some subjects suggested an alternative idiom *to slave away* as in "I've been slaving away at this report for three hours now". Some of them would add *work like a dog* and *work like a Trojan* to our list.

What made the subjects' responses consistent is the fact they shared conventional knowledge about the slave trade, the abolitionist movement, the American

Civil War and the fact that today slavery is illegal in most countries. The white race still today has a guilty conscience because of slavery.

Many books during and after the slavery period in America used the word 'nigger'. Some critics have considered Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as racist due to its depiction of the slave Jim, who was mocked many times by the white characters. Some schools have excluded the book from their curriculum or libraries. The word "nigger" appears numerous times, and is used to describe Jim and other black characters. While the term was contemporary for the period when Twain wrote the book, some modern readers have found it offensive, particularly those who do not understand the book. Other critics have noted that Twain's portrayal of the relationship between Finn and Jim overturned stereotypes of the time, and recognized Jim's humanity and strength.

The word nigger "now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English" (Merriam-Webster's online reference). There are also those who advocate removing the word from dictionaries altogether. This word, however, has also taken on other meanings. Briefly, the word is prevalently used in the following contexts: 1) as a racial slur, 2) a negative description for any dark-skinned people, 3) a negative description of people, irrespective of physical appearance connoting low social, political, moral, cultural, or economic status, and 4) a reference used by African Americans for other African Americans; used "affectionately / politically empowering" in African American vernacular or as a description of negative behaviours.

This frozen idiom actually shows that its elements are not really desemantized, as phraseologists often claim for the lexical components of an idiom. Even though the function of frozen idioms typically suggests an intensity, instead of interpreting it as 'working hard', the subjects pointed to the strong connotations of the lexical element featured in the expression as a whole. In other words, the subjects' strong reactions to this particular idiom of comparison indicated that its lexical components are far from being desemantized.

The last idiom from this group *burn the midnight oil* was not considered synonymous to the heading because it implies 'working late into the night, not necessarily hard'. It might be used to describe someone obsessed with their work, someone who will not quit when they should, or someone who has by implication too much to do during the day and has to work through the night, with a deadline due, for example. One subject described his mental image for this idiom: "it conjures an image of a Victorian gentleman in a nightcap and dressing gown working by oil lamp in his study. Peaceful hard work". So, this idiom is applied to intellectual work, not physical.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to consider synonymy in idiomatic expressions which included emotion idioms and frozen similes. Synonymy was defined here as similarity of meaning with a varying degree. This degree of similarity

was tested in a survey conducted with 25 native speakers of English. They were presented with a questionnaire containing five sets of idiomatic expressions referring to emotions and two sets of idioms of comparison.

There was a great deal of consistency in the subjects' descriptions of these subtle differences in the meaning of individual emotions belonging to the same set of idiomatic expressions in the questionnaire. This shows that people recognized the underlying conceptual metaphors which motivated many emotion idioms.

Frozen similes at first seemed more limited than metaphor-based idioms because they draw attention to some shared properties between two concepts, but still keep them distinct. The idioms of comparison in this experiment had very similar vehicle concepts (the ones following the word 'like') and at first it seemed the answers from the subjects would not be as detailed as expected. However, not only did the subjects give concrete examples of their usage, but they also described the actions implied by the similes in terms of their duration, manner, quality, intentionality and intensity. Similes also appeared to be very imageable figurative expressions. The expression *work like a nigger* best exemplifies that even speakers from different countries share tacit conventional knowledge which enables them to find motivating links for the meaning of idioms.

In cases in which the subjects were not sure about the meaning of an expression, they would search for a key word or some clue which would help them motivate the idiom with its nonliteral meaning (for example, the word *soft* in *go soft in the head*), but with semantically nondecomposable idioms this was not possible, because their individual parts do not contribute to their overall figurative meaning on the one hand, and because the nondecomposable idioms from this experiment are no longer used in contemporary spoken language, but can be found mostly in literature.

This experiment shows that it is impossible to find completely synonymous idiomatic expressions, because there are always fine distinctions in their meanings which restrict their acceptability in the same contexts and situations.

The great consistency in subjects' intuitions about the actions described by idiomatic expressions once again shows that people tacitly recognize different kinds of metaphorical thoughts (conceptual metaphors, mental images and conventional knowledge) when trying to interpret the figurative meanings of idioms.

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SINONIMIJA FRAZEMA

U ovom članku istražuje se paradigmatički značenjski odnos sinonimije kroz nekoliko skupina različitih frazema sa sličnim značenjem. Polazi se od pretpostavke da ne postoje dva sinonima koja imaju potpuno isto značenje u svim kontekstima i društveno-kulturnim razinama jezika i da korektivni mehanizmi sprječavaju apsolutnu sinonimiju kao u slučaju kad jedna od leksičkih jedinica izađe iz uporabe ili kad jedna od leksičkih jedinica poprimi različite konotacije u smislu stilske obilježenosti ili registra. Jedan od načina testiranja te hipoteze je provođenje ankete među izvornim govornicima u kojoj im se postavlja pitanje jesu li odabrani frazemi sinonimi ili nisu i u kakvim se kontekstima i uporabama njihova značenja razlikuju. U ovom se članku predstavljaju rezultati tog istraživanja u kojemu je sudjelovalo 25 izvornih govornika engleskog jezika.

Key words: phrasal, synonymy, idiom, idiomatic expression, metaphor
Ključne riječi: frazni, sinonimija, frazem, idiomatski izraz, metafora