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Croatian idioms denoting speech process: Aspects of university students' phraseological and cross-linguistic competence

Summary

The conducted research provided insight into specific segments of the phraseological competence of the younger generation of native speakers, which refers to the recognition and use of Croatian idioms that describe the speech process, as well as the knowledge of English equivalents. The results of the research showed a significant disparity between the knowledge of idioms and the self-assessment of their use in the language, which indicates that certain idioms are slowly disappearing from the speech of young people (Hansdóttir, 2024). Although the younger generation of speakers did not show a high level of interlingual phraseological competence regarding this semantic group of idioms, they simultaneously represent a valuable source of additional interpretations of the meaning of idioms, and a relevant reflection of contemporary language use which is not represented in phraseological sources. The paper aims to encourage further empirical and corpus-based research on the knowledge and active use of a broader range of idioms, both in native and foreign languages, to gain deeper and more relevant insights into the phraseological competence of the younger generation of speakers.

Keywords: Croatian, English, phraseological competence, speech process, university students

1. INTRODUCTION

Language, as the foundation of communication and a reflection of human cognitive processes, manifests our conceptualization of the world through various linguistic structures. Among these, idioms hold particular significance, with their importance

within any given language rooted in their Greek-Latin etymological origin, *idioma*, meaning “manifestation of uniqueness”. While reflecting universal human experiences, idioms primarily embody the thought patterns, cultural-historical identity, and unique realities of everyday life within specific linguistic communities. As carriers of extralinguistic knowledge about their respective cultures, idioms can be viewed as figurative windows into the conceptualization of reality, often posing interpretive challenges for members of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this regard, idioms are often viewed as the heart (Ellis, 2008), essence (Wang, 2017), or even the spiritual soul of a language (Liontas, 2017) mirroring the world of its speakers, “their hopes and fears, their lives and deaths” (Liontas, 2017: 9). As poetry of daily discourse (Johnson-Laird, 1993), these expressions enrich language and communication with vividness, expressiveness, and authenticity and, despite their frequent metaphorical basis, do not aim to create misunderstandings but rather, even more remarkably, enable faster and more direct communication (Škarić, 2008).

As complex formulaic expressions subtypes, idioms are linguistically defined as multi-word units whose fundamental characteristic relates to their semantic dimension – specifically, their non-compositionality. According to this principle, the meaning of an idiom as a whole does not correspond to the sum of its individual components. Despite the indisputable connection which exists between the literal and figurative meanings of the expression, this link is often obscured, as it can be “buried in the history of the language and the culture” (Stock et al., 1993, as cited in Mäntylä, 2004: 31). Within phraseological theory, idioms are defined in various ways, depending on the approach taken to their analysis and the features considered most relevant for their description. Due to terminological diversity and definitional variations, phraseology is often perceived as “a fuzzy part of language” (Cowie, 2001: 101). A relevant and widely accepted definition among Croatian linguists, and the one chosen for this study, characterizes idioms as “conventionalized multiword combinations that are holistically stored and automatically reproduced, and that may vary in frequency of occurrence, fixedness of form, and compositeness of meaning” (Omazić, 2015: 20).

Idioms are considered either equally or even more important than the individual lexical items stored in the lexicon, as approximately half of fluent written communication (Erman & Warren, 2000), and an even larger proportion of spoken communication among adult native speakers rely on idiomatic principles (Cowie, 1992). Phraseological competence is thus considered an integral component of communicative competence in both native and foreign language. It encompasses the knowledge of various phraseological units within a language, and the ability to

interpret and integrate them into speech according to context, social norms, and interactional goals (Ettinger, 2008, as cited in Ramirez Rodriguez & Vorobiova Munguia, 2022). Although the mastery of idioms is not a prerequisite for successful communication, it distinguishes a competent speaker and demonstrates a high level of language proficiency (Liontas, 2017). According to the principles of phraseodidactics (Ramirez Rodriguez & Vorobiova Munguia, 2022), the development of phraseological competence builds upon the speakers' existing phraseological awareness, and implies the advancement of general linguistic competence by providing new expressive means of communication, and fostering metalinguistic reflections on the language system. In other words, phraseological competence enhances a speaker's lexical competence and communication skills, encourages the development of metaphorical language use, promotes reflection on sociolinguistic aspects of language, and contributes to deeper cultural understanding. Moreover, mastering idioms in both native and foreign languages contributes to speech fluency (Gibbs, 2007; Kovač, 2020; Krasotskaya, 2022; Ramirez Rodriguez & Vorobiova Munguia, 2022); speakers who use a greater number of idioms are perceived as more fluent, regardless of minor grammatical errors in their speech (Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

Despite the importance of phraseological competence in linguistic and pragmatic terms, the teaching of idioms remains underrepresented in educational settings and teaching practices for both native and foreign languages (Irujo, 1986; Ramirez Rodriguez & Vorobiova Munguia, 2022). Idioms continue to be "the ugly duckling of vocabulary teaching" (Vasiljević, 2015), even though they are actually becoming an endangered species in the linguistic world. Namely, recent studies on English idioms indicate that numerous idioms are no longer part of contemporary language use and are gradually disappearing from the language (Hansdóttir, 2024). This phenomenon aligns with the psycholinguistic premise that language disuse leads to language attrition (Schmied, 2007). The decline in idiom usage is particularly evident among younger generations, influenced by factors including insufficient teaching practices, generational language shifts, the emergence of new idioms within youth idiolects, and the impact of internet-mediated communication (Hansdóttir, 2024). In order to understand language change and cultural transmission, it is essential to study idiom usage among native speakers, among which younger generations are particularly interesting; however, this area has been significantly overlooked in academic research (Hansdóttir, 2024: 25). As a matter of fact, the differences in how younger generations interpret the meaning of idioms within the context of contemporary language use remain underexplored (Mäntylä, 2004).

The main aim of this study is to address these gaps with respect to Croatian somatic idioms and to determine the knowledge, interpretation, and usage of idioms among university students as representatives of a younger generation of native speakers. The study also seeks to examine their cross-linguistic awareness with regard to their knowledge of English counterparts, considering their future profession, which includes teaching English. While only a few studies have addressed the attitudes of Croatian students towards idioms, their learning and teaching strategies (e.g., Parizoska, 2019; Pucelj, 2018), and the factors influencing their understanding (Jelčić, 2014; Jelčić Čolakovac, 2019), it is important to note that they primarily focus on the research on English idioms. Within the scope of Croatian phraseological research, studies examining the knowledge and interpretation of Croatian idioms among younger generations of native speakers in contemporary language are rare (e.g., Haršanji, 2020; Milčić, 2016). Recent research in this field has focused on phraseodidactic procedures in teaching Croatian as a second and foreign language (Vidović Bolt, 2022), as well as on the development of handbooks aimed at improving the phraseological competence of high school students who are native speakers of Croatian (Barčot et al., 2023).

This study examines the knowledge of Croatian idioms that describe various characteristics and phases of the speech process, and contain the component *jezik* (Eng. tongue) as a crucial organ for articulation and pronunciation. Namely, from the perspective of articulatory phonetics, the tongue is indispensable in speech production, serving as “the most significant articulatory organ, contributing more than any other to the variety of articulatory movements, positions, and forms” (Horga & Liker, 2016: 231). Since the lexeme *jezik* (Eng. tongue) signifies both an organ and a metonymy for speech, idioms incorporating the component *jezik* can vividly illustrate various aspects of interpersonal communication, as well as the characteristics of the speech process and articulation itself (Sarić, 2024). Idioms containing a body part—somatic idioms—represent one of the most numerous and productive groups of idioms in many languages (Kovačević, 2012; Spicijarić Paškvan, 2018; Valenčić Arh & Pavić Pintarić, 2020) and reveal how humans conceptualize abstract concepts through bodily experience. They are represented in numerous contrastive studies (Dugandžić, 2019; Hessky, 1987; Hrnjak, 2005; Krohn, 1994; Novak Milić, 2005; Novoselec, 2019; Piirainen, 2008; Stanojević et al., 2007) because they provide a rich foundation for discovering universals regarding the common physiological basis of the human body, as well as linguistic-cultural specificities that reflect the different worldviews of individual linguistic communities or cultural spheres.

The contrastive analysis underlying this research is a study of idioms containing the component *jezik/tongue/Zunge*, which examines similarities and differences in the lexicalization of concepts related to the speech process and articulation in Croatian, English, and German (Sarić, 2024). The findings of the study reveal significant semantic-conceptual similarities, reflecting the universal function of the tongue as an organ of speech. However, the contrastive analysis also identifies distinct patterns of lexicalization for analogous concepts across the three languages, highlighting the presence of linguistically conditioned expressions. This paper seeks to address the recommendation for future research outlined in the original study, specifically by investigating the usage of these idioms in contemporary language. In line with this, it represents an empirical research designed to examine one aspect of phraseological competence regarding Croatian somatic idioms among younger native speakers and their cross-linguistic awareness, using the corpus established in the contrastive study.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given that the primary aim of this research is to examine idiomatic knowledge—specifically familiarity, usage and contextual interpretation of Croatian somatic idioms describing speech processes among university students—as well as their cross-linguistic awareness regarding English equivalents, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What is the level of familiarity with Croatian idioms describing speech processes among younger native speakers of Croatian, specifically university students?
- 2) According to their self-report, what is the level of students' active usage of these idioms in their speech and communication?
- 3) Are students familiar with English idioms or expressions that convey equivalent concepts related to speech process?
- 4) Are there differences in the interpretation and semantic description of Croatian idioms and their English counterparts, particularly in relation to lexicographic and phraseographic definitions?

The research hypothesis proposes that students, as representatives of younger generations, will not only reveal generational shifts in idiom recognition and usage but also provide different interpretations and semantic descriptions with regard to both contemporary and related social context. Furthermore, the premise is that the research will also demonstrate an insufficient level of interlingual phraseological competence among the participants.

2.1 Participants

The study involved 52 students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Split, specifically from the Department of Teacher Education. These participants are native speakers of Croatian, who have studied English for approximately 14 years through their formal education and achieved the CEFR level of B2 at their high school leaving exam. In addition to their primary education training for future primary teachers, all participants are enrolled in the Early English Language Learning Module which qualifies them to teach English at the primary-school level alongside their primary teaching qualification. Furthermore, all participants have completed a course in English Phonetics and Phonology, providing them with theoretical knowledge about the characteristics and stages of speech processes and articulation. Consequently, the selection of idioms for this study, as well as the inclusion of English as a comparative language, is grounded in their relevant theoretical knowledge and additional qualifications in English.

2.2 Research instrument

As the research instrument, a structured questionnaire was employed to assess students' linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge. The questionnaire was designed to provide data addressing three key aspects for each idiom: 1) familiarity with the meaning of Croatian idioms within contextual usage, and their interpretation; 2) self-report of active usage in speech; 3) familiarity with English idioms or expressions conveying equivalent concepts.

Regarding familiarity with idioms, participants were required to confirm whether they recognized a specific Croatian idiom, and to provide an example of its usage within a sentence in order to verify their actual understanding and interpretation of its meaning. Contextual usage was emphasized as a critical factor in understanding idioms (Gibbs, 1980; Jelčić, 2014). This aspect was particularly significant because it revealed the extent to which participants' semantic descriptions aligned with those found in phraseological dictionaries. As noted by Mäntylä (2004), phraseological studies often overlook how native and non-native speakers interpret idioms, assuming that there is only one universally agreed-upon interpretation among language users. For the dimension of active usage, participants self-reported whether they actively used specific idioms in their speech. In terms of cross-linguistic awareness, participants were asked to provide either an idiomatic expression or their own paraphrase as English counterpart. To facilitate comparative analysis and highlight differences in meaning interpretation,

the “Results and Discussion” section included the meanings of each Croatian idiom alongside their English equivalents, as documented in current phraseological and bilingual dictionaries: *Hrvatski frazeološki rječnik* (2014), *Hrvatsko-engleski frazeološki rječnik* (2008), *Hrvatsko-engleski frazeološki rječnik* (2009), *Veliki hrvatsko-engleski rječnik* (2001), *Veliki rječnik hrvatskoga standardnoga jezika* (2015), *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* (2013), and *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* (2020).

2.3 Data analysis

Data analysis included descriptive statistics to determine the percentage of participants either familiar with each idiom, actively using it, or recognizing its English equivalent. Content analysis was conducted on sentence examples provided by participants, as well as on the suggested English counterparts. This analysis examined semantic descriptions and the differences in the interpretation of meaning between Croatian idioms and English expressions.

The semantic classification framework and the corpus of twelve Croatian somatic idioms containing the component *jezik* describing speech processes, established by Sarić (2024), served as the basis for categorizing these idioms into three groups: 1) idioms describing difficulties or errors in speech/pronunciation (e.g., *jedva prevaliti preko jezika što* [barely get something out], *lomiti jezik* [to struggle with pronunciation]); 2) idioms expressing an incentive or desire to speak or initiating speech (e.g., *povući/vući za jezik koga* [tempt sb. to talk], *razvezao se jezik komu* [sb. loosened their tongue]) and 3) idioms related to refraining from speech, cessation of speech, or remaining silent (e.g., *pregristi jezik* [to bite one’s tongue], *pojela je maca jezik komu* [the cat got someone’s tongue]).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Idioms describing difficulties and errors in speech/pronunciation

a) <jedva> prevaliti preko jezika što

The idiom <jedva> *prevaliti preko jezika što* meaning *force oneself to say something, barely bring oneself (with hesitation) to say something* was recognised by 75% of participants, while only 4% of them use it in speech. In Croatian-English lexicographic sources, this idiom is described by the paraphrase *pronounce / utter with difficulty*. Although 56% of participants indicated said paraphrase as the English counterpart of the Croatian term, none of the participants used the lexicographic paraphrase but different, individual descriptions of the idiom’s meaning such as *barely*

manage to say something, something is hard to tell. Sentence examples of contextual use of the idiom bring an additional semantic description that is not recorded in phraseological sources, based on which it derives that aggravated speech delivery may result from fear, embarrassment, shock or astonishment: *Od straha nije mogao prevaliti riječ preko jezika; Marko je bio toliko zapanjen da je jedva prevalio preko jezika tu rečenicu* (Eng. He was so scared that he could barely utter a single word; Marko was so astonished that he could barely say that).

b) ne ide preko jezika komu što

Synonymous idiom **ne ide preko jezika komu što** is recognised by 40% of participants, while only 4% of them use it in speech. In the phraseological dictionary, this idiom is defined as a refrain from speaking – *he/she is unable to say something*. Although lexicographic sources do not provide translation equivalents in English, 29% of respondents indicated their own descriptions of meaning through paraphrases such as *not able to say something, not able to express your thoughts*. Through examples of contextual use, there is an extended description of the idiomatic meaning and an explanation that this idiom describes the situation *where we do not want or find it difficult to say something so as not to hurt the other person: Htio ju je ostaviti, ali mu riječi nisu išle preko jezika* (Eng. He wanted to leave her, but he could barely make himself speak).

c) lomiti jezik

The idiom **lomiti jezik** meaning *speak (pronounce) with difficulty* is recognised by 70% of participants, while 10% of them use it in speech. The English counterpart is not provided in phraseological dictionaries, however bilingual lexicographic sources provide several translation equivalents describing the difficulty in pronunciation of the familiar language – *stumble over words, mouth words, speak with difficulty and twist one's tongue*. Half of the participants (50%) are familiar with English counterparts, which, in addition to the terms above, include their own English paraphrases such as *not able to say something correctly or something is very hard to say*.

d) plete se jezik komu

The idiom **plete se jezik komu** describes the condition when the speaker *delivers slurred, incomprehensible utterances*, whereby the phraseological source indicates that this person is usually inebriated. This idiom is recognised by 73% of participants, while 25% of them use it in speech and expand its semantic description within the example of contextual use. Namely, they do not explain the person's disfluency merely by his/her inebriation but also by stressful situations such as public presentations or confusion related to lying. In addition, 38% of participants are familiar with English

counterparts in the form of paraphrases presented in lexicographic sources such as *speak with difficulty* or *stumble over words*, but they also stated their own paraphrases such as *one can't speak properly*, *make mistakes while you talk*.

e) navrh jezika je *komu što*

Idiomatic expressions such as **navrh jezika je *komu što***, na vrhu jezika je *komu što*, na jeziku je *komu što* are presented by phraseological definitions *someone is ready to say (state, declare) something, about to come to mind* and *wanting but not daring to ask (say) something*. Speech delivery fails due to the impossibility to (instantaneously) remember what was meant to be said or because of restraint or forsaking the intention to say, ask or comment on something. Although all participants (100%) are familiar with the idiom, only 56% of them use it frequently in speech, while 81% of participants provide different translation equivalents in English. Among the total number of translation equivalents, 62% of them represent the correct English idiomatic equivalent *on the tip of the tongue*, while the rest of them include paraphrases (*when you can't remember something but you're trying really hard*) or literal translations (**on the top of the tongue*).

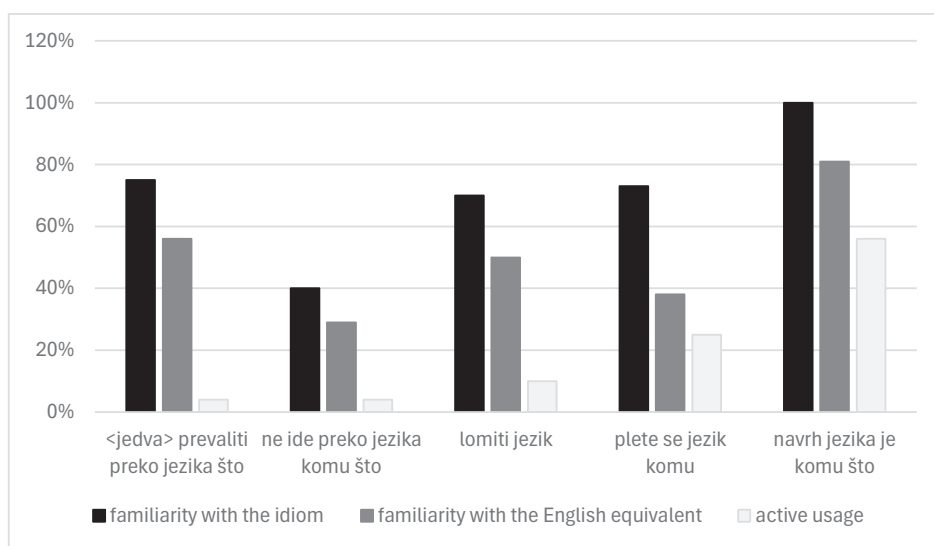


Figure 1. Familiarity with and self-reported active usage of idioms expressing difficulties and errors in speech/pronunciation

Slika 1. Poznavanje i samoprocjena upotrebe frazema kojima se opisuju poteškoće i pogreške u govoru/izgovoru

According to the chart (Figure 1), it is evident that the participants showed a high degree of familiarity with the Croatian idioms describing difficulties and errors in speech and pronunciation, but a significantly lower level of their active use in speech. There is an average level of familiarity with the English equivalents which are primarily represented in the form of paraphrases, whereby the participants expanded the semantic description of individual idioms. The idiom *navrh jezika je komu što* is an exception in this group of idioms. All participants are familiar with said idiom thus providing a high percentage of familiarity with the English idiomatic equivalent, as well as translations through paraphrases. It is a concept found in different languages of the world and hence a part of the International Phraseological Fund (IAF) (Eng. *on the tip of the tongue*, Spa. *en la punta de la lengua*, Pol. *na końcu języka*, Fr. *être sur le bout de la langue* etc.).

3.2 Idioms expressing an incentive/desire to speak or initiating speech

a) **povući/vući (potegnuti/potezati) za jezik koga**

Idiomatic variants **povući/vući (potegnuti/potezati) za jezik koga** are recognised by 37% of participants, while 19% actively use them in speech. The meaning of the idiom found in phraseological sources *makel/force/provoke someone to speak or to say something unintended* is unknown to a significant number of participants since as many as 21% of them offered wrong examples of its contextual use. In fact, sentence examples revealed that the participants attributed the meaning of the idiom containing the somatic component *nose*: *povući/vući za nos koga* – *to deceive/defraud someone*: *Vukao me za jezik kroz cijelu našu vezu* (Eng. He pulled my tongue throughout our relationship) to this idiom. Although the English non-idiomatic equivalent is presented in bilingual phraseology as *tempt somebody to talk*, the participants did not indicate this form, but offered their own descriptions of meaning such as paraphrases *to make someone say sth he doesn't want*, *to provoke somebody to say sth*. In accordance with the representation of the wrong meaning attributed to this expression, there is a same proportion of wrong translation equivalents, i.e., paraphrases in English such as, for instance, *to lie to somebody*, *trick somebody*, *to manipulate someone*.

b) **razvezao se jezik komu / razvezalo je jezik komu što**

Razvezao se jezik komu / razvezalo je jezik komu što are idiomatic variants presented by the phraseological definition *someone began to speak extensively under someone else's influence, someone became chatty*. Although examples of contextual use of

this definition within English phraseology reveal that this kind of speech often occurs under the influence of alcohol, some authors believe that one's tongue can also be loosened as a result of other states such as great excitement and happiness (Kovačević, 2012: 230). This idiom is familiar to 58% of participants, while 13% actively use it in speech. Although 52% of participants provided an English equivalent, only 4% indicated the idiomatic equivalent of *sb. loosened their tongue*, confirmed in bilingual phraseological sources. Other participants provided their own paraphrases such as *someone who talks too much* or *when someone is talkative*, while examples of contextual use confirm and expand the semantic description of the idiom. In fact, they attribute excessive speech to different conditions or states – inebriation, relaxation, the desire to speak after a person has abstained from speaking for a long time, and an interesting topic that motivates such speech: *Kada popije, jezik mu se razveže i nitko ne može doći do riječi; On se potpuno opustio, baš mu se razvezao jezik; Nije odavno pričala pa joj se razvezao jezik; Ta tema mu je razvezala jezik* (Eng. When he drinks, his tongue loosens and no one can get a word in edgewise; He was completely relaxed, his tongue was loosened; She hadn't spoken in a long time so her tongue was loosened; The subject loosened his tongue).

c) **svrbi jezik koga**

The idiom **svrbi jezik koga** meaning *one finds it difficult to keep quiet, one would like to speak up, one has a desire (need) to blurt out, one no longer wants to hide something* was familiar to the least number of participants, only 17%, while none of the respondents use it in speech (0%). This idiom, therefore, has the smallest proportion of provided counterparts in English (4%), however, they do not contain idiomatic equivalents *sb. is itching to talk* or *sb. cannot hold their tongue*, but represent paraphrases of the idiom such as *somebody must say something, he can't be quiet anymore, someone really wants to say something*. In English, the verb *itch* can also denote *to long for*, while the noun *itchiness* can also mean *impatience*. A total of 6% of participants provided the wrong equivalent and the paraphrase *itchy tongue*.

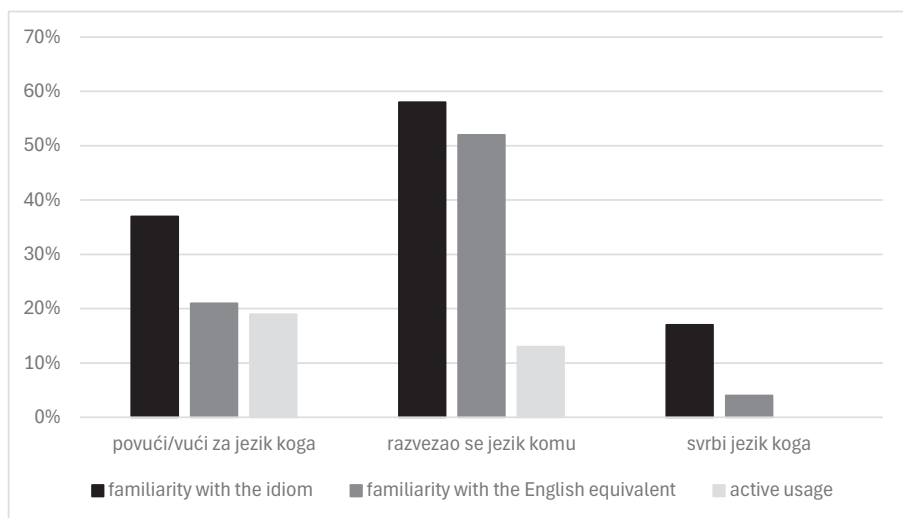


Figure 2. Familiarity with and self-reported active usage of idioms expressing an incentive/ desire to speak or initiating speech

Slika 2. Poznavanje i samoprocjena upotrebe frazema kojima se izražava poticaj/ želja za govorom ili početak govora

By analysing the results of survey questionnaires, it was found that respondents show a low level of familiarity with the group of Croatian idioms expressing an incentive or desire to speak or initiating speech, their English counterparts or their active use in speech (Figure 2).

3.3 Idioms related to refraining from speech, cessation of speech, or remaining silent

a) držati jezik za zubima

According to the phraseological definition, the idiom **držati jezik za zubima** means *to keep quiet, to refrain from speaking out of caution, from fear*. Although it is familiar to almost all participants (98%), it is actively used in speech by 52% of them. A significant proportion of participants (79%) are familiar with English counterparts, 51% of which are idiomatic equivalents such as *hold your tongue* and *keep (one's) mouth shut*, while the rest are paraphrases where silence also implies keeping secrets (*be quiet, not speak about something, keep a secret*). The examples of contextual use of the idiom confirm an additional semantic aspect: *Nemoj nikome reći, drži jezik za zubima; Ovo je tajna, bolje je da držiš jezik za zubima* (Eng. *Don't tell anyone, keep your mouth shut; This is a secret, it's better to keep your mouth shut*).

b) **pojela (popapala) je maca jezik komu**

The idiom **pojela (popapala) je maca jezik komu** meaning *someone was left speechless* is familiar to 90% of the participants, and almost half (44%) of them actively use it in speech. Although 75% of participants provided English counterparts, only 22% of them presented the exact idiomatic equivalent *cat got one's tongue*, while the rest used paraphrases (*when you don't say a word, when someone refuses to talk, when somebody is being silent*), as well as a literal translation **cat ate sb's tongue*.

c) **pregristi jezik**

The idiom **pregristi jezik** shares a similar semantic description as the form *ugristi se (ujesti se) za jezik* (Eng. to bite one's own tongue) and expresses (abrupt) cessation or refrainment from speech. A total of 54% of participants are familiar with the variants, while 29% of participants actively use them in speech. Although 42% of participants provided translation equivalents in English, only 4% of the equivalents represent the idiomatic counterpart **bite one's tongue**. Other equivalents include paraphrases with a semantic description of the idiom within phraseological dictionaries, such as, for instance, the expression *to regret saying something, even when you have something to say, you keep quiet*. This is confirmed by examples of contextual use of the Croatian idiom: *Požalio je što joj se ikad povjerio, poželio je da si je pregrizao jezik; Ugrizao sam se za jezik kad sam odao onu tajnu* (Eng. He regretted ever confiding in her, he wished he had bitten his tongue; I bit my tongue when I gave up that secret).

d) **zavezati jezik**

The idiom **zavezati jezik** meaning *to shut up, not to speak* is familiar to 52% of participants, while 15% of them actively use it in speech. English counterparts are provided by 40% of participants, with 19% of translation equivalents representing an expression designated in monolingual sources as an idiomatic equivalent *(get) tongue-tied*, while the rest include paraphrases such as *stop talking* or *shut up*. In bilingual phraseology, this idiom is associated with equivalents *ostati bez riječi, ostati bez teksta* (Eng. to be speechless, listless), as well as the paraphrase *zbog uzbuđenja ili iznenađenja ne znati što bi rekao* (Eng. being lost for words because of excitement or surprise). The Croatian idiomatic equivalent with the component *tongue* does not imply the hyperbole of *tying* but of *cutting off* the tongue, only in the form expressed in past tense *I got tongue-tied – odsjekao mi se jezik*. The idiom **zavezati jezik**, as well as its idiomatic variant **zavezati/vezati jezik komu**, are antonymous pairs of expressions referring to the incentive and desire to speak or the beginning of speech – *razvezao se jezik komu/razvezalo je jezik komu što*. In addition, these antonymous variants include

the semantic feature of *animate/inanimate*, whereby the noun as a subject in the idiom *razvezalo je jezik komu što* refers to the category of *inanimate* (usually alcohol), while the idiom *zavezati/vezati jezik komu* implies a person, i.e., a noun with the semantic feature *animate*. Contextual examples of the use of the idiom extend its idiomatic description, thus the participants emphasised in some examples that a person who needs to *shut one's mouth* (Cro. *zavezati jezik*) talks too much or speaks nonsense: *Zaveži jezik i prati nastavu! Rekla sam bratu da zaveže jezik i ne priča više gluposti* (Eng. *Shut your mouth and pay attention in class! I told my brother to shut his mouth and not talk nonsense anymore*).

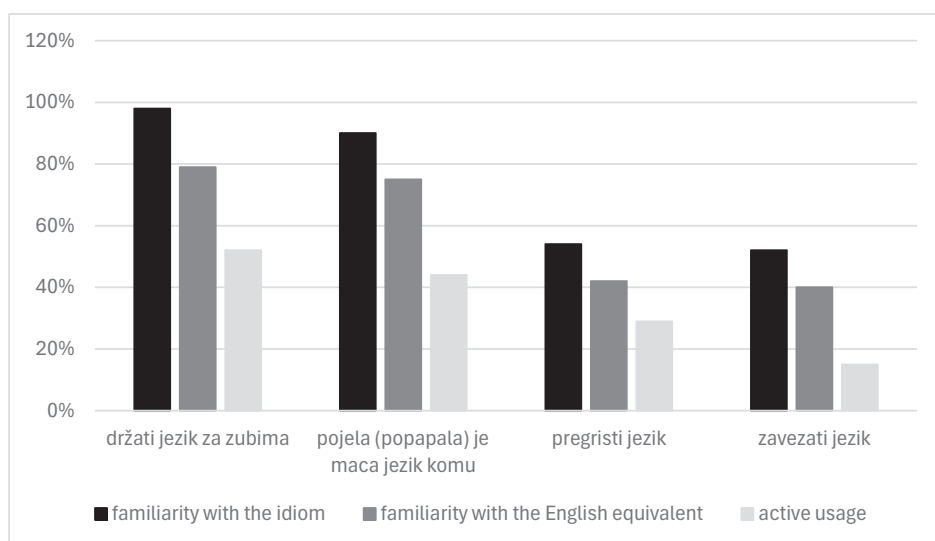


Figure 3. Familiarity with and self-reported active usage of idioms related to refraining from speech, cessation of speech, or remaining silent

Slika 3. Poznavanje i samoprocjena upotrebe frazema koji se odnose na suzdržavanje od govora, prestanak govora ili šutnju

As illustrated in the chart (Figure 3), this group contains idioms that are familiar to a large percentage of participants, as well as those they are less familiar with. The findings also indicate an insufficient level of their active self-reported use in speech, but a significant level of proficiency in English counterparts. Although idioms related to refraining from speech, cessation of speech, or remaining silent have the largest number of idiomatic equivalents in English as confirmed within bilingual sources, most participants are not familiar with the English idioms and therefore provide

paraphrases as translation equivalents. Within this group of idioms, the participants provided an additional semantic description in the examples of contextual use of the idiom that is not represented in phraseological sources.

4. CONCLUSION

The conducted research investigated Croatian somatic idioms related to speech processes among university students, focusing on their recognition, usage, and cross-linguistic awareness of English equivalents. The findings addressed the research questions raised, while also opening new avenues for the exploration in this field.

Firstly, the results revealed a significant disparity between participants' knowledge of idioms and their self-reported use in everyday language. This suggests that certain idioms are gradually disappearing from the speech of younger generations, aligning with recent research in this area (Hansdóttir, 2024). At the same time, the lowest levels of knowledge and usage were observed for idioms whose status within contemporary language remains uncertain. Although these idioms have established phraseological and lexicographic status, their presence in modern speech appears limited and is not adequately documented in relevant dictionaries through stylistic markers. To address this gap, future research should involve corpus-based studies to analyse the stylistic categorization of Croatian idioms comprehensively. This would enable labelling such idioms as old-fashioned, dated, or archaic—similar to practices within Anglo-American lexicographic traditions. Previous critiques have highlighted the insufficient stylistic qualification of Croatian phraseological dictionaries (Barčot, 2015), which hinders their comparability with other phraseological traditions by leaving stylistic interpretation solely to dictionary users.

Furthermore, an analysis of how Croatian idioms are interpreted in contextual use revealed a broader spectrum of semantic descriptions than those represented in the existing dictionaries. This underscores the need for empirical and corpus-based approaches to studying both meaning and usage patterns. Younger generations provide valuable insight into semantic variability that could enhance lexicographical resources. Such variability aligns with Mäntylä's (2004) critique which assumes uniformity in idiom comprehension among speakers.

Regarding cross-linguistic awareness, participants demonstrated varying levels of familiarity with English counterparts, often relying on paraphrases rather than idiomatic equivalents. This finding highlights the challenges of developing cross-linguistic phraseological competence among younger generations, who possess

respectable lexical competence as evidenced by their ability to provide English expressions even for the idioms that lack recorded equivalents in relevant dictionaries.

Integrating phraseological units into native- and foreign-language education curricula could improve students' phraseological competence, communicative proficiency, and cross-linguistic awareness. While even older idioms remain relevant due to their grounding in practical experiences (Liontas, 2017), generational shifts necessitate acknowledging linguistic evolution over time. In other words, preserving these colourful windows into the conceptualization of human experience allows each linguistic community to treasure its heritage and identity while embracing the breaths of fresh air brought by each new generation.

Although this study offers valuable insight into key aspects of younger native speakers' phraseological competence, its limitations include a homogeneous sample size and the reliance on self-reported data regarding a limited set of somatic idioms. Future research should expand participant demographics and explore a broader range of idioms across semantic domains using corpus-based methodologies to verify actual language production patterns.

The findings from this research aim to contribute to the broader fields of phraseology, phraseodidactics, phraseography, and translation studies.

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Hrvatska

Hrvatski frazemi kojima se opisuje govorni proces: aspekti frazeološke i međujezične kompetencije studenata

Sažetak

Provedeno istraživanje pružilo je uvid u pojedine segmente frazeološke kompetencije mlađe generacije izvornih govornika u vezi s poznavanjem i upotrebom hrvatskih idioma kojima se opisuje govorni proces te poznavanjem engleskih ekvivalenata. Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su značajan nesrazmjer između poznavanja idioma i samoprocjene njihove upotrebe u jeziku, što upućuje na činjenicu da pojedini idiomi polako nestaju iz govora mladih (Hansdóttir, 2024). Iako mlađe generacije govornika nisu pokazale visoku razinu međujezične frazeološke kompetencije unutar ove semantičke skupine frazema, ti govornici istovremeno predstavljaju dragocjen izvor dodatnih interpretacija značenja frazema i relevantan su odraz suvremene jezične upotrebe koja nije zastupljena u frazeografskim izvorima. Rad ima cilj potaknuti daljnja empirijska i korpusna istraživanja poznavanja i aktivne upotrebe šireg opusa frazema kako u materinjem, tako i u stranome jeziku, kako bi se dobio relevantniji uvid u razinu frazeološke kompetencije mlađe generacije govornika.

Ključne riječi: hrvatski jezik, engleski jezik, frazeološka kompetencija, govorni proces, studenti
