An Experimental Analysis of Metaphorical Thinking in Relation to Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract Idiomatic expressions contain elements of human essence, in the form of cultural markers, aspects of tradition, remembrances of the past, collective mentalities, cognitive patterns and figurative thinking. The investigation of idioms from different languages can highlight resemblances and contrast between people and cultures. Given that the nature of idioms is mainly metaphoric, it is interesting to analyze how language users decode their figurative meaning, particularly how non-native speakers interpret the metaphorical significance of idioms from foreign languages. This experiment focuses on the mechanisms of metaphorical thinking, emphasizing the role of accessing symbolic and conceptual knowledge or interpreting references in the use and understanding of idiomatic expressions.
Keywords Experiment; decoding meaning; metaphor; symbol; concept; literary references

1. Introduction

There is a tight connection between metaphors and idiomatic expressions and the relationship between them is one of subordination; the idiom is subordinated to the metaphor when it functions as an instrument of figurative language, whereas the relationship is inversed when the metaphor is the underlying foundation of an idiom, giving it significance and substance. Similarly to metaphors, idioms are used to figuratively express ideas and they have stylistic value, in that they enrich and adorn the language. As a general characteristic of idiomatic expressions, their meaning cannot be deducted from the individual words that compose them; however, there are also expressions that are more transparent and thus easier accessible.

While native speakers of a language acquire the meaning of idioms naturally and then retrieve it directly from memory when using the idiom, non-native speakers face a real challenge when it comes to understanding and using idiomatic expressions that belong to a foreign language and have no equivalent in their mother tongue. For instance, idioms that contain more or less explicit references to the culture, history, traditions or customs of a particular community or geographical area, are more opaque than idioms that are based on symbolism, metaphorical association or conceptual knowledge.

Metaphorically motivated idioms have a higher degree of transparency, as they offer clues that aid in decoding the meaning; the condition for successful decoding is represented by engaging metaphorical thinking, insight on symbolism and conceptual knowledge. Symbols and concepts are subordinated to the metaphor, as instruments that create the connection between concrete and figurative meaning.

This experiment is based on a questionnaire to investigate the mechanism of decoding idiomatic expressions based on metaphors, symbols and concepts, and the speakers' cognitive awareness of figurative connections that underlie metaphorical expressions. The experiment is performed on a number of thirty students from the Twinkle Star Linguistic Centre of Iaşi, Romania, aged fifteen to eighteen, attending a course of *Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)* and thus having a very good level of English (B2 – C1). The questionnaire is organized in three parts, centered on different matters of interest. The idiomatic expressions that have been used for the experiment belong to five languages – English, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian, and they have been selected from monolingual or bilingual dictionaries which also offer details about their origin and meaning: J. Siefring, *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*; R. Köster, *Duden-Redensarten: Herkunft und Bedeutung*; A.B. Jiménez, *Diccionario de dichos y frases hechas*; J. J. Almeida, *Dicionário aberto de calão e expressões idiomáticas*; G. Bărbulescu, *Mic dicţionar frazeologic portughez-român şi român-portughez.*

2. Metaphorical motivation

The first part aims to examine how the subjects decode idiomatic expressions using metaphorical thinking. For this purpose, the selection includes foreign expressions containing metaphors, symbols or concepts, without equivalents in Romanian, the native language of the subjects; the expressions are: English **to keep one's shirt on**, based on a concept (that men take off their shirts before fighting), German **sein blaues Wunder erleben** (to experience one's blue wonder), based on a symbol whose significance is culturally dependent (the colour blue has negative connotations in some Germanic languages, as opposed to Romance languages), Spanish **chiste verde** (green joke), also based on symbolism (green as a colour of freshness, boldness), and Portuguese **ser unha com carne** (to be like the nail and the flesh), relying on a metaphor (figuratively transferring the idea of closeness from the concrete to the abstract, from body parts to interpersonal relationships).

The subjects are given the expressions in their original and translated form, along with their meaning and they are asked to find a possible explanation for the meaning, in other

words a connection between the individual words taken literally and the figurative significance of the phrase taken as a whole (see Part 1). This task stimulates the occurrence of a reverse process that prompts the language user to go to the metaphor, symbol, or concept that creates the figurative foundation of an idiom; when a metaphor is involved, the speaker has to isolate the underlying association; in the case of symbols, the speaker uses knowledge of figurative connections between the abstract and the concrete; when it comes to a concept, the speaker accesses their mental frame, beliefs and acquired information.

Initially, this activity was isolated as part of a separate questionnaire that was also applied to a group of adults, with the purpose to see if the answers would be affected by the subjects' experience of life and language and symbolic knowledge; surprisingly, the adults gave more irrelevant answers or no answers at all, proving that people are generally more imaginative at a younger age; eventually, the results from the questionnaire applied to adults were not included in the analysis.

The results of the activity carried out by teenagers, presented in Table 1 below, prove that people have tacit knowledge of conceptual metaphors and they access the appropriate metaphors, symbols or concepts when processing and understanding idioms. Only the relevant answers, which represent the majority of all answers, were taken into consideration.

Part 1:
Find a possible explanation for the meaning of the following expressions:
> **English** *to keep one's shirt on* (= to remain calm) ....
> **German** *sein blaues Wunder erleben* (to experience one's blue wonder) (= to have an unpleasant or disappointing experience) ....
> **Spanish** *chiste verde* (green joke) (= indelicate, obscene joke) ....
> **Portuguese** *ser unha com carne* (to be like the nail and the flesh) (= about people, to be very close) ....

The answers given by the participants were grouped based on their relevance and the figures provided between parentheses in the table show the number of subjects that gave the same answer or offered very similar explanations.

Table 1

Accessing metaphors, symbols and concepts to understand idioms

Expression	Means of decoding
CONCEPT – English **to keep one's shirt on**	- pragmatic explanation: anger causes body temperature to rise and so people feel the need to take their shirts off (1); the shirt restricts movement, so it needs to be taken off before a physical fight (1); when people get angry, things get messy (1); keeping one's shirt on means adhering to society norms and normality and implicitly staying calm and having a diplomatic behaviour towards the others (1) - enunciation of concept: when men want to engage in a fight, they tend to take their shirts off (17) - figurative connection: when someone gets angry, they expose what they have inside, underneath their shirt (1)
SYMBOL – German **sein blaues Wunder erleben**	- symbolism: blue symbolizes sadness (7); in English, the colour blue stands for bad feelings (5), depression (3), disappointment (3); blue is a cold colour and so it has negative implications (6), blue can symbolize a nightmare (1), fear (1)
SYMBOL – Spanish **chiste verde**	- symbolism: green stands for bad things such as envy or jealousy (2); green represents perversion (1); green represents rawness (3); green means unripe (2); green means immature, so a green joke would be too bold, indiscrete or insulting (4); green means youthful, playful (2); green in this context alludes to nature, Adam and Eve, nudity (1); green represents illness (1), disgust (3), nausea (1), sickness (1), evil (1); green symbolizes freedom, the absence of rules and boundaries, so a green jokes respects no common sense rules (1); green stands out, it is a strident colour (1); green refers to honesty (1) and saying something straight (1)
METAPHOR – Portuguese **ser unha**	- metaphor (implicit comparison): removing a nail would cause a lot of suffering (8); the separation of nails from

com carne	fingers cannot be done without pain (6); nails and flesh are hard to separate (8); the nail is stuck onto the flesh, so the expression refers to a very tight bond between people (7); when people are very close, it is like they have the same blood or they are related (1)

2. Universality and uniqueness

The second part is constructed with the objective to explore the degree of convergence and divergence that can be observed when it comes to metaphorically designating reality in different languages. The subjects are given six foreign expressions based on metaphors, symbols, or concepts, translated and explained, and they are asked to associate them with autochthonous expressions, to find a correspondent, an expression with the same meaning or very similar meaning in the native language, which is Romanian (see Part 2). The purpose is to see if the subjects' choice is also based on a metaphor, symbol, or concept and to find out whether is it the same or a different metaphor, symbol, or concept. The chosen expressions are: German ***jemandem die kalte Schulter zeigen*** (to show somebody the cold shoulder) and Portuguese ***ter peito*** (to have chest), based on metaphors; German ***Bett und Tisch teilen*** (to share the bed and the table) and Portuguese ***a passo de boi*** (in the rhythm of an ox), based on symbols; English ***to be wet behind the ear*** and Spanish ***dar/tener carta blanca*** (to give/have the white card), relying on concepts. Some of the suggestions offered by the participants are rather creative and not commonly used as idiomatic expressions. The results are shown in Table 2.

Part 2:
Find a Romanian correspondent for the following expressions (an expression with the same meaning OR if not possible, a similar expression with close meaning, from the same semantic/thematic field):
> **German** *jemandem die kalte Schulter zeigen* (to show somebody the cold shoulder) (= to reject somebody) ~ Romanian ....
> **Portuguese** *ter peito* (to have chest) (= to be bold, courageous or endurant) ~ Romanian ....
> **German** *Bett und Tisch teilen* (to share the bed and the table) (= to be married) ~ Romanian ....
> **Portuguese** *a passo de boi* (in the rhythm of an ox) (= very slow/slowly) ~ Romanian ....
> **English** *to be wet behind the ear* (= to be naive, immature or inexperienced) ~ Romanian ....

> **Spanish** *dar/tener carta blanca* (to give/have the white card) (= to give/have permission) ~ Romanian ....

Table 2
Resemblance and dissimilarity in metaphorical, symbolic, or conceptual association

Expression		The suggested correspondent also contains a metaphor / symbol / concept		
		Yes		
		The same metaphor / symbol / concept	A different metaphor / symbol / concept	No
German ***jemandem die kalte Schulter zeigen*** (= to reject somebody)	*Metaphor*	16.7% - metaphor: *a trata cu răceală pe cineva* (to treat someone with coldness) (4); *a trata cu ochi reci* (to treat someone with cold eyes) (1)	63.3% - metaphor: *a-i întoarce spatele cuiva* (to turn one's back to someone) (15), *a întoarce faţa* (to turn one's face away from someone) (1), *a întoarce ceafa* (to show someone the backside of one's neck) (1) - symbolic gesture: *a-i da cu piciorul cuiva* (to kick someone) (1) - concept: *a-i da papucii cuiva* (to give someone their shoes) (1)	0%
Portuguese ***ter peito*** (= to be bold, courageous)	*Metaphor*	6.7% - metaphor / symbol: *a avea inimă de fier* (to have an iron heart)	66.7% - metaphor: *a avea sânge în vine* (to have blood in one's veins) (8), *a avea*	6.7% - metaphor / hidden simile: *a fi curcan* (to

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		(2)	*sânge în instalaţie* (to have blood in one's installation) (1), *a avea vână* (to have muscular fiber) (2), *a avea sânge rece* (to have cold blood) (2), *a fi neam cu ursul* (to be from the bear's family) (1) - symbol: *a avea nervi de oţel* (to have nerves made of steel) (1) - gesture: *a se bate cu pumnii în piept* (to pound one's fists on one's chest) (4), *a lua taurul de coarne* (to grab the bull by the horns) (1)	be a turkey) (1), *a fi cocoş* (to be a rooster) (1)
German ***Bett und Tisch teilen*** (= to be married)	*Symbol*	30% - symbol: *a împărţi casa şi masa cu cineva* (to share the house and the table with someone) (7), *a mânca la aceeaşi masă* (to eat at the same table) (1) - creative production: *a împărţi patul cu duşmanul* (to share the bed with the enemy) (1)	43.4% - symbol: *a împărţi casa cu cineva* (to share the house with someone) (3), *a împărţi un acoperiş* (to share a roof) (2), *a împărţi viaţa* (to share life with someone) (2), *a împărţi banii* (to share the money with someone) (1), *a face casă cu cineva* (to build a house with	0%

			someone) (2), *a fi împreună la bine şi la rău* (to be together for the good and the bad) (3)	
Portuguese *a passo de boi* (= very slowly)	*Symbol*	0%	90% - symbol / simile: *ca melcul* (like a snail) (24), *ca o broască ţestoasă* (like a turtle/tortoise) (2) - metaphor: *a face un pas înainte şi doi înapoi (ca racul)* (to take one step forward and two steps back like the crab) (1)	10% - irony: *cu viteza melcului turbat* (at the speed of a rabid snail) (3)
English *to be wet behind the ear* (= to be naive, immature)	*Concept*	0%	46.7% - metaphor: *a fi la început de drum* (to be at the beginning of one's journey) (1), *a fi încă boboc* (to be a gosling still) (2), *a avea caş la gură* (to have curd at one's mouth) (2), *a-i curge din gură* (to be drooling still) (1) - concept: *a nu avea barbă* (to not have a beard yet) (1), *a avea sabia curată* (to have a clean sword) (1)	20% - irony: *a fi născut ieri* (to be born yesterday) (4), *a crede că tot ce zboară se mănâncă* (to believe that everything that flies is good to eat) (2)

				- symbol: *a fi încă crud* (to still be raw/ green) (2), *a fi necopt* (to be unripe) (4)	
Spanish ***dar/tener carta blanca*** (= to give/have permission)	*Concept*	0%		100% - concept: *a da un cec in alb* (to give a black cheque) (1) - symbol: *a da undă/ lumină verde* (to give green light) (12), *a da mână liberă* (to give a free hand) (10), *a da frâu liber* (to give free rein) (3), *a da cale liberă* (to give free route) (4)	0%

3. Metaphors and literary references

The third part of the experiment is centered on the decoding of metaphors that stem from literary sources and metaphors that are connected to literary texts. The understanding of such metaphors may be more or less conditioned by literary knowledge. In the case of metaphors that originate solely from literature, meaning that their significance is not motivated by common associations of ideas, but only by a specific literary context, the decoding process occurs in the form of direct access and depends strictly on whether the language user is familiar with the source-text or not. In the case of metaphors that appear in literary texts but are also pragmatically motivated, however, the decoding of meaning may be done by means of empirical processing, so metaphor comprehension is not conditioned by literary knowledge, but occurs as an independent process instead; the metaphor may or may not prompt the language user to evoke the text that the respective metaphor is generally associated with.

For this activity, the subjects are given examples of idiomatic expressions containing metaphors that are more or less connected to literary texts and they are asked to indicate how they decode the meaning: by thinking of the source-text, or by using their imagination, logic, or personal experience (see Part 3). The selected expressions are: English ***to offer someone an***

olive branch, German **saure Trauben** (sour grapes), Romanian **a ţine şarpele la sân** (to hold the snake in one's bosom), Spanish **echar margaritas a los cerdos** (to throw pearls before the pigs), and Portuguese **separar as ovelhas dos bodes** (to separate the sheep from the goats). The English, German and Portuguese expressions are dependent on literary context, while the Romanian and Spanish expressions contain independent metaphors, which may or may not be associated with literary texts. The outcome is illustrated in Table 3 and the interpretation of the results demonstrates that dependent metaphors are understood using literary knowledge, while independent metaphors are decoded primarily by means of empirical or cognitive interpretation.

Part 3:
The following expressions are connected to literary texts. In order to make the connection between each expression and its meaning, do you think of the original text, OR do you use empirical/cognitive interpretation, based on your imagination, logic, or personal experience? Circle one of the two options.
> **English** *to offer someone an olive branch* (= to offer a token of peace and goodwill)
initial text (the Bible) / interpretation (imagination, logic, experience)
> **German** *saure Trauben* (sour grapes) (= something unattainable that sparks a feeling of envy)
initial text (Aesop's fable *The Fox and the Grapes*) / interpretation
> **Romanian** *a ţine şarpele la sân* (to hold the snake in one's bosom) (= to protect someone who is untrustworthy or ungrateful)
initial text (Aesop's fable *The Farmer and the Viper*) / interpretation
> **Spanish** *echar margaritas a los cerdos* (to throw pearls before the pigs) (= to give something valuable to someone who cannot appreciate it)
initial text (the Bible) / interpretation (imagination, logic, experience)
> **Portuguese** *separar as ovelhas dos bodes* (to separate the sheep from the goats) (= to make a division between things that are positive or superior and things that are negative or inferior)
initial text (the Bible) / interpretation (imagination, logic, experience)

Table 3

Direct access versus empirical processing

Expression		Decoding with the help of the source-text	Decoding by means of empirical processing
English **to offer someone an olive branch**	*dependent on literary context*	26/30 (86.7%)	26/30 (86.7%)
German **saure Trauben**		27/30 (90%)	27/30 (90%)
Portuguese **separar as ovelhas dos bodes**		24/30 (80%)	24/30 (80%)
Romanian **a ţine şarpele la sân**	*independent*	1/30 (3.3%)	1/30 (3.3%)
Spanish **echar margaritas a los cerdos**		6/30 (20%)	6/30 (20%)

3. Conclusions

The results of the experiment prove the importance of metaphorical thinking in the decoding of idiomatic expressions that contain figurative substance. Metaphors, symbols and concepts are accessed by language users in order to understand and use idioms, but also in order to find corresponding expressions in different languages. Also, literary knowledge proves to be relevant in the case of directly accessing the metaphorical meaning of idioms that stem from literary sources. Complimentary, metaphors whose meaning is not strictly motivated by a specific literary context may be decoded through empirical processing.