Idioms through Time and Technology

Idioms through Time and Technology:

The Signature of a Culture

By

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This book is dedicated to my parents,
who would have been so happy to see my name on it.

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PREFACE

Idioms through Time and Technology: The Signature of a Culture is a reader-friendly book which can be viewed as a game changer, giving a more precise definition of idioms along with new classifications. At the same time, it eliminates fixed phrases such as phrasal verbs, collocations, slang and proverbs from the class of the idioms while including two major new categories: similidioms and IBISes (Irony Based Idiom Sentences). As a matter of fact, similidioms (basically, idioms in the form of a simile) have been there probably since the beginning of our history as being capable of speaking, but they have not been revealed. Until now.

Starting from the observation that the production of idioms in any language is influenced, among others, by the technological advance of society, the book takes two of the most productive lexico-semantic categories of idioms in both English and Romanian – the *crazy* and the *stupid* idioms – and provides, for the first time, a classification according to their topics and patterns, in an intriguing contrastive approach.

The book also gives an answer to the question whether the true nature of proper idioms is negative. All the data, statistics included, lead to the same answer: yes, which is almost ironic, since *yes* is a positive word. Finding the answer involved idioms referring to four animals which were likely to create numerous such expressions: the dog, the cat, the horse and the ox. The data found for the English idioms mentioned above were compared to those obtained studying the Romanian idioms focussing on the same animals. The results are interesting, revealing the fact that idioms are even more culturally marked than proverbs. Practically, looking into the idioms the members of a language community use is similar to looking into their history and culture.

Well documented and not lacking a subtle sense of humour, *Idioms through Time and Technology: The Signature of a Culture* is a book which not only opens new perspectives for the researchers in the field, but also captivates the common reader interested in finding more about the expressions they may be using every day.

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Also, special thanks to my wife, Antoanela-Marta (PhD), who helped me keep my feet on the ground and hold my horses, so I don't go overboard with the idioms and the colloquial style (well, she wasn't anywhere near me when I wrote this paragraph).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALC	American Language Course. Book of Idioms.
CIDI	Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms
DFLR	*Dicționar frazeologic al limbii române*
DELC	Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture
DERC	Dicționar de expresii românești în context
GERDI	The Great English-Romanian Dictionary of Idioms

INTRODUCTION

As any research may have it, some goals were established from the very beginning while others revealed to me as the research was digging deeper and deeper into the field of idioms. In the end, when all the fog disappeared, I was able to clearly see the reasons for which I started this endeavour. They had been there from the very beginning, but I needed to go through hell and high water, idiomatically speaking, to be aware of their presence and make justice for all to the best of my ability:

1) finding a more precise definition of idioms;
2) establishing a new classification of idioms;
3) eliminating the fixed phrases which were taken into consideration in various dictionaries without being proper idioms;
4) demonstrating how technology influenced the production of this type of fixed phrases in English and in Romanian;
5) revealing the nature of idioms, whether negative, positive or neutral;
6) looking into the cultural mark that idioms may carry and see how the history and the mentality of a people may influence their production from the vocabulary they use to their inner structure.

Starting from the idea that idioms are complex mental images resembling pictures that represent reality in a rather artistic manner, the presence of verbal phrases, slang, proverbs, free collocations and other more or less fixed phrases in various dictionaries seemed to be rather awkward, especially because many of those fixed expressions were lacking something which I have always considered vital for an idiom: its metaphorical side. The process of eliminating the other fixed phrases was not an easy one, supporting every point of view with solid arguments being mandatory. I considered that **redefining the idiom and establishing newer, more precise guidelines in deciding whether an expression is an idiom or not** was necessary not only for the present research, but also for further research in the field. It goes without saying that, in many cases, there is still a fine line between idioms and other fixed phrases, but the stricter criteria established here proved themselves to be of a great help in working with the

corpus. Otherwise, the linguistic material would have overwhelmed me and the task of analysing the idioms from the cultural point of view and from the perspective of the technological advance would not have been possible. Not in a work of this size.

Chapter 1, *A New View on Idioms*, defines idioms more clearly than it has been done before and classifies them according to the newly found criteria. In order to reach this goal, the main prior attempts in defining them were mentioned and discussed along with the main directions in studying fixed phrases. Subchapters from 1.1. to 1.2.3.1. lay the bases of the entire research after them, establishing new rules in selecting the idioms and in finding new classes.

Chapter 2, *The Influence of Technology and Society on* Stupid *and* Crazy *Idioms*, analyses how idioms in general have been constantly influenced by the technological advance, making a comparison between some English and Romanian idioms. Focus is laid on the idioms referring to *stupidity* and *craziness*, hence also dealing with clearly defining the two rather overlapping concepts: craziness and stupidity. Another important component of the second chapter is establishing and classifying the patterns used in producing the analysed English idioms as well as comparing them to the ones used in producing the Romanian *stupid* and *crazy* idioms.

Chapter 3, *On Negative, Positive and Neutral English and Romanian Idioms*, deals with the problem of negativity, positivity and neutrality of the idioms in general and of the idioms including the names of or referring to the four domestic animals chosen for the research, namely the *dog*, the *cat*, the *horse* and the *ox*/*bull*. It is a contrastive approach due to the fact that it compares the English idioms with their Romanian counterparts. The main problems encountered in my research were establishing the criteria necessary for dividing the idioms into the three categories and separating the proper idioms from the rest of the fixed phrases (with conclusive results).

Chapter 4, *Culturally Marked Idioms - Idioms which Spill the Beans*, is concerned with a very sensitive issue: the difference between the two cultures - the English and the Romanian - as it is reflected in the production of the idioms presented and largely discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. It successfully demonstrates that idioms, among all the fixed phrases, are the most deeply culturally marked, overtaking the proverbs from this point of view. One of the conclusions of this chapter can be used as a moto for the entire study as well as for all the contrastive studies on idioms: “Tell me what idioms you have in your language, and I’ll tell you about your people”.

CHAPTER 1

A NEW VIEW ON IDIOMS

1.1 The Beginnings. Defining the idiom

Throughout the history of our species, new discoveries have always fired our imagination. Immediately after discovering what were thought to be irrigation channels on Mars, many scientists and science-fiction writers started talking about the inhabitants of the planet Mars without having solid evidence that they existed. All the discussions and speculations led to a snowball effect which had its climax in the radio dramatization of H.G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, the novel describing the fictional war between the Martians and us. Since then, thousands of pages have been written on the same subject and dozens of movies have been made, describing the attempt of intelligent creatures from other planets to enslave, colonize or even annihilate us.

Discovering the idioms was no exception. Once the discovery was made, the idiom frenzy began. Linguists studying them suddenly started seeing idioms everywhere they looked. "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail" (Maslow, 1966:15). According to this principle, there was a period of time, at the beginning, when every 'chunk of language' was treated like an idiom, from simple collocations or even single words with an idiomatic meaning to proverbs in the form of complex sentences. The tendency is still present, but the linguists are now aware of the fact that many of the phrases they generally call idioms are phrasal verbs, proverbs etc. GERDI (*The Great English-Romanian Dictionary of Idioms*) is the perfect example in this case. Even though the word *idioms* lies on the cover, and the authors let us know that the collection gathered no fewer than "18,000 idioms" (GERDI 2007, 10), note is made that the language samples in the enormous book are of a various nature: "English idiomatic expressions, collocations, phrasal verbs, verbal clichés, dicta, famous quotations, proverbs, saying and what not" (GERDI 2007, 8). Indeed, GERDI has everything one needs in order to make his speech sound like that of a native speaker of English. Except the accent and the correct pronunciation, of course. In other words, the book is

an excellent collection of genuine English language samples, from slangy words, i.e. *a babe (slang) = o gagică (colocvial), o puicuță (colocvial)* to proverbs, i.e. *A bird in hands is worth two in the bush.*

Acting in concordance with our thirst of knowledge and our proverbial curiosity, I looked inside idioms to see what they are made of, on the one hand, and to give a definition, on the other. Whether the general opinion was that defining it would be a walk in the park, so to speak, or not, I cannot possibly know, but the reality came to shatter any hope of a 'quick and painless' action. Even though all the elements are present, linguists have been looking for a clear definition for decades. It is believed that it has not been found yet, even though such a definition is formulated in this study, and it is the sum of many definitions which have been given so far.

1.1.1. Prior attempts

The attempt of finding the perfect definition of the idiom may be described using a phrase which is a real idiom, according to our definition: *a wild goose chase*. As any struggle to find something so well hidden and somehow illusory may have it, exaggerations have been made along the way. Exaggeration, inaccuracies and even self-contradictory statements. Among those, a 'traditional' definition is recognized by researchers in the field, regardless of their being reluctant to it and their trying to convince themselves that idioms are more than the respective definition may have already established: "The term 'idiom' is not an easily defined one - it can refer to many kinds of words and phrases. The traditional definition of an idiom is '*a group of words which has a different meaning from the sum of its parts*'" (Cullen et all 2000, iii). While admitting that there is a traditional definition which defines idioms as 'a group of words', Cullen et al. (2000) take into consideration a large plethora of expressions, from non-idiomatic transparent phrases such as *beyond belief, better late than never* and *bored to death* to proper idioms, metaphors for very real situations: *tared with the same brush, babe in the woods* and *carry the ball.*

In an attempt to make things significantly clearer, but obtaining the opposite effect, in my opinion, Wright (2002) mixes the fantastic with the reality and brings to the world of linguistics a definition which may create antagonistic reactions: "An idiom is an expression with the following features: 1. It is fixed and is recognized by native speakers. You cannot make up your own! 2. It uses language in a non-literal metaphorical way." (Wright 2002, 7). The fact that an idiom is a fixed phrase cannot be denied, but is it recognized by native speakers under any circumstances? If this is what the definition above meant to say, then one can assume that idioms are

written in our genetic code, therefore being automatically recognized and understood by us even though we have never heard them before. This is the fantastic side of the definition. It would be fantastic, indeed, to have the meaning of the fixed expressions in our language written in our genetic code because, then, we would not have to learn them and make the effort of memorizing. Unfortunately, this is far from being true. We have to learn every sound of our mother tongue and mumble them for more than one year before we put them two by two and form simple words: *ma-ma, pa-pa, da-da* etc. We learn our language word by word and phrase by phrase.

1.1.1.2. Empiricists versus Nativists

Logical as it may seem, the idea that we do not have in our genetic code or in our brain the words and the expressions formed by them, since the day we are born, has been subject of controversy for decades.

> Next consider concept acquisition. (…) The empiricist claim is that a small number of sensory concepts (plus a few logical connectives) are innate. Nativists, on the other hand, seem to be forced to adopt a rather radical position: that virtually all lexical concepts are innate. This position is known as 'radical concept nativism'. Nativists do not claim that experience plays no role in concept acquisition; but they see concepts as being triggered by experience in a brute-causal way (rather than learned from experience in a rational-inductive way). (Horsey 2006, 7)

I agree that some sensory concepts are innate. Experience comes from being exposed to different situations of life while the most basic sensory concepts must be innate, engraved in our genetic code, so that we can survive the elements. For instance, burning sensations give us the signal that we should not stay too close to hot objects or fire, and hunger triggers the instinct of feeding ourselves. Also, some logical connections can pass as innate, especially the ones which can be found in other animals. A good example is the fact that crows use the force of gravity to crack open walnuts by dropping them from certain hights. I remember that, when I was a child, living in the countryside where my family had a small farm, I used to scare the mother hens by imitating the sound of a crow because my grandmother had told me that crows sometimes snatch little chickens. Although it had never happened before and the hens had never had a close encounter with a bird of prey, they would become very alert and call their baby chickens to come under their wings at the sound of a crow call produced by me. Apparently, the hens could make some kind of logical connection between

the sound of a crow and the danger it represents. It looked like the association between crow and danger was embedded in their genetic code. While all these things are skills which mother nature give the animals in order to help them survive, speaking is not vital, despite the fact that it is essential to the evolution of our species. Speaking is not synonym with communication.

With the lexical concepts, the situation is different from a language to another. If all the people, regardless of their life experience, draw the same information from their senses (with the normal exceptions) and, for instance, stay away from the edge of tall building being afraid of falling - knowing that falling from hights may have death as a result - people who have English as their native language will invent names which will sound English and the people who have Romanian as their native language will invent a word resembling existing Romanian words. In a small experiment I conducted using Facebook and two groups of university students from "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania, I posted the picture of a plant that cannot be found in Europe, the vegetable sheep (Lat. *Raoulia Rubra*), and I asked both my Facebook contacts and my students to invent one Romanian name and one English name for the plant. I specifically asked them not to use already existing names in the two languages, but to invent new words.

The results showed that the lexical concepts are real and working, but not because they are innate. It is as normal for the native speakers of a language to invent words which will sound like real words in their language as it is to invent words which will sound as in a language to which they have been exposed long enough to be able to recognize its sound patterns. This capacity of recognizing and imitating lexical concepts has been used in movies and by stand-up comedians in order to create humour. The examples are numerous, from Joey (*Friends*) imitating French words to Russel Peters, the Canadian stand-up comedian and writer, of an Indian descent, who has his own point of view regarding this matter: "I don't speak another language, but if you know what another language sounds like, you can fake it" (source: *CBS This Morning*, at https:// www.youtube. com/watch?v= QbzT5utW4Ts, last visited on March 24th, 2020). In as far as the names my students and my friends came up for the plant, here are some of them: 1) Romanian-like names: *borbova, aralunia, doldor, bulboțica, tinola, gogoneața, gargoi, buguloi, gorgonea, hupoi, boboscata, atsurc verzui, supirici, coțurcă*, *negarniță* etc.; 2) English-like names: *bagbig, golvie, dreps, staap, grocy, guanthae, serqet, flapy, grolls, hungi, kapsi* etc. As it can be easily noticed, the names imitating the Romanian language sound either latin (*aralunia, tinola, doldor, boboscata*) or Romanian, the model

being real names of plants, using Romanian sounds (ă, ț, ș, such as *gogoneața, coțurcă, negarniță*) or the ending *-oi* (*gargoi, buguloi, hupoi*). How was it possible that people who are not native speakers of English to come up with words resembling the English language, such as *bagbig, golvie, dreps, flapy, grolls* etc.? They knew the sound patterns of the English language and they could mimic it for a certain reason: language patterns are not innate. They are learned.

> There is no genetic code that leads a child to speak English or Spanish or Japanese. Language is learned. We are born with the capacity to make 40 sounds and our genetics allows our brain to make associations between sounds and objects, actions, or ideas. The combination of these capabilities allows the creation of language. (Bruce D. Perry, American psychiatrist, M.D., Ph.D., senior fellow at Chils Trauma Academy in Huston, Texas; source: https://www.scholastic. com/teachers /articles/teaching-content/how-young-children-learn-language/, last visited on March 5th, 2020, at 10:11).

Wright is not the only one who, at a certain point in time, thought that native speakers would be able to understand an idiom without having heard it before. Cacciari and Tabossi (1993) had put it in a different way years before Wright: "Idioms are transparent to native speakers, but a course of perplexity to those who are acquiring a second language. If someone tells me that Mrs. Thatcher has become the queen of Scotland, I am likely to say *That's a tall story. Pull the other one*" (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993, vii). It goes without saying that even native speakers need to be explained what 'a tall story' is, simply because stories are not usually tall. They can be sad, happy, funny, long or short, but not tall. Therefore, a speaker, native or not, when coming across this idiom, needs to be explained what it expresses because we are not able to recognize an idiom unless we have learnt it before. In the spring of 2018, I conducted an experiment in which almost 80 Romanian university students, between 18 and 40 of age, were involved. I asked them if they knew what two Romanian idioms which I knew from childhood meant, namely *a fi într-o bujie* and *a-i fila o lampă* (lit. *to work with only one spark plug* and *to have a lamp flickering*, both of them meaning 'to have a screw loose'). Only two of them knew the meaning. Those two were the oldest in the group. The rest of them had literally no idea what they meant and many of them did not know what *bujie* (spark plug) is.

I repeated the experiment, this time using myself as the subject of it. I randomly opened a dictionary of idioms (Fowler 1972, 34) and I took the first idiom whose meaning I did not know: *play to the gallery*. I wrote

down the first meaning I could think of, in a logic way - *play in such a manner so it could please the gallery* - and then I read the definition from the book: "try to win approval from people not involved in the argument". Basically, I had given the same definition, but for a different situation. The gallery, in my case, was a real gallery and the player was a real player. My player was playing so as to win the hearts of the people who were not actively involved in the game: the gallery. This metaphor is, like the rest of the metaphors in a language, a combination of logic and imagination. Hence, the definition of the metaphor as suggested by us in the present work: **the metaphor is logic and imagination working together in order to present reality in the form of a piece of more or less abstract art.**

As far as Wright's (2002, 7) assertion is concerned, "You cannot make up your own!", there is no need to comment too much on this. Maybe on the exclamation mark at the end of it, which shows how convinced of the truth of this opinion on the matter Wright was. Wright is wrong, this time. No play on words intended. Idioms were not given to us by a deity. Idioms come and go in a language. They are the creation of an individual. People create idioms every day, but only some of them are catchy and become largely used for a while. Churchill himself is said to have come up with an idiom, *punch above your own weight* (meaning to do more than your best), which cannot be found in too many dictionaries printed on paper (not even in GERDI with its 18,000 idioms), but which is mentioned on 55,000,200 sites on the Internet (Google search, November 13th 2018). Barack Obama seems to have used it a lot while being the president of the United States, according to *USA Today*:

> President Obama has an often-used boxing metaphor for the small European countries that make an oversized contribution to international efforts on terrorism, disease, climate change and migration: They 'consistently punch above their weight,' he says. (USA Today 2016, May 13).

Using another idiom, the fact that Wright *hits the nail in the head* when he states that idioms use language "in a non-literal metaphorical way" is worth mentioning. Perhaps this is the source of all troubles when it comes to defining idioms: they are metaphors, samples of artistic creativity inside the languages. Art, in general, is difficult to define, and artistic productions do not have definitions, although one thing is certain with regards to them: they all use regular ingredients, namely words, to compose unusual meaning, namely metaphors.

In spite of some exaggerations in as far as defining idioms is concerned, Wright's *Idioms Organiser* is a very good tool to learn real idioms along with some simple and complex similes.

In disagreement with what is generally accepted about idioms - that they are metaphors - Dixson (2004) considers that phrasal verbs are idioms, too, and puts them in a book of lessons and exercises. It is another case of considering an idiom almost every group of two or more words, more or less frozen in a phrase. We have the hammer, let us consider everything around us a nail… I cannot agree, under any circumstances, that phrases such as *to look at, to look for, to get in (+ place), to stand up, to sit down, to get sick* etc. are idioms. They are not abstract representation of reality, therefore they are not metaphors and, consequently, they cannot be considered proper idioms.

The orientation above is not a new one. Almost all authors and editors of dictionaries of idioms, idiom organizers or idiom exercise books felt the need to include phrasal verbs, slang words and even proverbs in their work, following the same beaten path, mentioning the same phrases, arranging and rearranging them according to all sorts of criteria, giving the impression that the strength of any book on idioms is in number. For instance, Stone (1972) puts together, in what is presented as a collection of modern English idioms, real idioms (*take the bull by the horns*), verbs with a figurative meaning (*to ape - The child aped/was aping his parents)* phrasal verbs (*iron out = solve, smooth out, difficulties/problems*) and sayings (*You can't have your cake and eat it*). Jones (2002), in a book meant to be a learning tool for advanced learners, presenting a large number of real idioms otherwise carefully organized in user-friendly chapters, goes from single words (in a chapter entitled just like this: 'Single Nouns') such as *a blackout*, defined as something *very unpleasant to look at; a best*-seller, defined as a *loud whistle or cry of disapproval* etc. to proverbs, crossing an entire plethora of collocations and phrasal verbs in Section 3 of the book. Section 4 is dedicated to 'Idioms using prepositions' and it has phrases such as *at a loss, at the drop of a hat, for kicks, for the high jump, in red, in deep water, out of the woods* etc. It is another way of arranging fixed phrases, but a significant number of them are not real idioms according to my definition.

The fact that many fixed phrases have been mistaken as idioms is perfectly understandable. Seen as products of our creativity, any combination of a verb with other words giving a supplementary meaning to the verb may sound like a metaphor, making them resemble proper idioms, but they are not as evolved as the real idioms, which are considered in this paper the highest manifestation of creativity in a language. It is true that the phrasal verb *kick in* has a slightly different meaning than the simple verb, *to kick*,

but it is still connected semantically to it, as any phrasal verb is: "to hit something with your foot" and "a movement of your foot or leg" (Longman 2003), implying the idea, in some cases, of a stronger hit than others (e.g. a slap or a punch). All the other phrasal verbs under the word *kick*, in the dictionary, are formed around the idea of hitting something or moving the foot or the leg: *kick yourself, kick ass, kick out, kick around, kick back, kick off* etc. The situation changes and the expression becomes an idiom when the metaphor is more complex and the meaning of the word around which the expression is formed does not occupy the central position any longer, as in *kick up your heals* (meaning enjoying yourself very much at a party), *kick up a fuss* (meaning to complain loudly about something) and *kick somebody upstairs* (meaning to move someone to a more important job). The three elements - *your heals*, *a fuss* and *somebody upstairs* - are as essential as *kick up* and *kick*, respectively, in the three expressions cited above. In their turn, each part of these expressions has a different meaning when taken separately than the expression of the entire construction, thus making them idioms.

The main difference, yet, between the phrasal verbs and the idioms having in common the same verbs is that the first ones are closer to what new words are to someone who is learning a language in the sense that it is necessary to be memorised almost like simple words, while idioms are easier to be retained after being explained due to the fact that there is a logic connection between the image it builds in our mind and the meaning it has.

In as far as slang is concerned, things are even clearer since many of the slang expressions are, in fact, single words, thus not being taken into consideration as idioms from the very beginning. The ones which have the form of an expression are more difficult to be separated from idioms and it is possible that many of them have already passed as idioms.

1.1.1.3. The main directions in studying idioms

The idiom frenzy has its roots in the last decades of the 20th century, when a number of experienced linguists decided to study them thoroughly thus opening the path to various directions which were to be followed by many other important researchers in the field. It is a *sine qua non* condition to mention Chitra Fernando and the two directions detected by her while identifying the important linguists within them: on the one hand, the direction focussing on "lexically and grammatically regular idioms", featuring Weinrich (1969), Frazer (1970), Makkai (1972) and Strasler (1982) and the direction which focuses on the "idiosyncrasies of English, many of which are lexically and grammatically irregular", represented by Jesperen (1924), Smith (1925), Roberts (1944) and Fillmore et al. (1988),

on the other hand. In the end, there is a group of researchers combining the two direction and putting them in a dictionary meant to bring peace and harmony in this respect: Cowie et al. (1975, 1983) and their two idiom dictionaries (Fernando, 1996: 3). The two directions are "overlapping but slightly different" and discuss the many types of word combinations commonly named idioms, including phrases sharing the three "most frequently mentioned features of idioms": *compositeness, institutionalization* and *semantic opacity* (Fernando 1996, 3). In as far as the compositeness criterion is concerned, I totally agree with the linguists who accept only multiword expressions as being idioms and do not consider that single words can be idioms. While showing imagination and ludic spirit, words which are given a totally different meaning than the original one, a meaning which cannot be deducted logically (I am referring here to slang words, especially) cannot be taken into consideration as idioms because that would contradict a crucial part of my own vision upon idioms: creativity. Idioms are samples of linguistic creativity, the main ingredients being the words, and not the sounds that make one word. Even though slang words such as *dough* meaning *money* are an unusual way of naming different things which already have names, for people who prefer slang, they are not images, they are not compositions of words whose finite products have a meaning different from the words inside of it and different from the literal meaning. While the literal meaning of *dough* is "flour mixed with water ready to be baked into bread" (Longman 2003) and the figurative meaning is *money*, the word in itself is just a convention between people living in the same geographical area and has little to nothing to do with semantic opacity as defined by Fernando: "the meaning of an idiom is not the sum of its constituents. In other words, an idiom is often non-literal" (Fernando, 1996: 3). By 'the sum of its components' we understand components which, taken separately, have their own meaning, independent of the idiom, as in *spill the beans*, where every word has a meaning, saying nothing, yet, of the literal meaning of the sum of them and suggesting the figurative meaning of the phrase: revealing secret information by accident or intentionally.

The word *suggesting* in the phrase above may stir controversy, therefore it should be explained immediately. Even though there are voices who have stated, in various contexts, the fact that there is no logic in an idiom and that the meaning of an idiom cannot be logically deducted (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993, vii), I respectfully have to disagree and say that there is logic in every idiom, with no exceptions. Heidegger said it so clearly in one of his lectures, in 1935: "No man can jump over his own shadow" (translated in English and published in *What is a Thing*; source: https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/61cmxw/what_did_

heidegger_mean_by_no_man_can_jump_over/). His words can be interpreted in several ways. For our situation, their meaning is that nobody can think of something that is outside one's own experience and beyond one's horizon of knowledge (the word *knowledge* includes the experience of other individuals, too). It is the reverse of "if you can think it, you can do it" (a quote attributed to so many famous people that it is not worth finding the first one who said it). If one fails to understand the connection between beans as being secrets (they cannot be seen while they are still in the tin can) and the act of spilling them as being comparable with the act of revealing secrets kept hidden in some sort of a can (which may be the brain, the heart or wherever people keep their secrets), then that particular person will never understand the idiom or will never be able to come up with such an idiom.

> The investigation of a wide range of idioms clearly demonstrates that idioms are analysable and have figurative meaning that are at least partially motivated. (…). That is, many idioms, perhaps thousands, have individual components that independently contribute to what these phrases figuratively mean as wholes. For examples, speakers know that spill the beans is analysable because beans refer to an idea or secret and spilling refers to the act of revealing the secret. (Gibbs 1995, 99)

It is true that many idioms need to be explained, the meaning being almost totally opaque, but once explained to us, we see the hidden logic and we enjoy them. The *skeleton in the closet* will immediately become something that you do not want to have, once you are explained the meaning of the idiom, unless you are a medical school student and you need to have a real one in your closet, but you will almost inevitably make jokes and puns about it. As a matter of fact, this is a very important feature of the idioms – the humour inside of them. The next observation could be a part of the description of the proper idioms: they contain humour (irony included) or at least build an image meant to shock in a funny manner. In many cases both characteristics are present. For instance, the image of a car with its engine running, moving chaotically due to the fact that nobody is driving it, puts a smile on our faces in the case of a certain idiom naming not very sane people: *the engine is running, but there is nobody behind the wheel.*

Sometimes, the definitions given are difficult to understand. The phrasing is complicated, and the concepts are rendered by unusual words. The following is just one of the examples: "I shall regard an idiom as a constituent or a series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed" (Frazer 1970, 22 in Fernando 1996, 8). Translated from English to English,

Frazer's definition is basically as it follows: *an idiom is an expression made of one or more words whose meaning is not the meaning of any of the constituents*. The fact that Frazer includes single words in the class of idioms makes us think of slang. It is not a surprise, due to the fact that many linguists used to consider or still consider slangy words being idioms, but I cannot possibly agree with that. This kind of words, namely the slang words, cannot be idioms because their meaning is the one given by a certain community whose members accepted a certain convention. Thus, a word such as *cat* was given the meaning of "bad woman", and it is known with this meaning only by the people who are familiar with the convention. All the words are social conventions, and the fact that some words already having a meaning were given another meaning, more or less figurative, does not mean anything else but another convention, whereas a **real idiom such as *the elevator does not go all the way to the top* creates an image without altering the meaning of any of the words inside of it**. Every single word has its own significance which can be found in a normal dictionary, but the image created is a metaphor having its roots in a comparison. In this particular case, it is about a person who is not totally sane. A crazy person. A person compared to a building whose elevator does not reach the top. The head is compared to the top of the building, and the going up of the elevator can be the processes of thinking, the essence of a thought or a fact which is not completely understood, therefore being wrongly or even crazily understood by the person described with the idiom above.

Later on (see Table 1-3) semi-idioms will be taken into consideration and discussion because they exist, even though they might be named differently here and even though they will not be the ones identified by Cowie et al. twice, once in 1975, Volume I, and the second time in 1983, Volume 2. The first time when the term *semi-idioms* was mentioned was also the first time when their multi-word nature was revealed, but except being multi-word expressions, as all idioms are, the phrases mentioned by Cowie et al. are not idioms. They are phrasal verbs, i.e. *abstain from, develop from (into)* etc. First of all, the prepositions which co-occur with the verbs above do not change the meaning of the verbs. They were introduced in the large class of idioms for the wrong reason - their "strong tendency to co-occur with the verb" (Cowie et al. 1975, xi in Fernando 1996, 12). In Volume 2, two types of semi-idioms are identified, one which is closer to real idioms, containing a "non-literal member of the combination" with a figurative meaning, such as *jog* in *jog somebody's memory* (meaning *to make someone remember something*) and one which is nothing but a case of collocation, e.g. *cardinal error/sin/virtue/grace* (Cowie et al. 1983, xiii in Fernando 1986, 12). The intention was to make a distinction between

open collocations such as *leave the house, go to bed* etc. and idiom-like collocations or semi-idioms. Phrases such as *cardinal error* are considered semi-idioms because they allow "restricted lexical variations", but this should not be a criterion for establishing which collocations are idioms and which collocations are not. In *cardinal errors* the word *cardinal* has the meaning in the dictionary and the word *error* also has the meaning found in regular dictionaries. Restricted or not restricted, this combination is nothing but a noun with an adjective having the meaning of the very combination, and not a figurative one.

Very close to my own opinions on idioms, Strassler (1982) gives an excellent definition, whose clarity derives from the categorical tone:

> "An idiom is a concatenation of more than one lexeme whose meaning is not derived from the meaning of its constituents and which does not **consist** of a verb plus an adverbial particle or preposition. The concatenation as such then constitutes a lexeme in its own right and should be entered as such in the lexicon." (Strassler 1982, 79 in Fernando 1996, 14).

More than a definition which overlaps to everything I consider true about idioms, Strassler has a question I have been asking myself since the beginning of the present research: why do people, more often than not, use idioms instead of simple words naming what they mean? Why do we say that somebody is *like a bull in a china shop* instead of using the word *clumsy*? "(…) every idiom has a non-idiomatic synonym on the semantic level. The question now remains as to why idioms exist and why they can only be used under certain circumstances" (Strassler 1982, 85 in Fernando 1996, 13). Strassler believes that idioms have elements which are not common with their literal counterparts. I, on the other hand, think that the element the linguist was looking for is our need to create art wherever we may roam. We are the only animals capable of art and we have been creating art for tens of thousands of years, probably since having become self-conscious. The answer to why we use idioms must be a philosophical one, of a cognitive origin, because it has to do with our capacity of expressing ourselves in a figurative manner.

In spite of all the progress concerning the nature of the idioms, and despite all the various attempts to giving them a definition accepted unanimously, the idiom became even more difficult to be defined. It looked like almost all the other notions defining linguistic findings and realities were easy to be given clear definitions, such as the verb, the adverb, the subject, the predicate, the collocation, the proverb, the slang words etc, but not the idioms. Why were they so difficult to be given a definition? There

is one answer to this question: defining art is a difficult task, and idioms are samples of imagination with an artistic twist. They have been correctly catalogued as metaphors. Metaphors are artistic images of the reality.

Studying thoroughly the linguists who, in their turn, had studied idioms, in an attempt to clear things up by introducing a more general term, Fernando (1996) makes the distinction between idioms and *idiomaticity*. Apparently, by idiomaticity Fernando names the phrases which look like idioms, but are not:

> All idioms, of course, show idiomaticity. However, all word combinations showing idiomaticity, for instance, *habitual collocations,* such as *rosy cheeks, sallow complexion, black coffee* or *catch a bus,* etc., are not idioms for they are relatively unrestricted in their adjectival and nominal variants: *rosy/plump cheeks, rosy dawn* and *a sallow skin* are all possible. Similarly, we can have *strong coffee* and we can *catch a tram.* All these variations yield idiomatic expressions exemplifying idiomaticity, but they are not idioms. (Fernando 1996, 30)

The examples given above are nouns determined by adjectives in free collocations. *Black coffee*, for example, is nothing but a coffee which is black. It has no hidden or figurative meaning. It is just one of the many ways on which coffee is presented to the customers of a restaurant, for example. *Rosy cheeks* may pass as a metaphor for cheeks which have the colour of the roses, but it is a very transparent metaphor, the meaning of which does not have to be explained to an independent user of English. *Sallow* is just a word describing skin and it means exactly what any normal dictionary says about this type of skin: "slightly yellow and unhealthy" (Longman 2003).

Idioms should belong to a totally different "species" of phrases. They are the artists of the collocational world. They express images with a surprising meaning, being aesthetically enhanced. The image of a cat let out of the bag meaning *to reveal a secret carelessly or by mistake* makes us think of a naughty or scared cat storming out of a bag or maybe coming slowly out of it (it depends on the situation, the speakers/listeners' imagination and their previous experience with cats). **All idioms have to do with the experience of life on the part of the user. The experiential side is essential in understanding idioms and then in using them.** In other words, people need to have enough life experience in order to make the logic connection between an elevator stuck between floors and a person who cannot think straight, for instance, or between a moving car with nobody behind the wheel and someone who is not entirely in touch with what is taking place around them. The lack of such practical knowledge is the main

reason for which idioms are not taught to young children. It may be anybody's educated guess that an idiom such as *the engine is running, but there is nobody behind the wheel* will soon be obsolete due to the fact that there are more and more cars which do not need anybody behind the wheel. In the absence of an opaque, though logical metaphor, a collocation is nothing more than a group of two or more words put together, conveying a not at all surprising meaning. The difference between "I am in black" and "I am in *the* black", for instance, is enormous. The first sentence says that I am wearing black clothes whereas the second one has nothing to do with what I am wearing. The humble definite article changes the meaning dramatically, creating the image of a person with no debts, moneywise. *To be in the black*, meaning to have some money in a bank account, has a very logical explanation: the accountants used, and many of them probably still use, red ink (red colour, respectively) for writing the debts and black for writing the money a company or a person had.

On the other hand, the three categories identified by Fernando (1996), namely **pure idioms**, **semi-idioms** and **literal idioms** refer to multiword expressions (the only expressions which have in them the seed of an idiom), but using the very word *idiom* for all the three of them seems to be an exaggeration. While the definition of pure idioms is one of the best definitions there is for idioms, "a type of conventionalized, non-literal multiword expression" (Fernando 1996, 35), saying, in just a few words, everything about idioms, and the second one (the semi-idioms) still has the chance to pass as an idiom, the third one, the literal idioms, envisages stronger or weaker *collocations* whose meanings are too close to the literal meaning of at least one of the words from which they are made, thus turning them into simple colocations, transparent to the point where they cannot be taken into consideration as idioms. The semi-idioms, though, have that touch of mystery which puts them among idioms. *Drop names, catch one's breath* and *foot the bill*, for instance, are only half transparent, even though the meaning is closely related to one of the words, because names cannot be literally dropped (not even written on bricks and dropped, because it is not the name, but the brick with a name on it which was dropped), breath cannot be literally caught, and bills cannot be… footed. The meaning of the semi-idiom in discussion is to cover a rather expensive bill. The examples above are fully qualified for playing the role of semi-idioms in a language. It is not the case of the so-called literal idioms. They do not have any non-literal meaning, thus not being idioms of any kind. The reason invoked by Fernando is "the salient criterion for idioms: invariance or restricted variation" (Fernando 1996, 36). The "salient criterion" of invariance or restricted variation should be applied exclusively to phrases with a non-