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HOW L2 LEARNERS OF ENGLISH CONSTRUCT MEANING OF METAPHORICAL  
EXPRESSIONS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to understand even the most basic of human sensations in isolation. We are programmed to connect and concord various experiences and knowledges into a meaningful and mutually sustainable compound that influences who we are. In the context of our cognition, everything is directly or indirectly connected with everything else. Every new piece of knowledge is connected, built upon or derived from something already existing. For this purpose, our mind has at its disposition some “poetic” strategies. We think in images and parables. We express ourselves accordingly. Our cognitive growth would be unimaginable without this capacity to construct more complex and abstract notions on the basis of simpler, more embodied instances of our experiences. As will be shown in this paper, figurative thought is in the base of our cognitive growth and reasoning, making it not only desirable, but also inevitable in entire spectres of our daily lives. It represents a culture through the language and this is why it is useful and important to understand how the meanings of metaphorical expressions are constructed in our minds.

In the first section the relevant theoretical background will be presented: differences in the traditional and cognitive approach to language and figurative language will be presented with special focus on the conceptual metaphor theory and all of its most important facets. Special attention is dedicated to idioms, their variation and motivation. The section that follows deals with meaning construal and L1 figurative language processing in children, followed by an overview of previous research in L2 figurative language meaning construal.

After that we present our study. The results and discussion are presented in parallel, as it is easier to conduct a qualitative analysis by intertwining the two. Finally, limitations of the study are discussed as are recommendations for further research.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Traditional approach to grammar**

According to the traditional view of grammar dating back to Aristotle, grammar is a formal and self-contained system that can be described on its own, without any reference to other (cognitive) domains by elaborating on its finite number of components, categories and absolute principles (Langacker, 1988). This implies a prescriptive and strict approach akin to mathematics. It also implies that processes related to language acquisition are distinct from other cognitive processes. The components in language (and in other areas) have clear-cut boundaries and polar binary characteristics, allowing them to be neatly categorized in predetermined categories in which all of the members have equal status.

Language was brought back into the human mind by Noam Chomsky with his theory of Universal Grammar (UG) according to which the ability to learn languages depends on the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which is an innate mental capacity that functions by activating a finite number of principles (abstract grammatical rules) and parameters (which stipulate syntactic variability amongst languages) present in all of the world's languages. Exposure to a certain language activates those principles and parameters specific to the language one is exposed to and results in language acquisition. It is the role of science to determine which principles and parameters exist.

This theory was found to be problematic because, among other things, a finite binary set of principles and parameters universal to all languages could not be deduced, at times being too restrictive to offer a proper description of the phenomena in certain languages disallowing them to be interpreted in their own rights. Also, proposing that they are innate could not explain the speed at which languages change during time. Some even argue that UG

is a pseudoscientific theory because it is impossible to disprove, while its complexity makes it impractical for pedagogical use.

## **2.2. Cognitive linguistics**

According to cognitive linguistics, theories should not force linguistic phenomena into a finite (and at times predetermined) number of categories and principles. They should be built up flexibly on the basis of descriptive accounts (Langacker 1988). This theory is based on the following notions (Croft & Cruse, 2004, p. 1):

- language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty
- grammar is conceptualization
- knowledge of language emerges from language use.

On the one hand, this can be elaborated by saying that language is reflection of (fundamentally bodily) experience, a person's subjective view of the world and depends on our general cognition. We draw on the same general cognitive abilities to acquire a language as we do to perform other cognitive activities and it is impossible to do so in isolation of other psychological and cognitive domains. Because of this, language is influenced by our general cognitive abilities both in its acquisition and use.

On the other hand, our conceptualization can be traced in our language choices primarily because meaning can be found in all levels of language – morphemes, vocabulary items and grammatical constructions, be it on word, sentence or discourse level. The way we construct our sentences mirrors the way our thoughts are constructed, depending on our perspective, figure – ground representation, etc., which highly depends on our knowledge of the world (Žic-Fuchs, 1991). Langacker (1987) establishes his view on meaning in language by stating that all language structures are symbolic – they have both meaning and form, which



are intertwined in creating meaning. Because of this, they cannot be analysed separately, but everything must be taken into account, including the broader, cultural context. Grammar itself is a conventional reflection of the semantic structure of a certain language, not an autonomous or formal level of representation. It depends highly on our perspective and on degree. We abstract grammatical rules by analysing the available language input. We use the rules we abstracted and refine them by method of trial-and-error until we construct a language that corresponds to the one in our surroundings.

### **2.3. Traditional approach to figurative language**

Because of the traditionalists' understanding that language structures and their parts could be analysed independently of their context and each other, and due to their belief that grammatical borders are clear-cut and that one concept can belong to only one category, they treated figurative speech items as independent of each other, placed on a continuum but with no mutual corroboration.

These researchers based their research on novel metaphors found in literary works, concluding that metaphors have to do with literature and not cognition. They came to view metaphorical expressions as stylistic literary tools inferior to literal language, atypical for human cognition, ornate and straying from the point, making them inapt for use in the serious and exact domains of science and education (Kovecses, 2002; Gibbs, 1994). Metaphors were seen as condensed comparisons between two terms that are based on objective, literal and preexisting similarity (e.g. *Man is a wolf*). When overused, they become dead metaphors or idioms – petrified and unproductive, having lost their figurative value and not being viewed as having metaphoric value by their users. This process is called *idiomatization* and it consists of four phases. In the first phase a metaphor is formed by connecting two domains and is seen as

vivid and creative. In the second phase the metaphor and its path become familiar. In the third phase the domains are linked directly and the metaphor is shutting down, and in the final phase it becomes dead, the origin is forgotten leading the speakers to understand its meaning as arbitrary (Cacciari, 1993).

It logically proceeds that idioms would be defined as “fixed expressions that are semantically opaque, noncompositional, unanalyzable” with the meaning being present only on the level of the whole, as none of the parts carry meaning and do not refer to the whole of the expression (Everaert, van der Linden, 1995, p. 6). In other words, the meaning of the idiom cannot be attained on the basis of its parts, as is the case in phrase (1), which was used in time to illustrate how the motivation for this phrase might have been known when the phrase was first used, but was since lost, became untraceable and opaque, since there is no way to derive the meaning ‘to die’ from the lexemes *kick*, *the* and *bucket*.

(1) Kick the bucket.

Because of this, idioms have been treated as long and complex words stored in our mental lexicon with arbitrary meanings (Cacciari, 1993). Idioms have also been defined as “extreme examples of linguistic structuring and processing” (Langlotz, 2006, p. 9).

### **2.3.1. Idiom processing**

According to this noncompositional view, there are three theories of idiom processing: (a) after rejecting the literal meaning because of its inappropriateness in the context, the stipulated meaning stored in the mental lexicon is chosen (*direct look-up model*), (b) the literal and figurative meanings of the idiom are processed in parallel, and (c) they are processed directly as soon as they are recognized. What these hypotheses have in common is

the underlying belief that idioms are stored in our memory and viewed as long words without attributing any extended meaning to any of its parts (Gibbs, 1995). Because of this, they are learned by heart rather than understood.

These hypotheses were disproved as research showed that figurative expressions were processed as quickly as literal ones, while the difference between the literal and figurative meaning was not a question of opposing status, but a matter of degree.

#### **2.4. Cognitive approach to figurative language**

Cognitive linguistics has scrutinized a large number of figurative phrases from more viewpoints and with greater attention to cognitive foundation (Lakoof and Johnson, 1980), psychological reality (Gibbs, 1994) and cultural influence (Kovecses, 2005) in various modes of language. Their findings showed that rather than thinking of figurative expressions as poetic devices which could be labelled according to their characteristics, in order to better understand them it is more useful to see them primarily as cognitive tools underlying our conceptual system. Thus, rather than talking about metaphors and idioms as fixed and closed categories, we can speak of metaphoricity and idiomacity which may be present in a number of figurative expression, regardless of how they are labelled. For example, we may say that some idioms obtain their metaphoricity, and phrasal verbs their idiomacity (Geld, 2009). Our figurative capacities are based on four basic models of thought: metaphor, metonymy, irony and idioms, which “are not linguistic distortions of literal mental thought but constitute basic schemas by which people conceptualize their experience and the external world” (Gibbs, 1994, p. 1).

## **2.5. Conceptual metaphor theory**

In 1987 Lakoff and Johnson wrote their seminal work “Metaphors we Live by” in which they brought forth their *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. They looked closely at everyday language and found that, contrary to the view of traditional theories, metaphor is embedded in everyday speech and grounded in cognition: “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system”, which is in a large way unconscious, and “in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (1980, p. 3). Metaphor originates in cognition. We learn, think and express ourselves metaphorically to express complex and abstract notions such as feelings, ideas, complex systems, etc. It is because of this capacity that we are able to transfer it to literature and other forms of art.

This way of reasoning can be found in many domains: arts (movies, cartoons and theatre, sculptures, architecture), drawings, advertisements, symbols, myths, dream interpretation, history interpretation, politics, morality, etc. It also found its use in science to help explain new theories. If the metaphors and its entailments give an accurate explanation for the phenomenon, they remain in use. If not, they are discarded so better ones can be found and the theory can progress (Kovecses, 2005; Gibbs, 1994).

### **2.5.1. Conceptual metaphors and conceptual domains**

To illustrate the relationship between conceptual metaphors and domains, we will use Lakoff and Johnson’s example:

(2) Our relationship is at a crossroads.

The theory is based on the idea that all metaphors have their grounding in cognition in so-called *conceptual metaphors*, which can be defined as a cognitive strategy used to construct meaning by virtue of correlating concepts from two different domains. More precisely, metaphors function by understanding one concept in terms of another, by mapping information from the more concrete *source domain* (journey) onto the more abstract *target domain* (love). Correspondingly, we can extract the underlying conceptual metaphor: LOVE IS A JOURNEY. Vice versa, on the basis of this conceptual metaphor, we may construct other metaphorical expressions: *our marriage is on the rocks*; *I don't think this relationship is going anywhere*; *this relationship is a one-way street*, etc. (Stanojević, 2009; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Conceptual domains represent our structured knowledge of the world via our experience. It is useful to note two phenomena concerning the construal of conceptual metaphors that are present on a language or variety level. The first is *range of target* according to which one target domain may take multiple source domains (e.g. LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS MAGIC, LOVE IS A PATIENT, LOVE IS MADNESS, LOVE IS WAR, etc.), and the other is the *scope of metaphor*, where one source domain can serve to explain multiple target domains (e.g. LIFE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS A JOURNEY) (Kovecses, 2002).

Another perspective on conceptual metaphors is provided by Kovecses (2002), who defines them as: “ensembles of neurons in different parts of the brain connected by neural circuitry” (p. 23), basing the definition on the postulate that neurons that fire together wire together. He goes on by claiming that since the source domain relies on more concrete physical experience, it is located in the sensorimotor system, and the more abstract target domain is located in the higher cortical areas. This is interesting because of the more visual representation of conceptual metaphors as ideas literally stored and connected in our heads.

### 2.5.2. Mapping

Conceptual metaphors are realized by mapping information from the source onto the target domain. In order for a metaphor to work, this mapping has to reflect the structure of the target domain and it has to be illustrative and cognitively salient for the target audience, which means that they have to share the same experience from the source domain in order to understand the underlying correspondences. In the above example that would mean that the following mapping would occur:

| <b>Source domain</b> | <b>Target domain</b> |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| travellers           | lovers               |
| vehicle              | relationship         |
| obstacles            | problems             |
| common destinations  | common goals         |

This works as long as we choose the aspects that are corresponding in both domains and by ignoring those aspects that are inconsistent (Lakoff and Johnson, 1987). The information that is mapped is the main meaning focus of the source domain, which encompasses our core knowledge about the concept, and is characterized by the extent to which it is conventionalized, generic, intrinsic and prototypical (Kovecses, 2002, p. 82).

### 2.5.3. Metaphor and metonymy

Metonymy differs from metaphor in several ways. The most important difference is that metonymy has one conceptual domain within which two concepts are related. It may be used to direct one's attention to a specific aspect of the referent which is or should be made salient in the context.

Even though this explanation might seem simple, it is not fully implementable because in some cases it is difficult to determine where one domain ends and another begins. Because of this, metaphors and metonymies may intertwine because they have a gradual border between them. For this reason, each ambiguous instance should be examined independently by taking the context into careful consideration (Pragglejaz Group, 2007).

## **2.6. Idioms according to cognitive linguistics**

As stated above, in the traditional view idioms were seen as long complex words stored in our mental lexicon and their main characteristic was noncompositionality. This view is understandable since they are elusive in nature, their lexical and grammatical behaviour may be atypical and even nongrammatical, and their meaning unwonted. However, by researching idioms in their own right, most of them were found to be compositional, analysable and their motivation could be traced if proper etymological and psycholinguistic studies were conducted. An example was proposed by Gibbs (1994), who provided the historical background of the controversial idiom *kick the bucket*, where he explained how the constituent *bucket* in this instance did not denote a pail, but stemmed from the French borrowed word *buque*, meaning ‘balance’ and akin to the modern English word *butcher*, denoting a beam on which a butcher would suspend slaughtered pigs.

The category of idioms has fuzzy borders because of which there is little consent on their membership. They overlap with other expressions such as phrasal verbs, proverbs etc., which some linguists include into the category, while others exclude them. Idioms can be characterized by a number of characteristics which may be present in different degrees. Langacker defined them relatively vaguely as “a complex of semantic and symbolic relationships that have become conventionalized and have coalesced into an established

configuration” (1987: 25). His definition draws attention to several important things: the relationships between the components, which is where the figurative meaning is located, and their status, which is conventionalized and established as relatively or fully fixed expressions.

According to Langlotz (2006), idioms have grammatically undergone the process of *institutionalization* and have become conventionalized. They are formed by more than one lexeme (*compositeness*), which are syntactically, morphosyntactically and paradigmatically more or less *fixed*. This means that some idioms can be varied only to a certain degree, e.g. by changing the aspect (*trip the light fantastic* vs. *\*the light was tripped fantastic*) or constituents (*\*walk the light fantastic*). However, some idioms allow for various formal and semantic changes. Formal variations include morphosyntactic (inflecting idiomatic constituents and the use of various determiners and quantifiers), syntactic (postmodification, passivisation, clefting, etc.) and lexical changes. Semantic variations constitute lexicalised polysemy, discursive ambiguation and meaning adaptations.

As for their meaning, we must distinguish between two levels: the literal and idiomatic meaning. The more far apart those two levels are, the more *non-compositional*, or opaque, the idiom is. Pragmatically, they are used for ideational (*grab a bull by the horns*), interpersonal (*good evening*) and textual (*in a nutshell*) purposes.

Langlotz also establishes the standing that idiomaticity is motivated by general cognitive mechanisms and that it can reflect our creative intelligence. This is in line with the cognitive approach to figurative language in general.

### **2.6.1. Idiom motivation**

A famous experiment was conducted by Gibbs where he introduced the idiom *spill the beans* with a number of questions concerning the location of the beans, the volume of the



container, why and in what manner were they spilled, what are the consequences of the action and was it easy to retrieve them. The findings were that there was great consistency within the results, and that the participants had little if any difficulty to picture a detailed scene in their heads. Findings like these show that there is a shared understanding of idioms, meaning that there has to be some cognitive mechanism causing these consistencies. This is considered to be proof that idioms are motivated in a way that is cognitively meaningful and not merely arbitrary, that we acquire them not by learning them by heart, but by exploiting our general cognitive mechanisms and that their figurative value hasn't disappeared through time, but is still present in our subconscious understanding of them.

As we have shown earlier through the phrase *kick the bucket*, some idioms have indeed through time by changes in language (the origin of the word bucket in this sense has become forgotten) and our life habits (we don't know how butchers performed their work in the past), lost their motivational transparency. However, their meanings are still uniform among the speakers (see Hamblin and Gibbs, 1999). Other idioms have still very vivid motivations, as will be seen in the results of this study.

Idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors (*he's just letting off steam* – ANGER IS A HEATED FLUID IN A CONTAINER.), conceptual metonymies (*lend a hand* – THE HAND STANDS FOR THE ACTIVITY) and our knowledge of the world (*beat a dead horse*). As long as this motivation reflects our knowledge of the world and conceptual structure, they are analysable. Their intrinsic structure is creative and it mirrors the semantic structure of their underlying conceptual motivations.

Those idioms that are motivated by conceptual metaphors are called metaphorical idioms and by this virtue they are a subcategory of metaphorical expressions. To distinguish between metaphorical expressions (*he was spellbound*) and metaphorical idioms (*be under someone's spell*) the characteristics of idioms should be taken into account.

### 3. MEANING CONSTURAL

In the process of language acquisition, learners activate cognitive abilities or processes. We will refer to specific instantiations of these cognitive abilities as learning strategies, which have been defined as “the special thoughts and behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 1). With that in mind it is important to distinguish between L1 learners, who *acquire* language mostly unconsciously, spontaneously and implicitly, and FL learners who start *learning* language at a later age, meaning that they are cognitively more mature and do so by using learning strategies more consciously.

Croft and Cruse (2004) corroborate this claim by comparing general psychological processes with meaning construal operations. For example, attention (salience) was connected to *profiling* “the entity designated by a predication”, (Langacker, 1987, p. 118) and *metonymy*. Judgement (comparison) was connected to *categorization*, *metaphor* and *figure/ground representation* (the phenomena of choosing the smaller, more mobile, simpler, salient, etc. entity as the focal point in conceptualization). Perspective (situatedness) was compared to *viewpoint (focal adjustment)*, *deixis* and *subjectivity and objectivity* in language use. Finally, Constitution (gestalt) was connected to *structural schematization* (“the conceptualization of the topological, meronymic and geometrical structure of entities and their component parts” (Croft and Cruse, 2004, p. 63)), *force dynamics* (which deals with how forces among different participants are perceived) and *relationality* (the characteristic of an entity as being conceived with or without reference to another entity).

Some of these meaning construal processes are mirrored in certain language learning strategies (Geld 2009 and elsewhere). According to O’Malley and Chamot, there are three broad categories: cognitive, metacognitive and social/affective strategies. For the purpose of

this paper we shall concentrate on cognitive strategies which are defined as strategies used to “operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning” (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 44). It should be mentioned that cognitive strategies are somewhat difficult to distinguish from metacognitive strategies, which are defined as “higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity” (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 44). Some of the cognitive strategies they identify include: *translation* (comparing the L2 to the learners’ L1), *grouping* (which is akin to categorizing), *recombination* (of existing elements into a new, meaningful unit), *imagery* (learning by using visual aids), *elaboration* (of known elements in a meaningful way by e.g. connecting it to one’s knowledge of the world), and *transfer* (solving a new task by using pre-existing linguistic knowledge).

In this paper we shall discuss cognitive strategies in the light of cognitive processes identified as aspects of meaning construal evident in constructing meaning of English idiomatic expressions.

### **3.1. L1 figurative language processing in children**

Children can understand the metaphorical meanings in fairy tales and perceive similarities from different domains, but not in all cases. In order for them to understand a metaphorical expression, some criteria need to be met. The metaphors must be in clear context. In designing research instruments this is a matter of making them appropriate for their level of cognitive development. They must have the necessary knowledge of the world from which they can draw information required to understand the metaphor. They also must first form and grasp the conceptual domain to understand metaphors pertaining to it because they acquire metaphors on a domain-by-domain basis.

Since children have the capacity of metaphorical thinking and since idioms may be metaphorically motivated or to a certain degree decomposable, it is reasonable to conclude that they can, under the right circumstances, understand certain idiomatic expressions as well. They do this by developing skills used for general language processing, such as coding, making references, activating world knowledge, using imagination and creativity, finding out the communicative intention of the speaker, activating metalinguistic knowledge and knowledge relating to the different kinds of discourse or text, etc. (Levorato, 1993).

### **3.2. Previous research in L2 figurative language meaning construal**

There has not been a lot of research into the area of figurative language processing in EFL. This may be problematic because understanding figurative language is important for becoming a competent user of the foreign language. Given the limited exposure to the language, the context of language learning, and the fact that the learners may have limited, if any contact with the L2 culture, they process and comprehend figurative language differently and with greater difficulty than their peers for whom English is the L1. All this, combined with their cognitive capabilities connected to their age, means that L2 learners of English develop a more experimental, heuristic approach. This, however, depends on individual factors such as their general metaphoric competence (Littlemore, 2010) and on their L2 proficiency level. Considering the latter, Cieślicka (2010, p. 154) points out the following:

When processing an L2 idiom, beginner L2 learners first attempt to make sense of it by translating it literally into L1. Only then is the figurative meaning accessed. With increasing L2 proficiency though, foreign language learners become capable of processing figurative expressions directly, in the same manner as native monolingual users.

Accordingly, as the learner becomes more proficient in his L2, the knowledge connected to the two languages becomes intertwined in his mind as part of one dynamic system, resulting in a different approach to problems such as dealing with figurative language. Bromberek-Dyzman and Ewert (2010) call this *multicompetence*.

In two studies investigating on-line processing strategies in idiom understanding and meaning construal in nonnative speakers of English, Cooper (1999) and Winis & Zakaria (2013) identified several strategies used in understanding figurative language. Both studies presented idioms in context with the difference that Cooper conducted a think-aloud protocol, while Winis and Zakaria used a questionnaire. This partially affected their results. The identified strategies were guessing from context, discussing and analysing the idiom, using literal meaning, requesting information (in Cooper's study), repeating or paraphrasing the idiom (also in Cooper's study, which was explained as a way of prolonging the thinking period), using background knowledge, referring to an L1 idiom, and meta-analysis based on the knowledge of the nature of idioms. These strategies may be used intermittently in combination with each other by the same learner when dealing with any number of idioms. Therefore, factors that may influence idiom comprehension are the learner's knowledge of the world, the context in which the idiom is imbedded, any expressions in the learner's L1 that may correspond with the idiom at hand, and the literal meaning of an idiom both on the level of the whole and on the level of its constituents.

Another study was conducted by Taki & Soghady (2013) in which they used two idiom lists – one containing L2 idioms for a think-aloud protocol and the other composed of L2 idioms out of context. The idioms were analysed in three categories, based on their similarity to L1 idioms. They found that both the advanced and upper-intermediate subjects used their L1 to help them understand the idioms, but that the advanced subjects did not give up as easily as the other group. As for the idioms themselves, the ones with corresponding L1

idioms received the most correct interpretations. The results of this study corroborate the notion of the *interlingual factor*, which states that “L2 learners’ reliance on their own L1 in L2 idiom processing may assist or hinder their understanding of L2 idioms” (Winis & Zakaria, 2013, p. 73).

Geld (2006) investigated the strategic construal of L2 phrasal verb meanings in advanced learners of English. She concluded that the participants used their general cognitive capabilities to construct meaning of phrasal verbs and that the strategies used in L2 meaning construction were the same as those used in L1 meaning construal. In another research (2011) she focused on the influence that the nature of particle verbs had on L2 meaning construal and found that factors that influence construal include external factors connected to the participants (years of learning the L2, learning environment, language proficiency) and internal factors (whether their L1 and L2 are verb-framed or satellite-framed, whether the verbs are heavy or light, and the degree of informativeness of particles). The finding especially relevant for this study is the concept of *informativeness*, which refers to the constituents in a figurative phrase. Depending on their interaction and specificity in meaning, certain constituents may be more or less informative about the meaning of the whole phrase. This is an important insight for the understanding of figurative phrases, as it shows how certain elements within a phrase “work together” to create particular meanings, and how learners find these differences in the levels of informativeness meaningful.

## **4. STUDY**

### **4.1. Aims**

The aim of this study was to determine the nature of conceptual mechanisms that pupils in higher grades of elementary school have access to in determining the metaphorical meaning of idiomatic phrases, and to see whether they could use these mechanisms consciously and elaborate on them. Also, we wanted to take into consideration the concepts of idiom structure and informativeness, and see what it is in the idiomatic phrases that the pupils perceived as more or less salient and important for the meaning of the whole. Our hypotheses were the following:

1. There will be differences in the quality and quantity of interpretations and elaborations depending on the age and language proficiency of the pupils.
2. The degree of elaboration and variability of the idiom interpretation will depend on the idiom itself.
3. The pupils will activate strategies related to their general cognitive abilities in order to guess and construct the meaning of the idioms.

### **4.2. Participants**

The sample consisted of one 6<sup>th</sup> grade class with 17 pupils and one 8<sup>th</sup> grade class with 19 pupils who filled in the questionnaire. This means that all of the participants were between 12 and 15 years of age. This age group was chosen because they are cognitively mature enough to think and reason abstractly and identify and elaborate on their cognitive strategies. Both classes started learning English in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade and both were proficient enough to

understand the test items. Three students in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade had a 3, three had a 4, and eleven had an excellent grade in English. In the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, six students had a 4, while thirteen students had an excellent grade in English. This means that in total, three students' grade in English was below 4, nine had a 4, and the rest (24 in total) had an excellent grade in English. Although students' grade is a relative marker of their proficiency, it tends to be considered as a plausible variable in this kind of studies.

Since the participants were under sixteen years of age, the parents were asked to sign a parental consent form in which the study was briefly described.

### **4.3. Instrument**

#### **4.3.1. Pilot**

The question items were piloted on five pupils. They had all been studying English since their 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and all but one had an excellent grade in English. Three of the students were in grade 7, 1 in grade 6, and one in grade 8. Since the instrument was piloted with one or two pupils at a time, the entire process lasted between 20 and 25 minutes each time. First there was a short interactive presentation in which they were asked to try to guess the meaning of three idioms and explain the rationale for their guesses. They were then given a questionnaire with 11 items and detailed instructions. The sample of the pilot study was small because the main goal was to determine two things: whether the items in the study were appropriate and whether the warm-up activities were transparent and helpful to the pupils. The pilot had given us the following insights.

The students at times did not know how to express themselves, leaving no explanation on how they had come to a certain interpretation. Thus, the researcher did not obtain the



underlying rationale. For this reason the format of the questionnaire was changed to visually prompt both the interpretation of the idioms and their elaboration.

In the warm-up activities, two of the idioms were replaced with cognitively more demanding, engaging and less familiar or translatable ones in order to allow the students to engage more in their interpretation. More specifically, the idioms *get up on the wrong side of the bed* and *give someone wings* were replaced with *leave someone out in the cold* to enable a greater variety of interpretations and *saved by the bell* to illustrate how the pupils can guess the same meaning by relying on different aspects of their knowledge of the world (e.g., some of the explanations included an *ambulance bell*, *the school bell*, *the ringing of a phone*, while the *bell* in the phrase originally refers to the bell in boxing matches).

After the pilot study was finished, the questionnaire items were shown to the teacher of the participating classes. She confirmed that they were appropriate and most probably unfamiliar to the pupils.

#### **4.3.2. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of the following eleven English idioms (definitions are based on Hornby, 2005):

1. *Live in each other's pockets* – two people are too close to each other or spend too much time with each other
2. *Be a fish out of water* – a person who feels uncomfortable or awkward because he or she is in an unfamiliar surrounding or situation
3. *Be on the top of the world* – very happy or proud
4. *Cold as marble* – a person who is lacking emotion
5. *My heart sinks* – a sudden feeling of sadness

6. *Out of sight, out of mind* – used to say somebody will quickly be forgotten when they are no longer with you
7. *Be a bag of nerves* – to be very nervous
8. *Be home and dry* – to have done something successfully, especially when it was difficult
9. *Be in the driving seat* – to be the person in control of a situation
10. *My ship has come in* – one's fortune is made
11. *Bring the curtain down on something* – to finish or mark the end of something

The idioms were presented out of context. The aim was to see if the participants would be able to determine the meaning of fixed idiomatic expressions and if any of the idiom components or characteristics would influence the results. Providing context could have led the participants to base their conclusions on the elements related to the provided context rather than focus on the idiom components themselves (Geld, 2009). Also, because of the participants' profile, as well as the variant nature of figurative expressions, the idioms chosen for the study had to adhere to the following criteria:

- *Semantic transparency* – decomposable idioms (those with a semantically transparent or traceable background) were chosen to foster cognitive strategies pertaining to uncovering the meanings of the idioms provided (Gibbs, 1994).
- *Semantic and syntactic simplicity* – idioms with archaic vocabulary or with complex syntactic composition were excluded to ensure that the participants focus on the semantic contribution of the components rather than guessing their individual meanings.

- *Unfamiliarity* – the idioms had to be unfamiliar to our participants to encourage them to exploit the “creative function of figurative language and its online characteristics” (Brisard, Frisson, Dominiek, 2001, p. 90).
- *Meaning-form specificity* – idioms that had a meaning-and-form equivalent in Croatian were excluded to ensure that the thinking process would not be limited to providing the Croatian version of the idiom.
- *Appropriateness* – the idioms had to be appropriate for the age group. This pertains to idioms such as *pushing up daisies*, *be one sandwich short of a picnic* and *not play with a full deck*, which were excluded because of their meanings, despite the fact that they adhered to the other criteria.

For these reasons the idioms in this list are decomposable metaphorical idioms with a few that have clear anecdotal backgrounds or that are metonymically motivated. All of the idioms were taken from Hill Long (1984), Vrgoč, Fink, Arsovski (2008) and Bendow (2006, 2009).

### **4.3.3. Procedure**

Since the study was conducted during our participants’ regular English class, the time was limited to 45 minutes with 30 minutes reserved for filling in the questionnaire. The remaining time was used to explain the task. After a short motivational activity, the class was presented with three idioms. They had to guess their meanings and elaborate on what led them to their guesses. The elicited meanings were written on the blackboard to illustrate how many different interpretations could be derived from one figurative phrase and to establish that each interpretation had its motivation. The motivation for the first idiom (*seal your lips*) was presented to the class by comparing the head to a letter. They were both viewed as sealed

containers for secrets and the meaning of the phrase was elicited from the participants. The pupils were asked to guess the meaning and present the motivation for their guesses for the other two examples.

Following these activities the researcher explained that these expressions were called idioms. They may appear to have one meaning, but in use they have another, metaphorical or conveyed meaning and they are used to denote something abstract. Then the instructions for answering the questionnaire were presented via a PowerPoint presentation and they were left displayed during the rest of the class. Students were told that there were no wrong answers; that they should guess the meaning of the idioms, and then write what it was about the idiom that led them to their conclusion. They were also told that they may put down more than one answer for any item and that they were allowed to write in Croatian. They were asked to work independently and instructed to wait for the researcher to approach them in case they had a question.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In the analysis of the answers obtained we focused on the rationale provided in the second part, and disregarded the language mistakes and errors in the answers. Despite the fact that most pupils completed the whole questionnaire, in some cases they only paraphrased their guesses or gave obscure answers with no motivational insight. The completed questionnaires were analysed in the following way: first the answers were copied to a computer in categories based on the age of the participants and their grades. Then they were read and explanations of meaning motivation were extracted and scrutinized.

The tables below show the percentage of answers for each idiom as well as the arithmetic mean of guesses, explanations and literal translations for each class.

**Table 1: Results for class 6.a**

|     | Idiom                               | Guesses | Explanation | Literal translation only |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | Live in each other's pockets        | 88%     | 41%         | 0%                       |
| 2.  | Be a fish out of water              | 100%    | 59%         | 0%                       |
| 3.  | Be on top of the world              | 100%    | 53%         | 0%                       |
| 4.  | Cold as marble                      | 100%    | 82%         | 0%                       |
| 5.  | My heart sinks                      | 94%     | 53%         | 0%                       |
| 6.  | Out of sight, out of mind           | 94%     | 35%         | 0%                       |
| 7.  | Be a bag of nerves                  | 94%     | 65%         | 0%                       |
| 8.  | Be home and dry                     | 88%     | 71%         | 0%                       |
| 9.  | Be in the driving seat              | 88%     | 76%         | 0%                       |
| 10. | My ship has come in                 | 82%     | 65%         | 0%                       |
| 11. | Bring the curtain down on something | 82%     | 59%         | 0%                       |
|     | <b>Arithmetic mean:</b>             | 92%     | 60%         | 0%                       |

**Table 2: Results for class 8.a**

|     | Idiom                               | Guesses | Explanation | Literal translation only |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | Live in each other's pockets        | 79%     | 58%         | 5%                       |
| 2.  | Be a fish out of water              | 84%     | 74%         | 0%                       |
| 3.  | Be on top of the world              | 89%     | 32%         | 5%                       |
| 4.  | Cold as marble                      | 79%     | 32%         | 10.5%                    |
| 5.  | My heart sinks                      | 84%     | 47%         | 5%                       |
| 6.  | Out of sight, out of mind           | 79%     | 21%         | 5%                       |
| 7.  | Be a bag of nerves                  | 79%     | 32%         | 0%                       |
| 8.  | Be home and dry                     | 74%     | 47%         | 10.5%                    |
| 9.  | Be in the driving seat              | 79%     | 53%         | 5%                       |
| 10. | My ship has come in                 | 79%     | 21%         | 5%                       |
| 11. | Bring the curtain down on something | 58%     | 26%         | 0%                       |
|     | <b>Arithmetic mean:</b>             | 78%     | 40%         | 5%                       |

**Table 3: The combined results of both classes**

|     | Idiom                               | Guesses | Explanation | Literal translation only |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1.  | Live in each other's pockets        | 83%     | 50%         | 5%                       |
| 2.  | Be a fish out of water              | 92%     | 67%         | 0%                       |
| 3.  | Be on top of the world              | 94%     | 42%         | 5%                       |
| 4.  | Cold as marble                      | 89%     | 55%         | 10.5%                    |
| 5.  | My heart sinks                      | 89%     | 50%         | 5%                       |
| 6.  | Out of sight, out of mind           | 86%     | 28%         | 5%                       |
| 7.  | Be a bag of nerves                  | 86%     | 47%         | 0%                       |
| 8.  | Be home and dry                     | 81%     | 58%         | 10.5%                    |
| 9.  | Be in the driving seat              | 83%     | 64%         | 5%                       |
| 10. | My ship has come in                 | 81%     | 42%         | 5%                       |
| 11. | Bring the curtain down on something | 69%     | 42%         | 0%                       |

As evident from the results, the 6<sup>th</sup> graders provided on average 14% more guesses and 20% more explanations of their guesses than the 8<sup>th</sup> graders. This might be surprising because they are younger and they had been learning English two years less than their peers. On the other hand, there was a number of factors and individual differences that might have influenced the results. An anecdotal piece of evidence in favour of this is that the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were generally less interested and did not try as hard as the 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The answers provided by the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were generally less coherent and grammatically correct.

The quality of the answers between the two age groups is similar. Both groups used cognitive strategies that reflected the following cognitive processes: imagery, conceptual metaphor, figure/ground representation and profiling, which will be presented in greater detail below. Both groups provided similar meanings, sometimes even meanings that were correct. Naturally, we are inclined to consider the possibility that the participants who guessed correctly had not actually heard the idioms before. Some idioms (*be a fish out of water, be on the top of the world, my heart sinks*) were guessed correctly quite frequently, which may indicate that they were decomposable and transparent enough. This is yet another piece of evidence in favour of the cognitive view of idioms we are proposing in this paper.

The difference in the number of guesses and explanations between the more and less proficient 8<sup>th</sup> graders was also evident. Furthermore, as we mentioned above, there were only three 6<sup>th</sup> graders whose grades in English were below 4, and three whose grade was 4. Their answers varied in quality, so it is difficult to draw a conclusion for that group. This is why the first research question will remain partly unanswered. Generally, even though the two age groups are likely to have different proficiency levels in English because of the two years difference of English learning experience, both groups answered the questionnaire and provided substantial answers.

The participants' answers were organized according to what had been recognized as salient in each idiom. The answers are exemplified with italicized extracts and paraphrases from the questionnaires, including those that are idiosyncratic and unusual. In the section that follows we give the results for each idiom separately.

### **1. Live in each other's pockets**

All of the explanations were based around the word *pocket* and on the fact that it belongs to someone else. The elicited meanings can be grouped into the following categories:

- a) a container for (personal) wealth and possessions (answers describing this meaning include: *live from another's money, be someone's slave, depend on others, borrow or give money and other goods, live thanks to someone's help, use someone else's money*), as well as providing non-material necessities: *always be available for someone*;
- b) live in a house that doesn't belong to you (examples for this category are: *live under someone's roof, parents take care of children*);
- c) intruding someone's privacy (the explanation best describing this meaning is: *poking your nose into other people's business*);
- d) *be closed off to the world; live in someone's shadow* (This group of answers was associated to the physical characteristics of pockets).

In connection with the word *live*, a pocket as a container for personal wealth and possessions means that someone is dependent on another's money for their livelihood in both positive and negative ways, which may be motivated by *L1 transfer* from Croatian (and even some English) idioms with the keyword *pocket* that have similar meanings (e.g. *imati koga u*

*džepu*, which is akin to *in someone's pocket*), and that may rely on a conceptual metonymy which may be formulated as POCKET FOR POSSESSIONS.

Another line of reasoning took into account physical characteristics of pockets, i.e. that they are dark, closed and private, producing the meanings of intrusion (connected to the fact that one lives in them, which means that they are intimate with their private life), isolation and living in another's shadow.

Some results also featured interpretations based on the conceptual metaphor CLOSENESS IS AFFECTION or EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS (in cases when we live alongside others; think about others all the time; live in our friends' houses, etc.).

In conclusion, the word *pocket* was the most informative one in the phrase, but the constituents *live* and *each other's* were also influential in creating meaning of the whole phrase. Participants relied on their knowledge of the world and L1 to profile the pocket in different ways, as well as other processes such as conceptual metonymy and conceptual metaphor.

## **2. Be a fish out of water**

This idiom received the most interpretations of all. The most salient constituent here was *fish*, which gained several interpretations, some of which have a neutral, while others have a negative connotation. According to the results, *fish* stands for a person who is:

- a) different (*special, an exception, different, unusual*);
- b) socially excluded (*denied part in a community or company, useless, unaccepted, evicted, not fitting in, outside the group*);



- c) in a difficult position (*struggling in life, lonely and helpless, feels bad in an environment, doesn't belong somewhere, doesn't belong anywhere, is caught, without a home (unhappy); must learn to live with changes in life and learn to adapt; in a bad or dangerous situation*);
- d) unrealistic (*misjudges their own wishes and abilities because they think that they will be free*).

These interpretations account for nearly all of the answers. They were accessed via imagery (*I thought about it and thought of a picture*) and based on the participants' knowledge of the world (fish live in water, outside of it they struggle, die, dry up, etc.). Several answers included metaphorical entailments related to the constituent *water* which was described as a supporting group of people or friends. Also, some answers included *other fish* to denote other people as opposed to the socially excluded person. The fact that they chose to focus on the constituent *fish* is possibly due to the figure/ground representation where the fish (the smaller, living and more mobile constituent) is the figure, and the water (the larger, more passive constituent) is the ground.

One alternative interpretation was motivated by the English idiom "be in hot water". The interpretation was that by being out of the water, the fish was out of trouble.

### **3. Be on the top of the world**

All the construals of this idiom revolved around the constituent *top*, which the participants understood as the most important characteristic of a person who was:

- a) very positive, successful, etc. (*important, happy, perfect, successful, famous, the best, a leader, happiness, euphoria, something is getting better*);

- b) egoistic (*they don't care about others and their feelings, they think that only they are the best, they think that they are the most important, they think they are famous*).

These interpretations were supported by stating that one can *see everything from the top*, that one has *beaten a lot of things to get to the top*, that only one person *can be the best in something*, etc. One participant referred to personal experience: *When I experience a big success or a happy moment, I always think that I will go into space*.

In this example we could also argue that the focus on the *top* rather than *world* is a matter of figure/ground representation, as the *top* was perceived as something smaller and more salient, and the *world* as the ground which was schematized to the point of being nearly ignored.

Their answers were also based on the conceptual metaphor GOOD IS UP, and the force schema to explain the process of reaching the top and getting over obstacles. Because of this, we may also claim the activation of the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY.

This idiom received a relatively smaller number of explanations (52% in total), but an overwhelmingly large number of construals (94% in total) which were consistent in content. This may be due to its abstract grounding in the primary metaphor GOOD IS UP, which some students may have not recognized as metaphorical.

#### **4. Cold as marble**

This idiom was viewed as a whole. Both focal constituents were explicated, but the constituent *marble* was mostly profiled as something cold and hard. In fact the concept of coldness seemed most prominent. Accordingly, in most of the interpretations, the coldness in or of a person was singled out and explained as signalling:

- a) lacking emotion (*uncaring, nothing can touch you, not amused, not showing any emotion, calm*);
- b) feeling unwell or being bad (*sad, depressed, lonely, bad, evil*);
- c) *keeping a cool head*, based on the idea that *marble* stands for mind.

*Marble* was described as beautiful but cold and hard (which was transferred to the personality of the unstated referent) and connected to *cold*, which received the most direct attention in the form of L1 transfer (*nemati srca* (have no heart); *biti hladne glave* (have a cool head)). The characteristics of these constituents seemed to have influenced what the participants viewed as salient in the construction – they were more likely to view a person as cold, than as a piece of marble. In one instance there was transfer from the phrase *cold-blooded*, where the conceptual metaphor EMOTION IS HEAT (again pertaining to a person, their heart or soul) was elaborated more explicitly (*you aren't showing any emotion when a tragic and painful event occurs*). In similar cases, the lack of emotion represented something evil in the person.

## 5. My heart sinks

The answers for this idiom were also very consistent in signalling negative emotions or processes. The downward motion was understood as dark, sad and depressive, while sinking was profiled as:

- a) negative emotions (*sadness, loneliness, when your heart breaks, pain, suffering, deeper sinking means that it is more and more painful, someone's heart becomes more and more hurt over time*);
- b) negative processes (*ruining, decaying* (falling apart) *with no hope*).

The elaborations were in some cases partially based on the conceptual metonymy THE HEART STANDS FOR A PERSON or their soul (where the person was equated with the heart). In other cases they were based on the conceptual metaphor THE HEART IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS (*feelings are in the heart*), and *heart* itself was very often connected to love. All of the construals included the explanation of *sinking* described above. In one instance there was L1 transfer (*sve lađe su potonule* – all the ships have sunk; meaning that there is no hope left). The transfer was related to the concept of heart.

The position of the heart was the key for understanding this idiom, as illustrated by the following answer: *I think that this sentence is for those who have love problems or have recently broken up, so their heart sinks, because a happy heart is in its place [where it belongs] and it is there to be loved, and when that person is gone forever, their heart sinks.* This leads to the conclusion that the participants drew on image and force schemas to help them elaborate the phrase, and connected them with the conceptual metaphor DOWN IS BAD, as can be concluded from the elaborations of the downward motion some pupils provided and from their focus on sinking as something negative. There was also a great deal of consistency in the elaborations provided with their interpretations, which included personal experience – losses or break-ups with loved ones and other people.

## **6. Out of sight, out of mind**

There were two basic interpretations of this idiom. This is due to the fact that part of the participants took into account only the second part of the idiom and interpreted it as meaning *to be insane*. The others put equal focus on both *sight* and *mind*, and elaborated it in the manner that SEEING IS KNOWING, understanding and believing. The constituent *mind* was

never explicitly explained, but it led the participants to conclude that it had to do with cognition. More precisely, seeing (in connection with *mind*) was perceived as:

- a) knowing (not seeing is not knowing, not caring, *being confused, if you can't see, hear or feel something, it shouldn't hurt you, if something is far away from you, you don't think about it*);
- b) understanding (*if you can't understand something, you can't find a reason to do something*);
- c) *believing*.

The number of “stray” answers and the fact that this idiom received the least number of explanations (28% in total) may indicate that this idiom was too difficult for our participants. It may have been syntactically too difficult or the participants may have had difficulties perceiving *sight* and *mind* as containers and thus had difficulty making sense of the phrase. Another reason might be found in the following answer: *Its meaning could be literal*, indicating that the participant was not aware of the figurative meaning of the phrase, even though his strategic construal was: *When you don't see it, you don't think about it*. It is likely that this confused other participants as well.

In one answer, there was a change in the vantage point. Unlike most answers, where the person is the one who does not see, one participant offered the explanation that he was the one who was not seen by others.

## **7. Be a bag of nerves**

The interpretations for this idiom all relied on the conceptual metonymy NERVES STAND FOR NERVOUSNESS. More precisely, nerves stood for either a temporary state or the following personality traits:

- a) a very nervous person (*nervous, angry, in a rush, sensitive, always stay nervous, nothing can make you happy*);
- b) a very patient person.

In both cases the *bag* was perceived as a container for a person's personality. It stood for the capacity of a person (*a lot of things can fit in a bag*) and a place to store one's nerves. This pertained to both nervous and patient people depending on whether the participants understood the nerves as being the source of nervousness, or the thing that kept someone calm. The latter interpretations were probably motivated by Croatian idioms such as *imati puno živaca* (have a lot of nerves, meaning that someone is patient), meaning that a greater quantity of nerves would prevent nervousness. Obviously, the *nerves* played the most crucial role in this idiom because their meaning was metaphorically extended to represent one's personality. They were also understood as the more vivid, salient and smaller figures against the bigger, immobile ground (*bag*).

Alternatively, one interpretation stemmed from the idiom *have the nerve*, which was understood as being stubborn and insolent.

## **8. Be home and dry**

The word *home* received the most attention in this idiom. It was elaborated in the following ways:

- a) a safe, comfortable, warm place, situation or environment (*everybody needs a home to grow into a "normal person", somewhere where you belong, where you keep your property, the house is yours, so you are safe there, you can relax and enjoy*);
- b) solitude (*stay alone* as opposed to going out and socializing).

The most common answer was that it meant 'safe', which the participants connected both with *home* and *dry* (which was profiled as something safe and good). As opposed to this, the concept of being *wet* (e.g. *tears or rain*) were seen as something sad or dangerous (*you aren't outside and wet*). These explanations, along with the association related to the phrase *Home sweet home* resulted in the construals listed above under a). It can be concluded that these interpretations are due to the conceptual metaphor STATES ARE PLACES and profiling based on the participants' encyclopaedic knowledge of the two key constituents.

## 9. Be in the driving seat

This idiom was explained through metaphorical mappings elaborated by the element *driving* (the driver is the one responsible for controlling the car, taking the driving test is stressful, the driving seat is safe). Based on this, the following elaborations were provided:

- a) driving in the driving seat is *steering someone's life, controlling your own life*;
- b) *driving* is attaining one's goals and dreams, going forward, accomplishing something quickly (*cars are fast*), a responsibility (*you have to suffer the consequences; we are responsible for our actions*), something that makes you *nervous*;
- c) the driver is the *leader, the person in control, a responsible person*;
- d) the driving seat is a *safe place* or state.

As can be seen from the extracts above, all of these answers are based on the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. All also revolve around the same notion (driving). Some answers were presented via force schemas expressing different manners of traveling

through life (*steering, going forward*), and were mostly based on imagery (*I imagined myself driving and winning a race*).

## 10. My ship has come in

The same conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY was recognized in this idiom as well. It was supported by their knowledge of the world (a ship brings one's wealth, it is an opportunity to travel; a ship can enter one's life and take you to your destination; the harbour is safe as opposed to the journey which has storms). Its perspective of the participants varied greatly. One group saw the *ship* as their opportunity to travel away into the world, another group saw the *ship* as something that brings them wealth, while a third group saw themselves on the *ship* that has come in, meaning that they have returned and are either safe, settling down, or finishing a stage of their life, or their entire life. In short, the interpretations were the following:

- a) (my) ship stands for:
  - i. something life-changing and personal (*when someone's ship comes in he is able to go to his destination, opportunity, your day, your time, your luck, power*);
  - ii. something good (*when a ship comes into a harbour it brings things that will sell and earn a lot of money, something to be happy about*);
- b) shipping in is finishing the journey – a temporary end or the end of a life (*the arrival of the ship reminds me of the arrival to the goal and a safe place after a storm and journey and looking for what you want, give your job to someone else*).



A figure/ground representation can be recognized in their answers in that the ship is the figure and the sea or outer world act as is the ground.

## **11. Bring the curtain down on something**

The starting point for the construals of this phrase was the following: *when a curtain falls it marks the end of a theatre play or a movie*; a curtain in theatres hides actors, a curtain in a room hides your private life, a window, and darkens the room. Accordingly, the following interpretations were obtained from our participants:

- a) something is finished (*lowering the curtain at the end of a play*);
- b) one hides something (*curtains are words used to complicate a situation, hide secrets, our private lives, envy, because they can cover something, darken something, etc.*);
- c) one finds a solution to a problem (*a curtain is the temporary solution*).

Their attention was centred on the constituent *curtain*. In some cases, it marks the end of a play. Some participants backed up their claims by stating that the scene reminded them of the theatre or movies, grounding their interpretations in the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A THEATRE. In other cases interpretations were very consistent in relying on the idea of hiding something with the curtain. In a few cases the curtain was seen as a temporary solution.

Overall, the participants relied heavily on their knowledge of the world in profiling idiom constituents. Also, their L1 influenced their construals. An unexpected finding was that the students associated some of the idioms with other English phrases that contained some of the keywords in them. It is also worth mentioning that some 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils answered the

questionnaire bilingually, at times mixing the two languages in the same sentences, meaning that they activated both of their languages while answering the questions.

Another interesting finding is that despite the fact that all of the constituents within the idiom contributed to its meaning, there were usually one or two words which were more informative for meaning construal than the other constituents within the phrase. These were: *pocket, fish, top, cold, marble, sink, heart, sight, nerves, home, ship, and curtain*. This finding corroborates the informativeness principle proposed by Geld.

To recap, the first hypothesis stating that “there will be differences in the quality and quantity of interpretations and elaborations depending on the age and language proficiency of the pupils” has been disproved. It seems that the differences in age, cognitive capacities and L2 language proficiency were too small to provide any obvious differences between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade pupils. Other factors, possibly motivation and personality traits, have had a greater influence on the results, as the 6<sup>th</sup> graders provided more answers than their older peers, while there was no discernable difference in their quality. The quality of the answers was judged by examining the construal processes described by the participants. The two groups focused on the same key-words, used the same cognitive processes and construed similar meanings.

As for the second hypothesis which claimed that “the degree of elaboration and variability of the idiom interpretation will depend on the idiom constituents and structure itself”, we may conclude that the quality of their answers depended on the transparency of the idiom, and on how well they could profile certain constituents against their conceptual bases. This means that the second hypothesis has been proved.

Finally, the participants used a number of cognitive strategies reflecting general cognitive processes such as profiling, conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, figure/ground representation, force schema, imaging, elaboration and using differing vantage

points. This clearly confirms the third research question: “The pupils will activate strategies related to their general cognitive abilities in order to guess and construct the meaning of the idioms”.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This small-scale qualitative study has shown that pupils rely on their cognitive strategies, their knowledge of the world and both their L1 and L2 to construct the meaning of idiomatic expressions. As all of the items have been interpreted in a proper or motivated way, it is possible to conclude that at least some idioms are in fact compositional and their motivation may still be traced. However, what is even more important are the interpretations presented by the participants as they show what is meaningful for learners and what can contribute in their understanding of such expressions.

The limitation of the study was the lack of information concerning individual differences of the participants, as they most likely influenced the results. Factors such as language proficiency and metaphoric competence should be taken into consideration in future studies. Also, these results cannot be generalized to all the idioms in the English language. Studies using frequent and less transparent idioms may give different results.

Further research can explore variables that influence meaning construal in younger children, as well as difficulties they encounter in construing meaning and errors they make. This field is especially sensitive to the student's contact with L2 culture. The findings can be implemented in EFL classes to help develop new methods of teaching figurative language which would encourage students to develop their language learning strategies.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1. Questionnaire

Godina rođenja: \_\_\_\_\_

Ocjena iz engleskog jezika: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questionnaire

There are 11 idioms below. Please answer the questions: a) *Guess the meaning of each idiom* and b) *Why did you think of that answer?* You may write more than one guess.

#### 1. Live in each other's pockets

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

#### 2. Be a fish out of water

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

#### 3. Be on the top of the world

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

#### 4. Cold as marble

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**5. My heart sinks**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**6. Out of sight, out of mind**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**7. Be a bag of nerves**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**8. Be home and dry**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**9. Be in the driving seat**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**10. My ship has come in**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

**11. Bring the curtain down on something**

a) Guess the meaning.

b) Why?

## **Abstract**

Figurative language is a key tool in everyday communication. It has its conceptual, linguistic, pragmatic and socio-cultural uses. It has a wide range of categories that overlap, the most notable being metaphor, idioms and metonymy. They are motivated by embodied experience and perform a key part in conceptualization. In this paper we looked into the construal of meaning of metaphorical expressions from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. A qualitative study was carried out in which two elementary school classes (one 6<sup>th</sup> grade with seventeen pupils and one 8<sup>th</sup> grade with nineteen pupils) were presented with eleven transparent and unknown idiomatic expressions and asked to guess their meanings and explain what led them to their conclusions. The results showed that the participants were able to construct the meaning of all eleven items by relying on different general cognitive skills such as profiling, conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, figure/ground representation, etc. Their ability to construct meaning relied in part on the idiom itself. More precisely, the level to which an idiom was decomposable, the transparency of its motivation, the informativeness of its constituents, the participants' knowledge of the world and possible L1 influences had an impact on the results. This is in agreement with the cognitive linguistic understanding of figurative language motivation and meaning construal.

Key words: L2 meaning construal, conceptual metaphor, idiom, cognitive linguistics

## Sažetak

Razumijevanje frazeologije je ključno za svakodnevno sporazumijevanje. Koristi se u konceptualne, lingvističke, pragmatične i socio-kulturne svrhe. Sačinjava ga velik broj kategorija koje se djelomično preklapaju, a među najpoznatije ubrajamo metafore, idiome i metonimiju. Proizlaze iz tjelesnih iskustava i ključni su za konceptualizaciju. U ovom radu smo proučili konstruiranje značenja metaforičkih izraza iz perspektive kognitivne lingvistike. Provedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje u kojem su ispitana dva razreda osnovne škole (jedan šesti razred sa sedamnaest i jedan osmi razred s devetnaest učenika) u kojem je učenicima dan popis od jedanaest transparentnih i nepoznatih idioma izvan konteksta čija su značenja trebali pogoditi i objasniti kako su došli do svojih zaključaka. Rezultati su pokazali da su ispitanici uspjeli konstruirati značenja svih jedanaest idioma tako što su se oslanjali na različite kognitivne strategije, kao što su profiliranje, konceptualne metafore i metonimije, odnos lika i pozadine, itd. Njihova sposobnost za konstruiranjem značenja je djelomično ovisila o samom idiomu, odnosno o njegovoj transparentnosti i informativnosti njegovih sastavnih dijelova kao i o znanju o svijetu kojeg su sudionici posjedovali i o utjecajima materinog jezika. Ovo potvrđuje kognitivnolingvističko shvaćanje motivacije i konstruiranja značenja frazeoloških izraza.

Ključne riječi: konstruiranje značenja u stranom jeziku, konceptualna metafora, idiom, kognitivna lingvistika