JYVÄSKYLÄ STUDIES IN HUMANITIES 13

Katja Mäntylä

Idioms and Language Users

The Effect of the Characteristics of Idioms on their Recognition and Interpretation by Native and Non-native Speakers of English

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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the recognition and interpretation of English idioms by native and non-native speakers. The main aims were to find how different characteristics of idioms affect their interpretation, how unanimous (native) language users are about meanings of idioms, and finally, how well second language learners recognise English idioms. Although the significance of vocabulary and of lexical phrases, or language 'chunks' in language learning has been acknowledged, idioms have yet been neglected. The characteristics of idioms have been discussed as have been processing and storing them in the memory. Studies on idioms have, however, concentrated on native speakers. Yet, idioms are frequently used in everyday language, particularly in the media. Therefore, some knowledge and awareness of idioms is important to non-native learners especially at a more advanced level. This study defines an idiom as a figurative multi-word expression whose meaning is different from the sum of the literal meanings of its constituents. The respondents in the study were 36 British university students, and 144 Finnish university students of English. The material was gathered through a multiple-choice questionnaire comprising 65 idioms, and a background questionnaire on the language contacts of the respondents. The results suggest that English idioms are fairly difficult for Finnish students. The easiest were the idioms that had an identical equivalent in Finnish, e.g. *give the green light - näyttää vihreää valoa*. The tendency to seek assistance in the mother tongue also led to erroneous interpretations. Finnish students erred at false friends, such as *the last straw - viimeinen oljenkorsi,* and at idioms that shared a word with a Finnish idiom, such as *keep your head down - työntää päänsä pensaaseen*. The students tended to pick the one shared word and interpret the Finnish idiom containing that word as an equivalent. Thus, they failed to recognise idioms as wholes, and to compare the images that the literal meanings of idioms in the two languages create. The responses by native speakers showed that the meanings of idioms are a complex issue. Even though meanings are often taken for granted, and also expressed as such by dictionaries, the results showed that native speakers frequently disagreed on idiom meanings.

Keywords: idioms, English language, language learning

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the role of vocabulary in language studies, and in language learning and teaching, has gained considerable attention. During the nineties the focus shifted particularly towards language 'chunks', or word strings rather than single words both in Western Europe and the US. In Eastern Europe, word strings, phrases, idioms, sayings and formulaic language had been studied before, but very few of these studies have ever been translated. As a result of recent development, idioms have aroused interest not just among researchers, but also among teachers of languages. Discussion of the nature and definition of an idiom has been, if not hectic, at least lively. The very definition of an idiom has varied, and even today, there is no consensus as to what an idiom is: for some researchers, idioms include different types of fixed expressions, such as greetings or collocations, whereas others draw stricter lines. The problem with definition is two-fold: on one hand, the relationship of idioms to other metaphorical expressions is problematic, while, on the other hand, the boundaries between idioms and other multi-word expressions are not at all clear. To add to the difficulty, idiomatic expressions in general are sometimes erroneously labelled idioms, particularly in everyday language. Even though idioms are examples of idiomatic language, not all idiomatic expressions are idioms.

The definition of an idiom depends very much upon what are considered to be the most salient features of an idiom. In earlier years, when language studies in general were more interested in structures than meaning, idiom studies, too, concentrated on the form of idioms and form was also the basis of an idiom's definition. Idioms were seen as frozen, multi-word expressions that tolerated little or no (structural) variation. They were also considered dead; that is, there was no link to be detected between their meaning and origin. More recent studies, affected by functionalist views in linguistics, have approached idioms differently: instead of focussing on the structure, their emphasis has been on the meaning(s) of an idiom. It has been shown that idioms' meanings are far from arbitrary although the link between the literal and metaphorical meaning may not always be obvious. In this study, metaphoricity is taken to be

the most significant feature of an idiom, as idioms are very much alive and also tolerate both lexical and grammatical transformations.

Idioms pose particular problems in language learning and teaching. Contrary to common belief, idioms are also used in more formal contexts, and, for instance, newspapers offer plenty of examples of (creative) idiom usage. Versatility in the usage and meaning of idioms, in addition to their metaphoricity, makes them a real challenge to language users, in particular to second or foreign language learners. Views on how and what to teach and learn about idioms have varied according to which idiom characteristics have been emphasised. The approach focussing on the structure of idioms parallelled idioms to single words in the sense that learning them was seen as equivalent to memorising word strings. As idioms were considered mostly dead and frozen, idiom transformations, or, more significantly, the roots of metaphoricity did not play a role in idiom studies.

As the focus of attention in idiom studies shifted to metaphoricity, the place of idioms in second language learning was also viewed differently. Studies concentrated on whether foreign language learners ought to be taught easily analysable, transparent idioms, or whether idioms whose roots were more difficult to detect were more worth teaching. At the same time, the relationship between the learner's native language and the second/foreign language gained attention. Since it was evident that a number of idioms are shared by different languages and direct or partial translation equivalents exist among idioms, previous studies have emphasised second language learners' control of idioms that are close to those of their mother tongue, or else of idioms that have no equivalent in the learners' native language.

As for native speakers, there are studies on children's and adolescents' comprehension of idioms, and also on the understanding of idioms by hearing-impaired, but not by healthy adults. There are no studies on how various features of idioms influence their comprehension. Although the meanings and interpretations of idioms are multiple, previous studies have taken for granted that there is one 'correct' meaning for an idiom.

Since the world of idioms is very complex, starting with the very definition of an idiom, studying them and how they are learnt should perhaps be approached from a slightly wider perspective. This includes taking account of various idiom characteristics as well as the different meanings an idiom may have. Moreover, the relationship to mother tongue expressions is significant for second/foreign language learners. Bearing all this in mind, instead of merely teaching idiom lists to non-native learners, it may be more worthwhile to try to look at idioms themselves more carefully, as well as the conceptions and interpretations language users have of them. This sort of investigation sheds more light on what there is to teach and learn about idioms, and to what extent non-native learners can and should be able to master them.

1.1 Aims

The aims of this study stem from the unquestioned importance of idioms to non-native learners, and from the complexity of their meaning which is not taken into account in existing research. Idioms are frequently used in everyday language, and although they have been claimed to be colloquial, they can be encountered daily in newspapers, books, magazines etc., and on television, i.e . a wide range of spoken and written contexts. It is thus essential that non-native speakers are at least aware of idioms and their metaphorical nature, so that they recognise an idiom when they see one, even if they do not know exactly what it means. At an advanced level, they could be expected to understand at least some idioms. Finnish students' English skills have not been studied when it comes to idioms, even though there are nowadays even specifically English-Finnish idiom dictionaries for students (Rekiaro 1998, Westlake et al 2002), and even though, for instance, in the matriculation examination test, testees have been expected to produce idioms in connection with tests on vocabulary and structures. Thus, the first set of aims of this study is to see

1a) how advanced Finnish students of English understand and interpret English idioms and to what extent their interpretations agree with or differ from those of dictionaries and native speakers,
1b) what sort of effect their mother tongue, Finnish, has on interpretations,
1c) to what extent language learners are able to take advantage of idiom characteristics when interpreting them.

Even though the very definition of an idiom is impossible to agree upon, and there is unanimity as to the complexity of idiom characteristics (as the research presented in Chapter 3 shows), the multiple and complex meanings of idioms have not been discussed in the literature. Rather, the underlying assumption in idiom literature is that there is a stereotypical meaning for each idiom which all language users happily agree upon, and which can also be found in dictionaries. Since language users' conceptions of even single words denoting concrete objects differ from each other, it seems unreasonable to expect that an idiom could have a meaning or interpretation that all or even most language users share. A quick glance at idiom dictionaries confirms this, as the range of idioms included as well as their definitions disagree with each other. Moreover, dictionaries reveal that an idiom can often have several forms and may undergo syntactical as well as lexical changes. Bearing all this in mind, the world of idiom forms and meanings is far from simple. Therefore, the second set of aims of this study is to see

2a) to what extent native speakers agree with or differ from each other and English-English idiom dictionaries in interpreting the meanings of idioms,

2b) whether all potential meanings are equally acceptable to native speakers or are some meanings more readily accepted than others,
2c) how the features of idioms affect their interpretations.

The third aim of this study derives from the frequently repeated claim that idioms are informal or at best colloquial and pertain mostly to spoken language. If they are so informal, why teach them to non-native speakers at all? Moreover, just as with single words, there are bound to be differences as to the style and formality of different idioms: some are more informal than others. Thus, the third set of aims of this study is to see

3a) how language users, native and non-native, perceive the degree of formality of idioms and the potential contexts in which to use them,
3b) whether there are differences in the perceived formality of different idioms.

1.2 Structure

Before investigating the results of the idiom questionnaire, I shall first, in Chapter 2, briefly discuss the major issues in second language vocabulary learning and acquisition during the past decades. Chapter 3 discusses the several definitions and characteristics of idioms and forms a definition for this study. In Chapter 4, there is a short introduction to English-English and English-Finnish idiom dictionaries. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of previous idiom studies. In Chapter 6 I will discuss the methods and results of the present study, and lastly, in Chapter 7, draw conclusions based on it.

2 STUDIES ON SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY LEARNING

Studies in second language acquisition and learning (SLA)[1] have now long recognised the significance of vocabulary in contrast with the previously prevailing view that held structures and grammar to be the most central element in language and language learning. In vocabulary studies the traditional line of research has concentrated on defining the word and examining word formation and the relationships between words (see e.g. Aitchison 1987, Kempson 1992, Singleton 1995, Nation 1990 and 2001).

With respect to language learning, the various stages of knowing a word (including recognition and production), knowing a word at different stages of learning, and vocabulary teaching methods have received particular attention (see e.g. Ringbom 1987, Carter and McCarthy 1988, Schmitt and McCarthy 1997). As well as in terms of the structural properties of words, vocabulary has also been researched and taught through content, meaning, and semantic fields **(**Lehrer 1974, Kempson 1992, Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). From the point of view of the foreign language learner, lexical transfer has been widely studied, as interest in the influence of mother tongue revived in the eighties and nineties (Ringbom 1987, Sajavaara 1999, 77-80). Finally, the notion of word has been re-examined, as longer strings of language have been recognised as crucial parts of vocabulary (lexical chunks, formulaic language) (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992, Schmitt and McCarthy 1997). I shall now briefly discuss the development of second language vocabulary learning, and then shift the focus onto formulaic language and idioms in particular as they are at the core of this study.

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1 Since the terms learning and acquisition, as well as second and foreign language are often used interchangeably in SLA literature, I shall not attempt to make a distinction in this chapter. However, the Finnish respondents in this study can be characterised as foreign language learners.

2.1 Stages of knowing a word

The knowledge of vocabulary can be assessed in several ways. One way is to look at vocabulary mainly from a quantitative viewpoint and assess how many words learners know in a foreign language, and how many they should know in order to be able to cope in the language (Takala 1989, 5-7). One estimate is that "clearly the learner needs to know the 3,000 or so high frequency words of the language." (Nation andWaring 1997, 11). These estimates are usually based on frequency lists that in the era of computer corpora are easily available (Nation and Waring 1997).

Frequency lists have led to the search for core vocabulary, the knowledge of vocabulary necessary for a language learner to survive. The problem with core vocabularies is that different learners have different needs. Moreover, different language environments pose different demands. Core vocabulary usually contains the most basic and simple items in the vocabulary. Choosing them, though, is a difficult task affected by multiple criteria, such as frequency, representativeness, and collocability (Carter 1987, Carter and McCarthy 1988, 9-11, Nation and Waring 1997, O´Dell 1997, 239, Sjöholm 1995, 45-47). Thus, core vocabulary is not likely to include, for instance, metaphorical language such as idioms. In the case of beginners the idea of core vocabulary seems reasonable, but for more advanced learners subtler and more variable means of expression are needed.

In addition, the number of words known to the learner is not the whole picture: as some words are more useful than others, and as there are various stages of knowing a word, whether in the case of recognition or of production vocabulary. Instead of just counting the words the learner knows, we should also assess the quality of his/her knowledge. This is connected to the fact that each word holds quite a vast amount of information (semantic, collocational, syntactical etc.). A language learner is thus faced with several challenges: having to know different elements of language and words, understand the relationship between words and their meanings, understand the structure and formation of words and vocabulary and know how to combine syntax and vocabulary, to name a few (Nation 2001, 23-29). The following division by Ringbom (1987, 37) illustrates the complexity of 'knowing a word':

	at an early stage ---------->		at an advanced stage
Accessibility	the word is accessible within specific context only		the word is accessible regardless of context
Morpho-phonology	knows one form of word	knows word in all its forms (spoken, written, inflected)	knows the possible derivations of a word
Syntax	knows no syntactic constraints	knows some constraints	knows all syntactic constraints
Semantics	knows approximate meaning only	knows one meaning only	knows all possible meanings
Collocation	knows no collocational constraints	knows some constraints	knows all collocational constraints
Association	knows no associative constraints	knows some constraints	knows all associative constraints

FIGURE 1 Stages of knowing a word (Adapted from Ringbom 1987, 37).

Since all the stages above are applicable to recognition as well as the production of vocabulary, words carry a heavy burden. In this study, only recognition vocabulary was investigated. Recognising idioms is extremely demanding, particularly with respect to syntax, semantics and association. It requires knowing several meanings (literal and figurative ones) for expressions as well as being aware of metaphoricity, and the syntactical behaviour of words and formulaic language in particular. They are therefore more challenging to recognise and comprehend than are single, literal items.

2.2 The effect of L1 on vocabulary acquisition and use

L1 can assist in learning a foreign language since the learner is already familiar with the phenomena of language in general, and the relationships within vocabulary (e.g. Laufer and Shmueli 1997). However, the effect of L1 may also be negative. Although the same concepts might well exist in two cultures and worlds, the ways of referring to them might be totally different. A word may seem to have a direct translation equivalent in a foreign language when it might in fact only have a false friend that carries a different meaning. The effect of L1 has been studied to some extent in vocabulary research during the past four decades, and the results are somewhat controversial.

Transfer from mother tongue vocabulary can manifest itself in several ways. For instance, Ringbom (1987, 117) and Swan (1997) list several types of possible errors caused by transfer from LI. A language learner may borrow

directly from his/her mother tongue (e.g. a Finn learning Estonian may mix Estonian *sulhane* - Finnish *renki*, or Estonian *pulmad* - Finnish *häät),* or may borrow morphological or phonological traits from L1 and transfer them to modify vocabulary items in L2**.** A word may have a similar appearance in two languages although the meanings are different (false friends), e.g. *home* meaning government in Estonian and mould in Finnish, or Finnish *patteri* (radiator) resembling English *battery*. A language learner may also extend the semantics of an L2 word according to L1 semantics, e.g. Finnish *avata televisio* –> English *open the tv*. This is closely connected to pragmatics: a word may be appropriate in one context in L1, but a similar translation equivalent in L2 can be used only in a restricted context.

Finnish speakers have been found to transfer less from their mother tongue to English than Swedish-speaking Finns, and whereas Swedish speakers have been observed to transfer in accordance with phonological similarities and semantic properties, Finnish-speaking English learners lean on semantic properties and loan words (Ringbom 1987). Usually, the closer the two languages are to each other typologically, the stronger the transfer, especially when the learner perceives the two languages to bear similarities (Kellerman 1977, 80, 93). It should be borne in mind that transfer may also be positive, that is, the language learner may benefit from similarities between L1 and L2 (e.g. Ringbom, 1976, 488-489). For instance, Sjöholm (1995) found that Finnish speakers had more problems with English phrasal verbs than did Swedish-speaking Finns, a finding Sjöholm explained partly by the fact that there are no phrasal verbs in Finnish.

As for idioms, they exist in any language, and are formed according to similar principles. Differences arise when the semantics and literal meanings of a particular expression are more closely examined. According to Ringbom (1987, 135), "the learner tends to assume that the system of L2 is more or less the same in his L1 until he has discovered it is not." With less frequent expressions and more specialised language, this discovery may come at a fairly late stage, if at all. For instance in Finnish, *pitkässä juoksussa* (*in the long run)* is nowadays more or less adopted from English to indicate *ajan mittaan, ajan myötä, pidemmän päälle.* According to Krashen (1981,65), the influence of L2 is strongest in word-for-word translations of phrases.

2.3 The teaching of vocabulary

There has been a shift in foreign language teaching from grammar to vocabulary. It has been acknowledged that in order to be able to use grammar and apply its rules, one needs to have a fairly good vocabulary. Just as second language teaching in general, also the teaching of second language vocabulary has gone through changes over years. This has followed from a broader and deeper understanding of vocabulary: instead of just L1-L2 word lists, language teaching has also recognised the need for a deeper analysis of what it means to

know a word and what stages are involved in the process. In addition to reconsidering the role of vocabulary in language and the properties of vocabulary, vocabulary teaching has also been affected by what have been considered to efficient language teaching methods and most useful goals in language learning. Different approaches have been valued at different times and vocabulary has likewise been taught by different methods each considered valuable in its time for the desired purpose.

2.3.1 Using L1 as a mediator

The best known and the earliest method in vocabulary teaching is probably the grammar-translation method that is based on definition and etymology (Zimmerman 1997, 6) and lists of translation equivalents in L1 and L2. This method is also well-known to Finnish pupils. The popularity of word lists is partly connected to the idea of core vocabulary as the words in school textbooks were and still are not chosen haphazardly but based on frequency lists, while at the same time, they should deal with certain specific themes. Using L1 in definition and explanations does have its advantages as "several studies ... have shown that for many learners learning is faster if the meaning of the word is conveyed by a first language translation" (Nation 2001, 66). Moreover, as Scholfield (1997) claims, learners themselves tend to favour the use of dictionaries, often L2-L1, and rather than breaking them of the habit, they ought to be taught how to benefit more from dictionary use than mere L2-L1 translations. Also, dictionaries could be developed in such a way as to be more instructive.

However, relying on L1 is not without its problems. Nagy (1997, 73-74) argues that if the use of L1 is common in the classroom, the learners do not get used to using the target language to the extent they would if the classes were in L2. In the 70s and 80s, using L1 as a mediator became less popular in vocabulary teaching and L2 was favoured instead. For instance, in Sweden as early as in the late 60s bilingual wordlists were not recommended for textbooks (Krantz 1991 , 15)

2.3.2 Using solely or mainly L2

A natural approach or incidental vocabulary learning depends mainly on the use of L2, for instance in the form of guessing meanings from the context or using monolingual dictionaries (Sökmen 1997, 237). However, as Sökmen (ibid, 237-239) points out, incidental encounters with words are only one method of facilitating vocabulary acquisition, and often slow and error-prone. Furthermore, repetition and the opportunity to use the learnt word are essential in incidental vocabulary learning (Nation 2001, 67). However, just as with reading, being exposed to (spoken) language requires more than mere exposure to notably expand one's vocabulary (Vaurio 1998, 47). It has been shown that, for example, even a longer stay in an English-speaking country does not much

improve learners' production vocabulary, although with advanced learners, receptive vocabulary increases (Marton 1977, 38). As for phrasal language, being exposed to L2 is not be sufficient to increase even an advanced learners' knowledge of them (Marton 1977, 43). Purely incidental vocabulary acquisition as opposed to instructed learning, whether through discussion or reading or studying word lists appears to be quite ineffective (Sökmen 1997, 237-238), although extensive reading, when sufficiently guided, appears to have the potential of greatly enhancing vocabulary acquisition (Coady 1997, 235). Furthermore, incidental vocabulary acquisition is interconnected with language proficiency: the better the knowledge of the language, the more effective will incidental vocabulary acquisition be (Vaurio 1998, 47. See also Kristiansen 1990).

Topics and themes have become increasingly important in vocabulary teaching as the significance of word relations and connecting language and content have been acknowledged. Rather than separate words in a list, vocabulary should be perceived as interrelating networks of relations of words and meanings (Channel 1981, 117). Teaching sets and fields of words, semantic networks, and vocabulary pertaining to a certain topic have been found to be effective, reflecting the fact that semantic fields play a role in how words are linked to each other in mental lexicon (Aitchison 1994, Carter 1987, Lehrer 1974).

The idea of themes or topics can be and has been further developed into teaching content in a foreign language (Brinton et al. 1989, 15) which has grown in popularity in recent years. It is interesting to notice that the method itself is fairly old, as it resembles the direct method described by Zimmerman (1997, 8-9). The method, which was introduced as early as the 19th century, emphasises interacting in L2, without using L1 as a mediator. Its advantage is that it perhaps helps to draw attention more to meaning than to form (Brinton et al. 1989, 4), as learners attempt to link what they come across to what they already know (Woodworth 1973, 79).

Connected to the idea of working solely in L2 are the reading method and situational language teaching (Zimmerman 1997, 9-10). Reading in a foreign language has in fact been seen by some researchers as the best method to expand ones vocabulary (Coady 1997, Krantz 1991, 10). The reading method involves more than mere reading: it includes noticing words, decontextualising them, and negotiating or in some other way finding their meaning (Nation 2001, 63-65). There are several ways to explain the meaning of an unknown word, by actions, pictures, objects, context clues, or definitions either in L1 or L2 (Nation 2001, 85). It is worth noticing that as Nagy (1997, 75-76) highlights, SL learners are seldom as good at guessing from context as are native speakers, and accordingly giving definitions in some way and instructed learning have often proved more fruitful than other methods of vocabulary acquisition. On the other hand, SL learners are often more motivated to learn from the context and are able to do that as well (Honeyfield 1977, Nagy 1997, 76). The results, nevertheless, are controversial, as it has also been suggested that purposeful studying of words is the most fruitful way of acquiring vocabulary (Segalowitz

et al 1995), and it is at least needed to supplement incidental learning (Takala 1989, 10). It seems that what is essential then is not the method used as such, particularly when one bears in mind that different people benefit from different learning and teaching strategies, but rather the language(s) used. However, the method has very often been tied to a particular language: for example, using L1 has meant definitions, and using L2 context and other indirect ways of inferring meaning.

2.3.3 Communicative approaches

As the focus has shifted from grammar towards vocabulary, also meaning has become a significant target of teaching alongside form. This is further emphasized in different communicative approaches that concentrate more on language use and functions than on forms (Zimmerman 1997, 12-13). Also, whereas with grammar-translation, reading and to an extent also content-based teaching, the focus has been on written rather than spoken language, communicative approaches stress spoken language and oral fluency.

As Ellis (1994, 536) points out, language learners need to pay attention to both form and meaning, and good learners can shift their focus of attention according to the requirements of the task in hand. He (ibid.) also claims that social and interactional methods may be more useful with young learners than with adults. Of course, this may not always be true as different people respond to different methods in different ways, and also the tasks and goals of learning set demands for methods. Nevertheless, with younger learners, interaction and communicative approaches may prove more fruitful than traditional classroom instruction. As for vocabulary acquisition there is still not much evidence of the fruitfulness of communicative approaches. They definitely do guide learners more towards active use of the language and may thus promote vocabulary acquisition too. Yet, even though an extensive vocabulary is useless if one does not know how to apply it in practice, form also matters, not just meaning. A language learner should, in addition to being able to produce a word, be able to produce it in such a manner, both orally and in writing, that other language users will understand it as well. Furthermore, the different communicative approaches may not always pay enough attention to the various levels of knowing a word, its several meanings, restrictions in their use, metaphoricity etc.

2.3.4 Current trends in vocabulary teaching

Vocabulary teaching has changed in accordance with prevailing trends in language teaching in general, with what has been considered significant in language, and how vocabulary has been perceived. It seems that nowadays the multiplicity of available methods and strategies is recognised, and learners' individual differences and various goals for learning are acknowledged as well. As the significance of vocabulary is nowadays indisputable and studies on

vocabulary acquisition are on increase, the complexity of vocabulary acquisition is reflected in research, too. A good example of this is the recent book by Nation (2001) that deals with the multiple characteristics of vocabulary, as well as its learning and teaching. Moreover, whereas twenty years ago there were not very many studies on vocabulary, now they are plentiful, and most of them concentrate on acquisition. It is to be hoped that this is also reflected in actual teaching so that vocabulary is not treated as a "by-product of teaching structures or the communicative functions of sentences"(McCarthy 1984, 12). Rather, learners should be provided with explicit strategies to derive the maximum benefit from teaching (Palmberg 1987), and, teaching ought to explicitly take into account the significance of vocabulary (McCarthy 1984, 12).

In language learning and teaching, particularly in SLA and vocabulary teaching the emphasis has in recent years been placed not just on single words but larger entities, ´chunks´. In Eastern Europe sayings, collocations, phrases, idioms, etc. had been studied for decades before the West finally became aware of the significance of these longer word strings. In the 1990s their role in language use was widely agreed on, and this has also affected research and what is being recommended in teaching. Nowadays, phraseology, as Cowie (1998) calls this field, is widely studied, and its significance for linguistic theory and SLA is recognised (see e.g. Cowie 1998).

2.4 Formulaic language - a bridge between syntax and vocabulary

Perhaps because of its fairly recent origins, or perhaps because of its vastness, there is no established terminology referring to items in the field of phraseology. Phraseology itself has several names: Weinert, for instance, calls it formulaic language, that is, "formulas, pre-fabricated or ready-made language, chunks, unanalysed language or wholes" (Weinert 1995, 182). These chunks, too, have multiple names: Marton (1977) calls them conventional syntagms, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) lexical phrases, Fernando (1996) idiomatic expression, Moon (1998) fixed expressions to name a few. Prefabricated units or patterns, and formulaic language are also frequently used labels for these entities longer than one single word, e.g. collocations, phrases, sayings, greetings, idioms, proverbs etc.

Formulaic language in a sense builds a bridge between grammar and vocabulary. Instead of consisting of separate words, vocabulary contains prefabricated units, chunks, that have undergone grammatical processes and can, for instance, appear as clauses. *How are you?* is indisputably a question that can be grammatically analysed, but, on the other hand, it is also an entity that language learners usually learn as a whole, without analysing its structure (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992, 11), to be used in a particular context and situation. In this connection the language learner also learns how to respond to the question, and *I'm fine thanks. How are you?* is a prefabricated unit rather than two sentences. Weinert (1995) refers to several studies that have dealt with

the multi-word (*How do you do?*) or multi-form strings (*can't*) that appear as entities in the production or memory. In this sense, they resemble single words, rather than structures formed from words following linguistic rules (Bower 1969, Weinert 1995, 182). Also, their meaning may sometimes be similar to that of a single word, for instance similes (*cool as a cucumber*) can easily be replaced by a single word without much effect on their meaning. According to Weinert (1995), there is indisputable evidence of formulaic language being significant both in first language acquisition and in second language learning/acquisition. Naturally, a language learner does frequently rely on freshly constructed structures and forms. However, the importance of 'ready-made' language or formulas cannot be denied, either. Repetition and imitation play a role in language learning, and frequently heard or seen patterns, in their turn, are perhaps easier to remember and retrieve from the memory.

Cowie (1998) argues that prefabricated language units are crucial to achieving native-like proficiency. It should be borne in mind, however, that not all foreign or second language learners aim at native-like proficiency, nor is it necessary. Knowledge of formulaic language adds to the idiomaticity of the language produced, and, more importantly perhaps, is also correlated to comprehension. Not knowing that *black and white*, for instance, frequently accompany each other in that particular order and the combination can be called a collocation does not play a role in understanding the words. However, not knowing that *kicking the bucket* has nothing to do with either *kicking* or *buckets*, is a hindrance to comprehension. Similarly, say, not knowing the purpose and function of expressions like *I´m afraid* or *you know* does prevent understanding and interpreting the text and situation. Even less advanced learners need phraseological knowledge particularly in language comprehension, and L2 learners may benefit more from learning prefabricated units since they know they could be analysed into smaller pieces that would make them even easier to understand and learn (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992, 28).

3 IDIOMS

In vocabulary studies idioms have been approached from different perspectives, the focus of attention varying from form and frozenness (idiom structure) to metaphoricity and the degree of literalness (idiom meaning). Depending on the emphasis, the definition has accordingly varied from a very strict 'prototypical idioms only' viewpoint to a very flexible definition effectively identifying any fixed expression in idiomatic language as an idiom. The characteristics of an idiom are manifold, and before looking more closely at various approaches and different studies on idioms, the features of idioms appearing in vocabulary studies are discussed next, and a definition of an idiom for the purposes of this study is formulated.

3.1 The definition of an idiom

Just as with defining and labelling formulaic language in general, it is difficult if not impossible to reach agreement on the definition of an idiom. The term *idiom* is frequently used in the literature, but what it refers to varies. It is important to bear in mind that "idioms and idiomaticity, while closely related, are not identical" (Fernando 1998, 30). The relationship to other metaphorical as well as multi-word expressions poses problems. The fundamental issue with idioms seems to be the nature and scope of literalness and figurativeness and their relationship to each other. This focus reflects the growth of functionalist ideas in linguistics. There are other characteristics of idioms that have also been taken into account, such as their formal characteristics (e.g. whether they consist of more than one word), along the lines of formalist tradition. Accordingly, the basis of definition, and the feature that has been considered determinant in defining an idiom, has varied in accordance with the emphasis (see e.g. Nenonen 2002,6). On the other hand, linguists concentrating on the processing of idioms and their storage in the mind (e.g. Fraser 1970, Gibbs 1980) have not tended to concern themselves with problems of definition but have taken the definition more or less for granted.

Attempts to categorise idioms have almost invariably taken an idiom's tolerance of variation as the most significant feature (Fraser 1970, Fernando 1992). However, metaphoricity, too, has led to different subdivisions and a the identification of sub-classes of idioms, such as, semi-idioms (Fernando, 1992). Combining all these sub-classes into one single categorization system is by no means possible or necessary, even though for instance Fernando (1992) attempts to do it.

Also, views as to the degree of metaphoricity and variability of idioms have varied. Earlier studies concentrating on the form of idioms regarded them as 'dead' (Weinreich 1969, Fraser 1970, Swinney and Cutler 1979, Cowie 1981), that is, their origins cannot be traced or detected but their meanings are arbitrary. Thus, learning them has been seen as equivalent to memorizing them as entities since the connection between the form and meaning has not been acknowledged. Connected to this view is the frozenness aspect, i.e. idioms are fairly fixed in form and ought to be analysed as such. However, as numerous studies have shown (see e.g., Fernando 1992, 43-56, Moon 1998), idioms can and do vary in form, and while some tolerate more variation than others the number of totally frozen idioms is limited.

More recent studies on idioms have taken a different view, finding it evident that the meanings of idioms are by no means arbitrary however much they might occasionally appear to be to someone unaware of their origins, and equally unaware of the nature and characteristics of idioms (Gibbs 1980, Lakoff 1987, Kövecses and Szabó 1996). On one hand this adds to the complexity of idioms; they are expressions whose meanings are not arbitrary but which behave like single, arbitrary, words. On the other hand, if entrenched assumptions and beliefs about idiom characteristics are abandoned and their figurativeness admitted, they become far more comprehensible.

The latter aspect has also been studied from the viewpoint of second language learners (Irujo 1986, Arnaud and Savignon 1997), either concentrating on metaphorical, analysable idioms, or on totally dead, indecomposable expressions. Previous studies have placed emphasis on second language learners' control of either idioms that are close to their mother tongue, or on opaque, difficult idioms. As for native speakers, there are number of studies on children's comprehension of idioms, and also the understanding of idioms by hearing impaired, but not by healthy adults. The effect of idiom characteristics on their comprehension as such has not been studied. Moreover, previous studies have not questioned the interpretations of idioms but have taken for granted that there is one preferred interpretation for each idiom that language users (natives and non-native speakers) agree upon. This study attempts to look at non-native speakers' interpretations of idioms' meanings, and also, to see what kind of variation there is among native speakers in interpreting the meaning of an idiom. As idioms have diverse characteristics, this study also aims at finding out how the features of idioms affect their recognisability and intelligibility. I shall now move on to discuss the characteristics of idioms more fully, in order to form a definition of an idiom for the purposes of this study.

3.2 The characteristics of idioms

The long-established view took idioms to be dead, frozen metaphors, but this view has been re-examined and challenged during the past few years (Lakoff 1987, Gibbs 1990, 1992: 485, 1993: 57-61, Kövecses and Szabó 1996). 'Dead' referred to the origins of an idiom; idioms were often thought to carry arbitrary meanings whose metaphorical nature had been forgotten. Frozenness, in turn, referred to another frequently mentioned feature of idioms, that is, they have been claimed to be fixed in form with a very limited tolerance of transformations and variations. Not just the origin, but also the form of an idiom has been perceived as suffering from rigor mortis. However, more recent studies and at the same time psycholinguists' interest in metaphorical language have shown that a number of idioms are by no means dead nor frozen; metaphoricity and the origins of meaning are quite often traceable, and idioms can undergo alterations (e.g. Greim 1982, Gibbs et al. 1989, Gibbs 1990, Glucksberg 1993, McGlone et al. 1994).

It ought to be borne in mind that even though some features of idioms are more significant than others, several elements are needed for an expression to be labelled an idiom. Furthermore, there are expressions that are more prototypical idioms than others, and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish idioms from other types of fixed and/or metaphorical expressions. It seems best to approach idioms within a continuum of other phrasal expressions, and distributed along this continuum according to the extent to which they meet the criteria set for idioms. There are bound to be borderline cases, and just as it is difficult to agree on a definition, it may be impossible to form a definition that would totally manage to avoid fuzziness or ambiguity with respect to these borderline instances.

3.2.1 Metaphoricity

As was argued above, idioms are far from dead, that is, the relationship between the literal and figurative meanings can often be detected (e.g. Cronk and Schweigert 1992, Nippold and Rudzinski 1993), at least in the etymology of an expression. In this study, the terms figurativeness and metaphoricity are used as synonyms, and I shall not attempt to discuss the theory of metaphor as such (e.g. Lakoff 1987). Metaphoricity is one of the most frequently mentioned features of idioms. Nearly all studies treat this characteristic as a fundamental attribute of an idiom (e.g. Cronk et al 1993, Gibbs 1980, 1985, McGlone et al 1994, Nippold et al 1989, Strässler 1982). However, there are different degrees of figurativeness. Idioms are usually divided into three categories according to how easily the roots of figurativeness are to be detected. This division seems adequate: it is important to recognise and distinguish various stages of figurativeness but since the categories to an extent overlap and the borders between them can be fuzzy, it is not reasonable to try to make more than three

categories. *Transparent* idioms are expressions where the image the literal meaning creates is clearly linked to the figurative meaning, e.g. *give the green light. Semi-transparent* idioms, in their turn, are expressions where the literal meaning gives some hint of the figurative meaning but the link is not as obvious as with fully transparent idioms, e.g. *quake in your shoes.* Finally there are *opaque* idioms, where the motivation behind the figurative meaning is impossible to detect without knowing the etymology, e.g. *be home and dry*.

The roots of metaphoricity often lie in some real situation or act (e.g. *hang up one's boots*), or an image created by the similarity between the idiom and its meaning (e.g. *the fat is in the fire*). The reason why idioms have been seen as dead, as arbitrary, is that the link between the origins of an expression and its meaning has weakened (e.g. *kick the bucket*), or the literal context belongs to a special field unknown to the ordinary language user (e.g. *kick something into touch*) making the link very difficult to detect.

The problem with figurativeness is that even more than analysability, it depends on the judgement of the individual language user. Besides, once the figurative meaning is known, it is easier to see the link to the literal one. Laufer (1997, 25) warns about 'deceptive transparency' that is, words that "look as if they provided clues to their meaning" but in fact do not, e.g. false friends (*the last straw - viimeinen oljenkorsi, blue-eyed - sinisilmäinen*). In addition, it can sometimes be very difficult to determine the degree of figurativeness of a single idiom, since knowing its meaning, or other similar expressions in either the foreign language or native tongue, as well as the context, may all affect judgement.

However, according to Kellerman's experiments (1998, 1999), there can be notable similarities among language users concerning the images and pictures evoked by idioms. On the other hand, language users are individuals and can sometimes be very creative and different from each other in the images they form, as a small experiment on people's mental images of idioms has shown (Mäntylä and Dufva 1999). It seems that some idioms create similar images, some different, depending on how aptly the language user creates associations in his/her mind. Native speakers have been argued to be inclined to regard familiar things as motivated, that is, they see a link between the meaning and its origin (Sornig 1988, 281), and there is no reason why the same tendency should not occur also among non-native speakers.

The fact that an expression may often, depending on its context, carry its literal meaning instead of the figurative one makes the recognition and comprehension of idioms more difficult (Cacciari 1993, 27, Marschark et al 1983, Moore 1982, Needham 1992, Popiel and McRae 1988). *Footing the bill* can hardly have any literal meanings but a bucket can be kicked quite literally. It may be difficult to recognise an unfamiliar idiom in a text as an idiom, but it may also be difficult to realise when an expression known as an idiom is not an idiom but just words in an ordinary sentence. On the other hand, metaphoricity and the perception of idioms as metaphors may also set one on the wrong track, as Pulman (1993, 250) points out (see also Punttila 1995). If a language user relies too much on metaphoricity, s/he may attach meanings or features to an idiom

that are not there. Pulman (1993, 250) gives the example of *cat among the pigeons* which does not carry connotation of cruelty, yet a language user might attribute that feature when considering the image the expression creates.

Moon (1998a,178) quite aptly connects metaphoricity and ambiguity, but claims that context always solves the problem of ambiguity. It is perhaps too strong a statement as context is not everything. Context does often help but not always. Much of the ambiguity of idioms lies in their polysemy, and even though context more often than not probably does help the addressee to realise that the expression should not be taken literally, it does not that all often provide him/her with the correct one of several potential metaphorical interpretations. Moon (1998a,185) does add that as well as being potentially ambiguous in isolation, idioms may also be ambiguous in context if they are unfamiliar. This seems a necessary qualification as context may help in working out the meaning of an unfamiliar expression but, on the other hand, it may also produce false interpretations. Even if an idiom is familiar, however, ambiguity is occasionally present, as there are idioms with several figurative meanings, e.g. *look someone in the eye, sit on the fence*, *blow the whistle on someone*, to name a few. Therefore, even though an idiom is familiar, it means different things to different people[2]. To some language users an idiom is more arbitrary than to others, and there are bound to be unfamiliar, totally arbitrary and thus incomprehensible idioms in a language as well (Lakoff 1987, 451). Moon (1998a,179) goes on to point out that sometimes literal meaning, although referring to something that *could* happen, in reality does not seem too likely[3]. This is quite true: for instance it is possible to literally *bite the bullet*, or to *have a bee in one's bonnet*, but in today's world, both are probably highly unlikely. In these cases ambiguity as to the literal/metaphorical aspect is solved by the idioms themselves. The fact that literal interpretation is possible, does not mean that it would actually occur. Corpora analyses indisputably show that literal interpretations are very rare compared to figurative ones (ibid, 180-181) However, abandoning the literal interpretation opens up a new problem with respect to the figurative meaning.

A creative language user may take advantage of this figurative-literal -relationship. The following are headlines encountered in the Daily Telegraph's electronic version that illustrate how literal and figurative may be intertwined:

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2 Naturally, it can be argued that meanings never are the same to different people, but in order not to turn the discussion here towards such a philosophical issue, suffice it to say that in practice, there is a clear difference between telling authorities about someone's illegal activities or putting an end to a quarrel by acting as a mediator, which are both among potential interpretations of *blow the whistle on someone*.

3 For a more thorough consideration of the matter, and for a number of examples of e.g. the possibility of literal interpretation depending on one's ideology, or beliefs, see Moon 1998a, 178ff.

Car park careerists keep up to scratch (3 June 1997)
Hitler joke in Israel hits wrong note (article about a German musician from the Berlin opera visiting Israel) (2 June 1997)
Lamborghini importer gets the hump (28 May 1997)
Britons take centre stage at Broadway prize giving (3 June 1997)
Fly on the wall sees hotel chefs land in the soup (10 June 1997)
Youngest MP slips on her first banana skin (article about a British MP who had given instructions on how to vote to banana farmers in St Lucia) (23 May 1997)
Prescott pulls the plug on water meters (20 May 1997)
*Scientists in the dark over nature of light (*12 May 1997)

These examples show that even though taking advantage of metaphoricity may help in figuring out the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom, a language user, particularly a non-native, may be equally left in the dark when trying to determine whether an expression is figurative, literal, or both.

3.2.2 Analysability/Non-compositionality - two sides of the coin

Non-compositionality has often been interpreted as a sign of idioms being dead, that is, their meanings being arbitrary rather than figurative. The reason has been, as Lakoff (1987, 448) puts it, "that the meaning of an idiom is not predictable just from the meanings of the individual words that make it up." This does not, however, mean that the meaning is arbitrary (Lakoff 1987, 450). In fact, as studies on idioms' metaphoricity prove, it is often motivated, that is, a relationship between the metaphorical and literal meanings does exist. Stock et al (1993, 231) state that "there is a whole class of idioms for which Non-compositionality is false", and with these idioms, the meaning can be derived from their elements similarly to any other metaphor. Stock et al (ibid., 231-232) observe that with less metaphorical idioms, often "the apparent dissociation between the literal and idiomatic meaning is simply due to the fact that the connection is buried in the history of the language and the culture" (p.231).

Pulman (1993) applies the term *analysable* to idioms that can be broken down in such a way that each word can be claimed to correspond to/stand for a part of the metaphorical meaning of the whole. *Analysability* (e.g. Cacciari and Tabossi 1988, Gibbs 1993, Penttilä 1996) or *decompositionality* is thus connected to figurativeness, and, according to Gibbs (1993) and Pulman (1993), also to variation. According to Pulman (1993), totally opaque idioms are less likely to tolerate variance than figurative and analysable ones (see also Stock et al 1993, 234). Without going into more detail over the degrees of variance and analysability, Pulman's claim seems somewhat exaggerated. Pulman argues that although there are figurative idioms, that is, idioms whose origins are easily detected, there are also a number of opaque, totally non-transparent idioms, e.g. *kick the bucket.* However, many idioms that nowadays seem opaque originally referred to something quite concrete, analysable to people of an earlier time. Thus, the mere fact of opacity in the eyes of someone living today is perhaps not the reason for their intolerance of variance. Besides, idioms that may at first sight seem opaque often do convey (the image of) their figurative meaning, and though it may not be easy to work out the meaning by

imagination and logic, once the meaning of an idiom becomes known, it is easy to see the link between the figurative meaning of the idiom and the image created by its literal meaning (Keysar and Bly 1999, 1575-1576), e.g. *chew the fat, dog's dinner.*

Furthermore, while it is true that certain idioms which are nowadays opaque, like *kick the bucket*, only tolerate a limited amount of syntactic variation, tense, for instance, but certain opaque idioms can be, for example, passivised (*bring home, pull strings, cook the books* to name a few). Stock et al (1993) also admit that a number of idioms are analysable in such a way that each element can be interpreted as carrying a particular metaphorical meaning. They label this relationship between the words and the idiomatic meaning they carry in that particular expression *referent mapping* (ibid. 235). Remetaphorisation, "speakers punning or developing the idea ... thus revitalising and foregrounding compositional meaning" (Moon 1992, 15) provides further evidence for this. Moon's (1992, 15-16) examples serve well to illustrate the issue:

> *No skeletons in Matthew Taylor's cupboard, they all say. Well, a small door did open behind the Liberal candidate for Truro yesterday and a minor pile of bones was heard to clatter out.* (*The Guardian,* 24 Feb 1987:36)
>
> A television news reporter asking President Bush "*Did this summit bury the hatchet?"* Bush: "*There is no hatchet*"

The possibility of reduction and referring through one component to the whole expression can also be detected in other types of fixed phrases: it is possible, for instance, just to refer to *a rolling stone* without repeating the whole expression (Gläser 1988, 274). The possibility of reduction speaks for its part against frozenness. Moon (1998a,170) emphasises that lexical variation of idioms to adjust them to the context and situation actually is "evidence of their compositionality". To some extent compositionality is connected to the figurative use of single words in general (Moon 1998a, 201), for instance, in *light a fire under someone*, *fire* is an element used both in a literal and a metaphorical sense. Moon (ibid, 201) calls expressions of this kind of expressions *incorporated metaphors*.

Analysability is connected to metaphoricity, since even though it seems easy to detect, analysability depends on language users' intuitions (Gibbs 1993, 63). Gibbs (1993) strongly argues that analysability is crucial in the understanding and learning of idioms. If a language user and learner can see some motivation behind the form of an expression, it will naturally be easier to comprehend and probably also to memorise than an arbitrary expression. Arnaud and Savignon (1997) are also of the opinion that analysability and the consequent transparency ease a language learner's burden when encountering unfamiliar idioms.

3.2.3 Fixedness of form

Another basic characteristic of an idiom is frozenness, or invariance in appearance. Earlier idiom studies focussed their attention on this aspect (Weinreich1969, Fraser 1970). Again, just as with metaphoricity, views differ as to the degree of variance attributable to idioms. Fraser (1970, 39), for instance, created a six-point *Frozenness Hierarchy* for idioms ranging from totally frozen forms that allow no grammatical or lexical changes to idioms that tolerate unrestricted variation. Before Fraser, Weinreich (1969) went so far as to set out mathematical formulae to express idiom structures. For Fernando (1996), to take another example of a certain fixedness of form is a basic attribute of an idiom, more fundamental than any other characteristic including figurativeness. Gläser (1988, 266) suggests that instead of frozenness, we ought to speak about semantic and syntactic *stability* that characterises idioms. Idioms often tolerate quite a lot of variation either in syntax (tense, third person singular, negation, position of particles, part of speech; *have an/no axe to grind, no-stone-unturned*) (Stock et al 1993, 234) or vocabulary (*a dog's breakfast/dinner*). Although there are idioms that are completely frozen in their form, meaning and context (e.g. *kick the bucket*), many idioms can undergo changes in their grammar, vocabulary, and context (Pulman 1993, McGlone et al. 1994). As language changes, also idiom variations change. Even though *kick the bucket* is usually referred to as an idiom that tolerates only variation in tense, Moon (1998,123) argues that also *kick the pail* and *kick the can* are possible.

In Moon's (1998a) corpus-based idiom-study variations were surprisingly frequent: the corpus was dominated by texts from journalism. However, Moon reports that not all the variation can be put down to the genre and challenges the whole notion of fixedness. Moon (1998a,123) states that "very large numbers of FEIs [fixed expressions, incl. idioms] do not have fixed forms, and it would be wrong to claim that they do. The evidence is simply against it." Objections have been raised to the effect that lexical variance is still fairly rare, that the language user cannot freely choose which words to replace with which others, and that the choices are limited (Stock et al 1993, 233-234), but lexical variation does exist and language users can be quite creative when inventing effective expressions to suit a particular situation. Fernando (1996, 42-65, 124-152), for example, lists numerous instances of lexical transformation and states that transformable idioms "may be modified by various transformational operations: addition, permutation, substitution, and deletion. In each case, the conventional meaning is varied adding to the interpretative effort on the part of the addressee" (Fernando 1996, 151).

However, such transformations may alter the meaning or at least the nuances the idiom carries, while depending on the context an expression may carry either its idiomatic or its literal meaning: it is literally possible *kick the bucket* or *shoot oneself in the foot* (Ortony et al. 1978, Colombo 1993, Cronk et al. 1993). This complexity, and the fact that idioms are commonly used both in speech and writing, can cause trouble especially for second language learners even in understanding, let alone in production.

Variation is connected with creativeness in the use of idioms. As it is possible to play with the relationship between the figurative and the literal, lexical and syntactical variability add to these possibilities and increase the flexibility of idioms. It allows alteration in the form and/or vocabulary of an expression to suit the context and situation while yet retaining the characteristics of an idiom. Once the former Iraqi president had uttered *the mother of all battles*, there started to appear mothers of all kinds of events in Finnish, too (Länsimäki 1995, 256). Similarly, *a lot of water has gone under the bridge* whenever various rivers or lakes have been mentioned in Finnish newspaper articles (*paljon on vettä virrannut Saimaaseen / Kymijoessa/ Kokemäenjoessa* etc.) On the other hand, variability also adds to the difficulty in using idioms: not only may various transformations be difficult for a non-native speaker to recognise and comprehend, they may also confuse a native speaker forming or interpreting them. For instance, two idioms may get mixed, or a change in the wording twists the meaning, or makes the literal meaning, and, thus, the image the expression creates, funny or inappropriate (Punttila 1995, 301-309).

An interesting suggestion has been made as to a possible link between frozenness and the lexical status of idioms (Swinney and Cutler 1979, 531). Swinney and Cutler (1979) propose that the more frozen the idiom, the stronger its lexical status, that is, the more strongly it is perceived as one word, not as a sentence-like expression containing separate words and meanings. This may be true since it seems quite logical that the more often the expression appears in the same form, the easier it is to recognise and memorise. Conversely, the more variation the expression allows, the less easy it is to recognise in its different forms.

3.2.4 Level of formality

Idioms have often been claimed to pertain to informal, spoken language rather than written or more formal language. To a certain extent this is true, but the few studies there are, however, prove that this claim is too simplified, as idioms are also a part of written language, even somewhat formal texts though they do not occur in highly formal texts. Newspapers in particular have caught the attention of phraseologists (e.g. Fernando 1996, Moon 1998a, 69-71) since plenty of examples of idioms and their different variations can be detected in newspapers, especially in headlines. Idioms are effective in arousing interest and it seems that journalists and reporters are quite eager to use them. Nowadays, at least in Finnish news and sports broadcasts, idioms are fairly frequently used on television, too.

Strässler (1982, 81) in his data analysis of transcripts of therapy sessions, trials, White House discussions and some excerpts from literature, found that despite the rather formal settings, idioms were still used in the conversations examined although less than he had expected. Trials and therapy sessions did not contain too many idioms, probably because of the institutional setting particularly in the former case. However, the White House transcripts

examined contained an unexpectedly large number of idioms. Strässler does point out, though, that this was mostly due to one single person who particularly liked to use idioms. This person was relatively low in the hierarchy which might partly explain his personal idiolect and his not feeling constrained to use strictly formal language. Strässler does not reveal much about the nature or themes of the conversations, so it is difficult to estimate their overall formality (Strässler 1982, 78-81).

Interestingly, Strässler (1982) also found that idioms are most often used when talking about a third person or an object, seldom when the speaker is referring to him/herself or to the hearer. Therefore, there seem to be some restrictions as to their use in reference to the participants in a speech event

Connected to the level of formality is the close relationship between idioms and context or register. Although a number of words carry a certain undertone or style, idioms are fairly seldom neutral. Thus, when using idioms, their style and context ought be a focus of special attention. This has also been emphasised in the field of idiom research (see e.g. Fernando 1996, 101). Subtle differences in meaning are sometimes neglected in the debate on whether or not idioms ought to be taught to non-native speakers. Stock et al (1993, 231-233) remind us that although two idioms might be close to each other in meaning, there are nuances that distinguish them from each other. Stock et al (ibid) further point out that the meanings of idioms are often oversimplified. For instance, *kick the bucket* is usually said to mean "to die", when in fact it means dying by "natural causes, and relatively suddenly too" (p. 233). Idioms are often highly context and register bound which adds to their complexity.

3.2.5 Multi-word expressions

An idiom consists of more than just one word. This feature is essential to an idiom albeit not without its own problems, too. Should we accept a prepositional phrase, such as *in bloom* (Moon 1998a, 146) as an idiom since there are two words, even though it could also be seen as an extension of the metaphorical meaning of *to blossom*? Or, is *on sale* (ibid, 147) an idiom although it is not metaphorical? Are *short list* and *fat chance* (Fernando 1996, 71) parallel to each other, and equal to the popular example of an idiom, *kick the bucket*? What is the relationship between multi-wordedness and metaphoricity, i.e. is it acceptable that one or more elements should carry their literal meaning and while only one element in an expression is metaphorical, e.g. *foot the bill* (Fernando 1998, 71)? What is the role of similes, such as *cool as a cucumber*? Is any multi-word, non-literal expression an idiom, e.g. *How do you do* (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992)? How many elements are allowed, or is there a maximum length for an idiom?

In defining idioms, more important than the degree to which any single feature is present in an idiom, is that an expression should possess a combination of these elements. Multi-wordedness alone is not enough, neither is figurativeness, or fixedness of form or the degree of analysability (see e.g. Pulman 1993, 250)

3.3 Idiom in this study

To define an idiom in an irrefutable, undebatable way is a mission impossible. It is equally impossible to label any particular expression as an idiom, collocation, phrase, etc. in an undebatable way. The distinction between an idiom and a collocation is fairly easy: collocations carry their literal meaning, or in Cruse's (1986, 40) words, they are semantically transparent. At first glance, the definition of an idiom is fairly widely agreed on: a multi-word expression that carries a meaning different from the sum of the meanings of the words it contains (e.g. Allan 1986, 237, Cruse 1986, 37, Chaika 1982, 200). The interpretation of this definition, however, varies enormously. Idioms were for a long time seen as dead, frozen metaphors, but as Gibbs (1993) has shown, this is not the case. Idioms can be distinguished from dead metaphors, as Cruse (1986) does in his analysis. For him, a metaphor becomes frozen or dead if it is often used with a particular meaning and consequently, loses its novelty and metaphorical nature and becomes an established or a standard expression that carries a metaphorical meaning. Some examples Cruse (p. 42) gives are *sweeten the pill*, *leave no stone unturned*. These examples indicate that to distinguish dead metaphors from idioms may not be necessary or even possible: Cruse (p. 44), also accepts this, adding that idioms and dead metaphors share certain features, and that the majority of idioms were originally metaphors. However, he does not make it clear what distinguishes these originally metaphorical idioms from dead, frozen metaphors. If it is merely the fact that the metaphoricity of dead metaphors is more obvious than that of idioms, or that dead metaphors do not tolerate any syntactic changes, the division still remains unclear. Recognition of the metaphoricity of idioms is again a question of interpretation (accepted also by Cruse p. 44), and there is no need to make the distinction as it leaves the problem with categorizing expressions (idioms, collocations, phrases etc.) unsolved. On the other hand, if syntactic frozenness is the criterion, then idioms with an unchangeable structure might be called dead metaphors just because of their structure.

The point at which a dead metaphor becomes an idiom therefore remains unclear: when is the metaphoricity of an expression so far away that a frozen metaphor becomes an idiom? It seems sufficient to say that an idiom will tolerate syntactic and/or lexical variation, to varying degrees. Also, the metaphorical origin of an expression may, to my mind, be clearly detectable, e.g. *give the green light*, while the expression is still an idiom. Naturally, it could be claimed that since in, for instance, *foot the bill*, *bill* carries its literal meaning, the meaning is obvious, only semi-metaphorical and that the expression is thus not an idiom. However, *foot* does not appear as a verb in any other connection, and thus the three words cannot be separated: they are an entity with the extra meaning not just to *pay the bill* but *having to pay* it. Hence, the meaning is not obvious. Besides, it does not seem reasonable to claim that the meaning would be apparent to a non-native as often in idioms only one (or even none) of the separate words carries its literal meaning. Coming across *foot* in such a strange

cotext as with *the bill* might indicate that at least one of the words must carry some additional, figurative meaning. On the surface, the expression does not differ from e.g. *pull someone's leg*, in which the literal meanings are absent (unless, of course, someone's leg is literally pulled, to make the issue more complicated). The only tool a language user has to distinguish the two examples from each other is intelligent guesswork, and that is not always enough. For instance, native adolescents have been found to consider idioms more transparent than adults (Nippold and Rudzinski 1993, 731), which may indicate that less experienced language users were more likely to rely on the literal meaning and the image it suggested. Naturally, the context assists in detecting the meaning, but the laborious process of understanding the expression does take time.

The argument that expressions that include words in their literal sense are not idioms might apply to for instance similes, but again it is the whole that should be taken account of, not just separate words. If someone is *as old as the hills,* they are, by definition, old, no matter whether the expression has connotations of being also old-fashioned and traditional, not just old-aged. However, when we approach idioms taking each one as a whole, and seeing it as a single entity, the situation is different: taken not as separate words and meanings but as a sum of words and figurative meanings so tightly intertwined that they cannot be separated or even distinguished, they form an idiom.

As has been mentioned before, there is no hard and fast distinction between idioms and non-idioms is weak and fuzzy, and there is indeed an overlap. It is not always easy or even possible to say on which side of the border an expression should be located. The focus should be on the meaning of the whole expression, and on its figurativeness. Idioms vary enormously in form and structure, so no rule as to the structure can be invoked, nor can it be claimed that an expression is not an idiom because of its variable structure or vocabulary, or because it does not contain a verb, etc. As Allan (1986, 238) puts it, "it seems to be impossible to legislate the boundaries of permissible modifications to idioms" since "many polylexemic idioms have a variety of forms anyway", and as "figurative expressions, they encourage spontaneous variation."

For the purposes of this study, an idiom is an expression that contains more than one word, and whose meaning is different from the sum of the literal meanings of its components. Excluded, however, are proverbs, sayings and conversational phrases. Although they all are multi-word expressions that often mean something different from the words in them, they each form a category of their own depending on the function they have. Proverbs often carry some additional meaning, or their purpose is to teach a lesson, and they are somehow more tightly connected with cultural discourse. Simply uttering them is an action intended to have a particular effect on the participants in the speech action. Sayings can be considered to be close to idioms, but they are usually not figurative. Finally, conversational phrases have a special interactional function, and they, too, are often literal rather than metaphorical. Figure 2 illustrates the fuzziness of the boundaries between various multi-word expressions.

Scholars who have studied idioms all seem to have their own individual views about the definition and nature of an idiom. Thus for some writers, the term *idiom* refers to idiomatic language in general, including conventional or conversational phrases, greetings etc. The other extreme in idiom studies is to accept as idioms only the most stereotypical examples, called traditional or pure idioms (*kick the bucket, be lost in the woods)*. A distinction is sometimes drawn between traditional idioms and semi-idioms[4], or 'true' and 'quasi' idioms (Fernando 1996, 35-36). Another category employed by Fernando (1996,35-36) is that of literal idioms that to my mind are more like conventional phrases, sayings, or collocations (*happy birthday, on the contrary, dark and handsome*).

The common feature most definitions share, even though the boundaries are sometimes stretched, is the metaphorical or figurative nature of idioms. An idiom means more than the sum of its words, that is, the meaning of the expression as a whole is different from the literal meaning of the words that make it up. There also seems to be a vague understanding of the phenomenon and of the significance of idioms in language generally among both linguists and language users. This is reflected in the inclusion of idioms (however one defines them) in dictionaries and second language teaching materials, and in the way whole dictionaries and exercise books are devoted to idioms. As certain idioms may carry several metaphorical meanings, there are also differences in the way they are treated in the literature: whether they are seen as separate expressions or as one, polysemous expression. In this study, a polysemous idiom has been considered as one single expression with not just one but several figurative meanings. An alternative, adopted by Moon (1998a) among others, is to see different meanings as separate, homographic expressions.

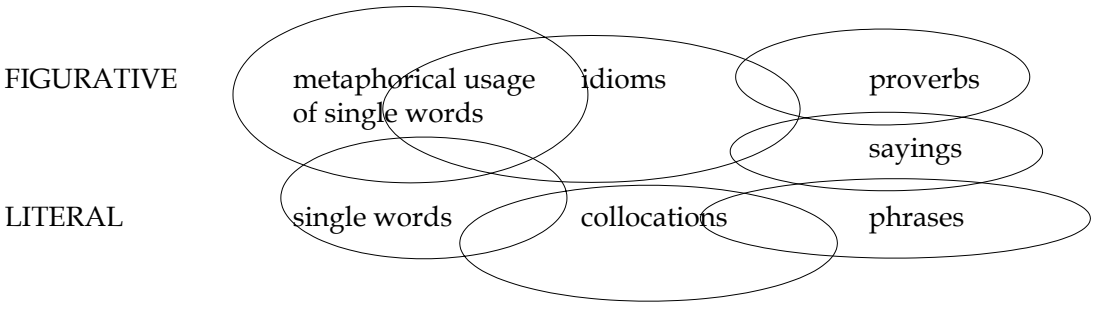

FIGURE 2 The rough field of vocabulary.

[4] an idiom that has at least one constituent that carries a literal meaning, e.g. *foot the bill*

4 IDIOM DICTIONARIES AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER

Just as some idiom researchers, idiom dictionaries are rather liberal in their definition of an idiom, and in addition to 'true' idioms, they also include many sayings, although proverbs and phrasal verbs are usually excluded from idiom dictionaries and included in dictionaries of their own, possibly because of their abundance. What is particularly important for a second language learner, is not just learning to recognise and understand and possibly also to produce the meanings of idioms, but knowing in what kind of situations or contexts they are and can be used. Idioms have been considered to pertain more to informal, colloquial, spoken language (e.g. Moon 1998) rather than to written language, or a more formal register. However, as the studies by Fernando (1996) and Moon (1998) show, idioms are frequently used in newspaper journalism and in fiction, to give two examples. Likewise, idioms can be heard on the television and radio and thus are part of everyday language. It is true that, just as with single words, there are also more informal or perhaps slang expressions among idioms but that does not mean these idioms as a category can be taken to be informal (see also *Collins Cobuild* 1995, vii).

A number of idioms are included in general dictionaries together with other multi-word expressions such as sayings, proverbs and collocations. Naturally, in a general dictionary the selection of idioms cannot be exhaustive. In general dictionaries, idioms are "treated rather like some derived words" (Jackson 1988, 109), and they tend to just explain their meaning rather than give examples of their usage etc. (Moon 1992, 16). Special idiom dictionaries, in their turn, have more space but still they cannot afford to give highly specific indications as to how to use particular idioms, in view of the great number of expressions they (must) contain (Moon, ibid). They do, however, offer examples, and often information on the degree of formality, sometimes even providing the etymology. Bilingual dictionaries are very short on information, simply giving an equivalent expression in L2, or a paraphrase used in L2 (Moon 1992, 17) without questioning the degree of equivalence or differences in usage between the two languages. According to Moon (1992, 17), the attitude conveyed by dictionaries is rather discouraging, as "in all cases, there is a

general impression that fixed expressions are nuisances". That hardly answers the needs of the non-native speaker who should learn to understand or sometimes even to use fixed expressions, including idioms. Even the line between multi-word and single-word expressions is sometimes difficult to define and determine (e.g. Moon 1998b, 81).

4.1 English-English idiom dictionaries

Since it is important for a second language learner to at least recognise and understand idioms, this study focusses particularly on second language learners. I shall now look at the most recent idiom dictionaries, that, alongside textbooks and teachers, are the resource SL learners have to turn to when encountering an unfamiliar idiom. I shall pay particular attention to the idea of an idiom conveyed by the dictionaries, and what they have included as idioms. The three British English idiom dictionaries chosen here are those that were used when creating the questionnaire for this study. Although presumably the majority of idioms learners encounter are American due to the dominant role of American English on television and film, British English dictionaries contain also American expressions and can thus be of assistance to SL learners. There are also two fairly recent English-Finnish idiom dictionaries that will be discussed here before moving on to discussing previous idiom studies. Each dictionary's definition will be considered first and this will be followed by examples and analysis.

4.1.2 *Collins Cobuild* 1995

Monolingual idiom dictionaries acknowledge at least implicitly that defining and categorising idioms is very complicated. Idiom dictionaries draw attention to problems of categorisation of idioms and acknowledge that there are several types of idiomatic expression. Besides, although they are called *idiom* dictionaries, they also contain other types of expression, such as proverbs and sayings. They give a rather wordy definition and explanation of typical the idiom characteristics, as the following extract shows:

> An idiom is a special kind of phrase. It is a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one it would have if the meaning of each word were taken individually.... Idioms are typically metaphorical: they are effectively metaphors which have become 'fixed' or 'fossilized'. (*Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms.* 1995. p.iv)

In addition, *Collins Cobuild* allows a degree of variation in idioms, and does not take them to be totally fixed. Naturally, the definitions provided by a dictionary and the coverage it gives depend on its purpose and target group. *Collins Cobuild* is intended for teachers of English and intermediate-advanced -level learners. It is based on *Collins Cobuild Corpus* and thus also contains

frequency classifications for the idioms. Collins Cobuild lists several categories of expression that have been included in the dictionary:

> traditional idioms: *spill the beans, red herring*, etc.
> common multi-word metaphors: *acid test*, etc.
> metaphorical proverbs: *every cloud has a silver lining*, etc.
> common similes: *old as the hills*, etc.
> others with a strong pragmatic meaning: *famous last words*, etc.

A few types of expression that have been excluded from the dictionary are listed in the introduction: other kinds of fixed expression, such as *in fact, at least,* greetings and other fixed formulae, like *how do you do,* and phrasal verbs. Thus, *Collins Cobuild* also contains expressions not falling into the category of idioms in the present paper. Proverbs and the class mentioned last 'others with a strong pragmatic meaning' are not idioms. Common similes posed a dilemma: on one hand, they can be comprehended as expressions simply intensifying the quality conveyed by the adjective, but, on the other hand, they carry an additional, figurative meaning that the adjective does not have by itself, for instance, *old as the hills* connotes not just old age, but also old-fashioned and traditional. It could be argued that by the same definition proverbs, too, for example, should have been included, but they, in their turn have the function of teaching a lesson, a characteristic not shared by idioms.

Collins Cobuild also gives information about the frequency of its idioms. It should be borne in mind, however, that frequency counts are only relative: they merely reveal something about the corpus they are based on but nothing else. Albeit corpora and computers have raised frequency counts to another level compared to the early days let alone the more modest counts of the preceding decades, it is still to a certain extent true that "advocates of frequency- lists stress the high percentage without telling the whole truth" (Engels 1968, 215). Idioms and their frequencies should be approached with similar caution as well; *Collins Cobuild* is based on a particular corpus which also has among its sources plenty of texts that are decades old. In the idiom dictionary, frequency has been measured by comparison with other expressions, but not by comparison to single words, phrasal verbs etc. The latter point is also emphasised in the preface to the dictionary (1996, xvii): "In fact, only a few high-frequency idioms in this dictionary are as common as the items in the Cobuild English Dictionary which are marked with a single black diamond."

Collins Cobuild, in addition to offering an explicit definition of an idiom, also contains a chapter on idioms and pragmatics. This is how the dictionary views idiom pragmatics (1996, vi-vii):

> Idioms (...) are often [used] to convey attitude. They typically convey evaluations. (...) An idiom may have connotations and pragmatic meanings which are not obvious to people who are unfamiliar with that idiom, and so the real meaning of a statement may be missed. Similarly, someone may (...) unintentionally cause the wrong reaction in the person they are talking to. (...) Idioms are used to give emphasis. (...) People often use idioms in order to create a sense of 'camaraderie' (...) Idioms are generally considered informal (...) [but] are often used in contexts which are not really informal at all."

Finally, *Collins Cobuild* warns learners not to use idioms in formal contexts. This section on pragmatics is very valuable indeed, and reflects the view the *Collins Cobuild* editorial board has of idioms, and also reflects the most recent idiom

studies. As the preface was written by Rosamund Moon, this perhaps is hardly a surprise. However, in the limited space a dictionary has to guide its users in the use of these expressions, *Collins Cobuild* succeeds well. As well as defining the meanings of idioms, this dictionary gives quite extensive examples of sentences in which each idiom may appear, and also in certain cases explains the etymology of an expression.

4.1.3 *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* 1992

Another fairly recently published dictionary exclusively devoted to idioms, *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (1992) defines idioms as follows: "An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meanings of the separate words (front cover)." *Longman* lists some other characteristics pertaining to idioms: idioms are metaphorical rather than literal, more or less fixed and invariable, and varying in the extent to which they meet the criteria; that is, some idioms fall deeper within the definition of an idiom than others that perhaps are closer to their literal meaning. Also, *Longman* mentions that most idioms consist of two or more words, and many belong to informal spoken language rather than to formal written English (p. viii). *Longman* (ix-x), too, lists various types of idioms:

1) Traditional idioms e.g. *spill the beans, give up the ghost*
-almost full sentences, you only need to add a subject (vs. other types of idioms that "function like particular *parts of speech*" e.g. a noun phrase functions as a subject, object, or complement (p. ix)
2) Idioms in which actions stand for emotions or feelings e.g. *hang one's head, throw up one's hands/arms*
-often cause trouble to NNS's since are not literal, and same action may denote in English quite something else than it does in some other language
3) Pairs of words e.g. *cats and dogs*
-many of these belong to the first group, function as particular types of speech
-order often fixed
4) Idioms with 'it' e.g. *live it up*
-'it' does not refer to the word coming before it as it usually does
5) Allusions e.g. *Whitehall*
-significant in English society
6) Sayings
-the more informal ones *you can't take it with you*
-proverbs *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*
7) Typical conversational phrases e.g. *how do you do*
-not literal
8) Similes e.g. *dead as a doornail, work like a horse*

Excluded are archaisms, jargon, Americanisms that are not used in Britain, foreign phrases (e.g. in French), common phrases (e.g. *on strike*, i.e. with no metaphorical meaning), and phrasal verbs.

Again, this dictionary contains expressions not treated as idioms in the present study. Allusions are not actually figurative but rather examples of metonymy (Strässler 1982, 20, Yule 1996, 122). Likewise, sayings and conversational phrases are not figurative. They belong to the sphere of idiomatic language, but are not idioms. It is difficult to see the difference between them and 'common phrases' that have not been included in the dictionary. Category Four, idioms with 'it', does not really contain idioms, since

e.g. *live it up* is more like a phrasal verb, and the dictionary does not give any solid ground for choosing to distinguish expressions with 'it' and calling them idioms.

Even though *Longman* also gives labels to certain idioms signalling their style, such as *formal, informal, slang, humorous* etc., they do it similarly to any other (general) dictionary without mentioning any pragmatic restrictions on idioms. Context, style, register etc. are not mentioned, and the concern for the needs of second language learners shown in *Collins Cobuild* is absent. Naturally, it can be argued that a dictionary's primary task is to provide information on the meanings of an expression, not to teach how to use them, but when the target user group is foreign language learners, it would have bene appropriate to provide more explicit guidance as to the idioms' contexts. Merely to mention that idioms often are colloquial is not enough. What is good about *Longman*, however, is that it too gives fairly extensive example sentences, and also quite often indicates etymology.

4.1.4 *Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Vol 2: Phrase, Clause and Sentence Idioms* 1983

Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English. Vol 1: Verbs with Prepositions and Particles. (1976) and *Vol 2: Phrase, Clause and Sentence Idioms* (1983) share the same principles and definition of an idiom. *Oxford* states that "an idiom is a combination of two or more words which function as a unit of meaning (Vol 1, viii-ix)." Further on it is said that this semantic unity often also makes idioms single grammatical units (Vol 1, ix).

As for the need for knowledge of idioms, the dictionaries comment that "familiarity with a wide range of idiomatic expressions, and the ability to use them appropriately in context, are among the distinguishing marks of a native-like command of English" and there is a "widely-held view that idioms ... are among the most characteristically 'English' elements in the general vocabulary." (Vol 1, vi). Also, the introduction mentions that the meanings are often ambiguous, especially for non-native speakers, and that there is thus clearly a need for idiom dictionaries (Vol 1, vi). The dictionaries do not, however, talk more specifically about context, style or the register of idioms. On the other hand, they contain idiomatic expressions rather than strictly just idioms.

In general *Oxford* seems to approach idioms differently from the other two idiom dictionaries. It gives perhaps the broadest definition of the three. It often also provides the literal meaning (if it exists) in addition to figurative one. The problem of literal vs. figurative is mentioned in the introductory part of the dictionary when discussing the dilemma of defining the idiom. *Oxford* does not attempt a strict definition of an idiom but is quite to the point in stating: "There is other evidence, too, especially the fact that a small number of words can be substituted in expressions often regarded as opaque (consider *burn one's boats* or *bridges*), that idioms are not divided as a small water-tight category from non-idioms but are related to them along a scale or continuum." (Vol 2, xii). This allows quite a broad definition of an idiom and the inclusion of various

idiomatic expressions in the dictionary. *Oxford*, however, differentiates between different types of idioms and other idiomatic expressions, albeit this does not show in the items listed or in their explanations.

> 1)Pure idioms e.g. *kick the bucket*
> 2)Figurative idioms
> -variation and pronoun substitution rare though possible
> 3)Restricted collocations = semi-idioms.
> -One element has a figurative sense that is only found in that particular context. Other element(s) carry their familiar, literal sense(s).e.g. *jog one's memory*
> 4)Open collocations
> -words that appear together in their literal sense and are freely combinable (e.g. *a broken window, fill the sink*). These have been excluded from the dictionary though the editors admit that sometimes it has been almost impossible to decide on the precise nature of an idiom
> 5) Finally, the boundary between idiomatic and non-idiomatic expressions is not always clear-cut and idioms are not always fixed but allow slight changes in their wording (e.g. *put a bold/grave/brave face on it/things)* (p.x). In this dictionary, as many unclear cases (semi-idioms) as possible have been included, too. (p.x)

Of the three dictionaries, *Oxford* is the only one that explicitly admits and discusses the problem with of defining an idiom. Despite its attempt to define and categorise idioms, *Oxford*, however, contains also expressions that on a stricter definition would be called idiomatic expressions rather than idioms, for instance *do you know/do you mind*. Expressions of this kind often appear in general dictionaries too, not just in those specialised in idioms, though the editors claim that they are often insufficiently treated in general dictionaries (p.xvii). However, a relatively broad definition of idioms had to be taken into account when creating the questionnaire for the present study.

Oxford approaches idioms from a grammatical viewpoint, which makes defining an idiom problematic as there is a wide range of grammatical structures and no precise set of patterns can be defined. The dictionary categorises idioms in two large groups, phrase idioms (noun/adj/prep/adv phrases, e.g. *a crashing bore/free with one's money/in the nick of time/as often as not*) and clause idioms (verb+complement/verb+direct object/verb+indirect object+direct object etc., e.g. *go berserk/ease sb's conscience (mind)/do sb credit*) (Vol 2, xi).

4.1.5 Summary

All three monolingual dictionaries have adopted a rather broad view of an idiom. They contain expressions that are useful for language learners and users, but which are idiomatic expressions rather than idioms. A considerable number of them can also be found in general dictionaries, which undermines the point of specialised idiom dictionaries. As general dictionaries cannot include all the richness of the world of idioms, which are used so widely in everyday language, there is certainly a need for idiom dictionaries. They would be even more valuable if they informed readers of the stylistic nature and the functions of idioms in the way *Collins Cobuild* does.

Since idiom is more strictly defined in this study, some expressions that appear in the dictionaries have not been accepted as idioms. On the other hand, the exclusion of certain expressions may not have affected the final result as of the 4,400 idioms in *Collins Cobuild*, only 65 were randomly selected for the questionnaire.

4.2 English-Finnish idiom dictionaries

Until quite recently, there have been no bilingual (English -Finnish) idiom dictionaries. There is still very little choice, with two dictionaries both quite popular in their style. I shall next introduce the two bilingual dictionaries that have appeared since the questionnaire for this study was drawn up and the inquiry conducted.

4.2.1 *101 idiomia in English* 1998

This dictionary defines an idiom as a group of words whose meaning is different from the individual meanings of its constituents. The definition does not explicitly mention metaphoricity, but says that idioms need to be learnt as entities. As for style and register, the foreword mentions that they appear in different styles, and that new idioms are being born all the time. As the title states, the book contains just over a hundred idioms, and the target audience is not mentioned.

101 idiomia in English has taken advantage of the figurativeness of idioms in that for most of the idioms, there is a picture referring to the literal meaning of the idiom. The explanations given in Finnish are, when possible, equivalent idioms. However, what is lacking is example sentences and any kind of indication as to the style, register, or formality of expressions. The dictionary may well serve the purpose when a learner wants to find the meaning of an unfamiliar expression, but if the dictionary's aim is to affect learners' SL production, this dictionary does not provide enough tools. It might have been appropriate to set out the dictionary's goals at least. Moreover, it is not revealed on what basis the idioms in the dictionary have been chosen. Considering so few have been included, this would have been appropriate.

4.2.2 *A bird in the hand is worth kymmenen oksalla* 2002

This dictionary does not set out any definition of an idiom at all, but the examination of the selection in the book reveals that for the most part, it contains pure idioms. Just as the other bilingual dictionary does, this one takes advantage of figurativeness by illustrating each idiom with a picture. The authors have managed to find an equivalent idiom in Finnish for each English expression, or else they have chosen only idioms with an equivalent in Finnish.

The basis for the selection is not explained, neither is the target group. Example sentences are not given, nor are style or register referred to.

4.2.3 Summary

Both bilingual dictionaries are very meagre both in the number of idioms included and in the information offered on idioms in general and the chosen idioms in particular. They seem intended to serve as entertaining reading and perhaps to raise awareness among language learners, but by comparison with monolingual dictionaries the information they offer is very scanty. The view they have of idioms seems to be that idioms are a peculiar, funny element in language. This is not explicitly stated, but is reflected in the way in which the idioms are treated and in what is left unsaid. Both dictionaries, however, make the most of the figurativeness of idioms when they use pictures to illustrate the meanings, thus enhancing the link between the literal and figurative, and encouraging learners to use their imagination and creativity.

4.3 The definition of an idiom revisited

Idiom dictionaries, like many studies of idioms also take a very broad view of what an idiom is. Phrasal verbs, though often showing idiom-like figurativeness, are usually distinguished as a category of their own. They are numerous, and structurally a homogeneous group (Sjöholm 1995). Collocations (*bread and butter*), sayings (*be that as it may*) , and other conversational phrases (*how do you do?*) are often included in idiom dictionaries although on the research front, they are usually treated on their own. These expressions are the easiest to detect and distinguish from idioms as they quite literally say exactly what they mean. On the other hand, if an idiom is seen more as an idiomatic expression in a particular language than a figurative expression, the fixedness of form certainly comes to the fore. Fernando (1996, 30), for instance defines idioms as "indivisible units whose components cannot be varied or varied only within definable limits." Hence, for Fernando (1996), figurativeness is not crucial but fixedness of form is. She (ibid, 30-31) goes on to say that all idioms are naturally idiomatic expressions but not vice versa: highly variable expressions like *catch a bus/train*, etc. are not idioms. In this study, however, metaphoricity is taken to be the key indicator of an idiom and thus these expressions have been excluded.

The first source to turn to when looking for the definition of a word is to a general dictionary. An idiom is thus

> -a group of words which have a different meaning when used together from the one they would have if you took the meaning of each word individually" (*Cobuild English Dictionary*), or
> -a group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meanings of each separate word put together." (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*), or

> -phrase or sentence whose meaning is not clear from the meaning of its individual words and which must be learnt as a whole unit (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*).

While English monolingual dictionaries seem to be fairly unanimous in their views and see no problem in the definition, a look at some dictionaries of linguistics gives a more complex answer to the question of what is an idiom:

> -a group of words which has a special connotation not usually equal to the sum of the individual words, and which usually cannot be translated literally into another language without the special meaning being lost. Alternative term: idiomatic expression. (*Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*)
>
> -a sequence of words which is semantically and often syntactically restricted, so that it functions as a single unit. The meanings of individual words cannot be combined to produce the meaning of the idiomatic expression as a whole. (*An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*)
>
> -a set expression in which two or more words are syntactically related, but with a meaning like that of a single lexical unit (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*)

Hence in their definitions the dictionaries pay attention to the fixedness of idioms and to their functioning as single units. The emphasis varies, and an idiom is either invariably a *set* expression, or *often* syntactically restricted. An idiom is also seen as synonymous with an idiomatic expression, and categorising an expression as an idiom does not seem to pose a problem.

Within the field of vocabulary and idiom research the definitions are often different from those adopted by the dictionaries, and variations are also encountered within this field. Although a change in the emphasis of research has accompanied changes in the conception of idioms, their role in language and in vocabulary, the definition of an idiom has not, however, developed in a similar way. Rather, all scholars seem to have a definition of their own, albeit some of them have not considered it necessary to define an idiom explicitly. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect certain tendencies in the definition adopted depending on the focus of each study. I shall next move on to discuss previous studies on English idioms.

5 PREVIOUS STUDIES ON IDIOMS

With the increased interest in formulaic language, there has also been a rise in idiom studies. In the former Soviet Union and Russian language studies, there is a long tradition of studying idioms but very few studies have been translated into western languages. In the West, there are some idiom studies that date back to the 60s and 70s, but until recent years, idioms have not played that significant a role.

The approach to idioms in vocabulary studies has changed significantly during the course of time. The field of vocabulary studies in general started to gain a greater foothold in linguistics in the 1970s, and multi-word expressions, including idioms, received more attention. Idioms have been investigated from various perspectives depending on the prevailing views in linguistics at any particular time. Not only the focus adopted, but also the definition of an idiom itself has varied. The approaches taken by linguists can be roughly divided into five categories that reflect different lines of thinking in linguistics at various times:

1. the structure of an idiom and its variations and transformations (1960s-early 1970s)
2. the processing and storing of idioms (late 1970s-1980s)
3. the metaphoricity of idioms (1985 onwards)
4. teaching, learning and understanding idioms (late 1980s onwards)
5. idioms within the wider perspective of idiomatic language, and the functions of idioms (1990s)

This chapter looks at each of these viewpoints in turn and discusses some major studies and findings in each case.

5.1 Idioms and language structure

Idioms started to arouse the interest of linguists in the sixties. There had in fact been some mention of idioms and other phraseological expressions in the previous decades (see e.g. Weinreich 1969), but the existence of idioms was only

fully recognised in the sixties. Albeit word meanings and associations had been discussed in vocabulary studies and by psycholinguists (e.g. Deese, 1965, Rommetveit 1968), idiom studies still concentrated on the form (for a concise introduction to different studies on form and syntactical transformations, see e.g. Greim 1982).

In Russia, interest in idioms goes back further and according to Makkai (1972, 24), Strässler (1982, 23) and Moon (1998, 17), for instance, western definitions and categorisations as well as idiom dictionaries have been influenced by Russian phraseological theories. Strässler (ibid.) emphasises that in Russia, idioms have gained much more attention than in the West, where idiom studies, despite a growing interest, remained rather sparse until the late '70s. This study uses western studies as its background but the Russian influence on them should not be forgotten. The main difference between Russian and western phraseologists seems to lie in the terminology they adopt (Howarth 1996, Mel'čuk 1998, Strässler 1982, Teliya et al 1998). Various western linguists have attempted to create their own labeling and categorisation systems, and the situation has been similar in Russia. In Russia, however, some terms are used that are absent in western studies, like *phraseloids*, for example. What is common to both lines of tradition, is that they see idiomatic and phraseological language as a continuum. Howarth (1996) illustrates this with the following figure:

<table>
<tr><td>Amosova</td><td>free phrases</td><td colspan="2">phraseloids</td><td>phrasemes</td><td>p. unities</td><td>p. fusions</td></tr>
<tr><td>Vinogradov</td><td>free phrases</td><td colspan="3">phraseological combinations</td><td>p. unities</td><td>p. fusions</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Aisenstadt/ Cowie</td><td rowspan="2">open collocations</td><td colspan="3">restricted collocations</td><td rowspan="2">figurative idioms</td><td rowspan="2">pure idioms</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>1</td></tr>
</table>

FIGURE 3 Comparison between Russian and European phraseological continua (Adopted from Howarth 1996, 32).

In general, the definition and labels given to idioms vary tremendously. More significant, however, are the views taken of the characteristics of idioms: what features have been highlighted and how idioms have been characterised.

5.1.1 Uriel Weinreich

The formalist tradition has left its mark on idiom studies. Although Uriel Weinreich, the pioneer at studying the forms of idioms, mentions that the most common definition of an idiom is "a complex expression whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of its elements" (Weinreich 1969, 26), he nonethelessin his discussion highlights form, not meaning, and looks at idioms from a generative perspective. By transforming idioms and other multi-word expressions into mathematical formulae, he ends up "calling any expression in

which at least one constituent is polysemous, and in ´which a selection of subsense is determined by the verbal context, a *phraseological unit*. A phraseological unit that involves at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal contextual selection of subsense, will be called an idiom." (Weinreich, 1969, 42). That one polysemous constituent should not be considered enough certainly does make sense, as it excludes expressions like *catch a train/bus* etc. in which one constituent carries a special meaning and can be combined with various words without its meaning changing. Whether a person *catches a bus* or *a train, catch* still refers to the same kind of activity. However, Weinreich's definition is not entirely unproblematic as it leaves out expressions like *foot the bill*, where only one constituent, *foot,* carries a special subsense used only in that particular expression. One cannot *foot the debt,* for instance. Moreover, *footing the bill* often signifies more than just paying the bill.

Weinreich (1969, 57) saw idioms as separate from the rest of the vocabulary, maintaining that "the description of the language is to contain, in addition to the dictionary, an *idiom list.*" The relationship of idioms to homophonous literal expressions seems to be the reason for this conclusion. Since idioms are such a specific feature in a language, and since several expressions can in certain contexts carry their literal meaning, it might appear clearer to present them on their own. Nevertheless, Weinreich does not mention other figurative or otherwise non-literal expressions. A single word can have a figurative or non-literal meaning, for instance metonymies like *10 Downing Street, a Catch 22*. These, just like idioms, are often extensions of the structurally similar literal counterpart, or the image created by the literal counterpart. *10 Downing Street* means not just the address or the building on the site, but the British Prime Minister, his or her opinion, and, perhaps by extension the official opinion of the British Government. As Strässler (1982, 19-20) points out, on surface this kind of metonymies are similar to idioms formed by phrasal compounds, for instance, *red herring*. Yet if *10 Downing Street* is considered to be an idiom, on the same principle expressions like *Capitol* or *Pentagon* should also be labelled idioms although in fact they are examples of metonymy (Strässler 1982, 20) and of non-literal language different from idioms. Weinreich (1969) does not suggest how this kind of expression should be approached in the vocabulary and what its relationship to idioms is, perhaps because his main concern was the structure of idioms, not their meaning or metaphoricity.

5.1.2 Bruce Fraser

Following in the footsteps of Weinreich, idioms were further investigated within the framework of transformational grammar in the 1970s. Bruce Fraser (1970, 22) defined an idiom as "a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed." Hence the definition takes meaning as its starting point. For Fraser figurativeness as such was not especially significant: expressions like *by accident,* or *inside of* were taken as idioms. Following the distinction made by Katz and Postal (1964), Fraser divided idioms into lexical idioms and phrasal

idioms. Lexical idioms consist of several morphemes but are dominated by a single syntactic constituent, e.g. *turncoat* (noun), *overturn* (verb). Phrasal idioms for their part have to be analysed as sentences, for example *Has the cat got your tongue?* (Fraser, 1970, 22-23).

The obvious trouble with Fraser's definition is that nearly any word or expression could be labelled an idiom. Defining the basic meaning of a word is an impossible task, and many words have more than just one literal meaning, not to mention metaphorical meanings. If *by accident* is an idiom, is it because *accident* is used to refer to something that is not done or caused deliberately rather than a concrete event like two cars colliding, or is it because *by* does not mean at the side of or beside something concrete? Thus, Fraser's definition is very broad. This, however, was not an issue for Fraser, who was concerned with how to present idiom structures and their transformations. As a result of his analysis, Fraser came to a different conclusion from that of Weinreich. Abandoning the problem of meaning and concentrating solely on form, Fraser (1970, 31) claimed that "an idiom and its literal counterpart should be analyzed as having identical deep structure syntactic representations." He shifted the focus onto syntactic transformations, and the possibility of applying them to idioms whose syntactic behaviour is unpredictable. Challenging the widely held belief that idioms are completely frozen, he came up with six different degrees of frozenness: at one end of the continuum were expressions that tolerate a fair amount of variation (*spill the beans*), and at the other end totally frozen idioms (*dip into one's pocket*) that behave unpredictably and are to be interpreted as semantic wholes, not as expressions consisting of parts each of which contributes to the meaning.

Least frozen:	Allows reconstitution: *spill the beans*
↕	Allows extraction: *take interest in*
	Allows permutation. *turn back the clock*
	Allows insertion: *lend a hand to*
↕	Allows adjunction: *insist on*
Completely frozen:	Allows no variation: *dip into one's pocket*

FIGURE 4 Fraser's (1970) frozenness hierarchies for idioms (pp. 39-41).

Fraser's hierarchies have been criticised for being more or less subjective, and disagreed upon even by native speakers (see e.g. Gibbs and Gonzales 1985). Fraser did not, after all, conduct a poll or a survey but used transformational grammar as his tool. This criticism perhaps reflects the problem with idioms, and language, in general: definitions, interpretations and tolerance of variation are to an extent flexible, subjective, and negotiable issues.

5.1.3 Adam Makkai

Whereas Fraser's (1970) concern had been frozenness of idioms, and in that sense their characteristics, Adam Makkai (1972) attempted to create a hierarchical classification of idioms. Makkai's work contains a fairly thorough

theoretical discussion on the classification and internal hierarchy of idioms. Makkai's definition of an idiom is broader than the view taken in this study. The basis of the definition is the same, however, namely that an idiom consists of two or more words. Makkai states that idioms provide the listener with disinformation in the sense that they may lead to "erroneous decoding" (Makkai 1972, 122). This claim has been criticised on the grounds that often the literal decoding of an idiom is not likely even though it is possible (e.g. *throw someone to the wolves*), or the literal expression does not make any sense (e.g. *rain cats and dogs*) (see e.g. Fernando 1996, 6). However, Makkai does not argue that all idioms would always be disinformative, rather that they might put the addressee on the wrong track, and cause misunderstanding. Although it is true that the literal interpretation is not always rational in the context, there are still exceptions as some idioms can be used to refer to their literal meaning, e.g. *do a U-turn, give the green light.* Thus it seems that it perhaps is an exaggeration to say that idioms are disinformative, but they do have a potential of being misunderstood or misinterpreted which originates in the figurative nature of an idiom. When the original literal meaning is no longer used, the figurative meaning may seem totally arbitrary and may be difficult or even impossible to decode.

The two main classes into which Makkai divides idioms are *idioms of encoding* and *idioms of decoding*. Of these, idioms of encoding include, for instance, prepositional verbs, like the example offered by Makkai, *drive at 70 M P H.* Makkai's main concern, however, is idioms of decoding, and the stratificational structure of language and its application to the classification of idioms. He has divided idioms of decoding into two idiomaticity areas, according to lexemic stratum and sememic stratum. Of these the former group is larger than the latter and contains phrasal verbs (*bring up, take off*), tournure idioms[5] (*kick the bucket, fly off the handle*), irreversible binomials (*here and there, by and large*), phrasal compounds (*yellow pages, book worm*), incorporating verbs (*baby-sit, sight-see*), and pseudo-idioms (*cranberry*). Sememic idioms, too, include several subclasses, nearly all pertaining to *institutionalised* language use, and falling outside the definition of an idiom in this study. These subclasses are, for instance, idioms of *institutionalised* politeness (*would you mind...?, may I...?*), greetings (*how do you do?*) etc. Makkai has also decided to include a group of culture-specific expressions under sememic idioms, that is, first base idioms[6] (*have two strikes against one*). Thus for Makkai institutionalisation is one of the characteristics of an idiom. He does also discuss the possibility of adding a third major class, namely cultural or hypersememic idioms, covering indirect speech acts like *it's getting chilly* signifying different things in different contexts but, he

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5 Makkai's label for pure idioms that consist of at least three words (Makkai 1972, 152- 155).

6 Idioms "based on a nation-wide cultural institution such as American baseball". (Makkai 1972, 172).

has nevertheless determined to follow a different line in his classification. Makkai himself admits that there are overlaps in the categories, since an expression could be claimed to belong to more than one class and it is not always easy to decide on the boundaries. (Makkai 1972, 117-185) All in all, Makkai's work is highly theoretical and, as Fernando (1996, 5) puts it, "highly formal". Makkai does not discuss the actual use or appearance of idioms or consider their processing: his starting point has been purely stratificational and he seems mostly interested in the internal hierarchy of idiom system. Some of his categorisations and definitions are difficult to accept, and the proliferation of categories does not always seem the most rational solution.

5.1.4 Frederick J. Newmeyer

A few years after Makkai's work appeared, Frederick Newmeyer (1974) adopted a different view of idioms. Newmeyer returned to the consideration of form, taking a certain degree of transformability for granted and concentrating on the question of regularity in the behaviour of idioms from the syntactical viewpoint. For him figurativeness was a significant feature of idioms and he compared idioms to their literal homophones. Newmeyer challenged the currently prevailing belief that idioms are stored in the mental lexicon as wholes. Instead Newmeyer suggested that idioms in fact consist of single words that have "identical entires to homophonous lexical items in their literal senses." (ibid., 327). According to Newmeyer (1974), it is possible to predict the syntactic behaviour of an idiom by taking into account its figurative meaning as well as its literal meaning. Thus, for instance, it would be possible to passivise *pull someone's leg* since also *tease someone* allows passivisation, and since it is possible to literally *pull someone's leg*, and express that in the passive form. On the other hand, *kick the bucket* cannot undergo passivisation since *die* does not exist in passive form. Newmeyer's main concern was full idioms (*kick the bucket*), as semi-idioms (*white lie*) do not always fit the pattern he developed.

Although Newmeyer's examples and his explanation are plausible, he does not question the choice of the literal counterpart at all, or the generalisability of his theory. Even though in some cases there obviously is only one best possible alternative, like *kick the bucket* vs. *die*, there are also cases where the meaning of the literal counterpart could be expressed in various, syntactically different ways. Also, it should be borne in mind that it is indeed possible, for instance, to passivise *kick the bucket*, but then only the literal meaning of the expression is possible, not the figurative one. Furthermore, passivisation is not all there is to the syntax of an expression, nor does it reveal anything about the nature and meaning of an idiom even though for Newmeyer figurativeness was the important criterion of an idiom.

5.1.5 Barbara Greim

Following in Newmeyer's footsteps, Barbara Greim (1982) combined semantics and syntax, in an attempt to create a grammar of idioms. She started with Newmeyer's analysis of transformations and took it further to suggest a grammar for idioms and a basis for the categorisation of idioms. Greim, like Newmeyer, looked at the syntax of both the idiom and its literal counterpart, and by comparing the two she came to the conclusion that transformability might be explained simply by the syntactic equivalence between them. Greim claims that certain transformations, for instance passivisation and relativisation, are possible with idioms whose syntactic structure is similar to that of the literal counterpart, e.g. (Greim 1982, 35)

to put one's nose out of joint verb+object(+prep phrase)
vs. *to make one jealous* verb+object(+adjective).

Greim calls this equivalence semantic-syntactic compatibility. Similarly, idioms. that have a different syntactic structure from their literal counterparts, i.e. that are semantic-syntactically incompatible, do not allow transformations to the same extent, e.g. (Greim 1982, 35)

to be on cloud nine verb (intrans) + place adverb
vs. *to be happy* verb (intrans) +adjective.

According to Greim, semantic-syntactic incompatibility might affect the interpretation of an idiom: if, for instance, *to be on cloud nine* were to undergo a question-transformation into *Where was he? On cloud nine,* (Greim 1982, 37-38) the expression would be interpreted literally. Greim does not discuss whether it would then be an idiom any more, rather than a word string similar to, for instance, *Where is he? In his room.*

Greim further discusses the effect of the literal counterpart, discussing for example how the fact that *die* is an intransitive verb may affect the idiom's transformability with the consequence that *kick the bucket* cannot be passivised. Like Newmeyer, Greim does not question the choice of literal counterparts but takes it for granted that there is one single literal expressions corresponding to an idiom. It is probably possible to always find a suitable literal expression to agree with the theory (and consistent with the structure of the idiom, if it is transformable), but again the generalisability of the theory is not proven. For instance

to take someone for a ride verb (trans) +object +compl.
vs. *to cheat someone* verb (trans) +object

Yet, despite different syntactic structures, it is possible that *someone is taken for a ride.*

In her semantic analysis Greim has divided idioms into three categories again according to their relationship to their literal counterparts. She has derived her terminology from C. S. Peirce and thus the categories are termed *iconic, indexical*, and *symbolic*. Iconic idioms are those that show what Greim calls a factual similarity to their literal counterparts, for instance *turn back the clock*. Indexicality, in its turn, represents idioms that have a factual contiguity with their literal counterparts, that is, they share or indicate a similar situation or circumstance, e.g. *to smell a rat*. The third class, symbolic idioms then

represent imputed contiguity, and "there is no readily discernible semantic link between their literal and figurative meanings" (Greim 1982, 39), e.g. *kick the bucket*. On the other hand, perhaps since her aim has been to develop a grammar for contemporary idioms, Greim does not mention the possibility of the relationship once having been iconic or symbolic, as for example might be the case with *kick the bucket*[7]. Hence, the syntactic structures of the figurative and literal meanings may also have originally been similar. (Accordingly, if one only has a digital clock, turning it back literally would no longer be possible.) The division of idioms according to their semantic resemblance to the literal counterpart is not unique in idiom studies, and Greim's terms correspond with the more commonly used *transparent, semi-transparent* and *opaque* that have also been adopted in this thesis.

Greim's main interest has been the hierarchy of transformability, and she has combined the two characteristics compatibility and figurativeness in order to build that hierarchy. According to Greim and the results of her acceptability tests with informants, compatible idioms are more likely to tolerate transformation than incompatible ones. As for figurativeness, iconic idioms tolerate transformation better than indexical or symbolic idioms. Greim maintains that compatibility is the dominant feature in transformation whereas figurativeness plays a lesser role. While tolerance of transformation is indeed a valuable target of research, it should be borne in mind that the categories overlap, and sometimes informants disagree as to the acceptability of certain transformations. It should also be noted that idioms that contain no verb and have therefore been excluded from Greim's work, can sometimes undergo (lexical) transformation. Lexical transformation in general has not been discussed by linguists concentrating merely on the syntax and grammar of idioms.

Greim's conclusions do, however, reveal certain tendencies, and indisputably prove that idioms do tolerate transformation and are by no means frozen.

5.1.6 Chitra Fernando

Chitra Fernando (1996) has written a description of English idioms using the Birmingham Corpus among other sources as background material. She has divided idioms and other idiomatic expressions according to various principles and aspects, one of which is lexicogrammatical structure. This seems reasonable as Fernando's main criterion for idioms is that they are either totally invariant or tolerate only a limited amount of variation (e.g. p. 36). In this lexicogrammatical categorisation, Fernando has included also the aspect of literalness/figurativeness. In addition, she examines idioms from a functional

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7 According to *Longman* (1979), the expression may originally have referred to pigs, which were hung by their heels from a beam after they had been killed. *Bucket* is thus assumed to have meant *beam*.

viewpoint. Although Fernando has included in her book numerous expressions that do not fall within the category of idioms in the present study, this lexicogrammatical classification nevertheless serves as a useful tool for discussing the idioms in this study.

Fernando's starting point has been the form and structure of an expression, which to her constitute the most significant feature of an idiom. In Fernando's classification, idioms are first further divided into *pure*, *semi-literal*, and *literal* idioms. Pure idioms are completely non-literal, 'traditional' idioms, such as *spill the beans*. A semi-idiom contains a word that carries its literal meaning, e.g. *foot a bill*. A literal idiom is a phrase or saying, e.g. *happy birthday, dark and handsome* (Fernando 1996, 35-36). These in their turn have been categorised according to transformability and literalness to form twelve categories altogether (pp.70-72). The distinctions are not always clear-cut, and categories unavoidably overlap with each other. Besides, people may interpret for instance the aspect of literalness differently: an expression literal to someone may be purely non-literal to another. In some cases, it is somewhat difficult to agree with Fernando's classifications or indeed, to understand them. For instance, she has placed *a dog's dinner* in the category of both literal and non-literal expressions; on p. 36 Fernando affirms that a literal idiomatic expression may also in some contexts carry its literal meaning. A dog can certainly have a dinner, but for the sake of consistency, also beans can be spilled. Yet, *spill the beans* is according to Fernando non-literal. In the present study an expression has been regarded as literal if the literal meaning or the image it creates has a connection to the idiomatic meaning and the literal meaning makes some sense. For example, *do a U-turn* clearly has a connection between its literal and non-literal meanings, whereas *spill the beans* does not. Also, as in normal circumstances it cannot be raining cats or dogs, the idiom is not literal.

Variation is another matter that has been treated differently in this study from Fernando's. Had all the transformations listed by Fernando (p. 42-52), i.e. tense, number, lexical, replacement, addition, permutation and deletion, been taken into account, there would hardly have been any invariant idioms as they seldom are completely frozen. For Fernando, invariance and restricted variation are the most prominent characteristics of an idiom (p. 36), in the broad definition she gives of idioms. However, in my opinion metaphoricity is the most significant feature, enriched by variance and varied forms. Thus in the present study transformations in tense, number, and word order have been excluded, and only more visible alterations that may even have their effect on the expression's meaning have been taken into account.

5.1.7 Summary

The history of studies of idiom structure follows that of the prevailing ideas in language studies in general. Several attempts have been made to construct a description and categorisation of idioms and other metaphorical expressions. Likewise, various idiom structures have been investigated to create a grammar of idioms. What is common to all theses studies is that none of them is

conclusive. The studies do show the versatility of idiom structures, but since idioms and their behaviour are often unpredictable, to produce a complete description on idiom patterns is an impossible task.

Another approach taken to idioms has its roots in psycholinguistics. Idioms have also been studied in terms of processing, and next, I shall introduce these studies.

5.2 Idioms in L1 processing

The processing of idioms and their storage in the mind became the focus of attention in the 1970s, and remained a topic of keen interest in psycholinguistic research throughout the following decade. In a sense there was thus a shift from idioms (i.e. language) to their users, how they access and remember idioms (i.e. language processing). Two major lines of investigation closely linked to each other can be detected: the storing and the processing of idioms. As for storage of idioms in the mental lexicon a consensus was reached in the 70's on idioms' being parallel to single words and stored as entities. The main question has been whether they are stored separately in a list of their own, or among the rest of the mental lexicon together with other lexical items. Studies of idiom processing have concentrated on the literal/figurative -distinction and have looked at which aspect is processed first, or whether the literal and figurative meaning might perhaps be processed simultaneously when an idiom is encountered. These studies have typically used reaction-time tests in investigating the issue, and most of them have concentrated on native speakers of English. The informants have been exposed to different types of idioms (in some studies, figurativeness was the distinctive feature, in others transformability) and their reaction times for each type were compared in the search for clues as to how idioms are stored in the memory and recalled .

There are some studies on native English speakers' learning and knowledge of idioms. The hearing-impaired have been particular subjects of study in this area, and children and adolescents have also been studied. Even though idioms are generally regarded as difficult to grasp because of their figurativeness and variability, even five-year-old children have been reported to understand certain idioms, although literal interpretations are more common until the children enter school and gradually acquire more figurative expressions in their language (Nippold and Martin 1989, Nippold and Rudzinski 1993). When adult native speakers have been involved in these studies it has mostly been in cases where idioms themselves and the various factors affecting their reception (e.g. literal vs. figurative interpretation, the effect of context etc.) have been investigated rather than the informants' knowledge of them.

5.2.1 Figurativeness

With the shift of focus towards the processing and storing of idioms in the mental lexicon, the question of what can be called an idiom and what transformations idioms tolerate came to be somewhat neglected. Although interpretations varied, the definition of an idiom was taken for granted to be "a string of two or more words for which meaning is not derived from the meanings of the individual words comprising that string" (Swinney and Cutler 1979, 523). In order to understand the processing and storing of idioms, the differences between figurative and literal expressions became the target of investigation.

The first studies of the processing of idioms concentrated not on the differences between idioms and their literal homophones but on distinct figurative and literal word strings denoting the same thing, or bearing a similar syntactic structure but different wording. It was assumed that a comparison of these two, and native English speakers' reaction times to word strings presented to them, would show whether or not, and how idioms differed from literal expressions as to their processing. In the early 1970s Bobrow and Bell (1973) examined informants' reactions to literal expressions and idioms that were presented to them without a context. Expressions were arranged in sets that led the testees to "perceive a particular syntactic structure (which) biases the meaning the Ss will see" (Bobrow and Bell 1973, 343), and to employ either a literal or idiomatic processing strategy[8]. Their results suggested that the set did influence the testees[9], supporting the hypothesis of separate strategies for idioms and longer literal expressions. This in its turn was interpreted as a proof of there being a processing strategy for idioms different from that for single word strings. This, was explained as "the result of processing the idiom as a word" (Bobrow and Bell 1973, 343). Bobrow and Bell (1973) did not take sides as to whether idioms were stored separately from other words or among them in the mental lexicon, even though their work has since been termed the *idiom list hypothesis,* suggesting that idioms would be stored in their own special list separately from the rest of the mental lexicon (see e.g. Swinney and Cutler 1979, 524). Nevertheless, Bobrow and Bell (1973) claimed that different processing strategies are applied to idioms from those used for literal word strings.

Ortony et al. (1978), however, after examining idioms and literal expressions in context, came to a totally different conclusion about the processes involved in understanding literal and metaphorical expressions.

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8 That is, each expression had two meanings, and informants were to say which one they detected first. Whether they really understood the expressions or not, was not examined.

9 As Swinney and Cutler (1979, 532-533) state, this may have reflected "the results of a mental decision as to the most appropriate meaning to be brought to conscious awareness".

According to them, the processes involved in the comprehension of the two types of expressions were in fact similar to each other. Their method was different from that of Bobrow and Bell in that Ortony et al. (1978) actually measured reaction times, instead of attending to first reactions. The informants had to press the space button on a computer keyboard when they comprehended the meaning of the expression shown to them on the screen and it was later checked whether they really knew the meaning of each expression, not just claimed they did. However, as their comprehension was not checked until later in a post-test, it cannot be verified whether the informants truly understood the expression when they first reacted.

Ortony et al. (1978) found that there was a difference in reaction times when idioms and literal expressions were presented in a short context. However, this difference disappeared when a longer context was provided. There was no difference in reaction time between familiar idioms and literal expressions. It was concluded that the comprehension processes for literal and for figurative language are very similar to each other.

Swinney and Cutler (1979) came to the same conclusion, and indeed found that idioms were in fact processed faster than literal word strings (see also McGlone et.al. 1994). This they interpreted as proof of idioms being like words, and also being processed like single words. Swinney and Cutler (1979) labelled this approach the *lexical representation hypothesis*, as opposed to the idiom list hypothesis.

The processing times for idioms have been investigated in other studies, too, and most of them report similar findings, though it seems that the properties of idioms affect their processing. For instance, in Schweigert's (1986) study that looked at the two dimensions of isolated expressions, figurative and literal, expressions that were used literally were in fact processed faster than those used figuratively. Also, in the same study less familiar idioms took longer to interpret when presented in a sentence biased towards figurative meaning than when they appeared in a sentence that made either literal or figurative interpretation possible (Schweigert 1986). This is rather surprising since it could have been expected that a sentence in which only a figurative meaning is possible it would have been easier to detect. One explanation could perhaps be that the subjects were not actually asked about the meanings and only their reaction times were observed. Thus it is possible that they did not recognise them as idioms and interpreted them literally as there was no need to question the literal interpretation.

Further evidence of idioms being processed like single words was found in the 1980s when psycholinguists grew more interested in idioms and their processing. In addition to mere reaction times, the characteristics of idioms and their impact on their processing and comprehension came to the forefront of research. Syntax and frozenness did not play as significant a role as previously, as figurativeness was considered more important. It was now taken as more or less proven that idioms were processed as single words, although some researchers warned that not all idioms necessarily have an equal status to single words in the lexicon (e.g. Gibbs 1985). Characteristics of idioms such as

frozenness, figurativeness, familiarity, literal meaning etc. were looked at from the point of view of processing. It is also important that the images created by idioms received attention for the first time, thus turning attention back to the origins of idioms.

The findings of Swinney and Cutler gained further support from other subsequent studies. Several reaction time tests showed that processing idioms took less time than literal words strings of similar length (e.g. Gibbs 1985, Glass 1983, Schweigert 1986, 1991, Schweigert and Moates 1988). This seemed reasonable because as Colombo (1993) points out, literal expressions have to be processed also syntactically, not just lexically. This belief has been challenged, as although it is quite commonly accepted that idioms are stored in the mental lexicion as single entries, Flores d´Arcais (1993, 83) points out that this is not the whole truth. Flores d´Arcais (1993) has investigated idioms and their literal homophones, and argues that even familiar idioms are always analysed syntactically by the language user.

The relationship between expressions' figurative and literal meanings has been further discussed since some expressions may carry either a figurative or a literal meaning in certain contexts (*be lost in the woods*), though as Gibbs (1985, 466) mentions, "many idioms do not have well-defined literal meanings." *A bull* may appear *in a china shop*, but the situation is not very likely. There has been a lot of debate on which of the meanings, figurative or literal is processed first, or whether they might be processed simultaneously. Even though Ortony et al. (1978) found that in some cases, the figurative meaning of an idiom may take longer to process than its literal meaning, in another experiment they achieved contradictory results and came to the conclusion that idioms are processed in the lexicon in the same way as literal tokens. Gibbs terms this approach the *direct interpretation*[10] (see also Glucksberg 1993, 4), something that does not occur by way of the literal meaning. According to him, people tend to regard idioms as figurative even in strong literal contexts (1985, 470), which differs from the findings of Bobrow and Bell. Gibbs' results indicate firmly that idioms are perceived as entities, as if they were single words, and that the figurative interpretation is primary. Peterson and Burgess (1993), however, comment on Gibbs' views on the possibility of the figurative interpretation preceding the literal one by saying that "in order there not to be any literal interpretation of an idiomatic string, the termination of literal processing must occur immediately upon the presentation of the first word of an idiom" (ibid, 205). Peterson and Burgess stress that this would lead to very time-consuming and laborious processing since only very few words are potential idiom-starters. Moreover, in agreement with Flores d´Arcais, they (ibid.) claim that syntactic structure is

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10 There are several different terms for the various ways of processing, Colombo (1993), for instance, calls direct interpretation the *selective access model*, which means that the context preactivates either literal or figurative meaning. As opposed to this there is the *exhaustive access model*, where all meanings are first processed and then the intended meaning is selected only later.

processed even in a figurative-biased context, and even when the literal meaning has been rejected.

It has also been suggested that figurative and literal meanings could be simultaneous in their processing. Even when it comes to fairly common idioms whose literal meaning is not very likely to occur (e.g. *spill the beans*), or is even impossible, the literal meaning may be processed simultaneously with the figurative one (Cronk et al. 1993, McGlone et.al. 1994). This might signal that although an idiom may be dead, i.e. the link between literal and figurative meanings has long been broken, language users do try to build a bridge between the two. Glass' (1983) findings, are also in disagreement with those of Gibbs, as he concluded that even with familiar idioms both the literal and figurative interpretations were made.

Flores d´Arcais (1993, 83-87) is of the opinion that a language user probably treats totally new idioms as metaphors and it is possible that when language users encounter them they first try to process them as literal expressions until realising their figurative nature. It does seem quite likely that when coming across a fairly transparent idiom or an expression that taken literally does not make sense or is even impossible, language users take it to be a metaphor. In the decoding, then, they treat it as an entity though they may regard each word in the expression at a time, pondering what and how that particular word contributes to the meaning of the expression as a whole. Similarly, if language users are familiar with the concept of an idiom in general they are able to recognise an example of one and treat it as a single expression whose components together form the meaning, and the meaning may well be approached from the metaphoric viewpoint. This is not, however, automatic as for certain expressions, literal interpretation is also possible. These expressions, even when intended figuratively, may be taken for literal expressions by mistake. For instance, one can quite literally *slip on a banana skin* or *shoot oneself in the foot* and it is not always immediately clear from the context which interpretation is called for. Also, as Flores d´Arcais (1993, 86) points out, in a neutral context it is sometimes difficult to understand the meaning of an unfamiliar and unique[11] idiom.

While much discussion has gone on about the order in which idioms are processed, Flores d´Arcais (1993) stresses that there is no special processing mode for idioms but they are processed like any other word that can carry either a literal or a figurative meaning, e.g. *warm*. Colombo (1993), on the other hand, mentions the possibility of idioms being somewhat different from metaphorical single words. According to her (1993, 165), idioms may be accessed at the figurative level in a similar way to single figurative words, but if a multi-word expression carries a literal meaning, only then does it also have to

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11 Often a pair or a group of idioms are similar to each other in their form, meaning and function, not just in one language but also between languages e.g. *kick the bucket, potkaista tyhjää*. A unique idiom does not share this kind of similarity with others and its decoding can therefore be difficult.

be analysed syntactically. Peterson and Burgess (1993) for their part claim that it is possible that different idioms undergo syntactic analysis to different degrees, depending on their frozenness.

Just as with the definition of idioms, it seems hard to reach agreement as to their processing when figurativeness is under consideration. There is a consensus on idioms being stored as entities in the mental lexicon. However, as to how they are accessed, analysed, and processed by contrast with literal expressions, there remains much room for disagreement. In an attempt to shed more light on the issue, idiom characteristics, context and their effect on processing and interpretation have been more specifically studied in order to find out if there is something in idioms themselves that makes different ones easier or more difficult to process. The likelihood of literal interpretation and frequency have been considered to be the most significant areas of investigation, and the studies carried out still much rely heavily on reaction time tests. Other possible factors affecting idiom comprehension, for instance the degree of frozenness and context have also been investigated. Tabossi and Zardon (1993) mention *idiom key*, the point at which the idiomatic meaning is activated (not necessarily a point after which a literal interpretation would be impossible). The position of the key varies, and Tabossi and Zardon (1993, 155-156) emphasise that it has no special formal properties, which makes detecting it more difficult. Also, there are bound to be individual differences as to what triggers the figurative/literal meaning. In the case of non-native speakers, second language idioms add their own difficulty.

5.2.2 Context

There has been a lot of debate about the role the linguistic context plays in the recognition and comprehension of lexical items, be they single words, idioms, phrases, sayings or whatever. The role of context becomes more important with ambiguous idioms (Colombo 1993, 184), which are in general more difficult than opaque expressions. As was discussed in chapter 2.3.2, context may assist in understanding an unfamiliar expression but it may equally lead astray. As for the necessity of context in understanding idioms, the results of studies on the comprehension of idioms are controversial. For instance, studies on children's comprehension of idioms have revealed that context does assist in working out the meaning. But other factors, such as explaining very carefully to the informants in advance the nature of idioms, and reminding them repeatedly that figurative intrepretations were expected have also had a significant effect. Consequently, it has not been possible to reliably estimate the role of context. (Nippold and Martin 1989). Naturally, context may help the addressee to select the intended meaning from several possibilities (Gernsbacher and Robertson 1999) but that is not always the case (Ortony et al. 1978, 476): "there certainly are cases where an utterance is insufficiently related to the context for it to be understood".

Despite the interest in the impact of context on interpretation in general, studies on the effect of context on the comprehension of idioms are scarce, and

mostly concentrate on native speakers. Ortony et al. (1978) and Schweigert and Moates' study (1988) show that context may assist in the more rapid interpretation of idioms, as familiar idioms presented in a paragraph-long context took less time to read than those with only a sentence-long context. However, both studies also showed a difference in reading times between idioms with literal and figurative meanings within each context type. According to Schweigert and Moates (1988), a longer context added to the comprehensibility of both literal and figurative expressions, rather than helping the informants to detect figurative meanings. Context length, thus, did not assist very well in distinguishing literal and figurative meanings but familiarity seemed to have been more significant. McGlone et.al. (1994) highlight the significance of context type: a specific context biased to figurative interpretation assisted the informants in their study more than did a more general context. The effect of a specific context was noticed also with variants of idioms.

According to Gibbs (1980), however, context does not play a very significant a role in the interpretation of idioms as is often claimed, rather the contrary. If there is no preceding context idioms are still more often interpreted figuratively than literally (Gibbs 1980, 149). Gibbs attributes this to the unconventionality of literal interpretations (ibid, 150): in real life, the actual situations or events described in idioms literally occur very rarely or are unlikely to occur at all.

5.2.3 Familiarity and frequency

Frequency and familiarity can be assumed to be linked to each other. The more frequent a word or expression, the more familiar it is likely to be. Frequency of occurrence, in its turn, is significant in language acquisition: not only does it acquaint language learners with certain expressions, but also with patterns and forms in general (see e.g. Ellis N. 2002, Larsen-Freeman 2002) With idioms the frequency/familiarity interdependence may, however, prove slightly problematic since even the most frequent idioms are not very common by comparison with the most commonly used single words. Moreover, the assessment of familiarity is based on individual subjects' estimates, which can vary vastly. It can in fact be rather difficult to try to grade expressions according to their familiarity. Naturally, some expressions may be easily ranked as unfamiliar or highly familiar, but between those opposite poles it may become difficult to assess an idiom's familiarity. In addition, frequency counts and frequency-based idiom lists have not been available until the past few years and therefore most studies have relied on native speakers' frequency estimates. Native speakers can be assumed to possess some knowledge or instinct about familiarity, but estimates are individual and thus bound to differ from one person to another. (e.g. Nippold and Taylor 1995, 431). Even age may affect estimates as adolescents have been found more willing to label idioms transparent than adults (Nippold and Rudzinski 1993).

Studies on the effect of familiarity suggest quite reasonably that familiar idioms are easier to comprehend than less familiar ones. When it comes to

children and adolescents, who tend to interpret idiomatic expressions literally, particularly in early childhood, familiar idioms, presumably memorised, are more easily perceived as figurative (Nippold and Martin 1989, Nippold and Rudzinski 199 . See also Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1988)

Schweigert and Moates (1988) studied the difference between the literal and figurative uses of familiar idioms among native English speakers, and the results supported the idiomatic processing model. That is, familiar idioms used with their figurative meaning took less time to comprehend than familiar idioms used with their literal meaning. This again suggests that idioms were perceived as wholes, and that their figurative meanings were accessed first. When the interpretation did not fit the context, then a literal interpretation was sought. Therefore, Schweigert and Moates drew the conclusion that familiarity might lead to attempts to interpret idioms figuratively. Similar findings by Cronk et al. (1993), also depending on native speakers of English, brought further support to this claim. Again figurative meanings seemed to have been stored as single lexical items, and frequent and more familiar idioms were more easily comprehended when used figuratively. Cronk et al. (1993), however, suggested a simultaneous processing model for idioms, whereby literal and figurative meanings would be retrieved at the same time and according to the context a suitable one chosen. This would indeed seem reasonable, as figurative meaning would presumably then take less time to retrieve than the meaning of a string of separate words. However, this does not rule out the possibility of figurative meaning being processed first. (see e.g. Aitchison 1994, Harris and Coltheart 1986, p. 135).

According to Cronk and Schweigert (1992), literalness and familiarity are equally important in reading and comprehending idioms. In fact their results could be interpreted to show that familiarity is the more significant of the two, since idioms used figuratively, or idioms of low literalness took longer to react to than less familiar idioms. However, when idioms were used literally or were expressions tending towards high literalness there was no difference between familiar and less familiar idioms. These findings provided further evidence for the hypothesis of familiar idioms being learnt and treated like single words. Familiar idioms had apparently been lexicalised and were treated as single words whereas less familiar idioms with a figurative meaning or properties took more time to process than those which carried a literal meaning or features. Therefore, it can be assumed that less familiar idioms were processed word by word, not as entities, just as Flores d'Arcais (1993) suggests. (Cronk and Schweigert 1992). Cronk and Schweigert do not explain how the idioms used were originally been selected for the native subjects to rate according to literalness and familiarity. The idioms in the study were, nevertheless, pure idioms. Since several native speakers rated them, the estimates of familiarity and literalness can be assumed to be fairly reliable.

Frequency, too, affects reading times: idioms of high frequency but low literalness are hard to comprehend in their literal meaning More frequent idioms have also been reported to take less time to read than rarer idioms, even when considering idioms the informants were less familiar with. (Cronk et al.

1993). This would seem to suggest that the relationship between frequency and familiarity is not as independent as Cronk et al. (1993) concluded, and as the familiarity ratings reported in their studies suggest. Perhaps the informants considered more their own productive language use when estimating idioms' familiarity. If familiarity and frequency were completely independent of each other, then why did the informants need less time to read and understand highly frequent but not too familiar idioms than they did to read idioms of high familiarity but low frequency? Moreover, if the familiarity ratings are considered reliable, the results of this study do not support the idea of familiar idioms being treated as single words in processing (see also Gibbs 1985).

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that these studies investigated reaction times and the number of repeated readings of idioms by respondents, not actual comprehension. Informants may have erred about the meanings of idiom, or may even not have known them, but since comprehension was not checked possible misunderstandings would have gone unnoticed.

For language users still learning the language literalness perhaps might play a slightly bigger role than for others. It has been shown that young children and adolescents, with their tendency to interpret also other figurative expressions literally, find transparent idioms easier to comprehend (Nippold and Rudzinski 1993). Nippold and Rudzinski (1993) explain this by challenging the idea of storage of idioms as "giant lexical units" (p. 736), and suggesting that although opaque idioms may well be stored and perceived as single lexical units, in the learning of transparent expressions analysis of their components and structure may nevertheless be involved. The situation may be similar for non-native speakers, although at least when it comes to adults they already are familiar with the concept of figurative language and idioms in their mother tongue.

5.2.4 Frozenness

Frozenness was long taken for granted as characteristic of idioms. Fraser's (1970) frozenness categories apply to grammatical frozenness - or variability. In addition, there is a lot of lexical variation in the world of idioms (e.g. McGlone et. al. 1994). Variation makes idioms more challenging for language users, particularly non-native speakers: mere recognition of a figurative expression and working out its meaning may not be enough but it may be necessary to know the original form, particularly with lexical variations. McGlone et.al. (1994) showed that familiarity plays a role with idiom variations as well: the more familiar the original idiom, the easier it is to comprehend its variant. They (ibid) also showed that variation does not make idioms too complex: reaction times were the same for both variants of idioms and their literal counterparts, which was probably partly due to the subjects' familiarity with variation in idioms in general. However, just as with Gibbs and Gonzales (1985), it was found that frozen idioms were processed faster than flexible ones, again suggesting lexicalisation of more stable expressions. On the other hand, flexible

idioms seem to be more easily memorised than frozen ones (Gibbs and Gonzales 1985).

Nevertheless, the processing differences between frozen and flexible idioms are not simple. Further studies have indicated that quicker processing of frozen idioms may be due not to their stable appearance but rather to their metaphoricity (Gibbs et. al. 1989). Gibbs et. al. (1989) argue strongly for the metaphoricity of idioms and their findings imply that more transparent (semantically decomposable or analysable) idioms are easier to process than idioms that are more opaque, regardless of their tolerance of variation.

5.2.5 Metaphoricity and analysability

The processing of idioms dominated the idiom studies until the late 1980s, until recognition of the importance of metaphoricity shifted the focus onto the figurative nature of idioms, and the actual understanding of idioms. It is well worth bearing in mind that studies of the processing of idioms concentrated on the actual processing and the time it took. They did not consider whether or not the informants really understood the expressions presented to them, or what sort of differences in interpretation there might have been among the informants.

Fraser's transformation, or frozenness, categories had already shown that idioms are not syntactically frozen and the rich lexical variation in their everyday use proved that idioms were not frozen in that respect, either, even though it is true that some idioms tolerate more variation than others, and that there are also others that allow no variation at all. Meanwhile, in the field of psycholinguistics, the other supposedly fundamental characteristic of idioms, deadness, was also questioned. It was gradually recognised that idioms are not dead entities but very much alive instead. Metaphoricity became the focus of attention, and together with metaphoricity, the terminology of *opaque, semi-transparent and transparent idioms* was introduced.

"Simply saying that each idiom is represented in the lexicon as if it were a single word does not adequately reflect the dynamic properties of these expressions." Gibbs (1985, 471). These dynamic properties are sometimes difficult to explain. While the degree of metaphoricity and analysability depends on the individual language user, native speakers of English have been reported to largely agree on the degree of decomposability of idioms (e.g. Gibbs 1990). While several idioms have originated in a literal meaning denoting a concept or event non-existent today, reasons for analysability were sought elsewhere. One possible explanation offered by Gibbs (1990, 421) did not give much credit to metaphoricity, rather the reverse: "it is possible that speakers learn to use idioms...by forming arbitrary links between an idiom, its figurative meaning, and a specific social situation". This does not seem very likely, as although idioms are often context- and register-bound, this hardly explains their analysability. Certainly the social situation and context in which a particular expression can be used add to its meaning but analysability does not arise from that. For instance, in the example by Gibbs (1990, 421), *spill the beans*,

revealing personal information about a third person vs. *blow the lid off* , revealing secrets of e.g. government corruption, the literal meanings of the expressions quite aptly picture the figurative meanings, including the nature of the social context.

Gibbs has pioneered in the study of idioms and their metaphoricity from various perspectives, and nowadays figurativeness is widely accepted as one of the cornerstones of idioms. Gibbs has been particularly interested in idioms denoting particular human activities and emotions (e.g. *spill the beans, get steamed up*). He claims that when it comes to this kind of expression, language users effortlessly connect their literal and figurative meanings, i.e. the expressions are highly motivated and analysable (Gibbs 1992). Although Gibbs investigated native speakers of English it could perhaps be assumed that idioms whose literal meaning creates a mental image close to their figurative meaning do not pose much difficulty to non-native speakers either, provided they are familiar with the concept of idioms. Furthermore, these human activity idioms are often more or less universal and there are similar expressions in different languages, even in languages not related to each other (Kellerman 1998, 1999). It is also interesting that learners' mental images have been found to be fairly consistent for idioms with similar figurative meanings (Gibbs 1990, 433)

Gibbs takes the concept of an idiom as given and while discussing the level of frozenness and metaphoricity of idioms does not question the definition. Significantly, however, he does argue against the view that idioms are dead and frozen, a view that prevailed in the 60s and 70, and is even today cherished by some. Gibbs' view of the nature of idioms, gave rise to his definition of idioms as metaphorical and transformable. In his experiments Gibbs has used very prototypical idioms, and concludes that idioms are partially compositional figurative expressions whose meaning is not easily paraphrased in one single literal form. (e.g. Gibbs 1990, 1992) Rather, "idioms have complex figurative interpretations that are not arbitrarily determined but are motivated by independently existing conceptual metaphors that provide the foundation for much of our everyday thought and reasoning" (Gibbs 1992, 485-486).

5.2.6 Summary

The main problem with studies on idioms and dictionaries of idioms compiled before the era of large computer corpora was that the expressions were collected by observing written and spoken language and simply noting idioms and listing them. Even though a corpus does also have its limitations due to the selection of texts on which it is based, the quantity of original text material is much larger and thus could be considered more representative than a random selection of texts scanned by a researcher or a lexicographer. Moreover, most studies that rank idioms according to their frequency in fact define relative frequency by asking a handful of native speakers their opinions. However, Moon (p.47) states that "the literature of corpus linguistics shows decisively that there is a tension or conflict between received, introspection-derived beliefs

about language and observed behaviour in corpora". This is not to say that earlier studies are necessarily worthless but that they should be read bearing their limitations in mind.

Idioms in L1 processing have gained a lot of attention. Several idiom characteristics and their combinations have been taken into account when investigating how idioms are processed. Just as there is no definite knowledge of how the mental lexicon is organised, there are only hints that suggest how idioms are processed. To my mind, the difficulty of defining and categorising idioms, in view of their multiple characteristics is also reflected in their processing. The degree of figurativeness, analysability, frequency, familiarity, context, the likelihood of literal expression all play their part. There is quite strong evidence that there are more familiar and frequent frozen idioms of which literal meaning is unlikely to be processed as single words. However, idiom studies have not yet been able to find out what is the most significant characteristic in processing, and the results so far disagree with each other.

Familiarity and frequency certainly play a role, and perhaps more with L1 processing than with L2. Nevertheless, figurativeness does play a role as well, particularly with less well known idioms. In the case of non-native speakers who presumably do not encounter idioms on such a regular basis as native speakers, this could be assumed to be a much more essential feature than, for instance, frequency. Interestingly though, with respect to idioms in L2 processing, familiarity is the only aspect that has been studied.

5.3 Idioms in L2 processing

Schraw et al. (1988) compared native and non-native speakers, and their reactions to idioms of high vs. average familiarity. That study revealed that idioms of high familiarity were understood more often both by natives and non-native speakers than those of low familiarity. Unlike studies relying on reaction times, their work investigated actual comprehension of idioms, whether or not the informants really had understood the expressions and how they paraphrased them. Not surprisingly, native speakers did better in the test than non-native speakers, who recognised and understood idioms, particularly less familiar ones, rather poorly. Schraw et al. (1988) drew the conclusion that familiarity did not in fact play that an important role, but lexicalisation did. Non-native speakersapparently attempted to interpret the idioms word for word, not as wholes. According to Schraw et al., this was due to the lack of lexicalisation, independent of familiarity. It seems to me, however, that distinguishing familiarity and lexicalisation from each other is neither reasonable nor even possible, considering that a certain amount of familiarity is a prerequisite for an idiom to become lexicalised. If an expression is completely unfamiliar there is a possibility of it being interpreted as a word string consisting of separate words, rather than as an entity even if the concept of an idiom is known.

According to Flores d´Arcais (1993, 83), different processing and storing methods may be activated depending on the familiarity of the expression. Familiar idioms would be represented as single entries, but for the less frequent and less familiar idioms a language user would have to rely on other means. This could be the case though bearing in mind the infrequent nature of idioms in general the division between single entries and other types of expression may not be so clear-cut.

Schraw et al. (1988, 414) claim that "lexicalisation is the basis of recognition ... in idioms while familiarity contributes solely to preferences for figurative interpretation", which seems an exaggeration, and an unnecessary separation of lexicalisation and familiarity from each other. It seems more reasonable to perceive familiarity and lexicalisation as two sides of the same coin, for familiarity does have a role in the comprehension of idioms. As Schweigert and Moates (1988, 292) put it:" idioms with which the perceiver is very familiar are probably more likely to be perceived as lexical units than less familiar idioms that, perhaps, must be processed literally before being recognized as idioms."

Ortony et al. (1978, 476) went as far as to claim that if the meaning of an idiom is not known by the language user, "it cannot, as a rule, be figured out, as can the meaning of novel metaphors". The issue is not that straightforward, as several idioms' meanings can be worked out, although it is true that their origins of them may sometimes be so far back in history that they are difficult or impossible to recognise. Ortony et al. (ibid.) point out too that, native speakers usually learn idioms, so there is no need for them to work out the meanings. Without need and experience they may also lack the ability to do so. To an extent this is true, but even native speakers cannot be familiar with all the expressions and words in the language and particularly among less frequent idioms there are bound to be unfamiliar instances. In addition, an idiom can have several figurative interpretations and even native speakers sometimes disagree on them, and novel metaphors, whether truly novel, or reformulations or transformations of old ones, are not always easy to comprehend either.

The situation is somewhat different for NNSs, however. Their knowledge of vocabulary is seldom at the same level as that of NSs, and besides they often have to acquire new vocabulary at a faster rate than native speakers (Nagy 1997, 76). Nagy (ibid, 76) points out that for this reason NNSs may have a greater need to use context in working out the meaning of an unfamiliar expression since their vocabulary is not as extensive as that of NSs and they are thus bound to encounter more new words and expressions. A limited vocabulary may clearly also pose problems with the use of context: an unknown word or expression is likely to remain un intelligible if the immediate context consists of fairly unfamiliar words as well. Recognising idioms and possessing a basic knowledge of their nature becomes, if not vital, at least helpful for NNSs.

Nagy (1997) distinguishes several different types of knowledge that can help in working out the meaning of an unfamiliar expression with the assistance of context: linguistic knowledge combined with knowledge of words and the world, i.e. knowledge of the nature and behaviour of idioms and the

knowledge of the speech situation itself (and the language appropriate in it), as well as strategic knowledge, i.e. the tools with which to disentangle idioms and the ability to make conscious use of them. In the study reported by Schraw et al. (1988), idioms were presented to the informants in a sentence-long context, which is hardly sufficient to indicate that the intended meaning is figurative instead of literal. If an expression is unfamiliar, the temptation to interpret it literally does exist, particularly since all the idioms in the study were selected on the criterion of there being a plausible literal interpretation (Schraw et al. 1988, 416).

5.3.1 Summary

Processing of idioms by L2 learners has not been as widely studied as the case of L1 speakers. Rather, studies on second language learners have concentrated on the actual understanding and production of idioms. The underlying assumption seems to be that idioms are processed similarly by all language users, whether L1 or L2 speakers. Nevertheless, when it comes to L2 learners, it does seem more reasonable to investigate how well they recognise and understand idioms, what characteristics of idioms affect this, and how L2 learners could best be assisted to recognise and comprehend unfamiliar idioms more effectively.

5.4 Pragmatics and the functions of idioms

Idioms have different functions in different discourse types (Fernando 1996, 1), and they often convey attitude and evaluations: approval, criticism, admiration, etc. (Collins Cobuild 1996, vi). Choosing an idiom instead of a literal expression carries an additional meaning itself. Despite the uniqueness of idioms, their pragmatics have not been as widely studied as, for instance, their processing. However, with the availability of computer corpora, it has become easier to study their functions and actual use.

5.4.1 Specific texts

The first researcher to look at the actual use and function of idioms was Strässler (1982), who analysed transcriptions of court hearings, therapy sessions, and White House conversations as well as some private recordings such as telephone conversations. He discusses various existing theories, studies and definitions of idioms according to the approach taken. For Strässler (ibid, 79), an idiom is an expression that consists of more than one word whose meaning is not derived from its constituents. He has also excluded phrasal and prepositional verbs. Thus, unlike more recent studies concentrating on function

and usage, Strässler looked specifically at what are taken to be idioms also in this study, not at idiomatic language and phrases in general.

Strässler (1982) did not find as many idioms in his data as he had expected. This may be due to the fairly formal and institutional nature of his data, and also, to the rather strict definition Strässler had adopted that restricts the range of expressions covered, unlike later pragmatic idiom studies. As for the nature of the idioms discovered, he reports that overall they were neutral, mostly referring to a third person or an object rather than the participants in the conversation. If they were used when talking about the participants then they were used with reference to those of lower status in the situation.

Strässler's findings seem to support the common claim that idioms are rather informal and more a feature of everyday spoken language than of formal or written language. Furthermore, Strässler (1982, 119) highlights the necessity of considering the social situation carefully before using idioms and this indeed is a point worth making as idioms are often register-bound and for some people, limited to colloquial language.

5.4.2 Corpus studies

5.4.2.1 Chitra Fernando

After Strässler (1982), over a decade passed before the functions of idioms again became the target of investigation. The general interest in pragmatics and, in vocabulary studies, in lexical strings and 'chunks' (e.g. Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992) may then have inspired idiom-oriented linguists as well. In addition, computer-based large corpora offered better possibilities than ever to examine the actual use, appearance and functions of various elements in language. Fernando (1996), for instance, derived data apart from what she collected herself, from the c. 20 million -word Birmingham Collection. Fernando adopted a broader view of idioms in her study, including idiomatic expressions and their different functions in language, not just what is understood by an idiom in the present thesis. She divided the expressions into two major classes, idioms and habitual collocations, and these in turn into several subclasses according to variance and figurativeness, characteristics that both play a vital role in the study of idioms. Fernando's categorisation system is one of the very few that combine these two features and it is quite thorough, thus providing a valuable guideline for further studies. In this study, the general framework of her system has been adopted, but it has been adjusted to better fit the definition of an idiom followed here. Fernando's *pure idioms*, and some[12] of the expressions she has

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12 For instance, *foot the bill* is considered an idiom in this study since *foot* appears as a verb only in that expression and the expression does not vary whereas *catch a bus/train* etc. is more variable, and *catch* is used as a verb also in different contexts. For Fernando, both would be semi-literal idioms because of the non-literal meaning of the verb.

labelled *semi-literal idioms* fall within the present definition of an idiom and they are thus the ones taken into account.

In addition to classifying expressions according to their idiomatic characteristics, Fernando has also categorised them according to their functions. The functional division follows Halliday's (e.g. 1994) categories of ideational, interpersonal and relational expressions. The term ideational is used by Fernando to refer to expressions that "contribute to the subject matter of a discourse by functioning as impressionistic packages of information" (p.188), and contain also the stereotypical idioms sometimes referred to as 'pure' or 'true', or expressions interpreted as idioms in the present study, e.g. *red herring, spill the beans*. Interpersonal expressions include phrases that 'facilitate interaction between language-users, especially in promoting conviviality" (p.188), like greetings, farewells etc. Relational expressions "relate phrases or clauses within sentences or relate sentences within a discourse", or "relate portions of a discourse, for example, paragraphs introducing new topics." (188), i.e. provide cohesive links like conjunctions, and adverbial and prepositional phrases. The latter two groups do not fall within the definition of an idiom in the present study and have thus not been considered here.

In addition to her comprehensive work in categorising and defining various expressions taking account of several variables, Fernando has examined in more detail the contexts and situations in which idiomatic expressions occur and what their functions are in each context. Since it is only ideational idioms that are of interest here, as interpersonal and relational idioms are idiomatic expressions rather than idioms, I shall now briefly review Fernando's findings about them. First of all, her book offers abundant examples of very vivid and variable use of idioms in different texts, most of which seem to be drawn from newspapers, thus providing evidence of the lively everyday use[13] of idioms in a forum present in nearly everyone's life. These examples also show that the possibility to reformulate and vary the form and wording of idioms is quite eagerly exploited, which from the viewpoint of a NNS makes their comprehension more challenging but also more worth pursuing. In Fernando's (p. 117) words: "idioms, though conventionalized, are seldom used in simple ways; nor is reading itself always simple despite the use of commonplace vocabulary."

Secondly, as for the nature of ideational idioms, Fernando (p. 108) has come to the conclusion that they "offer only overspecific ways of talking about the world. As such they are not vocabulary items of maximal utility in the way *people*, *house*... are." This indeed is true and is connected to idioms often being tightly tied to a certain register or context and also, to a certain underlying meaning or tone. There is a difference, say, between someone being just *old*, or *as old as hills*, or, for instance, someone *kicking the bucket* or *dying*, and also in the expressions' appropriateness in different contexts or situations. The limited

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13 For an excellent example of the creative use of the idiom *emperor's new clothes*, see Fernando 1996, 112-115.

number of potential contexts, however, does not mean that idioms would carry only very little information, rather the contrary (see e.g. Fernando 1996, 215)

A third issue Fernando discusses is the relationship between metaphoricity and the modern world discussed previously in this work (see chapter 3.2.1). Fernando (1996, 110) points out that "the dead metaphors implicit in idioms can be and are revived...and if the addressees are unable to recognize these revitalizations, they could miss out on the elaboration of the idiom's meaning, despite such elaborations being part of the message being communicated." On the other hand, this makes the task of understanding idioms more difficult creating the problem of how to grasp the meaning if and when the origins are unclear. However, the other side of the coin is that if a language user knows the nature of idioms, that they are not to be interpreted literally and often carry some additional meaning connected to their origins, this knowledge can prove useful in working out the meaning.

Finally, in a subclassification Fernando has looked at idioms in terms of the information they carry or the nature of meanings they are used to convey. Here she distinguishes between the following different classes: 1) idioms that are used to express a strategy to promote the speaker's own interest, e.g. *red herring*, 2) idioms of emotion, following the examples by Lakoff (1987) and Gibbs (1990), for instance *cause someone's blood to boil,* and 3) idioms that express attitudes, e.g. *bury the hatchet*. This division is not perhaps fruitful as such, and it is certainly even more controversial, fuzzy and subjective than other divisions (after all, *boiling blood* does show attitude as well, and *causing someone's blood to boil* may be a strategy used on purpose) but it does, nevertheless, add to the evidence that idioms can be and are used for a wide variety of purposes. Interestingly, Fernando has also noticed that idioms of emotion do not tolerate as much variation as the ones conveying a strategy (p. 135).

5.4.2.2 Rosamund Moon

The most recent input in the field of idiom research is Rosamund Moon's (1998a) corpus-based study of fixed expressions in English. Unlike Strässler, who based his research on a fairly limited number of texts and used a strict definition of an idiom and Fernando, who defined idioms more broadly and approached them from the functional viewpoint using large corpora as her source of examples and evidence, Moon has used corpora as her main tool, and examined instances drawn from them according to various variables and characteristics usually held to be emblematic of idioms. Moon's main source has been the Oxford Hector Pilot Corpus, an 18-million-word corpus of contemporary English. She also refers frequently to other corpora and text sources, particularly to The Bank of English.

Moon starts by discussing various terms employed by different researchers and different approaches taken towards idioms and other fixed expressions in vocabulary studies. Moon herself has adopted a wider definition of an idiom and thus prefers the term fixed expressions to idioms, albeit, as she mentions, fixed expressions are not necessarily fixed but can in fact often

undergo various syntactic and/or lexical changes (see e.g. Moon 1998a, 121-122). Yet, she defends the term by claiming that even though variation is allowed, "there still remains some kind of fixedness, symmetry, or integrity" (p. 122).

As for her categorisation, Moon's starting point, just as that of Fernando's, is the characteristics of idioms. Moon has divided the investigated expressions into three wider classes: 1) anomalous collocations, 2) formulae, and 3) metaphors, each of these consisting of various subclasses. Anomalous collocations represent the lexicogrammatical viewpoint, formulae concern pragmatics and finally metaphors relate to semantics. For the purposes of the present stud, metaphors are the most relevant category as they include what has here been considered as idioms.

Moon has further divided metaphors into *transparent*, *semi-transparent*, and *opaque*. All of these are non-literal and the latter two also to an extent difficult or impossible to decode without knowing the etymology of the expression. Moon uses the term *pure idiom* as a synonym for an opaque idiom. As for the other non-literal expressions, Moon has included similes and metaphorical proverbs (both labelled 'formulae') in her book. Proverbs are altogether excluded from the present study as they are here considered a category of their own[14], whereas similes, on the basis of their non-literalness, have been included. Moon readily admits the fuzziness of boundaries and that classifications are subjective and rather represent "a continuum than any discrete categories" (p.22). Thus, about a quarter of her data has been assigned to two categories. As Moon puts it: "On balance, a flexible system is preferable to a rigid one where only single classes are acceptable: it allows a greater range of information to be recorded..." (p.25).

Metaphors make up about one third (33.4%, n=2 265. 36% if also secondary classifications are taken account of) of all fixed expressions in Moon's data. Of these, 37 % were transparent, and 51 % semi-transparent. Contrary to those who regard idioms as dead, only 12 % of idioms in Moon's data were opaque, i.e. incapable of being decoded. According to Moon, the majority of expressions examined can be decoded by real-world knowledge although she does emphasise that the perception of transparency is subjective. Moon has also compared the frequency of some expressions in her data to that found in other corpora and discovered that there are bound to be differences between the corpora, as they consist of different types of text.

Since Moon's study was corpus-based, and her aim was to examine and describe idioms in one particular corpus, she proceeded by looking at the expressions in each category from various viewpoints. These include grammatical analysis and images of the expressions, the words they contain (e.g. those with a piece of clothing, adjectives, etc.), functions they have (e.g. event, situation, etc.), and so on. This sort of typology seems worthwhile when describing the idiomatic map of a language or a certain corpus as Moon has

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14 Non-literal expressions that often contain a lesson or a moral. As for their form and structure, proverbs frequently form a whole clause or even a two-clause sentence.

done, but for the purposes of the present study this kind of categorisation does not play a role. Thus, Moon's findings will not be considered in depth but some general points will be briefly reviewed. Moon has also taken into account the functions in discourse various expressions have and these again include numerous expressions not falling into the definition of an idiom in the present study.

The corpus Moon used contains a great deal of journalistic material. Interestingly, horoscopes appeared to be rich in idioms and proverbs, perhaps reflecting the rather narrative nature of the text-type. As for the differences between written and spoken language, Moon reported that fixed expressions were surprisingly rare in spoken texts, contrary to common beliefs and often repeated claims. Moon found plausible explanations in peopls impressionistically over-reporting the presence of idioms in speech, and also in that "some people may be overinfluenced by passive, ostensibly 'spoken-genre', speech situations such as dialogue in fiction, film, and television, where certain idioms appear to be fossilized and used to develop or delineate character..." (p. 73). Idioms may, however, have certain functions in conversation as a study of telephone conversations reveals: among other functions, idioms are used to summarise and draw a topic to a close in conversation in order to change a topic (Drew and Holt 1998)

Moon went into depth in defining and classifying the instances of transformation and variation. She took advantage of some existing and widely applied criteria and categories, and also created categories of her own. Some of her general findings concerning idioms will now be discussed, as will the validity of some of the classes she has created for types of variation.

While examining inflection in her data, Moon found a general tendency to avoid fixed expressions in sentences with plural subjects or else to use words *collective* or *corporate* to refer to plural in a fixed expression, for instance, *but advertisers have since mostly seen that they have shot themselves and the viewers in their collective feet* (Moon 1998, 96). Subjects, when mentioned were in the majority of cases human (81% of metaphors). As for grammatical transformation, Moon states that her data was too small to permit any generalisation, but transformations did occur. Also, she found numerous examples of lexical variation, with about 40 % of the fixed expressions in her data showing lexical variations or strongly institutionalized transformations, 35 % of those being metaphors. As many as 14% even had two or more possible variations, metaphors again accounting for 35 %. Moon does admit that the high proportion of variation may be partly due to the dominant genre in her data, i.e. journalism, with which idioms and their variations are often connected. Still, as Moon highlights, they can nevertheless be considered *fixed* expressions as, regardless of variation, "there still remains some kind of fixedness, symmetry, or integrity" (Moon 1998a, 122). In Moon's data verb variation was the commonest, while noun variation was almost as frequent. According to Moon, in metaphors nouns are often the focus of the expression and thus variation in the noun creates a greater difference than variation in the verb. Noun variation does not change the meaning, but substantially alters the

image the idiom develops. Differences in nouns were also more frequent markers of American vs. British English expression than variation in verbs. (Moon 1998a, 96-150)

Moon introduces a new term into the study of idioms, that of an *idiom schema*, which is related to lexical variation. She uses this term to refer to word clusters that share a metaphor and related wording but do not necessarily have a common fixed structure or wording, for instance, *it's water under the bridge/a lot of water flows under the bridge/water under the dam/water under the dyke/water under the mill.* Despite Moon's description of idiom schemas explaining variability and compositionality, and representing cultural concepts, it is nevertheless hard to see the necessity of the term. Moon further develops the idea by discussing visualizations of idioms, and idiom schemas, but yet it is difficult to agree with her on the significance of the term. The examples of idiom schemas offered by Moon can be perceived to represent lexical variations of idioms, altered to fit different contexts and situations. These variations may be unique and appear only in one particular context and thus not be as well established as, for instance, *beat one's breast/chest*, but they still are variations. Yet other examples provided by Moon seem more like two different expressions entirely, rather than variations or schemas, cf. *scare the life out of someone* vs. *be frightened out of one's mind,* or *another nail in the coffin* vs. *the final nail in the coffin*. Creating a new term and new classes and categories for variations does not seem necessary, or relevant, particularly since the existing categories are already subjective and fuzzy, and subject to disagreement among scholars. Thus, also the application of the notion of *frame*, sometimes also referred to as *script* (see e.g. Yule 1996, 147), seems to be a needless overextension of terms in a field full of superfluous terms and labels defined differently according to each researcher.

To add another term to discussion of variation in idioms, and to complicate a complex matter even further, Moon (1998a, 170) also discusses *exploitation* as one type of variation. By this she refers to "the stylistic manipulation of the lexis (and semantics) of FEIs; perhaps to provide some sort of defamiliarization , and typically providing humour", e.g. *He burns the candle at five ends*. Her remark that exploitation offers evidence of idioms' compositionality is, however, valid. Lexical variation does indeed signify a degree of compositionality. Somewhat similar to exploitation are *interruption* and *assertion* (ibid., 174-175), again seen as independent phenomena in the field of variation. The idea of lexical variation could perhaps be extended to cover these too, but it might be worthwhile to follow Moon's example and separate them as a type of their own. After all, something might be, say, *a very red herring*, and it is possible to *keep a close eye on someone*, yet these idioms do not tolerate lexical variation, since the words cannot be replaced by other words.

All in all Moon has approached her data from several different viewpoints. She has thoroughly investigated the corpora and can thus present evidence for several of her conclusions concerning idioms and other fixed expressions. However, it may not have been necessary to try to distinguish such

detailed categories as she now has sometimes done: in a fuzzy and subjective area, the highly detailed classes tend to be even more fuzzy and subjective.

5.4.3 Summary

In the course of time, the approach taken towards idioms has change and researchers have presented various definitions of an idiom accordingly. In the same way the view taken of idioms in foreign or second language teaching has developed together with other changes in teaching. Idioms have been regarded/are regarded as words, and much attention has been focussed on whether they are processed as single lexical items or separate word strings, whether they are stored in their own particular idiom vocabulary in the brain, or whether they are stored among other words in the memory. Reaction time tests (Gibbs 1985, McGlone et al 1994), for instance, have been applied to study the storage of idioms, and the evidence supports the single word -view, that is that idioms are processed as wholes, and their meanings are taken to be arbitrary in the same way as those of single words. (McGlone et al 1994, , Cacciari 1994). Moreover, in the little research on the teaching of idioms there is, and in the research on the knowledge and recognition of idioms by non-native speakers, the approach has been based on differences between L1 and L2 idioms, whether they have had equivalents and if so, then what kind (Arnaud and Savignon 1997, Irujo 1993).

Idioms are hard to define and also often to distinguish from other items in the vocabulary. Proverbs, for instance, are different in the sense that they "consist of 2 halves balancing each other, with parallel syntax" (Kniffka 1997, 75). According to Kniffka (1997, 75-77), this kind of symmetric structure is widely found in proverbs in different languages and cultures and generally they express popular wisdom, or as Hatch and Brown (1995, 203) put it, "shared cultural wisdom". Kniffka (1997, 78) also claims that only a native speaker of a language can know exactly what a proverb in that language means, what its canonical form is, and when it can be used. To a certain extent this applies to idioms as well. It is difficult to say whether a non-native speaker can know *exactly* what a foreign language idiom means. Non-native speakers often try to work out the meaning by comparing the expression to a similar one in their own native language. On the other hand, the exact meaning of an idiom is a somewhat vague concept: native speakers sometimes have very different interpretations of idioms as the results of the present study show. Should then all the meanings comprehended by natives be called exact meanings, or perhaps just one, the most frequent? As for the use and contextual knowledge of idioms, perhaps it is not really necessary for non-native speakers to use them. The discussion will now move on to look at research on idioms in second language learning and teaching.

6 IDIOMS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

The realisation that idioms were analysable and metaphorical in nature shifted the focus firmly from their form to their meaning and to the language user/learner and how they perceive idioms and their meanings. Most studies of English idiom comprehension and learning have concentrated on native speakers, children and the hearing-impaired in particular. The teaching and learning of idioms and figurative language in general has not been widely studied so far. Levorato (1993) has looked at the acquisition of figurative language among L1 children and has come to the conclusion that figurative language, including idioms, is acquired together with other linguistic skills. This seems reasonable since figurative expressions vary and develop just as vividly as literal ones, and they are often connected to their literal meaning (e.g. *vote with one's feet, add fuel to the flames*), knowledge of the world (e.g. *give the green light*), conventions, etc. L2 learners can be assumed to possess the linguistic skills[15] required for them to be able to decode idioms in their L1. Thus they should be familiar with the logic behind figurative language, and the various ways in which meaning could be inferred. The problem remains as to how they are to do this in a foreign language, how they should interpret and understand figurative expressions. Thus idioms encountered by non-native speakers perhaps constitute a more problematic issue. NNSs' knowledge of English idioms has not been widely investigated, and the starting point has invariably been the assumption that NNSs *must* recognise and also be able to produce English idioms. Opinions as to what idioms should be included have varied, as have views on how best to teach FL idioms to students.

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15 Levorato gives a list of examples here: "skills include coding, making inferences, 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, and so on" (Levorato 1993, 104).

6.1 Idioms and the second language learner

As was seen above, there are various factors that affect the comprehension and interpretation of idioms, for instance variability or transformability, frequency of occurrence and familiarity, and literalness (see e.g. Cronk et al. 1993, McGlone et al. 1994). Yet, how big a role they actually play in idiom comprehension by NSs and NNSs alike is, despite all the research, still unknown. When the context fails to provide the meaning of an expression, there are still several means a language user can resort to, which can be classified into three major categories: intralingual, interlingual, and extralingual (Krantz 1991, 24). Since idioms are metaphorical and mean more than the sum of their single elements, their meaning cannot be worked out by looking at each word separately. Albeit figurative, the meaning can also be discovered with the help of the literal meaning or the image it creates (Lakoff 1987, 380-397, 446-448, Gibbs 1992, McGlone et al. 1994). Mental linkages, applying sounds and images, analysing and reasoning, and intelligent guesswork (Hulstjin 1997, 210-211, Oxford 1990, 38-51, Schmitt 1997, 212) are equally applicable to deducing an idiom's meaning just as to language learning in general. Naturally, this is not always without problems: literal meanings can be unfamiliar, images and analyses vary, guessing the origins of an idiom may set one on the wrong track, etc. It should also be taken account of that although the meanings and semantic fields of single elements often assist in working out the correct meaning, idioms and their meanings have to be taken as a whole.

In the case of non-native language-users, the mother tongue can be and readily is searched or scanned in order to access the meaning of an idiom also in a foreign language, as Irujo's (1986a,1986b) results, for example, indicate. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that relying too heavily on a similar outlook does involve the risk of discrepancies in meaning. These false friends (e.g. English *the last straw,* the last problem in a series of problems that makes you give up, vs. Finnish *viimeinen oljenkorsi*, last resort) easily lead learners astray. On the other hand, the image a literal translation produces may also be less than lucid, and the separate words unfamiliar and misunderstood when they refer to some specialised area. For example, *kick something into touch* (postpone or reject something) remains misunderstood or unclear unless the learner is an expert on sports vocabulary, although the literal meaning would help immensely**.** There is no guaranteed way to infer an idiom's meaning, but it is always worth trying, and familiarity with suitable strategies does assist in the task.

When it comes to productive language skills, several researchers agree with Ellis (1997) that "an important index of nativelike competence is that the learner uses idioms fluently" (p.130)**.** However, much depends on the definition of an idiom: certainly it is important that a second-language learner is also able to produce e.g. conversational phrases, but idioms and metaphorical language in general are perhaps not so essential. Naturally, it also depends on whether or not nativelike competence is the aim, or just fluency and making

oneself understood in everyday life. However, understanding idioms is essential, and even though the following quote is about native speakers, it is applicable to non-native speakers as well: "failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual's understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings" (Nippold and Martin 1989, 59**).**

The idea of teaching phrases or fixed formulae is connected with their processing as single words. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) were among the first advocates of this and their starting point was earlier studies that have indicated that when children learn their first language they use prefabricated language chunks that they perceive as entities. Nattinger and DeCarrico argue that the same probably applies to second and foreign language learners as well, and they wish to introduce a learning method that takes advantage of the phenomenon. They also argue that since lexical phrases are numerous, and though language-specific, occur frequently in different languages, they are worth paying attention to in foreign-language teaching (p.66). In addition to defining and classifying several types and subtypes of lexical phrases the authors also categorize the different functions lexical phrases can have. They maintain that since lexical phrases are first learnt as unanalyzed chunks their associated functions in context are learnt at the same time (p.11). Also, they emphasize that although the phrases are learnt as chunks, foreign language learners can be assumed to possess the tools to analyse them and this is a skill that a child acquiring his/her first language does not have.

Nattinger and DeCarrico have created various categories for lexical phrases as well as for their functions. Among prefabricated language chunks they distinguish three different classes along a continuum: idioms, clichés, and non-canonical phrases. Idioms are defined as "complex bits of frozen syntax, whose meanings cannot be derived from the meaning of their constituents, that is, whose meanings are more than simply the sum of their individual parts" (p. 33), e.g. *kick the bucket*. Clichés too consist of relatively frozen patterns but their meaning can be derived from their individual constituents, e.g. *have a nice day*. Non-canonical phrases in turn have untypical structures, e.g. *by and large* co-ordinates a preposition with an adjective. In addition to these three, there are other kinds of fixed phrases that are canonical in shape and whose meaning can be described by the traditional rules of syntax, e.g. *a year ago*. Some of them are highly variable (*I think (that) X...* expresses assertion), some totally fixed (*by the way*, a topic shifter).

Nattinger and DeCarrico continue by classifying lexical phrases that they define as differing from "other conventionalized or frozen forms such as idioms or clichés mainly in that they are used to perform certain functions" (p. 36), e.g. *a* _____ *ago*. Lexical phrases are termed by Nattinger and DeCarrico collocations with a specific pragmatic function, and this functional characteristic makes them different from ordinary collocations like *rancid butter* (p. 36). Like collocations, idioms and clichés do not, according to Nattinger and DeCarrico, have any particular function. Nattinger and DeCarrico have further divided lexical phrases into subcategories, and identify numerous functions for their examples.

Nattinger and DeCarrico's classification system is multifarious and perhaps unnecessarily complex. The number of categories they distinguish is exhaustive and it is hard to see the purpose of there being so many of them. Furthermore, it is not always clear why they have decided to place certain expressions in certain categories. For instance, *hold your horses* could be called an idiom but according to Nattinger and DeCarrico it is, however, a lexical phrase, more specifically, a canonical polyword functioning as a disagreement marker. Similarly *a watched pot never boils*, which they term a canonical institutionalized lexical phrase functioning as advice, could be called a proverb.

The line between an idiom and what Nattinger and DeCarrico call a lexical phrase is very narrow. In my opinion idioms and also clichés have a function: for instance *kick the bucket* certainly expresses a degree of nonchalance, reflecting the fact that the speaker was not close to the deceased. It is difficult to imagine a person reporting the death of someone close by saying, "s/he kicked the bucket yesterday." Idioms in all their colourfulness and expressiveness have functions; they not only enrich language but also express certain attitudes or opinions of the speaker. There is a difference between *a cattle market* and *a beauty contest*, or *to run over a pedestrian* and *to have the pedestrian's blood on one's hands.* Moreover, Nattinger and DeCarrico's definition of an idiom, "a fully non-compositional, non-productive collocation is a true idiom, a truly frozen piece of language" (p. 177), is very restrictive and narrow, and according to them, *kick the bucket* is less an idiom than *hell for leather* since kick in the sense of die is also used in phrases like *kick off* and *kick out*.

Nattinger and DeCarrico do not discuss idioms further but rather concentrate on lexical phrases and their functions in discourse, and on the best ways to teach them. The basic idea, however, that language is learnt in chunks, and that this should be exploited in teaching and learning could perhaps be applied to idioms too. Idioms are often perceived as entities rather than word strings, and since they are relatively fixed and their usage is often tightly register-bound, they are probably the most effectively learnt as chunks.

6.2 English as a second/foreign language and idioms

There are very few studies on English idioms and second language learners. The reason for this may lie in the general lack of attention vocabulary has long suffered from in linguistics. It is also only recently that the focus of attention has shifted slightly from single words towards larger blocks and elements in the lexicon. As one plausible explanation, Cacciari and Tabossi (1993: xiii) mention the difficulty of accurately characterizing idioms and figurative language altogether. It has been easier to treat "figurative language ... as a relatively homogeneous topic.... Idioms, in particular, have often been considered 'dead metaphors'"(ibid: xii). This bias may have affected second language teaching, too. There the tradition may be more grammar-oriented and when it comes to vocabulary, the focus may have been more on single words or on idiomatic

phrases and expressions other than what are considered idioms in the present study (e.g. collocations, conversational phrases, greetings, phrasal verbs etc., like *in my opinion, how do you do, burst out in laughter*).

Views on whether or not to teach L2 idioms, and if so, which ones and how vary from one extreme to the other. Some see idioms as something that perhaps cannot be taught at all since they lack general rules (Sornig 1988, 285). At the other extreme is the opinion that "idioms and phraseological units in the broadest sense against their social background will provide a rich source of general education and increase the pleasure in foreign language teaching and learning" (Gläser 1988, 277).

6.2.1 Eric Kellerman

Kellerman (1977) studied Dutch speakers' recognition of English idioms in order to examine the effect of transfer in the process. He presented his subjects with sentences that contained English expressions that had an equivalent idiom in Dutch. Half of the English expressions were idioms, while the other half were not figurative. The subjects in the study were students in different years, and Kellerman did not check whether the students understood the expressions, only recognition was observed.

Kellerman noticed that whereas first-year students tended to reject Dutch-like idioms whether they existed in English or not, i.e. they were overtly careful to avoid transfer from their mother tongue, more advanced students were more knowledgeable and ready to accept also those English idioms that had a Dutch equivalent. However, Kellerman does not mention whether they had been explicitly taught idioms. He does mention, though, that first year students have not met very many idioms at school, and are linguistically naive since the school concentrates mainly on communication rather than on "grammatically perfect production" (p.114). This seems slightly odd as idioms certainly can be learnt and taught when the focus of instruction is on communication, but perhaps Kellerman refers rather to first year students' ignorance of the relationships between language structures in general.

6.2.2 Suzanne Irujo

Suzanne Irujo has carried out two studies on Venezuelan Spanish-speaking students' acquisition of English idioms. In the first study (Irujo 1986b), the subjects were all students ar an American university and were thus living in an English-speaking environment and exposed to English every day. In the study the recognition, comprehension, recall, and production of 45 idioms as well as the influence of the mother tongue were tested. One third of the idioms had Spanish equivalents identical both in literal meaning and in form, one third had equivalents that were similar in form and literal meaning to their English

counterparts, and the remaining fifteen idioms differed both in form and in literal meaning[16] (Irujo 1986b).

Irujo found that the idioms that had identical corresponding expressions in the subjects' native language were the easiest both to understand and to produce. Idioms that had similar equivalents were comprehended almost as successfully as those with identical ones, but in production, the effect of negative transfer from Spanish showed clearly. Different idioms, for their part proved to be the most difficult ones for the students in all four tasks, but showed less interference than similar idioms. Irujo reports that in production tasks students used both inter- and intralingual strategies for unknown idioms. It also appeared that students either did not fear to resort to Spanish, contrary to Kellerman's findings, or had simply learnt more easily the idioms that seemed familiar (ibid).

On the basis of these results, Irujo also conducted a study (Irujo 1993) concerned with non-native speakers' idiom production in English. The aim of the study was to test whether the widely held belief that non-native speakers would avoid idioms is true, and to discover what sort of idioms if any are used by second language learners. The subjects were twelve native speakers of Spanish who had learnt English as adults, and were professionals living and working in an English-speaking environment. The task was to translate paragraphs containing idioms from Spanish into English. Just as in the study described above one third had identical, one third similar, and one third different counterparts in the target language.

According to Irujo the assumed avoidance of idioms may not be the case after all: in the majority (two thirds) of the translations of the paragraphs the subjects attempted to use an idiom, and the percentage of correct idioms was almost equally high (59 %). The results also corroborate the findings of the earlier study in the sense that identical idioms were shown to be the easiest ones to produce.

It should be borne in mind, however, that in what Irujo calls a production task, the subjects were in fact translating text and the original text contained idioms. Thus it is hardly a question of true production, and conclusions about whether or not the subjects would actually (attempt to) use idioms in speech or writing cannot be drawn. The study merely indicates that when translating an L1 text containing idioms, very advanced learners may use L2 idioms. Biskup (1992, 84-85) even claims that "translation 'promotes' L1 influence on the production of L2 equivalents". (See also LoCoco 1975, Dulay et al 1982, Sharwood Smith 1994, 75). True production of idioms contains obvious risks for non-native speakers as Irujo, too, recognizes. Productive usage of idioms, just as

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identical equivalent: *to play with fire - jugar con fuego* (to play with fire)
similar equivalent: *to cost an arm and leg - costar un ojo de la cara* (to cost an eye to the face)
different equivalent: *to kick the bucket - estirar la pata* (to stretch the leg) (Irujo 1986b, 302-303)

any language usage, requires not just knowledge of meaning but of register, context, form, and transformability. Moreover, considering the metaphorical nature of idioms the risk of negative transfer and being misled by false friends (idioms similar or identical in form but different in meaning in two languages) is high, or, if the L2 learner is aware of their existence, may strongly hinder non-native speaker's reliance on mother tongue clues.

Even though L1 and its equivalent expressions can lend a welcome hand, they cannot be blindly relied on. In addition to false friends, "in most cases even those expressions which are very close lexically and semantically have differenet connotations and different distributions. It is simply not safe to assume that an equivalent is a good translation" (Moon 1992, 18).

6.2.3 Pierre Arnaud and Sandra Savignon

A different view from Irujo's is presented in a study by Pierre Arnaud and Sandra Savignon (1997). It concentrates solely on idioms and rare words that have no similar equivalents in the learner's native language, and that are totally opaque so that the meaning cannot be inferred from the elements the items contain. The main aim of the study was to see how the duration of language studies affects advanced learners' recognition of vocabulary when it comes to complex lexical (multi-word) units[17] and rare words, and whether it is possible for highly advanced learners to attain native-like proficiency. The reason for choosing rare items was that they "carry the highest information load in any text, and therefore cause the most hindrance in the reading process when unknown" (Arnaud and Savignon, 1997). Arnaud and Savignon stress that context guessing often leads to misunderstandings and errors in interpretation. Items that have similar equivalents in the learner's mother tongue are easy to decode; thus it is the different, opaque ones that pose problems. Hence it is necessary to learn not just frequent simple words, but also less frequent and more complex items. (Arnaud and Savignon, 1997)

The subjects in the study were native speakers of French, either university students of English, or teachers or teacher trainees. A group of American students served as native controls. The results indicate that just as in Kellerman's study non-native speakers' knowledge of rare recognition vocabulary does increase during their studies, as does the heterogeneity among subjects. When it came to rare single items, non-native teachers recognized even more words than the natives, though Arnaud and Savignon point out that this may have been caused by the fact that the natives were young undergraduates whereas the non-native teachers were middle-aged professionals. As for complex lexical units, even the teachers who were the most successful non-native speakers did not quite reach the native level. Arnaud and Savignon suggest that perhaps "constant exposure to the language is necessary for native-

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17 In Arnaud and Savignon's study *complex lexical units* is the term used for idioms.

like proficiency in the case of complex lexical units but not simple ones." Indeed the role of input in language acquisition is significant, whether concerning simple or complex items. Arnaud and Savignon's final conclusion is that vocabulary teaching ought to be intensified and that "complex lexical units deserve special pedagogical attention, and ... learners should have specific strategies for their acquisition." (Arnaud and Savignon, 1997).

It should be borne in mind, however, that in Arnaud and Savignon's study only opaque idioms were tested. In such cases meaning cannot be decoded nor can it always be reliably inferred from the context and accordingly straightforward learning remains the only means. Nevertheless, several idioms can be decoded, or at least the combination of the context and decoding assists in working out the meaning as long as the learner understands the logic of idioms and does not take them as dead metaphors or as long words that have an equivalent in learner's native language and that just have to be learnt. In the latter case s/he may also miss the gist of several transformations of the basic form of an idiom.

Bahns and Eldaw (1993) studied L2 learners' knowledge of collocations and though collocations are different from idioms, they have in common multi-word phrase-like construction. According to the study knowledge of collocations does not increase together with general vocabulary. Marton (1977) claims that in the acquisition of idioms and collocations, "mere exposure to the target language is not sufficient for the advanced learner" (Marton 1977: 43). He also maintains that an extended stay in an English-speaking environment does improve learner's receptive skills but not necessarily productive ones (Marton 1977: 38).

6.2.4 Summary

Despite idioms' importance in language and despite the dominant role English has among the languages in the world, English idioms and how they affect second language learners have not been widely studied. The few studies there are have concentrated on what kind of idioms ought to be taught to students, particularly from the point of view of language transfer and of transparency. The views taken by Irujo and Arnaud and Savignon represent opposite opinions.

It has been shown that the mother tongue may have an effect on the recognition of idioms, but whether it is more positive or negative has not yet been discovered. Moreover, transparency and a high degree of figurativeness can certainly be of assistance to second language learners as Irujo's results indicate. However, more studies are needed to see how idioms' characteristics in general affect their recognition. In addition, concentrating either on non-figurative idioms with no mother-tongue equivalent, or on transparent idioms with an equivalent in L1 may not be the most fruitful method of investigating idioms, which would have to include several different types of idioms in order to draw any conclusions. As familiarity has been found to be significant in the processing of idioms, frequency ought to be taken into account.

6.3 Idioms in second/foreign language teaching in general

In the case of non-native speakers, more important than being capable of idiom-dropping is to recognize idioms in text (spoken or written), and to have the tools to try to analyse the meanings of unfamiliar idioms. Hence, receptive knowledge of idioms should indeed be encouraged and supported. The meaning of idioms cannot always be inferred from the context, and there is often the risk of misinterpretation. According to Kelly (1990), guessing or inferring meaning by using decoding and previous knowledge of the vocabulary results in inferring the correct meaning far more often than does contextual guessing, which frequently leads to false conclusions and does not promote learning. Kelly (1990, 205) also points out that guessing from the context takes up a lot of time. For instance, the four-step strategy[18] proposed by Clarke and Nation (1980) advocates context-based guessing, and certainly is a time-consuming task. Irujo's (1986a) suggestion that idioms should be taught in the earlier stages of learning and not just to advanced students would certainly make idioms more familiar to foreign language learners, and would help them to conceive idioms as an important and lively, albeit difficult, part of language worth paying attention to.

The fact that in Irujo's study, similar idioms were the easiest for second language learners does not necessarily make them the ones most worth attention, quite the contrary. They may provide a good starting point for teaching, however, and assist in integrating the teaching of idioms into language classes, as similarity is bound to make the concept of an idiom more comprehensible. On the whole, other criteria should be used when determining which idioms to teach and to what extent. For instance, frequency, register, context, and information load should be taken into account and it is necessary to try to judge which of the most frequent idioms the learners are likely to encounter in everyday situations. That is of course a subjective question and no list of idioms that ought to be taught can be compiled. Since even the most frequent idioms are fairly rare compared to the most frequent single words (*Collins Cobuild* 1995: xvii), the teaching of idioms should, however, concentrate on providing learners with knowledge of how to recognize and analyse them and thus provide the means of acquiring wider recognition vocabulary. The students may do well in tests when they have been taught and are tested on things learnt easily, but it might be worth pondering whether teaching them the characteristics of idioms, and strategies to infer the meaning of unfamiliar idioms would be more valuable.

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(1) determining the part of speech of the word; (2) looking at the immediate grammar;
(3) studying the wider context; (4) guessing the word and checking the guess (Clarke and Nation 1980: 211).

Teaching non-native speakers to actively use and produce idioms in a foreign language is not necessarily rational. As has been discussed above, vocabulary and idioms in particular require knowledge not just of the dictionary meaning but also about the word's context, register, collocations, style etc. (see also O'Malley and Chamot 1990, 210-211). The relationship between a word and its meaning can be a complex one. However, it does make a good deal of sense to teach non-native speakers to recognize idioms in a text and to work out their meanings. Idioms are, although not excessively, frequently used in texts, both spoken and, perhaps more often, written. In order to understand newspapers, for instance, knowledge of and at least the consciousness of their existence are vital. There are several methods of working out the meaning of unknown words, some of which are also applicable to idioms (see e.g. Vaurio 1998). With idioms, using images and imagination and linking meaning and form (Ellis N. 1997, Nation 2001, 62) is a strategy worth mentioning. Likewise, using actions, objects and pictures (Nation 2002, 85) are applicable to idioms. Nation (2002, 94-98) also emphasizes rich instruction, which is in accordance with McCarthy's (1984) view that being available is not the same as being noticed or used. Expanding knowledge on existing vocabulary, e.g. through semantic mapping, has also been suggested, as have communication activities (e.g. Nation and Newton 1997, 248-251).

However, these means are not always sufficient, and the meaning of a word or expression may remain unclear or misunderstood despite various guessing or inferencing strategies. Laufer (1991b, 1997) discusses lexical factors that hinder comprehension (although Laufer talks about reading comprehension, the categories equally apply to spoken aural comprehension). For unknown words, there are basically two ways of inferring the meaning, starting either from the word itself, its form, inflection etc. or the context of the word. Laufer (1997, 25) introduces the term *deceptive transparency* to refer to words that look as if they contain clues to their meaning, yet in fact mean something other than what would seem logical (e.g. *shortcomings* interpreted as 'short visits', *discourse* as 'without direction').

With idioms the risk of this deceptive transparency is perhaps even greater if they are not recognized as idioms but are translated literally, word for word instead of looking at the metaphor behind the expression. Laufer (1997, 26) also mentions words with multiple meanings, and synforms, words that share similarities for instance in sound or form (*acute/cute*, *economic/economical*). Thus, words and expressions themselves contain misleading clues to meaning. If a language user is unaware, for instance, of an expression being an idiom rather than a literal expression, there is little s/he can do to infer its meaning. And even if s/he recognized it as an idiom but attempted to approach the meaning through separate words and their assumed figurative meanings, s/he would be following equally false tracks.

Laufer has studied the correlation between unknown words and reading comprehension, and quite naturally, the fewer unknown words in a text, the better the text has been understood. The same tendency applies to the awareness of unknown words: the more aware the reader, the better the

reading comprehension, even if the meanings of unknown words remained unknown. The mere awareness of their existence is, according to Laufer (ibid.) enough to add to understanding as it at least reduces the number of misinterpreted words.

If the word itself does not offer any clues to the meaning, the language user can try to rely on context. Nation (2002, 240-245), for instance has advocated guessing and using contextual clues in inferring the meaning of a word. However, using context in inferring the meaning of unknown words is not without problems either. (e.g. Kelly 1990, Arnaud and Savignon 1997). Laufer (27-30) lists cases in which the context is not much of assistance: clues can be unusable since they themselves are unfamiliar to the reader, they can be misinterpreted, or, they may quite simply be non-existent. In addition, reader's expectations and preconceptions about the text and its topic and his/her world knowledge of the subject-matter create the wrong idea, which of course can happen even if all the words are understood but the text is carelessly read in the way the reader thinks it should have been written. Especially with idioms that, metaphorical as they are, can mean basically anything, and are longish expressions, there may be so little context that it hardly helps in inferring the meaning. Moreover, idioms are not frozen but can be transformed and varied, and even the recognition of a variant can be difficult, let alone inferring its meaning.

One learning strategy that might be well worth applying to the comprehension of unfamiliar idioms is the keyword method advocated by, for instance, Hulstjin (1997). Although Hulstjin in his article refers to single words and stresses the role of context in understanding new words, the examples he gives and tools he proposes are worth discussing here as well. The keyword method, which involves finding a link between the new word and either some known word or an image and storing new words in and retrieving them from the memory with the assistance of this link, is not widely taken advantage of (Hulstjin 1997, 210). This is a pity, since learning words as word lists with translations into one's mother tongue is not always an efficient method. As was discussed above, although context-based guessing is useful when enlarging the recognition vocabulary, it does contain its dangers and is not a valued method for learning production vocabulary. As Hulstjin (ibid, 211) stresses, different language users memorise words exploiting various characteristics: some rely on orthography or pronunciation, others on syntactic characteristics or morphological structure. (Aitchison 1994, Levelt 1989). According to Hulstjin, the keyword method is suitable for concrete words that create a visual image, and he also stresses the significance of encyclopaedic knowledge, not just of language. With idioms, these two are combined, as idioms almost always refer to some concrete event or phenomenon, easy to visualise.

To sum up, the methods of comprehending and learning idioms are many. Also, although single idioms are far from having the frequency of single words, "taken together, they are numerous" (Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997: 106). Thus, recognising and understanding them is vital also to second and foreign language learners. If the learner aims at native-like competence, "an important

index of native-like competence is that the learner uses idioms fluently. So language learning involves learning sequences of words (frequent collocations, phrases, and idioms) as well as sequences within words" (Ellis, N. 1997, 130). Bearing all this in mind, the discussion will now move on to the present study that deals with the comprehension and interpretation of idioms among native as well as non–native speakers of English.

6.4 General research questions

As can be seen from the discussion above, idioms have mostly been studied from the viewpoint of native speakers. Besides, studies have mostly concentrated on reaction times and the processing of idioms, and how different idiom characteristics affect them. At the same time the studies all emphasize the importance of idioms and the significant role they play in everyday language, as well as their specific pragmatic functions. The former reputation of idioms as being informal and colloquial has been challenged too. Yet the role of idioms in the experience of second language learners has not been studied much, even though vocabulary in general has interested SLA researchers. In addition, the multiple meanings of idioms and the potential differences in their interpretation by language users have not been investigated, although it has been acknowledged that images and associations connected with idioms, as well as various estimates of for instance their familiarity and frequency, are bound to be subjective and individual.

What this study aims to discover is how language users' interpretations differ from each other, how idioms' functions and contexts are perceived, and how different idiom characteristics affect their comprehension particularly among non-native speakers.

7 METHOD

7.1 Participants

The participants in the study were all university students or graduates at Finnish or British universities. All had English either as a major or minor subject. Since the aim was to look at both the differences in interpretation among native speakers and the recognition and knowledge of idioms among subjects with Finnish as their mother tongue, there were both British and Finnish participants. Since idioms are considered such a difficult and specific area of language, it seemed inevitable that the participants would have to be advanced speakers of English. There were 144 Finnish participants altogether, all of whom studied English at the University of Jyväskylä either as their first (96 participants) or second (48 participants) subject. Less than half (67) were first year students, and 77 were more advanced, in their fourth of fifth year. Since all students who wish to study English have to pass a fairly difficult language skills test, and since a number of students had spent time in an English-speaking environment either as exchange students or au-pairs, it was assumed that the Finnish informant group were advanced level users of English. The native speakers who participated in the study were also undergoing or had recently completed university education, and were of approximately the same age as the Finnish participants. The original idea was to have approximately as many native speaker participants as there were Finnish speakers, but circumstances limited the number of native speakers to 36. Most of these were students at Lancaster University, but there were also some students and graduates from Thames Valley University. Albeit native and non-native speakers linguistic environments were by no means parallel, the background questionnaire showed that there were no great differences in the participants' linguistic behaviour.

7.2 Design of the questionnaire

In designing the questionnaire, the main purpose was to investigate students' (both native and non-native) interpretation and comprehension of idioms. Since idioms are ambiguous to an extent, and even English monolingual idiom dictionaries often disagree with each other about the meanings of idioms and the contexts in which they may appear, it was presumed that the subjects of the study would differ in their interpretations. In this sense the questionnaire concentrated on idioms rather than on their users. As for the non-native speakers, the questionnaire also aimed at finding out how well they recognised the idioms and knew their potential meanings and contexts.

The idioms used in the questionnaire were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995), since at the time of the questionnaire design it was the only one based on frequencies, and also the latest available on the market. The questionnaire[19] comprised three different parts: the first investigated the possible differences in the interpretation of idioms, the second was concerned with the appropriate contexts for idioms, and the third concentrated on one hand on the interpretation of meaning, and on the other hand, on NNSs' command of English idioms.

The idioms employed in Part I and II were the same. They were chosen from among the most frequent ones in *Cobuild* on the basis of a comparison of their definitions in three different English idiom dictionaries, *Cobuild, Longman,* and *Oxford***.** Amongst the most frequent[20] 577 idioms, there were 37 idioms for which at least two[21] of the dictionaries gave definitions different from each other. Of these, the twenty with the widest range of definitions were chosen for the questionnaire. The aim was to see how unanimous or divided the informants would be in their interpretations as to the potential meanings and contexts of the idioms. In the questionnaire, the idioms were presented without a context in order not to limit the number of potential interpretations.

7.2.1 Part I

In Part I, each of the twenty idioms was presented with four likely alternative meanings that had been taken from *Collins Cobuild, Longman,* and *Oxford*. The

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19 See Appendices I and II

20 In this study variants have not been counted as different expressions but several variations of an idiom have been counted as one single idiom. In figures given in the preface of *Cobuild* they are, however, counted as separate idioms

21 Not all the idioms could be found in all three dictionaries. *Oxford* , in particular, because of its individual view and definition of what is an idiom, differed most often from *Collins Cobuild* and *Longman.*

subjects were asked to estimate how acceptable the given alternatives were, and to mark their opinion about each alternative meaning on a scale of 1-5 from *not at all acceptable* to *completely acceptable*. For each idiom there was also a space for subjects' comments on the item. There were no correct answers for this part and although the subjects were not explicitly told this, it was implied by the question format. The aim was to find out about subjects' conceptions and opinions of idioms. Thus, the length and structure of alternatives, for instance, played no role in Part I, and no attention was paid to them. Just as throughout the questionnaire, the native vs. non-native aspect served as a variable in the statistical analysis of the results. The extent to which the respondents accepted the information proffered by the dictionaries was looked at in Part I.

7.2.2 Part II

In Part II, the subjects were requested to estimate how appropriate the twenty idioms would be in certain situational contexts. There were five contexts, *talking with a friend, a letter to a friend, conversation with an elderly person whom you do not know, a job interview or similar rather formal situation,* and *an essay or other course assignment,* differing from each other in mode (written vs. spoken), formality (informal vs. formal), and distance (close vs. distant). *Talking with a friend* represented informal, spoken context, *a letter to a friend* written informal context, *conversation with an elderly person whom you do not know* was the representative of fairly formal, spoken context, *a job interview or similar rather formal situation* represented spoken language too and was more formal than speaking with an elderly person. Finally, *an essay or other course assignment* was an example of a formal, written language context.

The subjects' task was once again to estimate how appropriate the idioms would be in given contexts on a scale of 1-5. NSs were asked to consider their own language usage, that is, whether or not they themselves would use the idioms in given contexts. This was made clear in the instructions, since the object was to find out how they themselves actually would use the idioms, not how they thought they were generally used, or perhaps how they should be used in standard language. NNSs for their part were not asked to consider their own active usage of English since the pilot tests proved that the test was quite difficult for non-native speakers, and it could be presumed that if they were to consider their own active English usage, the percentage of idioms used in general would prove not to be very high. Thus, to avoid confusion and frustration among the participants, they were simply asked to estimate how appropriate the idioms would be in given contexts. In the NNS test there was also an option 0 for idioms whose meaning the subjects did not know and could not work out, since assigning such expressions to certain contexts and situations would make no sense. The aim in this part was to find out participants' conceptions as to the formality, mode and distance the idioms require, not have them guessing the "correct" answers.

7.2.3 Part III

Part III was a multiple-choice test where each idiom was given four alternative meanings from which the subjects were to choose the correct ones. It consisted of 45 different idioms. There were three aims in the design. The first was to discover the subjects' interpretations as among these idioms there were instances where the dictionaries disagreed in their definitions. The second aim was to study non-native speakers' knowledge of English idioms and compare their interpretations with those of NSs since that had not been done before among Finnish speakers, or at least no such study has been published**.** The third objective was to see how the characteristics of transparency and transformability, their relationship to Finnish equivalents and their frequency affected their interpretation. The idioms were randomly chosen from amongst those marked for their frequency in *Cobuild,* and only idioms that according to the dictionary were amongst the rarest (i.e. without any mark in the dictionary) were considered too infrequent for the non-native speakers and thus left out of the questionnaire altogether. The total number of idioms in the most common frequency band was counted, and on this basis the size of the other two categories marked for their frequency in the dictionary was estimated[22]. From the most frequent idioms (marked with three triangles), every 28th, from the second most frequent (two triangles) every 28th, and finally, from the third most common frequency band (one triangle), every 58th idiom was picked out. This added up to twenty idioms from each frequency band, making sixty altogether.

However, the pilot tests showed that the number was too great since there were two other parts in the questionnaire as well. Hence in the final version of Part III, which was also used in the gathering of material for the actual study, there were fifteen items fewer than in the original. Every fourth idiom was left out, i.e. five idioms altogether from each frequency band. In Part III, just as in Part I, the idioms were presented without a context to allow various potential interpretations. The number of correct alternative meanings was thus 1-3 per idiom, not just one. To check on the recognition of idioms among non-native speakers, there were also distractors among the options. In addition, informants were given the chance to write their own comments if, for example, they thought that a possible meaning had been left out or that the given alternatives needed some reformulation.

7.2.4 Exclusion of context

It is obvious that in ordinary language use the context often offers clues as to the meaning of unfamiliar words or expressions, and instructions have even

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22 This was necessary since the dictionary gives figures based on the principle that all variants of the same idiom are different idioms whereas in this study, they were considered as one.

been developed for context-based guessing (Nation 2002). In this study, however, the context was deliberately excluded for several reasons. First of all, context does not always assist in finding out the meaning but can actually mislead and this does not promote learning (see e.g. Kelly 1990). This might be even more probable when it comes to idioms as they are often ambiguous and figurative, and so context may not help at all when trying to decide what they mean. Moon's (1998, 221) study, for instance, shows that in her idiom (or metaphor, as she labels idioms) data, evaluative and informative functions clearly outnumbered other functions. Idioms may carry quite a heavy information load and in these cases context is not of much assistance. It has also been shown that adult language users tend to favour linguistic convention, i.e. the relationship between idiomatic and literal meanings, over context when determining the meaning of an idiom (Laval 2003, 736).

A second point is that including the context in the questionnaire would have restricted the respondents in their choice of meanings. One of the aims of Parts I and II was to find as many interpretations of idioms as possible, and thus, leaving the context out was the most reasonable alternative. Although the context does affect the interpretation of an expression, i.e. ultimately decides which of the alternative meanings is realised in that particular setting, the set of potential meanings the expression can have exists apart from these contexts. Excluding the context ensured as many interpretations as the respondents knew or could think of for each expression in various possible contexts.

As for the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, the nature of idioms and the aims of the study play a significant role. Since the main aim of the study was to examine the effect of the characteristics of idioms on their interpretation, and there was no one correct answer, but several intended answers, calculating internal consistency was not possible. Furthermore, since there were many characteristics affecting the interpretation it was impossible to check how consistently the respondents interpreted the given idioms. In reporting the results, I have consistently taken various features of idioms into account, and discussed their effect on interpretation. Measuring and calculating internal reliability was neither reasonable nor possible. However, if the results were to be re-analysed according to similar guidelines used here, the results could be expected to be consistent. As for external reliability, it would have been possible to run the questionnaire with another group of respondents, but since the aim of this study was not to develop any tool to test idioms, this was not considered necessary or reasonable.

The validity of the questionnaire is related to the complex nature of idioms. In order to guarantee internal validity, various features of idioms were taken into account in the design of the questionnaire. Frequency, transparency, transformability and relationship to Finnish were all considered significant. Their effect on interpretations has been discussed in Chapter 8. The different parts that concentrated on the versatility of idiom meanings (Part I), potential contexts of idioms (Part II), and on the effect of idiom characteristics on their interpretation (Part III), reflected the complexity of idioms. In order to study the multiplicity of idiom features, this kind of a questionnaire seemed a reasonable

solution. As to the external validity of the questionnaire, the results show some tendencies among the respondents. The results cannot, however, be generalised since the number of students who filled in the questionnaire was not representative of all university students of English in Finland. Similarly, the group of native speakers of English cannot be said to be representative of all speakers of English although the number is certainly large enough to make statistical comparisons possible. Within the scope of this study it was not possible or necessary to seek generalisability but to describe idioms and the respondents' interpretations of them.

7.2.5 Alternatives in Part III

At every stage in the preparation of the questionnaire, there being both native and non-native speakers of English as informants posed certain difficulties. The questionnaire could not be too easy for the native speakers, nor could it be too difficult for the non-native speakers. In Parts I and II where the main objective was to find out about conceptions and interpretations, the problem was not very great. In Part III, however, where the purpose was to investigate not only variations in conceptions also non-native speakers knowledge of idioms, the issue required extra attention. The solution was to include not only one but from one to four[23] correct answers in the alternative meanings. This allowed the examination of interpretations since among these idioms too there were examples of disagreement between the dictionaries, and there were also idioms with multiple meanings. Thus, it was worthwhile to look at possible differences in interpretation especially among the native speakers. In addition, as for the idioms with multiple meanings, it would have been impossible to decide which meaning to choose to represent the whole idiom - even now there were cases in which a possible meaning was missing as native speakers commented in their answers.

The distractors in Part III were created according to various principles. The list of distractors together with the explanations are given in the Appendix. The literal meaning of the idiom was used as one distractor if possible (e.g. *speak volumes* --> talk in an unnecessarily loud voice to gain attention). If there existed another similar-looking idiom, its meaning was used as a distractor (e.g. *pull faces* --> repeatedly cheat or deceive others, cf. *pull someone's leg*). Often the idiom contained a word with a metaphorical meaning of its own different from that of the idiom, and this was taken advantage of (e.g. *give the green light* --> talk about environmental matters and in favour of nature). It was also necessary to include distractors that would show possible L1 transfer in the non-native speakers' answers; L1 transfer probably could not have been avoided in preparing the test as Finnish idioms and connotations came naturally into mind. Often the image the idiom created had an equivalent in Finnish (e.g. *light a fire*

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23 In the instructions, the informants were told that the four alternatives given for each idiom included 1-4 correct answers.

under someone --> try hard to get rid of someone, Finnish '*savustaa joku ulos*'), and in some cases there was a Finnish expression that resembled a literal translation but the meaning was different from the English version (e.g. *be home and dry* --> escape a punishment for a crime, Finnish '*selvitä kuiville, olla kuivilla*' can also be used in this meaning. Also, *pull faces* --> *'vetää nenästä*).

7.3 Research questions

The general research questions can be broken down into more specific questions and hypotheses concerning each of the three parts of the questionnaire. The questions concerning all three sections were as follows:

> 1. How well do advanced Finnish students of English understand English idioms and to what extent do their interpretations agree with or differ from those of dictionaries and native speakers? What sort of effect does their mother tongue, Finnish, have on their interpretations and to what extent are they able to rely on characteristics of idioms when interpreting them?

The hypothesis was that the Finns would be inclined to rely on Finnish idioms when possible in interpreting English ones, as previous studies have shown that the idioms that have a translation equivalent in NNSs' mother tongue, are the easiest for them. On the other hand, it was intriguing to see to what extent the students would rely on their native language, as Kellerman's results indicated that students, aware of the danger of negative transfer, might avoid relying on mother tongue expressions. As for the relationship with native speakers' interpretations, it was expected that since idioms belong to such a specific area and can carry multiple meanings, the interpretations of the two groups would differ to some extent.

The second question concentrated more on dictionaries and the interpretations native speakers are willing to accept. Since even the three dictionaries used in compiling the questionnaire disagreed with each other, it was to be expected that native speakers would differ from the dictionaries. Besides, as one idiom may carry multiple meanings, native speakers are bound to be more familiar with some of them rather than having equal knowledge of each of them. Thus, the second group of questions was as follows:

> 2. To what extent do native speakers agree with or differ from each other and English-English idiom dictionaries in interpreting the meanings of idioms? Are all potential meanings equally acceptable to native speakers or are some meanings more readily accepted than others? How do the features of idioms affect their interpretation?

The third set of questions dealt with the nature of idioms and the degree of their formality, or rather, how language users perceive it. Since idioms have been claimed to be informal and colloquial, although they are also claimed to be frequently used, it was worthwhile seeing how language users actually feel about them. It could be expected that they would reject idioms in a more formal

context and accept them in informal settings. On the other hand, there might be differences depending on the particular idioms, as some idioms are more formal than others. Thus the last set of questions was as follows:

> 3. How do language users, native and non-native, perceive idioms' degree of formality and the potential contexts in which to use them? Furthermore, are there differences between idioms or do language users base their judgements on the context rather than on idiom?

7.4 Procedure

There were no other specific instructions for the respondents except that they should fill in the whole questionnaire uninterrupted. As for the Finnish respondents this was easy to do, as they filled it in during one of their writing course tutorials. There was no time limit, as this was not a test and the respondents could take as long as they wanted. A tutorial lasts 90 minutes, which was long enough for all the participants. In addition, there were students who volunteered to participate in the study and extra sessions were arranged for them to fill in the questionnaire.

The native speakers were allowed to take the questionnaire home with them, and fill it in there. Again, they were instructed to complete the task uninterrupted, and also to do it independently, i.e. not to discuss it with other people or consult dictionaries while filling it in.

All other instructions were included in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were identical for both groups except that in Part II the native speakers were asked to estimate whether they themselves would use the idioms in particular contexts, and the non-native speakers were asked if they thought the idioms were appropriate in those contexts. The underlying assumption was that non-native speakers would perhaps be less willing to use idioms in any context due to their relative unfamiliarity and might thus interpret the question differently.

7.5 Statistical analyses

For the statistical analyses, the SPSS 10.0. programme was used. In the case of Part I, in order to be able to run the analysis, the acceptability categories were reduced from five to three: *not at all* and *marginally acceptable* were labelled as *not acceptable*, *acceptable* being the most neutral choice remained the same (OK), and *quite* and *completely acceptable* were combined into *very acceptable*. The response percentage was then calculated for each combination per alternative idiom meaning, and Fisher's two-sided exact test was used to investigate the differences between the two groups of participants. Fisher's exact test is a

modified Chi-Square test for small data, and was chosen since the number of responses in several cells was less than five, especially among native speakers.

In Part II, native speakers and non-native speakers were again treated separately in their own groups. The acceptability estimates the respondents gave for each idiom were summed up first within each context group. After this, *talking to a friend* and *letter to a friend* were combined into the category *informal*, and the other three contexts (*talking to an elderly person, job interview and written assignment or essay*) into the category *formal*. The acceptability estimates per each formality group were then calculated. In addition to sum variables, Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated to check the correlations. The coefficient values for the written contexts did not correlate, and thus the distinction between written and spoken language could not be further investigated. It seems that the participants regarded the distinction between informal and formal to be more determinant.

For Part III, the procedure was similar to Part I. The frequency and percentage of each response alternative per idiom in the two groups was counted, and Fisher's two-sided exact test was then used to check whether the differences between the two groups were significant. Since the number of responses in several cells was less than five, mostly due to the unattractiveness of certain alternatives to the native speakers, Fisher's test was chosen.

8 RESULTS

8.1 Part I : Acceptability of different meanings

In Part I the participants were presented with twenty frequent idioms. They were asked to rate the acceptability of four dictionary-based alternative meanings for each idiom. The original acceptability scale was 1-5, but to be able to run the statistical analysis, the acceptability categories were reduced to three.

As shown in Table 1, the twenty idioms investigated in Part I revealed that even though there may be several possible interpretations, one is usually noticeably more acceptable to language users than the other meanings. Even though the non-native speakers and the native speakers agreed on some of them, the non-native speakers showed greater diversity of interpretation than the native speakers. For the native speakers, an interpretation was either acceptable or not, and as a group they were fairly unanimous. However, among the non-native speakers, an interpretation quite often received some measure of both acceptance and rejection, rather than either one or the other.

TABLE 1 The acceptability of four dictionary-based alternative meanings per twenty frequent idioms for each participant group and the results of Fisher's Exact Test. The first figure in a Fisher cell shows whether the differences are statistically significant (<0.05), and the second figure is the value according to Fisher's Test - the higher the figure, the more significant the difference. Statistically significant differences have been marked in bold letters on grey background.

	Native speakers			**Non-native speakers**			
Idiom meaning	**% not ac-cep-table**	**% OK**	**% very ac-cep-table**	**% not ac-cep-table**	**% OK**	**% very ac-cep-table**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
1. look someone in the eye							
a) look at someone directly without showing any emotions	52.8	30.6	16.7	62.9	18.8	18.2	0.326 2.359
b) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth	0	8.3	91.7	9.7	13.9	76.4	0.065 5.007
c) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth when in fact you are lying	47.2	25	27.8	65.7	19.6	14.7	0.083 4.884
d) look at someone directly although you would rather avoid their eyes	63.9	19.4	16.7	71.5	13.2	15.3	0.569 1.249
2. find your feet							
a) gain experience and more confidence in a new situation or new surroundings	0	2.9	97.1	35.4	20.8	43.8	**0.000** **37.397**
b) discover and make use of one's abilities	51.4	22.9	25.7	23.1	28.7	48.3	**0.004** **10.672**
c) achieve a settled outlook and purpose in life	45.7	20	34.3	27.5	37.3	35.2	0.069 5.410
d) become able to act by oneself independently	31.4	22.9	45.7	19.6	25.2	55.2	0.316 2.313
3. sit on the fence							
a) not being able to make up one's mind	30.6	27.8	41.7	39.4	26.8	33.8	0.579 1.143
b) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups because that might harm one's own position	13.9	8.3	77.8	15	41.4	43.6	**0.000** **17.19**
c) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups in order to delay an on-going process	25	33.3	41.7	49.3	27.1	23.6	**0.019** **7.782**
d) not telling one's opinion in order not to take sides	8.3	13.9	77.8	22.7	31.2	46.1	**0.003** **11.289**

continues

TABLE 1 continues	**Natives**			**Non-natives**			
	not acceptable %	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**not acceptable %**	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
4. have a field day							
a) enjoy oneself by doing something one gets great pleasure from	11.1	11.1	77.8	18.7	19.4	61.9	0.244 2.865
b) participate in some special occasion	69.4	13.9	16.7	53.6	21.4	25.0	0.266 2.683
c) take advantage of the prevailing situation that is profitable for others. too	52.8	27.8	19.4	70.5	19.4	10.1	**0.013** **4.520**
d) take advantage of a situation that is difficult or upsetting for other people	66.7	11.1	22.2	82.6	4.3	13.0	0.079 4.924
5. fly the flag							
a) state one's opinions clearly	60.6	15.2	24.2	35.9	21.8	42.3	**0.037** **6.457**
b) openly support someone (e.g. person.country. party. movement)	18.2	6.1	75.8	9.8	21.7	68.5	0.059 5.657
c) represent a group or a country at some special occasion. e.g. sports event	24.2	9.1	66.7	62.2	17.5	20.3	**0.000** **25.210**
d) be present at a meeting or an event only to show others that one has attended	60.6	15.2	24.2	69.0	14.8	16.2	0.473 1.409
6. open the floodgates							
a) allow free expression of emotions. criticisms. or activities that have been prevented	14.3	8.6	77.1	5.6	12.0	82.4	0.265 3.054
b) release a great force of destruction or rebellion previously held under control	20.0	11.4	68.6	28.4	28.4	43.3	**0.022** **7.464**
c) cause many people do a particular thing they have not been able to do previously	51.4	20.0	5.7	63.8	18.4	17.7	0.291 2.486
d) incite people to rebellious action	74.3	20.0	5.7	77.5	16.2	6.3	0.883 0.428
7. have a go at someone/something							
a) criticize someone strongly without a good reason	8.6	14.3	77.1	49.7	19.6	30.8	**0.000** **27.854**
b) attack someone physically	54.3	11.4	34.3	75.4	16.9	7.7	**0.000** **14.399**
c) use or try something after someone else has done it first	44.1	14.7	41.2	17.7	13.3	69.0	**0.005** **10.350**
d) try to stop a criminal from doing or escaping from a crime	74.3	11.4	14.3	93.0	4.2	2.8	**0.005** **9.815**

continues

TABLE 1 continues	**Natives**			**Non-natives**			
	not acceptable %	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**not acceptable %**	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
8. go out on a limb							
a) not being afraid of taking risks	22.9	34.3	42.9	62.4	18.8	18.8	**0.000 17.625**
b) be put in a position of weakness without any support or help	40.0	20.0	40.0	51.8	20.9	27.3	0.325 2.290
c) be put in a risky position separate from other people	34.3	22.9	42.9	54.7	30.2	15.1	**0.003 11.692**
d) intentionally do something risky which puts you in a position of weakness	17.6	8.8	73.5	23.7	22.3	54.0	0.096 4.605
9. go against the grain							
a) be against natural tendency or general custom	5.6	8.3	86.1	8.5	20.6	70.9	0.176 3.362
b) conflicting with one's own ideas and principles and thus difficult to accept	36.1	16.7	47.2	63.8	20.6	15.6	**0.000 15.152**
c) intentionally do something disapproved of	30.6	11.1	58.3	25.5	20.6	53.9	0.420 1.708
d) unintentionally do something disapproved of	58.3	25.0	16.7	70.9	19.1	9.9	0.279 2.532
10. drag your feet							
a) move or act slowly because one has a lack of interest or eagerness	0.0	8.3	91.7	12.8	19.1	68.1	**0.007 9.303**
b) refuse to do something because it would be too laborious	55.6	30.6	13.9	54.6	25.5	19.9	0.672 0.791
c) delay making a decision important to others in order to cause them trouble	55.6	22.2	22.2	63.8	20.6	15.6	0.537 1.250
d) delay making a decision important to others just to annoy them	55.6	25.0	19.4	52.5	24.8	22.7	0.968 0.183
11. get your hands on							
a) get hold of something	8.3	22.2	69.4	18.4	23.4	58.2	0.339 2.282
b) reach or obtain something one has desired for a long time. or needs badly	11.1	5.6	83.3	7.8	16.3	75.9	0.222 3.023
c) violently seize something or someone	44.4	19.4	36.1	60.3	13.5	26.2	0.215 3.134
d) catch and punish someone who has done something wrong	30.6	5.6	63.9	47.5	15.6	36.9	**0.015 8.431**

continues

TABLE 1 continues	**Natives**			**Non-natives**			
	not acceptable %	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**not acceptable %**	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
12. bring something to its knees/ bring someone to his/her knees a) destroy someone or something to make them humble	8.3	16.7	75.0	12.6	21.7	65.7	0.652 0.930
b) destroy someone or something to teach them a lesson	11.1	30.6	58.3	10.5	19.6	69.9	0.304 2.278
c) destroy someone or something to see them ruined	25.0	33.3	41.7	45.5	25.9	28.7	0.069 5.251
d) cause someone or something to be in a weak condition without any particular intentions	69.4	22.2	8.3	80.4	9.8	9.8	0.154 3.888
13. put the lid on something a) put an end to an activity or someone's hopes	16.7	11.1	72.2	36.6	15.5	47.9	**0.028** **6.996**
b) keep something a secret	19.4	22.2	58.3	41.1	23.4	35.5	**0.022** **7.424**
c) hide a true nature of a problem	41.7	22.2	36.1	46.1	27.0	27.0	0.570 1.192
d) control and stop a problem becoming worse	30.6	27.8	41.7	57.7	19.0	23.2	**0.011** **8.926**
14. flex your muscles a) test one's abilities on an unimportant task in order to prepare for the future	51.4	17.1	31.4	34.3	18.9	46.9	0.153 3.675
b) behave in a way intended to show one's power for others as a warning	22.9	17.1	60.0	44.8	26.6	28.7	**0.003** **11.422**
c) display one's power for self-gratification	45.7	28.6	25.7	55.9	20.3	23.8	0.438 1.585
d) show off one's muscles before doing something to attract attention	51.4	20.0	28.6	74.1	13.3	12.6	**0.022** **7.354**
15. pick up the pieces a) put matters back into their usual good order after some bad. unexpected event	11.1	8.3	80.6	19.4	25.0	55.6	**0.021** **7.698**
b) after something bad has happened. do what one can to get the situation back to normal. but not necessarily succeeding	11.1	11.1	77.8	10.4	16.0	73.6	0.818 0.489
c) after something bad has happened. make a fresh start	27.8	16.7	55.6	37.5	25.0	37.5	0.173 3.656
d) after a fight or a quarrel. try to promote reconciliation	25.0	30.6	44.4	62.5	21.5	16.0	**0.000** **18.707**

continues

TABLE 1 continues	**Natives**			**Non-natives**			
	not acceptable %	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**not acceptable %**	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
16. sit tight a) refuse to change one's opinions or principles	33.3	8.3	58.3	28.2	12.7	59.2	0.708 0.642
b) refuse to allow events influence oneself	44.4	19.4	36.1	35.5	28.4	36.2	0.471 1.444
c) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order not to make any mistakes	2.8	13.9	83.3	52.4	19.6	28	**0.000** **43.252**
d) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order to achieve what one wants	5.6	19.4	75	57.6	15.9	26.5	**0.000** **38.261**
17. make waves a) spoil or unsettle a comfortable situation	8.3	13.9	77.8	36.9	31.9	31.2	**0.000** **25.514**
b) cause trouble or anxiety	11.1	16.7	72.2	38.3	21.3	40.4	**0.001** **13.320**
c) change things. or challenge the way things are done	8.3	11.1	80.6	17.7	24.1	58.2	0.055 5.846
d) make things better or more exciting	63.9	13.9	22.2	63.4	21.8	14.8	0.402 1.860
18. blow the whistle on someone a) put an end to something one disapproves of	37.1	17.1	45.7	20.7	21.4	57.9	0.156 3.905
b) tell authorities about someone's illegal activities	5.7	0.0	94.3	39.3	17.9	42.9	**0.000** **32.504**
c) put an end to someone's actions just to cause them trouble	51.4	25.7	22.9	70.0	16.4	13.6	0.108 4.523
d) put an end to a quarrel by acting as a mediator	85.7	11.4	2.9	63.8	16.3	19.9	**0.017** **7.844**
19. make a clean sweep a) win something very easily. or win a series of victories	28.6	5.7	65.7	44.1	13.3	42.7	0.055 5.758
b) cause a complete change by getting rid of unwanted persons of things	20.6	14.7	64.7	38.5	32.9	28.7	**0.001** **14.464**
c) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to make the organization more efficient	31.4	28.6	40.0	32.9	30.8	36.4	0.944 0.186
d) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to show off one's power	82.9	5.7	11.4	67.3	22.2	10.5	0.072 5.492

continues

TABLE 1 continues	Natives			Non-natives			
	not acceptable %	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**not acceptable %**	**OK %**	**very acceptable %**	**Fisher's Exact Test (2sided)**
20. beat your breast a) be very angry or distressed about something that has gone wrong or is unfair	20.7	24.1	55.2	48.9	21.6	29.5	**0.009** **9.177**
b) publicly show anger or regret about an unfair situation only to draw attention to oneself and not being sincere	44.8	13.8	41.4	37.1	18.6	44.3	0.740 0.661
c) sincerely express guilt for something one has done	62.1	17.2	20.7	73.8	13.5	12.8	0.352 2.054
d) pretend to feel guilt for something one has done in order to be forgiven. not being sincere in one's remorse	79.3	10.3	10.3	60.3	17.0	22.7	0.190 3.481

Since there were only twenty idioms altogether, it is not reasonable to categorise them according to responses but rather to look item by item at what sort of reactions they evoked in the respondents in order to see to what extent they agreed with each other, and with the dictionaries. All the given alternatives were offered by the dictionaries and even though they are not all equally frequent or likely to appear on a regular basis, they could be expected to be accepted by a large number of language users, particularly native speakers. The question posed to the participants was not how likely they thought the alternative was to appear or how likely they themselves were to use a particular idiom to denote a particular meaning, but whether or not they accepted the alternative in question. I shall now discuss each idiom and the reactions it evoked in each group. The differences between the two respondent groups are only mentioned if they were statistically significant, i.e. the value of Fisher's two-sided exact test was <0.05.

1. look someone in the eye
a) look at someone directly without showing any emotions
b) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth
c) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth when in fact you are lying
d) look at someone directly although you would rather avoid their eyes

As for this expression, the two groups agreed with each other in that alternative B was the most likely interpretation. Nearly 30 per cent of the native speakers regarded also A as possible, even though not a very good interpretation. In Finnish, *katsoa (suoraan) silmiin* carries a similar meaning to B, and was a likely aid for non-native speakers. The idiom's transparency is not a likely explanation since the literal meaning and the image it creates could be connected to any of

the given alternatives, yet non-native speakers rejected the other three alternatives. Native speakers, for their part, were more tolerant, but the differences between them and non-native speakers were not statistically significant.

2. find your feet
a) gain experience and more confidence in a new situation or new surroundings
b) discover and make use of one's abilities
c) achieve a settled outlook and purpose in life
d) become able to act by oneself independently

The native speakers almost unanimously chose alternative A as a suitable interpretation for this idiom, and over half of them approved also D, whereas the non-native speakers were divided between A, B and D, differing to a statistically significant extent from NSs in A and B. There are Finnish expressions that are close to the English one, *saada jalansijaa* and *päästä jaloilleen* which might explain the popularity of A and D among NNSs but there is no related idiom in Finnish that would explain why B was also attractive. The native speakers gave more heterogenous responses on the acceptability of D: over 40 per cent regarded it as very acceptable, but 30 per cent found it unacceptable.

3. sit on the fence
a) not being able to make up one's mind
b) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups because that might harm one's own position
c) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups in order to delay an on-going process
d) not telling one's opinion in order not to take sides

This idiom brought out discrepancies between the respondent groups. With respect to A, both groups were evenly divided in the acceptability continuum. As for the other alternatives, the two groups differed from each other and the differences were statistically significant. The native speakers were more tolerant and readier to accept several interpretations than the non-native speakers. In fact all the suggested interpretations were acceptable to the majority of the native speakers, whereas the non-native speakers placed them towards the nonacceptable end of the continuum. Thus, no alternative was entirely acceptable to the non-native speakers. This might be due to the fact that there is no equivalent expression in Finnish, which left the non-native speakers without any additional help from their mother tongue. The expression closest in Finnish, *istua hievahtamatta* was of no assistance as its meaning is not reflected in any of the alternatives.

4. have a field day
a) enjoy oneself by doing something one gets great pleasure from
b) participate in some special occasion
c) take advantage of the prevailing situation that is profitable for others, too
d) take advantage of a situation that is difficult or upsetting for other people

There appeared no statistically significant differences between the two groups. A was clearly the best choice in the opinion of all the respondents, who were more neutral or negative about the other alternatives. Apparently the non-native speakers were also familiar with the English expression as there is no equivalent in Finnish. Even though the other alternatives were suggested as possible by the dictionaries, these language users did not consider them likely.

5. fly the flag
a) state one's opinions clearly
b) openly support someone (e.g. person, country, party, movement)
c) represent a group or a country at some special occasion, e.g. sports event
d) be present at a meeting or an event only to show others
that one has attended

With this expression, the respondents agreed on B and D, since the majority in both groups found B acceptable but did not consider D a likely interpretation. However, alternative A divided the non-native speakers: only 35 % of them ranked the alternative as not acceptable whereas as many as 60 per cent of the native speakers were not willing to accept it. There are close equivalents in Finnish, *tunnustaa väriä* and *liputtaa jnkn puolesta*, which are closest to alternative B, but also fairly close to A. This probably affected the non-native speakers' responses. As for C, the groups responded in the opposite ways: the native speakers accepted the interpretation, while the non-native speakers did not. The transparency of the expression has thus not affected the non-native speakers, since C and B are the closest to the literal meanings, yet the non-native speakers labelled C as unacceptable.

6. open the floodgates
a) allow free expression of emotions, criticisms, or activities
that have been prevented
b) release a great force of destruction or rebellion previously
held under control
c) cause many people do a particular thing they have not
been able to do previously
d) incite people to rebellious action

Again, the two groups agreed on the acceptability of some meanings but not all. A was clearly the favourite interpretation in both groups. The Finnish expression *aukaista tulvaportit* is a direct translation equivalent, sharing the core meaning with the English equivalent. The respondent groups also agreed on

unacceptability of C and D, but B produced a significant difference between the groups: almost 70% of the native speakers were ready to label this interpretation very acceptable whereas only 43% of the Finnish students responded similarly This might be due to the literalness of B: as the questionnaire was about idioms, perhaps B was not considered to be sufficiently idiom-like.

7. have a go at someone/something
a) criticize someone strongly without a good reason
b) attack someone physically
c) use or try something after someone else has done it first
d) try to stop a criminal from doing or escaping from a crime

This idiom divided opinions among the respondents. The two groups also behaved completely differently from each other. One reason might be that there is no equivalent in Finnish, leaving the non-native respondents without any extra aid. The non-native speakers were familiar with alternative C, over 80 % of them being ready to accept the interpretation. However, of the native speakers only 57 per cent found C acceptable, whereas the rest did not. As for the native speakers, A was considered the most likely interpretation, since over 70 % found it very acceptable.

8. go out on a limb
a) not being afraid of taking risks
b) be put in a position of weakness without any support or help
c) be put in a risky position separate from other people
d) intentionally do something risky which puts you in a position of weakness

B and D were the alternatives that the two groups agreed upon. B divided opinions so that approximately half of all respondents regardless of the group were ready to accept it, half were not, and as for D, the majority in both groups found it acceptable. However, A and C, too, were regarded as fairly acceptable among native speakers whereas non-native speakers considered them not to be likely interpretations. Apparently, although one alternative was clearly the most likely for the native speakers, they were also familiar with other meanings unlike the non-native speakers, who tended to pick only one alternative.

9. go against the grain
a) be against natural tendency or general custom
b) conflicting with one's own ideas and principles and thus difficult to accept
c) intentionally do something disapproved of
d) unintentionally do something disapproved of

The respondents agreed on all interpretations except for B: over 60 percent of the native speakers were ready to accept it, almost 50 % of them strongly, whereas over 60 % of the non-native speakers were not. As this alternative is

fairly close to A, it is difficult to speculate the reason for the non-native speakers' resistance. Perhaps the Finnish equivalent, *uida vastavirtaan*, which is closer to A than B, affected them here. Otherwise, A and C were found acceptable by both groups, with A the favourite and D being considered an unlikely interpretation, which is understandable as there it is opposite to C. It is also quite understandable that A was a clear favourite among the non-native speakers because of the Finnish equivalent that carries a similar meaning.

10. drag your feet
a) move or act slowly because one has a lack of interest or eagerness
b) refuse to do something because it would be too laborious
c) delay making a decision important to others in order to cause them trouble
d) delay making a decision important to others just to annoy them

This idiom is fully transparent when it comes to alternative A, and therefore, it is not surprising that both groups were ready accept it. Nevertheless, there was a significant difference between the groups as 91.7 % of native speakers found it very acceptable, and only 68.1 % of non-native speakers came to a similar conclusion. The groups were closer in their judgements of the other three alternatives since each of them was labelled not acceptable by over half of respondents.

11. get your hands on
a) get hold of something
b) reach or obtain something one has desired for a long time, or needs badly
c) violently seize something or someone
d) catch and punish someone who has done something wrong

Again, the two groups agreed on three alternatives, but disagreed on D which was found very acceptable by over 60 % of the native speakers but only less than 40 % of the non-native speakers. A and B were alternatives accepted by both groups, reflecting the literal meaning and the idiom's transparency. Also, the Finnish expression *saada käsiinsä* carries similar meanings to A and B

12. bring something to its knees/ bring someone to his/her knees
a) destroy someone or something to make them humble
b) destroy someone or something to teach them a lesson
c) destroy someone or something to see them ruined
d) cause someone or something to be in a weak condition
without any particular intentions

This was one of the few expressions over which there were no significant differences between the groups. A and B were clearly the favourites, D was found not to be acceptable, and C was considered fairly acceptable, particularly in the eyes of the native speakers. However, the difference from the non-native speakers was insignificant. Apparently the idiom does carry the idea of

intention and purpose, thus ruling out alternative D. Moreover, there is an equivalent in Finnish, *saada joku polvilleen*, denoting A and C, and perhaps also B. Furthermore, the literal meaning is closer to A, B, and C than D which shows in the responses.

13. put the lid on something
a) put an end to an activity or someone's hopes
b) keep something a secret
c) hide a true nature of a problem
d) control and stop a problem becoming worse

This idiom posed problems for the non-native speakers who were divided between different alternatives and there was no clear favourite. Alternative A was found very acceptable by 47.9 % of the non-native speakers but otherwise, the majority of non-native speakers were of the opinion the alternatives were not acceptable. A is clearly the most transparent and closest to the literal meaning, although other three are not that far from it either. There is also a Finnish expression, *laittaa piste jollekin*, which carries a similar meaning to A. The native speakers were once again more tolerant: A was their first choice as well, but B and D were also found acceptable by the majority of the native speakers. C was the only alternative on which the groups did not disagree: C was found unacceptable by over 40 % of respondents in both groups.

14. flex your muscles
a) test one's abilities on an unimportant task in order to prepare for the future
b) behave in a way intended to show one's power for others as a warning
c) display one's power for self-gratification
d) show off one's muscles before doing something to attract attention

A and C were alternatives that did not create any big differences between the respondents: A divided opinions and about half found it acceptable, about half not, and C was not accepted by the majority of the respondents. B was accepted by nearly 80 % of the native speakers (60 % even labelled it very acceptable) whereas 44.8 % of non-native speakers labelled it not acceptable. This was somewhat surprising since the Finnish equivalent, *pullistella lihaksiaan*, is close in meaning. However, it can also denote D, which was rejected by even a bigger proportion of the non-native speakers, 74.1 %. Over half of the native speakers (51.4%) also found it unacceptable. Even though D is closest to the literal meaning, it still was not a likely interpretation for respondents. The reactions of the non-native speakers might be explained by the perceived distance that Kellerman (1977) used to explain why non-native speakers rejected expressions that had an equivalent in their mother tongue: knowing the dangers of negative transfer and the distance between one's native language and the foreign language, learners might hesitate to rely on their mother tongue if they consider the likelihood of similarity between the two languages to be small.

15. pick up the pieces
a) put matters back into their usual good order after some bad, unexpected event
b) after something bad has happened, do what one can to get the situation back to normal, but not necessarily succeeding
c) after something bad has happened, make a fresh start
d) after a fight or a quarrel, try to promote reconciliation

As for this expression, the native speakers were quite tolerant: A and B were accepted to a great degree by approximately 80 % of the NSs, C 56 %,and D by 44 % of them. The non-native speakers, for their part, were not as liberal: the majority were willing to accept A and B but C divided opinions, and D was rejected by over 60 % of the NNSs. A being closest to the literal meaning is quite a natural interpretation, but B was even more popular among the NNSs than A, distinguishing them from the native speakers. As there is no equivalent in Finnish, the literal meaning could have offered help to the non-native speakers.

16. sit tight
a) refuse to change one's opinions or principles
b) refuse to allow events influence oneself
c) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order not to make any mistakes
d) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order to achieve what one wants

Once again the respondents agreed on two alternatives, finding A acceptable and being divided on B. However, C was found very acceptable by over 80 %, and D by 75 % of the native speakers, whereas over a half of the NNSs rejected both alternatives. This reflects the closeness of the literal meaning: the image of someone sitting tight is perhaps closer to A and B than C or D. Even though there is no distinct equivalent in Finnish, expressions like *olla inahtamatta, olla liikahtamatta* bear similarity to sitting tight, and to A and B.

17. make waves
a) spoil or unsettle a comfortable situation
b) cause trouble or anxiety
c) change things, or challenge the way things are done
d) make things better or more exciting

Making waves was more familiar to the non-native speakers from sports events as spectator activity, rather than carrying any of the given meanings. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were differences from the native speakers. Almost 90 % of the native speakers accepted A and B, and also C (indeed over 70 % labelled each of these alternatives very acceptable). D was regarded as unacceptable by over 60 % of the native speakers, and also by over 60 of the NNSs. C was also found acceptable by the majority of the NNSs. However, they

did not accept A or B, the distinct favourites among native speakers. This might be due to the fact that A and B both have a negative tone, whereas C and D are more positive. Audience *making waves* is usually a positive activity. Still, this does not explain why the NNSs also rejected D, a clearly positive alternative. There is no equivalent expression in Finnish, and as one non-native participant commented, the most likely place to encounter this expression is a sports event.

18. blow the whistle on someone
a) put an end to something one disapproves of
b) tell authorities about someone's illegal activities
c) put an end to someone's actions just to cause them trouble
d) put an end to a quarrel by acting as a mediator

Alternative A is quite close to the literal meaning of the expression and therefore, it is unsurprising that approximately half of respondents in both groups accepted the alternative. Moreover, the Finnish equivalent, *viheltää peli poikki*, carries a similar meaning. C did not bring any significant differences either but was generally considered not to be acceptable. B and D, however, caused disagreement. 94.3 % of the NSs accepted B whereas only 42.9 % of the non-native speakers judged it similarly. D was found unacceptable by the majority of the respondents, but the difference in numbers was still statistically significant: 85.7 % of the NSs and 63.8 % of the NNSs rejected the alternative.

19. make a clean sweep
a) win something very easily, or win a series of victories
b) cause a complete change by getting rid of unwanted persons or things
c) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to make the organization more efficient
d) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to show off one's power

On this expression, the two groups were in agreement except for B which was accepted by the native speakers and rejected by the non-native speakers. This was quite curious, since the Finnish equivalent, *uusi luuta lakaisee*, can also be interpreted similarly. However, equivalence did not affect the non-native speakers' judgement since they split into three groups over alternative C which is closest to the Finnish expression's meaning. Alternative A was the favourite for both groups, while D was rejected by the majority of the respondents. The Finns may have linked the idiom to another Finnish expression, *putsata pöytä*, which means the same as alternative A.

20. beat your breast
a) be very angry or distressed about something that has gone wrong or is unfair
b) publicly show anger or regret about an unfair situation only to draw attention to oneself and not being sincere

c) sincerely express guilt for something one has done
d) pretend to feel guilt for something one has done in order to be forgiven, not being sincere in one's remorse

With this idiom, alternative A created discrepancies between the two respondent groups since the native speakers were ready to accept it, wheras the non-native speakers were not. B was completely accepted by over 40 % in both groups, and was the clear favourite among the non-native speakers. This is most likely due to the Finnish equivalent, *lyödä rintoihinsa*, which has a similar meaning. C and D were regarded as unacceptable by the majority of the respondents in both groups.

As could perhaps be expected, the native speakers were, in general, slightly more familiar with a variety of meanings for an idiom than the non-native speakers. However, one interpretation was usually chosen over the others even by the native speakers. The non-native speakers tended to favour one alternative throughout, often close to a similar idiom's meaning in Finnish. The relationship to Finnish probably also explains why the non-native speakers, even though more heterogeneous in their responses than the native speakers, still tended towards unanimity. This is in accordance with Irujo's results, and even though Finnish and English are not related languages and the respondents definitely knew that, they did not hesitate to rely on their mother tongue, thus perhaps perceiving the distance (cf. Kellerman 1977) between the two languages as smaller than it is. On the other hand, even though all the interpretations were in theory possible, for each idiom there were alternatives that even the native speakers were not willing to accept. Naturally, just like any vocabulary item, an idiom is likely to have one or two meanings that are more common and better known than others. An uncommon interpretation, even if known to a language user, may still not seem acceptable because of its infrequency.

Twenty idioms is too small a number, and the responses were so divided that it is impossible to draw far-reaching conclusions or find regularities showing how idioms' characteristics may have affected their interpretation. Since all the idioms were picked from among the most frequent ones in *Collins Cobuild*, at least native speakers could have been expected to be familiar with them. However, relative frequency or even familiarity with idioms does not lead to agreement on their meanings: even though all the alternatives were possible, not all were acceptable in the native eyes. What was also interesting was the divisions within the group: there was not always any distinct favourite among the interpretations but respondents were split either between the two extremes, or into three equal groups.

8.2 Part II : The effect of context

Part II aimed at finding out how the participants regarded idioms' degree of formality: whether there were differences between contexts representing different levels of formality and whether there were differences between idioms as to how appropriate they were in various contexts. There were twenty idioms altogether, and the idioms in Part II were the same as in Part I, all taken from the most frequent frequency band in *Cobuild*. As they had encountered the idioms in Part I, the participants were already somewhat familiar with the expressions, and had an idea of their meanings. The idea was to see how acceptable the respondents considered idioms to be in different contexts that represented, on one hand, written (*letter to a friend, essay or course assignment*) versus spoken (*talking to a friend, speaking with an elderly person, job interview*) language, and on the other hand, formal (*essay or course assignment*, *speaking with an elderly person, job interview*) versus informal *(letter to a friend, talking to a friend)* situations. The focus thus shifted from the idioms themselves and the differences between idioms, to contexts in which they could or could not be used. As was discussed above, idioms have traditionally been labelled informal, or at best colloquial, and strictly not belonging to formal language. Yet instances of idioms can be seen every day in newspapers and fiction and heard on television in various types of programmes ranging from the news to sitcoms.

The respondents were presented with five different contexts and asked to rank each of the twenty idioms in each context. The native speakers were asked how likely they were to use the idiom themselves, and the non-native speakers were posed the question of how appropriate they thought the idiom was in each particular context. As non-native speakers were not expected to be as familiar with idioms as native speakers, asking about their usage of idioms might have been interpreted in a way at odds with the purpose of the study, so, the questions for the two respondent groups were different. The responses within each respondent group were summed up for each context, so that the possible differences between the contexts and between native speakers and non-native speakers could be easily detected. In addition, responses regarding formal versus informal contexts were considered. The differences between written and spoken contexts were not further investigated as the statistical analysis showed that the coefficient values for written contexts did not correlate. The differences in responses were caused instead by discrepancies along the formal-informal axis.

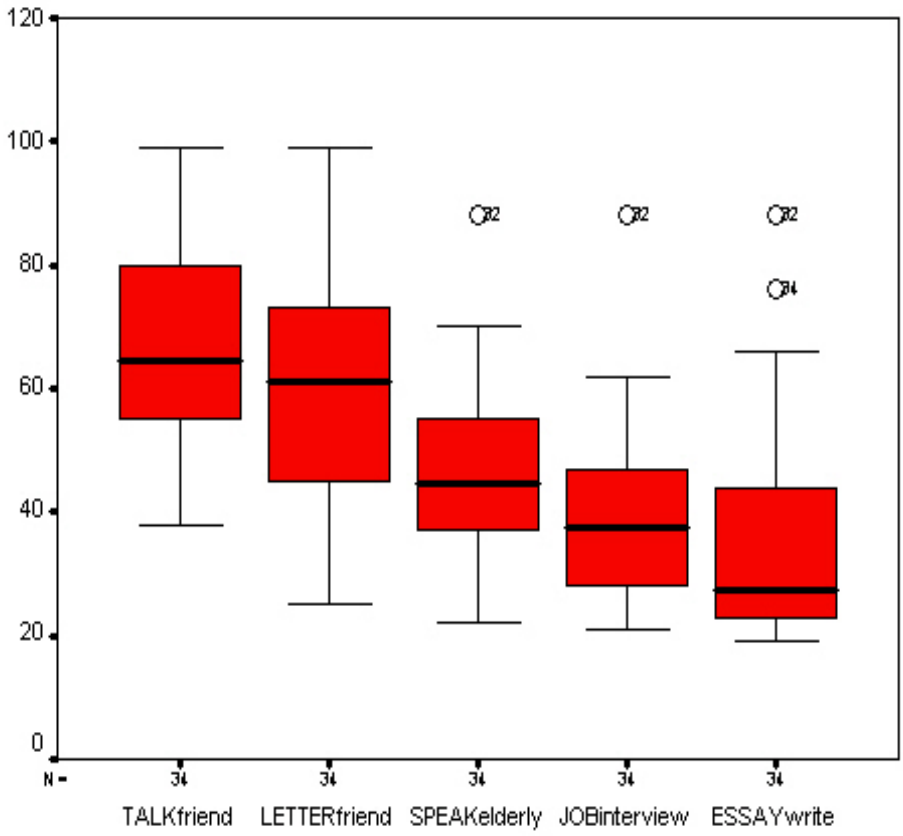

FIGURE 5 Native speaker estimates of usability of twenty idioms in five different of different formality levels.

As can be seen in Figure 5, the native speakers regarded the two most informal contexts, *talking to a friend* and *writing a letter to a friend* as appropriate situations for using idioms. Since there were twenty idioms for each context, and each idiom could be graded from 1-5, 100 means that the respondent regarded all the idioms as appropriate in that particular context. The lower the figure, the less appropriate the idioms were considered in that context. The top of the line denotes the respondent who gave maximum scores for idioms in a particular context, and the bottom, in turn, the respondent who ranked the idioms in that context the lowest. Fifty per cent of the respondents can be found in the dark block, in which the line denotes the median. For instance, with *talking to a friend*, the highest score is 100, which means that a respondent has graded each of the twenty idioms as 5 on the appropriateness scale. The lowest score is slightly under forty, which means that a respondent's estimates for the twenty idioms when summed up gave that result. Half of the respondents gave grades totalling between 55-80, and the median was approximately 63.

As can be seen, the respondents diverged most over *writing a letter to a friend*, and were nearest to unanimity when considering *talking to an elderly person* they did not know. *Writing an essay* or a similar assignment and *being interviewed for a job* were seen as inappropriate surroundings for using idioms,

supporting the view that idioms belong to informal contexts. In general, the native speakers were not entirely willing to use all the idioms even in more informal contexts, since the fifty per cent block is not as high as it could be even with the two more informal contexts. Moreover, written language, regardless of to whom it is directed, seems to represent more formal language, since a letter to a friend was ranked lower in appropriateness for the use of idioms than talking to a friend.

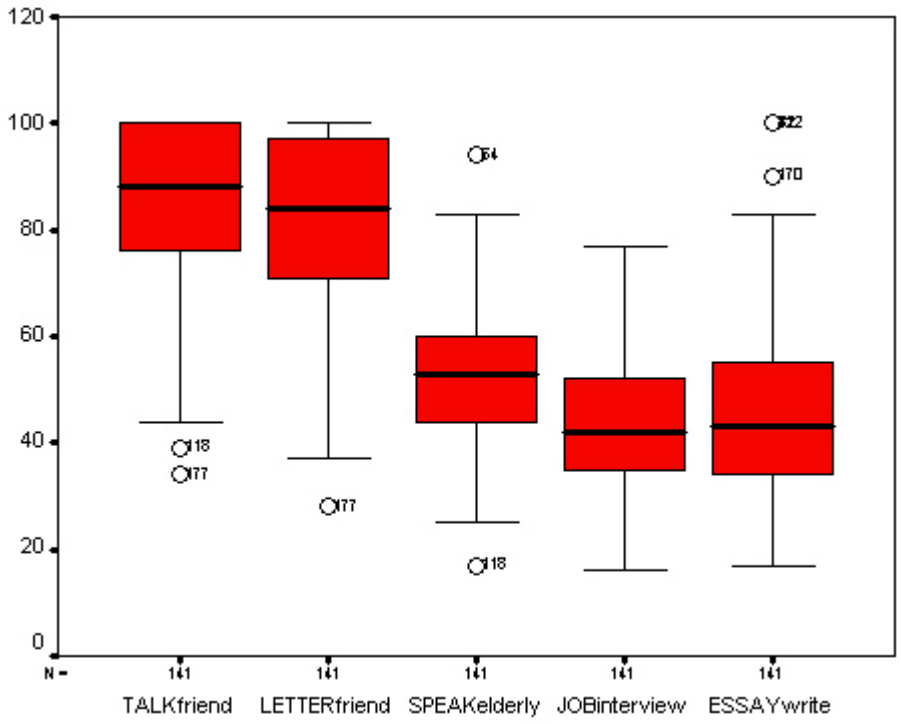

FIGURE 6 Non-native speaker estimates of appropriateness of twenty idioms in five different contexts of different formality levels

The non-native speakers' ideas of appropriate contexts for idioms differed from native speakers, as can be seen in Figure 6. Throughout, the non-native speakers accepted the use of idioms in various contexts more widely than the native speakers. The more informal or colloquial contexts, *speaking or writing to a friend*, were very much acceptable to the non-native speakers. The difference with respect to more formal contexts was greater than in the native speakers' group, due to the fact that the native speakers were more hesitant to use idioms even in informal contexts. The non-native speakers had similar perceptions of *speaking with an unknown elderly person*, and *being in a job interview*, as did the native speakers. However, whereas the native speakers had a stricter attitude towards using idioms in a formal written context, *essay or a similar assignment*, the non-native speakers were more willing to use idioms in an *essay* than in a *job interview*. This was somewhat puzzling, considering that non-native speakers are accustomed to writing essays in the educational framework, and that they have been trained in the differences between formal and informal language. It can,

however, be speculated that one possible reason for this was the non-native speakers' desire to sound more native-like through idiom usage. They may also have perceived idioms as pertaining to written rather than spoken language, but on the other hand, their responses for *talking with a friend and writing a letter to a friend* did not differ much, and in fact they ranked *talking to a friend* slightly higher. Therefore, either they were not quite certain about the nature of idioms, or, which is more likely, perceived the formality of an *essay* differently from the native speakers.

There were also a few respondents in both groups who diverged from the general tendency and were either ready to accept idioms in any context (both in the native- and non-native speaker groups), thus seeing them as just like any other vocabulary item, or else rejected them altogether (only in the non-native speaker group), categorising idioms as a group of their own to be avoided in any context. The latter may be due to the unfamiliarity of idioms in general, and perhaps also due to the perceived distance between Finnish and English: since the languages are not related, it is safer not to assume that idioms can be used similarly in both of them. However, in general, the decision as to whether or not to use idioms seemed to depend on how formal the language user perceives the situation to be, not on the written versus spoken language difference as such. Moreover, it did not matter which idioms were considered: the decision was made on the basis of contexts, not of idioms.

8.3 Part III : The recognition of idioms

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of idioms' characteristics on their recognisability, and whether the two groups reacted differently to the alternatives given. Moreover, the results revealed a wide variety of interpretations of idioms even among native speakers, challenging the prevailing idea that their meanings are agreed on and shared by language users. Each idiom will first be considered from the NS-NNS -angle, concentrating on the idiom's characteristics, and the various interpretations and their relation to the dictionary definitions will be discussed. On this basis, an attempt will be made to draw conclusions as to the effect of idioms' characteristics on their recognition and to offer considerations to be taken into account when planning vocabulary teaching for non-native speakers. The figures below show the percentages of responses each alternative meaning received from the two groups. Each figure describes the responses to one idiom, and the meanings given by the dictionaries (intended responses) are given in the heading of each figure. Alternative E shows the percentage of free written responses by the subjects. As can be seen in the results, the respondents seemed to consider the alternatives given sufficient and did not offer many alternative interpretations. The differences between the two groups are mentioned if they

were statistically significant, i.e. the value of Fisher's exact test was <0.05. The figure containing the values for the test can be found in Appendix V.

8.3.1 Idioms that caused no significant differences between the two informant groups

Out of 45 idioms in all there were nine expressions that did not cause any significant differences between the NNS and NS responses. These idioms will now be considered in an attempt to find possible reasons for the similarity of the two groups. Since the majority of the idioms produced different responses between NNSs and NSs, it is worth examining what sort of idioms either were easier for the NNSs, or caused disagreement in the NSs.

The idioms that caused no differences between the two groups can be roughly divided into two groups: 1) idioms that have an exact or close translation equivalent in Finnish and can thus be easily inferred from the English version, and which were also often were transparent, and 2) idioms that were troublesome for both informant groups. However, this is not the whole picture as there were other idioms that fell into one or other of these categories, yet they produced distinctly different responses from the two participant groups. It was therefore considered important to look at the results idiom by idiom to see what sort of distractors tempted the participants.

8.3.1.1 Idioms with a translation equivalent in Finnish

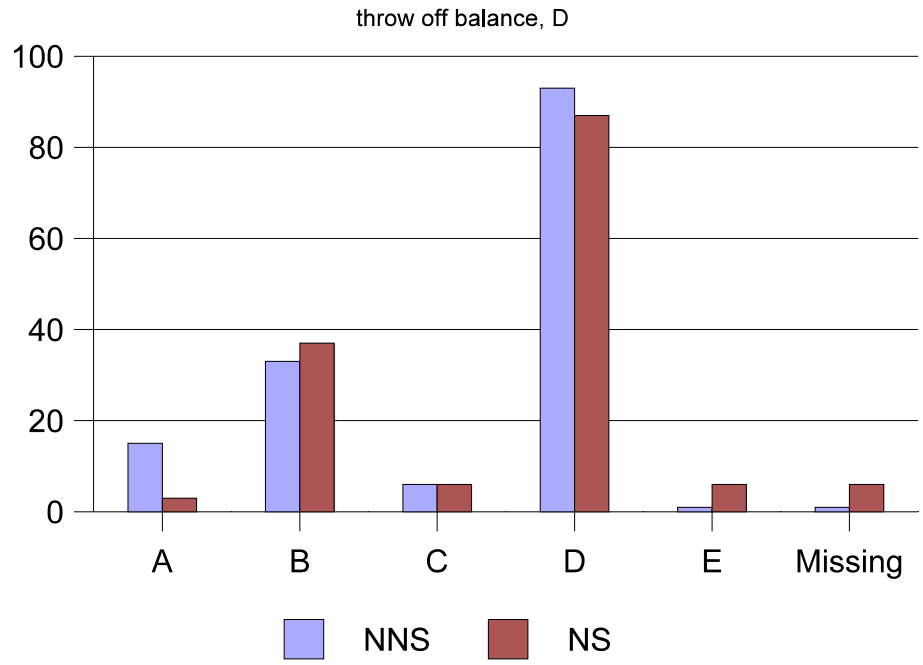

FIGURE 7 throw off balance

a) lose one's money in unwise investments
b) trip or push someone so that they fall
c) make someone change their opinion
d) suddenly confuse or surprise someone

Throw off balance was an idiom equally easy or difficult for both the informant groups to interpret. The vast majority chose the intended answer D (*suddenly confuse or surprise someone*), and only a few fell for B (*trip or push someone so that they fall*) which is far more concrete. The idiom itself is fully transparent, which may have assisted in its interpretation, as well as the fact that it may undergo both lexical and grammatical changes, which adds to the frequency. There is a similar expression in Finnish, *suistaa joku raiteiltaan/tasapainosta, horjuttaa jnkn tasapainoa.*

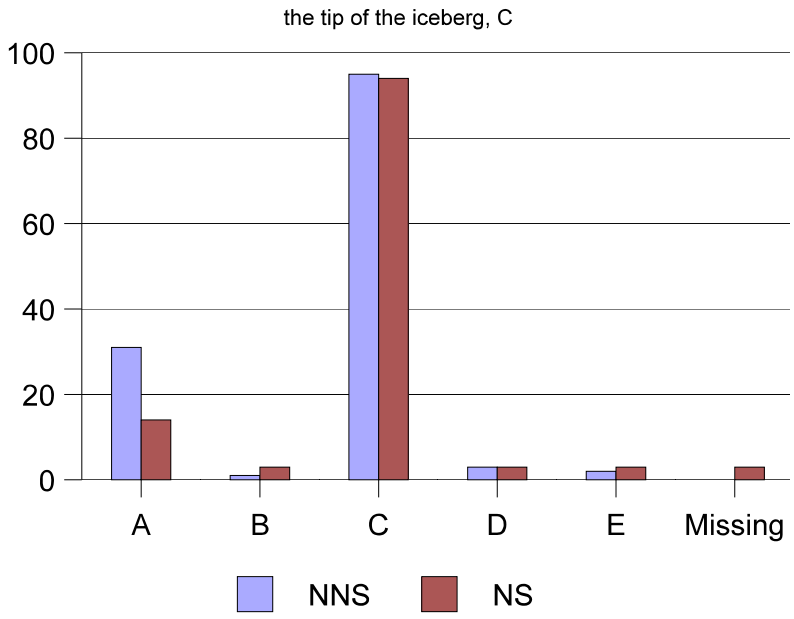

FIGURE 8 the tip of the iceberg

a) a warning of an approaching, unavoidable danger or problem
b)very impolite and unsympathetic behaviour towards other people
c) part of a very large problem although the rest may not be obvious
d) an uncertain position that is difficult to maintain and take care of

The tip of the iceberg bears similarities to *throw off balance*: it is colloquial, fairly frequent, transparent, may undergo a grammatical change, and most importantly, has a direct equivalent in the Finnish language, *jäävuoren huippu*. This expression was familiar to most of the informants. Alternative A, *a warning of an approaching, unavoidable danger or problem* is very close to the actual meaning and so it is understandable that about 30% of NNSs and over 10 % of NSs found this interpretation possible, too. The other two distractors represented different semantic fields and were not as attractive to the informants as the other two. This indicates that even those who did not recognise the intended interpretation, or read the alternatives in an unexpected way, still had quite a good idea of the idiom's meaning.

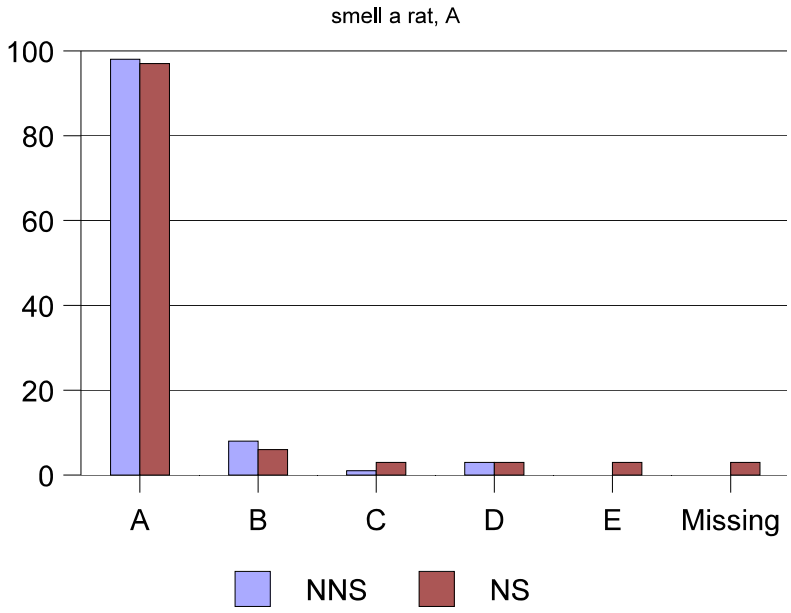

FIGURE 9 smell a rat

a) suspect that something is wrong
b) be disgusted by something/one
c) report a crime to authorities
d) escape an unpleasant situation

Smell a rat posed no problems to either of the groups as almost a hundred per cent chose alternative A which was also the intended response. The expression is semi-transparent which may have helped the non-natives in their interpretation. Besides, in Finnish, *haistaa palaneen käryä*, smelling something unpleasant, carries a similar meaning. *Longman* adds this idiom to its long list of colloquialisms and *Oxford* too mentions its informal nature. Finally, smelling a rat is a frozen idiom, that is, transformations are not possible except for the verb tense.

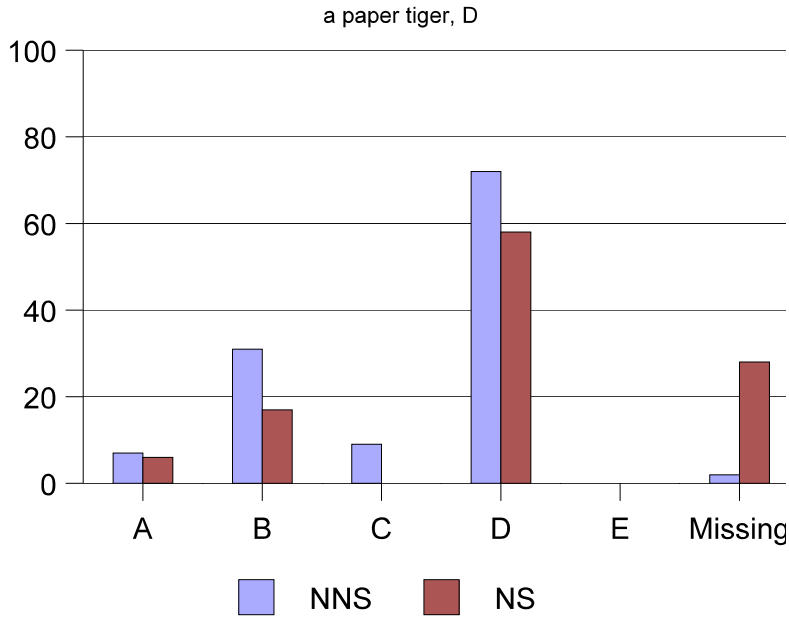

FIGURE 10 a paper tiger

a) written evidence that proves someone guilty
b) someone/thing harmless and not taken seriously
c) an extremely talented and skilful writer or author
d) someone/thing who is less powerful than they seem

Another idiom in which Finnish probably helped the non-native speakers and brought no significant differences between the two informant groups, was *a paper tiger*. In fact, a greater percentage of NNSs than NSs recognised the intended alternative. The Finnish *paperitiikeri* together with idiom's transparency are the most likely reasons for this. As for the NSs, a surprisingly large percentage left this idiom unanswered, which indicates its unfamiliarity and also the NSs' reluctance to try to work out or guess the meaning of an unfamiliar expression. According to *Longman*, paper tigers are non-formal, and the only transformation is pluralisation.

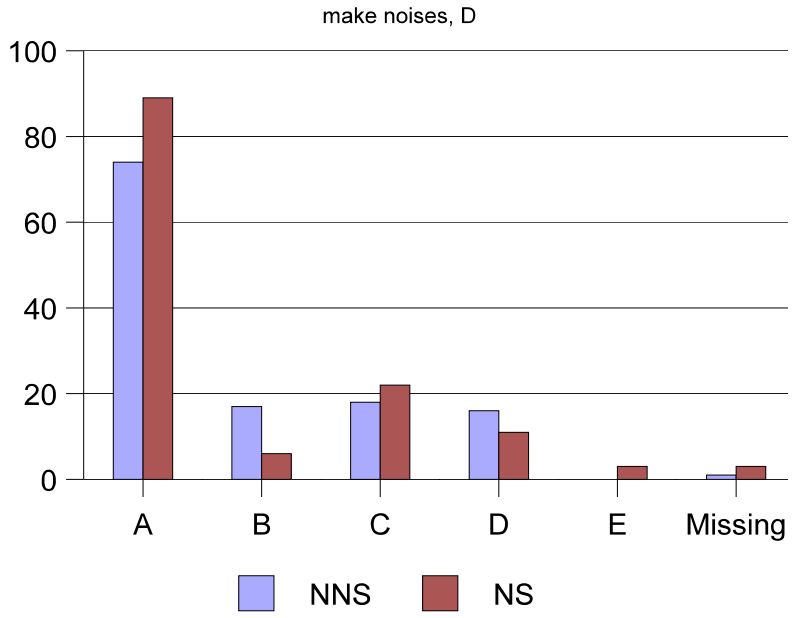

FIGURE 11 make noises

a) openly complain about something
b) speak in an extremely loud voice
c) advertise or support something
d) talk about something indirectly

Make noises proved to be an idiom over whose meaning both native and non-native speakers disagreed with the dictionaries. The intended alternative D, *to talk about something indirectly*, was not very popular among the informants, who preferred to *openly complain about sthing* instead. This makes the idiom semi-transparent, and also creates a link to a Finnish equivalent, *pitää meteliä* that may also carry a similar meaning depending on the context.

8.3.1.2 Idioms that were difficult for both groups

Other idioms in which the two groups did not significantly differ from each other, represent different types. They were not so easy to recognise or interpret, and for the NNSs the mother tongue was not of much assistance, neither was the literal meaning and or any possible degree of transparency.

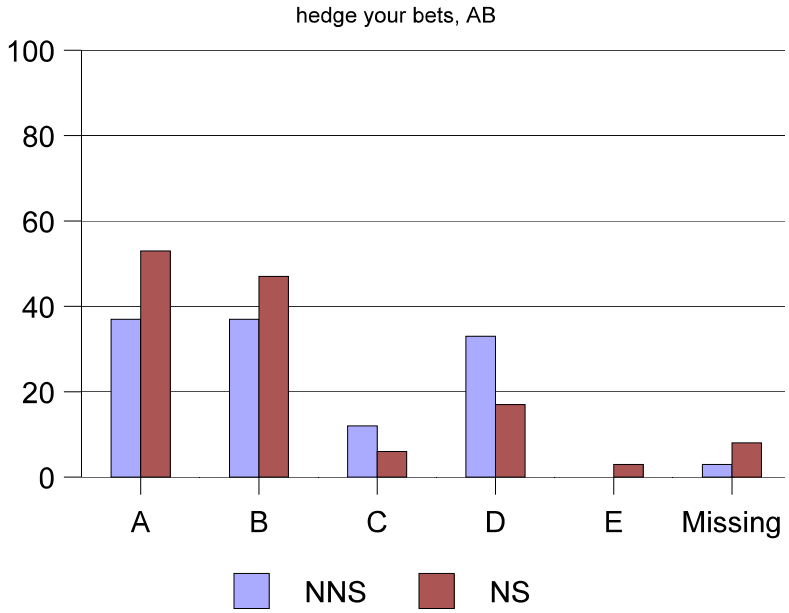

FIGURE 12 hedge your bets

a) invest money in several businesses to protect oneself against losses
b) hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides
c) gamble and bet large sums of money regularly in all kinds of games
d) be unwilling and hesitant to invest money in fear of losing it all

Hedge your bets was intriguing since both groups had trouble recognising the two intended meanings. Interestingly, option B, which was the only one not referring to money, still did not attract much attention. The expression is semi-transparent, but the original literal meaning is perhaps difficult to detect, and the connection can be seen only after knowing the figurative meaning. To *hedge* alone carries a special meaning which is connected to the idiom's meaning, and if the language user is not familiar with it, working out the idiom's meaning is laborious, if not impossible. Likewise, the Finnish equivalent, *pelata varman päälle* offers no help if the meaning of *hedge* is not known. This idiom seemed to divide opinions in both groups, and the expression's unfamiliarity shows also in the number of missing answers among the NSs.

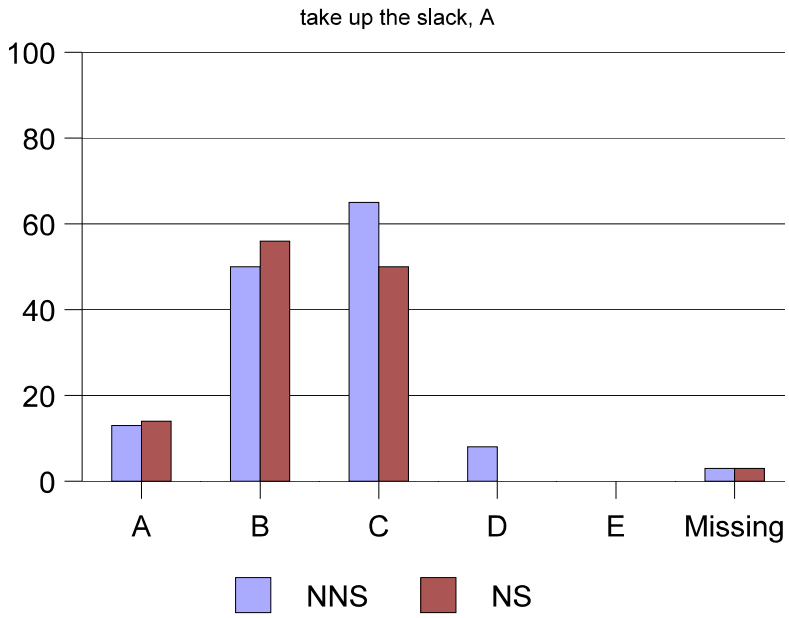

FIGURE 13 take up the slack

a) make a company more profitable
b) finish somebody else's job
c) clean up a mess made by others
d) treat other people harshly

Take up the slack was not familiar to the participants in either group, at least not with the meaning the dictionaries suggested. The two alternatives that were semantically closest to each other were the most popular for both groups even though not mentioned by the dictionaries, and there was no significant difference between the groups. In addition, the number of missing answers was low, signalling that the informants experienced the idiom as familiar. Finnish offered no help, and since the idiom is opaque, neither did its literal meaning. Even though it is also possible literally to *pick up the slack*, that did not aid in seeing the expression in the same way as the dictionaries.

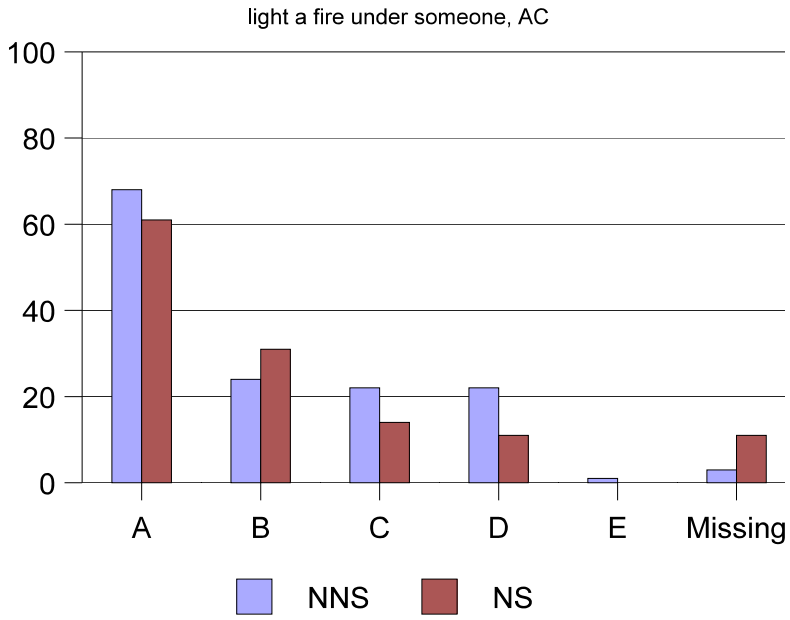

FIGURE 14 light a fire under someone

a) urge someone to do something
b) raise someone's interest
c) make someone behave in a certain way
d) try hard to get rid of someone

Light a fire under someone produced similar reactions in both groups. The vast majority recognised one of the intended two alternatives, and surprisingly many also chose an alternative that was not a potential interpretation according to the dictionaries and also belonged to a different semantic field from the dictionary definitions. The idiom is semi-transparent, but there is no direct equivalent in Finnish. There is a similar expression *tuli hännän alla* which is connected to the particular intended alternative that most informants chose. However, its meaning is not the same as the meaning of the English expression.

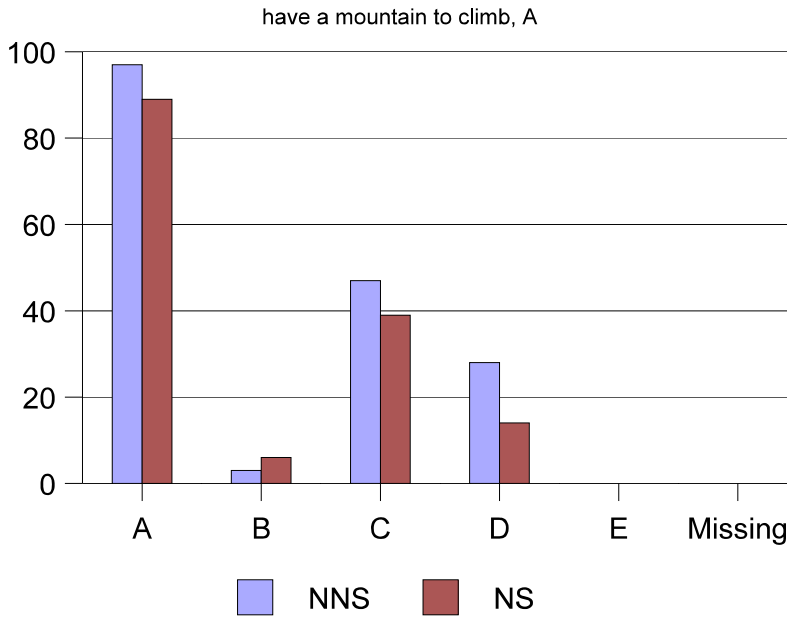

FIGURE 15 have a mountain to climb

a) have a very difficult goal to achieve
b) have no friends in a difficult situation
c) have an impossible task to accomplish
d) have a highly dangerous task ahead

Another idiom over which the informants did not significantly differ was *have a mountain to climb*. The majority chose the intended alternative, even though an alternative from the same semantic field also gained attention. The idiom is fully transparent, which probably helped the informants, including the Finns, who were not aided by their native language.

8.3.2 Idioms over which the two informant groups disagreed

The vast majority of the idioms in Part III, 36 out of 45, caused disagreement between the two informant groups to a statistically significant degree. This was so even though amongst these idioms there were also transparent ones that had close equivalents in Finnish, and other idioms that were fairly difficult to interpret due to e.g. opacity. The rest of the idioms will now be considered one by one in order to see how big a role transparency played and what other reasons there may have been behind the different reactions of the two groups. The remaining idioms have therefore been divided into three classes:

1) *transparent idioms*, including idioms whose literal and figurative meanings are closely linked to each other and the figurative can be deduced from the literal,

2) *semi-transparent idioms,* referring to idioms that have a component that links the literal and figurative meanings although the link is not as obvious as with transparent idioms, and finally
3) *opaque idioms* whose literal and figurative meanings are completely different from each other and the literal meaning is of no help in working out the literal one.

It should be borne in mind that the transparency-opacity division ocuurs along a continuum, so there are borderline cases and it is not always possible to find agreement on the degree of transparency. The categorisation made here has been checked by two native and two non-native speakers but the final decisions are mine.

8.3.2.1 Transparent idioms

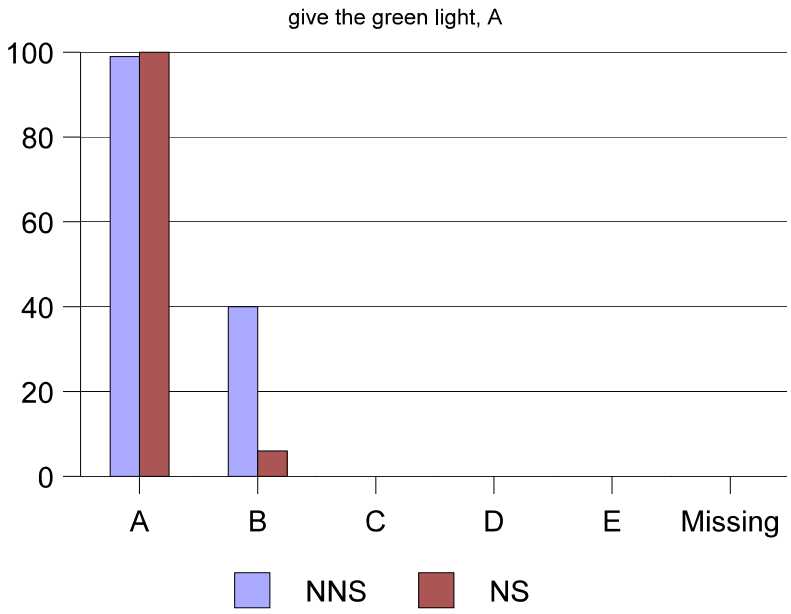

FIGURE 16 give the green light

a) permit or allow someone to carry out their plans
b) agree with someone's opinions without hesitation
c) make someone realize the true nature of a situation
d) talk about environmental matters and for the nature

This expression is fully transparent as the association with, for example, traffic lights is obvious. The expression has different forms, as the verb can take an indirect object. In addition, some lexical variation does occur as it is possible to, e.g., *show/have the green/red light*. *Longman* lists the idiom as not formal, and *Oxford* also refers to it as informal. There is a direct translation equivalent in Finnish which has obviously assisted NNSs in choosing alternative A. However, unlike the NSs, NNSs also thought B a likely interpretation. It is

semantically linked to A, and reflects the broader meaning the expression has in the Finnish language.

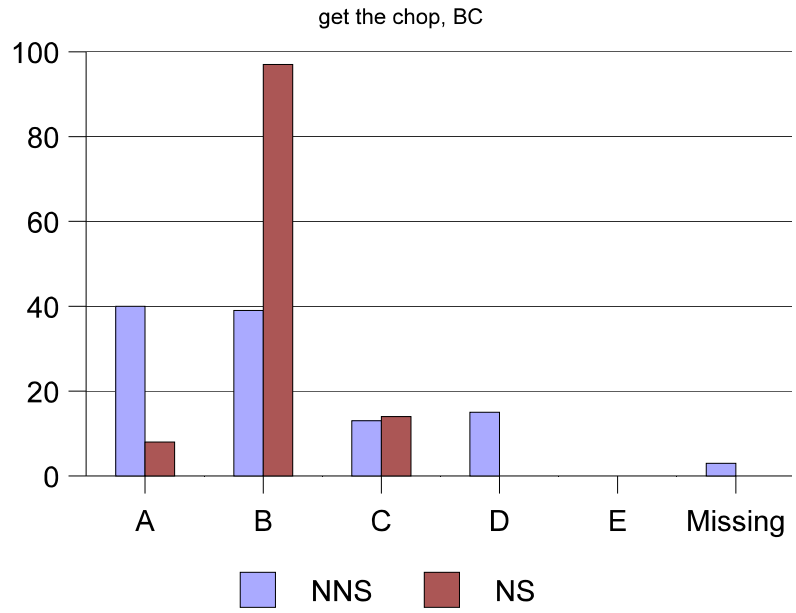

FIGURE 17 get the chop

a) be beaten
b) be sacked
c) be killed
d) be shocked

This idiom is categorised as informal by all three dictionaries. It is variable, as several verbs can take the place of *get*, and also, *chopper* can be used instead of *chop*. The expression is transparent and has a Finnish equivalent with a different appearance, *saada potkut/kenkää*, which applies to alternative B, and an equivalent with a similar choice of words, *kirves heilahtaa*.. This was also the meaning the NSs thought to be the most likely interpretation. Even though C is also mentioned in the dictionaries, less than a fifth were ready to accept it too. As for the NNSs, B was chosen by nearly 40 %, but so was A. Also D was more popular than C. In dividing the NNSs this idiom was quite successful. Perhaps the link to the Finnish equivalent could not be seen since *chop* and *potkut/kenkää* mean different things, and there was no other Finnish point of comparison available and thus the NNSs had nothing to latch on to.

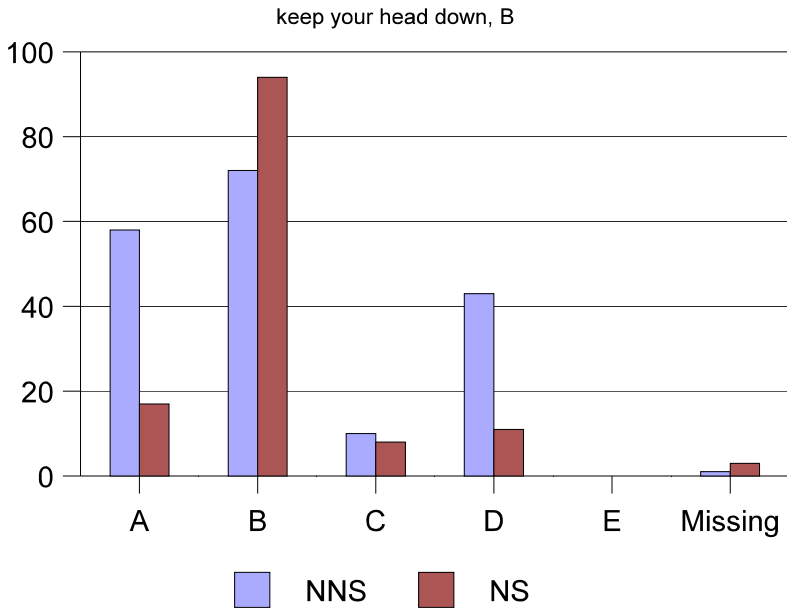

FIGURE 18 keep your head down

a) act in a modest way despite one's talents and success
b) attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet
c) defend oneself against unjust and harmful criticism
d) wait for the situation to develop before being involved

This idiom allows both grammatical and lexical variation. It is also transparent and has an equivalent in Finnish that is different in form but fairly similar in meaning, *pitää matalaa profiilia*, which in its turn, has a direct translation equivalent in English, *keep a low profile*. Apparently, the Finnish equivalent assisted the NNSs even though their recognition percentage was significantly lower than the NSs'. The NNSs were alsowilling to accept alternatives A and D, D being close to the meaning of a Finnish expression *työntää päänsä pensaaseen*. Again, picking one word in the idiom and finding an expression in Finnish containing that particular word, was a valid strategy for the NNSs, leading them astray.

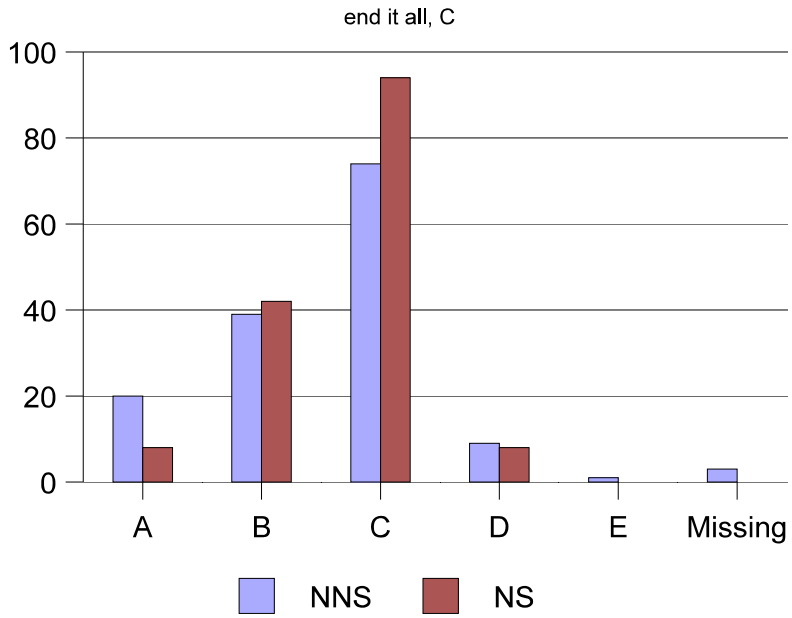

FIGURE 19 end it all

a) get a job done
b) finish a relationship
c) commit suicide
d) retire from one's job

This idiom too is transparent, as the literal interpretation quite clearly conveys the figurative meaning as well. The form of the idiom does not change and there is no equivalent Finnish expression. The closeness of the literal meaning was noticeable to the non-native speakers, even though they still differed from the NSs in recognising C. Just as with the previous idiom, over 40 % of the NSs felt B was possible as well, which was a response not supported by the dictionaries.

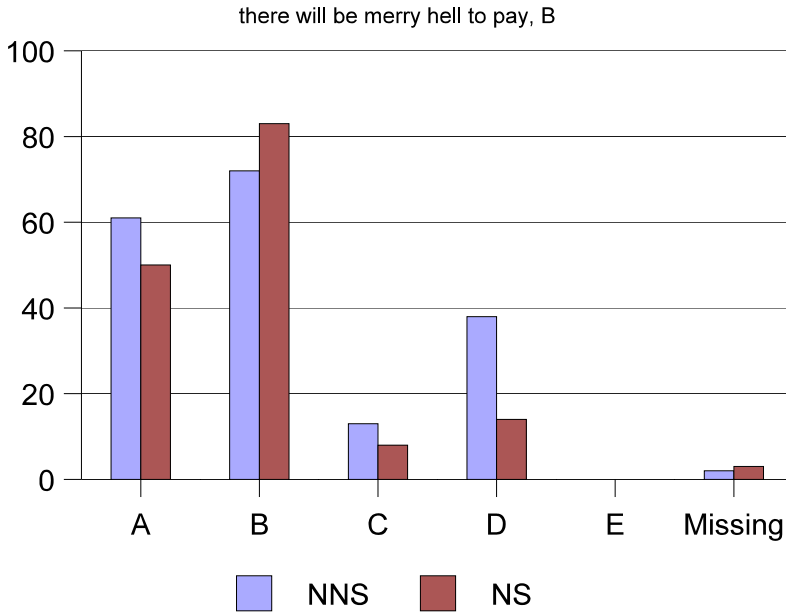

FIGURE 20 there will be merry hell to pay

a) punishment will follow
b) serious trouble will arise
c) financial costs will rise
d) total confusion will follow

This expression is flexible as the verb allows lexical variation. It is transparent, and according to *Longman*, colloquial. There is an equivalent in Finnish, as just as in English, you may have to pay for something you have done or said, *joutua maksamaan, saada maksaa*. Even though over 60 % of the NNSs chose A, the alternative was popular among the NSs, too, which is probably the result of the special meaning *pay* can carry. There is an expression that could be considered an equivalent, *tulla kuumat paikat/oltavat*, which probably helped over 70 % of the NNSs to choose the intended alternative. As for the other alternatives, a number of the NNSs regarded D as likely, thus causing a division in their group.

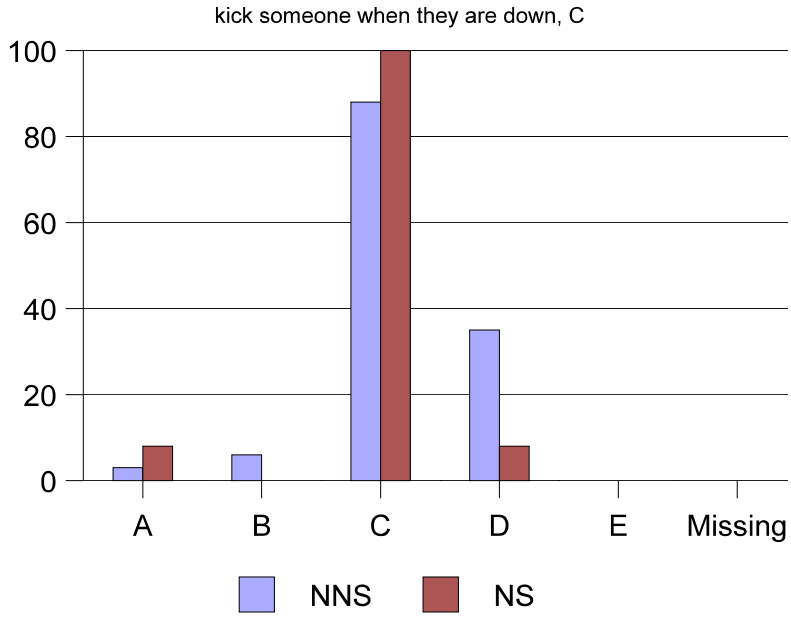

FIGURE 21 kick someone when they are down

a) criticize someone behind their back
b) tell someone to start working harder
c) hurt someone who is in a weak position
d) attack someone when they least expect it

This frozen idiom is transparent and not formal (*Longman*). There is an expression in Finnish with a similar meaning but different wording, *lyödä lyötyä*. This appeared to be enough to aid the NNSs of whom over 80 % recognised the intended answer, although the percentage was significantly lower than among the NSs. D was also fairly popular among the NNSs, reflecting the meaning of *iskeä vyön alle* which is not exactly a false friend, as its form is dissimilar to the English idiom's appearance.

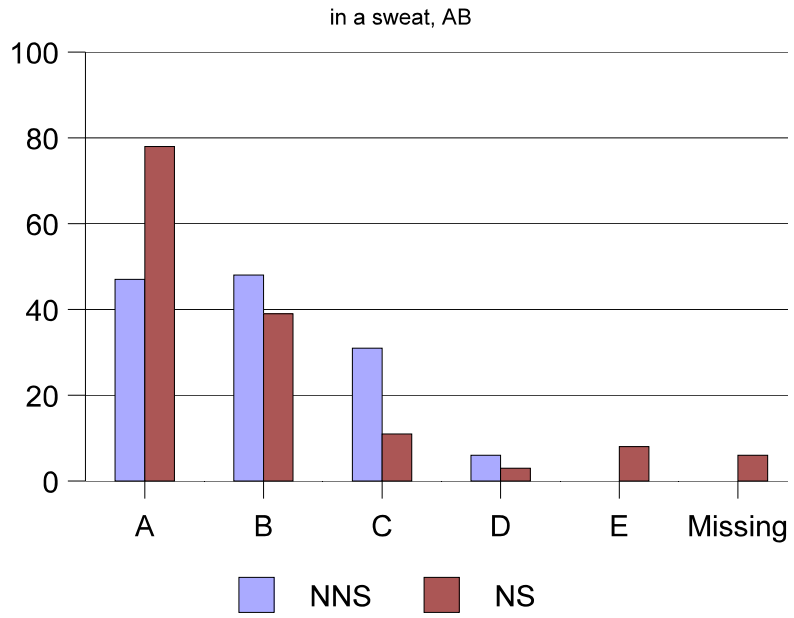

FIGURE 22 in a sweat

a) anxiously
b) frightened
c) quickly
d) suddenly

Again, although the literal interpretation may also mislead, it is indeed linked to the metaphorical meaning of the expression and this makes it transparent. It is also possible to say that someone is *in a cold sweat* but otherwise the idiom does not have variations. *Longman* places the idiom in the non-formal category. The Finnish equivalent is problematic since there is, firstly, a false friend *hiki pipossa/hatussa* (close to C), and secondly, expressions like *kylmä hiki, tuskanhiki*, which always require the attribute to describe the sweat. In addition, there is the expression *hiestä märkänä* which may but does not necessarily carry the same meaning as the English one. The NNS' replies did indeed vary, and the false friend C gained over 30 per cent of votes. However, the intended answers were recognised by over 40 % of the NNSs. For B the difference from the NSs was not significant, but for A it was.

8.3.2.2 Semi-transparent idioms

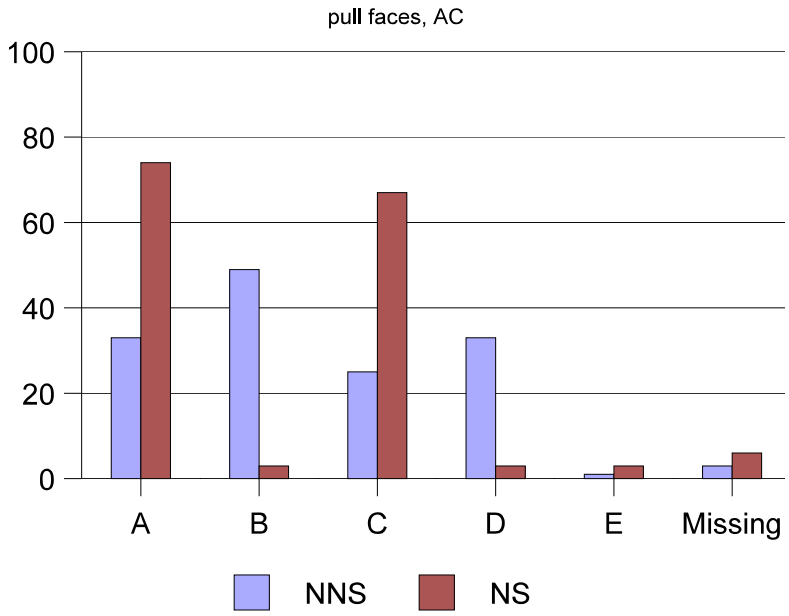

FIGURE 23 pull faces

a) twist one's face to amuse others
b) repeatedly cheat or deceive others
c) show dislike by twisting one's face
d) cause dissatisfaction or annoyance

Pull faces is semi-transparent as even though the image of a person pulling his or her face does give a hint of the meaning of the expression, it does not quite explain the possible attitude behind the face-twisting. The idiom is flexible both in terms of lexis and grammar. The Finnish equivalent, which is quite infrequent, has a different wording, *väännellä naamaansa, to twist one's face.* Finally, *Longman* mentions that it is not used in formal contexts.

There were two intended responses, and they were well recognised by the native speakers. However, the non-native speakers varied in their replies, and the most popular alternative was not connected to dictionary meanings of the expression which were also the interpretations favoured by the native speakers. The non-native speakers were lured by *repeatedly cheat or deceive others* (B) which probably indicates that they confused the idiom with *pulling somebody's leg*, or with the Finnish false friend, *vetää nenästä*. This would suggest that the non-native speakers were unable to spot the link between the literal and figurative meanings and instead looked for an expression either in Finnish or English that shared some words with the expression in question. Finally, the other distractor (D), *cause dissatisfaction or annoyance*, was fairly popular among non-native speakers. It is semantically linked to B, one resulting from the other.

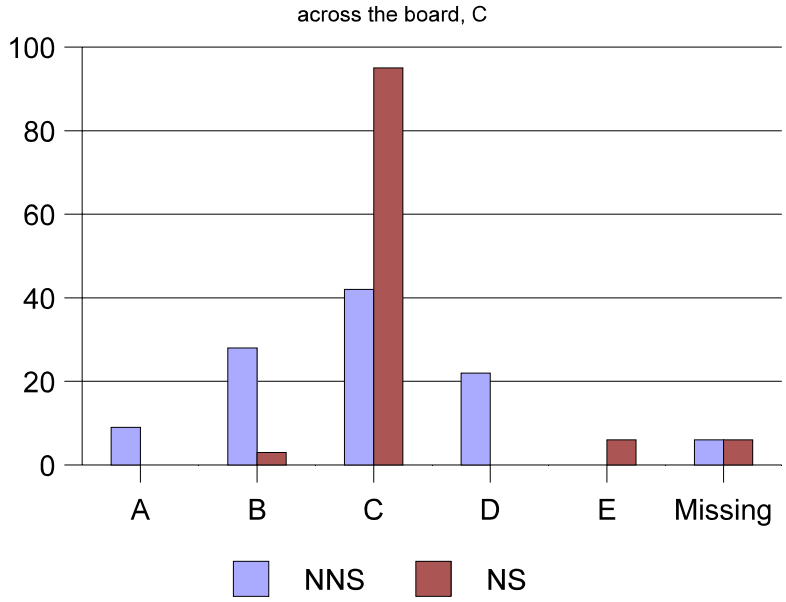

FIGURE 24 across the board

a) being introduced for the first time
b) delegated for other people to do
c) affecting everyone or -thing equally
d) under development and planning

According to *Longman* (1979), *across the board* is not formal by nature. It can function either as an adjective or an adverb although the form of the expression remains unaltered. It can be considered fairly transparent but has no equivalent in Finnish, which may explain the divergences among the NNSs, and their difference from the NSs. The vast majority of the native speakers chose the intended answer (C), whereas only 41.7 % of the Finns considered *affecting everyone or -thing equally* be the correct interpretation. The distractors *delegated for other people to do* (B), and *under development and planning* (D) were also attractive to the NNSs to make their responses statistically significantly different from those of the NSs. Here it is difficult to detect possible Finnish expressions that may have been misleading, but it seems rather that the informants attempted to find a link between the image the expression creates and its meaning, hence realising the essence of idioms. Unfortunately, in this case the idea of e.g. delivering things or plans across the board does not denote delegating, nor does it refer to the idea of things being *levällään*, which might explain NNSs choosing alternative D.

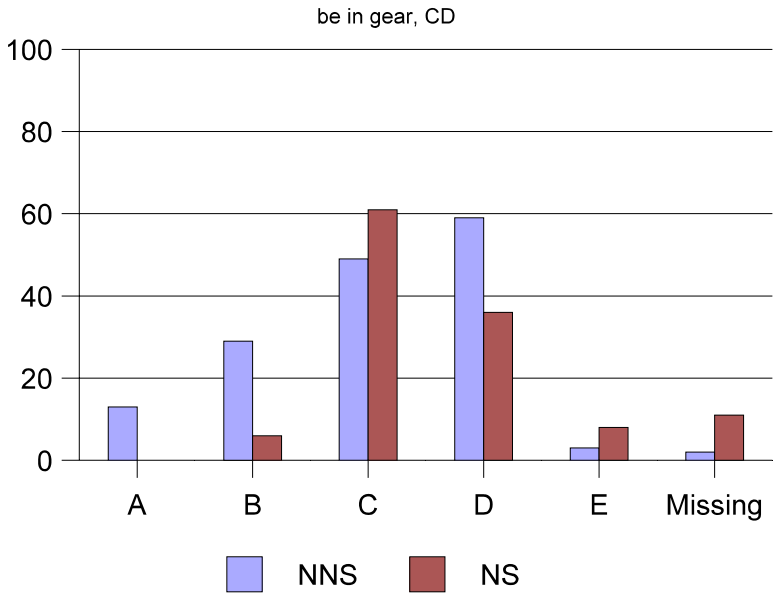

FIGURE 25 be in gear

a) constantly change one's mind
b) follow the latest fashion and trends
c) be in excellent working order
d) deal with something effectively

According to *Longman*, this is another expression which is not formal. It is flexible as to the verb since verbs other than *be* can also be used. In addition, it is possible to *get into gear*. The idiom is fairly transparent and has a Finnish equivalent with a different wording, *täydellä höyryllä/teholla/voimalla* or *täysin palkein* whose meaning is closest to alternative D. Whereas the NSs detected at least one of the two intended responses without problems, there were different responses from the NNSs. Of the intended responses the native speakers preferred C, and the non-native speakers alternative D, probably because of the closeness to the Finnish expression. However, almost half of them also chose C, not differing significantly from native speakers. The other two alternatives, which represent different semantic fields from the intended responses, produced a difference between the groups, as the non-native speakers were more inclined to accept them than the native speakers. This again indicates the uncertainty of the non-native speakers as to the meaning of an idiom.

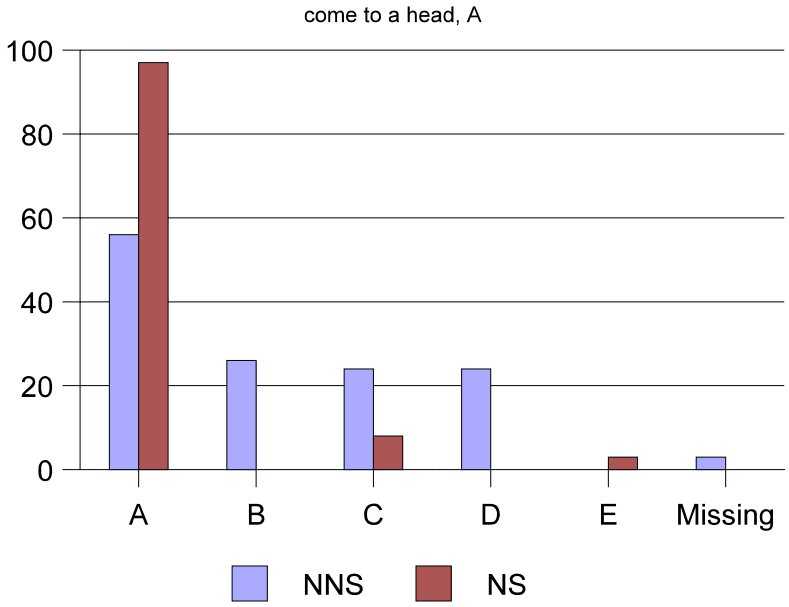

FIGURE 26 come to a head

a) reach the most decisive stage
b) thoroughly understand something
c) cease to exist or stop completely
d) suddenly get a new inspiring idea

This idiom is fully transparent if the language user is familiar with expression's etymology[24]. However, at least for a non-native speaker, a boil and the vocabulary related to it is hardly among the set of the most useful or common words. The idiom is thus perhaps closer to semi- than full transparency . It does allow some variation as, for instance, *bring* can be used instead of *come* and then the verb can take a direct object. There is no real equivalent in Finnish, *tulla käännekohtaan* is rather close in meaning but has a direct translation of its own, *reach a turning point.* It may well have assisted the informants, though, as over a half of the NNSs managed to recognise the intended answer which was chosen by almost all the NSs. The other three alternatives were also possible in the eyes of the non-native speakers, which is quite understandable since B and D are semantically close to each other, and to the literal translation of a potential false friend, *saada päähänsä, juolahtaa mieleen*. Alternative C did not produce significant differences between the two groups, and for Finns, it seems quite a logical interpretation, since *tulla tiensä päähän* has a similar appearance. C is also fairly close to A semantically.

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24 Referring to the point (*head*) of a BOIL or other swelling on the body. When a boil comes to a head it is about to burst. *(Longman 1992)*

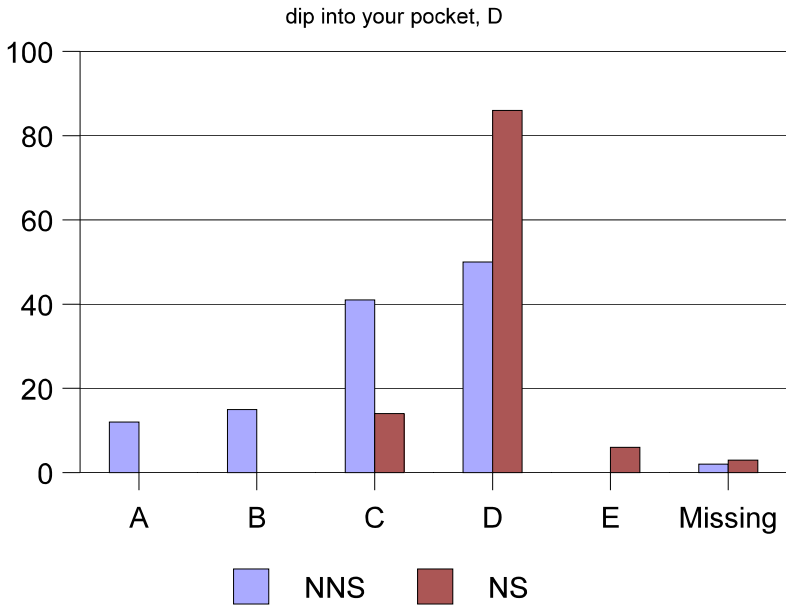

FIGURE 27 dip into your pocket

a) win money in pools, or lottery etc.
b) attempt to steal or shoplift something
c) spend more money than one could afford
d) spend or give money on something

This expression is far from frozen as both *dip* and *pocket* can be inflected, and both the verb and the noun can be replaced by other word choices. Also, it is possible to *dip your hand into your pocket*, adding another source of lexical variation. The expression is semi-transparent as the image of the literal interpretation does reflect the figurative one. There is a Finnish equivalent with a different structure, *kaivaa kuvettaan*. Also, there is a false friend in Finnish, *pistää taskuunsa* which means to steal. However, this did not distract Finns much, even though the majority still failed to recognise the dictionary-based answer. The two alternatives most closely linked to each other semantically were also those most often chosen by the NNSs. In general, they were rather divided over this idiom which indicates they were not certain what to lean on. The NSs, for their part, did not all recognise the intended answer either, which reveals a degree of unfamiliarity.

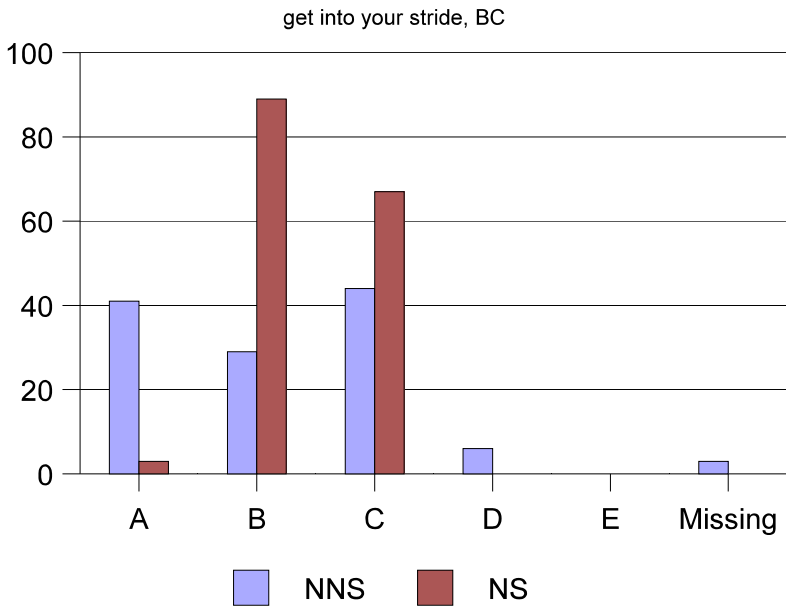

FIGURE 28 get into your stride

a) make someone behave as you want them to
b) become accustomed with a new activity
c) learn to do something easily and confidently
d) be looked up and respected by other people

This is another flexible idiom, as the verb is replaceable. The idiom is also transparent and has an equivalent in Finnish with a slightly different structure and wording, *saada asiat rullaamaan*. It seems the wording was too dissimilar to the original as NNSs failed to distinguish between the intended responses and distractor A. Their most common responses were C, A and B which was perhaps unexpected as the meaning of A is distinctly different from B and C, which for their part, are linked to each other. Perhaps the participants detected a distant link between a stride and *saada joku talutusnuoraansa* which relates to A.

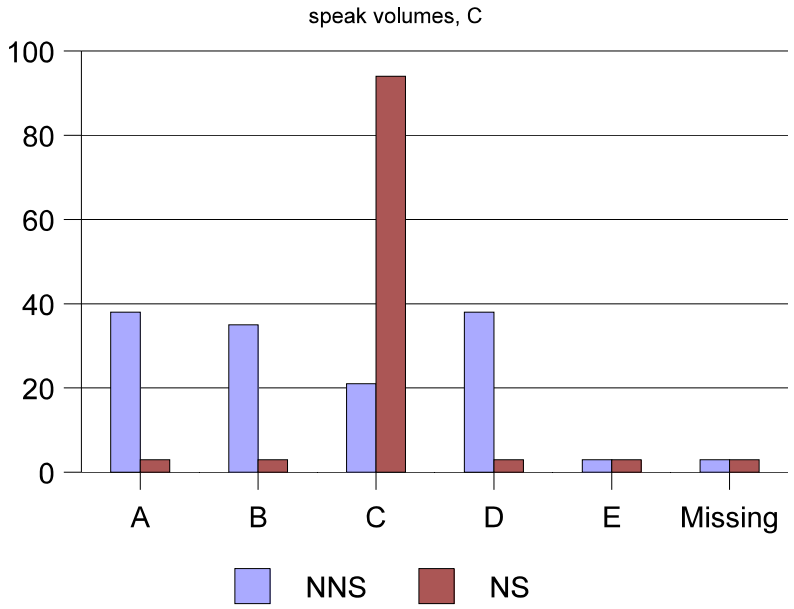

FIGURE 29 speak volumes

A) talk in an unnecessary loud voice to gain attention
b) unable to keep anything a secret but eager to gossip
c) reveal a lot about something, even without speaking
d) be very eloquent, and used to and fond of talking

This idiom has no variations. *Longman* once again labels the expression as not formal. As for transparency, the idiom is semi-transparent. In Finnish, the same meaning is conveyed with different words, *puhua selvää kieltään/paljonpuhuva*. Again, since the wording is different, the respondents were unable to establish the link between the two languages. Whereas the NSs almost unanimously chose C, the NNSs were again divided between the four alternatives, with C being opted for less often than the other alternatives. All alternatives are semantically closely linked to each other and the NNSs clearly had trouble choosing.

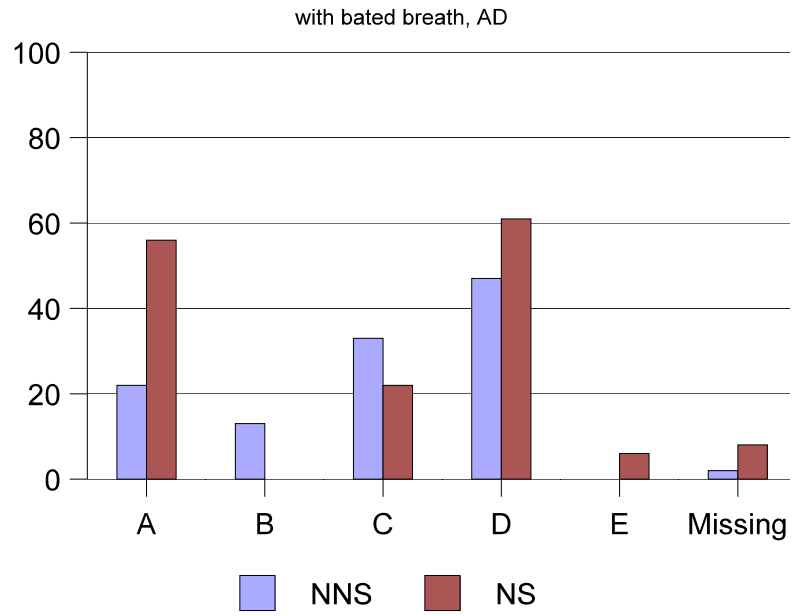

FIGURE 30 with bated breath

a) expectantly or worried
b) chokingly or painfully
c) cautiously or slowly
d) excitedly or anxiously

This idiom is, according to *Longman,* not formal. It is also completely frozen although it can be used in connection with several different verbs. The idiom is semi-transparent, since in the emotional state the idiom suggests, one often holds one's breath and thus the image is close to the figurative meaning. In Finnish, there is a direct translation equivalent *henkeään pidätellen*. The problem with the Finnish expression is that it can refer to either A, C , or D. It seems that the NNSs regarded D as most likely also in Finnish as it was the most widely chosen by them, and this did not significantly differ from the native speakers' responses. D was also a slightly more likely interpretation to the native speakers than A. C gained some acceptance from both groups, which is interesting since the dictionaries did not recognise this interpretation. As for A and B, the non-native speakers differed from the native speakers. It was perhaps difficult for the non-native speakers to try to decide between the alternatives, which are all linked semantically in some way, and Finnish did not offer any conclusive aid. A and B are to some degree negative in tone, which may have been one reason why they were not attractive to the NNSs. A number of NSs failed to answer, , and others provided their own explanations, which suggests that the idiom or the alternative interpretations were unfamiliar.

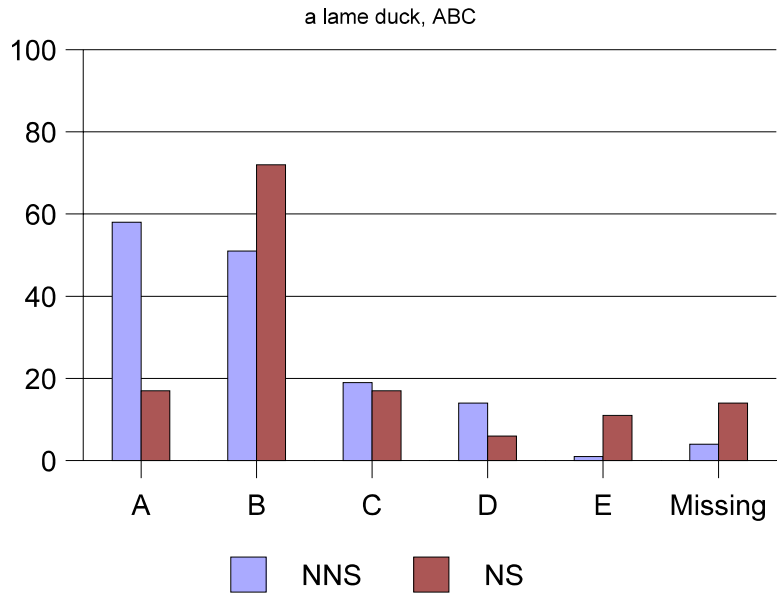

FIGURE 31 a lame duck

a) a government or authority with little real power
b) a person in a weak and uncertain position
c) a business company in financial difficulties
d) a speech inappropriate to a particular situation

This expression is very hard to categorise as to its transparency as even though there is nothing in the literal interpretation that would link it to a certain field, for instance, the image of a lame duck does indeed convey the essence of the metaphorical meaning. Therefore, the expression is semi-transparent. To an extent the expression is variable as it can be used also as an attribute, and it is possible to refer to ducks in theplural instead of a single bird. According to *Longman*, the idiom is colloquial. It has no distinct equivalent in Finnish. Even though *siipirikko* is similar in idea and appearance, it differs in meaning. According to the dictionaries, the idiom has several interpretations in English, although the NSs seemed to have one distinct preference. Their choice differed from that of the NNSs, who thought A more likely. There were also a number of answers missing among the NSs, and some also gave their own explanations, which suggests that the idiom or the alternative interpretations were unfamiliar.

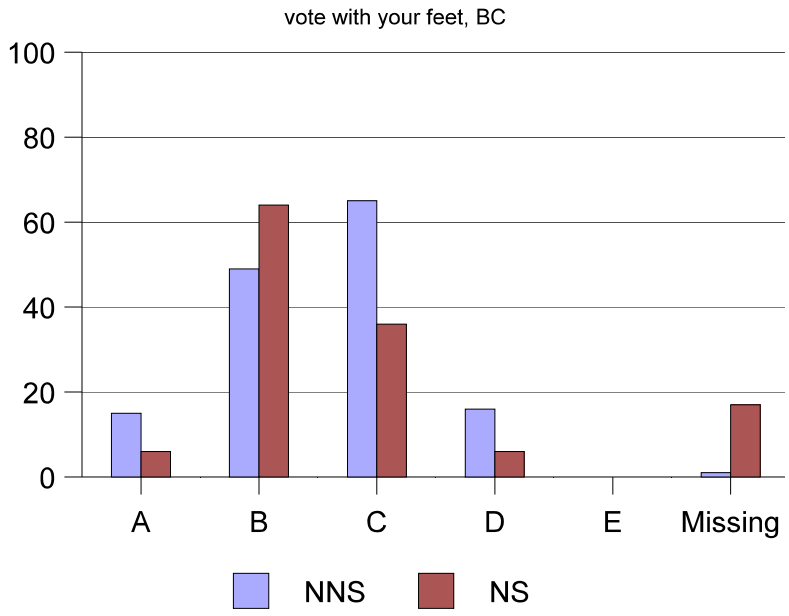

FIGURE 32 vote with your feet

a) have an indifferent attitude towards politics
b) indicate what you want through your actions
c) show contempt or dislike by leaving a place
d) support someone by standing by their side

This is a frozen, semi-transparent idiom which has a direct translation equivalent in the Finnish language, whose meaning is closest to alternative C. This also shows in the responses, as the NNSs were significantly more willing to accept C than the NSs. As for the other alternative offered by thedictionaries, the two groups did not differ. This again strengthens the view that NNSs rely on their mother tongue when working out the meaning of a foreign language idiom.

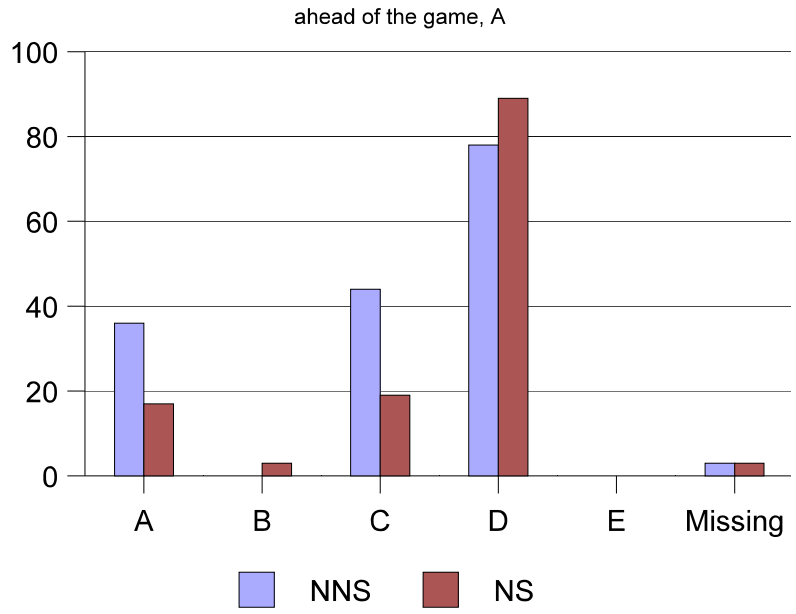

FIGURE 33 ahead of the game

a) prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation
b) ridiculing and criticizing other people behind their back
c) with better chances than others to win a competition
d) more advanced than anyone else in a particular activity

This idiom tolerates no variance and is semi-transparent. It has no equivalent in Finnish. Instead, the Finnish expression *aikaansa edellä* is a false friend. This would explain why D was the most popular answer among the NNSs. However, the NSs also favoured this alternative instead of the dictionary-based A. This was different from the NNSs, of whom nearly 40 % chose A. The alternative closest to the literal meaning, C was often chosen by the NNSs, indicating unawareness of the metaphoricity of the expression.

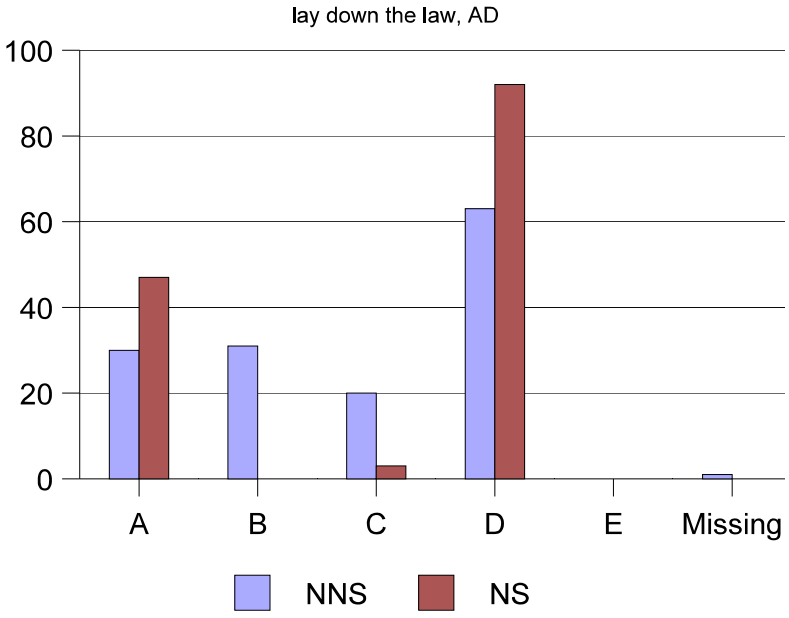

FIGURE 34 lay down the law

a) express one's opinion with great force
b) be involved in illegal and shady activities
c) behave in impolite and immoral way
d) set down the rules for other people

This expression is colloquial (*Longman*) and lexically frozen. However, *down* can appear also after *the law*. Transparency is difficult to judge, as *lay down* as a verb carries a similar meaning to its contribution to the idiom's meaning. Still, considering the literal meaning of *law*, the expression as a whole is semi-transparent. It has a direct Finnish translation equivalent, *lukea jllkin lakia*, denoting alternative D. This obviously aided the NNSs, as they did not significantly differ from the native respondents with respect to the intended answers. However, B and C were also attractive to the NNSs, which shows an attempt to find a connection between the literal and metaphorical meanings, leaning more in the literal direction.

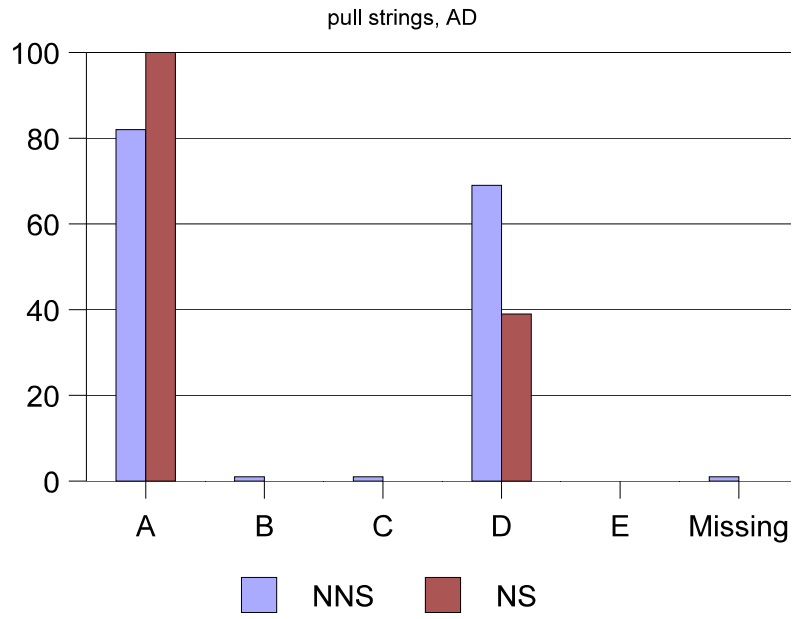

FIGURE 35 pull strings

a) use influential friends or indirect pressure to achieve one's aims
b) make other people nervous by one's unsympathetic behaviour
c) cheat or deceive somebody to make them suffer or perish
d) control or manipulate other people for one's own advantage

This expression is anything but frozen. It is also possible to *pull wires*, or refer to *wire-* or *string-pulling*. The idiom is semi-transparent as the idea of puppets and using strings to control them does indeed link to the figurative meaning. Although perhaps not part of our everyday lives, puppet shows can be assumed to be familiar to most language users. According to *Longman,* the idiom is not formal. It has a Finnish equivalent that is a direct translation, *vedellä/vetää (oikeista) naruista*, and shares the same meanings as the English expression. There is also an expression *sätkynukke, puppet,* which is connected to D. Therefore, it was fairly easy for the NNSs to recognise A or D as intended responses. Nevertheless, thir difference from the NSs was statistically significant, as a greater percentage of the NSs was willing to accept both interpretations. Finally, A gained far more acceptance than D, so the meanings are not equally familiar or acceptable to language users as the dictionaries suggest but A proves to be the more likely interpretation.

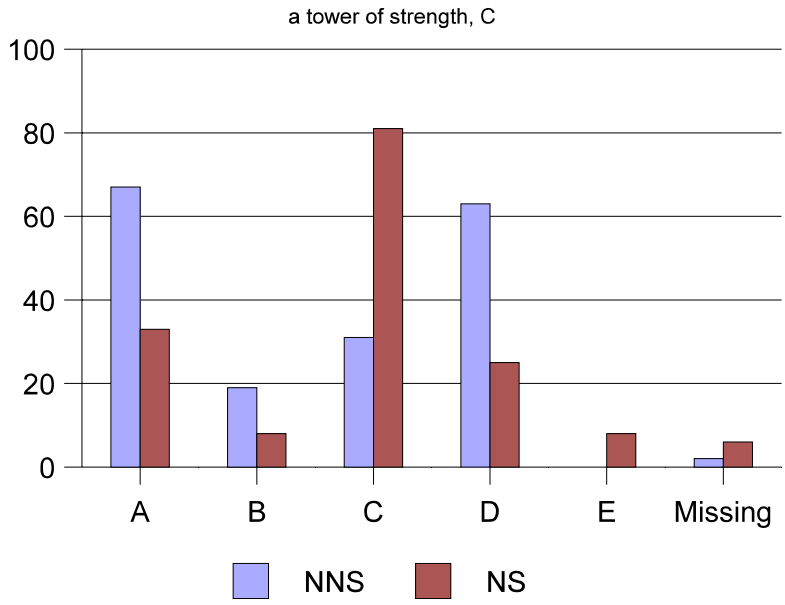

FIGURE 36 a tower of strength

a) a person who never needs other people but is independent
b) a person who is physically in a very good condition
c) a person who is always willing to give help and support
d) a person who seldom gets depressed or loses his energy

This is another idiom that falls into the category of 'not formal' in *Longman*. *Oxford* labels it a cliche. It is lexically variable but grammatically frozen. The idiom is semi-transparent with an equivalent in Finnish with a different wording , *tukipylväs, -pilari*, sharing the English version's meaning. In this case, however, the Finnish equivalent did not help the NNSs as they failed to recognise the intended answer. Alternative D is close to the meaning of a false friend *voimanpesä*. Hence it seems that finding an expression that shares even one word with the English idiom was the NNSs' strategy here. The fact that the participants knew the questionnaire was about idioms may have made them reject B, which is closest to the literal meaning.

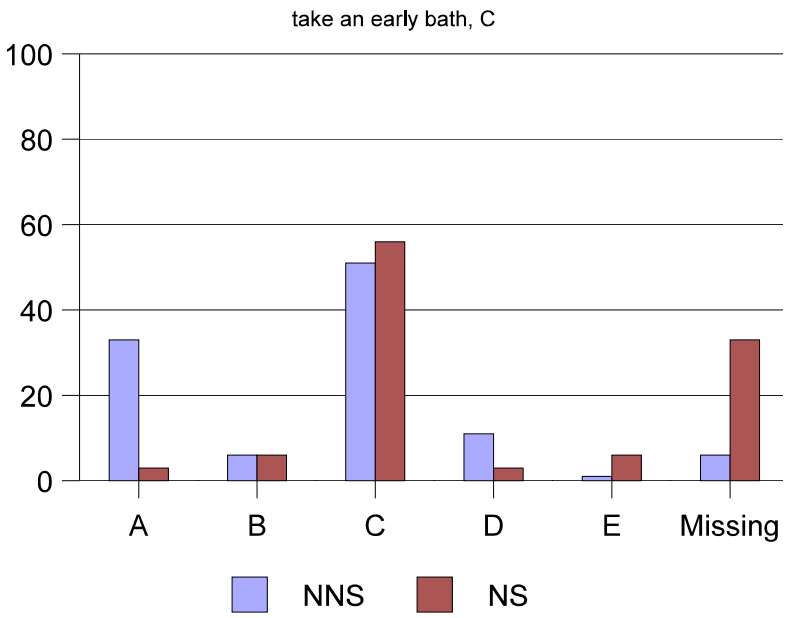

FIGURE 37 take an early bath

a) get used to a new situation
b) get into financial difficulties
c) leave some activity unfinished
d) go to bed unexceptionally early

This is a well-disguised transparent idiom. Since its roots are in sports language, i.e. to an extent in specialised language, the origins and the literal meaning are perhaps not easily detected or known even by native speakers. For this reason the idiom has here been seen as semi-transparent. The idiom does not allow changes except for verb tenses. There is a Finnish expression similar in meaning but different in appearence, *jättää leikki kesken*. *Joutua suihkuun* in Finnish is restricted to its literal use in sports, and has an equivalent more common in AmE, *be sent to the showers.* In Finnish, *tulla maitojunalla takaisin* and *joutua jäähylle* carry a related idiomatic meaning but imply humiliation and involuntariness. Apparently this was enough for the NNSs who managed to recognise the intended answer almost as often as the NSs. However, the NNSs were also attracted by A, which may show the effect of the Finnish expressions *kylmä suihku, kielikylpy* etc. Bath or shower themselves carry a suggestion of a new situation which one is trying to get used to, of immersion. Finally, the number of missing answers among the NSs was exceptionally high,since over 30 % left this item blank. This indicates that the respondents were not familiar with the idiom or sports terminology, or were not able to extend the literal meaning in a metaphorical direction.

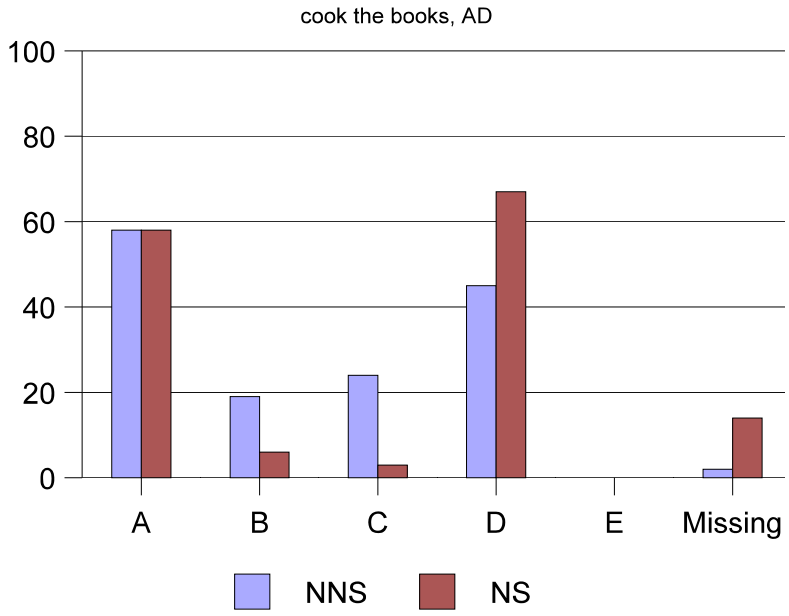

FIGURE 38 cook the books

a) change written records for one's own purposes
b) be in the habit of telling stories and lies
c) make a mess or cause a complete chaos
d) falsify facts or figures to steal money

This expression is, according to *Longman* and *Oxford*, colloquial and informal. It is frozen and semi-transparent. There is no equivalent in Finnish. Still, the NNSs succeeded in recognising one of the intended answers as often as the Nss. The NNSsstrongly favoured A and then D, whereas the NSs reversed this order and unlike the NNSs, showed little inclination to accept B or C. Interestingly, the NNSs favoured C over B, even though C belongs to a different semantic field from the other given alternatives, which dealt with lying or otherwise unethical behaviour.

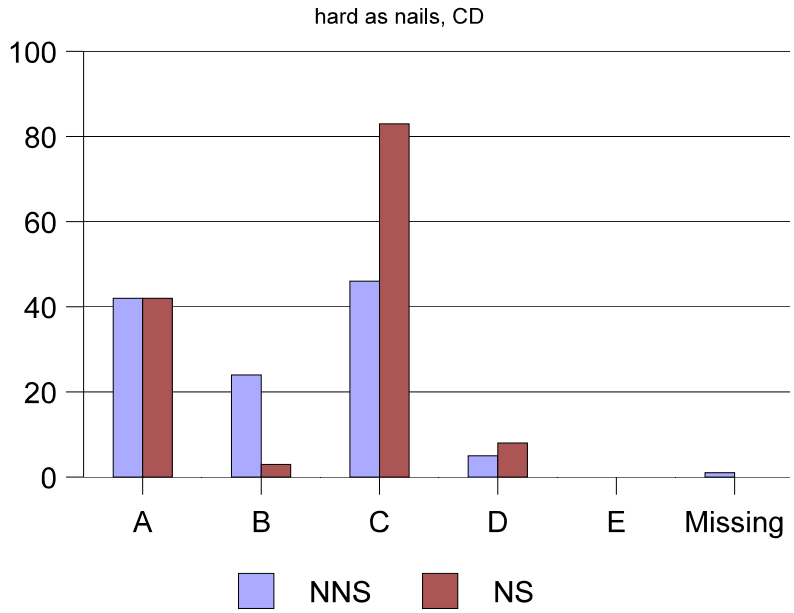

FIGURE 39 hard as nails

a) extremely stubborn and obstinate
b) seemingly strong but in fact weak
c) extremely tough and ruthless
d) in excellent physical condition

This expression is fairly transparent: the image of nails may not be the most illustrative one but the word *hard* in the idiom does assist in detecting its meaning. On the other hand, since *nail* may refer to a piece of metal as well as the material in fingers and toes, the NNSs may have had trouble deciding which one was meant. The idiom is flexible as it allows lexical replacement (*tough as nails*), or can be used as an attribute. According to *Longman*, it is not very formal. In the Finnish version, hardness is associated with a stone, not nails, denoting alternative C. This did not much help the NNSs as they performed quite poorly compared to the NSs. The latter, however, did not accept alternative D, mentioned in dictionaries, and curiously enough, were as willing to accept A as the NNSs. This seems to be an expression that has several meanings, but not equally current among native speakers.

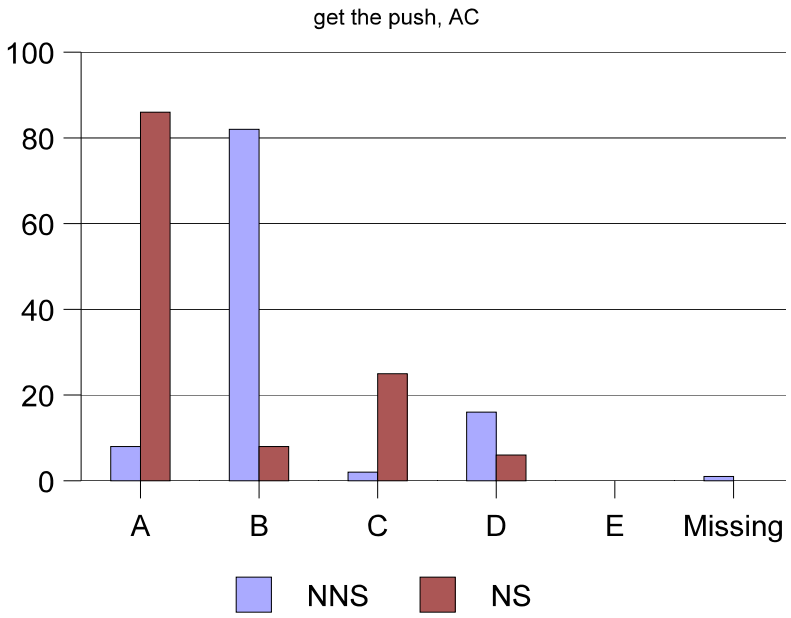

FIGURE 40 get the push

a) lose one's job or position
b) find a motive to do something
c) be finished with a relationship
d) be bossed around by someone

This idiom allows lexical variation. *Longman* and *Oxford* label it as colloquial and informal and it is semi-transparent.In Finnish, the equivalent expression is *saada potkut/kenkää*, i.e. the wording is different. Because of this, the NNSs failed to recognise the intended answers and instead opted for B, which is close to the Finnish expressions *antaa potkua, panna vauhtia, antaa työntöapua*. The idea of pushing in these expressions is positive, contrary to the English idiom. Finally, even though the dictionaries gave both A and C as potential interpretations, the NSs very clearly preferred A.

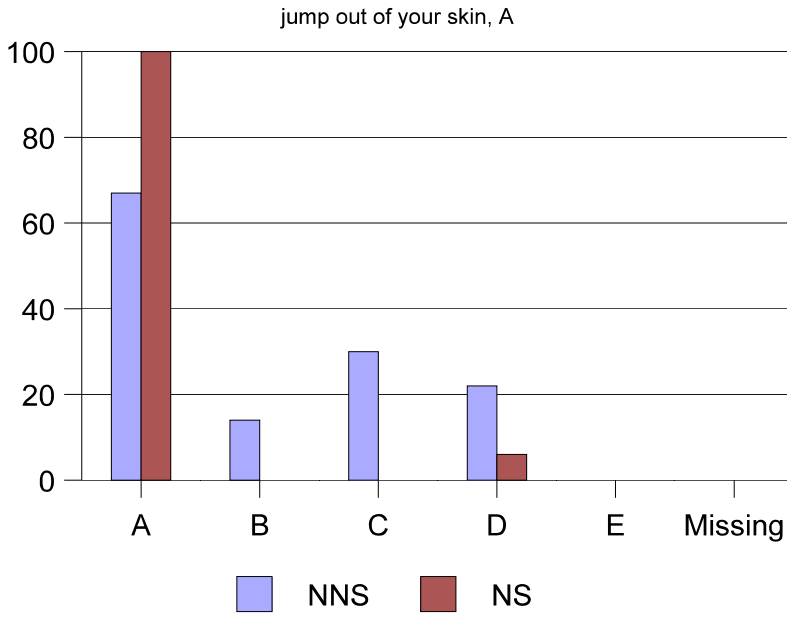

FIGURE 41 jump out of your skin

a) be suddenly very frightened or shocked
b) be involved in something out of ordinary
c) be thoroughly annoyed or infuriated
d) be energetic and ready to do anything

The literal interpretation of this idiom is linked to the figurative one and thus, the idiom is semi-transparent. Its form is frozen and, according to *Longman*, it is colloquial. There is no equivalent in Finnish. A direct translation does exist (*hypätä nahoistaan*) but it is a false friend denoting alternative C, fairly popular among the NNSs answering the questionnaire. D was also considered possible by the NNSs, as in Finnish there is also an expression *ei pysy nahoissaan*. However, over 60 % of the NNSs managed to pick the intended answer regardless of false friends. The difference from the NSs was nevertheless significant, since the latter were unanimous in their replies.

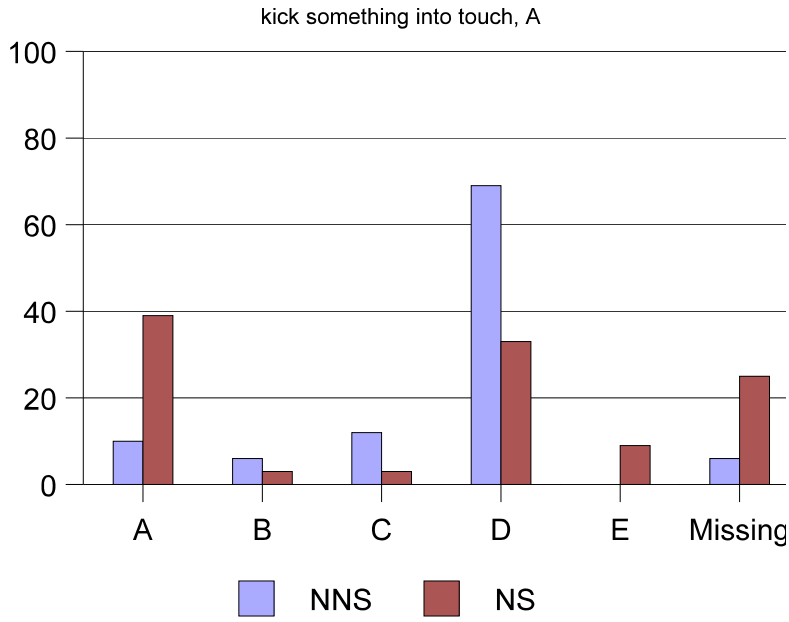

FIGURE 42 kick something into touch

a) reject or postpone something
b) do something illegal or immoral
c) exploit someone's weaknesses
d) challenge someone to do something

This expression is similar to *taking an early bath* (31) which also has its origins in sports. Again, if one is familiar with sports terminology this idiom is fully transparent, as the literal meaning refers to kicking the ball out of the field in rugby. However, for a person oblivious of sports, the idiom is totally opaque and therefore as a compromise, it has been treated as semi-transparent in this paper. The idiom does not tolerate alterations and has a semi-metaphorical equivalent with a different wording, *jättää hautumaan/pöydälle, työntää ö-mappiin*. The vast majority of theFinns thought D the most likely interpretation. One possible explanation for the NNSs' response is that the word *kick* is repeated in Finnish expressions *potkia liikkeelle/potkia persuksille* which is closest to meaning D. It seems that non-native speakers regarded sharing one word a sufficient link between Finnish and English. The unfamiliarity of the expression and its origins, however, shows in the NSs' responses: over 20 % of them left the item unanswered and less than 40 % recognised the intended answer.

8.3.2.3 Opaque idioms

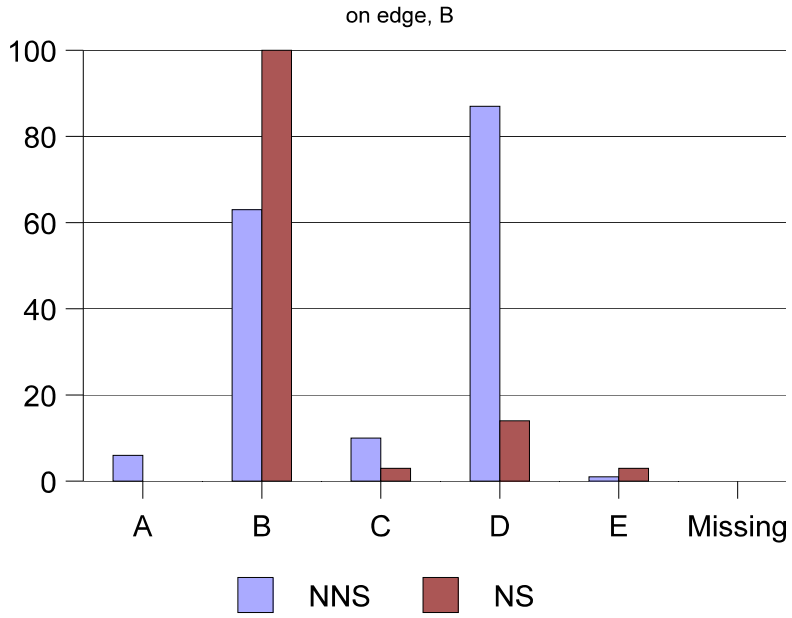

FIGURE 43 on edge

a) successful and in a strong position
b) very nervous and unable to relax
c) always fashionable and trendy
d) in a dangerous or risky situation

Again, *Longman* labels the expression 'not formal'. Though the idiom is used in connection with various verbs, e.g. *be, seem, feel* etc., thus bearing a certain amount of flexibility, the structure itself does not alter. As for figurativeness, the expression is opaque since the figurative interpretation of the expression does not reflect the literal one. In Finnish the closest equivalent would probably be *käydä kierroksilla*, not resembling the English form and thus difficult to connect. Therefore, it is not that surprising that whereas all the NSs chose the intended response, the majority of the NNSs picked *in a dangerous or risky situation* (D) which is fairly close to Finnish *olla kuilun reunalla/partaalla*, a false friend. However, the intended response, *very nervous and unable to relax* (B), was also chosen by over 60 % of the NNSs, so they did have some clue as to the actual meaning of the idiom. It is likely that they saw the link between the two alternatives, the fact that someone in a dangerous situation is likely to be nervous, and preferred the one that had an equivalent in Finnish.

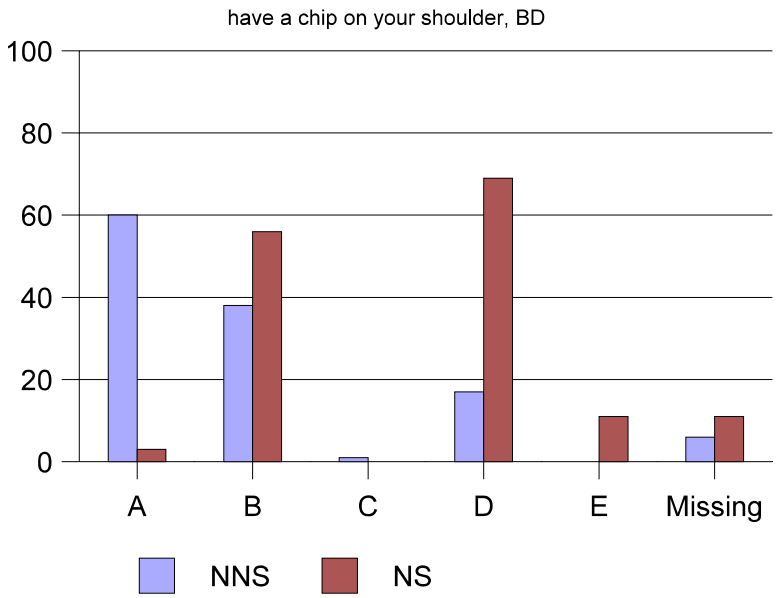

FIGURE 44 have a chip on your shoulder

a) feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust
b) feel inferior because of your background and education
c) unexpectedly win or inherit a very large sum of money
d) be angry because you think you have been treated unfairly

Although the original literal meaning of the expression[25] does mean that the expression was once semi-transparent, it can hardly be assumed that a language user today would know its etymology, and thus the expression is opaque. It is also flexible, as other verbs or prepositions can be used instead of *have*, and the expression can be used before a noun *chip-on-the-shoulder*. In Finnish there is an equivalent, *kantaa kaunaa*, that has a similar wording although it is not a direct translation, since *kauna* has its origins in the agrarian culture, something an average present-day language user would not know. Finally, *Longman* (1979) identifies the idiom as colloquial. The differences between the two groups proved to be quite large, as the two intended responses were favoured by theNSs, whereas the NNSs were more divided and the majority of them were deceived by a distractor, *feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust* (A). This may be a result of a Finnish way of saying someone has a burden to bear, *jkin painaa hartioita, on painava taakka harteillaan*, or or referring to someone taking the blame or responsibility, *ottaa harteilleen*. The word *shoulder* is repeated there and is the most likely reason to have distracted the Finnish informants.

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25 "From a former American custom. A boy wanting to fight would put a chip (small piece of wood) on his shoulder. He would fight any other boy who dared to knock the piece of wood off." (*Longman* 1992).

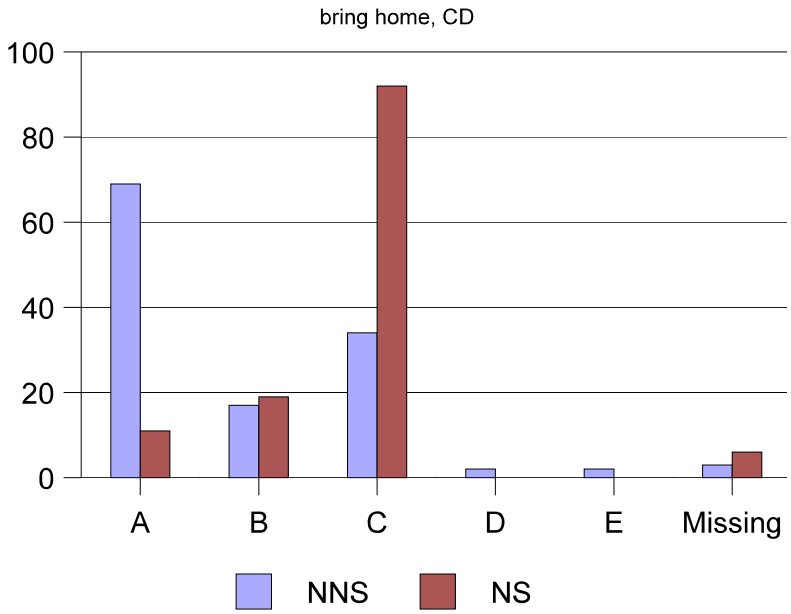

FIGURE 45 bring home

a) be more successful than others in a particular situation
b) earn enough money to support one's whole family
c) make someone understand the true nature of a situation
d) prove someone guilty of a crime or serious misconduct

Longman labels this expression as not formal. It tolerates variation as also other verbs than *bring* can be used, and the verb can take a direct object. As for its meaning, the idiom is opaque.It has an equivalent in Finnish, but only with a different wording (*saada menemään perille/jakeluun*). Less than 40 per cent of the NNSs recognised the intended answer C, which was markedly the favourite interpretation among NSs. Alternative A was the most popular one among the NNSs, which shows they fell for the false friend, *tuoda voitto kotiin.* Interestingly, some NSs also chose B which suggests that they confused the idiom with *bring home the bacon*. Finally, it is intriguing to notice that alternative D was also suggested as a possible interpretation by the dictionaries, yet none of the NSs considered it a possible answer.

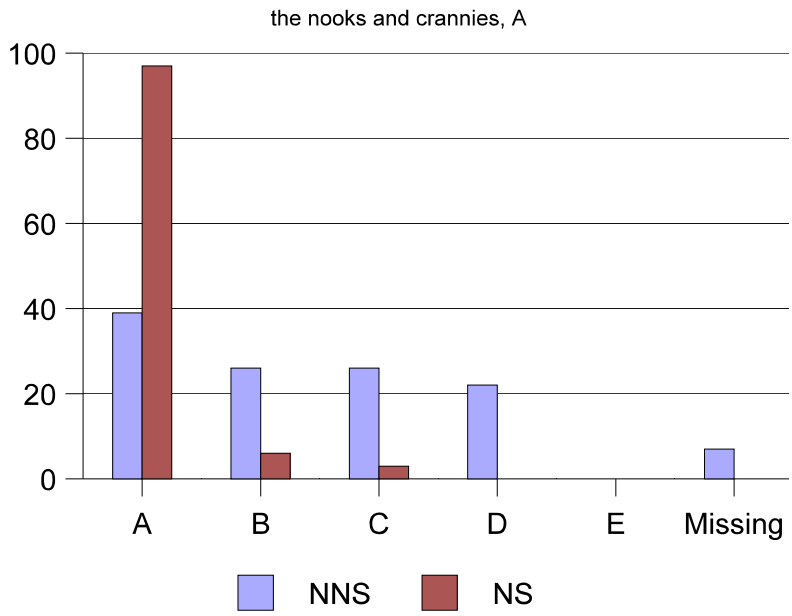

FIGURE 46 the nooks and crannies

a) small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed
b) whims and oddities in someone's behaviour or character
c) difficulties and obstacles which cause unexpected delay
d) insignificant and quite harmless rumours and gossips

This is an opaque expression which actually lies in the fuzzy line between idioms and phrases/sayings. It allows some variation, as (*in*) *every nook and cranny* also exists. The expression has no equivalent in Finnish even though there is a phrase *joka nippeli ja nappeli* that is fairly close in the meaning. Its link to the English wording is non-existent, however. Opacity and lacking an equivalent took its toll and the non-native speakers were divided in their opinions. Even though A was the most popular alternative, the difference from the native speakers was noticeable, and fewer than 40 % of the Finns managed to choose the intended alternative.

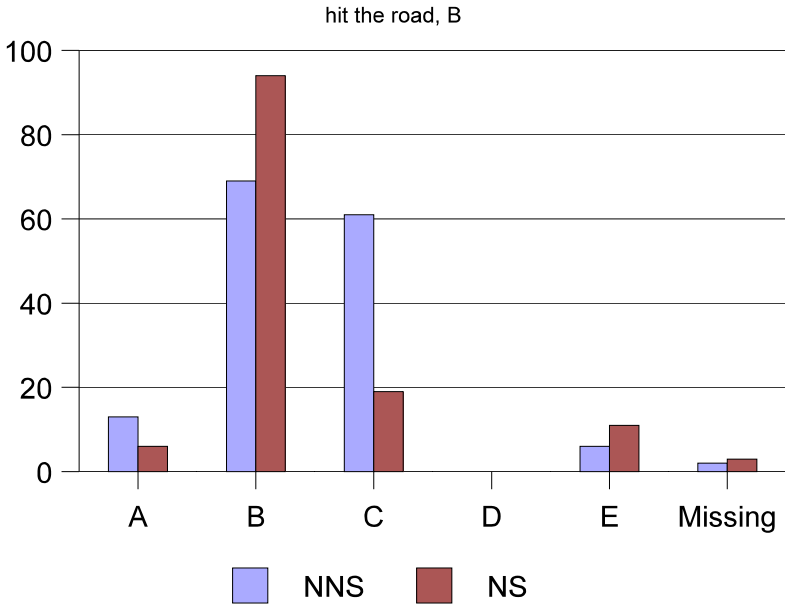

FIGURE 47 hit the road

a) pioneer a new idea
b) begin a journey
c) ask someone to leave
d) lose one's way

This idiom, is opaque. It is lexically variable as *road* can be replaced. According to *Longman*, the idiom is colloquial. In Finnish, there is a similar expression but with different structure and vocabulary, *lähteä tien päälle*. Apparently, this also helped, as almost 70 % of the NNSs recognised the intended answer, still significantly fewer than the NSs. Interestingly, though, over 60 % of the Finns were also ready to accept alternative C. This reflects a false friend found in a well-known song, whose lyrics in Finnish clearly say *painu pois, Jack* (*hit the road, Jack!*). Even though the English lyrics are as straightforward in telling Jack to leave, less than 20 per cent of NSs thought C was also possible. This indicates the idiom's familiarity.

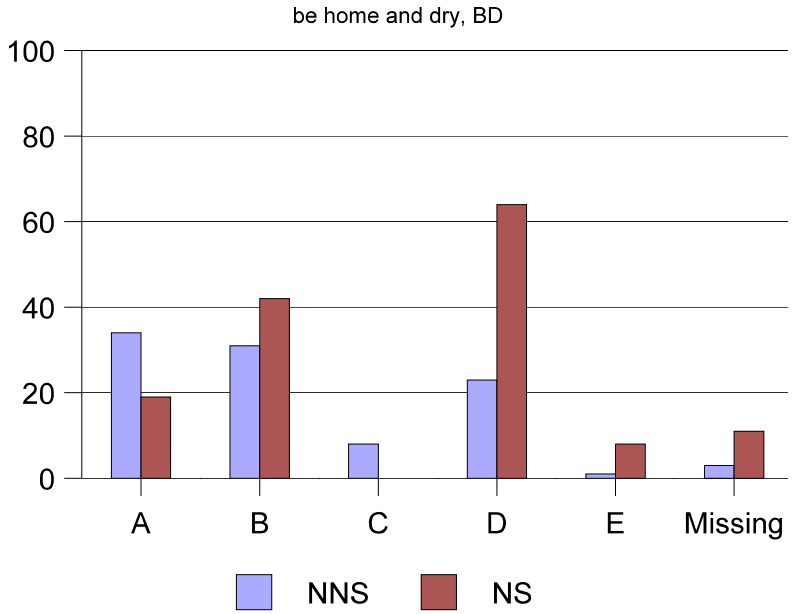

FIGURE 48 be home and dry

a) escape a punishment for a crime
b) achieve one's aims in a negotiation
c) neglect one's responsibilities
d) succeed well in a competition

This is an opaque idiom. Even though knowing the figurative interpretation helps to see the connection to the literal, not even the image of the literal interpretation is enough to reveal the idiom's meaning. It is also frozen except for the Australian English variant *be home and hosed*. According to *Longman*, this idiom is not formal. In Finnish there is an equivalent *tuoda voitto kotiin,* carrying a similar meaning to D and B. However, there is also a false friend, *olla kuivilla, selvitä kuiville*, denoting meaning A, which was the most attractive alternative to the NNSs. Expression's link to the Finnish equivalent remained unnoticed by the majority of NNSs, distinguishing them significantly from the NSs. Even though the dictionaries gave both B and D as possible interpretations, D was by far the NSs' favourite. Interestingly, C was also chosen by nearly 8 % of the Finns, which may indicate their ignorance of the potential connection between an expression's metaphorical and literal meaning.

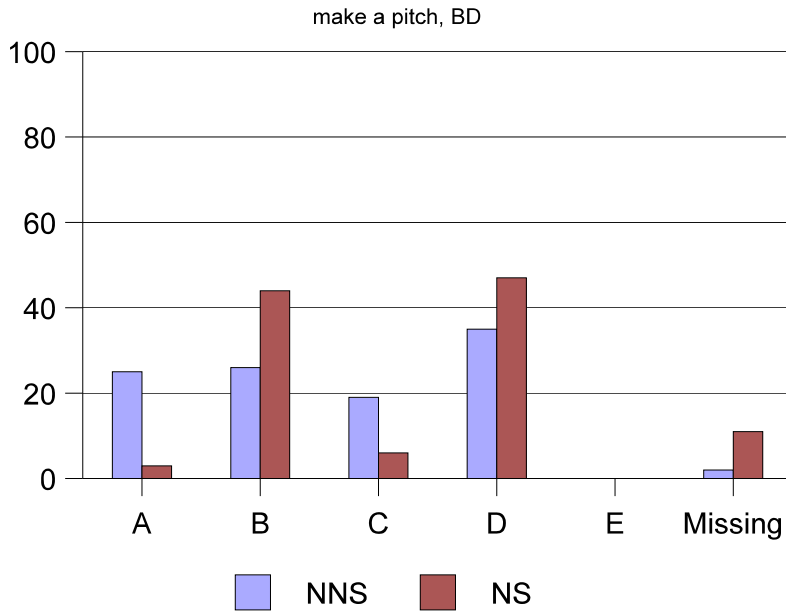

FIGURE 49 make a pitch

a) succeed well in a contest
b) try to obtain something
c) be in a leading position
d) promote something

This idiom is opaque and frozen. The expression is also colloquial, according to *Longman*. There is no equivalent in Finnish. This resulted in the NNSs' divided responses. Except in the case of D, the NNSs differed significantly from the NSs, and even with D, less than 40 % recognised it as a potential interpretation. The the expression was more familiar to the NSs: although not many of them recognised both possible interpretations, they succeeded in recognising at least one of them.

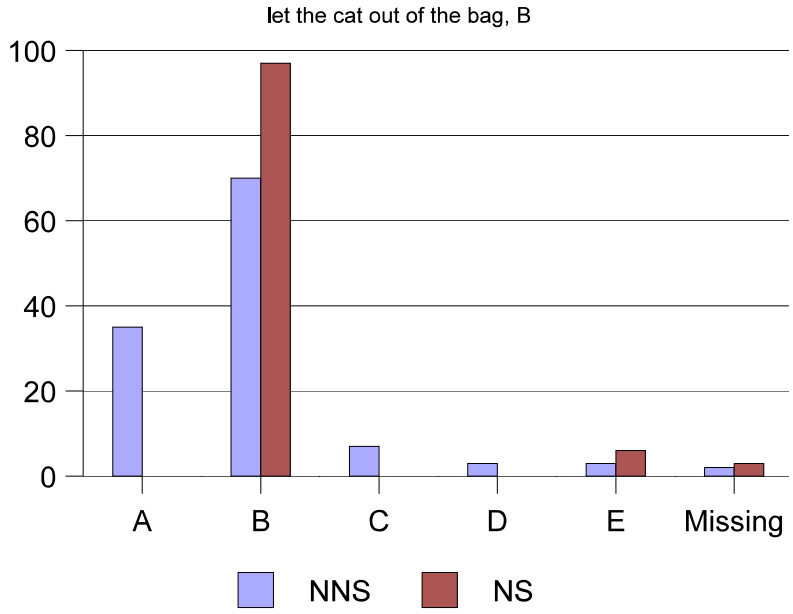

FIGURE 50 let the cat out of the bag

a) solve a problem that has long been bothering one
b) accidentally and unintentionally reveal a secret
c) tell a lie about someone or spread false rumours
d) do a favour to someone to also profit from it oneself

This expression is on the fuzzy border between semi-transparency and opacity, as although knowing its probable etymology[26] does make it look fully transparent, a present day language user can hardly be assumed to be familiar with its origin. Therefore, it has been placed under opaque idioms. The expression is flexible to the extent that it is also possible to say that *cat is out of the bag,* and to inflect the verb. This idiom, is colloquial (*Longman*). There is no equivalent in Finnish. However, there is a false friend, *nostaa kissa pöydälle,* whose meaning is close to A. This may explain the nearly 40 % acceptance among the NNSs of the first alternative. Although over 60 per cent of the NNSs also recognised the intended answer, they still differed from the NSs to a statistically significant degree.

26 Referring to a trick. A cat was put in a bag by someone who would claim that it was a pig and try to sell it to an inexperienced person. Thus, to *let the cat out of the bag* meant to reveal a trick. *(Longman 1992)*

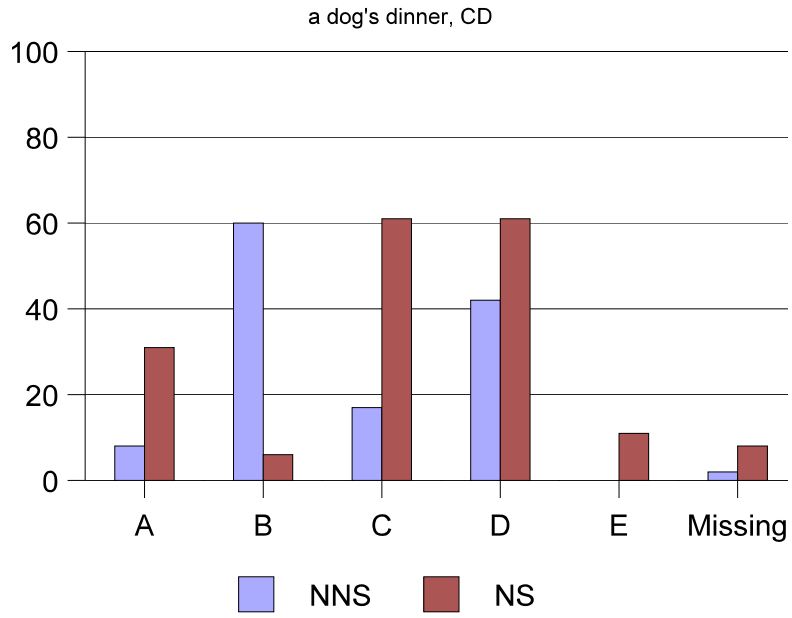

FIGURE 51 a dog's dinner

a) a scruffy-looking homeless person
b) a meal consisting of left-overs
c) work that has been badly done
d) a chaotic and messy situation

With this expression the degree of transparency definitely is in the eye of the beholder. One could assume that dog-lovers view this idiom as completely opaque, whereas a person with no pets might consider it fairly transparent. In this study it has been regarded as opaque. It allows some lexical variation (*a dog's breakfast*), and according to *Longman* and *Oxford*, it is colloquial and informal. It does not have a Finnish equivalent. This led the non-native speakers to choose the only literal alternative, B. Of the two intended answers, they favoured D, but still differed from the native speakers. It was interesting that over 30 % of the NSs thought A a likely interpretation, although it is not mentioned in the dictionaries, and there were also a number of missing answers and respondents' own explanations. While the majority of the NSs accepted the alternatives given by the dictionaries, they did not do so unanimously.

8.4 Summary of the results

8.4.1 Meeting the aims of the questionnaire

The subjects' performance reveals a great deal, firstly, about the nature of idioms and the multiplicity and variety of their meanings and interpretations. The results make it clear that idioms are even more ambiguous than is usually claimed. Secondly, the informants' responses show noticeable differences between native and non-native speakers in the recognition and interpretation of idioms. Whereas native speakers more often than not were familiar with the expressions and could concentrate on the potential contexts and nuances in the meaning, non-native speakers relied on their mother tongue, using a peculiar strategy of picking one word in the original idiom, and then finding a metaphorical expression in Finnish containing that same word. Thus, they used the literal meaning to create a new metaphor. Thirdly, comparison between the two groups indicated differences in the respondents' attitudes towards unfamiliar idioms and how to approach them: whether or not to try to work out their meaning.

In Part I all the given interpretation alternatives were possible, according to the dictionaries. What is particularly striking is the native speakers' disagreement over the acceptability of the given alternatives, which strengthens the idea that idioms are very complex and that even the native speakers' understanding of them vary. Dictionaries seem to be an insufficient aid for non-native speakers.

Part II was assumed to reveal differences between the different contexts and the suitability of using idioms in them. Even though there were only twenty idioms in this section, it was possible that there would be some sort of differences depending on the idioms themselves, not just the contexts. However, the results showed the differences occuriing between contexts, which confirms that idioms indeed are perceived as informal. There were also individual differences between participants, which would suggest that idioms might be something in a person's idiolect rather than in language users' general usage.

Part III with its correct-false alternatives offered numerous points to look at. Even though the difference between the two informant groups was not a major issue, the difference is notable. As for intra-group investigation, with the non-native speakers the years spent on English studies were assumed to have an effect, as well as the experience of staying in an English-speaking environment. The informants shared much the same background and therefore it would have been impossible to try to explain the differences in their idiom interpretation by, for instance, their English language contacts or habits. Nevertheless, since the emphasis of this paper is on the idioms themselves rather than on their users, the homogeneity of the informants' experience is an asset rather than a handicap.

Part III in particular was intended to show up possible differences in the recognition of idioms depending on their characteristics. In addition to the most significant feature of idioms, transparency, also frequency, tolerance of variation, and the relationship to the Finnish equivalent were observed. It would have been possible to choose a difefrent set of characteristics, or to prioritise some other feature than transparency. Nonetheless, transparency, or the degree of metaphoricity, is the decisive characteristic of an idiom, according to the definition adopted in this thesi,. Yet, language users do not always know how to take advantage of figurativeness, especially in foreign languages. Thus it was intriguing to see not only how transparency was related to other idiom characteristics, but also whether it affected the informants' performance. In addition to the recognition of idioms, it was also useful to consider the distractors the informants were led astray by. Choosing a false alternative is perhaps even more revealing than recognising the correct one, as the distractors give some indication of the subjects' ideas of idioms and their perception and awareness of the figurative nature of expressions as well as of their views on the relationship between English and Finnish vocabulary.

Perhaps more significant in Part III, however, was the attempt to approach idioms using a somewhat different categorisation from that usually adopted for idioms. The original idea was to follow Chitra Fernando's classification, since although she has adopted quite a broad definition of an idiom, hers is the first in idiom studies to take more than one characteristic of idioms into account. That is essential if the goal is to investigate idioms manysidedly. However, it was soon discovered that Fernando's categorisation system, based on lexicogrammatical structure and figurativeness, was still quite rigid. It was sometimes highly problematic, or even impossible to decide into what category an idiom should fall. Strict categories do not allow the fuzzy lines which are unavoidable with idioms. Therefore, categorisation was abandoned in favour of continuum charts that try to acknowledge the fact that idioms overlap in their classes.

8.4.2 Characteristics of idioms and their recognisability

The following tables illustrate the effect of various characteristics on the recognition and interpretation of idioms within each group. As transparency is one of the most important features of idioms, and the one that might assist language users, whether native or non-native, to deduce the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom, other characteristics have been looked at in connection with transparency. The tables show the percentage of participants who recognised at least one of the alternative meanings suggested by the dictionaries.

TABLE 2 The recognition percentage of dictionary-based alternatives by non-native speakers

Finnish form	TRANSPARENT	SEMI-TRANSPARENT	OPAQUE
TRANSLATION	93.1 95.1 97.2	46.5 71.5 75.3	57.3 16.0 31.3 34.4
EQUIVALENT WITH A DIFFERENT WORDING	88.2 26.0 72.2 47.6	77.8 36.8 53.8 94.4 25.3	50.7 28.8 50.0 97.9 45.8 25.7 68.8 4.9 61.8
NONE	96.5 73.6 72.2	55.6 41.7 66.7 44.8 10.4	42.8 31.6 38.9 13.2 30.6 51.4 36.1 70.1 72.2

TABLE 3 The recognition percentage of dictionary-based alternatives by non-native speakers

Frequency	TRANSPARENT	SEMI-TRANSPARENT	OPAQUE
FREQUENT	93.1 95.1 97.2	53.8 41.7 28.8 77.8 94.4 55.6 50.0	68.8 61.8 25.7 45.8 38.9
FAIRLY FREQUENT	26.0 72.2 36.8 46.5	31.3 57.3 75.3	34.4 16.0 42.8 13.2 97.9 36.1 31.6 30.6
RARISH	96.5 73.6 72.2 88.2 47.6	66.7 50.7 44.8 4.9 51.4 25.3 71.5 10.4	29.5 70.1

TABLE 4 The recognition percentage of dictionary-based alternatives by non-native speakers

	TRANSPARENT	SEMI-TRANSPARENT	OPAQUE
Variation			
LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL (incl. word order. number. passivisation. change of the word class)	93.1 97.2	72.2 25.3 50.0 28.8 75.3 4.9	45.8 13.2
EITHER OR	26.0 95.1 46.5 47.6	77.8 72.2 53.8 71.5 41.7 55.6	10.4 51.4 70.1 42.8 68.8 29.5 25.7 31.6 30.6 31.3 38.9
NONE (except for variation in aspect and/or tense which have been excluded)	96.5 88.2 73.6	44.8 36.8 66.7 94.4	57.3 50.7 34.4 97.9 36.1 16.0 61.8

TABLE 5 The recognition percentage of dictionary-based alternatives by native speakers

	TRANSPARENT			SEMI-TRANSPARENT				OPAQUE			
Frequency											
FREQUENT	88.9	94.4		48.6	94.4	70.1		94.4	100	62.5	
	100		36.5		20.1	97.2	86.1		18.0		97.2
FAIRLY FREQUENT		55.6			94.4						
			50.0		80.6	50.0	58.3	11.1			
				69.4		69.4			35.2	13.9	
							97.2		16.7	52.8	45.8
RARISH	88.9	94.4	83.3	100		55.6		61.1			
	100		58.3		34.7	55.6	62.5				
				45.8	58.3		38.9		97.2		

TABLE 6 The recognition percentage of dictionary-based alternatives by native speakers

Variation	TRANSPARENT	SEMI-TRANSPARENT	OPAQUE
LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL (incl. word order. number. passivisation. change of the word class)	88.9 100 55.6 36.5 94.4 83.3 58.3	45.8 48.6 69.4 55.6 58.3 94.4 97.2	86.1 70.1 94.4 69.4 38.9 62.5 97.2 80.6	18.0 13.9 94.4 35.2 61.1 52.8 45.8 97.2
EITHER OR				
NONE (except for variation in aspect and/or tense which have been excluded)	88.9 100 94.4	34.7 50.0 100 20.1	50.0 55.6 58.3 11.1	97.2 16.7 100

8.4.2.1 Transparency

As has been discussed above, categorising idioms according to their characteristics is a complex task. The category boundaries blur and overlap, and there are so many features defining idioms that taking all of them simultaneously into account is impossible. Also, assessing the features of idioms is bound to be subjective. However, the characteristics of idioms cannot be ignored, as previous studies have shown their effect on recognition and also on production. As transparency is the feature that is most likely to offer help in deciding the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom, other features have been combined with transparency in order to see their effect on idiom recognition. Together with transparency, frequency and variation have been taken account of, as well as the relationship to equivalent Finnish expressions in the case of the non-native speakers.

It should be borne in mind that the correctness of the model answer is not definite: being based on different English-English dictionaries it attempted to cover a fair number of possible alternative interpretations. It would be unrealistic to assume that even a native speaker would be familiar with all the interpretations, or that the dictionaries would be omniscient. However, it was somewhat surprising to note that several dictionary alternatives were unrecognised even by the native speakers. This, together with the fact that in sixteen out of the 45 cases over a tenth of the native speakers chose a distractor rather than or in addition to the 'correct' answer, perhaps indicates that idioms or their meanings are not necessarily very familiar even to native speakers. It also illustrates the versatility of idioms and their potential interpretations. A language user, native or non-native, may recognise one meaning without necessarily knowing all of them. All things considered, it is more apt to speak about appropriate answers rather than correct ones.

As can be seen in the tendencies suggested by figures above, transparency was of assistance at least to the non-native speakers. The recognition percentages towards the transparent end of the continuum tend to be higher than at the opaque end. The native speakers, on the other, did not much benefit from transparency: there are no substantial differences in percentages along the horizontal axis.

8.4.2.2 Relationship to Finnish

The resemblance of idioms to mother tongue expressions was essential in analysing the non-native speakers' responses. In the light of earlier studies on English idioms and NNSs, it was assumed that idioms that had a direct translation equivalent in the informants' native language, would be the easiest to understand, and that conversely those that had no equivalent or a totally different equivalent in their mother tongue, would pose the biggest problems. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the informants were advanced level speakers and students of language at university. Therefore it

could also be assumed that they were familiar with the concept of false friends, and might reject correct alternatives if they were too close to their mother tongue (cf. Sjöholm 1999, 144).

Deciding on the relationship between the Finnish and English equivalents is not unproblematic either. There are individual differences in how people perceive the relationship, and also there are differences in (Finnish) idioms familiar to language users. An idiom may also be similar in form but slightly different in meaning or tone, making it not always straightforward whether they should be treated as equivalents or two totally different idioms. Although five adult native speakers assessed the equivalence of the expressions, that is not to say that the solution reached here is the only possible one. As has been mentioned above, an idiom can either have a direct translation equivalent, an indirect translation equivalent (for instance, carrying a similar idea and image, only in slightly different words, e.g. *smell a rat/haistaa palaneen käryä* -smell that something is burning), or an equivalent totally different in form (perhaps not even an idiom in the other language but just a single word), but similar in meaning.

The impact of Finnish equivalents was noticeable: transparent translation equivalents were familiar to the informants and they agreed with the dictionary meanings fairly often. Idioms with no equivalent at all in Finnish, particularly opaque ones were, as could be assumed, the most difficult. This is in accordance with previous idiom studies. It is intriguing to note that some transparent idioms that have a different looking equivalent in Finnish were also problematic. This may have been due to informants' inability to recognise them as equivalents.

8.4.2.3 Frequency and flexibility

In addition to transparency and mother tongue equivalents, frequency has been mentioned as a potential characteristic affecting the recognition of idioms and a potential basis for teaching them. Arnaud & Savignon (1997) recommended that since transparent and equivalent expressions are easy for non-native speakers, teaching ought to concentrate on opaque and rare expressions. However, in this questionnaire, frequency did not seem to have a large effect on the non-native speakers. It is true that there were rarer expressions that had their origins in some special language and were troublesome also to native speakers. Nevertheless, idioms representing different frequency bands in *Cobuild* produced no differences in non-native speaker responses. This may well be due to the often-mentioned fact that even the most frequent idioms are infrequent when compared to frequent words.

However, frequency might be a more significant factor among native speakers than among non-native speakers due to more exposure to language. The figures above suggest that most frequent idioms, even if they were opaque, were well recognised by native speakers. With rarer idioms, however, transparency seemed to assist native speakers and they recognised the meanings given by the dictionaries fairly easily. It might be that more frequent

idioms are simply those that occur in such contexts and so often that native speakers agree on their meanings.

As has been seen, idioms more often than not tolerate grammatical or lexical changes. The effect of transformations is two-fold: on one hand, tolerating transformations adds to the frequency of an idiom. On the other hand, transformations may alter the expression's appearance fairly radically, thus making it more difficult to recognise. This is the case particularly with lexical alterations, as grammatical changes seldom are radical enough to significantly alter the appearance of an expression. However, transformability did not seem to affect the recognisability of expressions, perhaps because of this controversial effect transformations may have on an idiom.

8.4.3 Strategies chosen by participants

In the light of the results of this study, it seems that non-native speakers had three main strategies when deciding on the meaning of an idiom. The Finnish language was the first aid on which they frequently relied. In some cases the route was easy to follow as there was a direct translation equivalent in Finnish - in some cases a false friend, though. However, even when there was no equivalent referring to the whole expression in English, non-native speakers regarded it as sufficient if a figurative expression in Finnish shared one word with the English one. The distractors that had been created with close Finnish expressions in mind, seemed alluring to non-native speakers.

The second most popular strategy among non-native speakers seemed to be looking for links to literal interpretations. If the given meaning alternatives included a fairly literal option, NNSs, in spite of knowing the questionnaire was about idioms, chose that one. This might suggest that they were indeed aware of the nature of idioms and the links between their literal and figurative meanings. However, if so, they were not capable of extending their knowledge to interpreting idioms figuratively but rather remained on the literal level.

Thirdly, if Finnish provided no help and if there was no literal interpretation among the alternatives, non-native speakers seemed to believe in the power of educated guesswork. This showed when answers diverged among the group. Transparency, when conjoined with Finnish seemed to assist the participants, was not enough to help on its own.

Several studies have shown that adult native speakers and more advanced non-native speakers tend to associate words through paradigmatic links, for example, synonyms or co-ordinates. Less proficient NNSs as well as NS children, however, are more inclined to rely on phonological associations. On the other hand, less frequent words alter NS associations: the less frequent the word, the more even adult NSs turn to phonological associations. Similarly, advanced NNSs associate rare words with words bearing phonological resemblance. (see e.g. Wolter 2001, pp. 41-45). This tendency might partly explain the choices made all the participants; after all, there were idioms such as *bring home* or *pull faces* that had figurative expressions close in appearance in English and might have been linked to them and their meanings.

The most popular NS strategy for unfamiliar idioms seemed to be skipping them, as very often those that divided opinions among the NSs, also produced a larger percentage of missing answers. It seems that they were not willing to try to work out the meaning on the basis of the literal meaning, or to guess. In contrast, the NNSs did not hesitate to choose between the given alternatives, or even to write their own interpretations. It is not proposed that this is because they had better control of English idioms than native speakers, but that they were readier to lean on logic or guesswork to produce an answer, perhaps because they completed the questionnaire in university settings.

Even though it was expected that the respondents would favour different alternatives and interpret idioms differently, it was still somewhat surprising to see how consistent the differences were. It was to be expected that native speakers would outscore non-native speakers, and I agree with Howarth (1996, 192) that "it is dangerous to transfer conclusions directly from native to non-native performance". Even though the NNS informants were advanced students who at least at university have to use English almost daily, and who watch numerous American and British films and TV series (as their replies in the background questionnaire show), idioms still belong to such a specialised area of language knowledge that only natives and near-natives can possess. Based on this study, it is impossible to tell whether the differences between the two groups were the result of discrepancies in metaphor processing or due to familiarity with idioms in a particular context. It has been suggested that the controversy on how idioms are processed by contrast with literal expressions, may be due to individual differences rather than differences caused by idioms and metaphorical language in general (Blasko, 1999).

In the interpretation of the results of the idiom questionnaire it should be borne in mind that the aims were manifold: not only todiscover at how many idioms the informants knew, but also, more importantly, what kind of idioms were known or unknown, and what sort of means the informants resorted to on coming across unfamiliar idioms. Even though the informants were not specifically asked how they had drawn their conclusions, the different distractor types give clues about the informants' reasoning. It was also interesting to see how differently native speakers in particular interpreted idioms and their characteristics (formality, appropriateness in written/spoken language etc.), considering the disparities between the definitions and explanations in different dictionaries of idioms.

8.4.4 Evaluation

In every study, there is bound to be room for improvement. In this study, too, some sections did not work out quite according to plan or expectations. The idiom questionnaire had its problems. First of all, the selection of idioms is only as representative as the main source used, *Collins Cobuild* dictionary. Idioms seem to be very much a characteristic of individual idiolects, and even the most frequent idioms are not close to the frequency of most frequent single words. However, although Moon (1998, 7), for instance, stresses that a corpus is only as

representative as its sources, of the existing idiom lists a frequency-based dictionary still offered the most reliable source for the idioms in the questionnaire.

Also, the unfamiliarity of idioms and their characteristics posed problems particularly for the non-native informants. Presenting the idioms without a context did not ease their task, quite the reverse. As has been discussed above, the NNSs frequently commented on idioms being unfamiliar to them even as a concept, let alone when it came to the meaning of specific idioms in English. According to the informants, idioms had not received attention in formal language teaching, and thestudents' experience of language acquisition in a natural environment was limited. However, it should be borne in mind that the aim of the questionnaire was not just to measure the NNSs' knowledge of idioms but with the assistance of various distractor types to investigate what sort of means they relied upon when working out the meanings of idioms. The difficulty of the questionnaire only guaranteed that the informants, at least the non-native speakers, were compelled to take advantage of other methods to work out the meanings of the idioms in addition to scanning their lexical resources.

Of the three different sections, Part II was undoubtedly the most difficult for both the native and non-native informants. In the end it did not reveal what it was hoped it would reveal, i.e., the differences in formality of certain idioms and the situations in which they could be appropriately used. Nevertheless, Part II did illustrate the informants' conceptions of idiom usage and level of formality in general. It might have been more fruitful to examine the differences in degrees of formality and idioms' appropriateness to certain situations in the reverse order of what was done in Part II. Instead of listing idioms and asking the informants to assess their formality, perhaps simply defining the situations and using a close test to find the most appropriate idioms to be used in those situations would have produced more useful results.

Part I was also more difficult for non-native speakers than Part III: there were more negative comments from the informants, and more blank answers than in Part III. In retrospect, it is laborious to try to rank various interpretations according to their 'correctness', even in one's mother tongue, let alone in a foreign language. Part I, however, did show differences in interpretations, and was also a valuable tool when regarding the relationship between the different dictionaries and their definitions, presumably the primary source of information for non-native speakers.

Part III was not without problems either. A multiple-choice questionnaire as a form has its limitations. Another way to investigate the recognition of idioms would have been an explanation questionnaire. That might have encouraged the informants to use their imagination more freely when they encountered an unfamiliar expression. However, since the multiple-choice questionnaire itself required a considerable effort from the non-native speakers, and the blank spaces reserved for the informants' own additional alternative meanings more often than not remained blank, a multiple-choice format did serve its purpose and made the questionnaire tolerable for the non-native

speakers. An explanation task would have been even more difficult, possibly even too demanding. With native speakers, for their part, a multiple choice questionnaire probably covered more possible alternative interpretations than an open explanation questionnaire.

Finally, a few words on the exclusion of context. Even though the decision was justifiable and the grounds for it were reasonable, it would also have been interesting to see what sort of differences context might have made to interpretations. It can be assumed that context would have limited the range of potential interpretations, but on the other hand it might have assisted in distinguishing interpretations that were definitely incorrect. As was mentioned above, context might also have lured the informants into wrong tracks, and this would have been a particularly interesting subject for investigation. This offers a point of further investigation, that is, the advantages and disadvantages of context in working out the meaning of unfamiliar idioms.

In the analysis of the results of the questionnaire, certain problems also arose. Categorisation of the idioms proved to be complicated, and the division performed in this study is not beyond dispute. Albeit the classification of idioms according to their characteristics could have been carried out in a different manner and on a different basis, the principle adopted here was considered to serve best the purpose of this study. Meanwhile, slthough a certain amount of subjectivism was unavoidable, the assessment of idioms' characteristics and their classification was carried out systematically.

9 CONCLUSION

It has long been widely accepted that the world of idioms is very complex, and this study adds some elements to this complexity. Metaphorical language as such is sometimes difficult to recognise, as the roots of metaphoricity may be hard to detect and are to some extent language- and culture-bound. Just as language in general, figurative language changes all the time, and what may, at one time, have been a logical connection between literal and metaphorical worlds, seems irrational and arbitrary to today's language user. Also, just as language users have different definitions for literal words and expressions, they also have different ideas of what figurative expressions denote. Figurative expressions may vary in their form, and an expression may carry several meanings. This does not help to make them less difficult for language learners. This study has attempted to shed some light on the complex characteristics of idioms, and their effect on language users' interpretations. As there are numerous elements that make up an idiom, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the different features of idioms. This study has sought to find answers as to how various features affect native and non-native speakers' recognition and interpretation of idioms. Also, native and non-native speakers' responses were analysed to see what sort of differences there were between and within the two respondent groups with respect to different idioms and different contexts. The results showed that idioms are perhaps even more complex a field than was earlier thought. Language users' ideas about idioms and their meanings are fairly divergent, and language users are not necessarily aware of their figurative essence. Thus, they are not able to take advantage of the link between figurative and literal meanings when trying to comprehend unfamiliar idioms. Therefore, instead of discussing what (sort of) idioms to teach to non-native speakers, it is more worthwhile to ponder *what to teach about idioms*, and what sort of knowledge of idioms is necessary or most useful for non-native speakers.

9.1 Native vs. non-native speakers of English

As was seen above, non-native speakers differed from native speakers to a considerable degree in their interpretation of idioms. Native speakers more often than not recognised the meanings offered by the dictionaries, which was not surprising bearing in mind the relative infrequency of idioms compared to single words. The native speakers as a group also agreed to a greater extent on meanings than did the non-native speakers. There were few instances where the non-native speakers were quite unanimous, and this was often about idioms that had a direct translation equivalent in their own native language. When it came to formality of idioms and appropriate contexts, the non-native speakers expressed more liberal views than the native respondents. Idioms are often referred to as pertaining to informal, spoken language, even though they are also used in, for example, newspaper articles. However, the non-native speakers extended their use to even more formal contexts, such as academic essays, where it is not advisable to use idioms even in the respondents' own English department. This might indicate that the non-native respondents confused the concepts of an idiom and idiomatic language, and treated idioms just as any instance of idiomatic language use. Since students of English often wish to be, not just experts on the English language but also proficient in it, idiomatic language as such is something they aspire to. However, the results also show that their knowledge of idioms was somewhat lacking and they did not manage to distinguish idioms from other examples of idiomatic language. As for the non-native speakers, figurativeness was left in the shadow of idiomaticity.

9.2 The effect of the characteristics of idioms

The characteristics of idioms did not in fact seem to make much difference to their recognition or interpretation. However, some tendencies were evident with respect to idiom characteristics in both respondent groups, which again differed from each other. Frequency seemed to affect in such a way that native speakers were more prone to agree on the meanings of more frequent idioms whereas their interpretations of less frequent idioms were more diverse and differed from the dictionaries too. However, the non-native respondents had problems even with more frequent idioms. This again implies that they were not familiar with the expressions, nor did they possess enough knowledge of idioms' characteristics in order to be able to determine their meanings using the clues the idioms themselves had to offer. Rather, they tended to rely on their mother tongue, Finnish, and its idioms that shared one or more words with the English expression. Considering the respondents were advanced level university students of English, who can be claimed to be fairly familiar with

languages and their features in general, including word-formation, this strategy was somewhat surprising and strengthens the idea that their understanding of idioms was not as developed as it could have been. It might have been expected that they would have attempted to work out the meaning of an unfamiliar idiom by linking literal and figurative meanings. Yet, they seldom did this which suggests that idioms as metaphorical language, and as an entity were a difficult phenomenon for them. They seemed to consider idioms in terms of their separate words, rather than as entities. Their chosen strategy worked well for idioms that had a direct translation equivalent in Finnish, which is in accordance with previous idioms studies. Other idioms in the study, however, posed bigger problems. The features of frequency, transparency and flexibility did not seem to play an equally significant role for the non-native speakers as their native language. Even though transparency could have helped considerably, and it did help somewhat, its effect was not as great as that of the Finnish language. Frequency did not make any difference with the non-native speakers which was somewhat surprising, as with the availability of computer corpora and the dictionaries based on them, frequency counts have been emphasised in vocabulary studies. However, since idioms in general are fairly infrequent compared to most frequent single literal expressions, this probably explains the small role frequency played among the non-native speakers. Even flexibility, which increases frequency as there are more possible forms in which an idiom may appear, did not contribute to the non-native speakers' successful interpretations.

However, when one considers how many meanings one idiom can carry, and how often native speakers disagree on their meanings, it is not perhaps that surprising that non-native speakers had problems determining figurative meanings. Even though dictionaries and existing idiom studies imply that an idiom has one or more meanings that language users agree upon, this appeared not to be the case. Although the sample in this questionnaire was fairly small, native speakers managed to disagree over the meanings of idioms. Furthermore, they disagreed with the dictionaries, which was most noticeable in the results of Part I of the questionnaire. The dictionaries gave all the alternative interpretations as equal, yet the native speakers rejected a number of them and usually found one or two more acceptable interpretations. Since non-native speakers have dictionaries to rely on, and dictionaries are based on extensive corpora and undergo careful editing, it could have been expected that all or nearly all the meanings given by them would have been accepted by native speakers.

As for the dictionaries, even though they are bound to have limitations due to space, and cannot contain all possible expressions or interpretations, they still leave something to hope for. The two Finnish-English idiom dictionaries there are, exploit figurative language and the images idioms create, and one of them also makes a point of the differences between the idioms in the two languages and gives equivalent idioms consistently in a very engaging manner. Nevertheless, both dictionaries are very scarce and, most importantly, they do not reveal on what grounds the idioms have been chosen. In addition, they do

not mention the possibility of syntactic or lexical changes, nor do they give multiple meanings for any of the idioms, or give any guidance as to their usage. It is true that a dictionary's primary task is not to teach language use, but surely there could have been space devoted in the foreword to the register and the restricted contexts and situations in which to use idioms.

9.3 Idioms in second language teaching

Rather than teaching non-native speakers idioms as such, and encouraging them to use idioms themselves in a foreign language as has been the prevailing idea in vocabulary studies, I think it is more recommendable to guide them as to how to recognise an idiom in a text and how to approach and interpret unfamiliar idioms. There are very few, if any, idioms that would be necessary for non-native speaker production (Yorio 1980, 438). However, recognising and understanding idioms is necessary even for a non-native speaker. Since idioms themselves offer tools for comprehension, language learners should be made aware of them and their nature, and learn how to use them. There were few instances even in this study where respondents attempted to create a link between figurative and literal meanings, showing some awareness of idiom characteristics. Such a general awareness ought to be encouraged and enhanced. Since the number of idioms is so vast, choosing the ones worth teaching or learning seems impossible. It does not seem that the relationship of idioms to mother tongue equivalents should determine which idioms to teach. Since expressions that have a direct translation equivalent in the learners' native language can be quite effortlessly understood (Irujo 1986a, 1986b), they may not be the most valuable ones to teach. Similarly, teaching opaque expressions (Arnaud and Savignon 1997) is not the most fruitful approach if the students do not know how to take advantage of more transparent expressions' transparency. Therefore, it is more useful to familiarise students with idiom characteristics and thereby provide them with tools to unlock and understand them. The recent Finnish-English idiom dictionaries have already taken a step in this direction as they take advantage of figurativeness and use pictures in their explanations, reflecting the very nature of idioms.

When it comes to using idioms, however, a non-native would be well advised to be very careful. False friends are numerous and even an advanced language user easily falls into the trap of using a 'wrong' idiom. Even though it might be tempting to use an expression that appears to be like a direct translation equivalent, even a proficient non-native language user has problems in distinguishing false friends from true ones. Similarly, since idioms' contexts and registers are restricted, non-native speakers should be cautious when attempting to use an idiom in a foreign language. Idioms appear in a more limited range of contexts than some other instances of idiomatic language.

Finally, it is important to distinguish idioms from other idiomatic expressions. Non-native speakers should of course be able to use, for example,

conversational phrases, phrasal verbs, greetings, collocations, etc. Figurative language, however, is another mater. There are enough literal expressions to learn in a language and even though it is important to be able to comprehend figurative language, its use might best be left to native speakers or to those second language learners who can boast native-like proficiency. It is more important, and demanding enough, to learn to recognise figurative expressions in language and to understand them.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire
PART I
Please read the idioms and consider how appropriately the given alternatives describe the meanings of the idioms as you would interpret them. You should think of all potential contexts in which the idioms may appear. Estimate each alternative on a scale of 1-5,

1= not at all acceptable meaning
2= marginally acceptable
3= acceptable
4= quite acceptable
5= completely acceptable

Mark your opinion after each alternative by circling the appropriate number. If you think that some meaning is missing or would like to reformulate the given alternatives, please write your comment on line e).

	not at all	marginally acceptable		quite	completely
1. look someone in the eye					
a) look at someone directly without showing any emotions	1	2	3	4	5
b) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth	1	2	3	4	5
c) look at someone directly to convince them that you are telling the truth when in fact you are lying	1	2	3	4	5
d) look at someone directly although you would rather avoid their eyes	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
2. find your feet					
a) gain experience and more confidence in a new situation or new surroundings	1	2	3	4	5
b) discover and make use of one's abilities	1	2	3	4	5
c) achieve a settled outlook and purpose in life	1	2	3	4	5
d) become able to act by oneself independently	1	2	3	4	5
e) _____					
3. sit on the fence					
a) not being able to make up one's mind					
b) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups because that might harm one's own position	1	2	3	4	5
c) not making any choice between two possibilities or opposing groups in order to delay an on-going process	1	2	3	4	5
d) not telling one's opinion in order not to take sides	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____	1	2	3	4	5

	not at all	marginally acceptable		quite	completely
4. have a field day					
a) enjoy oneself by doing something one gets great pleasure from	1	2	3	4	5
b) participate in some special occasion	1	2	3	4	5
c) take advantage of the prevailing situation that is profitable for others, too	1	2	3	4	5
d) take advantage of a situation that is difficult or upsetting for other people	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
5. fly the flag					
a) state one's opinions clearly	1	2	3	4	5
b) openly support someone (e.g. person, country, party, movement)	1	2	3	4	5
c) represent a group or a country at some special occasion, e.g. sports event	1	2	3	4	5
d) be present at a meeting or an event only to show others that one has attended	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
6. open the floodgates					
a) allow free expression of emotions, criticisms, or activities that have been prevented	1	2	3	4	5
b) release a great force of destruction or rebellion previously held under control	1	2	3	4	5
c) cause many people do a particular thing they have not been able to do previously	1	2	3	4	5
d)incite people to rebellious action	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
7. have a go at someone/something					
a) criticize someone strongly without a good reason	1	2	3	4	5
b) attack someone physically	1	2	3	4	5
c) use or try something after someone else has done it first	1	2	3	4	5
d) try to stop a criminal from doing or escaping from a crime	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					

	not at all	marginally	acceptable	quite	completely
8. go out on a limb					
a) not being afraid of taking risks	1	2	3	4	5
b) be put in a position of weakness without any support or help	1	2	3	4	5
c) be put in a risky position separate from other people	1	2	3	4	5
d) intentionally do something risky which puts you in a position of weakness	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
9. go against the grain					
a) be against natural tendency or general custom	1	2	3	4	5
b) conflicting with one's own ideas and principles and thus difficult to accept	1	2	3	4	5
c) intentionally do something disapproved of	1	2	3	4	5
d) unintentionally do something disapproved of	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
10. drag your feet					
a) move or act slowly because one has a lack of interest or eagerness	1	2	3	4	5
b) refuse to do something because it would be too laborious	1	2	3	4	5
c) delay making a decision important to others in order to cause them trouble	1	2	3	4	5
d) delay making a decision important to others just to annoy them	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
11. get your hands on					
a) get hold of something	1	2	3	4	5
b) reach or obtain something one has desired for a long time, or needs badly	1	2	3	4	5
c) violently seize something or someone	1	2	3	4	5
d) catch and punish someone who has done something wrong	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					

	not at all		marginally acceptable		completely
12. bring something to its knees/ bring someone to his/her knees					
a) destroy someone or something to make them humble	1	2	3	4	5
b)destroy someone or something to teach them a lesson	1	2	3	4	5
c) destroy someone or something to see them ruined	1	2	3	4	5
d) cause someone or something to be in a weak condition without any particular intentions	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
13. put the lid on something					
a) put an end to an activity or someone's hopes	1	2	3	4	5
b) keep something a secret	1	2	3	4	5
c) hide a true nature of a problem	1	2	3	4	5
d) control and stop a problem becoming worse	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
14. flex your muscles					
a) test one's abilities on an unimportant task in order to prepare for the future	1	2	3	4	5
b) behave in a way intended to show one's power for others as a warning	1	2	3	4	5
c) display one's power for self-gratification	1	2	3	4	5
d) show off one's muscles before doing something to attract attention	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
15. pick up the pieces					
a) put matters back into their usual good order after some bad, unexpected event	1	2	3	4	5
b) after something bad has happened, do what one can to get the situation back to normal, but not necessarily succeeding	1	2	3	4	5
c) after something bad has happened, make a fresh start	1	2	3	4	5
d) after a fight or a quarrel, try to promote reconciliation	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					

	not at all	marginally	acceptable	quite	completely
16. sit tight					
a) refuse to change one's opinions or principles	1	2	3	4	5
b) refuse to allow events influence oneself	1	2	3	4	5
c) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order not to make any mistakes	1	2	3	4	5
d) wait before taking any action to see how the situation develops in order to achieve what one wants	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
17. make waves					
a) spoil or unsettle a comfortable situation	1	2	3	4	5
b) cause trouble or anxiety	1	2	3	4	5
c) change things, or challenge the way things are done	1	2	3	4	5
d) make things better or more exciting	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
18. blow the whistle on someone					
a) put an end to something one disapproves of	1	2	3	4	5
b) tell authorities about someone's illegal activities	1	2	3	4	5
c) put an end to someone's actions just to cause them trouble	1	2	3	4	5
d) put an end to a quarrel by acting as a mediator	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					
19. make a clean sweep					
a) win something very easily, or win a series of victories	1	2	3	4	5
b) cause a complete change by getting rid of unwanted persons or things	1	2	3	4	5
c) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to make the organization more efficient	1	2	3	4	5
d) be new in a position of authority and make a lot changes in the staff to show off one's power	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					

20. beat your breast	**not at all**		**marginally acceptable**	**quite**	**completely**
a) be very angry or distressed about something that has gone wrong or is unfair	1	2	3	4	5
b) publicly show anger or regret about an unfair situation only to draw attention to oneself and not being sincere	1	2	3	4	5
c) sincerely express guilt for something one has done	1	2	3	4	5
d) pretend to feel guilt for something one has done in order to be forgiven, not being sincere in one's remorse	1	2	3	4	5
e)_____					

PART II
Non-natives
Now please consider how appropriate the idioms given below would be in the five alternative contexts or situations which may represent different levels of formality. Estimate each context alternative on a scale of 1-5,
1= not at all appropriate in this context
2= marginally appropriate
3= appropriate
4= quite appropriate
5= completely appropriate

N.B. Even if you are not familiar with some idiom, please still try to analyse and estimate its potential usage on the given scale. Try not to leave any item unmarked.	talking with a friend	letter to a friend	conversa-tion with an elderly person whom you do not know	job interview or other similar rather formal situation	essay or other course assignme nt
1. look someone in the eye					
2. find your feet					
3. sit on the fence					
4. have a field day					
5. fly the flag					
6. open the floodgates					
7. have a go at someone					
8. go out on a limb					
9. go against the grain					
10. drag your feet					
11. get your hands on					
12. bring something to its knees/ bring someone to his/her knees					
13. put the lid on something					
14. flex your muscles					
15. pick up the pieces					
16. sit tight					
17. make waves					
18. blow the whistle on someone					
19. make a clean sweep					
20. beat your breast					

Natives

Now please consider how appropriate the idioms given below would be in the five alternative contexts or situations which may represent different levels of formality. You should concentrate on your OWN language usage, i.e. would you or would you not use these idioms in given contexts. Estimate each context alternative on a scale of 1-5,

1= I would never use this idiom in this context
2= I might use in this context, but it's quite unlikely
3= I probably would use in this context
4= I would quite likely use in this context
5= I would definitely use in this context

N.B. Even if you are not familiar with some idiom, please still try to analyse and estimate its potential usage on the given scale. Try not to leave any item unmarked.	talking with a friend	letter to a friend	conversa-tion with an elderly person whom you do not know	job interview or other similar rather formal situation	essay or other course assignme nt
1. look someone in the eye					
2. find your feet					
3. sit on the fence					
4. have a field day					
5. fly the flag					
6. open the floodgates					
7. have a go at someone					
8. go out on a limb					
9. go against the grain					
10. drag your feet					
11. get your hands on					
12. bring something to its knees/ bring someone to his/her knees					
13. put the lid on something					
14. flex your muscles					
15. pick up the pieces					
16. sit tight					
17. make waves					
18. blow the whistle on someone					
19. make a clean sweep					
20. beat your breast					

PART III

Please choose from the given alternatives the correct meaning(s) for each expression. You should think of all potential contexts in which the expressions may appear. Note that a set of alternatives may contain more than one (1-4) correct answer. If you think that some meaning is missing from the options, or that the given alternatives need some reformulation, please write your comment on line e).

1. throw off balance
a) lose one's money in unwise investments
b) trip or push someone so that they fall
c) make someone change their opinion
d) suddenly confuse or surprise someone
e) _____

2. pull faces
a) twist one's face to amuse others
b) repeatedly cheat or deceive others
c) show dislike by twisting one's face
d) cause dissatisfaction or annoyance
e) _____

3. on edge
a) successful and in a strong position
b) very nervous and unable to relax
c) always fashionable and trendy
d) in a dangerous or risky situation
e)_____

4. have a chip on your shoulder
a) feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust
b) feel inferior because of your background and education
c) unexpectedly win or inherit a very large sum of money
d) be angry because you think you have been treated unfairly
e) _____

5. across the board
a) being introduced for the first time
b) delegated for other people to do
c) affecting everyone or -thing equally
d) under development and planning
e) _____

6. be in gear
a) constantly change one's mind
b) follow the latest fashion and trends
c) be in excellent working order
d) deal with something effectively
e) _____

7. come to a head
a) reach the most decisive stage
b) thoroughly understand something
c) cease to exist or stop completely
d) suddenly get a new inspiring idea
e)_____-

8. bring home
a) be more successful than others in a particular situation
b) earn enough money to support one's whole family
c) make someone understand the true nature of a situation
d) prove someone guilty of a crime or serious misconduct
e) _____

9. give the green light
a) permit or allow someone to carry out their plans
b) agree with someone's opinions without hesitation
c) make someone realize the true nature of a situation
d) talk about environmental matters and for the nature
e) _____

10. the nooks and crannies
a) small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed
b) whims and oddities in someone's behaviour or character
c) difficulties and obstacles which cause unexpected delay
d) insignificant and quite harmless rumours and gossips
e) _____

11. dip into your pocket
a) win money in pools, or lottery etc.
b) attempt to steal or shoplift something
c) spend more money than one could afford
d) spend or give money on something
e) _____

12. hit the road
a) pioneer a new idea
b) begin a journey
c) ask someone to leave
d) lose one's way
e) _____

13. get into your stride
a) make someone behave as you want them to
b) become accustomed with a new activity
c) learn to do something easily and confidently
d) be looked up and respected by other people
e) _____

14. get the chop
a) be beaten
b) be sacked
c) be killed
d) be shocked
e) _____

15. speak volumes
a) talk in an unnecessary loud voice to gain attention
b) unable to keep anything a secret but eager to gossip
c) reveal a lot about something, even without speaking
d) be very eloquent, and used to and fond of talking
e) _____

16. hedge your bets
a) invest money in several businesses to protect oneself against losses
b) hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides
c) gamble and bet large sums of money regularly in all kinds of games
d) be unwilling and hesitant to invest money in fear of losing it all
e) _____

17. with bated breath
a) expectantly or worried
b) chokingly or painfully
c) cautiously or slowly
d) excitedly or anxiously
e) _____

18. the tip of the iceberg
a) a warning of an approaching, unavoidable danger or problem
b) very impolite and unsympathetic behaviour towards other people
c) part of a very large problem although the rest may not be obvious
d) an uncertain position that is difficult to maintain and take care of
e) _____

19. a lame duck
a) a government or authority with little real power
b) a person in a weak and uncertain position
c) a business company in financial difficulties
d) a speech inappropriate to a particular situation
e) _____

20. vote with your feet
a) have an indifferent attitude towards politics
b) indicate what you want through your actions
c) show contempt or dislike by leaving a place
d) support someone by standing by their side
e) _____

21. ahead of the game
a) prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation
b) ridiculing and criticizing other people behind their back
c) with better chances than others to win a competition
d) more advanced than anyone else in a particular activity
e) _____

22. keep your head down
a) act in a modest way despite one's talents and success
b) attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet
c) defense oneself against unjust and harmful criticism
d) wait for the situation to develop before being involved
e) _____

23. be home and dry
a) escape a punishment for a crime
b) achieve one's aims in a negotiation
c) neglect one's responsibilities
d) succeed well in a competition
e) _____

24. smell a rat
a) suspect that something is wrong
b) be disgusted by something/one
c) report a crime to authorities
d) escape an unpleasant situation
e) _____

25. make noises
a) openly complain about something
b) speak in an extremely loud voice
c) advertise or support something
d) talk about something indirectly
e) _____

26. make a pitch
a) succeed well in a contest
b) try to obtain something
c) be in a leading position
d) promote something
e) _____

27. lay down the law
a) express one's opinion with great force
b) be involved in illegal and shady activities
c) behave in impolite and immoral way
d) set down the rules for other people
e) _____

28. take up the slack
a) make a company more profitable
b) finish somebody else's job
c) clean up a mess made by others
d) treat other people harshly
e) _____

29. pull strings
a) use influential friends or indirect pressure to achieve one's aims
b) make other people nervous by one's unsympathetic behaviour
c) cheat or deceive somebody to make them suffer or perish
d) control or manipulate other people for one's own advantage
e) _____

30. a tower of strength
a) a person who never needs other people but is independent
b) a person who is physically in a very good condition
c) a person who is always willing to give help and support
d) a person who seldom gets depressed or loses his energy
e) _____

31. take an early bath
a) get used to a new situation
b) get into financial difficulties
c) leave some activity unfinished
d) go to bed unexceptionally early
e) _____

32. cook the books
a) change written records for one's own purposes
b) be in the habit of telling stories and lies
c) make a mess or cause a complete chaos
d) falsify facts or figures to steal money
e) _____

33. let the cat out of the bag
a) solve a problem that has long been bothering one
b) accidentally and unintentionally reveal a secret
c) tell a lie about someone or spread false rumours
d) do a favour to someone to also profit from it oneself
e) _____

34. hard as nails
a) extremely stubborn and obstinate
b) seemingly strong but in fact weak
c) extremely tough and ruthless
d) in excellent physical condition
e)_____

35. end it all
a) get a job done
b) finish a relationship
c) commit suicide
d) retire from one's job
e) _____

36. light a fire under someone
a) urge someone to do something
b) raise someone's interest
c) make someone behave in a certain way
d) try hard to get rid of someone
e) _____

37. a dog's dinner
a) a scruffy-looking homeless person
b) a meal consisting of left-overs
c) work that has been badly done
d) a chaotic and messy situation
e) _____

38. there will be merry hell to pay
a) punishment will follow
b) serious trouble will arise
c) financial costs will rise
d) total confusion will follow
e) _____

39. kick someone when they are down
a) criticize someone behind their back
b) tell someone to start working harder
c) hurt someone who is in a weak position
d) attack someone when they least expect it
e) _____

40. have a mountain to climb
a) have a very difficult goal to achieve
b) have no friends in a difficult situation
c) have an impossible task to accomplish
d) have a highly dangerous task ahead
e) _____

41. a paper tiger
a) written evidence that proves someone guilty
b) someone/thing harmless and not taken seriously
c) an extremely talented and skilful writer or author
d) someone/thing who is less powerful than they seem
e) _____

42. get the push
a) lose one's job or position
b) find a motive to do something
c) be finished with a relationship
d) be bossed around by someone
e) _____

43. jump out of your skin
a) be suddenly very frightened or shocked
b) be involved in something out of ordinary
c) be thoroughly annoyed or infuriated
d) be energetic and ready to do anything
e) _____

44. in a sweat
a) anxiously
b) frightened
c) quickly
d) suddenly
e) _____

45. kick something into touch
a) reject or postpone something
b) do something illegal or immoral
c) exploit someone's weaknesses
d) challenge someone to do something
e) _____

APPENDIX 2

Idioms in Part III - background information

TABLE 7 The characteristics of idioms in Part III

IDIOM	freq	MEANING (based on the three dictionaries)	TRANSPARENCY	VARIATION	FINNISH EQUIVALENT	FORMALITY/ MISCELLANEOUS
1.throw off balance	***	suddenly confuse or surprise someone	transparent	lexical *knock off balance* grammatical (passivisation)	translation *horjuttaa jnkn tasapainoa, suistaa joku raiteiltaan*	
2. pull faces	***	twist one's face to amuse others or to show dislike	semi-transparent (attitude behind face-twisting unrevealed)	lexical and grammatical *make a face*	different wording *väännellä naamaansa* (a potential false friend: *vetää nenästä*)	Longman: not formal
3. on edge	***	very nervous or unable to relax	opaque	-	different wording *käydä kierroksilla* a potential false friend *kuilun reunalla*	Longman: not formal -in connection with various verbs, *be, seem, feel* etc.

4. have a chip on your shoulder	***	feel inferior because of your background and education or be angry because you think you have been treated unfairly	opaque (originally transparent but etymology[27] hardly known nowadays)	lexical *wear/get a chip ... with/without a chip...* grammatical (before a noun *chip-on-the -shoulder*)	different wording *kantaa kaunaa* (*kauna* referring to agrarian culture) a potential false friend *taakka harteilla*	Longman: colloquial
5. across the board	***	affecting everyone or -thing equally	semi-transparent	grammatical (functions either as an adjective or an adverb)	-	Longman: not formal
6. be in gear	***	be in excellent working order or deal with sthing effectively	semi-transparent	lexical *shift into gear*	different wording *täydellä höyryllä/voimalla/teholla* or *täysin palkein*	Longman: not formal

[27] "From a former American custom. A boy wanting to fight would put a chip (small piece of wood) on his shoulder. He would fight any other boy who dared to knock the piece of wood off." (*Longman* 1992).

7. come to a head	***	reach the most decisive stage	semi-transparent (if familiar with the etymology[28]--> transparent)	lexical *bring sthing to a head* grammatical (object)	- (*tulla käännekohtaan* close but has a translation equiv. in English, *reach a turning point*) (a potential false friend: *saada päähänsä*)	
8. bring home	***	make sb understand the true nature of the situation or prove sb guilty of a crime or misconduct	opaque	lexical *hammer home* grammatical (passivisation, object)	different wording *saada menemään perille/jakeluun* a potential false friend *tuoda voitto kotiin*	Longman: not formal a close false friend *bring home the bacon*
9. give the green light	***	permit or allow sb to carry out their plans	transparent	lexical *get the red light* grammatical (passivisation, in object)	translation *näyttää vihreää valoa*	Longman: not formal Oxford: informal
10. the nooks and crannies	***	small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed	opaque	lexical *(in) every nook and cranny*	- (a saying close in meaning *joka nippeli ja nappeli*)	

[28] Referring to the point (*head*) of a BOIL or other swelling on the body. When a boil comes to a head it is about to burst. *Longman*

11. dip into your pocket	***	spend or give money on sthing	semi-transparent	lexical *put your hand into your pocket* grammatical (number)	different wording *kaivaa kuvettaan* a potential false friend *pistää taskuunsa, to steal*	
12. hit the road	***	begin a journey	opaque	lexical *hit the trail*	different appearance *lähteä tien päälle*	Longman: colloquial
13. get into your stride	***	become accustomed with a new activity or learn to do sthing easily and confidently	semi-transparent	lexical *hit your stride*	different appearance *saada asiat rullaamaan/ päästä vauhtiin* (a potential false friend: *olla jnkn talutusnuorassa*)	
14. get the chop	**	be sacked, be killed	transparent	lexical *face the chopper*	as for the former meaning, different wording *saada kenkää* (or, with a fairly similar word-choice, *kirves heilahtaa)*	Longman: informal Cobuild: informal
15. speak volumes	***	reveal a lot about sthing, even without speaking	semi-transparent	-	different wording *puhua selvää kieltään* (note also the adjective *paljonpuhuva*)	Longman: not formal

16. hedge your bets	**	invest money in several businesses to protect oneself against losses or hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides	semi-transparent (*hedging* alone carries a special meaning connected to the idiom's meaning. Also, *Longman* mentions the original idea behind the expression, putting up a 'hedge' or a protective wall)	-	different appearance *pelata varman päälle*	Longman: colloquial
17. with bated breath	**	expectantly or worried excitedly or anxiously	semi-transparent	-	translation *henkeään pidätellen*	Longman: not formal -can be used in connection with several different verbs
18. the tip of the iceberg	***	part of a very large problem although the rest may not be obvious	transparent	grammatical (plural)	translation *jäävuoren huippu*	Longman: colloquial
19. a lame duck	**	a government or authority with little real power, or a person in a weak position, or a business company in financial difficulties	semi-transparent	grammatical (plural, attributive use)	- (*siipirikko* differs in the meaning but carries a similar idea and appearance)	Longman: colloquial
20. vote with your feet	**	indicate what you want through your actions, or show contempt or dislike by leaving a place	semi-transparent	-	translation *äänestää jaloillaan*	

21. ahead of the game	**	prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation	semi-transparent	-	- a potential false friend *aikaansa edellä*	
22. keep your head down	**	attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet, or wait for the situation to develop before being involved	transparent (although not all the figurative meanings are revealed by the literal one)	lexical (*get your head down*) grammatical (plural)	- (*pitää matalaa profiilia* carries a similar meaning but has a translation equivalent of its own, *keep a low profile*. Another equivalent:*työntää päänsä pensaaseen* has partly a different wording)	
23. be home and dry	**	achieve one's aims in a negotiation, or succeed well in a competition	opaque	- (Australian English, lexical *home and hosed*)	- a potential false friends *selvitä kuiville*, *olla kuivilla*	Longman: not formal (also with e.g. *get*)
24. smell a rat	**	suspect that sthing is wrong	semi-transparent	-	different wording *haistaa palaneen käryä*	Longman: colloquial Oxford: informal
25. make noises	**	talk about sthing indirectly	semi-transparent	-	- a potential false friend *pitää meteliä*	

26. make a pitch	**	try to obtain sthing, or promote sthing	opaque	-	-	Longman: colloquial
27. lay down the law	**	express one's opinions with great force, or set down the rules for other people	semi-transparent (*lay down* carries a special meaning thus adding to transparency)	grammatical (word order)	translation *lukea jllekin lakia*	Longman: colloquial
28. take up the slack	**	make a company more profitable	opaque	lexical (*pull in the slack*) grammatical (passivisation)	-	Longman: not formal
29. pull strings	**	use influential friends or in pressure to achieve one's aims, or control or manipulate others for one's own advantage	semi-transparent	lexical (*pull wires*) grammatical (passivisation, word-class)	translation *vetää(oikeista) naruista*	Longman: not formal a very close false friend *pull the strings*
30. a tower of strength	**	a person who is always willing to give help and support	semi-transparent	lexical (*pillar of strength*)	translation *tukipylväs, -pilari; voimanpesä*	Longman: not formal Oxford: cliche

31. take an early bath		leave some activity unfinished	semi-transparent (if one is familiar with the etymology[29]--->transparent but since the roots are in special languge, i.e. sports, regarded as s-t here)	-	different appearance (*joutua suihkuun* in Finnish is fairly restricted to its literal use in sports, and has an idiom equivalent more common in Am. English, *be sent to the showers*. In Finnish, *tulla maitojunalla takaisin* and *joutua jäähylle* carry a related idiomatic meaning but imply humiliation and involuntariness)	
32. cook the books		change written records for one's own purpose, or falsify facts or figures to steal money	semi-transparent	-	-	Longman: colloquial Oxford: informal

[29] More commonly used talking about foorball or rugby. Refers to a player being sent off the pitch before the end of the game because of breaking the rules severely. (*Cobuild*)

33. let the cat out of the bag		accidentally and unintentionally reveal a secret	opaque - semi-transparent (etymology[30] hardly known these days)	grammatical (passivisation)	- a potential false friend: *nostaa kissa pöydälle*	Longman: colloquial
34. hard as nails		extremely tough and ruthless, or in excellent physical condition	semi-transparent	lexical (*tough as nails*) grammatical (word class)	different wording, *kova kuin kivi*	Longman: not formal
35. end it all		commit suicide	transparent	-	-	
36. light a fire under sb		urge someone to do sthing, or make sb behave in a certain way	semi-transparent (the former meaning clearly conveyed but the latter not)	-	- a potential false friend with a close meaning, *tuli hännän/pyrstön/ takapuolen alla*	Cobuild: mainly American
37. a dog's dinner		work that has been badly done, or a chaotic and messy situation	opaque (very much in the eye of the beholder, depending on one's attitude towards pets)	lexical (*a dog's breakfast*)	-	Longman: colloquial Oxford: informal can be used in connection with different verbs
38. there will be merry hell to pay		serious trouble will arise	transparent	lexical (*there is going to be hell to pay*)	different wording *tulee kuumat paikat; joutua maksamaan*	Longman: colloquial

[30] Referring to a trick. A cat was put in a bag by someone who would claim that it was a pig and try to sell it to an inexperienced person. Thus, to *let the cat out of the bag* meant to reveal a trick. *Longman*

39. kick someone when they are down		hurt sb. who is in a weak position	transparent	-	different wording *lyödä lyötyä* (a potential false friend: *lyödä vyön alle*)	Longman: not formal
40. have a mountain to climb		have a very difficult goal to achieve	transparent	-	-	
41. a paper tiger		someone/thing who is less powerful than they seem	semi-transparent	grammatical (plural)	translation, *paperitiikeri*	Longman: not formal -with several different verbs
42. get the push		lose one's jobor position, or be finished with a position	semi-transparent	lexical (*give the boot*) grammatical (passivisation, in object)	different wording, *saada potkut/kenkää*	Longman: colloquial Oxford: informal
43. jump out of your skin		be suddenly very frightened or shocked	semi-transparent	-	- a potential false friend, *hypätä nahoistaan*	Longman: colloquial

44. in a sweat		anxiously, or frightened	transparent	lexical (*in a cold sweat*)	different wording (*kylmä hiki (otsalla), tuskanhiki*, always requires the attribute to describe the sweat. *Hiestä märkänä* may also in some contexts serve as an equivalent, in some it is a false friend) a potential false friend, *hiki pipossa/hatussa.*	Longman: not formal
45. kick sthing into touch		reject or postpone sthing	cf. 31. Labelled here as semi-transparent as the origins in a special language.	-	different wording (*jättää hautumaan/pöy-dälle. laittaa ö-mappiin)*	Cobuild: mainly British

APPENDIX 3

The distractors in Part III

Idioms and meaning alternatives (the ones suggested by dictionaries are given in bold letters)	The basis for a distractor
1. throw off balance a) lose one's money in unwise investments b) trip or push someone so that they fall c) make someone change their opinion d) **suddenly confuse or surprise someone**	 *balance* of a bank account physical *balance,* Finnish *horjuttaa tasapainoa* *swing/tip the balance*
2. pull faces a) **twist one's face to amuse others** b) repeatedly cheat or deceive others c) **show dislike by twisting one's face** d) cause dissatisfaction or annoyance	 Finnish *vetää nenästä*, to cheat *a long face*/ FI *naama pitkänä*
3. on edge a) successful and in a strong position b) **very nervous and unable to relax** c) always fashionable and trendy d) in a dangerous or risky situation	 *have the edge*, *cutting edge* *cutting edge* e.g. *edge of a cliff*, FI *kuilun partaalla*
4. have a chip on your shoulder a) feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust b) **feel inferior because of your background and education** c) unexpectedly win or inherit a very large sum of money d) **be angry because you think you have been treated unfairly**	FI *taakka harteilla* *chip in*

5. across the board a) being introduced for the first time	*noticeboard*
b) delegated for other people to do	*board of e.g. a company*
c) **affecting everyone or -thing equally**	
d) under development and planning	still being processed by *a board of a company,* FI *levällään* (*on the table*).
6. be in gear a) constantly change one's mind	*change gear*
b) follow the latest fashion and trends	*gear* referring to clothes
c) **be in excellent working order**	
d) **deal with something effectively**	
7. come to a head a) **reach the most decisive stage**	
b) thoroughly understand something	*get into your head*/ FI *mennä jakeluun*
c) cease to exist or stop completely	*head off*
d) suddenly get a new inspiring idea	*take it into your head* / FI *saada päähänsä*
8. bring home a) be more successful than others in a particular situation	FI *tuoda voitto kotiin*
b) earn enough money to support one's whole family	*bring home the bacon*
c) **make someone understand the true nature of a situation**	
d) **prove someone guilty of a crime or serious misconduct**	
9. give the green light a) **permit or allow someone to carry out their plans**	
b) agree with someone's opinions without hesitation	*in a new light*
c) make someone realize the true nature of a situation	*see the light*
d) talk about environmental matters and for the nature	*green issues*

10. the nooks and crannies a) **small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed** b) whims and oddities in someone's behaviour or character c) difficulties and obstacles which cause unexpected delay d) insignificant and quite harmless rumours and gossips	all distractors are connected to the actual meaning of the expression, carrying the air of something fairly insignificant and small
11. dip into your pocket a) win money in pools, or lottery etc. b) attempt to steal or shoplift something c) spend more money than one could afford d) **spend or give money on something**	*have deep pockets* *pick sb's pocket*/FI *pistää taskuunsa* *be out of pocket*
12. hit the road a) pioneer a new idea b) **begin a journey** c) ask someone to leave d) lose one's way	all connected to the idea of going somewhere, being on the road
13. get into your stride a) make someone behave as you want them to b) **become accustomed with a new activity** c) **learn to do something easily and confidently** d) be looked up and respected by other people	make others work along your *stride* *take in your stride*
14. get the chop a) be beaten b) **be sacked** c) **be killed** d) be shocked	*chop* referring to hitting sb as a result of *getting the chop*, and a phonological connection to *chop*

15. speak volumes a) talk in an unnecessary loud voice to gain attention b) unable to keep anything a secret but eager to gossip c) **reveal a lot about something, even without speaking** d) be very eloquent, and used to and fond of talking	 *volume* referring to the sound level connected to the actual meaning and *volume* referring to the amount *volume* referring to the amount
16. hedge your bets a) **invest money in several businesses to protect oneself against losses** b) **hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides** c) gamble and bet large sums of money regularly in all kinds of games d) be unwilling and hesitant to invest money in fear of losing it all	 *betting* connected to the actual meaning
17. with bated breath a) **expectantly or worried** b) chokingly or painfully c) cautiously or slowly d) **excitedly or anxiously**	 *short of breath, out of breath* *hold one's breath/* FI *henkeään pidätellen* can also refer to this
18. the tip of the iceberg a) a warning of an approaching, unavoidable danger or problem b) very impolite and unsympathetic behaviour towards other people c) **part of a very large problem although the rest may not be obvious** d) an uncertain position that is difficult to maintain and take care of	 connected to the actual meaning *icy beahviour* *slippery* associates with *ice*, the tip of the iceberg is thus bound to be a difficult position
19. a lame duck a) **a government or authority with little real power** b) **a person in a weak and uncertain position** c) **a business company in financial difficulties** d) a speech inappropriate to a particular situation	 *lame excuse*

20. vote with your feet a) have an indifferent attitude towards politics b) **indicate what you want through your actions** c) **show contempt or dislike by leaving a place** d) support someone by standing by their side	*voting; voting with your feet* carries a negative connotation opposite to the actual meaning
21. ahead of the game a) **prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation** b) ridiculing and criticizing other people behind their back c) with better chances than others to win a competition d) more advanced than anyone else in a particular activity	 opposite to being open ahead of someone linked to the literal meaning *ahead of its time*/ Finnish *aikaansa edellä*
22. keep your head down a) act in a modest way despite one's talents and success b) **attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet** c) defense oneself against unjust and harmful criticism d) **wait for the situation to develop before being involved**	 opposite to *go to sb's head*/Finnish *mennä päähän, huppuun* close to *keep your head*
23. be home and dry a) escape a punishment for a crime b) **achieve one's aims in a negotiation** c) neglect one's responsibilities d) **succeed well in a competition**	 Finnish *olla kuivilla/selvitä kuiville* connected to *selvitä kuiville* (something preceding it)
24. smell a rat a) **suspect that something is wrong** b) be disgusted by something/one c) report a crime to authorities d) escape an unpleasant situation	 connotation to the literal meaning *rat* in the meaning *somone being disloyal or cheating you*/close to Finnish *vasikoida* the result of A -swhen yous mell a rat, you try to escape the situation

25. make noises a) openly complain about something	*make a noise about,* literal meaning, Finnish *pitää meteliä*
b) speak in an extremely loud voice	literal meaning, Finnish *pitää meteliä*
c) advertise or support something	*make encouraging noises*, *speak for sb,* Finnish *puhua jonkun puolesta*
d) **talk about something indirectly**	
26. make a pitch a) succeed well in a contest	literal meaning *pitch* referring to sports. Also, phonetic resemblance to *without a hitch*
b) **try to obtain something**	
c) be in a leading position	literal meaning *pitch* referring to sports
d) **promote something**	
27. lay down the law a) **express one's opinion with great force**	
b) be involved in illegal and shady activities	literal meaning. *against the law, break the law*
c) behave in impolite and immoral way	literal meaning
d) **set down the rules for other people**	
28. take up the slack a) **make a company more profitable**	
b) finish somebody else's job	*slack* as an adjective denoting with less business than usual
c) clean up a mess made by others	*slack* as an adjective (loose or lazy)
d) treat other people harshly	the literal meaning
29. pull strings a) **use influential friends or indirect pressure to achieve one's aims**	
b) make other people nervous by one's unsympathetic behaviour	connotes to alternative D
c) cheat or deceive somebody to make them suffer or perish	close to pull the rug from under sb
d) **control or manipulate other people for one's own advantage**	

30. a tower of strength a) a person who never needs other people but is independent	connotes to the actual meaning
b) a person who is physically in a very good condition	Finnish *voimanpesä*
c) **a person who is always willing to give help and support**	
d) a person who seldom gets depressed or loses his energy	connotes to the actual meaning
31. take an early bath a) get used to a new situation	Finnish *kielikylpy, kielisuihku*
b) get into financial difficulties	*take a bath* (lose money)
c) **leave some activity unfinished**	
d) go to bed unexceptionally early	connoted to literal meaning
32. cook the books a) **change written records for one's own purposes**	
b) be in the habit of telling stories and lies	connected to the actual meaning
c) make a mess or cause a complete chaos	*too many cooks*
d) **falsify facts or figures to steal money**	
33. let the cat out of the bag a) solve a problem that has long been bothering one	*nostaa kissa pöydälle*
b) **accidentally and unintentionally reveal a secret**	
c) tell a lie about someone or spread false rumours	connected to *put the cat among the pigeons*
d) do a favour to someone to also profit from it oneself	
34. hard as nails a) extremely stubborn and obstinate	Finnish *kovapäinen*
b) seemingly strong but in fact weak	opposite to the actual meaning
c) **extremely tough and ruthless**	
d) **in excellent physical condition**	

35. end it all a) get a job done	close to the literal meaning
b) finish a relationship	close to the literal meaning
c) **commit suicide**	
d) retire from one's job	close to the literal meaning
36. light a fire under someone a) **urge someone to do something**	
b) raise someone's interest	*fire up*
c) **make someone behave in a certain way**	
d) try hard to get rid of someone	connected to *under fire*
37. a dog's dinner a) a scruffy-looking homeless person	opposite to *be dressed up like a dog's dinner*
b) a meal consisting of left-overs	literal meaning
c) **work that has been badly done**	
d**) a chaotic and messy situation**	
38. there will be merry hell to pay a) punishment will follow	*have to pay for sthing*, Finnish *joutua maksamaan*
b) **serious trouble will arise**	
c) financial costs will rise	literally *have to pay for sthing*
d) total confusion will follow	*hell breaks loose*
39. kick someone when they are down a) criticize someone behind their back	close to the literal meaning and *kick sb in the teeth, kick sb around*
b) tell someone to start working harder	Finnish *potkia persuksille*
c) **hurt someone who is in a weak position**	
d) attack someone when they least expect it	Finnish *iskeä vyön alle*
40. have a mountain to climb a) **have a very difficult goal to achieve**	
b) have no friends in a difficult situation	connected to the literal meaning and the image it creates
c) have an impossible task to accomplish	connected to the literal meaning and the image it creates
d) have a highly dangerous task ahead	connected to the literal meaning and the image it creates

41. a paper tiger a) written evidence that proves someone guilty b) someone/thing harmless and not taken seriously c) an extremely talented and skilful writer or author d) **someone/thing who is less powerful than they seem**	 literal meaning, something dangerous that in on paper literal: dangerous animal but seemingly harmless as of paper literal: a real tiger in writing
42. get the push a) **lose one's job or position** b) find a motive to do something c) be finished with a relationship d) be bossed around by someone	 Finnish *panna vauhtia; push ahead* *give the push* close to *push in*
43. jump out of your skin a) **be suddenly very frightened or shocked** b) be involved in something out of ordinary c) be thoroughly annoyed or infuriated d) be energetic and ready to do anything	 literal and the image it creates Finnish *hypätä nahoistaan* literal and the image it creates
44. in a sweat a) **anxiously** b) **frightened** c) quickly d) suddenly	 Finnish *hiki hatussa* *in a sec*
45. kick something into touch a) **reject or postpone something** b) do something illegal or immoral c) exploit someone's weaknesses d) challenge someone to do something	 *kick over the traces* close to *kick sb about* Finnish *potkia liikkeelle/persuksille*

APPENDIX 4

Correlations in Part II

TABLE 8 Correlations per context among native speakers

			TALK friend	LETTER friend	SPEAK elderly	INTERVIEW job	WRITE essay
Spearman's rho	TALK friend	Correlation Coefficient	.1.000	.920**	.508**	.481**	-.013
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.002	.004	.941
	LETTER friend	Correlation Coefficient		1.000	.541**	.559**	.188
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	.	.001	.001	.286
	SPEAK elderly	Correlation Coefficient			1.000	.826**	.449**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	.	.000	.008
	INTERVIEW job	Correlation Coefficient				1.000	.595**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	**********	.	.000
	WRITE essay	Correlation Coefficient					1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	**********	**********	.

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 9 Correlations per context among non-native speakers

			TALK friend	LETTER friend	SPEAK elderly	INTERVIEW job	WRITE essay
Spearman's rho	TALK friend	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.926**	.335**	-.106	-.132
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.213	.118
	LETTER friend	Correlation Coefficient		1.000	.386**	-.018	-.086
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	.	.000	.829	.309
	SPEAK elderly	Correlation Coefficient			1.000	.545**	.111
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	.	.000	.189
	INTERVIEW job	Correlation Coefficient				1.000	.469**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	**********	.	.000
	WRITE essay	Correlation Coefficient					1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	**********	**********	**********	**********	.

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 10 Correlation concerning formal vs. informal contexts among native speakers

			FORMAL
Spearman's rho	INFORMAL	Correlation Coefficient	.470 **
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.005

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 11 Correlation concerning formal vs. informal contexts among non-native speakers

			FORMAL
Spearman's rho	INFORMAL	Correlation Coefficient	.089
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.295

APPENDIX 5

Acceptance percentages and Fisher's test values for alternative meanings in Part III

Part III

TABLE 12 The acceptability of four meaning alternatives in each participant group and the results of Fisher's Exact Test (<0.05 is statistically significant and they have been marked in bold letters). The meaning alternatives suggested by dictionaries are given in bold letters.

	% natives accepted	**% non-natives accepted**	**Fisher's Exact test (two-sided)** Fisher's test value
1. throw off balance a) lose one's money in unwise investments	2.8	14.6	0.083
b) trip or push someone so that they fall	38.9	33.3	0.560
c) make someone change their opinion	5.6	5.6	1.000
d) **suddenly confuse or surprise someone**	88.9	93.1	0.484
2. pull faces a) **twist one's face to amuse others**	75	32.6	**0.000**
b) repeatedly cheat or deceive others	2.8	48.6	**0.000**
c) **show dislike by twisting one's face**	66.7	25.0	**0.000**
d) cause dissatisfaction or annoyance	2.8	33.3	**0.000**
3. on edge a) successful and in a strong position	0	6.3	0.208
b) **very nervous and unable to relax**	100	61.8	**0**
c) always fashionable and trendy	2.8	10.4	0.201
d) in a dangerous or risky situation	13.9	86.8	**0**

4. have a chip on your shoulder a) feel guilt and shame for doing something wrong or unjust	2.8	59.7	**0**
b) **feel inferior because of your background and education**	55.6	37.5	0.059
c) unexpectedly win or inherit a very large sum of money	0	2.1	1
d) **be angry because you think you have been treated unfairly**	69.4	13.9	**0**
5. across the board a) being introduced for the first time	0	9	0.074
b) delegated for other people to do	2.8	31.3	**0**
c) **affecting everyone or -thing equally**	94.4	41.7	**0**
d) under development and planning	0	21.5	**0.001**
6. be in gear a) constantly change one's mind	0	12.5	**0.026**
b) follow the latest fashion and trends	5.6	29.2	**0.002**
c) **be in excellent working order**	61.1	48.6	0.197
d) **deal with something effectively**	36.1	59	**0.016**
7. come to a head a) **reach the most decisive stage**	97.2	55.6	**0**
b) thoroughly understand something	0	26.4	**0**
c) cease to exist or stop completely	8.3	22.2	0.063
d) suddenly get a new inspiring idea	0	25.7	**0**
8. bring home a) be more successful than others in a particular situation	11.1	69.4	**0**
b) earn enough money to support one's whole family	19.4	16.7	0.805
c) **make someone understand the true nature of a situation**	91.7	34	**0**
d) **prove someone guilty of a crime or serious misconduct**	0	2.1	1

9. give the green light a) **permit or allow someone to carry out their plans**	100	97.2	0.585
b) agree with someone's opinions without hesitation	5.6	40.3	**0**
c) make someone realize the true nature of a situation	0	2.8	1
d) talk about environmental matters and for the nature	0	0	1
10. the nooks and crannies a) **small and less accessible parts that are normally unnoticed**	97.2	38.9	**0**
b) whims and oddities in someone's behaviour or character	5.6	25.7	**0.007**
c) difficulties and obstacles which cause unexpected delay	2.8	25.7	**0.001**
d) insignificant and quite harmless rumours and gossips	0	22.2	**0**
11. dip into your pocket a) win money in pools, or lottery etc.	0	11.8	**0.026**
b) attempt to steal or shoplift something	0	14.6	**0.009**
c) spend more money than one could afford	13.9	41	**0.002**
d) **spend or give money on something**	86.1	50	**0**
12. hit the road a) pioneer a new idea	2.8	13.2	0.083
b) **begin a journey**	94.4	68.8	**0.001**
c) ask someone to leave	19.4	60.4	**0**
d) lose one's way	0	0.7	1
13. get into your stride a) make someone behave as you want them to	2.8	41	**0**
b) **become accustomed with a new activity**	88.9	29.2	**0**
c) **learn to do something easily and confidently**	66.7	43.8	**0.016**
d) be looked up and respected by other people	0	5.6	0.36

14. get the chop a) be beaten	8.3	40.3	**0**
b) **be sacked**	97.2	38.9	**0**
c) **be killed**	13.9	13.2	1
d) be shocked	0	15.3	**0.009**
15. speak volumes a) talk in an unnecessary loud voice to gain attention	2.8	38.2	**0**
b) unable to keep anything a secret but eager to gossip	2.8	34.7	**0**
c) **reveal a lot about something, even without speaking**	94.4	20.1	**0**
d) be very eloquent, and used to and fond of talking	2.8	37.5	**0**
16. hedge your bets a) **invest money in several businesses to protect oneself against losses**	52.8	36.8	0.09
b) **hesitate in expressing one's opinion in order not to take sides**	47.2	36.8	0.259
c) gamble and bet large sums of money regularly in all kinds of games	5.6	11.8	0.373
d) be unwilling and hesitant to invest money in fear of losing it all	16.7	33.3	0.067
17. with bated breath a) **expectantly or worried**	55.6	22.2	**0**
b) chokingly or painfully	0	12.5	**0.026**
c) cautiously or slowly	22.2	33.3	0.231
d) **excitedly or anxiously**	61.1	46.5	0.138
18. the tip of the iceberg a) a warning of an approaching, unavoidable danger or problem	13.9	30.6	0.059
b) very impolite and unsympathetic behaviour towards other people	2.8	0.7	0.361
c) **part of a very large problem although the rest may not be obvious**	94.4	95.1	1
d) an uncertain position that is difficult to maintain and take care of	2.8	2.8	1
19. a lame duck a) **a government or authority with little real power**	16.7	58.3	**0**
b) **a person in a weak and uncertain position**	72.2	51.4	**0.026**
c) **a business company in financial difficulties**	16.7	18.8	1
d) a speech inappropriate to a particular situation	5.6	13.9	0.256

20. vote with your feet a) have an indifferent attitude towards politics	5.6	15.3	0.172
b) indicate what you want through your actions	63.9	49.3	0.137
c) show contempt or dislike by leaving a place	36.1	65.3	**0.002**
d) support someone by standing by their side	5.6	16	0.175
21. ahead of the game a) **prepared to deal with changes in a particular situation**	16.7	36.1	**0.028**
b) ridiculing and criticizing other people behind their back	2.8	0.7	0.361
c) with better chances than others to win a competition	19.4	44.4	**0.007**
d) more advanced than anyone else in a particular activity	88.9	77.8	0.166
22. keep your head down a) act in a modest way despite one's talents and success	16.7	58.3	**0**
b) **attempt to avoid trouble by being unnoticed and quiet**	94.4	72.2	**0.004**
c) defense oneself against unjust and harmful criticism	8.3	9.7	1
d) **wait for the situation to develop before being involved**	11.1	43.1	**0**
23. be home and dry a) escape a punishment for a crime	19.4	48.6	**0.001**
b) **achieve one's aims in a negotiation**	41.7	30.6	0.235
c) neglect one's responsibilities	0	11.8	**0.026**
d) **succeed well in a competition**	63.9	32.6	**0.001**
24. smell a rat a) **suspect that something is wrong**	97.2	97.9	1
b) be disgusted by something/one	5.6	7.6	1
c) report a crime to authorities	2.8	1.4	0.49
d) escape an unpleasant situation	2.8	3.5	1

25. make noises a) openly complain about something	88.9	74.3	0.076
b) speak in an extremely loud voice	5.6	16.7	0.114
c) advertise or support something	22.2	18.1	0.634
d) **talk about something indirectly**	11.1	16	0.606
26. make a pitch a) succeed well in a contest	2.8	25	**0.002**
b) **try to obtain something**	44.4	26.4	0.043
c) be in a leading position	5.6	19.4	0.048
d) **promote something**	47.2	34.7	0.181
27. lay down the law a) **express one's opinion with great force**	47.2	29.9	0.074
b) be involved in illegal and shady activities	0	30.6	**0**
c) behave in impolite and immoral way	2.8	20.1	0.011
d) **set down the rules for other people**	91.7	63.2	**0.001**
28. take up the slack a) **make a company more profitable**	13.9	13.2	1
b) finish somebody else's job	55.6	50	0.581
c) clean up a mess made by others	50	64.6	0.127
d) treat other people harshly	0	8.3	0.128
29. pull strings a) **use influential friends or indirect pressure to achieve one's aims**	100	81.3	**0.003**
b) make other people nervous by one's unsympathetic behaviour	0	1.4	1
c) cheat or deceive somebody to make them suffer or perish	0	1.4	1
d) **control or manipulate other people for one's own advantage**	38.9	69.4	**0.001**

30. a tower of strength a) a person who never needs other people but is independent	33.3	60.4	**0.005**
b) a person who is physically in a very good condition	8.3	18.8	0.209
c) **a person who is always willing to give help and support**	80.6	31.3	**0**
d) a person who seldom gets depressed or loses his energy	25	62.5	**0**
31. take an early bath a) get used to a new situation	2.8	33.3	**0**
b) get into financial difficulties	5.6	6.3	1
c) **leave some activity unfinished**	55.6	50.7	0.71
d) go to bed unexceptionally early	2.8	11.1	0.201
Missing responses	33.3	5.6	**0**
32. cook the books a) **change written records for one's own purposes**	58.3	57.6	1
b) be in the habit of telling stories and lies	5.6	19.4	**0.048**
c) make a mess or cause a complete chaos	2.8	24.3	**0.002**
d) **falsify facts or figures to steal money**	66.7	45.1	**0.025**
33. let the cat out of the bag a) solve a problem that has long been bothering one	0	34.7	**0**
b) **accidentally and unintentionally reveal a secret**	97.2	70.1	**0**
c) tell a lie about someone or spread false rumours	0	6.9	0.215
d) do a favour to someone to also profit from it oneself	0	2.8	0.585
34. hard as nails a) extremely stubborn and obstinate	41.7	42.4	1
b) seemingly strong but in fact weak	2.8	24.3	**0.002**
c) **extremely tough and ruthless**	83.3	45.8	**0**
d) **in excellent physical condition**	8.3	4.9	0.421

35. end it all			
a) get a job done	8.3	20.1	0.142
b) finish a relationship	41.7	38.9	0.849
c) **commit suicide**	94.4	73.6	**0.006**
d) retire from one's job	8.3	9	1
36. light a fire under someone			
a) **urge someone to do something**	61.1	68.1	0.436
b) raise someone's interest	30.6	23.6	0.395
c) **make someone behave in a certain way**	13.9	21.5	0.36
d) try hard to get rid of someone	11.1	22.2	0.166
37. a dog's dinner			
a) a scruffy-looking homeless person	30.6	7.6	**0.001**
b) a meal consisting of left-overs	5.6	59.7	**0**
c) **work that has been badly done**	61.1	17.4	**0**
d**) a chaotic and messy situation**	61.1	41.7	**0.041**
38. there will be merry hell to pay			
a) punishment will follow	50	61.1	0.258
b) **serious trouble will arise**	83.3	72.2	0.204
c) financial costs will rise	8.3	13.2	0.574
d) total confusion will follow	13.9	38.2	**0.005**
39. kick someone when they are down			
a) criticize someone behind their back	8.3	3.5	0.199
b) tell someone to start working harder	0	5.6	0.36
c) **hurt someone who is in a weak position**	100	88.2	**0.026**
d) attack someone when they least expect it	8.3	34.7	**0.002**
40. have a mountain to climb			
a) **have a very difficult goal to achieve**	88.9	96.5	0.08
b) have no friends in a difficult situation	2.8	3.5	1
c) have an impossible task to accomplish	38.9	47.2	0.455
d) have a highly dangerous task ahead	13.9	28.5	0.088

41. a paper tiger a) written evidence that proves someone guilty	5.6	6.9	1
b) someone/thing harmless and not taken seriously	16.7	30.6	0.144
c) an extremely talented and skilful writer or author	0	9	0.074
d) **someone/thing who is less powerful than they seem**	58.3	71.5	0.159
42. get the push a) **lose one's job or position**	86.1	7.6	**0**
b) find a motive to do something	8.3	81.9	**0**
c) be finished with a relationship	25	2.1	**0**
d) be bossed around by someone	5.6	16	0.175
43. jump out of your skin a) **be suddenly very frightened or shocked**	100	66.7	**0**
b) be involved in something out of ordinary	0	13.9	**0.015**
c) be thoroughly annoyed or infuriated	0	29.9	**0**
d) be energetic and ready to do anything	5.6	21.5	**0.029**
44. in a sweat a) **anxiously**	77.8	47.2	**0.001**
b) **frightened**	38.9	47.9	0.356
c) quickly	11.1	30.6	**0.02**
d) suddenly	5.6	6.3	1
45. kick something into touch a) **reject or postpone something**	38.9	10.4	**0**
b) do something illegal or immoral	2.8	6.3	0.689
c) exploit someone's weaknesses	2.8	11.8	0.13
d) challenge someone to do something	30.6	69.4	**0**
Missing responses	25	5.6	**0.001**

YHTEENVETO

Idiomien ominaisuuksien vaikutus englannin idiomien ymmärtämiseen ja tulkintaan syntyperäisten ja suomea äidinkielenään puhuvien näkökulmasta

Tutkimuksessa selvitettiin, miten syntyperäiset englanninpuhujat ja suomenkieliset englannin opiskelijat tunnistavat ja tulkitsevat englanninkielisiä idiomeja. Erityistä huomiota kiinnitettiin siihen, miten idiomin moninaiset ominaisuudet vaikuttivat niiden ymmärtämiseen.

Sanastotutkimuksen rooli kielen oppimisen ja opettamisen tutkimuksessa on kasvanut parina viime vuosikymmenenä. Pidempien sanaryppäiden, esim. sanontojen, kollokaatioiden ja fraasien, merkitys oppimisessa ja sanaston järjestymisessä mentaalileksikossa on huomattava. Idiomeja on tutkittu sekä niiden ominaisuuksien että niiden prosessoinnin näkökulmasta, mutta kielen oppijoiden, erityisesti vieraan kielen oppijoiden, kannalta idiomien tulkinta on ollut paitsiossa. Idiomeja kuitenkin käytetään yleisesti, etenkin sanomalehdissä ja kirjallisuudessa. Siksi erityisesti niiden tunnistaminen ja ymmärtäminen ovat tärkeitä ainakin edistyneemmille vieraan kielen oppijoille.

Tässä tutkimuksessa idiomi on määritelty monisanaiseksi kuvaannolliseksi ilmaukseksi, jonka merkitys on eri kuin sen sisältämien sanojen kirjaimellisten merkitysten summa, esim. *kokeilla kepillä jäätä*. Idiomien merkittävin ominaisuus on merkityksen kuvaannollisuus. Idiomit ovat harvoin arbitraarisia, sillä niiden juuret ovat usein ilmauksen kirjaimellisessa merkityksessä ja sen luomassa mielikuvassa tai siihen liittyvässä tapahtumassa. Kirjaimellisen merkityksen luoma mielikuva onkin oiva apuväline vieraan idiomin merkityksen selvittämisessä. Idiomit eivät siis ole 'kuolleita' eivätkä myöskään jähmettyneitä. Valtaosa idiomeista sietää variaatiota, joka voi olla sanastollista tai kieliopillista (aikamuoto, sanajärjestys). Idiomien tunnistettavuuteen ja ymmärtämiseen vaikuttavaa myös niiden esiintymistiheys. Vieraan kielen oppijoilla viakuttavat myös heidän äidinkielensä idiomit.

Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kolmiosaisen monivalintakyselyn avulla. Vastaajina oli 144 suomalaista englannin yliopisto-opiskelijaa sekä 36 brittienglantia äidinkielenään puhuvaa yliopisto-opiskelijaa tai juuri yliopistosta valmistunutta henkilöä. Idiomit valittiin *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) -sanakirjasta. Se perustuu laajaan tekstikorpukseen, joka kirjan ilmestyessä sisälsi n. 211 miljoonaa sanaa. Sen lisäksi merkitysten määrittelyssä käytettiin *Longman*in (1979) ja *Oxford*in (1983) idiomisanakirjoja. Kyselyssä idiomit esitettiin ilman kontekstia. Tällä haluttiin varmistaa kaikkien mahdollisten tulkintojen ilmitulo. Kyselyn ensimmäinen osio sisälsi 20 idiomia, jotka valittiin *Cobuild*in frekventeimpien ilmausten joukosta. Kyselyssä kullekin idiomille annettiin neljä merkitysvaihtoehtoa, jotka kerättiin edellä mainituista kolmesta sanakirjasta. Vastaajia pyydettiin valitsemaan vaihtoehdoista ne, jotka heidän mielestään kuvasivat idiomin merkityksiä. Toisessa osiossa vastaajia pyydettiin arvioimaan samojen 20 idiomin sopivuutta erilaisissa konteksteissa. Kontekstit edustivat kirjoitetun ja puhutun kielen eri muodollisuusasteita. Idiomien usein ajatellaan kuuluvan

puhuttuun, epämuodolliseen kieleen, mutta mm. aiempien tutkimusten sanomaklehtiaineistot osoittavat, että idiomeja käytetään myös kirjoitetussa, muodollisemmassa kielssä. Tästä syystä tutkimuksessa haluttiin tarkastella kielenkäyttäjien käsityksiä idiomien käyttökonteksteista. Kyselyn kolmannessa osassa oli 45 idiomia, jotka edustivat kolmea eri frekvenssiluokkaa. Kullekin idiomille oli annettu neljä merkitysvaihtoehtoa. Näistä 1-3 oli sanakirjojen mukaan oikeita, ja vastaajien tehtävänä oli valita annetuista vaihtoehdoista oikeat.

Tulokset näyttivät osoittavan, että idiomien merkitykset ovat varsin moninaisia. Syntyperäistenkin englanninpuhujien vastaukset erosivat toisistaan, ja suinkaan kaikki sanakirjojen antamat merkitykset eivät olleet kielenkäyttäjien mielestä hyväksyttäviä. Kontekstien osalta syntyperäiset puhujat tuntuivat hyväksyvän idiomien käytön epämuodollisissa puhetilanteissa, kun taas suomalaiset vastaajat olivat valmiimpia käyttämään idiomeja myös muodollisemmissa tilanteissa, ja kirjoitetussa kielessä. Konteksteissa oli myös havaittavissa yksilöllisiä eroja: joukossa oli vastaajia, jotka eivät hyväksyneet idiomien käyttöä ollenkaan, ja niitä, jotka olivat valmiita hyväksymään idiomien lähes rajattoman käytön.

Kolmannen osion vastaukset antoivat viitteitä, että vaikka suomalaiset opiskelivat englantia yliopistossa, ja olivat siis edistyneen tason opiskelijoita, heidän idiomitietämyksensä oli niukkaa syntyperäisiin puhujiin verrattuna. Aiemmin on tehty vain muutamia tutkimuksia englannin idiomeista ja vieraan kielen oppijoista. Niissä on havaittu, että idiomit, joilla on oppijoiden äidinkielessä täydellinen tai osittainen vastine, ovat helpoimpia ymmärtää. Sen sijaan idiomit, joille ei oppijoiden äidinkielessä ole vastinetta, tai joiden vastine on muodoltaan täysin erilainen kuin englannissa, tuottivat ongelmia. Sama suuntaus oli havaittavissa myös tässä tutkimuksessa.

Suomalaisten vastaajien yleisimpänä strategiana voidaan pitää äidinkieleen tukeutumista. Tämä johti virheellisiin päätelmiin, sillä toisinaan kahden kielen idiomit ovat muodoltaan samankaltaisia, mutta merkitykseltään erilaisia. Mikäli kyselyn englanninkielisellä idiomilla ei ollut suoraa käännöstä suomessa, suomalaiset vastaajat pyrkivät löytämään suomesta idiomin, joka sisälsi edes yhden saman sanan kuin englanninkielinen vastine. Vastaajat näyttivät hyötyvän myös idiomien kuvaannollisen ja kirjaimellisen merkityksen läheisyydestä: Mitä lähempänä toisiaan kuvaannollinen ja kirjaimellinen merkitys tai sen luoma mielikuva olivat toisiaan, eli mitä läpinäkyvämpi idiomi oli, sitä helpompi ei-syntyperäisten vastaajien oli se ymmärtää. Esimerkiksi idiomin *give the green light*, *näyttää vihreää valoa* kuvaannolliset ja kirjaimelliset merkitykset ovat hyvin lähellä toisiaan. Idiomien frekventtiys sen sijaan ei näyttänyt vaikuttavan niiden ymmärtämiseen. Idiomien variaatioiden määrällä ei myöskään tuntunut olevan merkitystä.

Tulokset osoittivat, että yhdellä idiomilla voi olla runsaasti merkityksiä . Ne osoittivat myös, että idiomien ymmärtäminen on haasteellista jopa edistyneemmän tason oppijoille. Idiomeja käytetään yleisesti, ja siksi myös niitä on tärkeä ymmärtää. Ymmärtämisessä äidinkieltä luotettavampi tuki on kuvaannollisen ja kirjaimellisen merkityksen yhteyden ymmärtäminen, koska tällöin vältetään samannäköisten mutta eri asiaa tarkoittavien ilmausten sekoittaminen

keskenään ja ymmärtäminen väärin. Tästä syystä vieraan kielen opetuksessa olisikin suositeltavampaa opastaa ymmärtämään idiomien luonnetta kuin keskittyä yksittäisten idiomien opetteluun. Koska äidinkielen ilmaukset saattavat johtaa harhaan ja koska idiomit ovat usein konteksti- ja rekisterisidonnaisia, vieraan kielen oppijoiden ei ehkä ole tarkoituksenmukaista pyrkiä niitä aktiivisesti käyttämään. Oleellisempaa on tunnistaa kuvaannolliset ilmaukset tekstissä (puhutussa tai kirjoitetussa) ja ymmärtää niiden merkitys.

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