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SUMMARRY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

PROCESSING COLOUR AND ANGER IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN BY ROMANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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1. Introduction

The introduction of this thesis delves into the exploration of how Romanian learners of English as a foreign language grapple with idioms, focusing on the influence of cultural background on language comprehension. The study highlights the significance of understanding a language's cultural and historical roots, particularly when it comes to figurative expressions like idioms, which pose a unique challenge to non-native speakers. The research is rooted in the premise that translation has long been a crucial tool for appreciating and understanding different cultures, their traditions, and their languages. By studying idiomatic expressions, the research aims to shed light on the difficulties and strategies employed by Romanian learners in mastering English, which can have broader implications for language education and cross-cultural communication.

Idiomatic expressions, known for their figurative nature, are challenging for both native and non-native speakers. Native speakers, having been immersed in the language and culture from an early age, often use and understand idioms effortlessly, without being conscious of their metaphorical meanings. In contrast, non-native speakers, such as Romanian learners of English, may struggle with these expressions due to their limited exposure to the cultural contexts that give rise to idiomatic language. This gap can lead to misunderstandings or awkward situations, as non-native speakers might interpret idioms literally rather than figuratively. However, with time, practice, and exposure to authentic materials like literature, films, and conversations with native speakers, non-native speakers can improve their understanding and usage of idiomatic expressions.

The thesis also distinguishes between learning a "*foreign language*" and a "*second language*" concepts that are often used interchangeably but have different implications depending on the learner's environment. Learning a foreign language involves studying a language that is not commonly spoken in the learner's immediate community, as is the case for Romanian students learning English. Conversely, learning a second language involves acquiring proficiency in a language that is spoken within the learner's community but is not their native language. This distinction is crucial because it reflects the different levels of exposure and immersion a learner might have, which in turn affects their ability to master idiomatic language.

The introduction emphasizes the importance of a solid vocabulary, but it also points out that understanding idiomatic expressions requires more than just knowing the literal meanings of words. Idiomatic language often operates outside of literal meanings, relying heavily on cultural

and contextual knowledge. For example, children, who are still developing their linguistic and cultural understanding, may struggle with idiomatic expressions even if they have a good grasp of literal vocabulary. This challenge extends to language learners, who need explicit instruction and exposure to idiomatic expressions in authentic contexts to develop what is referred to as figurative competence.

The thesis is structured into five chapters, each with several sub-chapters. The first chapter, "*Definitions of idioms and terms*" provides a foundational understanding of idioms by exploring various definitions, including the one provided by the Longman Dictionary of English Idioms. This chapter sets the stage for the research by defining the key term around which the study is centred.

The second chapter, "*Literature review"* delves into the extensive body of work on idiomatic expressions, examining how both native speakers and non-native learners process these expressions. The literature review covers various theories related to idiom comprehension and figurative language, drawing from diverse fields such as cognitive linguistics and translation studies. Influential works by scholars like Zoltan Kövecses, George Lakoff, and Mark Johnson are discussed, providing a comprehensive backdrop for the current study.

The third chapter, "*Research methodology"* outlines the research hypotheses, questions, subjects, and methods used in the study. It also presents the idioms selected for the research and explains the rationale behind their selection.

The fourth chapter, "*Data collection"* details the experiments conducted during the study, including a contrastive analysis of idioms and experiments involving idioms related to weather, anger, and colours. The results of these experiments are presented and analyzed in separate tables, providing empirical support for the study's findings.

The penultimate chapter presents the study's findings, discusses its limitations, and offers suggestions for further research. This chapter emphasizes the importance of engaging Romanian learners in the field of figurative language to enhance their language skills.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a comprehensive list of references, including works, articles, and studies that have contributed to the understanding of figurative language processing, thus grounding the research in a well-established academic context.

Chapter 1. Definitions of Idioms and Terms

A precise entry is given in the *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*:

"An idiom is a fixed group of words with a special different meaning from the meanings of the separate words. So, **to spill the beans** is not at all connected with beans: it means 'to tell something that is secret." *(Longman Dictionary of English Idioms, 1990: inside front cover)*

Figurative – adjective - (of words and phrases) used not with their basic meaning but with a more imaginative meaning in order to create a special effect (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/meaning)

Meaning – noun - The meaning of something is what it <u>expresses</u> or <u>represents</u> (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/meaning)

Idiomatic – adjective - (of a group of words) having a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word considered separately (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/idiomatic)

English as a foreign language - English as taught to people whose main language is not English and who live in a country where English is not the official or main language (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/English-as-a-foreign-language)

English as a second language - English as taught to people whose main language is not English and who live in a country where English is an official or main language (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/English-as-a-second-language)

Figurative language - refers to words or phrases that are meaningful, but not literally true (https://www.merriam-webster.com/grammar/figurative-language)

There are two major senses of the term metaphor in the Oxford English Dictionary (1996):

1. A type of language – a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable

2. A form of conceptual representation – a thing considered as representative of some other (usually abstract thing) – a symbol

"A metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this." (Kenneth Burke, 1945)

Idiomaticity - property of multi-word expressions whose form and/or meaning cannot be explained on the basis of its component parts and the morpho-syntactic rules of the language at issue. (https://www.degruyter.com/database/WSK/)

Non-literal – **adjective -** not understanding or intending a word or phrase in its original, basic meaning (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/non-literal)

Conceptual – **adjective -** based on ideas ... (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/example/english/conceptual-metaphor)

Metaphor - **noun -** an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person ... (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/example/english/conceptual-metaphor)

Mental lexicon - The mental lexicon is that component of the grammar that contains all the information – phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic – that speakers know about individual words and/or morphemes. (https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/linguistics-the-cambridge-survey/mental-lexicon/2C9D130A0EA2CDF9A80E19CB3AC64EC7)

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Idioms are a fascinating aspect of language, distinguished by their unique characteristics in syntactic flexibility, transparency, and mental representation. These traits highlight the complexity of idiomatic expressions, influencing how they are understood, processed, and interpreted in various contexts. This summary delves into the various dimensions of idioms, exploring how they are mentally represented, how their transparency affects their interpretation, and the cognitive processes involved in understanding idiomatic and figurative language.

Idioms can be classified into two categories based on how they are mentally represented: compositional and non-compositional. The fundamental difference between these two approaches lies in how they address the components of an idiom.

1. Non – compositional view:

According to this perspective, the meaning of an idiom is not derived from the meanings of its individual components but rather from the entire phrase. This view tends to conventionalize the figurative meaning of idioms, suggesting that idioms function as fixed expressions whose meaning cannot be inferred by analysing their constituent parts.

2. **Compositional view:**

In contrast, the compositional approach asserts that each component of an idiom contributes to the overall meaning. This means that while idioms are indeed conventionalized to some extent, their constituent parts can still activate literal senses that add semantically relevant elements to the overall meaning of the idiom. This perspective acknowledges the potential for idioms to exhibit

compositional behaviour, where the individual words within an idiom retain some degree of their literal meanings.

Idioms also differ in their level of transparency, which refers to whether the origin of an idiom is still apparent or has become obscure over time.

1. Opaque idioms:

These are idioms whose origins are not easily traceable, making their meanings more challenging to deduce. For example, the phrase "*kick the bucket,*" which has come to mean *"to die,"* has lost its connection to its original literal meaning after centuries of usage in its figurative sense.

2. Transparent idioms:

In contrast, transparent idioms are those whose origins are still evident, making their meanings more accessible. The phrase "*throw in the towel,*" for example, is still associated with its literal use in boxing, where it signifies surrender, making its figurative meaning more transparent to the user.

The evolution of idioms over time often leads to a loss of their original meaning or the rationale behind their initial use. As idioms become more conventionalized, their transparency decreases, making them harder to understand without contextual or historical knowledge.

Cognitive processing of idioms and figurative language

The conventional pragmatic view suggests that the primary role of language interpretation is to compute literal meaning. According to this viewpoint, when people encounter a metaphorical expression, their initial interpretation is rooted in the literal meaning, which is closely related to tangible objects and the perceivable world.

When a person hears a phrase like "*John is a wolf,*" the first interpretation generated is the literal one, where John is seen as a predatory animal. However, listeners quickly shift to considering the figurative meaning, analysing John's personality traits or behaviour that might metaphorically align with those of a wolf. This process involves two stages: an initial literal analysis followed by a comparison with the context to determine whether the literal meaning fits. If it does not, the listener reanalysis the phrase for a possible figurative meaning.

Context plays a crucial role in determining whether a literal or figurative interpretation is appropriate. If the literal meaning does not align with the context, the listener is prompted to search for a figurative interpretation. This cognitive process underscores the importance of context in language comprehension, particularly when dealing with idiomatic or figurative language.

The relationship between language and thought is another area of interest in the study of idioms and figurative language.

One perspective suggests that language and thought are functionally independent, meaning that what we think is not always directly reflected in what we say. This idea is often observed in young children, who may struggle to connect cognition and language. However, even adults can experience moments where their thoughts are not fully captured by their language, indicating a complex relationship between the two.

Zoltan Kövecses explored the relevance of metaphorical thought to understanding culture and society. According to the Lakoff-Johnson framework, metaphors are grounded in embodied human experiences, making them a fundamental part of how we understand abstract concepts. For instance, the metaphor "*affection is warmth*" stems from the physical warmth associated with a loving embrace, which is a universal human experience.

This universality of metaphors suggests that while they may be expressed differently across languages, the underlying conceptual metaphors are often shared. However, diversity in metaphorical expression is also important, as it reflects the cultural and linguistic variations that shape how metaphors are understood and used.

Metaphors are central to both everyday language and literary expression. In literary theory, metaphors are viewed from two angles: as literary or poetic devices and as symbols.

In literature, metaphors often serve to convey complex ideas and emotions through vivid imagery. For example, describing crime as a disease ("*Crime in our city has become an epidemic"*) uses the concept of disease to represent the spread and impact of criminal activity.

Metaphors can also function as symbols, where one thing represents another. In the example above, disease is used symbolically to discuss crime, highlighting the metaphorical connection between the two concepts.

Metaphors challenge the substitution approach to meaning, where one word is replaced by another with the same meaning. In the case of the metaphor "*man is a wolf,"* there is no direct literal equivalent, making the metaphor necessary to convey the intended meaning.

The study of idioms poses challenges for psycholinguists, particularly in understanding how they are processed and acquired.

The theory of idiom comprehension and use revolves around two key issues: the compositionality of idioms and their syntactic features. Compositionality refers to the extent to which an idiom's meaning can be deduced from the meanings of its parts. Idioms vary in their level of compositionality, with some being fully compositional and others non-compositional.

Another issue is the extent to which an idiom's meaning is tied to its syntactic form. Some idioms are syntactically flexible, meaning they can be modified or used in different grammatical forms without losing their meaning. For example, the idiom "*give up the ship*" can be modified in various ways (e.g., "*He gave up the ship,*" "*The ship was given up by the city council*") and still retain its idiomatic meaning.

For language learners, understanding and using idioms can be particularly challenging, especially when dealing with idioms that have no direct equivalent in their native language.

Learners often refer to idioms in their native language when confronted with culturally unfamiliar idioms. This strategy is particularly effective when the idioms in both languages share similar forms or meanings. However, when idioms differ significantly in form, learners may struggle to produce the correct idiom in the target language unless they have encountered it before.

According to the cultural duality hypothesis, when learners encounter a culturally novel idiom with no equivalent in their native language, they will still search for a similar idiom that fits the figurative context. This approach combines the use of native language knowledge with contextual guessing, helping learners navigate unfamiliar idioms.

Kövecses (2002) supports a traditional interpretation of figurative language, where metaphors are seen as an alternative to literal expression, often becoming so ingrained in everyday language that their metaphorical nature is overlooked. This view contrasts with the cognitive perspective, which sees metaphors as integral to thought, not just language. Idiomatic phrases, as discussed by Gibbs (1994), can be categorized morphologically into decomposable idioms (where parts contribute to the whole meaning) and non-decomposable idioms (where the meaning is independent of the parts). Conventionally, idioms are divided into conventional idioms (frequently used), non-conventional phrases (less common), and dead metaphors (in the process of becoming conventional). Langacker (1987) argues against the simplistic view of idioms as fixed phrases, emphasizing their complexity and the compositionality that people can perceive. The debate extends to the role of literal meaning in idiom comprehension, with traditional models possibly overemphasizing it. Three types of idiom processing models are recognized: non-compositional, compositional, and hybrid, reflecting the varied approaches to understanding how idioms are processed and understood in language.

The idiom list hypothesis, proposed by Bobrow and Bell (1973), suggests that idioms are stored in a separate mental lexicon from ordinary words. According to this hypothesis, understanding an idiom involves recognizing that the literal meaning does not fit the context, prompting retrieval of the idiomatic meaning from this special lexicon. Brannon's experiments in

1975 supported this view, showing that idioms take longer to process than non-idioms, indicating a distinct cognitive process for idiom comprehension.

The lexical representation hypothesis, proposed by Swinney and Cutler (1979), challenges the idiom list hypothesis by arguing that idioms are processed in the same way as regular words within the standard lexicon, with figurative and literal meanings accessed simultaneously. This model was reinforced by experiments from Glass (1983), Schweigert (1986), and Estill & Kemper (1982), which demonstrated no time lag between figurative and literal interpretation.

Gibbs' direct access hypothesis (1980, 1986) further challenged traditional views by asserting that idiomatic meanings can be accessed directly, bypassing literal interpretation altogether. This model suggests that when people encounter idioms, they immediately comprehend the figurative meaning without needing to process the literal meaning first. Gibbs' experiments, along with findings from Mueller and Gibbs (1987) and Schweigert and Moates (1988), provided strong evidence for this hypothesis. However, other studies, such as those by Giora and Fein (1999) and Blasko and Connine (1993), suggested that both literal and figurative meanings might be activated, depending on context, challenging the notion that literal meanings are entirely bypassed.

Compositional accounts of idiomaticity suggest that idiom processing is influenced by factors like familiarity, context bias, and idiom predictability. Schweigert (1986) found that familiarity plays a crucial role in idiom comprehension, with unfamiliar idioms requiring more processing time. Cacciari and Tabossi's (1988) configuration hypothesis posits that idioms are stored as specific word configurations, with the figurative meaning becoming active upon encountering a keyword in the idiom. Their research indicated that the position of keywords within an idiom affects how quickly its meaning is recognized.

Glucksberg's phrase-induced polysemy model (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2001) focuses on the polysemous nature of words within idioms, arguing that the appropriate sense of each word is selected based on context. This model suggests that words in an idiom can have both literal and figurative meanings, with the figurative meaning being activated based on the phrase's context. Panou (2013) challenged Glucksberg's view, arguing that the overall meaning of an idiom is derived from the entire phrase rather than individual components, especially in quasi-metaphorical idioms.

Gibbs' conceptual metaphor hypothesis (1992, 1994) builds on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, arguing that idioms are linked to conceptual metaphors stored in the mental lexicon. According to Gibbs, understanding idioms involves accessing these underlying metaphors, which provide a framework for interpreting figurative language. However, critics like

Keysar and Bly (1999) and Keysar et al. (2000) argued that idioms function more like mirrors reflecting structures projected by native speakers rather than windows into conceptual metaphors.

Hybrid accounts of idiomaticity combine elements of previous models, suggesting that idioms can be processed as words in specific cases, depending on factors like decomposability, conventionality, and transparency. The graded salience hypothesis, proposed by Giora (1997, 1999), argues that the most salient meaning (whether literal, figurative, or conventional) is accessed first during idiom processing. This model suggests that in familiar contexts, figurative meanings are more likely to be accessed first, while in less familiar contexts, literal meanings might dominate.

The syntactic-conceptual model, proposed by Cutting and Bock (1997), emphasizes the interaction between syntax and lexicon in idiom comprehension. This model suggests that idioms should be viewed as having both syntactic and semantic structure, rather than as simple large words. Their experiments indicated that both literal and structural information are activated during idiom processing, supporting the idea that idioms have an internal structure that influences how they are understood.

The super lemma theory, proposed by Sprenger, Levelt, and Kempen (2006), introduces the concept of a "super lemma" in the lexicon that represents an idiom and activates the individual lemmas (or components) that comprise it. This theory suggests that idiomatic constructions compete with their literal counterparts at the lexical level, with the super lemma facilitating the retrieval of the idiom's meaning. This model accounts for the syntactic sensitivity of idioms, providing a more flexible framework for understanding how idiomatic and literal meanings interact during processing.

Overall, these various hypotheses and models illustrate the complexity of idiom comprehension and the ongoing debate among linguists and psycholinguists about how idioms are processed in the brain. While earlier models like the idiom list hypothesis and lexical representation hypothesis laid the groundwork for understanding idiom processing, more recent approaches, such as the direct access hypothesis, configuration hypothesis, and super lemma theory, offer nuanced perspectives that consider the role of familiarity, context, syntax, and conceptual metaphors in shaping how we understand idiomatic language. The hybrid accounts highlight the importance of integrating multiple factors and approaches to capture the full range of processes involved in idiom comprehension.

Idioms are a significant aspect of any language, reflecting the cultural nuances and fluency of its speakers. For learners of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL), mastering idioms is crucial for achieving language competence. Idioms are pervasive in daily conversations,

literature, media, and politics, making their understanding essential for effective communication. The challenge with idioms lies in their non-literal nature, which often poses difficulties in learning and teaching. The most problematic idioms for learners are those that closely resemble expressions in their native language, as these can lead to misunderstandings due to false equivalences.

When discussing idiom comprehension among ESL and EFL learners, the concept of "*transfer*" becomes vital. Transfer refers to the influence of previously learned language patterns on the acquisition of a new language. In this context, contrastive analysis—a method comparing the learner's native language with the target language—helps predict potential difficulties in idiom learning. The hypothesis was that learners would find it easier to acquire idioms that are similar to those in their native language due to positive transfer, while dissimilar idioms would be harder due to interference.

Irujo's 1984 study on idiom comprehension supported these hypotheses:

1. Identical idioms - learners found these the easiest to comprehend and produce, showing evidence of positive transfer.
2. Similar idioms - while learners could understand these idioms almost as well as identical ones, their production often reflected interference from their native language.
3. Different idioms - these were the hardest to comprehend and produce, with little evidence of either positive or negative transfer.

The study highlighted that advanced learners of a foreign language often rely on their native language knowledge to understand and produce idioms in the second language. However, this reliance can lead to interference, especially with idioms that are similar but not identical in both languages. In addition to native language influence, learners also employ various strategies to interpret idioms, such as using incomplete phrases, substituting one idiom for another, or even creating literal expressions.

Understanding idioms involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to link a mental image with the idiom's figurative meaning. Idioms are motivated by two primary types of semantic links:

1. Metaphoric motivation - occurs when idioms are linked to conceptual metaphors, providing a figurative meaning based on broader conceptual connections.

2. Symbol-based motivation - rooted in cultural knowledge and typically extends to one component of the idiomatic expression.

Motivation in idioms refers to the ability to understand why an idiom has its figurative meaning in relation to its literal one. For instance, the idiom "*tip of the iceberg*" can be easily

motivated by common knowledge about icebergs, where the visible part is just a small portion of the whole, symbolizing a larger underlying issue.

Psycholinguistic studies have shown that idiom motivation significantly impacts how idioms are mentally represented. For familiar idioms, people often retrieve the meaning from memory, sometimes with complex contextual information beyond a simple paraphrase. Lakoff's model of idiom motivation argues that idioms are often motivated by conceptual metaphors, which help map the literal meaning of an idiom onto its figurative interpretation. For example, in the idiom "*spill the beans*," the metaphor involves "*beans*" representing secrets and "*spilling*" representing revealing them.

However, this conceptual metaphor approach has been challenged by other linguists, who argue that idiom comprehension might rely more on literal interpretations of the idiom's components rather than on abstract metaphorical reasoning. Cacciari and Glucksberg's research suggested that mental images associated with idioms often reflect the literal meanings of the idiom's words before the figurative meaning is understood.

Colour idioms are a specific category that can be motivated by both metaphors and cultural knowledge. For example, the idiom "*red tape*" refers to bureaucratic obstacles and is rooted in the historical practice of tying official documents with red ribbon. Similarly, "*being in the red*" or "*being in the black*" originates from traditional bookkeeping practices where losses were recorded in red and profits in black.

The comprehension of colour idioms can vary significantly across different cultures, highlighting the intricate relationship between language and culture. For instance, while black and white are often seen as opposites, their associations with light and darkness add layers of meaning that might not be directly translatable across languages.

Understanding the meaning of a colour idiom often requires knowledge of specific cultural contexts. For example, "*put something down in black and white*" means to make something official, a meaning derived from the high visibility and permanence associated with writing in black ink on white paper.

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

The research investigates how Romanian learners of English process idioms using Searle's three-stage model of comprehending nonliteral language as a theoretical framework. Searle's model involves three key steps: deriving the literal meaning of an utterance, testing this meaning against the context, and seeking an alternative non-literal meaning if the literal one doesn't make

sense in context. The study aims to understand the strategies Romanian learners use to process idioms, particularly considering factors such as compositionality (how much an idiom's meaning can be deduced from its components) and transparency (clarity of the idiom's figurative meaning).

Hypothesis 1 posits that Romanian learners employ the same strategies to process idioms, regardless of the idiom's compositionality or transparency. To test this, participants were presented with idioms of varying compositionality and transparency, such as "*black sheep*" (highly compositional and transparent), "*kick the bucket*" (moderately compositional or transparent), and *"red herring*" (non-compositional and opaque). The study utilized think-aloud protocols, response times, and accuracy measures to scrutinize participants' strategies. If learners employ uniform strategies across all idiom types, it suggests reliance on general linguistic or cognitive strategies. However, if they adjust their strategies based on the idiom's properties, it indicates a more adaptable cognitive process in language comprehension. This could inform teaching strategies that differentiate based on idiom types.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that Romanian learners of English process idioms more accurately when provided with contextual clues than when idioms are presented in isolation. The second stage of the experiment presented idioms within rich contexts, allowing comparison of comprehension and translation accuracy between isolated and contextualized idioms. It was expected that contextual clues would lead to higher accuracy, as context provides semantic and pragmatic information aiding in disambiguating idioms. The outcomes of this hypothesis could have significant implications for language teaching, suggesting the integration of context-rich materials in teaching idioms.

The study also explores four key research questions:

1. How do Romanian learners employ varying strategies when processing distinct types of idioms? This question investigates whether learners use different strategies for idioms that vary in transparency and compositionality, which could indicate cognitive flexibility and adaptability in language learning.

2.To what extent do Romanian learners incorporate features of their native language in idiom translations? This question examines language transfer and how Romanian learners might rely on Romanian linguistic norms when interpreting English idioms. Understanding this transfer could help address common errors in language learning.

3.What challenges do Romanian learners encounter in comprehending figurative language? Figurative language is often challenging due to the gap between literal and figurative meanings. Identifying these challenges can help tailor teaching strategies to better support learners.

4.What strategies can be implemented to mitigate these challenges? The study aims to propose practical solutions to enhance idiom comprehension, such as contextual learning, cultural immersion, cognitive strategies, and comparative analysis between English and Romanian idioms.

The research involved 66 students aged 15-17, with English proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B1+ according to the CEFRL. The students were selected from various backgrounds, including rural and urban areas, and represented a balanced gender distribution. The selection criteria considered their age, expected English proficiency, and educational background.

The study focused on idioms related to weather, anger, and colours (e.g., "*blue*", "*green*", "*black*", "*red*"), which are rich sources of idiomatic expressions in both English and Romanian. The idioms were selected for their relevance in both languages, and the study included idioms from both British and American English to provide a diverse linguistic experience.

The experimental procedure was consistent across all stages, following a two-part design where idioms were first presented context-free and then within a context. This approach allowed for the comparison of translations and interpretations in different scenarios, providing insights into how context influences idiom comprehension. The experiments were conducted over two years, with intervals between sessions, and the students were not informed about the nature of the experiments to avoid biases.

The COVID-19 pandemic required some experiments to be conducted online using Google Forms, particularly for the 24 students studying Mathematics Informatics. This introduced potential variables such as distractions, access to external resources, and differences in focus. Despite these challenges, the study aimed to maintain rigorous data analysis, acknowledging the limitations imposed by the online format.

The research findings could have significant implications for language teaching methodologies. If learners are shown to use uniform strategies regardless of idiom type, it might indicate the need for more differentiated instructional approaches that address the specific demands of different idioms. If contextual clues are proven to enhance idiom comprehension, this would support the integration of context-rich materials in language instruction. Understanding the role of native language transfer in idiom comprehension could also lead to more effective teaching strategies that address common errors arising from this transfer.

Chapter 4. Data Collection

The data collection chapter of this research begins with a contrastive detailed analysis of the expressions *"kick the ball"* and "*kick the bucket*." This comparison serves as an introductory

example to illustrate how idioms can vary significantly in their literal and figurative meanings, and how these differences pose unique challenges for language learners. *"Kick the ball"* is a straightforward, literal phrase that most learners would interpret easily, while *"kick the bucket"* is an idiom with a figurative meaning—*"to die"*—that cannot be deduced from the individual meanings of the words involved. In the first phase of the experiment, students were presented with the idiom *"kick the bucket"* without any contextual clues. As expected, many students interpreted this phrase literally, translating it as *"a lovi găleata"* in Romanian, which directly means *"to hit/kick the bucket."* This literal translation underscores the difficulty of interpreting idiomatic expressions without contextual guidance, particularly for non-native speakers who may not be familiar with the idiomatic usage in English. The second stage meant the addition of the time frame: *"John kicked the ball yesterday; John kicked the bucket yesterday."* Despite the introduction of *"yesterday"* to provide a time frame, students continued to translate the phrases literally, with limited recognition of the idiomatic meaning. The third stage meant the addition of *"unfortunately"*: *"Unfortunately, John kicked the ball yesterday; Unfortunately, John kicked the bucket yesterday".* The inclusion of *"unfortunately"* led to some confusion among students, as the phrases appeared less coherent. However, most still translated them relatively literally. In the final stage, introducing the elements of *"unfortunately"* and *"because he was ill"* made it challenging for students to translate the phrases. The idiomatic meaning of the second expression was particularly elusive due to their lack of prior exposure to the idiom. *"Unfortunately, John kicked the ball yesterday because he was ill; Unfortunately, John kicked the bucket yesterday because he was ill."*

The research focused on idioms related to weather, anger, and colour, as these categories are rich in idiomatic expressions in both English and Romanian. The idioms selected included those with direct counterparts in Romanian as well as those unique to English, to examine how students navigate both familiar and unfamiliar expressions. For example, idioms like *"be a breeze"* (be extremely easy) and "red flag" (a sign of warning) were chosen for their relevance and frequency in everyday language.

Each idiom was presented to the students in two stages:

1. Stage one - context-free presentation

In the first stage, idioms were presented without any contextual information. Students were asked to translate and interpret the idioms based solely on their knowledge of English and Romanian. This stage aimed to assess the students' ability to recognize and understand idioms in isolation, highlighting the challenges posed by idioms that are non-compositional or opaque.

2. Stage two - contextual presentation

In the second stage, the same idioms were embedded within sentences that provided rich context. This approach was designed to offer clues that might lead to a more accurate interpretation of the idiomatic meaning.

The results of these experiments are systematically presented in tables that include the following data:

Students' translations - the initial translations provided by the students for each idiom, both in the context-free and contextual stages.

Back translations - these translations were then back-translated into English to allow for an analysis of how closely the students' interpretations aligned with the intended idiomatic meaning.

Interpretation of results - a detailed interpretation of the results, focusing on the differences between the context-free and contextual translations, and what these differences reveal about the students' idiom processing strategies.

Chapter 5. Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations

Chapter 5 of the thesis, titled "*Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations*" brings together the findings from extensive research into how Romanian learners of English process idioms, with a focus on figurative language and its interpretation. The chapter delves into the challenges these learners face, the effectiveness of various idiom teaching strategies, and the limitations encountered during the research. It also provides recommendations for future research and practical applications in language teaching.

The research undertaken for this thesis was an in-depth exploration of how Romanian learners of English understand and process idiomatic expressions. This area of study is particularly complex due to the figurative nature of idioms, which often do not translate directly between languages. The study's primary aim was to identify the difficulties these learners encounter and to propose potential solutions.

A significant aspect of the research was the exploration of the theory of compositional and non-compositional idioms in relation to their mental representation. Compositional idioms have meanings that can be inferred from their constituent parts, while non-compositional idioms do not. The findings revealed that Romanian learners often struggle more with non-compositional idioms, particularly when they lack contextual clues. This aligns with existing theories that suggest idiom comprehension is heavily influenced by the availability of context and the familiarity of the expression.

The research comprised a series of carefully designed experiments. Six of these experiments had two stages each, while a seventh had four stages. Participants were presented with idioms in both context-free and contextualised formats. The results consistently showed that context plays a crucial role in aiding comprehension. When idioms were presented without context, participants often defaulted to literal translations or struggled to find any meaningful interpretation. However, when provided with a context, even minimal, participants were more successful in interpreting the figurative meaning.

The study also examined how Romanian learners of English approach idioms depending on their prior exposure. Learners who had encountered an idiom before and understood its figurative meaning were generally more successful in interpreting it, whether translating it into Romanian or explaining it in English. However, for learners encountering idioms for the first time, there was a tendency to rely on literal translations, which often led to misunderstandings.

One of the key findings was that the mental process of interpreting idioms is notably slower for non-native speakers compared to native speakers. Native speakers can quickly discern whether a literal or figurative interpretation is required, whereas non-native speakers, including the Romanian learners studied, often need more time to arrive at the correct meaning, particularly when their native language influences their understanding.

The research also highlighted the role of context in idiom comprehension. While some students could interpret idioms correctly in context, others could not, suggesting that context alone is not always sufficient for comprehension. This points to the need for more targeted teaching strategies that go beyond simply providing context.

The study's limitations were largely influenced by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a shift to online data collection methods. The reliance on Google Forms for conducting experiments introduced several challenges that impacted the study's validity and reliability.

One major limitation was the lack of control over the experimental environment. In a traditional classroom setting, the researcher can monitor participants closely to ensure that they follow the experimental protocol, such as not consulting external resources. In contrast, the online setting made it difficult to control these variables, potentially leading to results that do not fully reflect the participants' natural cognitive processes.

Engagement was another significant issue. In an online experiment, it is challenging to ensure that participants remain focused and motivated throughout the tasks. This lack of engagement could result in less accurate data, as participants might rush through tasks or provide random answers.

Furthermore, the inability to provide immediate clarification or support to participants during the experiments was a significant limitation. In a classroom setting, the researcher can offer explanations and answer questions in real time, ensuring that participants understand the tasks. This support was lacking in the online format, which could have led to misunderstandings and errors in the responses.

The variability in the environments where participants completed the experiments also introduced a layer of inconsistency in the data. Factors such as distractions, noise, or other external influences could have affected participants' performance, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

Another limitation was the small and potentially inconsistent sample size. Although the study provided valuable insights, the limited number of participants might not fully represent the broader population of Romanian learners of English. This is particularly relevant when considering the diversity of backgrounds and proficiency levels among the participants.

Based on the findings and limitations of the study, several recommendations are proposed for future research and language teaching practice:

Contextualised idiom instruction

The research underscores the importance of context in understanding idioms. Therefore, it is recommended that language teachers integrate idioms into meaningful contexts rather than presenting them in isolation. This could involve using sentences, dialogues, or stories where idioms naturally occur, helping students infer their meanings from the surrounding text.

Use of authentic materials and visual aids

Teaching idioms can be enhanced by using authentic materials such as movies, songs, or news articles, where idioms are used in real-life situations. Visual aids, such as pictures or videos, can also help students remember the idioms and understand their meanings better.

Gradual introduction and repetition

Idioms should be introduced gradually, starting with the most common and simple ones. Repetition is crucial for retention, so regular revision and practice should be incorporated into the curriculum. Encouraging students to use idioms in their writing and speaking assignments can also reinforce their learning.

Comparative analysis with native language idioms

Comparing English idioms with those from the students' native language can help them understand the figurative meanings more deeply. This approach not only aids in comprehension but also enhances cultural awareness.

Interactive and engaging teaching methods

Interactive activities, such as role-playing, games, and group discussions, can make learning idioms more enjoyable and effective. Role-playing scenarios where idioms naturally fit into the conversation can provide students with practical experience in using them.

Continuous *Feedback and Reflection*

Providing timely and constructive feedback is essential in helping students master idioms. Encouraging students to reflect on their learning process, such as through journals or discussions, can help them become more aware of their progress and areas that need improvement.

Further Research

Given the limitations of the study, future research should aim to address these by using larger and more diverse sample sizes, as well as controlled experimental settings. Additionally, exploring the impact of different types of contexts and the role of cultural factors in idiom comprehension would provide further insights into how idioms can be effectively taught and understood by non-native speakers.

In conclusion, this chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by Romanian learners of English in processing idioms, the limitations of the research conducted, and practical recommendations for improving idiom instruction. By acknowledging the complexities of figurative language and the cognitive processes involved, this study contributes valuable knowledge to the field of language education, particularly in the context of second language acquisition.

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