

ACCESSING THE MEANING OF AN IDIOM

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This paper looks at the nature and complexity of English idioms from the viewpoint of an L2-learner. The form and the meaning of an idiom may alter depending on the context and the individual language-user's interpretation. Although frequently used, idioms are often neglected in language teaching. A study on English idioms indicates that native speakers are heterogeneous in their interpretations, and that L2-learners possess several tools to access the meaning of idioms, only they are not aware of these tools and thus unable to use them to their full potential.

Keywords: L2, English, vocabulary, idioms

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present paper is to discuss the characteristics of idioms and the difficulties they pose to second language learners in particular. Although there are distinct differences in interpretation, for instance in idiom dictionary entries, the variance in native speakers' conceptions of meanings has not gained much attention in earlier research. L2 learners and idioms is another equally neglected combination in research as well as teaching, possibly because of the difficulty of idioms. Yet, the few studies carried out on the matter indicate that L2 learners have the potential to learn idioms. The aim of the study reported here was to investigate how well non-native speakers of English recognize idioms and know their potential meanings and contexts. This paper concentrates on non-natives and mentions natives only in comparison to non-natives. Especially, I shall pay attention to the ambiguous nature of idioms and non-natives' approach to their meaning. Before moving on to the actual study, I shall first deal with some previous studies on idioms.

2 EARLIER STUDIES ON IDIOMS

An idiom is a figurative expression whose meaning is different from, or more than the sum of, the meanings of its elements (e.g. *kick the bucket*). Idioms were long seen as dead, frozen metaphors, a view that 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' refers to the origins of an idiom; idioms are often thought to carry arbitrary meanings of which metaphorical nature has been forgotten. This characteristic is also connected to the dispute about how idioms are accessed and understood. Studies dating from the 1980s and the decades prior to that maintain that idioms are perceived as long words that carry arbitrary meanings that have to be learnt and known by heart as they cannot be deduced from the meanings of their components, nor on the basis of the image their literal meaning or idea of their origins may bring into mind (Weinreich 1969: 40-43, 57-58, Bobrow and Bell 1973; Swinney and Cutler 1979, Gibbs 1980, Gibbs and Gonzales 1985). When discussing these articles, Glucksberg (1993: 4) uses the illuminating term 'direct access', which implies that the meaning of the whole idiom is accessed directly, without analysing its elements. With this as their starting point, the proponents of direct access view have concentrated on the dispute on how the meanings of idioms are accessed and processed; whether they are included amidst the meanings of other words in mental lexicon, and processed similarly to literal expressions (Swinney and Cutler 1979), or whether the access to the idiom's meaning requires a separate processing mode (Bobrow and Bell 1973). More recent studies on idioms and metaphors and their comprehension, however, have indicated that language users intuitively and unconsciously detect more of idioms' origins and the connection between the idiom and its metaphorical meaning than they themselves may realize (Gibbs 1992, 1993).

Frozenness, in turn, refers 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. Idioms have been described with the help of mathematical formulae (Weinreich 1969), and various degrees of frozenness (Fraser 1970). Not just the origin, but also the form of an idiom has been perceived as suffering from rigor mortis. The more recent studies and psycholinguists' interest in metaphorical language have shown that a number of idioms are by no means dead nor frozen; metaphoricity and origins of meaning are quite often to be traced, and idioms can undergo alterations (e.g. Greim 1982, Gibbs et al. 1989, Gibbs 1990, Glucksberg 1993, McGlone et al. 1994).

In the scarce vocabulary research concentrating on idioms, they are often referred to as having only one meaning and interpretation in a certain

context regardless of the individual language user. Nevertheless, a quick glance at any (idiom) dictionary reveals that an idiom often carries several meanings (see also Lakoff 1987: 451) and nuances even in one and the same context, just as a single word can have multiple meanings. Idiom dictionaries frequently disagree in their definitions, a definition given priority in one dictionary may not be mentioned at all in another. This is not surprising since dictionaries are compiled and explanations written by human beings and until today, the dominant method in idiom dictionary compilation has been for the lexicographers to collect and write down the idioms they happen to come across, and on this basis, combine a selection for the dictionary.

Idioms may also have various forms or contexts: vocabulary or word order, for instance, may vary (e.g. *blast/blow/shoot/send to kingdom come; make a splash/make a major splash; call spade a spade/call spade a bloody shovel*), just as may the context in which an idiom is appropriately used. 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). However, transformations and changes may alter the meaning or at least the nuances the idiom carries, or, depending on the context, an expression may carry either its idiomatic or literal meaning; it is possible to quite literally *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.

2.1 English idioms and second or foreign language learners

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 longer blocks and elements in 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 paper (e.g. collocations,

conversational phrases, greetings, phrasal verbs etc., like *in my opinion*, *how do you do*, *burst out in laughter*).

2.1.2 Spanish as mother tongue

Suzanne Irujo has carried out two studies on Venezuelan Spanish-speaking students' English idiom acquisition. In the first study (Irujo 1986b), all subjects were students in an American university, i.e. were living in an English-speaking environment and thus exposed to English daily. 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 identical Spanish equivalents both in literal meaning and 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 meaning¹. (Irujo 1986b)

Irujo found that the idioms that had identical corresponding expressions in subjects' native language were the easiest both to understand and produce. Idioms that had similar equivalents were comprehended almost as successfully as identical ones but in the production, the effect of negative transfer from Spanish showed clearly. Different idioms, in their turn, 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, and either they did not fear to resort to Spanish, or had simply learnt more easily the idioms that seemed familiar. (ibid)

On the basis of these results, Irujo (1993) also conducted a study concerned with non-native speakers' idiom production in English. The aim of the study was to test whether the widely held belief that non-natives would avoid idioms is true, and also, what sort of idioms, if any, are used by second language learners. The subjects were 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 correspondents in the target language. (Irujo 1993)

According to Irujo, the assumption of avoidance may not be true after all: in the majority (2/3) 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 ones gained in the

¹ e.g. identical equivalent : to play with fire vs. *jugar con fuego* (to play with fire)
 similar equivalent : *to cost an arm and leg* vs. *costar un ojo de la cara* (to cost an eye to the face)
 different equivalent : *to kick the bucket* vs. *estirar la pata* (to stretch the leg) (Irujo 1986b, 302-303)

earlier study in the sense that identical idioms were the easiest ones to produce. (ibid)

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 a text containing idioms, very advanced learners may use idioms. True production of idioms contains obvious risks for non-natives as Irujo, too, recognizes. Productive usage of idioms, just as any language usage, requires not just the knowledge of the meaning but of the register, context, form, and transformability. Also, 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.

2.1.2 French as mother tongue

A different view from Irujo's is presented in a study by Pierre Arnaud and Sandra Savignon (forthcoming). It concentrates solely on idioms and rare words that have no similar equivalents in learner's native language, and that are totally opaque so that the meaning cannot be inferred from the elements the items contain. The main interest in the study was to see how the level of study affects advanced learners' recognition of vocabulary when it comes to complex lexical (multi-word) units² and rare words, and whether it is possible for highly advanced learners to attain native-like proficiency. The reason behind 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, forthcoming). 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, forthcoming)

The subjects in the study were native speakers of French, either students of English at a university, or teachers or teacher trainees. A group of

² In Arnaud and Savignon's study, complex lexical units is the term used for idioms.

American students served as native controls. The results indicate that non-natives' 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-natives did not quite reach the native level. Arnaud and Savignon suggest that perhaps "constant exposure to the language is necessary for native-like proficiency in the case of complex lexical units but not simple ones."³ Their 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, forthcoming)

It should be borne in mind, however, that in Arnaud and Savignon's study, only opaque idioms were tested. Thus, their meaning cannot be decoded nor can it always be reliably inferred from the context and, accordingly, straightforward learning remains the only means. Nevertheless, quite a few idioms can be decoded, or at least the combination of the context and decoding assists in figuring out the meaning as long as the learner understands the logic of idioms and does not take them as dead metaphors, nor as long words that have an equivalent in the 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.

3 ACQUISITION AND COMPREHENSION OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The teaching and learning of idioms and figurative language in general has not been too widely studied. 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 are often connected to their

³ See also Bahns and Eldaw 1993. They studied L2 learners' knowledge of collocations and though collocations are different from idioms, they share the idea of multi-word, phrasal-like construction. According to the study, knowledge of collocations does not increase together with general vocabulary.

Marton (1977), in his turn, 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).

literal meaning (e.g. *vote with one's feet; add fuel to the flames*), world knowledge (e.g. *give the green light*), conventions, etc. L2 learners can be assumed to possess the linguistic skills⁴ required for them to be able to decode idioms in their L1. Thus, they should be familiar with the logic behind figurative language, and various ways in which the meaning could be inferred. The trouble remains how they are to do this in a foreign language, how they interpret and understand figurative expressions. Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine how idioms are in fact interpreted, and how close to their literal meaning they are.

As for non-natives, 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), formal guessing, or guessing or inferring meaning 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 context guessing takes up a lot of time. For instance, the four-step strategy⁵ proposed by Clarke and Nation (1980) advocates context guessing, and certainly is a time-consuming task. Irujo's (1986a) suggestion that idioms should be taught as early as at beginning levels and not just to advanced students would certainly make idioms more familiar also for 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 reverse. 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 and to what extent to teach. 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

⁴ 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).

⁵ (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).

a subjective question and no list of idioms that ought to be taught can be compiled. Since even the most frequent ones 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 give the means to acquire wider recognition vocabulary. The students may succeed well in tests when they have been taught and are tested on things learnt easily, but it might be worth pondering on whether teaching them the characteristics of idioms, and strategies to infer the meaning of unfamiliar idioms would be more valuable.

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). When the context fails to provide the meaning for an expression, there are still several means a language user can resort to; these 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 (Oxford 1990: 38-51) are equally applicable to deducing an idiom's meaning as they are 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 the idiom may lead on the wrong tracks, etc. It should also be taken account of that although meanings and semantic fields of single elements often assist in figuring out the correct meaning, idioms and their meanings have to be taken as a whole.

As for non-native language-users, mother tongue can be and is easily searched or scanned for accessing the meaning of an idiom also in a foreign language, as Irujo's results, too, indicate. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that relying too heavily on similar outlook does contain its risks, discrepancies in meaning. These false friends (e.g. English *the last straw* vs. Finnish *viimeinen oljenkorsi*) easily lead learners astray. On the other hand, the image a literal translation produces may also be less than lucid, and separate words unfamiliar and misunderstood when they refer to some specific area. For example, *kick something into touch* 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.

4 THE PRESENT STUDY

I shall now move on to introduce some results of a study investigating the idiom comprehension and interpretation of both native and non-native speakers of English. The informants referred to here took part in a pilot study that is part of a larger idiom study still in progress. The non-native informants (NNSs) were all Finnish who were either studying English philology at the university, or had taken their degree a couple of years ago and were pursuing postgraduate studies. The native subjects (NSs) were all British, and had graduated from a university. The professions of the pilot test informants varied from a teacher to a translator. The results presented here are based in addition to the pilot study, also on some randomly selected cases in the actual study. There the native informants were Britons studying at a university.

4.1 Method

The study is based on an idiom test, and the idioms were chosen from *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms* (1995) which is grounded on frequencies. The test comprises three parts: the first one investigates the possible differences in the interpretation of idioms, the second in their appropriate contexts, and the third part focuses, on the one hand, on the interpretation of the meaning and, on the other hand, on NNSs' command of English idioms. The study concentrates solely on recognition vocabulary, a decision made for the reasons discussed above. The idioms in Parts I and II were the same; they were chosen from among the most frequent ones on the basis of comparing their definitions in three different English idiom dictionaries, *Collins Cobuild* (1995), *Longman* (1979), and *Oxford* (1983). In the test, the idioms were presented without a context in order not to limit the number of potential interpretations. Furthermore, the subjects were asked to fill in a background questionnaire about their studies and language contacts (reading/writing, listening/speaking).

In Part I, each idiom was presented with four meaning alternatives, and the subjects were asked to estimate how acceptable the given alternatives are on a scale of 1-5 from not at all acceptable to completely acceptable⁶. For each idiom, there was also a space for subjects' comments

on the item. Since there are no correct answers for this part, although the format is that of a multiple-choice test, the alternatives were not formulated in a multiple-choice test manner nor method. The length and structure of the alternatives, for instance, played no role. Instead, the alternatives were constructed as unambiguous and explanatory as possible.

In Part II, the subjects were requested to estimate how appropriate the idioms would be in certain contexts. There were five contexts (talking with a friend, letter to a friend, conversation with an elderly person, job interview, formal essay or other course assignment), differing from each other in mode, formality, and distance. Again, the task was to estimate how appropriate the idioms would be in the given contexts on a scale of 1-5 from not at all appropriate to completely appropriate. The native informants were asked to consider their own language usage, that is, whether or not they themselves would use the idioms in the given contexts. The object is to find out how they themselves would use the idioms, not how they think they are generally used, or perhaps how they should be used. The non-native speakers' task was simply to estimate how appropriate the idioms would be in given contexts.

Part III consisted of 45 different idioms, and there were two aims in the test design. Firstly, to look at subjects' interpretations as also among these idioms, there were some instances where the dictionaries were divided in their definitions. Secondly, to study non-native speakers' command of English idioms because previous studies have mostly concentrated on native speakers, and the ways in which they process idiom meanings. Since studying English at a Finnish university implies daily exposure to English, it is worth looking at possible differences in students' performances. The idioms were randomly chosen amongst those three groups marked for their frequency in *Collins Cobuild*. Idioms without any mark in the dictionary were considered too rare for the non-natives and were thus left out from the test altogether. Part III was a multiple-choice test in which each idiom had four meaning alternatives of which the subjects were to

		not at all	margi- nally	accep- table	quite comp- letely
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 you are in fact lying	1	2	3	4 5
d)	look at someone directly although you would rather avoid their eyes	1	2	3	4 5
e)					

choose the correct ones⁷. Just as in Part I, also in Part III the idioms were presented without a context to allow all potential interpretations. Informants were also given a possibility to write their own comments if, for example, they thought that some meaning was missing or that the given alternatives needed some reformulation.

4.4 Tentative results

Tentative results suggest that although non-natives experience the test as difficult, they perform relatively well when compared to native speakers. Although in their comments, the non-natives almost without exceptions mentioned the difficulty of the test and their own powerlessness when faced with the task of figuring out the test items' meanings, they seemed to know or deduce, or have an intuitive idea of the meanings of the idioms much more often than they think they do. In Part III, they may have been helped by quite a few expressions having an almost literal translation with a similar meaning in Finnish, e.g. *give the green light*, and also by idioms whose meaning can be concluded via their components or associated meanings, e.g. *give the green light*, *hit the road* ('Hit the Road, Jack' is a well-known song). Finnish informants were also prone to rely on separate words, or, rather, to select and notice those words in the idiom and the explanation options that belonged to the same semantic field. This is to say, they paid attention to the literal meaning of a single word, not to the figurative or metaphorical or the image the idiom's literal meaning as a whole created, which caused erroneous answers (e.g. *speak volumes* interpreted as speaking in a loud voice, a *dog's dinner* understood as a meal consisting of left-overs). Only occasionally did non-natives confuse an idiom to another English idiom that shares some words with the test item (e.g. *pull faces* vs. *pull someone's leg*). Parts I and II were more problematic for non-natives than Part III. In Parts I and II, non-natives were more heterogeneous in their answers than in Part III, and also their replies differed from natives' estimations to a greater extent than in Part III. In their context estimations, non-natives were slightly more liberal than natives. That is, they accepted idioms in more formal contexts more often than natives.

⁷ An example of PART III:
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)
-

On the other hand, natives seem to be just as diverse in their idiom interpretation as dictionaries. In Parts I and III, natives interpreted approximately half of the idioms in a variety of ways. Also, not all native informants were familiar with all the idioms. In Part II, natives seemed to be divided into two groups: they either considered all the idioms as strictly colloquial, or were of the opinion that certain idioms, e.g. *open the floodgates*, *look someone in the eye*, can also be used in more formal contexts. This may have been connected to the age factor; older informants tended to be more conservative. The test also contains some textbook examples, idioms that are often mentioned as typical idioms. These, for instance *let the cat out of the bag*, did not cause any disagreement amongst the informants. Both natives and non-natives were unanimous as to the meaning of these rather established expressions.

In general, however, some differences did occur. For example, when Finns *vote with their feet*, they either quite literally leave a place and thus show their dislike or annoyance, or indicate what they want through their actions in general. The English informants came up with the former interpretation but not the latter. The equivalent expression exists in Finnish as well, covering both meanings, but that does not fully explain the difference between the two informant groups as the English dictionaries give both interpretations. L1 transfer seems a reasonable explanation when it comes to expressions like *jump out of your skin*; English informants and dictionaries connected it with being suddenly frightened or shocked, Finns may also jump when they are thoroughly annoyed or infuriated, as they sometimes do in Finnish. The influence of mother tongue may also have led Finns to interpret *being home and dry* as referring solely to success in a competition, English subjects and dictionaries are home and dry also after achieving their aims in a negotiation.

Naturally, there were also differences between Finnish and English subjects that cannot be explained by reference to the Finnish language, as natives' interpretations were heterogeneous: for one native speaker *taking up the slack* means making a company more profitable, but for another it denotes finishing somebody else's job. Or, when someone *makes noises*, s/he complains either openly or indirectly about something, depending on the individual interpretation of the expression. The frequency factor could be one explanation, as the most common idioms in Part III were the most unanimously interpreted by the informants. The idioms in Part III that belonged to the rarest of the three frequency categories included in the test, the least common ones created more disagreement, but not as much as the second most common idioms. Perhaps the most common idioms are so established and well-known that the majority of them are interpreted in an approximately similar way. However, the results of Parts I and II indicate that the explanation is not that simple: Parts I and II consisted of the most

common idioms, yet the replies were just as diverse as they were in the section with the second most common idioms in Part III.

4.5 Non-natives' comments

The tentative results and an analysis of informants' comments in the actual study reveal that non-natives experienced the test as very difficult. Although they took the test anonymously and it was emphasized that they were not expected to 'know' the expressions or their meanings, and that the test was not to measure their mastery of vocabulary, some of them still took it as a summative test in which they did not succeed too well. A number of students mentioned the lack of attention towards idioms at school, and the mere existence of idioms seemed to surprise them. These comments would suggest that idioms are certainly not a focus of any major attention in formal language teaching. They also seem to indicate that in L2 texts, their mere existence often remains unobserved. This may of course be caused by their meaning being clear from the context, but it is equally possible that they are disregarded because it is unclear what they really mean, and whether they are literal expressions or something else.

Informants' comments are very valuable indeed. No-one paid attention to the lack of context, something that certainly may have made the test more difficult for non-natives. On the other hand, as has been discussed above, the use of context has its risks, too. Also, the context would have narrowed down the choices, and the different meanings the idioms may carry and concepts the language-users connect with them would possibly have remained undiscovered. As for the difficulty of the idioms, perhaps making the selection easier for the students would have helped, but that would have demanded a different definition for an idiom. The definition adopted in the study hardly allows any 'easier' idioms, or at least not a set that all the informants would consider easier.

5 CONCLUSION

There are several levels of 'knowing' a word (Miller 1986; Nation 1990: 31), and this applies to idioms as well, whether or not they are considered as single long words. Knowing suitable strategies and means to try to access the meaning of an idiom is a skill in itself, something more than just knowing the meaning. That, in my opinion, would be the most useful way to approach, teach, and learn idioms. Since even native speakers do not always reach a consensus on the meanings of idioms, how could foreign or

second language learners reliably know which meanings to learn. Also, idioms are such a specific field of vocabulary that their productive usage may not be the most reasonable aspect to teach to L2 learners. However, in recognition vocabulary idioms are needed indeed. The meaning of a single word cannot always be inferred from the context, and when it comes to idioms, the task gets even more complicated.

The tentative results suggest that language users vary to a large extent in their interpretations and conceptions of idioms. Naturally, more results are needed to draw more reliable conclusions about the interpretations. It is also necessary to look at the idioms themselves more closely, to find out possible reasons for various interpretations. For instance, an idiom's frequency, literal meaning, level of frozenness, formality, typical appearance context, etc. may affect its interpretation. By examining the idioms themselves, and their occurrence in corpora it may be possible to draw conclusions about their interpretation. The non-natives' incorrect replies varied in some cases, but in some, nearly all informants had come to the same erroneous conclusion about the idiom's meaning. That is highly interesting, since it sheds light on how the meanings are inferred, and how unfamiliar idioms are recognized, comprehended and interpreted.

Although the test was quite difficult for non-natives, particularly the erroneous answers might offer clues to how the informants attempt to figure out the meaning. Also, they may give hints on what sort of idioms in particular are difficult for non-natives, and what sort of an approach would be worth teaching to them. Clearly in the pilot study, the idioms that had similar or identical equivalents in Finnish were the easiest, and the students recognized and correctly interpreted them without difficulties. This would support the view that idioms that can be understood on the basis of one's native language are indeed easy. The non-native informants instinctively used L1 in their interpretations, and also tried to comprehend the idioms on the basis of their literal meanings, only making the mistake of concentrating on single words instead of the whole idiom. This and their comments on difficulty together indicate that they were not truly aware of idioms' nature, nor of the means that would assist them to access the meaning. Had idioms gained more conscious attention, for instance in formal language teaching, the task would have been less laborious.

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