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Idioms through Time and Technology.

The Signature of a Culture

PhD thesis summary

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Key words: *idioms, proto-idioms, similes, similidioms, idiomatization, Irony Based Idiom Sentences (IBIS)*

In a nutshell

Contribution to developing the domain

Establishing newer and clearer criteria of differentiating between proper idioms and other non-idiomatic fixed phrases is meant to pave the way to **making better dictionaries**. The new category of idioms we have found, namely the **IBISes** (Irony Based Idiom Sentences), opens new opportunities for further research, including **dictionaries made exclusively of IBISes**, since they are as numerous as the rest of the idioms. At the same time, IBISes can be further organized according to the topic and the pattern they use. The process of **de-idiomatization** and the **similidioms** are two more new findings which are worth mentioning.

The objectives

1. Establishing clear criteria in distinguishing between proper idioms and other fixed phrases.
 2. Giving an improved definition of the idiom.
 3. Making a new classification of idioms according to how close they are to being proper idioms, in concordance with the new definition and using the criteria established in the present thesis.
 4. Tracing the idioms back to their roots and demonstrating that idioms come from simpler structures with which they co-exist.
 5. Establishing whether idioms are mainly negative, mainly neutral or mainly positive in their meaning.
 6. Demonstrating the close connection between the culture of a people and the idioms inside their language with reference to the patterns and the topics of the English and Romanian idioms.
- In order to achieve this objective, the following idioms were taken into consideration: idioms describing insanity and/or stupidity and idioms containing the following words in both languages: cat, dog, horse, ox/bull.

Research methods

- the statistical data analysis method
- the comparison techniques in order to find the common feature (the comparative-contrastive method)
- logic deduction
- logic demonstration

- *educated guess*
- *off the top of my head technique*

THE SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The **initial aim** of the research was to observe **how idioms have been influenced by the progress of technology**, passing through centuries, and **to classify the idioms developed in connection with technology according to specific topics they are related to and to the relevant patterns**. As research may more often than not have it – as a matter of fact, it should have it all the time – the research soon became more complex and led to findings which were difficult to anticipate at the beginning of our endeavour. We may say, without the fear of being wrong, that one of the most important findings is the fact that **only a fraction of the expressions contained by the contemporary dictionaries of idioms are idioms indeed**, the rest of them being collocations, simple similes, slang words or proverbs. Sometimes, the number of the expressions which are not idioms exceeds the number of the real idioms. This very important finding consequently led to a rather disappointing conclusion: idioms are not by the tens of thousands, as some dictionaries suggest or clearly state, but significantly fewer.

Chapter 1 deals with establishing new criteria for differentiating idioms from other types of expressions and with suggesting a more accurate definition of idioms. This improved definition, built on the ground laid by the common elements found in the previous definitions, also functions as a guide in selection of those expressions meeting all the necessary conditions for being idioms.

Without trying to make an exhaustive inventory of the definitions provided by the specialists in the field and of the various classifications of idioms, the main directions in studying idioms were analysed in order to extract the necessary information related to what an idiom should look like and what it should represent. All the paths took us to the same conclusion: **idioms are artistic representations of reality**. The fact that they are metaphors, semantically more or less opaque, had been stated before by well-known researchers in the field, such as Makkai (1972), Strasles (1982), Fillmore et al. (1988), Fernando (1996) and many others. What had not been said, but has been demonstrated in our doctoral thesis. is that, in spite of their opacity, idioms are not accessible only to the native speakers, as Wright (2002) clearly stated. On the contrary, they can be logically deducted by anyone, regardless of their

being native speakers of English or not. In addition to this, native speakers themselves need to be explained the idioms active in their language since they are not embedded in their genetic code. It is a matter of learning the meaning of a group of words in the same as the meaning(s) of isolated words is (are) learnt. The difference between the two, i.e. between words and multi-word expressions, such as the idioms is that the latter are **metaphors in which logic and imagination work together in order to present reality in the form of a piece of more or less abstract art.**

In addition to the methods specific to philological studies, the most used being, *the contrastive approach* and *the logical deduction*, two other methods were applied in our research. They may be viewed as unusual, but their importance has been proven beyond doubt: *the educated guess* and the *off the top of one's head technique*. In spite of their sounding unorthodox, they are related to something that should not be left out of any research, regardless of the field: *intuition*. While it is true that 'books are made of books', the most interesting findings are the result of intuition or of hunch, as it is called in spoken English. The *educated guess* may be proven wrong, but this fact should not rule out this method. As far as *the off the top of one's head technique* is concerned, it functions with both native speakers of the language in which the research is conducted and the non-native speakers of the same language, if the non-natives have been exposed to that language intensively and for a significantly long period of time. Teachers of English are among them. If a non-native speaker remembers only some expressions meaning for example, *tired*, this occurs due to the fact that they are the most frequently used. A native speaker may know more expressions with reference to the status of being physically exhausted, but the ones that a non-native speaker remembers are the ones that a native speaker also uses regularly. This statement is supported by the fact that idioms which are not popular, thus not commonly used, are prone to disappear from the language sooner.

Two of the research methods mentioned above, i.e. those based on intuition and logical deduction – helped us reveal an extraordinary truth: **idioms come from simple similes**. The demonstration (see sect. **1.2.1.**) uses the process of *idiomatization* in reverse, namely the *de-idiomatization*. Mention should be made that the word *idiomatization*, although creating the impression of a word invented especially for our research, and in spite of not being found in the most recent and updated dictionaries (such as Cambridge and Oxford online), is present in less notorious dictionaries. For instance, the Wiktionary defines **idiomatization** (plural *idiomatizations*) as being "the process of making a term idiomatic" (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/idiomatization>). As regards de-idiomatization this term may be considered as a premiere. In essence, the process of de-idiomatization is the most convincing piece of evidence that an

expression is an idiom. If the expression in case can be reduced to a simile, be it simple or complex, then that expression is a proper idiom. In order to demonstrate our theory, we considered the word *stupid* and found the chain leading to a proper idiom: *stupid – dumb as a donkey* (simple simile) – *dumb as a wooden Indian* (complex simile) – *not the sharpest crayon in the box* (idiom). The linguistic evolution regarding the ways one may refer to a person considered *stupid* is as clear as possible: from the isolated adjective *stupid* to a **simple simile**, *dumb as a donkey* which simply compares a human being to a donkey (the donkey having no other characteristic than the one implied by the comparison – i.e. dumb), going through the stage of a **complex simile** *dumb as a wooden Indian* which does not only imply that Indians are considered stupid, but also reinforces this idea giving the Indian in the simile a strange characteristic – being made of wood) and ending with the most complex means of stating that someone is stupid: an **idiom** in the form of a metaphor – *not the sharpest crayon in the box*. The comparison inside cannot be clearly seen in the idiom, but applying the method of de-idiomatization, the comparison is revealed: “De-idiomatizing it, the expression can be reduced to *not as sharp as the other pencils in the box*, which is still an **idiom**, but closer to a **simile** by using the comparative construction ‘not as...as’. The process of turning it into a simile goes through the ‘complex simile’ stage: *stupid as a dull pencil*. The next step is to reduce the **complex simile** to a **simple one**: *stupid as a pencil*. It can also be developed into a **metaphorically enhanced simile** (a simile which is added an element whose role is to build a metaphor): *stupid as a dull pencil in a box full of sharp ones*” (see Chapter 1, sect. 1.2.1.).

Section 1.2.2., presents a new view on **similes**, creating three new categories from the point of view of their **idiomaticity**, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. New terminology for the three categories of similes

Non-idiomatic similes	Proto-idioms	Semi-idioms or similidioms*
strong like an ox	smart as a stick	like a bear with a sore head

*the term *similidioms* was coined by associate professor Petru Iamandi during a discussion about idioms, in 2018.

Every new category of similes has its own formula and its own characteristics. Thus, the **non-idiomatic similes** simply compare A with B, according to *feature + like/as + noun which has that feature* formula, **proto-idioms** gives B a feature which B cannot have, creating a rather amusing image, using the *feature + like/as + noun which cannot possibly have that feature* formula, while **similidioms** are complex comparisons, putting B in an unusual situation, with the same effect as in the case of **proto-idioms**, using a *like/as + noun + unusual situation*

for the noun formula. As a consequence of the new findings, the expressions taken into consideration in our research are the ones exemplified in Table 2:

Table 2. Proper idioms

Proto-idioms	Similidioms	Pure idioms
dumber than a bag or rocks	like a dog with two tails	all foam, no beer (<i>stupid</i>)

Another very important finding is the fact that many idioms are found in the form of full sentences, such examples being separated from proverbs (see sect. 1.1.3.1. for the demonstration that **proverbs are not idioms**). The idiom-sentences differ from the proverbs in the sense that, while the latter represent samples of wisdom, giving advice or reflecting upon the world, **idiom-sentences** are humorous representations of reality through more or less ironic analogies (e.g. *The lights are on, but there's nobody home*, meaning *stupid*). As a consequence of these characteristics, which differentiate idioms from proverbs, idiom-sentences are named in our research paper **Irony Based Idiom Sentences (IBISes)** (see sect. 1.2.3.).

To conclude, our definition of **idioms**, which include **proto-idioms**, **similidioms**, **pure idioms** and **IBISes**, makes a clearer distinction between proper idioms and other types of fixed lexical patterns: *idioms are fixed phrases, made of at least two independent words, whose meaning is different from any of the words or the sum of the words in them and who come from a comparison, having the characteristics of a metaphor and being artistic images of reality.*

The definition above, reinforced with our own criteria for differentiating idioms from other fixed phrases, laid the foundation for Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Our main goal, in Chapter 1, was to make sure that all the expressions taken into consideration in order to achieve the goals established for the rest of the research were pure idioms. The next logical step was to study how **time** and **technology** influenced **the production of idioms**. The fact that technology helped creating new, modern idioms, was not just a matter of intuition, but we wanted to see how far the rabbit hole goes, metaphorically speaking. It was obvious that English idioms such as *to blow one's top off*, *to have a screw loose* and *the engine is running but there is nobody behind the wheel*, describing angry and crazy/stupid people respectively contained elements of technological progress, but more research was needed in order to enlarge on the fields of technological activity which influenced or supported the 'invention' of new idioms. The next logical step was to choose relevant corpus of idioms, preferably a prolific one. The *off the top of my head technique* proved itself very helpful in this case, the three idioms mentioned above,

which came first to my mind, provided me with the topics of my corpus: *crazy* and *stupid* idioms. Choosing two negative characteristics was not a coincidence, since most idioms are negative, as demonstrated in **Chapter 3**. As for *crazy* and *stupid* idioms, they are **over one hundred** in English including from proto-idioms to IBISes.

Similarly to Chapter 1, in which clear criteria had to be established for distinguishing general expressions from proper **idioms**, in **Chapter 2** had to establish a clear distinction between the ‘crazy’ and ‘stupid’ idioms. It may seem an easy task, but the dictionary definitions of the two words showed that the line between ‘crazy’ and ‘stupid’ is so fine, that it can be crossed without realising it. To make matters worse, some dictionaries used almost the same words in the definitions of the two notions, as if describing the same “symptoms”. As a consequence, we adopted a technological angle from which we looked at the matter and established the criteria for making the difference between the meanings of the two adjectives. Thus, the idioms describing people **not having all the components from the very beginning**, either by not being born with them or by not wanting to achieve them through education, were attributed to the adjective **stupid** (a term closer to the Romanian definition of ‘stupid’), while the idioms describing people **born with all the components, but malfunctioning**, were considered to make up the **crazy**-related corpus.

After extensive research, including over thirty books on idioms and idiom dictionaries and seventeen dedicated websites, for both English and Romanian idioms, we found great differences between the two languages, as shown in the Table 3 below:

Table 3. All idioms face to face

		English	Romanian
STUPID	idioms	83	8
	IBISes	40	9
CRAZY	idioms	9	9
	IBISes	29	4
TEMPORARY		27	12

The numbers speak for themselves. The English language is far more productive in as far as ‘crazy’ and ‘stupid’ idioms are concerned, approaching more topics and having more patterns. As regards the technology-based idioms, the examples available in English show a greater influence of technology on the idioms created by speakers, which is not the case with the Romanian idioms. The fact that there are zero Romanian idioms influenced by technology,

describing stupidity, is as relevant as the five technological domains which produced idioms in English: **tools** (e.g. *dumber than a bag of hammers*), **constructions** (e.g. *a brick shy of a load*), **means of transportation** (e.g. *not the fastest car in the lot*), **electricity and electronics** (e.g. *not the brightest lightbulb in the box*) and **computers/internet** (e.g. *a few keys short of a keyboard*).

Using **the statistical data analysis method**, we extracted various information concerning the differences between English and Romanian in as far as productivity is concerned. Consequently, from a total of 140 English and Romanian *stupid* idioms, 87% are English, 58% under the form of idioms and 29% under the form of IBISes. Only 13% are Romanian, but, unlike their English counterparts, there is an equilibrium between idioms and IBISes: 6% idioms and 7% IBISes. The situation is not very different for *crazy*: from a total of one hundred English and Romanian idioms 75% being in English. The fact that, statistically, there are more *crazy* idioms than *stupid* in Romanian can be viewed as a relevant cultural aspect (see Chapter 4).

Chapter 2 classifies, for the first time, *stupid* and *crazy* idioms according to their patterns and compares the most successful English patterns with the most successful Romanian ones. This first-time type of event led to interesting findings, revealing the attitude of the two peoples with regards to the two categories of people. For instance, the most productive English pattern – ‘**not + superlative adjective + category**’, e.g. *not the quickest bunny in the forest* – produced zero idioms in Romanian. How come that such a prolific pattern has produced so many idioms in English and no idioms in Romanian? This is also a cultural fact and it has its explanation in Chapter 4. As a matter of fact, every category, every topic used and every pattern an idiom has in a language or another has a cultural explanation.

Chapter 3 deals with finding an answer to a fundamental question suggested by **Chapter 2: Are negative idioms more numerous than the positive or the neutral ones?** *Crazy* and *stupid* idioms, expressing negative characteristics of people, were chosen to be a part of the study for two reasons: on the one hand they are more numerous than the ones describing the opposite characteristics and, on the other, they are very popular. Using the same *off the top of my head technique* I realized that I could remember significantly more idioms describing negative characteristics or situations than idioms describing pleasant, positive things. This phenomenon was valid for both English and Romanian. I asked six colleagues of mine, all teachers of English, to do the same thing, and the results clearly showed that we tend to remember negative idioms in a higher number, both in English and in Romanian. Since we did not have enough subjects to consider the **questionnaire method** as a means of supporting the

theory that most idioms are negative, we had to roll up our metaphorical sleeves and do a contrastive study, counting the idioms one by one and doing the necessary math. Therefore, we chose three categories of human characteristics which were prone to have both negative and positive descriptions and sorted them out according to their negativity, positivity and neutrality: **1) *personality-character*, 2) *appearance* and 3) *happiness-misery*** (see sect 3.2.3.). The criteria according to which an idiom may be considered negative, positive or neutral were established in section 3.2.2.:

- **a negative idiom** is an idiom which describes a harmful, unpleasant or unwanted situation, fact of life or person, without necessarily having negative words in their composition.

Philosophy aside, the definition above laid the basis for the complete definition of the **positive** and **negative** idioms:

- **a positive idiom** is an idiom which describes a good quality or feature of a person or of a situation, without necessarily lacking negative words in its composition;

- **a neutral idiom** is an idiom which does not meet any of the conditions mentioned in the definition for the other two kind of idioms.

Gathering all the idioms and the IBISes which we could find in various printed dictionaries, but mainly on the Internet (a source which can no longer be considered a second-hand or unreliable source, especially if it is handled carefully), and calculating the percentages we learned that 55% of the *personality-character* idioms are negative (30% being positive and 15% neutral) and 64% of the *appearance* idioms are negative (with only 1 neutral idiom and 4 positive, out 14 idioms in total). Although the idioms in the third category, *happiness-misery*, show a perfect balance, with 13 negative and 13 positive (and only 1 neutral), the negative idioms were still the majority.

Considering that our choices in gathering only certain idioms may be regarded as subjective, we made a decision meant to show total objectivity: counting all the idioms found on 10 consecutive pages in an official dictionary of idioms. After calculating percentages, the results spoke for themselves (see sect. 3.2.4.). The two dictionaries chosen were *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (CIDI 2001), and *Dicționarul Frazeologic al Limbii Române* (DFLR, Totici 2009).

The results were as anticipated, but there was one thing standing out: the Romanian idioms showed a tendency of being more negative than the English ones. The numbers we had obtained so far could not be taken into consideration for a contrastive approach since the idioms

did not refer to the same realities. The pages had been chosen at random, therefore we decided to extend our research in a way that would leave no room for doubt.

Chart 7

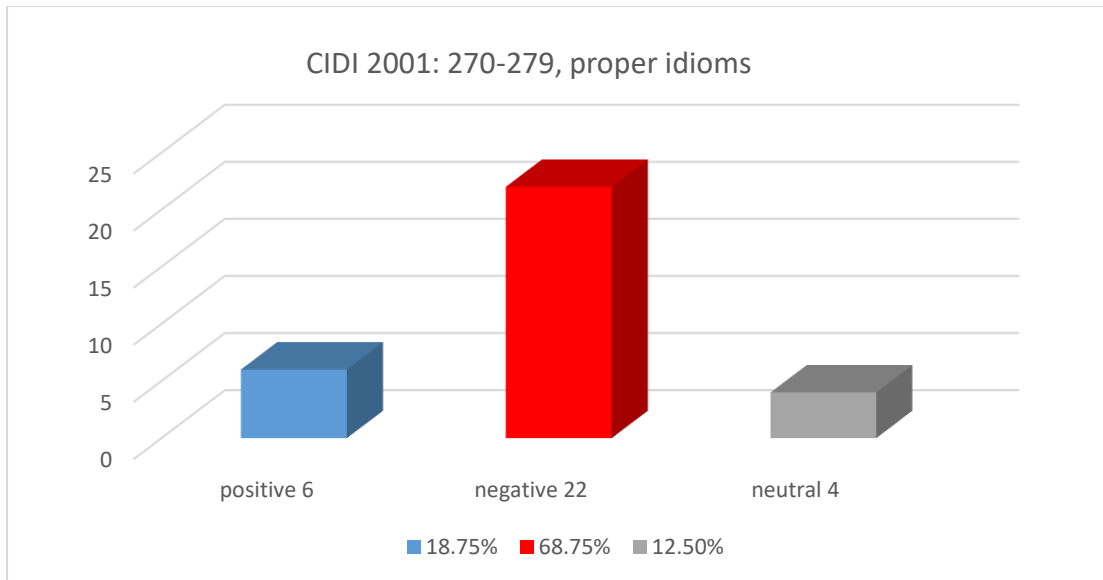
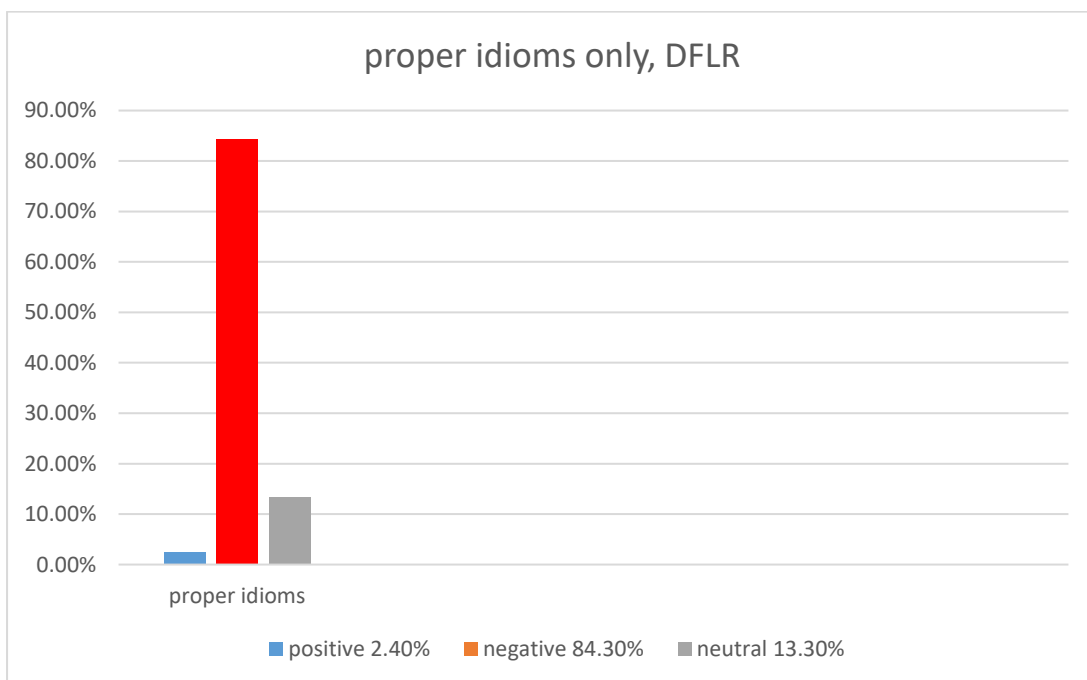


Chart 13. DFLR, proper idioms only



In order to put our theory to the test, we chose four domestic animals – the most beloved and the most common animals in the history of the human kind: the *dog*, the *cat*, the *horse* and the *ox/bull* – and looked for all the idioms with their names in them. The results revealed the

fact that, indeed, Romanian idioms are more negative than their English counterparts, as it can be seen in the table below (see **sect. 3.3.3.**).

Table 22 – English versus Romanian idioms

EN	positive	negative	neutral	RO	positive	negative	neutral
dog	6	15	7	câine	2	9	0
cat	4	14	4	pisică	1	10	0
horse	4	16	9	cal	2	13	4
Bull/ox	3	11	3	bou/taur	1	9	1

In percentages, there are 54% negative *dog* idioms versus 81% negative *câine* idioms, 64% negative *cat* idioms versus 91% negative *pisică* idioms, 55% negative *horse* idioms versus 68% negative *cal* idioms and 65% negative *ox/bull* negative idioms versus 82% negative *bou/taur* idioms. That facts that there are zero neutral *câine* and *pisică* and that the negativity is significantly higher in Romanian were discussed briefly in Chapter 4.

Just like a child who uses a certain set of words and has visible linguistic habits revealing, to some degree, how cultured his parents and their entourage are, the idioms a people uses reveal the culture of that people, with all its components: the beliefs, the customs, the history and the natural environment. As a matter of fact, the first two are under the influence of the last two, but all four of them are parts of the same concept named **culture**. Being fully aware that **culture** is a very complex phenomenon, we chose to consider only those theoretical aspects which supported our practical approach in **Chapter 4**. Consequently, our view on culture is defined not so much by what people in a community do, but by how the people in that community do the things that everybody does because, generally, people all over the world do the same things, but **what makes them different is how they do them**. For instance, people get married in almost every culture, but the rituals differ under the influence of the culture of the community in which the event takes place. The culture itself is, in its turn, influenced by a series of factors among which the most important are the history, the natural environment and the proximity with other cultures. And, since the most important means of communication in any culture is the language, the expressions used by the members of a community are the most advanced and the most subtle ambassadors of the respective culture. **Chapter 4** aims at demonstrating that **‘tell me what idioms you use, and I will tell you about your people’** is not just an intriguing play on words.

The culture of a people is embodied in the idioms they use to a greater extent than it is embodied in the proverbs they have due to the fact that proverbs belong to the literary language – the most famous old book of proverbs is entitled as such, *Books of Proverbs*, and it is in the Bible, the most translated book in the world, although there is an older book of proverbs, written on clay tablets, approximately 1,000 years older than the one in the Bible (see **sect. 4.5**). Arguably, idioms are used mainly in the spoken language. It goes without saying that writers use idioms and slang in order to create a certain atmosphere and to make some characters more credible, but it is the characters who use the spoken language, not the writers. For instance, there is a significant difference between the language used by the main character in *The Catcher in the Rye* uses – the rebel teenager – and the language used by Andrew Hodges in the biography of Alan Turing, the genius mathematician who broke the code used by the German army in World War II.

Taking into consideration what scientists in the field name anthropological culture, **Chapter 4** revisits the idioms studied in **Chapter 2** and **Chapter 3**, in an attempt to explain the situation expressed in numbers in these two chapters. Thus, the great difference between the percentages of the English and Romanian negative idioms in **Chapter 3** – where Romanian negative dog, cat, horse and ox/bull idioms are by 27% more than their English counterparts – cannot be explained outside the culture of the two people. Having no other means of measuring culture, stereotypes seemed to be one way of trying to get to an answer. Politically correct or not, stereotypes exist and they are based on the impression a people makes on the rest of the world. The existence of so many neutral English idioms, in comparison to the Romanian ones, may be caused by the famous English calm. The fact that the difference between the negative and the positive English idioms is not as big as their Romanian counterparts can also be explained through their distant attitude. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, there is a country whose people of Latin origins are known for having a shorter fuse, so to speak, and whose blood riches the boiling point faster. “True or not, the presumed more volcanic and more emotional character of Latin people, including the Romanians, can be an explanation for the lack of neutral idioms with *cat* and *dog*. This observation seems to be supported by some Romanian expressions which cannot be found in English: *ori e una, ori e alta* (it is either one or the other), *ori la bal, ori la spital* (it is either at the ball or at the hospital) and *eu te-am făcut, eu te omor* (I made you, I’ll kill you or It is I who made you, therefore it will be I who will kill you)” (see **sect. 4.5**).

Another intriguing fact which can be explained only through culture is the high rate of negative *horse* and *ox/bull* idioms both in English and in Romanian. After all, these two animals

played a very important role in the history of the two people. Why were they used mainly for producing negative idioms? The explanation lies in an English famous saying: **misery needs company**: “We consider that we are not wrong when we reach to the conclusion that the four animals were chosen to be part of negative idioms precisely because of the necessity of “seeing” a friendly face when needed” (see **sect. 4.5.**).

In as far as the *crazy* and the *stupid* idioms are concerned, revisited and analysed from a cultural point of view in sect. 4.6., their most successful patterns and topics reveal aspects of the two cultures. If it is true that a picture speaks a thousand words and that idioms are pictures of reality, made with words, then an idiom may speak a thousand words. For instance, the fact that the most productive English pattern, ‘**not + superlative adjective + category**’ has not produced a single idiom in Romanian may be caused by the fact that, from a historical point of view, the Romanian people has never had the chance to think in terms of superlative adjectives about themselves, at a national scale. In addition to that, using a pattern as the one above implies having a feature which characterizes the people who think they are the top of the food chain, so to speak: being judgemental. For centuries, the citizens of the now former British Empire have been told how great they are compared to the others. They had the most advanced industry, the greatest naval fleet, the biggest passenger boat in the world etc. They were used to thinking in superlative terms, therefore they would quickly notice when someone was the ‘adj-est’ in the bunch. This attitude, which caused the appearance of the pattern, was reinforced by another English-speaking nation having a similar attitude: the Americans.

To sum up, the way we speak is the way we think. The patterns and the topics used in producing idioms are the reflection of the mentality of a nation. A mentality built on the customs, beliefs, history and natural environment of that particular people. In a word, a mentality built on culture. We are certain that, if an all unknown civilization left behind would be a dictionary of their idioms, we would be able to extract valuable cultural information about them.

With its new classifications of idioms based on original criteria, 23 tables and 24 especially designed charts, based on 36 dictionaries and books on idioms, 17 online dictionaries and 30 novels and science books, and analysing about 480 idioms, our doctoral thesis went the extra mile and explored every avenue in an attempt to leave no stone unturned. Idiomatically speaking.

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