

# The Play of Familiarity and Predictability in English Business Idioms

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## Abstract

*This study looks at the use of idioms by Romanian business students learning English as a second language. An experiment has been conducted, in which 119 students of economic sciences were given the task to match 20 idioms to contexts in which they may be used (short sentences from which the idiom had been removed). The students were explained beforehand that each idiom matches one sentence, that all sentences are taken from business contexts and that none of the idioms is used literally. They were also asked to rate the degree of their familiarity with the idiom (1 – Familiar, 2 – Less familiar, 3 – Unfamiliar). The purpose of the study was to restrict the students from reverting to the literal meaning of the idioms and from decomposing them, in order to determine the play of familiarity and predictability in identifying the meaning of idioms.*

**Keywords:** idiom, predictability, familiarity, business, ESL

**J.E.L. classification:** A22

## 1. Introduction

The aim of the study is to analyse the familiarity of Romanian business students with some common English idioms in the field of economic studies and to cross-reference it with the predictability of the idiom, while limiting the impact of the literality and compositionality of the idiom. An experiment has been conducted, in which 119 students of economic sciences (52 1<sup>st</sup> year accounting students, 35 1<sup>st</sup> year finances and banks students, 14 1<sup>st</sup> year management students, 11 3<sup>rd</sup> year marketing students and 7 3<sup>rd</sup> year international business students) were given the task to match 20 idioms to contexts in which they may be used (short sentences from which the idiom had been removed).

The students were explained beforehand that each idiom matches one sentence, that all sentences are taken from business contexts and that none of the idioms is used literally. They were also asked to rate the degree of their familiarity with the idiom (1 – Familiar, 2 – Less familiar, 3 – Unfamiliar) and the time they took in deciding upon a match (1- Less than 30 seconds, 2 – Less than 1 minute, 3 – More than 1 minute). The students were given 50 minutes to complete the task. The study restricted the students from reverting to the literal meaning of the idioms and from decomposing them, in order to determine the play of familiarity and predictability in identifying the meaning of idioms.

## 2. Materials and methods

The research method used was the matching of 20 idioms which had been removed from sentences, to the respective sentences. Students were explained beforehand that the literal meaning is never used. Only a quarter of the idioms can be decomposed to understand the figurative meaning.

The students' answers were then cross-referenced with their rating on familiarity, resulting how

many of the students picking the right answers were familiar with the idiom, and how many were not (they predicted the meaning of the idiom). Another interesting aspect is that of idioms known to the students, but which were matched with the wrong context, in which case we analyse the false friends.

Students were given the possibility not to make all the matches in case they could not establish a connection between a certain idiom and a context, in order to avoid mechanical matches which are not based on a logical process form the part of the student.

Similar research has been conducted by Wendy A. Schweigert (1986), Robert Timothy Reagan (1987), Gregory Schraw et al. (1988), Stephen J. Popiel and Ken McRae (1988), Alison Ai Ching Lim et al. (2009), Zahra Fotovatnia and Mehdi Goudarzi (2014) etc.

### 3. Four characteristics of idioms: familiarity literality, compositionality and predictability

Idioms have been defined as “common figurative expressions used in colloquial speech [...] characterized by a figurative or idiomatic meaning that cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual words in the phrase” (Schweigert, 1986, pp. 33, see also Reagan, 1987, pp. 417). However, several idiom-processing models have been advanced, some of them admitting to the compositionality of idioms, i.e. the possibility to draw the meaning by considering the constituting lexemes of the idiom. For instance, the Idiomatic Processing Model (proposed by Gibbs, 1980 and Schweigert and Moates, 1988) states that the figurative meaning is activated first, while the Idiom Decomposition Hypothesis (of Gibbs and Nayak, 1989) admits that in the case of some idioms the meaning can be drawn by analyzing its constituent words (Ai Ching Lim, et al., 2009, p. 1779). Similarly, Bobrow and Bell’s (1973) Idiom List Hypothesis proposes that idioms are stored separately from the rest of the lexicon, while Cronk et al., 1993 and Swinney and Cutler, 1979 propose the Lexical Representation Hypothesis supporting the opposite, that idioms are stored and retrieved like all the other words (Ai Ching Lim, et al., 2009, p. 1779).

There are several idiom characteristics to take into account, such as familiarity (how well known the idiom is), literality (idioms may have both literal and figurative meanings), compositionality (the possibility of decomposing the idiom in order to understand the figurative meaning) and predictability. This study dwells on familiarity and predictability, trying to establish the degree in which Romanian business students are able to either activate or to predict the figurative meaning of idioms.

### 4. Familiarity versus predictability

The quantitative analysis of the student’s answers resulted in Table no. 1, which shows for each idiom the number of students who made matches, the number of correct matches and further the number of students with correct matches who declared being familiar, less familiar or unfamiliar with the idiom. The last column represents correct matches which were not rated in terms of familiarity.

Table no. 1 Cross-reference of the familiarity and predictability of idioms

Idiom	No. of answers	No. of correct answers	Of which:			
			1 – Familiar	2 – Less Familiar	3 – Unfamiliar	4 – Unspecified
1. for love or money	105	62	17	14	18	10
2. close the books	100	37	4	20	11	2
3. sweetheart deal	100	35	8	13	6	8
4. buy off	101	33	8	9	12	4
5. elephant in the room	98	33	13	7	8	5
6. highway robbery	99	31	10	8	7	6
7. work out	105	28	11	7	7	3
8. white-collar	93	27	7	7	10	3
9. banker's hours	105	26	4	8	12	2
10. in the red	102	26	3	7	10	6
11. face value	96	26	4	13	6	3
12. take a nosedive	99	23	4	2	11	6

Idiom	No. of answers	No. of correct answers	Of which:			
			1 – Familiar	2 – Less Familiar	3 – Unfamiliar	4 – Unspecified
13. cut corners	96	22	5	2	10	3
14. keeping books	102	20	4	3	8	5
15. break even	109	17	3	9	3	2
16. take public	93	17	2	5	7	3
17. cooking the books	106	13	2	4	4	3
18. pay-off	96	12	4	2	2	4
19. throw money at	100	12	5	2	3	2
20. write off	111	11	3	5	2	1

The table clearly shows that for the idioms at numbers 1-4 and 8-17, more students who made correct matches rated the idioms as unfamiliar, whereas a significant number of students rated the idioms as less familiar. This is irrespective of the compositionality properties of idioms. Therefore, idioms at numbers 1-4 and 8-17 were more predictable than familiar.

## 5. False friends

Table number 2 shows the most common associations between an idiom and a context for which it is not appropriate.

Table no. 2 Frequent associations

Context of the idiom	Frequent association 1		Frequent association 2	
	Idiom	No.	Idiom	No.
work out	break even	14	for love or money	6
for love or money	banker's hours	14	white-collar	9
write off	work out	21	pay-off	11
banker's hours	elephant in the room	10	face value	9
break even	write off	14	take a nosedive	15
keeping books	buy off	9	take public	8
cooking the books	cut corners	15	in the red / close the books	8
highway robbery	cooking the books	13	elephant in the room	14
in the red	cooking the books	15	banker's hours	11
face value	work out	20	pay-off	9
pay-off	keeping books	8	write off	24
throw money at	break even	11	close the books	11
take a nosedive	break even	10	throw money at	7
white-collar	face value	11	pay-off	15
buy off	write off	10	break even	9
close the books	in the red	15	cooking the books / break even / highway robbery	8
take public	break even	10	throw money at	18
cut corners	take a nosedive	9	close the books	7
elephant in the room	cooking the books	7	highway robbery	8
sweetheart deal	pay-off	18	face value	10

Such associations may be based on the unpredictability of the idioms and on the fact that although the students have heard the idioms in use before, they are not yet familiar with their meanings. Therefore, the wrong associations come in when the idiom is neither familiar, nor predictable.

## 5. Conclusion

The experiment dwells on the fact that two of the characteristics of idioms (compositionality, literality) were limited or removed altogether, the students having to rely on familiarity and predictability and on the given contexts. The context is also limited and the students did not have the possibility to check that they have the right understanding of the context. Therefore, when all three elements converged (the two active characteristics and the right understanding of the context), the students made a correct match. When two of the three elements converged, the students made either a correct or an incorrect match (i.e. if the context is understood correctly, only one of the two characteristics of idioms is necessary in order to make a correct match). Although some students did make right matches based on only one of the three elements, there were students who declared that certain idioms are familiar to them and still made incorrect matches (i.e. they misunderstood the context).

Given the above, we can draw the conclusion that a sentence or a context share the same type of characteristics as idioms (literality, compositionality, familiarity and predictability). By ripping an idiom from the context or the context from the idiom, there is a double negotiation – the students had to negotiate between the figurative and the literal meaning of both the context and the idiom, in function of each other.

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