

# **The Role of Cognitive Mechanisms and Semantic Motivation in Business English Idioms Acquisition: An experimental study**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the possible application of cognitive semantics in the process of teaching and learning Business English idioms. The theoretical assumptions of this study are based on the cognitivist view that idioms are, to a certain extent, semantically motivated by cognitive mechanisms, with the conceptual metaphor being the most dominant one. This study is an attempt to test the hypothesis that metaphoric conceptualisation can contribute to a more successful acquisition of idioms, especially in comparison to pure memorisation of the same linguistic expressions. This small-scale experiment was carried out with 20 Business and Economics students divided into the experimental group and the control group. The students in the experimental group were introduced to the semantic motivation of idiom meaning, whereas the control-group students were taught the same idioms in the traditional way. After being presented with the carefully selected idioms in two different ways, the students in both groups were required to do four different types of exercises with a view to testing the semantic motivation hypothesis. As a result, the research findings and the results obtained in this experimental study suggest that the awareness of cognitive mechanism and semantic motivation behind the meaning of idioms can significantly assist students in the process of a somewhat systematic and consistent acquisition of Business English idioms.

**Keywords:** Idiomatic expressions, Business English, cognitive mechanisms, conceptual metaphor, semantic motivation, language acquisition

## **Introduction: Traditional vs. Cognitivist view of idioms**

Contrary to the traditional view of learning idioms as ‘dead’ metaphors, the cognitivist view suggests that the meanings of idioms (or the majority of them) are semantically motivated and not arbitrary (Gibbs 1994; Kövecses & Szabo 1996; Lakoff 1987). The semantic motivation stems from the cognitive mechanisms such as the conceptual metaphor, the conceptual metonymy, and conventional knowledge (Lakoff 1987), which link different domains to the meanings of idioms. ‘The

motivation for the occurrence of particular words in a large number of idioms can be thought of as a cognitive mechanism that links domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings', Kövecses & Szabo (1996: 330). In the cognitivist light of idiom interpretations, these linguistic units are perceived as part of our conceptual world, belonging both to the language and mind. As a result, idioms are semantically motivated by conceptual mappings that are formed in the world of concepts and reflected onto the language. Such a perception of idioms highlights the partial compositionality of idioms, which enables a much easier semantic interpretation (Gibbs 1994). This view of idioms was the starting point for our experimental study with the example of Business English idioms.

### **Research objectives and methods**

Having in mind the conceptual nature and the semantic motivation of idioms, we wanted to investigate the pedagogical aspect of cognitivist view of idioms. We chose to carry out a small-scale experiment to check if the cognitivist theoretical framework could facilitate the teaching and learning of idioms. For that purpose, we decided to focus our research on BE idioms. The basis for the experiment was an in-depth cognitivist study of Business English idioms conducted by Milošević (2008). In that comprehensive thesis, Milošević (2008) investigated the semantic motivation of BE idioms within the theoretical framework of Cognitive Semantics, detecting four cognitive mechanisms<sup>1</sup> behind the semantics of idioms together with 18 source domains motivating the meanings of the idioms under examination.

As regards the methodology for this experiment, we exploited the basic ideas of similar experimental studies undertaken by Boers et al. (2000) and Kövecses & Szabo (1996). The main hypothesis was that the awareness of the semantic motivation of BE idioms produces better results than mere memorisation in the teaching/learning of BE idioms. Although no rigorous statistical method was implemented in the results analysis, the research findings supported the hypothesis that learning is more successful when students are aware of the semantic motivation of BE idioms.

### **Research procedure**

The subjects of the study were 20 second-year students studying Business and Economics at Belgrade Business School. These students were chosen bearing in mind that they were already learning business English at the college and were

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<sup>1</sup> The four mechanisms identified in the research are: the conceptual metaphor, the conceptual metonymy, conventional knowledge and conceptual blending.

familiar with the basics of Business terminology. Moreover, their English was at the upper-intermediate level, which was a sufficient level for this experiment. The students were divided into two groups: control group A and experimental group B, each composed of 10 students. In order to make both groups equal with regard to their level of English knowledge, subjects were asked to do a general English test (*Quick Placement Test, Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate*). After analyzing the test scores, we divided the students into two groups: the control group had an overall score of 78.25%, whereas the experimental group's overall score was 78.75%.

The experiment consisted of two parts. The first part involved a lecture on Business English idioms, whereas the second part involved the testing of BE idioms. It is important to point out that the subjects were not familiar with the BE idioms they were taught (and later tested on) before the experimental study was conducted. The experiment started with a 20-minute lecture for both groups. Both groups were introduced to and taught the following twelve BE idioms: *a business angel, a sinking ship, a green product, a bidding war, fresh blood, given a red card, white-collar worker, economic chill, a safe bet, locust funds, to get off the ground, and economic headwinds*. The selected idioms reflect 12 different source domains, which, owing to various conceptual metaphors<sup>2</sup> identified by Milosevic (2008)<sup>3</sup>, establish the conceptual mappings with the target domain of BUSINESS/ECONOMY.

In the case of Group A, the procedure was as follows. All twelve BE idioms were written on the white board and the meanings of all twelve idioms were explained. The idioms were also exemplified by one sentence containing the given idiom together with the Serbian translation. After the lecture, the students had 15 minutes to memorise the given idioms. Then, the students were asked to do a four-exercise test, which lasted 40 minutes.

In the experimental Group B, the teaching of idioms involved a slightly different procedure compared to the control Group A. Namely, the idioms were also written on the white board and the meaning of each idiom was explained and exemplified with one major exception. Unlike the students in Group A, while teaching the selected idioms to students in Group B we introduced the fact that these idioms might be semantically motivated by the conceptual metaphors established between the various source domains (WAR, SAILING, etc.) and the target domain of BUSINESS. For example, when explaining the meaning of an idiom *a bidding war*,

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<sup>2</sup> Since this was small-scale research, the emphasis was on the conceptual metaphor as the primary cognitive mechanism responsible for the semantic motivation of BE idioms.

<sup>3</sup> In his work, Milošević (2008) recorded and conducted a detailed semantic analysis of almost 400 BE idioms in a corpus-based study within the framework of Cognitive Semantics.

the students were presented with the conceptual metaphors DOING BUSINESS IS WAGING WARS and COMPANIES/BUSINESSMEN ARE WARRIORS. Similarly, an idiom *a safe bet* involved introducing the following metaphors BUSINESS IS A GAMBLE and INVESTORS ARE GAMBLERS. The same process was reiterated with all 12 BE idioms. The aim of this teaching/learning procedure was to raise the experimental-group students' awareness of the semantic motivation of BE idioms by drawing attention to the fact that various conceptual metaphors motivate the semantics of the BE idioms under examination, forming conceptual mappings between the established source domains and the domain of BUSINESS. These students also had fifteen minutes to learn the presented BE idioms, but, unlike the Group A students, the Group B students were expected to develop links between the given idioms and the presented conceptual metaphors. Then, the students in Group B were given 40 minutes to complete a four-exercise test.

As mentioned earlier, the test that the students in both groups were asked to do had four different exercises. The total number of idioms in all four exercises was 48<sup>4</sup>. The first exercise was a gap-fill exercise with 12 sentences that were missing the 12 BE idioms with which the students had been presented during the lecturing process. The second exercise consisted of 10 sentences and 10 new BE idioms with a gap-fill task as well. The sameness of the first two exercises was not coincidental. The second exercise was devised with a view to checking the students' ability to apply the knowledge of the semantic motivation of BE idioms to previously unknown idioms. The third exercise with a more creative task was made up of six sentences containing idioms with one word missing, which needed to be completed with six out of 12 given words. The missing words were the words that were a clear indication of the source domains they originated from (e.g. *slide* – PHYSICAL MOVEMENT, *blue* – COLOUR, etc.). Finally, the fourth exercise involved twenty BE idioms divided into two columns of 10 idioms and was the most demanding one. The 10 idioms in both columns belonged to the same source domains. The students were instructed to match the idioms based on the potential similarity between the given idioms. The first aim of this exercise was to see if the students in the control group could perceive any similarity between the idioms, and the second was to check to what extent the experimental group students would recall the semantic motivation of idioms and be able to apply that knowledge in the matching exercise accordingly. Here are the two hypotheses that we wanted to test:

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<sup>4</sup> The 48 tested idioms encompassed all 18 source domains that motivated the semantics of BE idioms detected by Milošević (2008).

- a) If semantic motivation is more useful than the mere memorisation in the process of idiom teaching/learning, group B will have more correct responses in exercise 1.
- b) If semantic motivation plays a positive role in idiom acquisition, group B will score higher in exercises 2, 3 and 4, which involve more creative tasks in three different types of exercises.

We will now investigate the results in relation to the two hypotheses. The data analysis is presented in the next section.

### Data analysis and results

Let us now look at the results of the experimental study. Table 1 presents the maximum number of points for each of the four exercises, the number of points scored by Groups A and B respectively.

**Table 1.**Number of points for

<u>Maximum number of points</u>	<u>Group A</u>	<u>Group B</u>	
Exercise 1	120 (100%)	102 (85%)	117 (97,5%)
Exercise 2	100 (100%)	58 (58%)	70 (70%)
Exercise 3	60 (100%)	31 (51, 66%)	35 (58, 33%)
Exercise 4	100 (100%)	42 (42%)	63 (63%)

As the findings in table 1 show, experimental Group B students performed better in all four exercises. Taking into account the results, let us examine the two hypotheses. In Exercise 1, both groups recorded high scores. Group A scored 102 correct responses, which is 85 per cent of the possible 120 responses. Group B scored 117, which is 97.5 per cent. The high scores of both groups in Exercise 1 – 97.5 per cent for Group B and 85 per cent for Group A – can be attributed to the fact that the

exercise contained the same idioms that students were taught during the lecture 15 minutes prior to the test. Even so, Group B outperformed Group A by 12 per cent. In Exercise 2, the scores were lower, namely 70 and 58 per cent for Groups B and A respectively, because the idioms were all new to the participants, so they had to perform a more creative task. Nevertheless, Group B achieved a 12 per cent higher score. The difference in the third exercise was somewhat smaller, with Group B scoring 58.33 per cent and Group A 51.66 per cent, for two reasons: This was a more complex type of exercise that required the application of semantic compositionality of idioms and the number of overall points was significantly lower (60 points) than the number of points in exercise 1 (120 points) and exercise 2 (100 points). Finally, the largest difference was recorded in the fourth exercise, with Group B scoring 21 per cent higher than Group A. This discrepancy probably arises from the fact that the students in Group B were aware of the existence of various source domains that motivated the meanings of the BE idioms. The higher scores achieved by Group B in exercises 2, 3 and 4 appear to support the second hypothesis. To sum up, Group B produced better results in all four exercises, with the difference ranging from 6.67 to 21 percent.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that both groups recorded considerably lower scores in Exercises 2, 3 and 4 in comparison to Exercise 1. There may be at least two reasons for this. The first, more obvious reason may be the fact that in Exercise 1, the students were tested all the idioms they had been taught in the lecture 15 minutes before the test. The second, less evident reason might be the fact that Exercises 2, 3 and 4 contained new idioms, and the students had to predict their meanings. Since we already know that prediction is to be distinguished from motivation (Lakoff 1987), the lower scores are not surprising. Nevertheless, the higher scores recorded by Group B indicate that the awareness of semantic motivation and cognitive mechanisms can assist students in the idiom acquisition process.

Based on the results analysis, it is tempting to assert that higher scores achieved by Group B in all four exercises are a result of the Group B students' knowledge of conceptual metaphors and the existence of various source domains whose elements are mapped onto the domain of BUSINESS. This knowledge helped them match the idiomatic expressions with a greater facility in comparison to Group A. According to the analysed data, it is evident that there is a clear tendency towards more effective acquisition of BE idioms if the awareness of their semantic motivation is present. Clearly, the findings clearly show that the knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms that motivate the semantics of idioms contributes to a more successful learning of idioms compared to the traditional learning through the 'blind' memorisation process.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that this was a small-scale study without any in-depth statistical analysis, its results are still sufficient to support the conclusion that awareness of the conceptual structure of BE idioms and of the existence of cognitive mechanisms behind their meanings – especially the conceptual metaphor – significantly facilitates the acquisition of BE idioms. Taking into account the research findings and subsequent interviews with the subjects of the experiment, we may say that the knowledge of the semantic motivation of idioms helps students learn these linguistic units more successfully. This claim can be corroborated by the score in all four exercises, which evidently demonstrates that the experimental group students achieved consistently higher results than the control group students. On the other hand, it is important to underline the fact that the semantic motivation of BE does not mean that the meanings of the observed idioms are fully predictable (Kövecses & Szabo 1996: 330). However, the semantic motivation of BE idioms opens up endless possibilities for a more comprehensive description of the idiomatic meanings, which carries considerable pedagogical implications. All in all, we hope that this experiment might carve out a path to a more systematic acquisition of idioms by making students aware of the cognitive mechanisms that motivate the semantics of these linguistic expressions.

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