

# **A Study of Selected English Idioms**

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Bachelor Thesis  
2011



**Tomas Bata University in Zlín**  
Faculty of Humanities

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Univerzita Tomáše Bati ve Zlíně

Fakulta humanitních studií

Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

akademický rok: 2010/2011

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení: **Tomáš KUNDRATA**  
Osobní číslo: **H08340**  
Studijní program: **B 7310 Filologie**  
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro manažerskou praxi**

Téma práce: **Studie vybraných anglických idiomů**

Zásady pro vypracování:

**Studium tématické literatury**  
**Vymezení a charakteristika pojmu idiom**  
**Formulování hypotézy**  
**Výzkum pomocí dotazníkové metody**  
**Vyhodnocení dotazníku**  
**Potvrzení či vyvrácení hypotézy**

Rozsah bakalářské práce:

Rozsah příloh:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Seznam odborné literatury:

**Dopjerová-Danthine, Mária. 2002. Anglické idiomy pod lupou. Bratislava: Remedium**  
**Baker, Mona. 2010. In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.**

**Collins, Vere Henry. 1985. Book of English Idioms. New York: Longman.**

**Greenbaum, Sidney, Geoffrey Leech, Randolph Quirk and Jan Svartvik. 1985. A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. New York: Longman.**

Vedoucí bakalářské práce:

**Mgr. Hana Čechová**

Ústav anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání bakalářské práce:

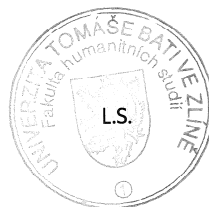
**1. února 2011**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce:

**6. května 2011**

Ve Zlíně dne 1. února 2011

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá idiomy a idiomatickými výrazy. Teoretická část se zaměřuje na komplexní vysvětlení pojmu idiom. K úplnému pochopení tohoto pojmu budou poskytnuty různé definice s příklady. Dále teoretická část zkoumá dva významy idiomů, doslovný a obrazný; a také zkoumá ekvivalenci idiomů mezi češtinou a angličtinou.

Praktická část této bakalářské práce se skládá ze dvou částí. První část je zaměřená na studium vybraných anglických idiomů, zejména na jejich etymologii. Druhá část předkládá průzkum mezi Brity.

Klíčová slova: Idiom, Idiomatická spojení, Ekvivalent, Původ, Průzkum, Fráze, Idiomatická etymologie.

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis deals with idioms and idiomatic expressions. The theoretical part of the bachelor thesis focuses on complex explanations of the term “idiom.” Numerous definitions with examples will be provided to define the term “idiom.” Furthermore, the theoretical part explores two possible meanings of idioms, the literal and the figurative; and it also researches equivalency of idioms in Czech and in English.

The practical part of this bachelor thesis consists of two parts. The first part focuses on a study of selected English idioms, mainly on their etymology. The second part is comprised of a survey on idioms carried out among British participants.

Keywords: Idiom, Equivalent, Origin, Survey, Phrase, Etymology of idioms

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Hana Čechová for all the valuable advice and I would also like to thank my family and Miss Kamila Fridrichová for all their support. Last but not least, I would like to thank Dr. Wade Provo, Professor Emeritus of Modern Languages, Rockford, Illinois, U.S.A. for a proof-reading of my thesis.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

”It is understanding that gives us an ability to have peace. When we understand the other fellow’s point of viewpoint, and he understands ours, we can sit down and work out our differences.”

Harry S. Truman

It is true that we cannot achieve much without understanding each other. Not only to achieve something significant, but even to exist, we have to communicate with others, and in order to do so, we need a tool. A language. Today, English is a language of world importance. To fully understand the language and also people who use the language, we have to master all of its aspects. One of those aspects of the English language is idioms. But, what actually is an idiom? What features does it possess? How can we recognize it in a text? How important are idioms? How often are they used by native speakers? Is it worth learning them? This aim of this thesis is to give answers to all of these questions; in fact, most of them should be answered by a survey taken among British native speakers. I believe that idioms are an important component of the English language and that their knowledge can help us understand English and to express ourselves more eloquently. They can simply help us sound more natural. Moreover, I am going to research selected idioms, mainly their meaning, and I’m also going to find out, whether their origin is known or not, and if so, answer the question, “How can that be of value to us?”

# **I. THEORY**

## 1 DEFINITION OF THE TERM “IDIOM”

”An idiom is a phrase or an expression with a special meaning that is different from the individual meanings of the words – for example, “to sleep like a dog” means to sleep very soundly; “to rain cats and dogs” means to rain heavily” (Gardner 2005).

From the syntactic point of view, an idiom is a phrase or a sequence of words, but from the semantic point of view, it functions as a single word (Palmer 1976). David Crystal (Crystal 1997) states that, the term “word” is not sufficient for study of idioms because, for example, the idiom *let the cat out of the bag* consists of seven words and, therefore, it is senseless to say that a word consists of seven words. And because of this, linguists use the terms *lexeme* and *lexical item* which are also used to refer to idioms. The term *lexeme* will be used in this thesis.

“Idioms behave as though they were syntactically complex words whose meaning cannot be predicted, since their syntactic structure is doing no semantic work” (Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish 2005).

Idioms are a result of complex linguistic development. They used to be metaphorical expressions that established themselves through constant reuse, gained figurative meaning and finally became frozen (Cowie et al. 1983).

In addition to this, Kvetko (Kvetko 2005) states that idioms are institutionalized; this means that they are regarded as units by the target language community.

To sum this all up, a list of qualities of idioms can be made from previously cited definitions:

1. An idiom is a special type of phrase.
2. It has a special and fixed meaning which was established through long-term reuse.
3. This figurative meaning cannot be predicted from the words that form an idiom. That is why non-native speakers have to learn it by heart in order to use the idiom properly.
4. An idiom is a multi-word expression, but it operates from a syntactic point of view as a single word and is considered a single lexeme from a semantic point of view.
5. Idioms are petrified and allow little or no variation.
6. They are wide-spread enough to be widely recognized by speakers of a language.
7. Idioms retain exactly the same meaning, no matter what type of variation they undergo (Kvetko 2005).

## 1.1 Importance of idioms

Idioms are used very frequently in English and occur in almost any type of text. Halliday and Yallop (Halliday and Yallop 2007) say that native speakers love idioms, because they consider them to be an important part of their cultural heritage.

For non-native speakers, idioms represent a serious challenge in understanding the language because their meaning cannot be retrieved from the words, thus understanding idioms is crucial for effective communication (Gardner 2005). On the other hand, Halliday and Yallop (ibid 2007) highlight the fact, that non-native speakers are in the habit of overusing those idioms they have learned. Parker and Riley (Parker and Riley 2005) say that idioms are often inconceivable to foreign-language learners, and they would rather use non-idiomatic equivalents, even in expressive tasks. The bigger mismatch between literal and figurative meaning, the harder it is to understand the idiom for a non-native speaker.

Language is alive. People love to play with language, and idioms are a great example of it, so we can now often see artificial terms like *bucket list* which means a list of things a person would like to do before he or she passes away, and that meaning is clearly conveyed by the idiom *kick the bucket*.

## 1.2 Literal and figurative meaning

All idioms have both literal and figurative meanings; however, in some cases, the literal meaning is illogical because idioms often do not follow standard rules of syntax and semantics. This is why Fromkin (Fromkin 2000) says that the fixed meaning of an idiom must be learned.

(1) *Kick the bucket.*

The literal meaning is “to kick the bucket;” the figurative is “to die.”

(2) *Kick the wooden pail.*

The literal meaning is “to kick the pail;” there is no figurative meaning.

(3) *Die*

The literal meaning is “to deprive of life;” there is no figurative meaning.

(Akmajian 2005)

Palmer (Palmer 1976) says, that however idiomatic meaning cannot be predicted from the words of an idiom, sometimes its meaning is closely related to one word of an idiom. Thus *kick the bucket* means *die*. Kvetko (Kvetko 2005) provides extensive research on

opacity of idioms and classifies idioms as pure idioms, partially motivated idioms and semi-idioms according to their degree of opacity.

1. Pure idioms (demotivated idioms, opaque idioms, and phraseological fusions) – The meaning of idioms from this group is not in any way connected to the words of the idioms. Examples: *White elephant*, *hair of the dog that bit you*. Kvetko also used idiom *kick the bucket* as an example, but Palmer used the same idiom as an example for transparency of meaning.
2. Partially motivated idioms (semi-opaque idioms, figurative idioms, phraseological unities) – There can be found some semantic relation between an idiom from this group and its constituent. Examples: *have a free hand*, *behind closed doors*, *add fuel to the flames*.
3. Semi-idioms (semi-transparent idioms, phraseological combinations, restricted collocations) - Idioms from this group combine both literal and figurative meanings. One word from an idiom of this group carries literal meaning, and the other word carries figurative meaning. Examples: *foot the bill*, *lie through one's teeth*.

Most of the English idioms are monosemous, which means that they can be explained only in one way, but there is also a small number of polysemous idioms, for example, the idiom *to be in the air* which means either *to be in circulation/about to happen*, or it can mean *uncertain/undecided* (Kvetko 2005).

### **1.3 Idioms vs. other multiword expressions**

There are several multiword expressions in English, for instance, idioms, collocations, proverbs, etc. In this part of my thesis, I would like to describe them and explain how they differ from idioms.

#### **1.3.1 Collocations**

Collocations are combinations of words which sound natural to native speakers, for example, in English it is normal to say *strong wind* and *heavy rain*, but not *\*heavy wind* and *\*strong rain*. (Oxford Collocation Dictionary 2003). Here are some examples of collocations:

- (1) Sell a television.
- (2) Sale of a television.
- (3) A television has been sold.

#### (4) Having sold a television

We can see that unlike the idioms, the meaning of these collocations is completely transparent and their pattern is relatively flexible. Moreover, we can also see each grammatical rule in these examples has a corresponding semantic principle (Cacciari and Tabossi 1993).

A meaning of a word in a collocation is often influenced by other words with which it collocates, but the meaning can still be easily identified.

Example: *luxurious house* is a house which is very expensive and comfortable. We can retrieve the meaning of both parts of this collocation without any problem, as long as we know the words used (Baker 1992).

Each word of a collocation has a separate meaning, and we can easily understand the meaning of the whole collocation simply by combining those meanings. But this approach doesn't work for idioms, and thus *red herring* has nothing to do with fish or red color, but means *to draw attention away from the central issue*.

“Idioms and fixed expressions are at the extreme end of the scale from collocations in one or both of these areas: flexibility of patterning and transparency of meaning” (Baker 1992, 63).

### 1.3.2 Proverbs and fixed expressions

Fixed expression such as *Ladies and Gentlemen, so to speak, best regards* and proverbs such as *You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar, A stitch in time saves nine* and *Ignorance is bliss* are similar to idioms in that they allow little or no variation in form, and they have to be taken as one lexeme to establish meaning. The meaning is transparent, but these phrases mean more than just the words of which they consist. It is because we know the context in which they are usually used (Baker 1992).

### 1.3.3 Phrasal verbs

A phrasal verb is a combination of a verb and an adverb. Common examples are *make up* and *give in*. Phrasal verbs are much like idioms because their meaning cannot be predicted. Phrasal verbs can often be replaced by non-phrasal verbs because there is usually a verb with the same or very similar meaning. There are many phrasal verbs with both literal and figurative meanings. For example, *put down* has a literal meaning and various figurative meanings with several degrees of idiomacity:

#### (1) To write down

*To jot down everything she says.*

- (2) To bring to an end

*Will Qaddafi put down rebellion and maintain power?*

- (3) To subject an animal to euthanasia

*We had to put down our dog when I was a kid.*

These are only 3 much more figurative meanings the verb phrase *put down* has. Other meanings are either not frequent or informal (Palmer 1976).

#### **1.3.4 Similes**

Similes are phrases that describe one element by comparing it to another one, often comparing to a thing which is known for its specific quality to stress the quality for the element compared. For instance, *fight like a lion, swim like a dolphin, tough as bull, black as night*.

#### **1.3.5 Binomials and trinomials**

Binomials and trinomials are phrases that contain two or three related or similar words. As well as idioms, binomials and trinomials tend to be frozen in their construction and meaning (Kvetko 2005). For example: *hook, line and sinker; here and there; now and then; spick and span*.

#### **1.3.6 Social formulae**

Everyday phrases used in certain situations. For instance *How do you do? What's up? long time no see* (Kvetko 2005).

Some of these types of phrases possess a certain degree of idiomacity (their meaning is different from the meaning of their constituents), but they are not considered to be true idioms because they do not display one or more qualities specific for idioms. These qualities were described in chapter 1.

However, a substantial number of linguists would disagree with this statement and would rather define some or all of these types of phrases as idioms, mainly because of the idiomacity they possess.

### **1.4 Recognition of idioms in text**

Baker (Baker 1992) in her book *In other words* shows that there are various types of idioms divided according to their discriminability.



1. Idioms violating true conditions – These idioms can be recognized very easily, because their literal meaning does not make any sense in a given context. For example: *Don't let the grass grow under one's feet, cat got one's tongue, throw out the baby with the bath water, to rain cats and dogs etc.*
2. Idioms violating grammar rules – Phrases which do not follow rules of standard grammar are likely to be idioms and they are easily recognizable as well. For example: *trip the light fantastic, blow someone to kingdom come etc.*
3. Idioms that start with *like* – The word *like* should alert us that we could be dealing with an idiom or some other expression that should not be interpreted literally.

These three groups represent idioms which can be recognized quite easily

“Generally speaking, the more difficult an expression is to understand and the less sense it makes in a given context, the more likely a translator will recognize it as an idiom” (Baker 1992, 65).

## 1.5 Relations among idioms

Kvetko (Kvetko 2005) provides a list of relations among English idioms along with examples.

1. Homonymous idioms – These idioms have the same written or spoken form, but they carry different meanings.  
Example: *make hay* – to cause disorder  
*make hay* – take advantage of
2. Synonymous idioms – Idioms from this group bear the same or similar meanings.  
Example: *an eye for an eye, tit for tat*
3. Antonymous idioms – Idioms with opposite meanings can be found in this group.  
Example: *small beer x big fish*  
*hard nut to crack x child's play*

## 1.6 Construction of idioms

Idioms can be divided into four groups according to their construction (Kvetko 2005, 106).

1. Idioms with verbal syntagmatic structure – So called verbal idioms, comprised of a verb and an object.  
Examples: *make up one's mind, build castles in Spain, kick the bucket*

2. Idioms with a different syntagmatic structure without a verb – So called verbless idioms. This group includes nominal, adjectival and adverbial idioms.

Examples: *Once in a blue moon, as fit as a fiddle, tooth and nail.*

3. Idioms with a sentence structure – Also known as sentence idioms.

Examples: *Talk of a devil and he'll soon appear, don't count your chicken before they are hatched.*

4. Minimal idioms – idiomatic expressions with at least one fully lexical word.

Examples: *Of course, by heart, like hell.*

## 2 FEATURES OF IDIOMS

Some idioms tend to be completely frozen, and their structure cannot be changed e.g. *it's raining cats and dogs*. Other idioms offer some kind of variability: they can be passivized, used in the plural, etc. However, most idioms are in the grey area between the two extremes, of complete invariance and wide alterability (Halliday and Yallop 2007).

This level of variability differs from idiom to idiom, and a non-native speaker cannot hope to achieve the same sensitivity to estimate whether an idiom can be manipulated or not (Baker 1992).

During the passivization (the process in which an agent subject becomes a patient subject) of an idiom, a part of this idiom may become separated, like in *the beans were by then pretty well spilled*. This detached part of the idiom is called an idiom chunk (Matthews 1997).

Even though that idiom is semantically considered to be a word, it does not act like one, so we cannot, for example, create the past tense by simply putting the suffix *-ed* to the end of the idiom.

- (1) \*Kick the bucketed.
- (2) Kicked the bucket.

\*marks non-standard or grammatically incorrect sentences.

### 2.1 Grammatical features

Idioms and idiomatic expressions do not follow standard grammatical rules, mainly because of the fact that their elements do not have any meaning (Cruse 2000).

Moreover, Cruse (ibid 2000) provides the following grammatical features:

a. Elements are not separately modifiable:

- (1) \*Yossarian kicked the buckets.
- (2) \*Yossarian kicked the old bucket.

Idioms can be modified only as a whole unit:

- (4) Yossarian kicked the bucket unexpectedly.

b. Elements do not coordinate with genuine semantic constituents:

- (5) \*Yossarian kicked and punched the bucket.
- (6) \*Yossarian kicked the bucket and the pail.

c. Elements cannot take contrastive stress or be the focus of topicalizing transformations, and the like:

- (7) \*It was bucket what Yossarian kicked.
- (8) \*What Yossarian did to bucket was kick it.
- d. Elements cannot be referred back anaphorically:
  - (9) \*Yossarian kicked the bucket. Jack kicked it, too.
- e. An idiom does not survive the substitution of any of its constituent elements by a synonym or a near synonym:
  - (10) \*Yossarian kicked the pail
    - \*Yossarian pulled his sister's arm.

Accordingly, Baker (Baker 1992) provides a list of what a speaker or writer cannot do with idioms:

- a) To change a word order
  - (1) \*Throw the wind to the money.
- b) To delete a word
  - (2) \*Throw a wrench into the works.
- c) To add a word
  - (3) \*Let the cat out of the canvas bag.
- d) To replace a word with another
  - (4) \*Let the dog out of the bag.
- e) Change its grammatical structure
  - (5) \*The music was faced.

This breaking of rules does not need to be a contravention of standard grammar. A grammatically correct sentence with perfect sense can still be created, but by breaking these rules, the figurative meaning is destroyed, so it should be avoided unless our intention is a pun or a joke.

And of course, there are exceptions to these rules. For example, there are idioms which have several variants, depending for instance on region, so similes *like the Cheshire cat* and *grin like the Cheshire cat* can be found.

Kvetko (Kvetko 2005) explains this in further detail and divides idioms into four groups, depending on what type of variation a given idiom allows.

1. Idioms allowing grammatical variations – Categories, tenses, forms, word order, articles, etc. can be changed in these idioms. Examples: *have been in the wars* – *had been in the wars*, *turn up one's nose*, *turn one's nose up*.

2. Idioms allowing lexical variations – A word from an idiom can be replaced by another, or a word can be even added to an idiom. Examples: *out of a clear sky* – *out of a clear blue sky*, *cross sb's palm* – *cross sb's hand*.  
There are also idioms which allow both grammatical and lexical variations. Example: *a/the skeleton in the cupboard*, *a/the family skeleton*.
3. Idioms allowing spelling variations – These idioms allow changes in spelling, writing small/capital letters, punctuation marks etc. Examples: *nosy parker*, *nosy Parker*, *Nosey Parker*.
4. Idioms with geographic variations – Idioms in this group may include changes of all previously described groups. There are several idioms with geographical variants which are preferred in certain areas. Examples: *a/the skeleton in the closet* (Amer.) – *a/the skeleton in the cupboard* (Brit.)

It is clear from these sets of rules provided by various linguists that it is nearly impossible to provide a comprehensive list of changes that an idiom can undergo. This is mainly because of the fact that every single idiom is very specific in what changes it can undergo and what changes it cannot undergo. Unfortunately, it is almost inconceivable for a non-native speaker to decide on his or her own what changes an idiom can undergo, mainly because of a lack of “English language sensitivity”.

### 3 EQUIVALENCY

Every language has a wide variety of ways to express a certain meaning. It can be expressed by a single word, collocation or some kind of phrase. Thus we cannot expect that we always find equivalent idioms (Baker 1992).

#### 3.1 Idioms with no equivalent in the target language

Idioms are culture specific. The more the cultures vary, the more probable it is that there will be no equivalent for an idiom. For example many idioms come from the Bible or other books of significant authors such as Shakespeare, but, of course, there are some cultures which are not influenced by Christianity or by Shakespeare. Therefore, it is highly possible that there will be idioms with no equivalents between the languages of such cultures.

Baker (Baker 1992) shows that there are also certain problems with idioms containing specific geographical features. These idioms may prove very difficult to translate, because they are highly culture specific. But even some of these idioms may have semantically perfect equivalents in other languages. For instance, the English idiom *to carry coals to Newcastle* is highly culture specific, because its reference to Newcastle, but it still has equivalents in other languages. Germans use *Eulen nach Athen tragen* (*to carry owls to Athens*), the French use *porter de l'eau à la riviere* (*to carry water to the river*) and the Czechs use *nosit dříví do lesa* (*to carry wood to the forest*) and all these three idioms bear the same meaning of doing something pointless or superfluous.

#### 3.2 Idioms with a partial equivalent in the target language

Idioms from this group can have similar meanings, but they might be used in markedly different contexts or they can carry different connotations. Baker (ibid 1992) uses these examples: *to sing a different tune* is an English idiom which means "to change one's manner, usually from bad to good". The Chinese have a similar idiom *chang-dui-tai-xi* which can be translated exactly as the English one, but this idiom is used in different situations, because of its strong political connotations. Another illustrative example is the idiom *to skate on thin ice* which means *to be or place oneself in a risky or delicate situation*, and this idiom can be compared to the Serbian idiom *navuci nekoga na tanak led* which means *to pull someone onto thin ice*. It can be seen that these two idioms have almost the same meaning, but they are used in different contexts. The main difference is

that the Serbian one is used in situations where someone is forcing someone else into a dangerous situation.

As already mentioned, idioms have literal and figurative meanings, and it is sometimes impossible to find corresponding idioms between two languages which have both the same literal and figurative meanings. This is especially true when translating some wordplay. For instance, the sentence *He had sufficient influence to be able to poke his nose into the private affairs of others where less aristocratic noses might have been speedily bloodied* contains a pun on the idiom *to poke one's nose into* (*pry into or meddle in another's affairs*) and, therefore, can be translated only into languages which have an idiom with a similar meaning and contain the word *nose* in it (Baker 1992).

### **3.3 Idioms with a perfect equivalent in the target language**

Perfectly equivalent idioms are exceptional and rare because these idioms have to possess exactly the same literal and figurative meanings, their connotations must be precisely the same, and even the frequency of usage has to be equal. Idioms with perfect equivalents in two or more languages usually come from the same source (Kvetko 2005).

As examples might be used idioms *forbidden fruit* in Czech *zakázané ovoce* or *black horse* in Czech *černý kůň*.

## **II. ANALYSIS**



## 4 ANALYSIS OF NATIVES SPEAKERS' POINT OF VIEW

This survey was carried out from January to April 2010. The questionnaire was sent to approximately two hundred people and I received 54 responses, but four of them had to be discarded because they were incomplete.

### 4.1 Gender of respondents

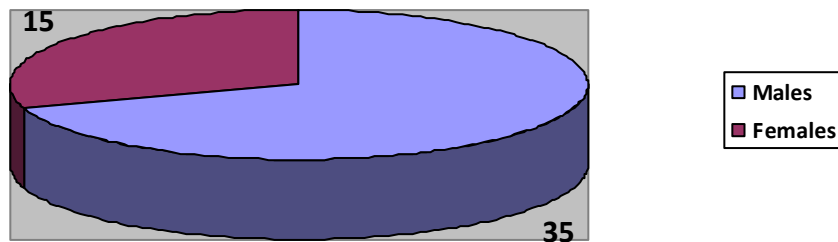


Figure 1. Gender of respondents

Table 1. Comparison of gender and frequency of usage

	Males	Females
Once a day	17%	20%
Twice a day	28%	27%
Three times a day	19%	33%
Four times a day	11%	0%
Other	25%	20%

It is clear from the survey that idioms are slightly more often used by men, but the sample is not large enough to draw a clear conclusion.

## 4.2 Age of respondents

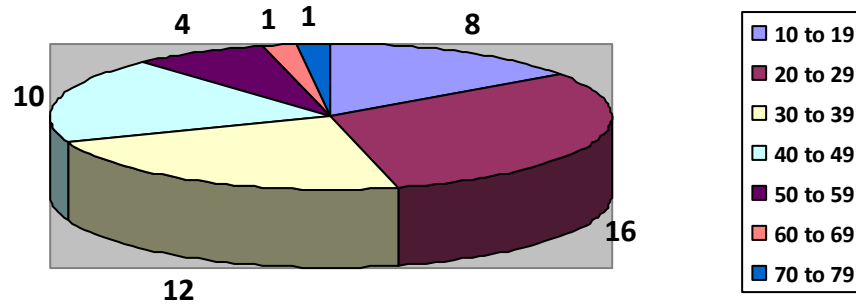


Figure 2. Age of respondents

The average age of respondents was 33 years. The youngest respondent was 13 years old, and the oldest one was 71 years old.

Table 2. Comparison of age and frequency of usage

	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
Once a day	6%	4%	6%	2%	2%	0%	0%
Twice a day	2%	4%	6%	4%	6%	0%	2%
Three times a day	6%	10%	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Four times a day	0%	4%	2%	2%	0%	2%	0%
Other	0%	8%	4%	10%	2%	0%	0%

Results are almost completely staggered. There are no considerable differences, which means that there is no remarkable relation between age and frequency of usage of idioms.

### 4.3 Achieved education

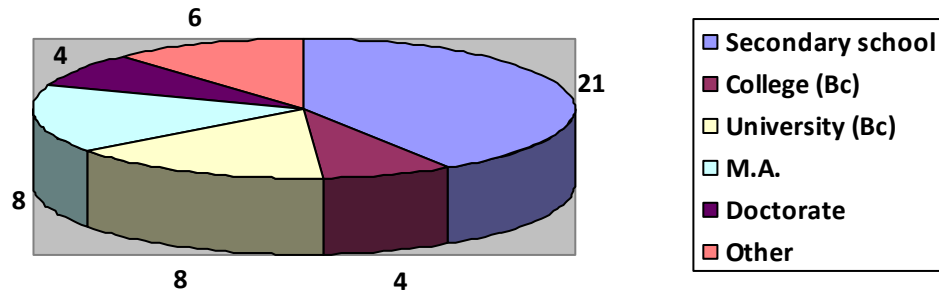


Figure 3. Achieved education

Other educational levels include mostly people still in secondary school, and one respondent for BSc Environmental science, BTEC ONC and one in teacher training.

Table 3. Comparison of education and frequency of usage.

	Secondary school	College (Bc)	University (Bc)	M.A.	Doctorate	Other
Once a day	12%	2%	2%	0%	0%	2%
Twice a day	14%	4%	2%	4%	0%	2%
Three times a day	8%	2%	4%	4%	2%	2%
Four times a day	2%	0%	2%	2%	4%	2%
Other	4%	0%	4%	6%	4%	0%

People with a secondary education tend to use idioms less frequently than people with a higher education. Most of the people with a secondary school education answered that they use idioms only once or twice a day; some of them even answered that they do not use idioms at all. On the other hand, most people with a higher education stated that they use idioms three or four times a day, sometimes even much more.

#### 4.4 Frequency of usage of idioms

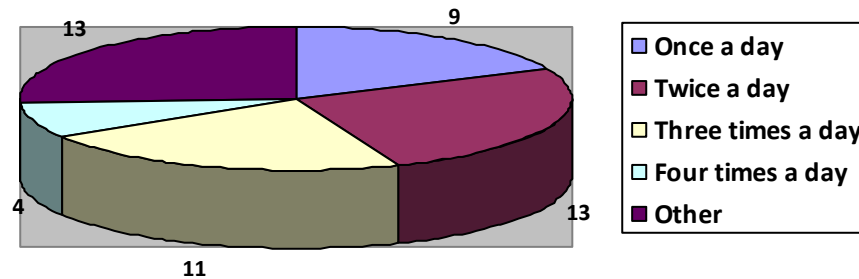


Figure 4. How often do you use idioms?

Most participants in the survey use idioms twice or three times a day. Only two respondents answered that they do not use idioms at all. On the other hand, seven people stated that they use idioms more than four times a day.

#### 4.5 Idioms in communication with non-native speakers

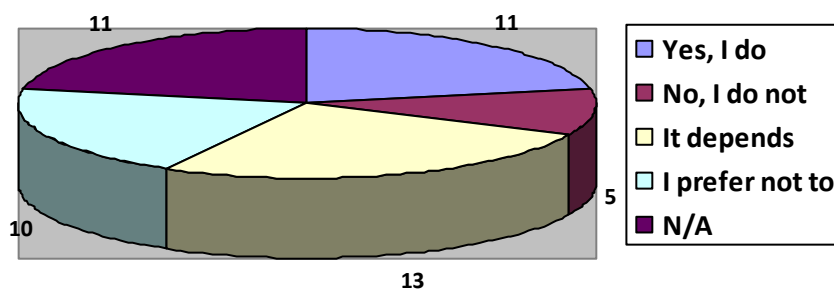


Figure 5. Do you use idioms even in communication with non-native speakers?

Almost all English speakers know that idioms might be confusing for non-native speakers, and because of this, most natives try to avoid using idioms in communication with foreigners; but they usually do this only with beginners, and they use idioms when talking to an advanced speaker. Despite of this, some speakers use idioms even in communication

with beginners because they believe that idioms are an inseparable part of the English language and everyone should know them.

Some remarkable quotes:

Respondent 1: “they often are not grasped quickly as L2 learners translate literally up to C1 level”

Respondent 2: “I use idioms without thinking, with beginners I might try not to, but it's good for all to hear them as they are key to speaking and understanding English as it's spoken”

Respondent 3: I usually try to avoid them unless I am speaking with a relatively advanced speaker, as they can be confusing to the listener otherwise.

Respondent 4: “Some non-natives like Idioms and are fluent enough to understand - in general I try to avoid them where I am speaking with someone who is not fluent...”

Respondent 5: “They should know them”

#### 4.6 Importance of idioms

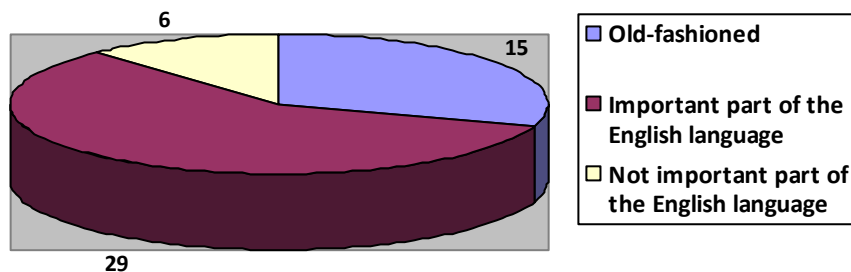


Figure 6. Idioms according to those surveyed:

58% of respondents believe that idioms are an important part of the English language, mainly because they are omnipresent, used frequently, part of their culture and because they make English more interesting. Only six people consider idioms to be an unimportant part of the English language.

Some remarkable quotes:

Respondent 1: “differentiates between mother-tongue and good learners”

Respondent 2: “They are used by native speakers everyday and are what makes English, English.”

Respondent 3: “English would be a lot more boring without them.”

Respondent 4: “They add colour and expression to the language and should be celebrated.”

Respondent 5: “lots of local expressions or sayings. you can tell where someones from by these sayings”

Respondent 6: “They are widely used, particularly in conversation.”

Respondent 7: “It helps to explain something clearly, to assist in communicating a point”

Respondent 8: “They are part of our culture.”

Respondent 9: “Why are they important? we use them every day”

Respondent 10: “i could live without them i guess”

Respondent 11: “they are simply everywhere (Tv, radio, news, books, tv shows....)”

Respondent 12: “They make English more interesting.”

Respondent 13: “Idioms are omnipresent”

It is clear from these comments that native speakers value idioms highly; they mainly appreciate their enrichment of English, but on the other hand, there are individuals who do not consider idioms to be important. The answer of a fifth of respondents suggests another interesting function of idioms. Regional idioms might be used as an indicator of where a person comes from.

Table 4. Comparison of age and point of view.

	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
Old fashioned	10%	10%	4%	4%	2%	0%	0%
Important part of the English language	4%	18%	12%	12%	6%	2%	2%
Not important part of the English language	2%	0%	8%	2%	0%	0%	0%

Idioms are noticeably more considered to be old fashioned by people under 30; however, it is clear from some answers that this is also idiom specific. Idioms are an opened lexical

category. New idioms are created every single day, but only few of them spread enough to become something more than just a regional idiom.

## 5 STUDY OF SELECTED ENGLISH IDIOMS

Selected idioms are researched in this part of my thesis. This research is focused mainly on the etymology of these idioms and should prove why it is useful to know the origin of the idiom, both for native and non-native speakers. Knowing the origin has several advantages for non-native speakers. It can help them to understand the idiom, to remember it vividly, and so on, but it also has its advantages even for native speakers. An idiom *cold enough to freeze the balls off* is an excellent example. This idiom is generally considered to be inappropriate, but if everyone knew its origin, no one would say that anymore. According to the webpage [www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk), this idiom comes from the navy. In the old days, all ships carried iron cannons which used iron balls as ammunition. To prevent them from rolling all over the deck, they were embedded in a metal plate with holes called a *monkey*, but when the temperature dropped way too low, the brass monkey shrank and the balls simply jumped off it, and thus the idiom *cold enough to freeze the balls off*.

### 5.1 To kick the bucket

There are several theories about how this idiom was created. The common theory is that it is derived from the bucket that people use to stand on when committing a suicide by hanging. Ammer (Ammer 1997) in her *The American heritage dictionary of idioms* states that this idiom more likely originates from the use of the word *bucket* as a beam in a slaughterhouse, which comes from French *buquet*. Animals were killed and then suspended by their heels on this beam and naturally, because animals struggled or went into post-mortem spasm after being slaughtered, the term *to kick the bucket* was invented. Dopjerová (ibid 2002) supports the fact that this idiom originated in a slaughterhouse, but she claims that the term *bucket* was used in its original meaning. The bucket was used to catch blood from slaughtered animals that were hanged on the beam above the bucket, and when people wanted to suspend the animal, they had to pull it on the beam, and the bucket was often hit by the legs of the dead animal, which explains the expression *to kick the bucket*. Dopjerová also offers another theory. When a husband of a family died, the widow put a bucket in front of her house so others could succor her with a few coins, but of course there were also people who kicked the bucket, instead of giving money.



Table 5. To kick the bucket

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: B	A: to fall sick – 8% (4 respondents)
	B: to die – 92% (46 respondents)
	C: to leave – 0%
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 12% (6 respondents)
	Seldom – 52% (26 respondents)
	Never – 36% (13 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	88% (44 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “I think I do - its too with the last moments before hanging, kicking the bucket away causes the person to be hung”
	Respondent 2: “Yes. When hanging yourself you stand on an upside down bucket, putting the noose around your neck, kicking the bucket out from under your feet then causes you to hang yourself and die.“
	Respondent 3: “some XVIII centrury stuff, can't be to certain though”
	Respondent 4: “something with standing on a bucket when attempting to suicide???”

This survey proved that this idiom is well-known and quite often used in The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, although almost no one knows its history.

## 5.2 To hit the bulls eye

The circular center of a target has been called the *bull's eye* (also *bullseye*, *bulls-eye* and *bulls eye*) since the 17th century, and it is called this way because an eye of a bull was used as a target for marksmanship. Another theory is that this term is connected to a British coin

that was called the *bull's eye* and was used in the 19th century when it got its name because it was often used as a bet on bull fights (DopjEROV 2002).

Table 6. To hit the bulls eye

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to be absolutely right – 96% (48 respondents)
	B: to kill a bull – 2% (1 respondent)
	C: to punch somebody – 2% (1 respondent)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 16% (8 respondents)
	Seldom – 68% (34 respondents)
	Never – 16% (8 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	74% (37 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “yes, darts”
	Respondent 2: “Well from archery one presumes centre of target”
	Respondent 3: “It means to hit the centre of the target (worth 50 points) in a game of darts.”
	Respondent 4: “Playing Darts”
	Respondent 5: “archery, hitting the exact center”
	Respondent 6: “Yes. The center of a target or dart board is called the "bulls-eye" - this is where you are aiming for, it is the place with the highest score... so hitting the bulls-eye means you get perfectly on target”
	Respondent 7: “sth with a coin”

	Respondent 8: “prob. from marksmanship”
	Respondent 9: “bullseye is a term from darts... probably”
	Respondent 10: “An old English coin called bullseye used as a target for practice.”

This is another well-known idiom, only 2 people answered incorrectly. People usually connect the origin of this idiom with darts, but it is only half-truth.

### 5.3 A white elephant

White/albino elephants are considered to be sacred in Thailand and some other Asian countries. These elephants could not be slaughtered or used as a workforce, and in addition to that, these elephants required special and very expensive food, and the owner had to provide access to the elephant for anyone who came to worship it. Thai kings used to give these elephants to those with whom they were displeased because in most cases, the elephants ruined their owner (Ammer 1997). The legend also states that the English King Charles I was given an elephant in 1629 by the King of Siam king, which led to his ruine (Dopjerová 2002).

Table 7. A white elephant

Survey responses:	
This idiom means:	A: unwanted/useless item – 82% (41 recipients)
Correct answer: A	B: precious gift – 10% (5 respondents)
	C: miracle – 8% (4 respondents)
Do you use this idiom?	Often - 6% (3 respondents)
	Seldom – 46% (23 respondents)
	Never – 48% (24 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	88% (44 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “Literally from owning a white elephant”

	<p>Respondent 2:</p> <p>“Yes. White elephants were holy in the Hindu world, the owner was forced to take care of it very well, but was not allowed to make it work... therefore a white elephant was something expensive that you could not use.”</p>
	<p>Respondent 3:</p> <p>“some thai story”</p>
	<p>Respondent 4:</p> <p>“Someone gave a white elephant as a present, but it was too expensive to take care about the elephant so the owner went bankrupt.”</p>

82% of respondents knew the meaning of this idiom, though almost a half never used it, and because of that, it is quite surprising, that some people knew the exact origin of the idiom.

#### 5.4 To rain cats and dogs

The origin of this idiom is opaque and, therefore, there are several theories, usually with little or no evidence to support them. Ammer (Ammer 1997) offers one of them. The theory is that during heavy rains a gutter overflowed with all kinds of garbage, including dead animals. Another theory is connected with the mythology of Odin, the Anglo-Saxon god of storms, in which his servant dogs and wolves are associated with rain (Dopjerová 2002, 51).

Table 8. To rain cats and dogs

Survey responses:	
This idiom means:	A: to rain heavily – 96% (48 respondents)
Correct answer: A	B: to be angry – 4% (2 respondents)
	C: to be sad – 0%
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 20% (10 respondents)
	Seldom – 44% (22 respondents)
	Never – 36% (18 respondents)
Do you happen to	92% (46 respondents) answered no.

know origin of this idiom?	Respondent 1: “Thatched roofs would be habitat for small animals. rain might wash them out, heavy rain would wash out even cats and dogs”
	Respondent 2: “Yes, a corruption and mocking from the french "catadoupe" which means waterfalls - there is a french expression to say it is "raining waterfalls" using the word "catadoupe" which was introduced in to england during the norman occupation of england...it started out as "it is raining catadoupe" (meaning waterfalls) and over time people corrupted this to "cats and dogs"”

This is another very well known idiom; almost all respondents knew its meaning, but only two knew its history.

### 5.5 To be at loggerheads with somebody

The website [www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk) explains the origin of this idiom. The term *loggerhead* was used to refer to a stupid person, literally a block-head. A logger was a wooden pile to which anyone could fasten a horse, and it was often used as an improvised weapon during fights, thus people started to say *to be at loggerheads*. Collins (Collins 1970) supports this theory and claims that *logger* is a dialectical form of *log*, which was used to refer to the minds of two rivals unable to reach an agreement because of intellectual differences.

Table 9. To be at loggerheads with somebody

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to have a strong disagreement with somebody – 96% (48 respondents)
	B: to have a relationship with somebody – 0%
	C: to love somebody – 4% (2 respondents)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 12% (6 respondents)
	Seldom – 50% (25 respondents)
	Never – 38% (19 respondents)

Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	94% (47 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “floating wood jam”
	Respondent 2: “Yes, It comes from Middle English - A "Logger head" was a "block head" or stupid person - so being "at logger-heads" literally to disagree to the point that nobody understands the other person's point of view - they are like stupid people with respect to each other's views.”

Almost everyone knew meaning of this idiom, but only 3 guessed its origin.

## 5.6 To shed crocodile tears

Crocodiles have lachrymal glands to produce tears, which helps them to keep their eyes clean and quite naturally they have to clean their eyes after every major struggle, especially after hunting for a prey. This phenomenon has been noted since ancient times, so there are many stories mentioning a crocodile crying while devouring his prey. People started to use the term *crocodile tears* for anything that was not sincere because logically crocodiles do not feel sadness while devouring their prey (Ammer 1997). This term was introduced into English by William Shakespeare.

Table 10. To shed crocodile tears

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to show sadness that is not sincere – 78% (39 respondents)
	B: to be really sad – 20% (10 respondents)
	C: to see something terrible -2% (1 respondent)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 4% (2 respondents)
	Seldom – 66% (33 respondents)
	Never – 30% (15 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	82% (41 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “literally from the crocodile who doesn't cry”

	<p>Respondent 2:</p> <p>“Like elephants it's taken from the literal meaning Crocodile shed "tears" after meal, but they're to remove useless products of metabolism rather than to express sadness.”</p>
	<p>Respondent 3:</p> <p>“Crocodiles (and otehr reptiles including sea turtles) shed tears that do not express unhappiness, but perform a natural function of clearing the eyes of grit and sand.”</p>
	<p>Respondent 4:</p> <p>“Yes - it comes from the belief that crocodiles cry while they eat their own young... the idea being that they act sad but they keep doing it anyway and so they are not sincere.”</p>
	<p>Respondent 5:</p> <p>“from a greek legend where crocodile was crying when he was eating his victims”</p>
	<p>Respondent 6:</p> <p>“Greek tale.”</p>

This idiom is an example of semi-transparent idiom. The meaning of these idioms can be partially retrieved because one word of the idiom is used with its literal meaning. This often leads to misinterpretations because they only decipher the literal meaning, but not the figurative one. In this case, 22% of native speakers misinterpreted the idiom.

## 5.7 To knock on wood

There are two theories about the origin of this idiom. The first one states that it comes from the habit of knocking on wood to banish evil spirits. This was a common practice among druids who used to carry a small piece of oak wood that was used to ward off evil spirits. The second theory states that it is derived from people who used to touch wooden crosses during prayers to bring good luck (Dopjerová 2002).

Table 11. To knock on wood

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: C	A: to chop down a tree – 0%
	B: to win a lottery – 0%
	C: to express a wish that something will or will not occur – 100% (50 respondents)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 36% (18 respondents)
	Seldom – 50% (25 respondents)
	Never – 14% (7 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	88% (44 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “actually should be touch wood in most UK areas”
	Respondent 2: “Actually never heard of it as knock on wood - touchwood yes but not knock”
	Respondent 3: “Knocking on unpainted wood is believed to bring luck.”
	Respondent 4: “Yes, Old superstition used to say that tapping on a tree would ward off evil spirits, and therefore bring good luck.”
	Respondent 5: “People used to touch wooden crosses to bring good luck.”

This is the most frequently used idiom from the survey. Half of the respondents seldom use the idiom, and 36% of respondents use it often. Also, everyone knew the exact meaning.

## 5.8 To run the gauntlet

The word *gauntlet* in this idiom does not refer to a glove, as commonly believed. It is derived from the Swedish *gatlop* or *gatloppe*, which means "lane run," and it was almost immediately replaced by the word “gauntlet.” It meant that someone was forced to run



between two rows of soldiers who tormented the runner. Running the gauntlet was used as a punishment in the military (Reese 2002).

Table 12. To run the gauntlet

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to be exposed danger, criticism etc. – 78% (39 respondents)
	B: to take a risk – 22% (11 respondents)
	C: to win a race – 0%
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 6% (3 respondents)
	Seldom – 48% (24 respondents)
	Never – 46% (23 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	86% (43 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “Something to do with medieval knights one would presume”
	Respondent 2: “military, narrow corridor exposed to enemy fire.”
	Respondent 3: “In medieval times a glove or gauntlet was thrown down as a challenge to a duel. Picking up the gauntlet meant that you accepted the duel.”
	Respondent 4: “medieval game/sport”
	Respondent 5: “Yes, a common form of minor punishment for English soldiers during the middle ages was that they would be stripped and forced to run down between 2 rows of men who would try to whip them with their "gauntlets" which were armored gloves covered in metal used to protect the hands during battle.”

This idiom proved to be quite rare in the UK, because almost half of the respondents answered that they never used it. Moreover, only 78% knew the meaning of the idiom.

## 5.9 To fight like Kilkenny cats

This idiom comes from 1798, the year of the Irish Rebellion. At that time, mercenaries used to tie two cats together by a rope to make them fight. Cats usually fought until one or both of them died of a fatigue, but one day an officer cut the rope to relieve their suffering. When a colonel asked how the match ended, the officer simply answered that those cats fought so desperately that they ate each other (Dopjerová 2002).

Table 13. To fight like Kilkenny cats

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to fight until both parties are destroyed – 48% (24 respondents)
	B: to fight fiercely – 48% (24 respondents)
	C: to flee – 4% (2 respondents)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 4% (2 respondents)
	Seldom – 36% (18 respondents)
	Never – 60% (30 respondents)
Do you happen to know origin of this idiom?	86% (43 respondents) answered no.
	Respondent 1: “Ireland”
	Respondent 2: “The legend has it that there were 2 cats in the town of Kilkenny, who fought so giercely that they ate each other.”
	Respondent 3: “Kilkenny is a town in Ireland, and I presume that comments were made about the bellicose nature of the resident felines.”

	Respondents 4: “No, but I assume it's because Cats fight fiercely, and so do Irish people, and so Irish cats must fight even more fiercely”
	Respondent 5: “No, and I've never even heard of it. some irish story with soldiers”
	Respondent 6: “Irish fairy tale.”
	Respondent 7: “Some story with Irish soldiers and fighting cats...”

This is another great example of a semi-transparent idiom. Only 48% of respondents knew the correct answer; another 48% of respondent picked an answer with similar meaning, and only 4% picked the last answer. On the other hand, 60% of respondents never used this idiom. This idiom also shows how useful it is to know the etymology because in this case the meaning is perfectly clear from the origin.

### 5.10 To drive somebody nuts

The word *nut* referred to a *head* by 1820, and gradually people started to use the word *nut* to refer to a serious mental condition (Dopjerová 2002).

Table 14. To drive somebody nuts

Survey responses:	
This idiom means: Correct answer: A	A: to highly exasperate somebody – 96% (48 respondents)
	B: to control somebody – 2% (1 respondent)
	C: to make somebody feel happy – 2% (1 respondent)
Do you use this idiom?	Often – 40% (20 respondents)
	Seldom – 48% (24 respondents)
	Never – 12% (6 respondents)
Do you happen to	92% (46 respondents) answered no.

know origin of this idiom?	Respondent 1: “very self explanatory.. make you go mental..”
	Respondent 2: “Yes, "Nuts" has been a slang word for "Crazy" since the 1800s, to "drive" means to push, force, or direct in this context... so "driving me nuts" means forcing me to be crazy.”

This is another well-known idiom; 48 respondents knew the meaning, and 20 people claim to use it often, with 24 seldom using it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Idioms are a particularly important part of the English language. More than a half of native speakers support this statement, mainly because they consider idioms to be their cultural heritage and because they appreciate their enrichment of the English language. But idioms also have an immense value even for non-native speakers. It is clear from the survey that native speakers consider correct application of idioms as a sign of highly advanced English.

Idioms are frequently used, but the frequency of usage is idiom specific, and it also depends on a native speaker's preferences. Some tend to use idioms more frequently than others. According to the survey, men and people with a higher education use idioms much more frequently.

Idioms and their features were described in great detail in the theoretical part of this thesis. The importance of idioms and why non-native speakers should pay special attention to them were also explained. The figurative and the literal meanings were described, as well as equivalency. How idioms can be recognized in a text was explained, and examples were given of all these aspects for a clearer understanding of origin and use.

The origin of most idioms is opaque. Often there are several theories about how an idiom was created, but usually with little or no evidence to back it up. However, some origins are well-known and perfectly explain how the figurative meaning has merged into a phrase. This knowledge may prove extremely useful, both to native and non-native speakers. A knowledge of the etymology of idioms helps to understand and remember idioms better.

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## **APPENDICES**

P I      Survey.



## APPENDIX P I: SURVEY

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. Gender:
  - Male
  - Female
4. Where in the UK are you from? (county/town)
5. Achieved education:
  - Secondary school
  - College (Bc)
  - University (Bc)
  - M.A.
  - Doctorate
  - Other
6. How often do you use idioms? (approximately)
  - Once a day
  - Twice a day
  - Three times a day
  - Four times a day
  - Other:
7. Do you use idioms even in communication with non-native speakers?
  - Yes, I do
  - No, I do not
  - It depends
  - I prefer not to
  - N/A
    - Please give reasons:
8. Idioms are according to you:
  - Old-fashioned
  - Important part of English language
  - Not important part of English language
    - Please give reasons

9. *To kick the bucket*

10. This idiom means:

- To leave
- To die
- To fall sick

11. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

12. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in "NO")

13. *To hit the bullseye*

14. This idiom means:

- To be absolutely right
- To punch somebody
- To kill a bull

15. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

16. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in "NO")

17. *A white elephant*

18. This idiom means:

- Miracle
- Precious gift
- Unwanted/useless item

19. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

20. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in "NO")

21. *To rain cats and dogs*

22. This idiom means:

- To rain heavily
- To be angry
- To be sad

23. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

24. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)

25. *To be at loggerheads with somebody*

26. This idiom means:

- To love somebody
- To have a relationship with somebody
- To have a strong disagreement with somebody

27. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

28. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)

29. *To shed crocodile tears*

30. This idiom means:

- To see something terrible
- To show sadness that is not sincere
- To be really sad

31. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

32. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)

33. *To knock on wood*

34. This idiom means:

- To express a wish that something will or will not occur
- To win a lottery

- To chop down a tree
35. Do you use this idiom?
- Often
  - Seldom
  - Never
36. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)
37. *To run the gauntlet*
38. This idiom means:
- To be exposed to danger, criticism etc.
  - To take a risk
  - To win a race
39. Do you use this idiom?
- Often
  - Seldom
  - Never
40. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)
41. *To fight like Kilkenny cats*
42. This idiom means:
- To fight until both parties are destroyed
  - To fight fiercely
  - To flee
43. Do you use this idiom?
- Often
  - Seldom
  - Never
44. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)
45. *To drive somebody nuts*
46. This idiom means:
- To make somebody feel happy
  - To highly exasperate somebody
  - To control somebody
47. Do you use this idiom?

- Often
- Seldom
- Never

48. Do you happen to know the origin of this idiom? (If not, put in “NO”)
49. Click *Finish survey* to save your answers.

Thank you once again for your time!

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