

Idiomatic Expressions as a Language Barrier in Intercultural Business Communication

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá problematikou idiomatických výrazů, které mohou působit jako jazyková bariéra při interkulturní obchodní komunikaci v manažerské praxi. Bakalářská práce je rozdělena na teoretickou a praktickou část. Teoretická část obsahuje kapitoly, které se zabývají aspekty interkulturní obchodní komunikace a dále teorií idiomatických výrazů v anglickém jazyce. Praktická část popisuje provedenou textovou analýzu a její výstup. Mezi použité zdroje patří odborná literatura a články zaměřené na frazeologii a interkulturní komunikaci a obchodně zaměřená periodika. Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je poskytnout doporučení a pomůcku s využitím v manažerské a obchodní praxi.

Klíčová slova: interkulturní obchodní komunikace, obchodní angličtina, idiomatické výrazy, mezinárodní obchod, komunikace, manažerská praxe

ABSTRACT

This Bachelor's thesis is concerned with the topic of idiomatic expressions that can act as a language barrier in intercultural business communication. The Bachelor's thesis is divided into theoretical and practical parts. The theoretical part includes chapters on the aspects of intercultural business communication, as well as the theory of idiomatic expressions in the English language. The practical part then describes the performed text analysis and its results. The used sources include scientific literature and articles focused on phraseology and intercultural communication and business-oriented periodicals. The main goal of this Bachelor's thesis is to provide a recommendation and a tool to be used in the managerial and business practice.

Keywords: intercultural business communication, Business English, idiomatic expressions, international business, communication, managerial practice

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I hereby declare that the print version of my Bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

In the global world of today, people, and people involved in the business in particular, encounter intercultural environment whether they want it or not. Some of them may feel enthusiastic about such situations, but others would likely interact with the one type of people they have known since birth and can communicate with – and nothing else. However, is it possible to do such a thing nowadays? Of course, it is, as many local or regional-level businesses work and prosper without international or intercultural business interaction. But those who aim higher and wish to explore the ‘great big world’ will need to contact foreign individuals, such as business partners, investors, or customers, who all may come from different corners of the world. Different cultural backgrounds of people who communicate or try to do so, as explained in this thesis, may be problematic because of a number of reasons. Ineffective or inefficient communication can cost not only nerves or relationships but also money. That is why companies do (or should) not overlook the importance of intercultural communication in the world of business. Failed mergers, lost resources or business partners are only a few examples of what barriers in intercultural business communication may cause.

Speaking of intercultural business communication, it is crucial also to understand that the world of business speaks mostly in English, the major global language of the current era. Moreover, English, as beautiful as it is, has its perils, and one of those perils are idiomatic expressions. To communicate effectively, a certain level of language competence is needed. To communicate in international business, the level is usually advanced. Business English, a skill that is required and appreciated by many companies, is rich on idioms, be it similes, phrasal verbs, sayings or traditional idiomatic expressions. To master this particular area of English is not an easy task. That is why this thesis, after explaining the concepts of intercultural business communication and English idioms, introduces a glossary of idiomatic expressions used in business – with the goal to help students of business or people already in business, native speakers of English or not, to gain knowledge and better understanding of this area of business communication, and possibly manage to overcome (or advance in their attempt to overcome) this barrier. Intercultural business communication comprises many aspects, and this thesis explores and emphasises only a fragment of this broad topic, but it aims to explore it in the most effective and sensible way to create a tool or a guide that could help to improve the communication skills of people in international business or managerial practice.

I. THEORY

1 INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

This chapter is concerned with the introduction of intercultural business communication (IBC), along with its theoretical concepts and some of its characteristics. It also explores other topics connected to the theory of IBC, including the relationships among culture, language and business, a mention of the communication theory and how the IBC fits into the model of communication. The theme of English as the global language and the lingua franca of business is presented as well. The aforementioned topics are all included with the aim to provide a definition of what IBC is and what are its values and significance for the people in business, and lastly, to provide an overview of the selected barriers to IBC that can pose a problem to one's IBC competence, focusing on the language barriers and later specifically idiomatic expressions as the language barrier.

The need for the ability to distinguish among the different values and characteristics of different cultures appears to be increasing in the area of business. Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, experts on management and intercultural communication, state in their book *Riding the Waves of Culture* that “if business people want to gain understanding of and allegiance to their corporate goals, policies, products or services wherever they are doing business, they must understand what those and other aspects of management mean in different cultures.” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, 3) As pointed out in Neha Kohale's article on assertive communication at the workplace, the assertive style of communication is a difficult skill to learn, unlike the passive or aggressive styles which tend to be more responsive or automatic (Kohale 2016). Some executives may, however, come to believe that mastering the assertive communication mode is the most crucial asset of a manager and it applies to the communication with (business) people of any origin or environment. Although it is an important quality with a diverse range of uses by the people in managerial positions or generally in business, as suggested in a communication expert Laura Bacci's article (Bacci 2013), several authors other than Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner put emphasis on the importance of intercultural communication competence, implying that the business environment is dynamic and leaning towards globalisation more and more, and therefore the bold tactics, such as the “take it or leave it” attitude, may not be as effective as they used to be in the past. Instead, the present-day managers and business people should aim to recognise the cultural differences among their international partners or employees in foreign subsidiaries and themselves in order to improve the cooperation and smoothness during their collaborative efforts, and to eradicate the habits seen as unhealthy

for the intercultural and international business, such as the tendencies of isolation or stereotyping. (Wayne and Dauwalder 1994, 646-9) The books of both Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner and Robert Gibson give examples and statistics on either the differences in the cultural background and ways of thinking of the people from different cultures, and the issues that arose because of the incompetently executed intercultural communication among those people, with *Riding the Waves of Culture* providing figures and charts e.g. on how people perceive time in the respective cultures (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, 127-9) and Gibson's *Intercultural Business Communication* mentioning the well-known – and failed – Daimler-Chrysler merger (Gibson 2002, 1-3) and many more to highlight the diversity of cultures and the significance of the intercultural communication competence in the world of business. Some of these examples are referred to further in this chapter.

1.1 Culture, Language and Business

To better grasp the concept of intercultural business communication, the relationship among the fields of culture, language (the English language in the case of this thesis) and business needs to be explored at first. The three words mentioned above all represent a portion of the human life, with culture and language having been present for millennia now, and business, although its concept as understood at present is newer than the former two, is relatively omnipresent in the modern society as well. As this subchapter explores in its respective parts, both culture and language – English in particular – play dominant roles in business.

The first question to answer when asking about the connection of culture, language and business, is what culture is. In his book *Among Cultures: The Challenge of Communication*, Bradford J. Hall argues that too many definitions of the word *culture* exist nowadays and that it is not an easy task to define it. (Hall 2005, 3). True to this statement, numerous authors attempt to detail and describe the concept of culture in their publications, including Edward T. Hall (1989, 10-28), Robert Gibson (2002, 7-8) or Fred E. Jandt (2010, 15-28). This results in the existence of multiple definitions and ways of understanding culture. Gibson, however, distinguishes between the typical view of culture as a collection of the works of man (arts, music, literature, architecture) and culture as a “shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours.” (Gibson 2002, 7) In summary, Geert Hofstede, a social psychologist, calls culture a set of unwritten rules that guide people towards being good members of various groups (Hofstede 2019), which, along with Gibson's second definition, suits the purpose of this thesis best.

1.1.1 Culture and Language

While the link between the business environment and the varied cultural backgrounds of people in it, as foreshadowed above, may be a concept more difficult to comprehend, the connection between culture and language seems to be more transparent: to understand the culture, one has to understand its language and vice versa. Wenying Jiang, a linguist and teacher specialising in English and Chinese, describes the two variables as inseparable in her *ELT Journal* article, noting that language as such is seen as an essential part of culture, for it “simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it.” (Jiang 2000, 328) Jiang then mentions that scientists often tend to compare language to a mirror through which culture can be perceived and observed, and she presents three metaphors that refer to the discussed connection. The following table parallels Jiang’s metaphors to emphasise their common meaning:

Table 1 *Metaphors on the Connection of Culture and Language*

	Language	Culture	Combination
Philosophical view	flesh	blood	living organism
Communicative view	swimming skill	water	swimming
Pragmatic view	vehicle	traffic light	transportation

Source: Jiang 2000, 328-9

In all of the metaphors – each corresponding to a specific viewpoint on the matter – the variables of language and culture are likened to specific parts of a whole, and together they create a combination that could not work if any of the two parts was missing. The complementary role and the mutual need for one another are illustrated in all of the three examples, but Jiang goes further with the latter two, comparing the combinations of swimming and transportation to the process of communication:

- Without water (**culture**), swimming (**communication**) would be impossible, while without the swimming skill (**language**), people could swim only in shallow water (communicate in highly limited ways).
- A vehicle (**language**) enables easy and fast transportation (**communication**) with the traffic lights (**culture**) telling people which ways they can, should or should not go (providing guidance on appropriateness and cultural standards). (Jiang 2000, 328-9)

Moreover, Jiang states that spheres of culture and language can be viewed as an iceberg with the small part above the surface representing the language and a small fraction of culture – the apparent parts – and the rest of the iceberg (culture) lies hidden underwater. (Jiang 2000, 328) This type of metaphor is employed relatively frequently in the description of culture and related aspects, e.g. in the books *Cultural Issues in Business Communication* (Sellin and Winters, 63-4) or *Intercultural Business Communication* (Gibson 2002, 7). Lastly, as far as the study of language is considered, it is a common fact that it is not only the language that the students are exposed to but also at least a fraction of a culture associated with that language. In summary, culture and language are strongly connected aspects of life – with the change and development of one, the other is affected as well – and together, they are essential for effective and efficient communication, which is a fact to be kept in mind not only for everyday life but for the area of business as well.

1.1.2 Culture as a Factor in Business

While business is as much a human creation as language is, business' relation to culture, as implied above, may not be as striking as that of culture and language. Ultimately, business is business, and managers and businesspersons have other things to do than ponder upon culture, as some may say. Nevertheless, culture is a factor that can play a major role in today's business. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner state that international managers often find themselves in a position where they have to adjust to a number of different cultural environments: 1) the culture of their origin, 2) the culture at their workplace, and 3) the culture of the company they work for. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, 3) Gibson goes further in this sense, distinguishing the cultures mentioned above (professional and corporate), and detailing the personal culture into gender, age, religious, regional and class types of culture, stating that many of these may play a more critical role at the workplace than the general national cultural background. (Gibson 2002, 8-9)

This procedure of adjustment to cultures or types of culture can prove to be highly demanding, and with the increasing trend of market globalisation, it does not appear to be disappearing any time soon, and that is why people working in international or intercultural business need to localise their business activities, products and services, and customise them to the local markets – which have been shaped by different cultures in different parts of the world, and thus the customers and people overall behave differently in different markets, with varied values and patterns of communication. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997, 3) Although globalising markets promise to bring a singular, relatively homogeneous

consumer generation – millennials are, after all, described by some authors, such as Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, as the most uniform generation of all, despite their craving for individualism and uniqueness (Chamorro-Premuzic 2014) – it is unlikely to happen in the near future, and the relevance of the IBC competence is unlikely to decrease soon.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, several publications focused on IBC give numerous practical examples of how an ineffective way of intercultural communication can damage business efforts and vice versa. Coming back to the failed merger between Chrysler and Daimler, or other examples, e.g. a conflicted attitude of a web designer deciding which style of design to use to satisfy the symbolic and aesthetic traditions of different cultures during his work, it may bring one to the conclusion that intercultural business is not a good idea at all and it is not possible to overcome the divide between cultures. (Gibson 2002, 1-5) Notwithstanding the above, George Bradt, a Forbes contributor, firmly claims in his article on the importance of culture during business mergers that “the game is won or lost on the field of cultural integration,” specifying that the cultural compatibility between business partners is crucial, talking of both the corporate and the international cultures and how successful companies take cultural awareness into consideration. (Bradt 2015) Suggesting a similar thought, Robert Gibson notes that some companies not only accept but embrace cultural awareness, referring to the statement by Procter & Gamble on their openness to cultural diversity and its benefits, and presenting the idea of the so-called ‘synergy effects,’ the concept that claims that combined effort delivers better results than the individual efforts summed together. (Gibson 2002, 6-7) As evident from this subchapter, culture, whether it is national, gender, corporate, professional or other, has a significant influence over business, reaching and changing behaviours of corporates, businesspeople and customers alike.

1.1.3 English as a Lingua Franca

The dominant influence of the English language in modern society is undeniable. With the count of 379 million native users according to *Ethnologue*, English is beaten only by the Mandarin (the most widely used variant of Chinese – nearly 918 million) and Spanish (460 million) languages in this category, while its total number of users (L1 and L2 together) around 1.1 billion, slightly above Mandarin, making English the most widespread language today (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2019), one of the six official languages of the United Nations and one the organisation’s two (the other being French) working languages. (Crystal 2010, 367) That is why English indeed can be called a lingua franca, or “a language used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages,” as the Cambridge

Dictionary defines it, along with a sample sentence: “The international business community sees English as a lingua franca.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)

Following the statement by the dictionary’s sentence, it can be said that English is not only the current global language of the society in general, dominating the media, diplomacy and international organisations, tourism, and other areas of public life (Crystal 2003, 86-104), but also presiding over the languages employed in the world of business. Pascale Chauvot, a language educator and training manager, proclaims English the language of international business, saying that companies require English or Business English (BE) competence in an increasing number of employees – and these are not only executives or managers – with the aim of effective and efficient communication. (Chauvot 2010) Dorie Clark, a marketing strategist, claims that English will maintain its dominance in global business in the future and that today, the command of English is a commonly required skill for business people, comparing it to the evolution of literacy (from the attribute of the privileged to the standard skill of nearly all people). She also points out that even in China, English plays a significant role as L2. (Clark 2012)

English can be described as diverse. Throughout the centuries of its development, it has been influenced by several other languages (as the English-speaking culture has been influenced by foreign cultures), including French or Latin among the more prominent ones. (Allen 2014) Its diversity may be, though, one of the challenges during the study of English. Some may describe the language as simple and easy to learn, while some list a number of difficulties one must face when trying to get a command of the language, including a large number of borrowings (Greek, Latin, French, etc.), peculiarities in pronunciation (silent *k* in the words like *know*, *knife*, etc.), homophony (*close* as a verb or an adverb), contradictory grammar or semantics (verbs *overlook* and *oversee* have opposite meanings despite their roots *look* and *see* have not), English idioms, and more. (Oxford Royale Summer Schools 2014). All of the aforementioned obstacles may pose a problem in acquiring competence in either general or Business English, and thus create a barrier to one’s ability or competence of intercultural business communication. Nonetheless, English, with all the challenges and perks it represents, appears to be unavoidable in the world of business.

1.2 Communication and Its Components

To understand what intercultural business communication is, it is not enough to comprehend that culture and language – the fundamental parts of communication – are bound to business. It is essential to realise what the process of communication encompasses and how that plays

into the intercultural business environment. In order to devise a coherent definition of IBC, this subchapter explores the theoretical aspects of communication and also its components, exploring how communication works and what variables may influence the communication process. John Fiske's *Introduction to Communication Studies* states that communication can be perceived from two perspectives – either as a “transmission of messages,” or “production and exchange of meanings,” pointing out that communication covers a variety of activities, from speaking to one another to watching television. (Fiske 1990, 1-2). Fiske also presents multiple communication models by various authors, one of them being the Lasswell's Model of Communication, one of the best-known and most heavily used. In his theory, a political scientist and communications theorist Harold Lasswell says that to understand the working of communication, a general question – originally presented as a piece of text and remade into a figure in this thesis – needs to be answered:

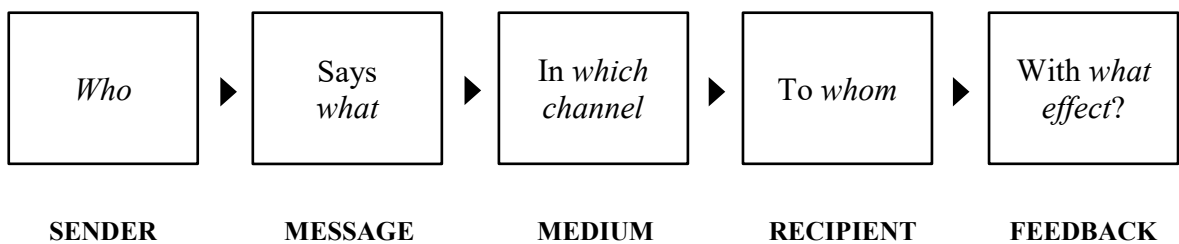


Figure 1 Lasswell's Model of Communication (Source: Fiske 1990, 30-1)

This model or formula introduces the roles and parts necessary for communication, including the source or *sender*, the receiver or *recipient* and the communication environment or channel (*medium*) via which the *message* is transmitted, with the process resulting in the recipient's reaction to the message called the *feedback*. (Fiske 1990, 30-1). This is not, however, the only well-known model of communication. Fred Jandt presents another one, that is quoted by other authors as well, e.g. Robert Gibson (2002, 9). Jandt's model is similar, but more complex, introducing the *sender*, *message*, *channel*, *receiver* and *receiver response* (a basis of *feedback*), and adding the elements *encoding* (“putting an idea into a symbol”), *noise* (distortion of the message during the transmission via a medium) and *decoding* (opposite of encoding), framing the whole process into a *context*. (Jandt 2010, 42-3) It is visible that both authors draw similar conclusions about the communication structure as they state nearly identical components of the process. Moreover, while Lasswell's model does not directly address culture as a variable, Jandt's does, as the author notes that context is a significant figure in communication, later describing various types of communication

context, e.g. international or intercultural one. (Jandt 2010, 43-5). In accordance with this, the authors Sellin and Winters also include culture among the essential components of communication, arguing that this element is “generally ignored” by the communication participants. (Sellin and Winters 2006, 63)

Consequently, it appears that the roles of the source (sender) and recipient are always crucial for communication to happen. It is also suggested that one of the most prominent variables in the process may be culture. Relating to this, Jandt poses a question that brings this subchapter to its conclusion, asking how would the communication proceed if the source and the receiver were originating from different cultures, each aware of a different context with only a few shared symbols. Answering the question, he states that such a situation is defined as an example of intercultural communication. The difference between intercultural communication and intercultural business communication (IBC) is then that during IBC, the environment or setting of communication is the world of (international) business.

1.3 Barriers to Intercultural Business Communication

Obstacles may arise during every possible kind of communication, and IBC is no exception to that. These obstacles, usually called barriers, cause troubles in communication; they can distort the communicated message, influence encoding or decoding in an inappropriate way, and consequently evoke unfavorable or undesired receiver response or feedback. Whether they are stemming from one’s personal incompetence (e.g. insufficient language skill) or one’s attitude and world view, the barriers to IBC or intercultural communication in general, may be of many different origins. The bullets below present a selected list of some of the barriers to IBC – except the language barriers that are discussed separately – listed in the works of Robert Gibson (2002, 10-17) and Fred E. Jandt (2010, 81-103):

- **Attitudes.** An umbrella term for several of the barriers, including the **anxiety** or fear of approaching that what is different and unfamiliar, which may result in the feeling of unease leading to the “out of place” behaviour. Jandt likens this to the experience of the first day in a new school. The following presented form of a barrier-creating attitude is **assuming similarity instead of difference**, meaning that a person unaware of the standards of a foreign culture incorrectly assumes that they are the same or similar to their own, which is often untrue, causing inappropriate behaviour. The last distinct barrier in this category is **ethnocentrism**, the negative judgment of the aspects of a foreign culture and the belief that one’s own culture is superior.

- **Culture Shock.** Similar to but more complex than anxiety, a culture shock is an often observed and studied phenomenon that originates in the loss of familiar symbols and signs of social intercourse (sudden exposure to a foreign culture without maintaining contact with the familiar one). It can be divided into several stages, and it may harm not only one's communication competence but also physical and mental health.
- **Perception.** The way people (even within the same culture) perceive reality is never 100% identical, but with a shared cultural background, they can see things similarly. Because the perception of things is culturally determined, unawareness of the difference in perception may be a problematic barrier to IBC.
- **Stereotypes.** Stereotyping and also prejudice are well-known concepts in regards to culture and communication, usually defined as making a judgment of a specific group (ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, gender, professional group) – often a negative one and often based on an inaccurate or insufficient amount of information. The danger of stereotyping is pointed out by Wayne and Dauwalder as well. (1994, 648-9)

1.3.1 Language Barriers

Because this thesis is concerned primarily with the topic of English idioms as a barrier to IBC, the language barriers to intercultural communication need to be paid more attention to than other types of barriers listed above. Any language can act as a communication barrier, whether in tourism, government or business, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* believes. (Crystal 2010, 352-3) As implied earlier in this thesis' subchapter called *English as a Lingua Franca*, English may be one of those barrier-creating languages, as it has its numerous peculiar rules, exceptions and unique features that can pose a problem for users of the language. Fred E. Jandt, who dedicates one chapter of his book to the concept of language as a barrier to intercultural communication, presents the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as a marker of the fact that the language a person uses influences their mindset and overall way of thinking and interacting. The theory in itself, also mentioned by other authors including George Yule (2006, 218-20), relates to the idea of linguistic relativity and says that no one is able to observe the whole scope of reality or the world around them, but only the portion that the language they know enables them to observe, concluding that the view of the reality of every person is culturally and linguistically determined and that "culture is controlled by *and* controls the language" – a statement implied earlier in this thesis. (Jandt 2010, 130-1). The practical applications of this theory can be found in several layers of language, primarily these two:

- **Vocabulary.** The lexicon of each language corresponds to what that language needs (or needed) to express with words. Jandt comes with the well-known example of the Eskimo people who use multiple words to express snow in their language because the phenomenon has more relevance in their culture (or reality) than it does in the life of, e.g. the English-speaking cultures. That the expansion of vocabulary is based on the expansion of the culture using that vocabulary is obvious also from the fact that the Yanomamo language expresses numbers only as *one*, *two* and *more than two*, for the Brazilian Yanomami tribe people have never needed to expand this part of their lexicon since they do not use advanced mathematics in their life in the way other civilisations do. (Jandt 2010, 131-3)
- **Grammar and Syntax.** The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis puts even more emphasis on the grammar than it does on vocabulary. It mentions grammatical rules as imperative in one's perception of the world, as evidenced from various languages using varied word order structures for sentences or clauses: the positions of the subject, verb and object in the clause show which element of reality (doer, action, object) has which place and importance in a specific culture. (Jandt 2010, 133-4)

Besides the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Jandt mentions other phenomena that make language a barrier to intercultural communication, e.g. the system of pidgins or creoles, languages that were created primarily for business purposes, once again highlighting the prominence of English in the world and business (Jandt 2010, 139-157), or the problems with translation and equivalence among languages and cultures, pointing out that many concepts one culture is familiar with may be unknown to other cultures, and as such, they cannot be perfectly translated or communicated across cultures. Speaking of inequivalence, Jandt mentions the vocabulary, concepts and experiences, grammar and syntax, and also idiomatic expressions as problematic areas. (Jandt 2010, 135-8).

1.3.2 Idiomatic Expressions as a Language Barrier

Idiomatic expressions are hinted to be a problematic and challenging part or layer of the English language multiple times throughout the scope of this thesis, and described as such by several authors, works, or articles, e.g. the article on the difficulties of English mentioned earlier in this thesis (Oxford Royale Summer Schools 2014) or the Czech-English dictionary of phraseology that states that idioms hardly ever have direct equivalents in other languages, pointing at the difficulty of English idioms translation (Bočánková and Kalina 2007, 7).

Weying Jiang says that different cultures each have different ideas and connotations (Jiang 2000, 329), and that may result in the formation of phrases that are not well understood by different cultures. As Fred E. Jandt indicates in this book, idiomatic equivalence is one of the hard challenges in translation or intercultural communication. (Jandt 2010, 136) Because of their non-transparent and figurative nature explored in the following chapter, idioms, be it phrasal verbs, proverbs, metaphors, or others, may be frequently a source of confusion, as Wayne and Dauwalder point out, explaining that idioms are not to be interpreted literally and that English idioms, in particular, may be a perilous (and sometimes even economically ineffective) means of intercultural business communication. (Wayne and Dauwalder 1994, 652) The fact that idioms can pose a language barrier to IBC can be demonstrated in the following example (later referenced in the practical part of this thesis):

⇒ *Cooking the books* is illegal, yet practised activity in certain businesses.

The idiomatic expression *cook the books* frequently used in BE is not understood in its literal sense by those familiar with the phrase. People – primarily those in business – understand that the phrase means to commit accounting fraud and give false information in one's or company's accounts. For those unfamiliar with the idiom, however, it may seem that it is a common practice in some companies to literally cook pieces of literature in a pot. That is why learning and knowing idioms is crucial in the world of business. Idioms may be one of the most strenuous language barriers in IBC to overcome, but once mastered, they may turn into one of the best advantages in the intercultural business communication competence.

2 ENGLISH IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

This chapter discusses the core theoretical aspects of English idiomatic expressions, aiming to provide information on the nature and characteristics of idioms, such as idiomaticity and idiomatic variations or polysemy, and introduce some of the distinct types of idioms in order to familiarise the readers with the topic of idioms. The topic is hard, probably impossible in many cases, to approach just intuitively, but it is rewarding at the same time. David Crystal says that idioms are used widely in both speaking and writing, but their importance lies primarily in conversation – when expressing agreement, summarising, and more. (Crystal 2010, 163) Therefore it can be claimed that idioms, when used cleverly and appropriately, can be a powerful tool and a useful addition to one's communication skill, which applies to intercultural business communication as well.

Idioms sometimes have an ambiguous image. While the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* describes them as “a colourful and fascinating aspect of English” (Walter 2006, vi), they are also pointed out as problematic in the previous chapter of this thesis, being a barrier to IBC that is hard to overcome. Being a barrier, though, means that even if hard to conquer, a *light at the end of the tunnel* exists. As the idiomatic phrase in italics suggests, idioms, once mastered, may become an invaluable asset in one's communication skills, as suggested above, because they are not only used frequently by the native and competent English speakers, but they can help to explore attitudes or emotions of people (Walter 2006, vi), which is an added value in both regular and intercultural business communication. This chapter focuses mainly on the practically applicable properties of idioms, and as such, it does not explore the historical or historically linguistic background of idiomatic expressions.

2.1 Definition and Characteristics of English Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions are an intricate part of language characteristic for several reasons, and it is believed that at least minimal, general knowledge of some of its features is needed to gain better knowledge and competence in their use, and, eventually, improve one's IBC as a result. This subchapter introduces some of the significant characteristics of English idioms, attempting to define what the terms *idioms* or *idiomatic expressions* mean, how non-transparent the meaning of idioms can be, how flexible or rigid idioms are, whether they allow any variations in their interpretation or form.

2.1.1 Idiomaticity

As alluded before, the meaning of an idiomatic expression “cannot be deduced by examining the meanings of the constituent lexemes,” as explained in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, meaning that idioms must be approached as figurative or metaphorical phrases, because their literal meaning is usually irrelevant and often nonsensical. This can be seen in the case of giving someone a *golden parachute*, which does not mean that someone is given an actual parachute of a golden colour or made of gold, but rather that they were fired and given a large sum of money as a form of apology. Crystal also states that another sign of idiomaticity is that the phrases are grammatically and lexically fixed (Crystal 2010, 163). That is true to an extent, and the somewhat frozen and inflexible nature of idioms may be one of their main characteristics, but as explored later in this subchapter, even fixedness is not applied in all idioms fully. On the whole, idiomaticity is the primary attribute of idioms, shifting the meaning of phrases from literal to figurative, but it is not the only feature worth mentioning.

2.1.2 Semantic Features

Semantic Classification

Semantically, idiomatic expressions can be classified into three distinct groups, according to Kvetko (2006, 30-32). First are **pure idioms**, also called opaque or demotivated idioms, that are very hard or impossible to understand without the knowledge of their meaning, as their individual parts’ meanings have no relation to the overall meaning. These idioms include the expressions *red tape* (= excessive bureaucracy), *kick the bucket* (= die) or *spill the beans* (= reveal a secret). The next group are **figurative** or **semi opaque idioms** in which a connection between the idiom’s components and the overall meaning can be found to some extent, for the literal meaning(s) may allude to the idiomatic/figurative meaning, as in the case of *bring sb to his / her knees* (= defeat sb) or *behind closed doors* (= hidden from public). The last group encompasses **semi-idioms** that stand between their literal and figurative meanings, as one part is understood figuratively, and the other keeps its literal meaning, e.g. *horse sense* (= common sense) or *white lie* (= a harmless or trivial lie).

Monosemy and Polysemy

While English idioms are generally considered **monosemantic**, i.e. having only one – often hard to guess – meaning, some of them are **polysemantic**, having a multitude of meanings. Monosemantic idioms, that are in majority, include *hot stock* (= a newly issued stock in high

demand) or *white elephant* (= something that is costly but has no useful purpose), and idioms with multiple meanings are e.g. *on the spot* (= in trouble vs immediately vs actually present) or *take care* (= look after sb, be careful, deal with sb, kill sb). (Kvetko 2006, 32-3)

Idiomatic Semantic Fields

When the need for grouping of idioms arises, as is the case of the practical part of this thesis, idiomatic expressions can be clustered into the so-called idiomatic, or phraseological, fields that Pavol Kvetko describes as “sets (groups) of semantically related idioms, connected by the same general concept.” Such grouping may be advantageous not only for the creation of a glossary or dictionary, but also during an analysis of common features or relationships (synonymy, antonymy, and more) among respective idioms. While Kvetko (2006, 34) gives examples by grouping idioms according to the feeling or emotion they evoke (*in a cold sweat* or *shake like a leaf* for “fear” and *run the show* or *keep a tight rein* for “power”), Seidl and McMordie cluster idioms by their area of usage in life, including the business departments of banking, stock exchange, general business and trade (Seidl and McMordie 1990, 186-92) – in a fashion similar to the practical part of this thesis.

2.1.3 Fixedness

Fixedness or variability is an important feature of idiomatic expressions, as some idioms can be altered during their usage without losing their status or meaning as an idiom, while others cannot, such as *by hook or by crook* which is considered “a complete lexical compound” and it is impossible to use it in a different form, e.g. **by hooks or crooks*. (Widdowson 1996, 61) Pavol Kvetko describes the fixedness of idioms as a complex linguistic feature, stating that despite idioms being usually considered fixed expressions, only a small number of them are completely rigid and unchangeable. Kvetko names these expressions as **frozen**, **fixed** or **invariable**, and he further adds that the fixed nature of theirs is often rooted in their other features, such as their use of rhythm, rhyme or alliteration (*out of sight, out of mind, burn one’s bridges*). Among other fixed idioms referenced by Kvetko are *red tape*, *at the eleventh hour* or *once in a blue moon*. Kvetko then continues with **changeable** idioms, saying that the majority of idioms are variable to some extent, because they undergo grammatical changes (*make up one’s mind* → *he made up his mind*) or they are open to lexical variants (both *lay one’s cards on the table* and *put one’s cards on the table* are possible variants of one idiom). Kvetko warns, though, that these changes cannot always be applied in the same manner to all idioms, even if they are changeable, summarising the fixedness by bringing an example of a frozen expression *red tape* (while **red tapes*, **redder tape* cannot be used) and

a more variable idiom *white elephant* (*white elephants* can be used, but **whiter elephant* is incorrect). (Kvetko 2006, 28-9) Based on the varying levels of fixedness, specific types of variations of idioms exist, as detailed in the following subchapter.

2.1.4 Variations

Considering changeable idioms as a significant part of idiomatic English, this subpart deals with the generally considered types of idiomatic variations, namely lexical, grammatical, orthographic (spelling) and geographical variants. The changes, rooted in varying degrees of fixedness, that create these variations are, as stated by Kvetko, usually based on the processes of substitution, addition or permutation. Kvetko also notes that different variations may have different stylistic value or frequency, and that complex variants exist, combining multiple types of variation in a single idiomatic expression. (Kvetko 2006, 29-30)

Lexical Variants

Changeable idioms with lexical variations allow their respective parts to be substituted for others without changing the intended meaning. The changeable words can be both lexical (full-meaning words, be it nouns, adjectives, verbs, or other parts of speech) and functional (such as prepositions). Lexical variants of idioms then include expressions such as *black as night / black as midnight, hold a meeting / run a meeting or walk on air / float on air*. (Kvetko 2006, 29) Various reasons exist for the formation of such variants, one of them being the gender customisation, e.g. *right-hand man / right-hand woman*.

Grammatical Variants

Variations in grammatical elements of idioms are stated to be of morphological, syntactic or morphological-syntactic origins, involving the possibility of change in word order (*day and night / night and day, skin and bones / bones and skin*), tense (*spill the beans / spilt the beans, leave no stone unturned / left no stone unturned*), grading of an adjective (*small fry / smaller fry* – though not **the smallest fry*), and others. (Kvetko 2006, 29-30)

Orthographic Variants

Orthography, or spelling, is a matter of relative versatility in the English language, as many words exist that are somewhat flexible in their spelling, most notably their variations used in British and American English (*behaviour vs behavior, centre vs center*). According to Kvetko, these changes appear in idiomatic English as well, including variations in writing, hyphenation, capital letters, abbreviations, and more, ultimately making learning and gaining

knowledge in the area of idioms even more challenging and complicated. Variants presented by Kvetko are e.g. *to a T* vs *to a tee*, *pay lip service* vs *pay lipservice*, *sit in judgement* vs *sit in judgment* and also the British-American variations such as *grey area* (BrE) and *gray area* (AmE). (Kvetko 2006, 30)

Geographical Variants

Lastly, Kvetko mentions geographical variations, a category that is distinct especially in the English language because of some of the striking differences among the British, American and also Australian versions of the language. The author distinguishes between the **identical** idioms that may convey different meanings in varied versions of English (*Indian summer* marks the period of pleasant autumn weather, but additionally also a period of happiness and success in BrE), **different** idioms that are known only in one particular English (*make a federal case out of sth* and *go south* in AmE and *cut the cackle* or *(go) under hammer* in BrE) and then **partly different** idioms that are the result of the types of variations described above, such as *grey area* (BrE) vs *gray area* (AmE). (Kvetko 2006, 47-9)

2.2 Specific Types of Idiomatic Expressions

Within the field of idiomatic expressions, no singular or universal system of categorisation exists that would dictate which idiom belongs to which group, but certain specific types of idioms are so distinct in their structure, usage, or appearance that they are clustered into special, widely known groups with high regularity. *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* lists fourteen types of idioms worth of noting (1979, ix-x). Not all of them, however, are seen as equally relevant for this subchapter, and thus two groups – phrasal verbs and sayings and proverbs – are given more space in individual parts of this subchapter, while the other three mentioned groups are summarised below:

Traditional Idioms

Traditional idioms, referred by this name also in the *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* (Walter 2006, vi), include those types of idiomatic phrases that people most often understand under the word *idiom*. They can be noun phrases such as *black market* or *white elephant*, verb phrases like *catch sb red-handed*, and other types of phrases – usually not full sentences in themselves – having a common ground in their non-literal meaning. These types of idioms feature most prominently in the practical part of this thesis, as they appear to represent the major portion of idiomatic expressions found in Business English.

Binomials

Binomials, also called **pairs of words**, consist of two related words. These words usually come from the same word class and they are joined by a conjunction (*by, and, or*, or others), and the expression as a whole tends to be fixed with the word order being irreversible. As noted by Čermák, binomials can serve a multitude of functions in language, and they can both stand alone, e.g. *back and forth, here and there, right or wrong*, or be a part of a larger idiom, like *raining cats and dogs* or *be at hammer and tongs*. (Čermák 2007, 424-7)

Similes

Also called **comparative idioms**, similes are idiomatic expressions based on the comparison of one thing to another, creating a figurative connection between the two. Easy to recognise, similes usually compare the conditions or qualities by the use of words *as* or *like*, and they emphasise the first of the compared phenomena in the case of adjectival or adverbial phrases, which offers a relatively simple solution to the question of their translation into non-figurative language – e.g. the simile *as quiet as a mouse* can be replaced with *very quiet*. Another frequently occurring types of similes are verb phrases (*work like a horse*). Other similes may include *memory like an elephant, as sharp as a needle* or *as old as the hills*.

2.2.1 Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs, also called idiomatic verbs by the *Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (Brown and Ashby 2001, xi), may not be a striking example of idiomatic expressions, but they belong to the group nevertheless. They can be defined as phrases consisting of usually two to three words with their core being a verb joined by a preposition and/or an adverb. (Gairns and Redman 2011, 5) Phrasal verbs are inherently idiomatic in nature because they are not used in their literal, but figurative meaning – though not always, as explained by the authors Seidl and McMordie (1990, 101). The following examples demonstrate this phenomenon:

- ⇒ There is no point in trying anymore. Just *give up*.
- ⇒ It *turned up* just fine in the end.
- ⇒ I would like you to *sit down* and be quiet.

Upon closer investigation of the sentences, varying degrees of idiomaticity can be observed in the verbs. The phrasal verb *give up* has only a little semantic relation to the verb *give*, as the verb *turn up* does not indicate an action of turning, but of something happening. On the other hand, the phrasal verb *sit down* denotes the action of seating, so it can be said that

phrasal verbs vary in their level of idiomaticity and figurativeness. Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman comment on various grammatical aspects of phrasal verbs, like their transitivity and their ability to change or shift the meaning of the core verb in multiple ways (enhance: *eat* → *eat up* = eat everything; change the meaning from literal to figurative: *eat* → *eat into* = use everything; and more) (Gairns and Redman 2011, 12). Other authors then make remarks on the difficulty of understanding and using phrasal verbs correctly – for several reasons. Not only because of their figurative meaning, which prevents intuitive usage, but also because English phrasal verbs are often polysemantic, meaning that they carry more than one meaning which can be confusing for learners, as commented on in an article about the problems of learning multi-word verbs (British Council 2019) or in an aforementioned study book by Gairns and Redman (2011, 16-20). Looking at the verb *make up*, it can be used in as many as ten different meanings, five of which, as stated by the *Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2000, 323-4), are given below with the dictionary's sample sentences:

1 **combine together to form sth**

Indonesia is *made up* of over 13,000 islands.

2 **make a choice**

I wish he'd hurry up and *make up* his mind.

3 **think of a lie or excuse that is not true**

I bet he's *making* it all *up*.

4 **come to amends with sb after a fight**

Although the father had *made up* with his daughter, there was still a strain between him and his son-in-law.

5 **compromise for sth (usually an avoided responsibility)**

I'm going home early – I'll *make up* the time tomorrow.

As evident from this subchapter, although phrasal verbs do not look like standard idiomatic expressions, they can be classified as ones. They can be as problematic and as convenient as other idioms, and their knowledge appears to be crucial, as they are frequently referenced in the teaching materials of the English language. Even if they are not included in the practical part of this thesis as a separate group of idioms, phrasal verbs can be found in it, as they are an essential part of idiomatic English.

2.2.2 Sayings and Proverbs

Although linguists seem to differ in their opinion on whether proverbs are or are not idioms, saying and proverbs are included in this part of the thesis because their general feature is similar to those of other idiomatic expressions: their meaning is, apart from some exceptions, not to be understood literally, but figuratively. *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (Speake 2008, Introduction) defines a proverb as “a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and pithy manner.” Correspondingly, the entry on the word *proverb* in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* describes it as “a short well-known statement that gives advice or expresses something that is generally true,” directly referring to the entry of a *saying*. (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2019) With this, it is safe to say that only a thin line between a proverb and a saying exists. This opinion is further supported by Kvetko, who comments that words *proverb* and *saying* are frequently interchanged, highlighting only marginal differences between the terms and also stating quotations by well-known individuals as a part of this group as they changed from quotations to proverbs/sayings with time, e.g. Julius Caesar’s *the die is cast*. (Kvetko 2006, 19-20) Both sayings and proverbs, however, differ from traditional or proper idioms in that they usually form full sentences. (*Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* 1979, x) Lastly, these specific idioms are considered to divide into three main categories, as presented below with examples and explanations (Speake 2008, Introduction):

1 **abstract statements that express general truths**

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

when a person is missing someone, it seems they love the missed ones even more
(interestingly contrary to the saying *out of sight, out of mind*)

2 **specific observations from everyday life that make a general point**

Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.

do not put all your efforts or resources into a single goal

3 **sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and folklore, including regional and country proverbs**

When the wind is in the east, ‘tis neither good for man nor beast.

a cold eastern wind brings troubles to one’s life

II. ANALYSIS

3 METHODOLOGY

Based on the examination of specific idiomatic expressions used in Business English, the main goal of the thesis is to create a glossary to help the business environment to cope with idioms. Such a glossary (aimed primarily – but not exclusively – at the students soon to be in business or people already in business) can serve as a tool to enrich one's personal vocabulary, gain better understanding of the meaning and appropriateness of usage of individual idioms and improve one's ability to express their thoughts, feelings and opinions in a more authentic way; all to help to improve the intercultural business communication competence. The one hundred entries displayed in the following chapter clearly cannot encompass the broad range of business idiomatic expressions, and they do not aim to, but they are selected to reflect the portion of Business English that can be often encountered.

The main question posed before the creation of the list of expressions was which idioms to choose to represent the diverse environment of Business English in the best way possible. While corpus and discourse analyses were considered as fitting to the nature of this thesis, it was concluded that the glossary would be formed by business-oriented texts being examined with a form of text analysis. When comparing different types of textual analyses, H. G. Widdowson states that one of the advantages of the corpus analysis is the ability to measure the frequency and also examine the range of words or phrases. (Widdowson 2007, 78-79) These elements, however, were employed during the text analysis and the creation of the glossary in this thesis without using any specific corpora of language. To form the glossary, articles in online electronic versions of six business-oriented periodicals were systematically examined in order to find repeating idioms and assess the frequency of their usage in Business English. The analysis used articles from the following periodicals:

- *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/>.
- *Forbes*. <https://forbes.com/>.
- *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/>.
- *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/>.
- *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/>.
- *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

The expressions were clustered into categories according to the semantic fields they were assessed to belong to, and these groups were further divided into subgroups in order to better distinguish among the different spheres of business the particular phrases and expressions

tend to be used in. Each entry in the glossary is provided with an explanation that was consulted with one of the dictionaries listed in the bibliography of this thesis. The dictionaries used are either general or specialised on Business English, phrases and idiomatic expressions or both of the latter two. The definitions are either cited from the dictionaries or modified to suit the purpose of the glossary, and the dictionaries are not referred to directly in the glossary in order to maintain the conciseness of the text. All entries also include example sentences to familiarise the users of the glossary (be it students, business people, non-native speakers or others) with the situations in which the expressions may be encountered. Because the sentences found in the source periodicals would be mostly out of context and probably would not make much sense to the readers if isolated, new sentences were created to show the typical situations of usage of the phrases. Alternatively, if any of the dictionaries included a suitable sentence, it is cited in the glossary and the particular dictionary or source is referred to. An entry in the selection then looks as follows:

0 idiomatic expression

definition

⇒ An example sentence.

⇒ **expression** related to the main one in the entry, should a relevant one exist

Because the nature and style of entries are similar to those found in dictionaries, the generic preposition *to* is not used with the verb phrases, according to the style used in most of the consulted dictionaries. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that not all expressions listed are purely business idioms – a number of them may be seen in different areas of English (e.g. *bitter pill (to swallow)* is a general idiom) – but because of their significant frequency in Business English, they are included. The system of the categorisation of expressions is detailed in the following chapter, along with the glossary itself.

4 SELECTION OF SPECIFIC IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN CHOSEN AREAS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

This chapter comprises a list of idiomatic expressions frequently used in Business English. The information on the creation process of the list, as well as the sources used, is explained in the previous chapter. Based on the nature of the source articles the specific expressions were found in, the phrases were divided into five groups with some of them including subgroups. The groups are as follows:

- 1 **Economy**
- 2 **Business People and Activities**
- 3 **Expressions with Colours**
- 4 **Expressions with Numbers**
- 5 **Expressions Containing Specific Words**

Several of the listed expressions appear to belong to more than one selected area, and that is correct (e.g. *black market* may be under both Expressions with Colours and Expressions with ‘Market,’ and the same applies to a *white-collar (worker)* – Colours or Types of People in Business). The choices of where to include said expressions were made in an attempt to balance the number of idioms among the groups and maintain the topical punctuality at the same time (all of the expressions containing the word ‘market’ are clustered together, even if some of them contain colours – a separate category – as well).

4.1 Economy

This group encompasses idiomatic expressions and phrases that occur in some of the general areas of the economy, divided into four subgroups:

- 1 **Accounting**
- 2 **Money and Price**
- 3 **Sales**
- 4 **Stock Market**

The first five of the following expressions are of a general nature and can be encountered in multiple spheres of economy. Therefore, they are not included in any of the subgroups.

1 **big picture**

a broad overview of a situation, issue or problem; a wide perspective or appraisal

⇒ You cannot see the *big picture* because you keep focusing on the details only.

2 bitter pill (to swallow)

something difficult or unpleasant that must be accepted

⇒ Reporting to the boss after our team's failure was a *bitter pill to swallow*.

3 fast / quick buck

easily and quickly earned money

⇒ The manual was easy to translate, and I got paid well. It was a *quick buck*.

4 money talks

a proverb; wealth gives power and influence to those who possess it

⇒ People say that only one's hard work and dedication are ways to achieve greatness, but in the end, we all know that *money talks*.

5 tighten the / sb's belt(s)

spend less money (during a time of financial difficulty)

⇒ Instead of *tightening their belts* in order to repay their student loans, many fresh graduates spend money on unnecessary luxuries.

4.1.1 Accounting

6 balance the books

make certain that the money spent is not more than the money received

⇒ The accounting department suggested to the financial management that the company should cut extra costs in order to *balance the books* in December.

7 bottom line

the final profit and loss figure for a company

⇒ The company's CFO argued that such an insecure investment might pose too high a risk for the *bottom line*.

8 cook the books / accounts

to give false information in a company's accounts in order to gain an advantage

⇒ *Cooking the books* is illegal, yet practised activity in certain businesses.

9 creative accounting / accountancy = window dressing

misleadingly optimistic, though not illegal, forms of accounting

⇒ Companies do not need to commit fraud to make their results look better; all they need is a little bit of *creative accounting*.

10 number cruncher

someone whose job includes working with numbers and doing calculations;
an accountant / bookkeeper

⇒ Not every Maths-clever person would want to be a *number cruncher*. Some people want to use numbers more creatively than for accounting.

4.1.2 Money and Price**11 bang for the / sb's buck**

value received in return for the money spent

⇒ The investors will take a risk, but they want to get the most *bang for their buck*.

12 fortune

an extremely large amount of money; collocates with **make / spend**

⇒ Solely thanks to her activity as an influencer and a brand ambassador, she managed to *make a fortune* of several million dollars.

13 over the top

to an excessive or exaggerated degree; an extremely high price (BE)

⇒ Our procurement manager wants to terminate the contract with these distributors. Their prices are *over the top*.

14 cost a pretty penny

be very expensive

⇒ The new machines must have *cost a pretty penny*.

15 skyrocket

rise or become successful extremely quickly

⇒ The water prices *skyrocketed* after the conference on climate change.

4.1.3 Sales

16 cash cow

a business, product or service that makes a large profit, often used to make money to support other business activities

⇒ The new mobile app is our *cash cow*. Without its revenues, we would have to cancel several other projects.

17 cold call = blind call (also cold-call sb)

a phone call or visit from someone trying to sell a product or service who has not been asked by the customer to do this; often executed by the so-called “mail order firms” (Greener 1994, 111)

⇒ This morning I got a very annoying *cold call*. They tried very hard to persuade me, but I refused politely.

18 hard sell

a policy or technique of aggressive salesmanship or advertising

⇒ The participants of the event were given the *hard sell*. Many bought the goods, but some of them seemed quite shaken by the attitude of the salesmen.

19 selling point

a characteristic of a product or service that will persuade people to buy it

⇒ Our *selling point* is the intuitive use of the product. People always like it when they don't have to think much.

4.1.4 Stock Market

20 bear

a person who sells shares in the hope of buying them back later at a lower price

⇒ “The *bear* anticipates that the price will fall and that the shares promised, which at the time of the ‘sale’ he does not possess, can be acquired at a price lower than the selling price [...]” (Greener 1994, 63)

21 bull

a person who buys shares in the hope of selling them later at a higher price

⇒ Being a *bull*, she keeps buying shares she expects to later rise in price.

22 go public

apply to a stock exchange to become a public limited company

- ⇒ The company *went public* during their IPO on 4 April 2017 with a relatively small number of shares.
- ⇒ **go private** = take a listed company into private ownership, thus removing its shares from the stock exchange

23 hot stock

a newly issued stock that is in high public demand

- ⇒ This promising company's shares are considered to be a *hot stock*.

24 stag

a person who buys newly issued shares intending to sell them at a profit as soon as they can be traded

- ⇒ He hopes to sell the shares as fast as possible; he's a prototype of a *stag*.

4.2 Business People and Activities

This group of idioms revolves around the specific types of people in business and also the activities they or others in business may encounter. The group is divided as follows:

- 1 **Types of People in Business**
- 2 **Meetings**
- 3 **Negotiations**

4.2.1 Types of People in Business**25 big fish in a small pond**

a respected person in a small organisation or town, who might not be so effective or have such power in a larger company or place

- ⇒ He is just a *big fish in a small pond*; he might be at the top here, but he would never succeed in a multinational company.

26 movers and shakers

people with a lot of power and influence

- ⇒ Dylan is the CEO, but the Board of Directors are the real *movers and shakers*.

27 right-hand man / woman

someone's closest assistant or helper

⇒ This is Frank, my *right-hand man*. I would be lost without him.

28 rising star

a person (alternatively a company) who is likely to be successful

⇒ Our new brand manager has been doing very well so far. She is a *rising star* without doubts.

29 top dog

the most important person or organisation in a particular situation

⇒ Here goes Mr Black, our potential client. He is the *top dog* right now.

30 whizz-kid / whizz kid / whiz kid (AmE)

a young person who is very good and successful at something

⇒ She is a *whizz-kid*; despite being young and inexperienced, she seems to succeed at every task given to her.

31 yes-man / yes man

a person who agrees with everything their employer says in order to please them

⇒ We want someone who has an opinion on their own, not a *yes-man* like him.

4.2.2 Meetings**32 chair a meeting**

be in charge of a meeting; be responsible for managing a meeting

⇒ This is the first time I am *chairing a meeting*. I am quite nervous.

33 compare apples and / to / with oranges

try to compare or highlight similarities between two different, unrelated things

⇒ The consultant pointed out that we were *comparing apples and oranges* because the German and Italian businesspeople tend to work and organise their time very differently.

34 hold / run a meeting

organise a meeting

⇒ We need to *hold a meeting* to discuss the arising issues.

35 make a mountain out of a molehill

make a slight difficulty seem like a serious problem

⇒ Calm down; two hours delay is no disaster. Please stop *making a mountain out of a molehill*.

36 table a / the discussion

postpone a discussion or a particular topic until later

⇒ The team leader *tabled the discussion* about the cafeteria until the next week.

4.2.3 Negotiations**37 agreement in principle**

an agreement in which the general terms and conditions of a deal are accepted without the complete details

⇒ The parties reached an *agreement in principle* during the first day of negotiations already.

38 back and forth

a situation in which people alternate in sharing their perspectives

⇒ We had a rigorous *back and forth* during the discussion, and everyone could share their opinions and ideas.

39 deadlock (between sb and sb / in / on / over sth)

a situation in which people cannot agree and no progress can be made; collocates with multiple prepositions

⇒ “There was a *deadlock* between the directors and the negotiating committee.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)

40 drive a hard bargain

strongly defend a position that is very much to one’s own advantage when reaching an agreement

⇒ They are confident during negotiations, always *driving a hard bargain*.

41 in a nutshell

very briefly, giving only the main points

⇒ “What went wrong?” “*In a nutshell*, everything.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)

42 in the driving seat = in the driver's seat

in control; in a dominant or influential position

⇒ Now that Jo is *in the driving seat* again, the whole team feels more secure.

⇒ **take a back seat** = take a less prominent role (willingly or not)

43 sweet deal

a beneficial business arrangement

⇒ Our partners agreed to provide us with extra services. That was a *sweet deal*.

44 sweetheart deal = sweetheart contract

an agreement between two parties that offers advantages to both but is unfair (or even illegal or illicit) to competitors

⇒ “Members of the council had arranged a *sweetheart deal* with CTS.” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online 2019)

45 take it or leave it

accept or refuse the offer completely

⇒ The conditions cannot be adjusted any further. Last offer, *take it or leave it*.

46 throw in the towel

admit defeat or inability to do something anymore

⇒ I see that I cannot persuade you. It is time to *throw in the towel*.

4.3 Expressions with Colours

This group of idiomatic words and phrases clusters together expressions containing the names of colours. It is divided into three subgroups:

- 1 **Expressions with ‘Black’ and ‘Red’**
- 2 **Expressions with ‘Golden’**
- 3 **Expressions with Coloured Collars**

The colours black, red and golden appear prominently in the business language, that is why the expressions with these colours are separate from the others. The last subgroup in this group then covers the expressions that revolve around the colours of the collars of certain members of the workforce. The first six expressions in this group, however, do not fit into any of the aforementioned subgroups, thus they are listed separately.

- 47 blue chip / blue-chip**
reliable, safe, respected
⇒ “You can’t lose. It’s a *blue-chip* investment.” (L’Estrange and Norman 1996, 9)
- 48 (give sb) the green light**
(give) permission to do something
⇒ “The Commission *gave us the green light* to start negotiations.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 49 green shoots (of recovery)**
the first signs that an economy is growing again after a recession
⇒ “He announced the could see the greens shoots of recovery in the job market.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 50 pink slip**
a document given to an employee to tell them that they were made redundant
⇒ I was given my *pink slip* a month ago; I need to start looking for a new job.
- 51 show sb’s true colours (BrE) = true colors (AmE)**
reveal sb’s true intentions, thoughts, feelings or personality
⇒ She appeared sweet and pliable during our first meeting, but during the next one she *showed her true colours*, and I realised dealing with her won’t be easy.
- 52 white elephant**
something that costs a lot of money but has no useful purpose
⇒ “The stadium is likely to become a *white elephant* after the championships are over.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 4.3.1 Expressions with ‘Black’ and ‘Red’**
- 53 black economy**
business activity that is illegal because the tax on profits is not paid
⇒ “An increase in the national minimum wage could damage many businesses and boost the *black economy*.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 54 blacklist / black list**
a list of people or organisations considered untrustworthy or disloyal

- ⇒ They will not do business with us; we are on their *blacklist*.
- ⇒ **blacklist sb** = put sb on one's blacklist
- ⇒ **blacklisted** = present on sb's blacklist

55 (bleed / leak / spill) red ink

a situation in which a company is losing a lot of money

- ⇒ Any trade with the company should be avoided; they've been *spilling red ink* for months now.

56 in the black vs in the red

in profit / financially stable (black) vs in loss / fall in value (red)

- ⇒ Due to the bad financial strategy, four of our subsidiaries are *in the red* now.
- ⇒ **be in black numbers** vs **be in red numbers** = be in profit vs be in loss

57 red-eye / red eye (flight)

late night flight which arrives at the start of the business day, leaving travellers with little if any time for real sleep

- ⇒ The *red-eye flights* are unhealthy and inefficient, but sometimes necessary.

58 (catch sb) red-handed

(find someone) doing something illegal

- ⇒ He was *caught red-handed*. Now it is clear he was cooking the books.

59 red-letter day

a special occasion

- ⇒ "It was a *red-letter day* for us when we got that big order from France."
(L'Estrange and Norman 1996, 60)

60 red tape

official rules and processes that seem unnecessary and cause delays

- ⇒ *Red tape* bureaucracy does not look important, but probably is.
- ⇒ **cut red tape** = stop or diminish red tape activities

4.3.2 Expressions with 'Golden'

61 **golden handcuffs**

a payment made to an employee as part of an arrangement that they will not leave to work for another company

⇒ Financial benefits can serve as *golden handcuffs* to keep employees loyal.

62 **golden handshake**

a payment or a benefit given when an employee leaves a company

⇒ I suggest we give him a generous *golden handshake* for his great contributions.

⇒ **golden parachute** = a large payment made to an employee if they are forced to leave a company, e.g. if it is taken over

63 **golden hello**

a payment made to an executive when they start working at a company or to encourage an employee to leave their company and join the other

⇒ The new position was attractive in itself, but the *golden hello* I got was nice.

64 **golden opportunity**

an advantageous opportunity unlikely to be repeated

⇒ This deal is a real *golden opportunity*. We must not miss it.

4.3.3 Expressions with Coloured Collars

65 **blue-collar (worker)**

a person who does manual or factory work

⇒ Everyone wants to study at college and get a top-management job these days.
The demand for *blue-collar workers* is rising.

66 **pink-collar (worker)**

a person who works in services, or does a job traditionally done by women (nursing, kindergarten-level teaching, caretaking)

⇒ Nurses are usually seen as *pink-collar workers* because they're mostly women.

67 **white-collar (worker) = black-coated worker**

a person who works in an office and their job requires mental rather than physical efforts (managers, clerks)

- ⇒ People think that *white-collar workers* have it easy, but they cannot be further from the truth. Mental activity is extremely exhausting.

Other colours of workers' collars exist, but such expressions are not used as widely as the three mentioned above and they have not been in use for as long as the blue, white or pink collars. The following table, however, presents differently coloured collars as described by Hassan Choughari, a human resources consultant, in his LinkedIn article. (Choughari 2016)

Table 2 *Types of Less-Prominent Collar Workers*

black-collar	either mining and oil industry, or illegal workers
gold-collar	either young, low-wage workers, or valuable experts, e.g. doctors, lawyers or researchers
green-collar	environment and ecology-related workers
grey-collar	originally those beyond blue or white-collars, nowadays also healthcare professionals, firefighters, police officers, security guards
no-collar	either overqualified and unemployed or technology experts who “eschew collars altogether”
open-collar	home office workers
orange-collar	prison labourers (because of the orange jumpsuits)
red-collar	government workers and farmers
scarlet-collar	sexual services workers and pornographic performers
yellow-collar	creative industry workers, e.g. photographers

Source: Choughari 2016

4.4 Expressions with Numbers

This group of expressions deals with the use of numbers in idiomatic Business English.

68 at sixes and sevens

in a confused, badly organised, or difficult situation

- ⇒ The last month was crazy. The whole department was *at sixes and sevens*.

69 (at) the eleventh hour

the last moment or almost too late

- ⇒ The material arrived *at the eleventh hour*.

- 70 back to square one**
start working on sth from the beginning because the previous attempt(s) failed
⇒ “If this doesn’t work, we’re *back to square one*.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 71 fifty-fifty**
divided equally between two people or organisations
⇒ I want us to be equals. Everything *fifty-fifty*.
- 72 from day one**
from the first day or the very beginning
⇒ *From day one* I knew this would be demanding but rewarding work.
- 73 have second thoughts (about sth)**
change opinion about sth or start to doubt it
⇒ Are you *having second thoughts about* this contract?
- 74 nine times out of ten**
almost always
⇒ This works *nine times out of ten*.
- 75 put two and two together**
guess the truth about a situation from what an individual has seen or heard
⇒ I *put two and two together* and realised it must have been a fraud.
- 76 second to none**
as good as or better than all others
⇒ “The conditions that these prisoners are kept in are *second to none*.”
(Cambridge Dictionary 2019)
- 77 seventh heaven**
a positive situation which causes extreme happiness
⇒ They agreed with all our terms and conditions. This is *seventh heaven*!
- 78 thanks a million**
thank you very much (often used ironically with the opposite meaning)
⇒ You ruined the whole deal. *Thanks a million*!

79 twenty-four seven

all the time (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week)

⇒ I am in the office *twenty-four seven*; I don't even remember going home.

4.5 Expressions Containing Specific Words

The last of the selected groups of business-related phrases and expressions presents idioms that contain specific words found to be prominent in Business English, with the group being divided into two subgroups:

1 Expressions with 'Business'**2 Expressions with 'Market'****4.5.1 Expressions with 'Business'****80 be (back) in business**

be able to (once again) engage in an activity

⇒ Our company's intranet is on again and we *are back in business*.

81 be none of sb's business

sb does not need to know

⇒ This is a concern of my private life, not a professional one;
so it *is none of your business*.

82 business is business

a phrase that says that in a particular situation, the most important thing to do is what is right for a business

⇒ He is my old friend, but *business is business*.

83 do business with sb

engage in business activities with sb

⇒ We *do business with* many companies in our market segment.

84 do the business

do what is wanted or needed in a particular situation

⇒ You may not like his manners, but he always *does the business*.

85 get down to business

start talking about the subject to be discussed

⇒ “If the introductions are over, I’d like to *get down to business*.” (Cambridge Dictionary 2019)

86 like nobody’s business

very quickly or very much

⇒ During the meetings, he speaks *like nobody’s business*.

87 mean business

be serious about sth; want to achieve something

⇒ “There’s a company buying our shares. They now own 15%, so they must *mean business*. If we’re not careful, they’ll be making a takeover bid for us.” (L’Estrange and Norman 1996, 46)

88 mind sb’s own business

used to tell someone (informally) that sb should not ask about sth private

⇒ I do not need to tell you where I’ve been. You should *mind your own business*!

89 mix business with pleasure

engage in an activity that combines aspects of personal and professional life

⇒ Teambuilding vacations are meant to *mix business with pleasure*.

90 monkey business

a dishonest or unacceptable behaviour

⇒ The head of the HR office suspected there would be some *monkey business* going on should the interns be left alone.

4.5.2 Expressions with ‘Market’**91 bear market**

a situation when share prices are falling, and many people are selling them

⇒ The share prices are plummeting; this is what a *bear market* looks like.

92 black market

a situation of illegal trading in goods, currencies or services

⇒ “He sells stolen goods on the *black market*.” (Tuck 1994, 58)

93 bull market

a situation when share prices are rising in value

⇒ The skyrocketing share prices are typical for a *bull market*.

94 buyer's market

a time when there are more goods for sale than there are people to buy them, so the prices are usually low

⇒ With the surplus of goods, you can call it a *buyer's market*.

⇒ **seller's market** = the opposite situation

95 corner the market

control the available supply of a type of product or the ability to sell it

⇒ “You can't buy these anymore; the Belgians have *cornered the market*.”

(L'Estrange and Norman 1996, 17)

96 flood the market

become available in large numbers, often at a low price

⇒ Before the premiere of the new instalment of the movie series, the marketeers ordered to *flood the market* with the merchandise.

97 grey market (BrE) = gray market (AmE)

an unofficial but not illegal system of selling goods

⇒ “The store sells designer clothes and shoes sourced from the *grey market*.”

(Cambridge Dictionary 2019)

98 market jitters

anxiety or nervousness among investors, causing them to sell stocks and bonds which causes prices to go down

⇒ The recent instability on the stock market caused *market jitters* among many traders and investors.

99 play the market

risk money buying or selling shares

⇒ Because of his experience with the stock exchange, he could afford to be bold and *play the market*.

100 price yourself / sb / sth out of the market

charge so much for a product or service that nobody wants or is able to buy it

⇒ Even if these are luxury goods, you should reconsider your pricing strategy,
or you might end up *pricing yourselves out of the market*.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introductory part of this thesis, this piece of work is intended for people operating and working in the world of business, for students of business or others who wish to improve in the field of (intercultural) business communication. This thesis aimed to provide guidance in the study of English idioms, and at the same time introduce aspects of communication, its connections to culture, diversity and the world of business. Therefore, this thesis' goal was not only to assist in the extension or enrichment of the English lexicon of the reader but also to familiarise them with the importance of proper communication, an essential skill in business, as well as in life.

This thesis consists of theoretical and practical parts, both of which are divided into two chapters and multiple subchapters. In the first chapter of the theoretical part, the theory and concept of intercultural business communication was studied, exploring the relationship of culture, language and business as fundamental parts of IBC, examining the role of culture and its many types in the business environment, and lastly delving into the position of the English language as a *lingua franca* of business. It was found that culture and language are important factors in international business, that the level of IBC competence is often a determiner of success or failure in that area, and that English has a dominant position in business and economy, and it will likely keep it in the near future. This chapter also studied barriers to IBS and determined that English idiomatic expressions are one of them. The second chapter in this part investigated the theory of English idioms with its characteristics and properties being revealed to be a threat and a barrier to IBC if mishandled.

In the practical part of this thesis, a text analysis of articles in selected business-oriented periodicals was performed with the objective to assess what English idioms frequently occur in Business English. One hundred idiomatic expressions found to appear most frequently in the periodicals were then clustered into thematic groups according to their common features, such as the area of business they tend to occur in. These groups were presented in a glossary provided with a definition and example sentence for each of the idioms included. This thesis intended and managed to encompass only certain aspects of the aforementioned topics, and it clearly could not include every piece of knowledge and information needed to fully understand the complexity of idioms in intercultural business communication, but it attempted to detail the topic of idiomatic expressions as a language barrier in intercultural business communication as well as possible within the given resources, time and space. In conclusion, the goal of the Bachelor's thesis was met.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AmE	American English
BE	Business English
BrE	British English
CEO	chief executive officer
CFO	chief financial officer
IBC	intercultural business communication
IPO	initial public offering
L1	first language
L2	second language
sb	somebody
sth	something
vs	versus

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