DIMENSIONS OF FIGURATIVE EXPRESSION IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

Constantin MANEA
University of Piteşti

Abstract

Figurativeness, connotation and metaphor, based on a set of age-old semantic mechanisms rooted in tradition, are based on either similarity or contiguity (cf. the metaphor, the simile, and the metonymy). The present paper intends to point out some of the intrinsic qualities of figurative expression, noticeable in a number of phraseological units in the English language, while trying to assess their relative scale and position in contemporary Romanian. The common or similar set of images is part of the thesaurus of the archetypes of humanity. The representative material we used was selected from several medium-size dictionaries of English. Some frequent phraseological units were proved to be actually allusions to, or remnants of, common apophthegmatic units. A number of observations were made concerning such issues: the domain of reference of the "nuclear elements", their type and degree of metaphoricalness, their relative expressiveness, their origin (when relevant), their similarity with elements of the same order in Romanian, or their belonging to the international store of metaphors. The most interesting aspects in point of cultural or historical allusion are the possibility of reviving old or lost images, and providing etymology proper. Idioms encapsulating cultural and historical allusion and international idioms are listed, as well as some aspects of interesting etymologies, and the stylistic values of figurative idioms. Finally, some didactic applications of such research projects are suggested.

Key words: *phraseology*, *figurative*, *literal meaning*, *metaphor*, *image*

Résumé

Fondés sur une poignée de mécanismes sémantiques forts anciens, enracinés dans la tradition, les concepts de figurativité, de connotation et de métaphore fonctionnent soit sous la forme de la similarité, soit sous celle de la contiguïté (par exemple: la métaphore, la comparaison et la métonymie). Le présent article poursuit le but de mettre en évidence quelques unes des qualités innées de l'expressivité figurative, qui sont à remarquer dans bon nombre d'unités phraséologiques de l'anglais. En même temps, nous voulons essayer d'évaluer leur relative échelle et leurs positions respectives en roumain contemporain. La collection d'images communes ou similaires fait partie du trésor d'images archétypales de l'humanité. Nous avons employé un matériel représentatif que nous avons extrait de plusieurs dictionnaires de l'anglais, de dimensions moyennes. Nous avons prouvé que certaines unités phraséologiques très fréquentes sont, en

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

fait, des allusions à, ou des réminiscences d'unités apophthegmatiques communes. Nous présentons bon nombre de remarques au sujet de problèmes tels que: pour les «éléments-noyau», leur domaine de référence; le type et le degré de leurs métaphoricités respectives; leurs relatives puissances expressives leur origine (quand elle est importante à connaître); leur similarité d'avec des éléments pareils du roumain; leur affectation au répertoire international des métaphores. Pour ce qui est des allusions culturelles ou historiques, les questions les plus intéressantes tiennent à la possibilité de faire revivre des images fort anciennes ou que l'on considérait perdues, et à la chance de retrouver, pour celles-ci, leur étymologie correcte. Nous avons dressé une liste d'expressions idiomatiques porteuses d'allusions culturelles ou historiques et aussi une liste de telles expressions à impact international. Nous avons fait de même au sujet de certaines étymologies intéressantes qui présentent des traits particuliers. Nous y discutons aussi des valeurs du style de certaines expressions idiomatiques à valeurs figuratives. Enfin, nous y suggérons, pour ce type de projets de recherche, quelques applications à portée didactique.

Mots-clés: *phraséologie, figurativité, signification littérale, métaphore, image*

"The metaphor is a lexicon-related issue."
(Umberto Eco)

Figurativeness and connotation are the very "salt" of everyday expression in any natural language. This is primarily grounded on a set of semantic mechanisms or shifts, which have been used through a multi-millennial tradition, and are based on either similarity, or contiguity. The chief such metasememic devices are the metaphor, the simile, and metonymy. The main result of such semantic shifts are the extensions of meaning, some of which are produced by modifying the field of reference; the process through which some terms migrate from one domain of reference to another is essentially metaphorical. These cases of resemantization ensure, on the one hand, the individuality of the newly coined terms and meanings (which is more often than not highly expressive and eloquent), and on the other hand, be it rather paradoxically (at times), a kind of transnational/ international unity: one can thus talk, in the context, about metaphors and images (sometimes "lost images" – specific to phraseology, and also, similarly, to paremiology) having an international character.

The main goal and contention of the present paper was to assert some of the intrinsic qualities of figurative expression noticeable in a number of phraseological units of the English language, while also assessing (be it approximately) their relative scale, position and currency across various

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

languages of the world – principally, by comparing them with the situation in contemporary Romanian. Inheritors of a common, or at least very similar set of images – part of the large thesaurus of archetypes, or of the even larger cultural-ideological, spiritual store of humanity – humans are therefore, provably, all the more brotherly and closely related in their true essence.

We have culled the most representative material provided by a number of medium-sized dictionaries of English – namely, *Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus*, © HarperCollins Publishers, 1992 (*COLL*) and *The American Heritage Dictionary*, *Third Edition*, © 1994 SoftKey International Inc. (*AmH*). No distinction was made as far as the degree of complexity or the type of the phraseological units selected and analysed was concerned. We did not consider it necessary to approach proverbs, sayings or any other apophthegmatic units, which can quite frequently aspire to the status of "fixed units" of the lexicon; it will be true to say that what E. Coşeriu called *repeated discourse* (Rom. *discurs repetat* – essentially a type of partial linguistic quotation) faces one with the puzzling fact that some frequent phraseological units are actually allusions to, or remnants of, common apophthegmatic units (which are glossed as such in most dictionaries, e.g. *call the tune* "To be in control". The phrase comes from the proverb "The one who pays the piper calls the tune." – *AmH*): thus, the demarcation between phraseological/idiomatic, and apophthegmatic can be demonstrated to be at times rather insubstantial or hazy.

We endeavoured to make some (rather summary) observations about relevant issues such as: the domain of reference of the "nuclear elements" in the phraseological units selected, their degree of concreteness, their type and degree of metaphoricalness (even similes can account as being *metaphoric*, in the present context), their relative expressiveness, their origin (if relevant with respect with possibly "dormant", or previous metaphorical images), their similarity with elements of the same order in Romanian, or their belonging to the international store of metaphors, etc.

In any natural language, the figurative meanings of the words are part and parcel of the mental or conceptual lexicon, e.g. the word *salt* is glossed as "a white powder or colourless crystalline solid, consisting mainly of sodium chloride and used for seasoning and preserving food" (if used in the direct sense), but also as "liveliness or pungency: *his wit added salt to the discussion*" (COLL). All through the history of mankind, similitude, no less than contiguity, has led to semantic associations which have in the main contributed to substantially enriching and adding nuances to the vocabulary of natural languages.

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

The central meanings of the words are objective, intellective and impersonal; they have been used for a long time by large masses of ethnically or culturally related people as sets of conventional signs in order to perform social communication. The objective, impersonal and intelligible meaning of a word (employed virtually by "all those who use it") is represented by *denotation* ("a particular meaning, esp. one given explicitly rather than by suggestion" – *COLL*). Denotation is the cognitive or communicative aspect of meaning, while *connotation* stands for the emotional overtones that speakers associate with the individual uses of words. "Denotative meaning (…) accounts for the relationship between the linguistic sign and its denotatum" (Chițoran, *Elements of English Structural Semantics*, p. 35). When words do not merely denote (i.e. mark, or designate objects, actions, states, etc.), they signify something in addition to the primary meanings, implying or suggesting associations or ideas different from the literal/direct meanings (representing the indispensable minimum of definition), certain feelings that have been attached to the respective terms as a result of social and personal experience, e.g. the word *maiden* connotes modesty and chasteness. So, the special additional meaning that a word (or other linguistic unit) possesses, by dint of cultural or personal (mainly emotional) associations, is connotative whereas denotation covers the relationship between a linguistic unit and the non-linguistic entities to which it refers. In most cases, the connotative meanings or suggestions belong to the entire community, or at least to the majority of those who use a certain natural language. Unlike exact sciences, everyday language cannot abstain from using connotative words in view of the great complexity of man's existence and environment, as well as the fact that imagination is a component part of language – a living entity after all, not a mere code for transmitting purely pragmatic messages.

While the vast majority of the usual dictionaries give users mostly denotative meanings, glossing connotative terms and phrases is a *must* in any good, comprehensive dictionary; this can actually be said to be one of the most direct ways of access to the very spiritual gist, or the "soul" of a natural language. Communication is at times heavily based on metaphorical conventions. In English as elsewhere, such lexicalized metaphors can come either as (1) individual terms, as (2) compounds, or as (3) phrases and idioms. Thus, (1) *to hamstring/to be hamstrung* (*by someone*) can be used in its literal/direct meaning: "to cripple by cutting the hamstring (one of the tendons at the back of the knee; the large tendon at the back of the hock in the hind leg of a horse, etc.) of", or in its figurative meaning: "to ruin or thwart"; some other similar figurative meanings, based on metaphor: *to be walked all over by somebody else, to be trampled under feet, I'm dying to*

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

(*see it*), *to hammer on about sth*., *to seethe with* (*impatience*); *to pepper* "to sprinkle liberally; to dot": *His prose was peppered with alliteration*" (COLL); *a thorny question*. The degree of transparency of the figurative secondary meanings can vary: let us compare *to stun* "to shock or overwhelm; to surprise or astound", *to mesmerize* "to hold (someone) as if spellbound", *to petrify* "(tr,; often passive) to stun or daze with horror, fear, etc.", and the less obviously related figurative senses in: *to channel* / *to be channelled* (*down*, etc.) "to guide into or convey through a channel or channels: *Information was channelled through to them*"; *to spiral* "(*intr*.) to increase or decrease with steady acceleration: *Wages and prices continue to spiral*"; *to broach* "to initiate (a topic) for discussion: *to broach a dangerous subject*" (cf. the meaning of the source noun, i.e. *broach* "1. a long tapered toothed cutting tool for enlarging holes; 2. a spit for roasting meat, etc." (*COLL*). As we can see, a number of such senses are based on lexical conversion, e.g. *to butter someone up* "to praise or flatter someone excessively: "Percy was always buttering up the boss, so he was surprised when he failed to get a promotion." (*AmH*); *to cotton to* "to take a liking to someone or something: "I was afraid Janet wouldn't like my brother, but she cottoned to him immediately" (*AmH*).

(2) English is very rich in figurative compounds, some of which are colloquial, or even slang(y), e.g. *brain wave*/*brainwave* "*Informal*. A sudden idea or inspiration", *brainchild* "*Informal*. An idea or plan produced by creative thought; invention", *brain*(-)*drain* "the emigration of scientists, technologists, academics, etc., for better pay, equipment, or conditions", *brainstorming* "intensive discussion to solve problems or generate ideas", *to brainwash* "to effect a radical change in the ideas and beliefs of (a person), esp. by methods based on isolation, sleeplessness, hunger, extreme discomfort, pain, and the alternation of kindness and cruelty", etc.

(3) Most figurative phraseological units are based on images or "scenarios" that provide semantic transparency (in fact, they are more often than not "easy to see through, understand, or recognize; obvious" – *COLL*), e.g. *diamond in the rough* "Someone or something with potential or talent but lacking training or polish. This phrase refers to the fact that diamonds found in nature are rough and uneven. They must be cut and polished to bring out their true beauty" (*AmH*); *old hat* "Obsolete, old-fashioned": "Get with it, Murray; your methods are strictly old hat" (*AmH*); *twist someone's arm* "to persuade or coerce someone"; *break new ground* "to do something that has not been done before" (*COLL*); *back to the drawing board* "return to an earlier stage in an enterprise, or start work all over again, because a planned undertaking has failed". Similar "scenarios" are grounded on the mechanism of the simile, e.g. *as the crow flies* "the most direct route

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

between two places": "The sea voyage from New York to San Francisco is a long one, though it's not so far as the crow flies" (*AmH*).

The range of the underlying images and "scenarios" is broad enough for the dictionary users (be they lexicologists, lexicographers, dictionary buffs or addicts) to get valuable hints as to the phenomenal variety and richness of the imagination of the people using such phraseological units. Of course, they can be subsumed to broader, more abstract concepts, e.g. "conflict", "careful, attentive examination", "resolution", "agreement", etc. Here are the most relevant images extracted from our selection – some of which also contain explanatory notes: *burn the candle at both ends* "to do more than one ought to; to overextend oneself" (*AmH*); *burn your bridges behind you* "to eliminate any possibility of a retreat to a former position": "In his ruthless pursuit of success, Sloane offended all his co-workers and effectively burned his bridges behind him" (*AmH*); *bury the hatchet* "to agree to end a quarrel"; *climb*/*jump/get on the bandwagon* "to join or give support to a political party, cause movement that seems to be assured of success"; *draw the line* "to set a limit, as of acceptable behavior" (*AmH*); *drive a nail into one's coffin* "to do something that causes you serious and permanent harm": "My uncle has a bad liver; I tell him that every time he drinks, he's driving another nail into his coffin" (*AmH*); *eat humble pie* "to be forced to acknowledge one's deficiencies or errors": "Professor Norris had to eat humble pie when the reviewers pointed out numerous factual errors in his book" (*AmH*); *fly off the handle* "to become suddenly enraged" (*AmH*); *get down to brass tacks* "get to the real issue; deal with the task at hand": "After avoiding the thorny question of tax reform for months, Congress finally got down to brass tacks last week and drafted a preliminary proposal" (*AmH*); *get up on the wrong side of the bed* "to act unpleasant because the day got off to a bad start" (*AmH*); *go against the grain* "to go contrary to someone's natural disposition (…) This refers to the fact that someone who rubs his hand against the grain on a piece of lumber will get splinters" (*AmH*); *go the whole hog* "to engage in something without reservation or constraint": "At first, the general had his doubts about the plan, but finally he decided to go the whole hog" (*AmH*); *hair of the dog that bit you* "a remedy that contains a small amount of whatever caused the ailment": "When Anne had a bad hangover, Paul offered her a Bloody Mary and said, 'Have a little of the hair of the dog that bit you'." (*AmH*); *in the doghouse* "temporarily out of favor or in trouble" (*AmH*); *keep the wolf from one's door* "to ward off poverty or hunger": "The job won't provide him with any luxuries, but it should keep the wolf from his door" (*AmH*); *know the ropes* "to be familiar with the details of an operation": "You won't have to train the new computer operator; she already knows the ropes"

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

(*AmH*); *make a clean breast of it* “to make a full confession” (*AmH*); *pay the piper* (*and call the tune*) “to bear the cost of an undertaking and control it” (*AmH*), “to pay the consequences for self-indulgent behavior: “If you drink heavily all night, in the morning you will have to pay the piper” (*AmH*); *sit on the fence* “to remain neutral, to refuse to take sides in a dispute; often used in a derogatory way about someone who is thought to lack the courage to decide” (*AmH*); *smell a rat* “to sense foul play”: “They claim they will honor the terms of the CONTRACT, but I smell a rat” (*AmH*); *water off a duck’s back* “to fail to catch on or make a mark”: “The reporter’s snide comments rolled off the candidate like water off a duck’s back” (*AmH*); *pot calling the kettle black* “criticizing others for the very fault one possesses”: “I wouldn’t call him lazy if I were you, Andy; that would be the pot calling the kettle black” (*AmH*).

The referential domains such phraseological units were derived from are, for the most part, quite old, so the fields of human life that they drew on are rather easy to predict, notwithstanding the absolute variety of the material included, e.g. ● Parts of the body: *cold feet* “to “have cold feet” is to be too fearful to undertake or complete an action”: “The back-up quarterback was called into the game, but he got cold feet and refused to go in”; *tooth and nail* “to fight “tooth and nail” is to fight with the intensity and ferocity of a wild animal”; *the cold shoulder* “to “give someone the cold shoulder” is to ignore someone deliberately” (*AmH*); “1. to treat (someone) in a cold manner; snub; 2. to ignore or shun (someone)” (*COLL*). ● Household and husbandry: *fly in the ointment* “A drawback, especially one that was not at first apparent (*AmH*); “*Informal*. A slight flaw that detracts from value, completeness, or enjoyment”; *rule the roost* “to dominate; to be in charge”. ● Agriculture, rustic/farm life: *beyond the pale* “totally unacceptable: “His business practices have always been questionable, but this last takeover was beyond the pale”; *kick the bucket* “*Slang*. To die”. ● Implements: *call a spade a spade* “to speak plainly and frankly/directly and bluntly; to avoid euphemism”. ● Animal life: *feather one’s own nest* “to look after one’s own interests, especially material ones”. ● Food: *soup to nuts* “to include or cover everything, as in a full meal: “The lecture on weather forecasting covered everything from soup to nuts”. ● Substances: *soft soap* “Flattery: “Mary asked the boss to stop giving her a lot of soft soap about her performance and to start leveling with her like any other employee”. ● Crafts and trades: *chip off the old block* “an expression used of people who closely resemble their parents in some way (*AmH*); “*Informal*. A person who resembles one of his or her parents in behaviour” (*COLL*); *run of the mill* “common, ordinary, routine, average”; *too many irons in the fire* “to have “too many irons in the fire” is to be engaged in too

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

many activities". ● Dressmaking: *seamy side* "the sordid, unattractive aspect of something: "Lying and stealing are part of the seamy side of life" (*AmH*). ● Hunting: *sitting duck* "a very easy target (…) The term comes from hunting, where it is much easier to hit ducks sitting on the water than when they are in flight" (*AmH*); *kill two birds with one stone* "to accomplish two objectives with a single action". ● Fishing: *hook, line, and sinker* "completely and without reservation: "Mary doubted that her ruse would fool the boss, but he fell for it hook, line, and sinker." The reference is to fishing tackle" (*AmH*). ● Navy: *tip of the iceberg* "only a hint or suggestion of a much larger or more complex issue or problem": "The money missing from petty cash was only the tip of the iceberg of financial mismanagement". This phrase alludes to the fact that the bulk of a floating iceberg is concealed beneath the water, leaving only a small portion, its tip, visible above" (*AmH*); *sail under false colors* "to behave deceptively; the "colors" of a ship are its identifying flags". ● Warfare: *hoist with one's own petard* "to be caught in one's own trap: "The swindler cheated himself out of most of his money, and his victims were satisfied to see him hoist with his own petard". A "petard" was an explosive device used in medieval warfare. To be hoisted, or lifted, by a petard literally means to be blown up" (*AmH*); *standing orders* "Orders that remain in effect until they are specifically changed: "During the year in which the troops occupied the town, they were under standing orders not to fire unless fired upon" (*AmH*). ● Archery: *two strings to one's bow* "More than one option or set of resources: "Salinas has two strings to his bow; if his career in politics falls through, he can fall back on his law practice" (*AmH*). ● Boxing: *throw in the towel* "to quit in defeat. The phrase comes from boxing, in which a fighter indicates surrender by throwing a towel into the ring" (*AmH*); "(in boxing) to concede defeat by the throwing of a towel (or sponge) into the ring by a second; to give in and accept defeat; discontinue a venture" (*COLL*); *hit below the belt* "To say something that is often too personal, usually irrelevant, and always unfair (…) The expression comes from boxing, in which it is illegal to hit an opponent below the belt" (*AmH*). ● Leisure activities: *trump card* "In general, something capable of making a decisive difference when used at the right moment; in certain card games, trump is the suit designated as having precedence over the others". ● Music: *run the gamut* "To cover a whole range: "The students' reactions to the novel ran the gamut from delight to loathing" (*AmH*); *play to the gallery* "to direct a performance toward less sophisticated tastes; by extension, to attempt to gain approval by crude or obvious means: "The cast of the play was a decidedly mixed bag of youthful method actors and old hams who played to the gallery" (*AmH*).

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

Sometimes, the ethical implications of the phraseological/idiomatic units (especially those glossed by *The American Heritage Dictionary*) make them assume characteristic features closely resembling those of the various apopthegmatic units (mainly proverbs and sayings), e.g. *get a dose of one's own medicine* "To receive the same unpleasant treatment one has given others: "Bart got a dose of his own medicine when everyone in the office started playing practical jokes on him", *fair-weather friend* "A friend who supports others only when it is easy and convenient to do so". In the same dictionary, there are numerous phraseological units that are virtually identical, through either structure or purport, to genuine apophthegmatic units, e.g. *can't have your cake and eat it too* "*idioms* To be unable to keep something and use it at the same time: "He was afraid to drive his expensive new car because it might get dented, but you can't have your cake and eat it too" (*AmH*), *can't see the forest for the trees* "*idioms* An expression used of someone who is too involved in the details of a problem to look at the situation as a whole: "The congressman became so involved in the wording of his bill that he couldn't see the forest for the trees; he did not realize that the bill could never pass" (*AmH*), *carry coals to Newcastle* "*idioms* To do something that is obviously superfluous; Newcastle is a city in England where coal is mined: "Karen wanted to give Dad a magazine subscription for his birthday, but I said that would be like carrying coals to Newcastle, since he already has fifteen or twenty subscriptions" (*AmH*), *swap* (*switch*) *horses in midstream idioms* "To change leaders or adopt a different strategy in the middle of a course of action: "When the coach was fired just before the playoffs, many thought it was a bad idea to swap horses in midstream" (*AmH*).

At other times, their derivation from proverbs (i.e. the fact that they are incomplete forms of former apophthegmatic units – which boils down to their "primary", or "literal" origin/etymology) is explained in the dictionary article. We could recognize some phraseological units as being (1) traces/ incomplete forms of (longer) proverbs (proper), or (2) allusions to fables and other concentrated forms of cultural wisdom; sometimes, cross-reference is provided. Some examples: (1) *call the tune idioms* to be in control. The phrase comes from the proverb "the one who pays the piper calls the tune" (*AmH*), *cry over spilt milk* "To dwell pointlessly on past misfortunes: "I know you wish that you'd handled the project more efficiently, but there's no use crying over spilt milk", *the last laugh* "The final victory or satisfaction. (*See he who laughs last, laughs best*)" (*AmH*); *the last straw* (or *straw that broke the camel's back*) "The last in a series of grievances or burdens that finally exceeds the limits of endurance: "The management has given me nothing but trouble since I took this job, and now

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

they've cut my benefits! Well, that's the last straw: I quit!" (*AmH*). (2) *lion's share* "A disproportionately large segment of the whole: "Though we always divided our winnings, somehow Barton always seemed to end up with the lion's share" (*AmH*); a special case seems to be provided by the idiom *sour grapes* ("Sour grapes" refers to things that people decide are not worth having only after they find they cannot have them" – *AmH*), which is derived from both a fable and a saying, i.e. *When the fox cannot reach the bunch of grapes, he says the grapes are sour*.

We think that, as far as cultural or historical allusion is concerned, the most interesting aspects are the possibility of reviving old/lost images (while explaining the very implications of the idiom), and providing etymology proper. Thus, some idioms are relatively hard to decrypt in point of cultural or historical allusion or reference; some may refer to the classical world, e.g. (*with*) *a grain* (or *pinch*) *of salt* "with reservations; skeptically" (*COLL*)/"To "take something with a grain of salt" is to ignore or not worry about it, to treat it as trivial, as worth less than a grain of salt: "The producer took the bad reviews with a grain of salt when her film broke all attendance records" (*AmH*) – cf. the Latin phrase *cum grano salis*). Some other idioms may provide a bookish type of cultural reference, equally hard to decode today, e.g. *halcyon days* "times of peace and tranquillity; the expression refers to a mythical bird that had the power to calm the waves when it nested on the sea during the winter solstice. "Compared to the utter turmoil of last month, these are certainly halcyon days" (*AmH*) – cf. *halcyon* ['hælsiən] "*Greek myth*. A fabulous bird associated with the winter solstice" (*COLL*).

Equally interesting are the idioms carrying cultural allusions having to do with the mediaeval world, e.g. *fling* (*throw*) *down the gauntlet* "To issue a challenge: "The candidate flung down the gauntlet and challenged his opponent to a debate." A gauntlet was a glove; the wearer would throw it to the ground to show that he was challenging an opponent to fight" (*AmH*); or with some other (mainly Oriental) cultural areas, e.g. *sacred cow* "Figuratively, anything that is beyond criticism: "That housing project is a real sacred cow: the city council won't hear of abandoning it." In India, followers of Hinduism consider cows sacred and do not eat them because they believe the animals contain the souls of dead persons" (*AmH*).

There are phraseological units situated midway between the areas of cultural and historical allusion/information, e.g. *Pyrrhic victory* "A victory that is accompanied by enormous losses and leaves the winners in as desperate shape as if they had lost. Pyrrhus (319-272 B.C.) was an ancient general, and also king of Epirus, who invaded Italy but was ultimately defeated by the Romans (275 B.C.); after defeating the Romans, he told

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

those who wished to congratulate him, “One more such victory and Pyrrhus is undone”; *fiddle while Rome burns* “To do something trivial and irresponsible in the midst of an emergency; legend has it that while a fire destroyed the city of Rome, the emperor Nero played his violin, thus revealing his total lack of concern for his people and his empire” (*AmH*);

A rather obscure or controvertible cultural allusion is contained in the frequent idiom *white elephant* “An unwanted or financially burdensome possession, or a project that turns out to be of limited value: “The new office building turned out to be a white elephant once the company decided to move its headquarters” (*AmH*).

Some examples of highly circulated figurative idioms containing historical allusion/reference are: *cut the Gordian knot* “To solve a notoriously difficult problem in a quick and decisive manner: “The president hoped that his bold new anti-inflation plan would cut the Gordian knot.” According to Greek legend, an oracle declared that the man who could untie the Gordian knot would become the ruler of all Asia. Alexander the Great impatiently cut it with a single stroke of his sword and proceeded to conquer Asia” (*AmH*); *meet one’s Waterloo* “To encounter one’s ultimate obstacle, and to be defeated by it: “After beating dozens of challengers, the champion finally met his Waterloo.” From the Battle of Waterloo, where Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated” (*AmH*); *thrown to the lions* “Figuratively, to be thrown to the lions is to be placed in a difficult situation for which one is completely unsuited: “To put that new teacher in front of those unruly students is to throw him to the lions.” During the Roman persecutions, Christians were thrown to the lions in the Colosseum” (*AmH*).

The instances of literary allusion may refer to literary works belonging to English, American or world literature. A numerous set of such metaphoric idioms were derived, as incomplete citations, from Shakespeare’s plays, e.g. *pound of flesh* “Creditors who insist on having their “pound of flesh” are those who cruelly demand the repayment of a debt, no matter how much suffering it will cost the debtor: “The bank will have its pound of flesh; it is going to foreclose on our mortgage and force us to sell our home.” From *The Merchant of Venice*, by Shakespeare, in which Shylock demands a pound of flesh from his debtor’s body as the agreed compensation for a loan the debtor is unable to repay” (*AmH*); *star-crossed lovers* “Lovers whose relationship is doomed to fail are said to be “star-crossed” (frustrated by the stars), because those who believe in astrology claim that the stars control human destiny. William Shakespeare created the phrase to describe the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*” (*AmH*); *the green-eyed monster* “Jealousy: “Carl has really been bitten by the green-eyed monster; he gets jealous if his wife so much as talks to another man.” This metaphor was coined by

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

Shakespeare in his play *Othello*" (*AmH*); *milk of human kindness* "A phrase from *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, meaning humane feeling, concern for other people: "Everyone agreed that Houston was a brilliant thinker and an excellent lawyer, but some people worried that he lacked the milk of human kindness" (*AmH*). Allusion to other authors writing in English include writers like the British Th. Hardy, S. T. Coleridge, and the American poet H. W. Longfellow, e.g. *far from the madding crowd* "To be "far from the madding crowd" is to be removed, either literally or figuratively, from the frenzied actions of any large crowd or from the bustle of civilization. The main reason for the currency of this phrase is that it was used as the title of a popular novel by the English author Thomas Hardy" (*AmH*); *albatross around one's neck* "An annoying burden: "That old car is an albatross" (*AmH*), "a constant and inescapable burden or handicap: *an albatross of debt*" (*COLL*) – cf. S. T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*); *footprints on the sands of time* "A phrase from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, describing the mark that great individuals leave on history" (*AmH*); *ships that pass in the night* "Often said of people who meet for a brief but intense moment and then part, never to see each other again. These people are like two ships that greet each other with flashing lights and then sail off into the night. From a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow" (*AmH*).

Cultural allusion inspired by world literature provided such figurative idioms as *dog in the manger* "A person who spitefully refuses to let someone else benefit from something for which he or she has no personal use": "We asked our neighbor for the fence posts he had left over, but, like a dog in the manger, he threw them out rather than give them to us." The phrase comes from one of Aesop's fables, about a dog lying in a manger full of hay. When an ox tries to eat some hay, the dog bites him, despite the fact that the hay is of no use to the dog" (*AmH*); *cultivate one's own garden* "To take care of one's own needs before trying to take care of others": "The mayor ought to cultivate his own garden before he starts telling the governor what to do." This is the moral of *Candide*, by Voltaire: "take care of your own and the world will take care of itself" (*AmH*).

Similarly, the Bible has been a generous source of metaphor, e.g. *cast pearls before swine* "To offer valuable things to those who cannot appreciate them". By extension, to express complex or elevated ideas to an insensitive and hostile audience; from Jesus' warning to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine"; *dyed-in-the-wool* "Thoroughgoing or complete. "The door-to-door Evangelists were wasting their time with Evans; he was a dyed-in-the-wool atheist"; *olive branch* "The branch

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

brought by a dove to Noah's ark signifying that the Flood was receding. An olive branch is now regarded as a sign of peace, as is the dove"; *salt of the earth* "Basic, fundamental goodness; the phrase can be used to describe any simple, good person" (*AmH*), "a person or group of people regarded as the finest of their kind. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his followers, who are mainly fishermen and other simple people, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (*COLL*); *wolf in sheep's clothing* "Figuratively, anyone who disguises a ruthless nature through an outward show of innocence. Jesus taught his followers to "beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (*AmH*). Sometimes, idioms alluding to quotations from the Bible can be used jocularly, e.g. *kingdom come* "The next world; the afterlife": "The superpowers have enough nuclear warheads to blow the entire world to kingdom come." An allusion to the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" (*AmH*).

Very interesting (side/incidental) etymological remarks could be made at this point. Some idioms just happen to be etymologically self-explanatory, e.g. *worth one's salt* "Worth one's salary or wages" (cf. the very etymology of the term *salary*: "from Anglo-Norman *salarie*, from Latin *salarium* the sum given to Roman soldiers to buy salt, from *sal* salt" *COLL*). Some idioms merely claim to be derived from historical facts (although most people actually believe in their verisimilar historical-cultural derivation), e.g. *thumbs up* (or *thumbs down*) "Expressions of approval and disapproval respectively": "The two critics disagreed about the movie; one gave it thumbs up, the other thumbs down." In the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome, the thumbs-up gesture from the crowd meant that the loser would live; thumbs down meant death" (*AmH*).

A similar discussion could involve the relationship between literality and transparency; some of the figurative idioms turned out to be fully transparent (which applies to both native speakers of English and Romanian), e.g. *see red* "To be or become extremely angry: "When Roger realized that he had been duped, he started to see red" (*AmH*). Some others proved to be opaque, e.g. *wet behind the ears* "To be "wet behind the ears" is to be inexperienced and naïve". At times, such opaque idioms could be accounted for through the inclusion of etymologically obscure words, or of the so-called *nonce words* ("a word coined for a single occasion"), e.g. *at loggerheads* "Engaged in a confrontation or head-on dispute": "Labor and management are at loggerheads in this affair, and it may be some time before they can negotiate a settlement" (*AmH*) – Etymology: "C16: probably from dialect *logger* wooden block + *HEAD*" (*COLL*). Or there can be old terms, now opaque, which were incorporated in the idiom, e.g. *by dint of*

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

"by means or use of: *by dint of hard work*" (etymology: *dint* "*Archaic*. A blow or a mark made by a blow" (*COLL*).

Examining the etymological notes provided by the dictionaries we consulted, we were able to come up with a number of fairly interesting conclusions: one the one hand, it is the very (synchronic) opacity that some idioms display (duly elucidated by the dictionary explanations) that enhances their expressiveness, e.g. *chip on one's shoulder* "To "have a chip on one's shoulder" is to invite conflict by being extremely touchy: "Joe really has a chip on his shoulder; every time I say something to him, he takes it the wrong way". In the past, a young boy would place a wood chip on his shoulder and dare anyone to knock it off as a way of showing how tough he was"; *bite the bullet* "To adjust to unpleasant circumstances": "The severe drought is forcing everybody to bite the bullet and use less water." Before anesthesia, surgeons operating on the wounded gave them a bullet to bite to help them withstand the pain" (*AmH*). On the other hand, there may be generic, indefinite information, e.g. *forty winks* "A nap; a short sleep: "If you're feeling drowsy, take forty winks; I'll wake you when our guests arrive" (*AmH*); anyone can wonder today: why *forty* and not *fifty winks*? We believe the numeral was in no way related to anything referential belonging to the reality in the past – cf. the French idiom *faire les cent pas*, probably also the Biblical phrase *Take your thirty silver coins*, etc.

Sometimes, the etymological explanations include fascinating etymological and cultural (even technical/highly specialized) sidelights, e.g. *second wind* "A new surge of energy after a period of mental or physical exhaustion": "At the midway mark, the marathoner got her second wind and left the other runners far behind." The expression refers to the fact that a person's metabolism changes to a more efficient mode during prolonged exercise" (*AmH*); *golden mean* "The desirable middle ground between any two extremes, according to the philosophy of Aristotle" (*AmH*).

For quite numerous figurative phraseological units and idioms, the "romantic stories" associated with their etymology are absolutely compelling: *buy a pig in a poke* "To buy something sight unseen (a "poke" is a bag)": "The mail-order offer sounded like a bargain, but I didn't want to buy a pig in a poke" (the word *poke* originally sounded *pouch* – so, a bag or a sack); similarly, *red herring* "In argument, something designed to divert an opponent's attention from the central issue. If a herring is dragged across a trail that hounds are following, it throws them off the scent" (*AmH*).

At the other end of the spectrum, we came across (relatively) recent coinages, e.g. *brain trust* "A group of experts who serve as advisers to a government or organization": "Before being appointed to the Cabinet, Brown had been a leading figure in a financial brain trust" (*AmH*), and also

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

idioms of rather technical reference, most of which are already international, e.g. *on someone's* (or *the same*) *wavelength* "*Informal*. Having similar views, feelings, or thoughts (as someone else)" (*COLL*), *green light* "permission to proceed with a project" (*COLL*), *the light at the end of the tunnel*, etc.

Probably the most interesting point of our analysis was to establish the degree of expressiveness of the idioms under scrutiny; being figurative, they were virtually all found to possess expressiveness (cf. connotation), but we think the best examples proved to be those derived from the sheer imaginativeness of their literal make-up), e.g. *bee in one's bonnet* "A chronic preoccupation, often fanciful or eccentric"/*to have a bee in one's bonnet* "to be preoccupied or obsessed with an idea"; *once in a blue moon* "To do something "once in a blue moon" is to do it very rarely"; *paint the town red* "To go carousing": "Arnie and a few of his buddies drove off in a big car Friday night and really painted the town red" (*AmH*); *wet blanket* "Someone who dampens enthusiasm": "We were all having a good time until Harold walked in and started acting like a wet blanket" (*AmH*); *born with a silver spoon in one's mouth* "Born into a wealthy family": "He may have a lot of money, but he earned every penny himself; he wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth" (*AmH*); referential imaginativeness: *wear one's heart on one's sleeve* "to express affection or sentiment too openly or ostentatiously: "You have to play it cool with a girl like Heidi; you mustn't wear your heart on your sleeve" (*AmH*). That seems to be a good thing in English, though at times the sheer literality can sound a bit absurd or far-fetched to a foreigner, e.g. *spread oneself too thin* "to engage in so many activities that one can't perform any of them well" (*AmH*); unfortunately (for us non-natives), only few idioms are stylistically marked (as *colloquial*, *informal*, etc.), e.g. *in hot water* "In deep trouble".

As far as the stylistic values of the intrinsic expressiveness of such idioms are concerned, the main point to make is that quite a large number of them are jocular/humorous, e.g. *birthday suit* "To be "in one's birthday suit" is to be completely naked (as people are at birth)" (*AmH*), *busman's holiday* "A vacation during which a person engages in activity that is the same as or similar to his or her usual employment: "Our Spanish professor had a busman's holiday this year; she spent her entire vacation doing research in Spain" (*AmH*), *cool one's heels* "To wait for a long time: "The doctor kept her cooling her heels for almost an hour", *elbow grease* "Strenuous physical effort: "If you're going to get this job done, you'll need to apply a little elbow grease" (*AmH*), *two shakes of a lamb's tail* "Something that can be done in "two shakes of a lamb's tail" can be done very quickly: "The repairman said he could fix our tire in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and he

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

was right: we were back on the road in ten minutes" (*AmH*), *walking papers* "Notice of dismissal. To "get one's walking papers" is to be fired", *war horse* "A person or thing that has seen long service or has lived through many hardships and can be relied on: "That teacher is a real war horse; he has seen the passing of ten different principals" (*AmH*). Sometimes, there is an (otherwise very English) absurd tinge to them, e.g. *skin of one's teeth* "To do something "by the skin of one's teeth" is to just manage to get it accomplished: "I never thought we'd get the magazine to the printer by the deadline, but we made it by the skin of our teeth" (*AmH*). We think literal absurdity is fully justified in older idioms: *rain cats and dogs* "To rain heavily: "We wanted to play touch football, but now it's raining cats and dogs, so I guess we'll stay inside". Some idioms contain even rather macabre hints, e.g. *skeleton in the closet* "A potentially embarrassing secret": "Before nominating the new judge, the committee asked him if he had any skeletons in the closet" (*AmH*).

Given the increasingly globalized sphere of world communication and culture, it is small wonder that idioms too should become more and more international – though many international idioms are in fact quite old. Many of the phraseological units we analysed were found to be purely international items, e.g. *crocodile tears* "An insincere show of sympathy or sadness; crocodiles were once thought to "weep" large tears before they ate their victims": "Don't shed any crocodile tears for Fisher; I know you were responsible for his firing", *eleventh hour* "The last minute": "The water bombers arrived at the eleventh hour – just in time to prevent the forest fire from engulfing the town", *feet of clay* "People are said to have "feet of clay" if they are revealed to have a weakness or flaw that most people were unaware of": "When the coach was arrested for drunken driving, the students realized that their hero had feet of clay", *fifth wheel* "A hanger-on; a person who serves no function: "The vice president felt like a fifth wheel after his exclusion from the committee", *live in an ivory tower* "To lead an impractical existence removed from the pressures and troubles of everyday life: "Like most college professors, Rasponi lives in an ivory tower", *play second fiddle* "To play a supporting or minor role in relation to someone else: "Tired of playing second fiddle, she resigned and started her own company." In an orchestra, the position of second violinist (fiddle) is not as glamorous as that of first violinist" (*AmH*), *pull strings* "To use personal connections to obtain a position": "Pat interviewed officially for the job, but he also had his uncle pulling strings behind the scenes", *read between the lines* "To pay attention to what is implied, though not explicitly stated, in writing or in speech", *take the bull by the horns* "Take the initiative in confronting a difficult position": "You'll never decide What you want in life

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

by simply thinking about it; you've got to take the bull by the horns and try out a few possibilities", *turn over a new leaf* "To begin anew; to change one's ways": "Since he was grounded, Larry has turned over a new leaf and does his homework every night", *wash dirty linen* (*laundry*) *in public* "to air private problems where they can be seen by all" (*AmH*), etc. In other idioms, it is only the image/"scenario" that is international, while the literality is quasi-international, e.g. *bolt from* (*out of*) *the blue* "An unexpected event that strikes like lightning from the sky": "He had been with the company for eighteen years; when he was fired, it must have felt like a bolt from the blue", *clean slate* "A new start; especially to make a new start by clearing the record". This phrase comes from the use of chalk and slates in classrooms in the past. By wiping the slate clean, a student could remove any evidence of a mistake; *easy come, easy go* "A phrase suggesting lack of concern over how things turn out, and particularly over money": "She never took things very seriously; 'easy come, easy go' was her motto", *hold water* "To seem logical and consistent": "At first I was persuaded by the politician's speech, but upon reflection, I decided that his arguments didn't hold water", *play it by ear* "To improvise": "Rather than plan an elaborate strategy, Andy decided to play it by ear." Music played by ear does not follow written notes", *split hairs* "to argue about an inconsequential and trivial aspect of an issue": "When you are accused of being forty-five minutes late for an appointment, you are splitting hairs to say that you were really only forty minutes late", etc. It would be worth trying to compare the structure of all those phraseological units that resemble similar coinages in Romanian only partly, in order to establish the points of convergence and divergence (some may prove to be very similar in point of form, while others can prove "idiomatic False Friends"): *nine days' wonder* "someone or something that is famous and celebrated for only a short time": "Last year the art critics praised Jonas as if he were a master, but he turned out to be a nine days' wonder" (cf. Romanian *nici o minune nu ține mai mult de trei zile*); *grasp* (*clutch*) *at straws* "To make a final, desperate effort": "The candidate made a few last attempts to discredit his opponent, but it was clear he was just grasping at straws" (cf. Romanian *a se agăța și de ultimul fir de pai*).

Concluding, we can state that English has numerous figurative idioms based on conventionalized metaphors, the expressiveness of which is more often than not remarkable. In-depth analyses seeking for the points of convergence and divergence between two (or more) languages should be conducted on a larger scale. Such research projects will most certainly prove the clear didactic implications of comparative work in the field of lexicology and lexicography; figurative idioms are part and parcel of

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

everyday, real language, and repertories such as the one suggested so far could practically demonstrate the possibility for students (of EFL, or any other language) to learn and study them, in order to enrich and deepen their knowledge of "living English", and, last but not least, to illustrate the phenomenon of linguistic interference (since some phraseological units are genuine *False Friends*, e.g. *to lead by the nose* – even if only partial, at times).

Among the didactic applications of such research projects, we deem highly desirable a possible European project which would gloss, in a methodical, comparative manner the metaphorical phraseological/idiomatic units (and, alternatively, the most frequent/representative paremiologic/ apophtthegmatic units) from at least four broad linguistic-cultural areas of Europe: Romance, Germanic, Slavonic, Balkan (maybe also Celtic?). The main objectives of the research will have to be: glossing and studying the form/structure, the meaning/sense (both the translation/literary one, and the marginal sense implications, including pertinent observations on the literality of the expression), the imagery/the "scenario"; the possible filiations; the relative age of the idioms; their (possible) international character.

One of the general conclusions of such studies is, we believe, the idea that there are (concretely observable) complex cross-cultural interrelationships between emotional responses and the respective cultural models.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*** *Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus* (*COLL*), © HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

*** *The American Heritage Dictionary* (*AmH*), SoftKey International Inc., 1994.

*** *The New English Bible – with the Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

*** *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Bible Quotations*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1995.

Ayto, John, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, Columbia Marketing, 1994.

Bantaş, Andrei, *English and Contrastive Studies*, Bucureşti, T.U.B., 1979,

Bauer, Laurie, *English Word-Formation*, Cambridge University Press, 1984

Bollinger, Susan, *English Idioms*, Buch und Zeit Verlagsgesellschaft, Köln, 1990.

Chițoran, Dumitru, *Elements of English Structural Semantics*, Bucureşti, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică, 1973.

Collins, V. H., *A Book of English Idioms*, Longman, 1958.

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)

Colțun, Gheorghe, Spirescu, Monica, *Aspecte ale frazeologismelor de origine biblică*, în *Language and Literature. European Landmarks of Identity*, Piteşti, Editura Universității din Piteşti, 2009, p. 30-34.
Crystal, David, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 3rd edition, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1992.
Curry, Dean, *Illustrated American Idioms*, U.S. Information Agency, 1988.
Dixson, Robert J., *Essential Idioms in English*, Regents Publishing Company, 1971.
Funk, Wilfred, *Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories*, 1968.
Guilbert, Louis, *La créativité lexicale*, Librairie Larousse, Paris, 1975.
Levițchi, Leon D., *Lexicologia limbii engleze*, Bucureşti, EDP, 1978.
Manea, Constantin, Maria-Camelia Manea, *Remarks on Some Phraseological and Apophthegmatic Units in English and Romanian – convergent and Divergent Points*, in "Perspective contemporane asupra lumii medievale", no. 1/2009, Piteşti, Editura *Tiparg*, p. 104-108.
Manea, Maria-Camelia, Manea, Constantin, *English Vocabulary – Theory and Practice*, Piteşti, Editura *Neotonic*, 2004.
Munteanu, Cristinel, *Forme ale discursului repetat ca tradiții literare europene inserate în tradiția lingvistică românească*, in vol. *Identitatea culturală românească în contextul integrării europene*, Iaşi, Editura *Alfa*, 2006, p. 235-240.
Sellner, L., *Englisch im Alltag*, VMA Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1988.
Skeat, William W., *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd, Hertfordshire, 1993.
Spears, Richard A., *American Idioms Dictionary*, National Textbook Company, 1991.
Tohăneanu, G.I., *Dicționar de imagini pierdute*, Editura *Amarcord*, Timişoara, 1995.

BDD-A3871 © 2012 Editura Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:13:49 UTC)