ON THE POSITIVE/ NEGATIVE/ NEUTRAL MEANING OF SOME ANIMAL IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN

Iulian MARDAR
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi

Abstract. *Starting from a brief theoretical approach to idioms, the present article aims at establishing, using mathematical methods, the percentage of positive, negative and neutral idioms including the nouns 'cat', 'dog', 'horse' and 'ox/bull' in English and Romanian. In this comparative-contrastive approach reference will be made to a series of aspects allowing the analyzed idioms to be classified as semantically positive, negative or neutral. Special attention will be devoted to the negative idioms including the four nouns denoting domestic animals due to the fact that they are the majority. The negativity of those idioms is given not only by the negative words inside of them (they are, anyway, just a few), but also by their meaning (which is the case of the majority).*

Keywords: *animal idioms, positive meaning, negative meaning, neutral meaning*

Idioms have been with us for hundreds of years, but it was only in the 1950's that linguists started paying more attention to such linguistically and culturally marked word combinations. Although numerous efforts have been made to clearly define and classify idioms, specialists have not been able to provide definitions and classification applicable to the wide range of idioms existing in any language in general and in English, in particular. "The term 'idiom' is not an easily definable one – it may be used to denote many types of words and phrases. The traditional definition of an idiom is 'a group of words which has a different meaning from the sum of its parts'" (Cullen, Hands, McGovern, Wright iii). Indeed, this seems to be the closest definition of an idiom and it converges with another definition provided by Makkai: idioms "should be made of at least **two words** and **the meaning of an idiom is not predictable from its component parts**, which are empty of their usual senses." (Makkai 118, 122, in Fernando 4).

Trying to find a better definition than the one given by Makkai (1972) and seemingly adopted by Cullen et al. (2000), Wright (2002) suggests its own definition centred on three characteristics of idioms. One of these characteristics is commonly accepted by numerous specialists, while the other two are debatable: "*An idiom is an expression with the following features: 1. It is fixed and is* ***recognized by native speakers****. 2) You* ***cannot make up your own****! 3) It uses language in a non-literal – metaphorical – way"* (Wright 7).

Idioms are generally agreed to be metaphorical and I subscribe to this opinion, but Wright's statement that an idiom is recognised by native speakers is not entirely true. By not mentioning how native speakers come to understand a certain idiom, we may believe that native speakers have the understanding of all their native language idioms in their DNA. Moreover, the possibility of non-native speakers of English to understand idioms is excluded. If this is the case, can I be considered a native speaker of English simply because I understand idioms? Of course, I understand those idioms whose meaning I have already learned, but this is how native speakers understand idioms at the beginning: by learning what they mean.

The second aspect mentioned is even more difficult to understand because it is both sententious and profusely wrong: "*You cannot make up your own*". It makes you wonder how idioms appeared in language, if one cannot make up one's own. If what was meant by this sentence is that idioms are collective acts of creation, then it is still wrong. If a group of

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people created an idiom, then they created their own idiom. In English, the word "you" refers to both singular and plural.

There are also linguists who include phrasal verbs, slang words and/or proverbs in the category of idioms, but in order to make a long story short, this paper will take into consideration only **those expressions made of at least two words, whose meaning is different from the sum of the words in it or from the meaning of any word taken separately**. Therefore, slang, phrasal verbs and proverbs will not be taken into consideration, even though it is possible that some proverbs should have a meaning different from the sum of the words in it and from the meaning of any word taken separately.

Since the present paper is about negative, positive and neutral idioms, some clarifications need to be made. First of all, what are negative idioms? We consider that negative idioms are those idioms with a negative meaning, regardless of whether they contain negative words or not. The negative meaning may be a negative quality, a negative fact or a difficult situation. Positive idioms are those expressions with a positive meaning (a positive human quality etc.). Neutral idioms are those structures which are neither positive, nor negative, showing no positive or negative quality, no positive or negative fact and no favourable or unfavourable situation.

The negative-positive-neutral meaning of idioms was tested on a series of relevant idioms including names of animals or referring to them. Consequently, the idioms analysed in the present paper include the nouns: *dog, cat, horse, bull/ox* which denote four of the best known, most useful and most loved animals by people. Having been with us for thousands of years, it is no wonder that the nouns denoting them produced the highest number of idioms.

Evidence regarding our long relationship with the animals mentioned above is made available by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH, www.amnh.org) according to which the dog was domesticated about 15,000 years ago, the cattle no less than 8,000 years ago (cow and ox), and the horses about 6,000 years ago. However, these animals started being used by people only when they settled down and laid the foundations of agriculture, cultivating plants, growing animals and becoming sedentary. In this process other animals, for example, the sheep and the pig, were domesticated along with the dog, the cattle and the horse, but different from the latter, sheep and pigs were used by the people for what they could provide rather than for what they could do to prove useful to the people.

As far as cats are concerned, they may have domesticated… themselves, as a science report made public on nationalgeographic.com states. This was possible because cats were in search of food and it was natural for them to hang around human communities where large amounts of food, mainly crops and agricultural products, attracted mice and rats, their favourite meal.

> *The earlier ancestors of today's domestic cats spread from southwest Asia and into Europe as early as 4400 B.C. The cats likely started hanging around farming communities in the Fertile Crescent about 8,000 years ago, where they settled into a mutually beneficial relationship as humans' rodent patrol. "This is probably how the first encounter between humans and cats occurred," says study co-author Claudio Ottoni of the University of Leuven. "It's not that humans took some cats and put them inside cages," he says. Instead, people more or less allowed cats to domesticate themselves.* (https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/06/domesticated-cats-dna-genetics-pets-science/)

Summing up the ideas mentioned above, the present paper focuses on four animals which have played an important role in people's lives for centuries. Dogs (which are not a

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source of food in the majority of the countries) have watched our houses and have helped us hunt for hundreds of years. Cattle have been a source of food, but have also helped people work the land. Similarly, horses helped the people work the land, but they also increased the speed with which people travelled on long distances. Last, but not least, cats have kept the rodent population under control and have been a source of serenity and relaxation for many people who accepted to have cats closer to them.

Without further ado, reference will be made to the idioms including the nouns 'dog', 'cat', 'horse' and 'bull/ox' in English and Romanian with the aim of finding similarities and dissimilarities in the idiomatic representations specific to the two languages under discussion. The 'dog' idioms in English illustrated below:

ENGLISH IDIOMS WITH "DOG"

NEGATIVE: 1. go to the dogs = ruin oneself/be ruined / deteriorate morally; 2. have/ lead a dog's life = have an unhappy life; 3. give a dog a bad name (and hang him) = give somebody a bad reputation and it often remains; 4. (to be) the underdog = somebody who has to do what others tell him; 5. a dog in the manger = somebody who stops the others enjoying/using something that is useless to himself; 6. to be in the dog house = to have annoyed or made somebody angry; 7. to wag the dog = to purposely divert attention from what would otherwise be of significant importance; 8. dog eat dog = marked by destructive or ruthless competition; 9. to throw somebody to the dogs = to allow someone to be attacked or criticized; 10. to turn dog on somebody = to betray; 11. to dog it = to avoid responsibility; to work lazily or half-heartedly; 12. put on the dog (Am.E., informal, insulting) = trying to show that you are rich or high-class; 13. a dog's breakfast = someone or something that looks extremely untidy; 14. to be a dirty dog = to be an untrustworthy person; 15. to bark up the wrong tree = not to address to the right person; 16. small dog, tall weeds = someone who does not have the necessary abilities to perform a task; 17. Put on some dog = give oneself an air of importance.

POSITIVE: 1. a gay/lucky/old/sly dog = a lively/ lucky/roguish/sly person (used affectionately); 2. help a lame dog over a stile = help somebody in trouble; often used after "over a stile"; 3. dog's bollocks = something or someone very good, at the top; 4. to call the dogs off = to stop attacking or criticizing someone.

NEUTRAL: 1. top dog = a person who has achieved a position of authority; 2. to dog somebody = to follow behind somebody closely (like a detective); 3. dressed-up like a dog's dinner = wearing very formal or decorative clothes in order to attract attention (the positive aspect is neutralized by the negative one); 4. to see a man about a dog = to excuse oneself without giving the real reason for leaving, especially to go to the toilet or have an alcoholic drink (dictionary.com); 5. doggy bag; 6. the hair of the dog = an alcoholic drink which is drunk in order to get rid of a hangover; also, an excuse to drink early; 7. let sleeping dogs lie = avoid somebody or a situation or topic that could cause trouble or could revive an old trouble. 8. barking dogs never bite.

ROMANIAN IDIOMS WITH "CÂINE"

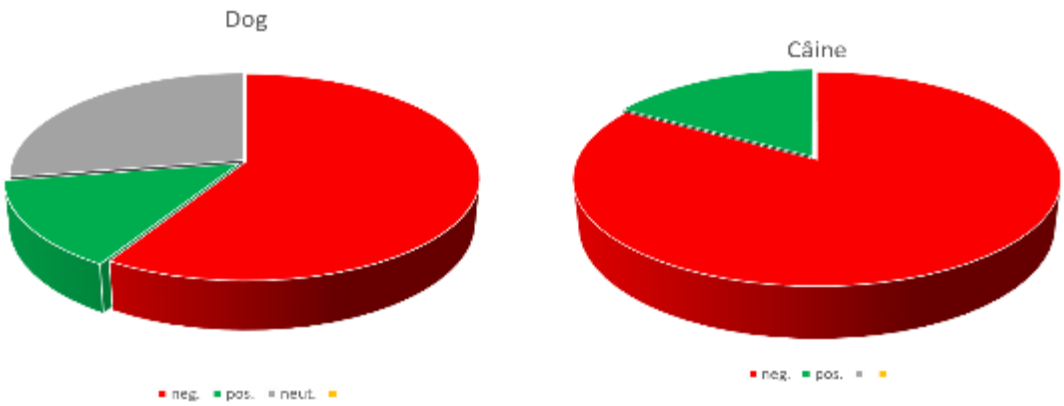
NEGATIVE: 1. viață de câine = a dog's life; 2. miroase a câine ud = smells like a wet dog; 3. om câinos la suflet = very mean person; 4. vreme câinească = bad weather; 5. vreme să nu scoți niciun câine afară = a weather in which one should not take a dog out; 6. negru în cerul gurii = black in the roof of the mouth (very mean person); 7. porc de câine = man good for nothing, not trustworthy; 8. brânză bună în burduf de câine = born with qualities, but too lazy to put them to work; 9. a tăia frunză la câini = to cut leaves to the dogs (to waste time); 10. a fi om de câine = to be a very bad person.

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POSITIVE: 1. a trăi ca câinele la stână; 2. umblă câinii cu covrigi în coadă.

As it may be easily noticed, most of the idioms referring to a dog or containing the noun 'dog' in English and 'câine' Romanian are negative, and there are no neutral idioms in Romanian including the noun 'câine' or referring to the animal it denotes.

Animal / aspect of idiom	Negative	Positive	Neutral
Dog 29	17 (58.6%)	4 (13.8%)	8 (27.6%)
Câine 12	10 (83.3%)	2 (16.6%)	0 (0%)



'Dog' and 'câine' negative, positive and neutral idioms

The situation is almost the same for the 'cat' idioms, with a significant difference in as far as the 'dog' vs. 'cat' negative English idioms are concerned.

ENGLISH IDIOMS WITH "CAT"

NEGATIVE: 1. let the cat out of the bag = reveal a secret accidentally; 2. not enough room to swing a cat = very narrow space; 3. cat-and-dog life = life/relation full of quarrels; 4. cat and mouse game = cruel/unkind domination of weaker person by stronger one; often tying with or torturing somebody; 5. cat-burglar = burglar who enters a building by climbing up its side; 6. Cat got your tongue? 7. cat on hot bricks/tin roof = very nervous; restless; 8. fat cat = a rather insulting way to name a business man or a politician; 9. grin like a Cheshire cat = to grin broadly, usually in a foolish way; 10. like a scalded cat = a person or an animal which moves very fast, as if they have been suddenly frightened or shocked; 11. look what the cat's dragged in = it expresses dislike or disapproval of someone who has just arrived; 12. put the cat among the pigeons = to cause trouble.
POSITIVE: 1. cat's whiskers / cat's pyjamas = the best person or thing of their kind; 2. like the cat that got the cream / ate the canary = someone who looks very satisfied and happy with themselves; 3. catbird seat = an important or powerful position.
NEUTRAL: 1. see which way the cat jumps = to delay making a decision until they are more confident about how the situation will develop; 2. raining cats and dogs = raining heavily.

ROMANIAN IDIOMS WITH "PISICĂ/MÂȚĂ"

NEGATIVE: 1.a fi mâță blândă (pretending to be a good person; a bad person); 2. a trage mâța de coadă = to have a hard life, with not enough money; 3. pisică plouată = a person who lacks enthusiasm and looks upset; 4. mâță leșinată (the same as pisică plouată); 5. a pasa motanul = to pass the tomcat meaning to get rid of responsibility; 6. a arunca pisica moartă în

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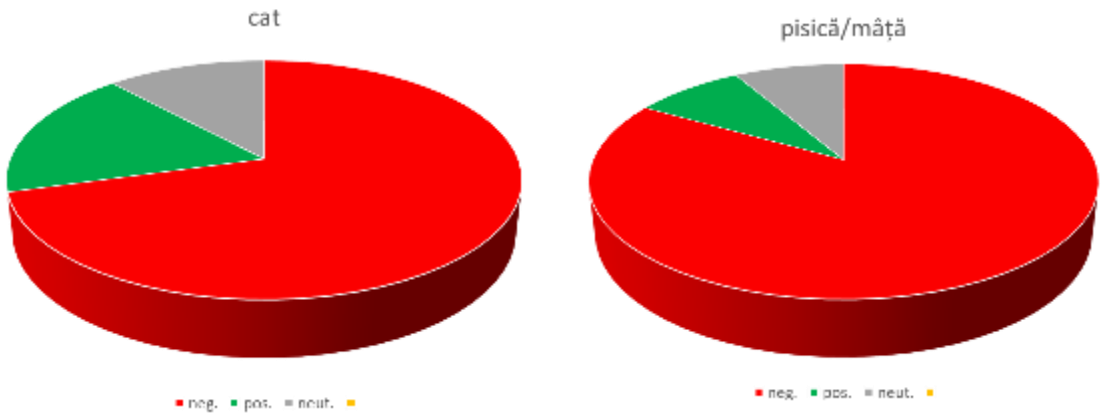
curtea altuia (the same as above; word-for-word translation, to throw the dead cat in somebody else's yard.); 7. a se uita ca mâța la calendar = (to look at something as the cat looks at the calendar) not to understand anything from what is going on; 8. a fi prins cu mâța-n sac = (to be caught with a cat in the sack) to be caught with a wrong deed; 9. a umbla cu mâța în sac = to try to fool people); 10. a trăi ca mâța cu șoarecele = not to go along with someone.

POSITIVE: 1. a rupe mâța/pisica-n două (to tear the cat in half, meaning to be courageous, strong, full of energy –DEX 1998, p.615, traditionally used with the meaning - to make a radical decision, to decide whether something is black or white, metaphorically speaking. The decision making process is also very important here.)

NEUTRAL: 1. a se uita ca mâța la pește = (to look as the cat at the fish) to want something very much;

Comparing the first group of idioms with this one, the number of positive and neutral idioms is obviously reduced in both cases, but there are significantly more negative idioms including the noun 'cat' as illustrated by the table below:

Animal / aspect of idiom		Negative		Positive		Neutral	
Cat	17	12	(70.6%)	3	(17.6%)	2	(11.8%)
Pisică / mâță	12	10	(83.33%)	1	(8.33%)	1	(8.33%)



'Cat' and 'pisică/mâță' negative, positive and neutral idioms

In the case of 'horse'/'cal' idioms the situation remains almost unchanged in the case of the Romanian idioms, semantic negativity being the main orientation, whereas the negative 'horse' idioms in English go back to 50%, like in the case of 'dog' idioms. The fact that the 'horse' idioms with negative meaning are the least numerous might be explained by the fact that, in the English culture, the horse is more respected than the cat and the dog.

ENGLISH IDIOMS WITH "HORSE"

NEGATIVE: 1. flog a dead horse = waste time/energy on something already established (flog = a lovi cu cravașa); 2. look a gift horse in the mouth = find fault with a present, when you shouldn't; 3. to be on one's high horse = to behave as though superior; 4. put the cart before the horses = do things in the wrong order; 5. to back the wrong horse = to make the wrong decision; 6. horsy = bossy and loud voice (especially about women;) 7. (to be) a one-horse town = a very small dull town; 8. a stalking horse = something that is used to obtain a temporary advantage so that someone cat get what they really want later; 9. Trojan horse = something that look harmless, but is likely to damage or destroy something important; 10. ride two horses at the same time = following two conflicting sets of ideas at the same time; 11. to be horsed (up) = to be under the influence of heroin (heroin was called horse in the

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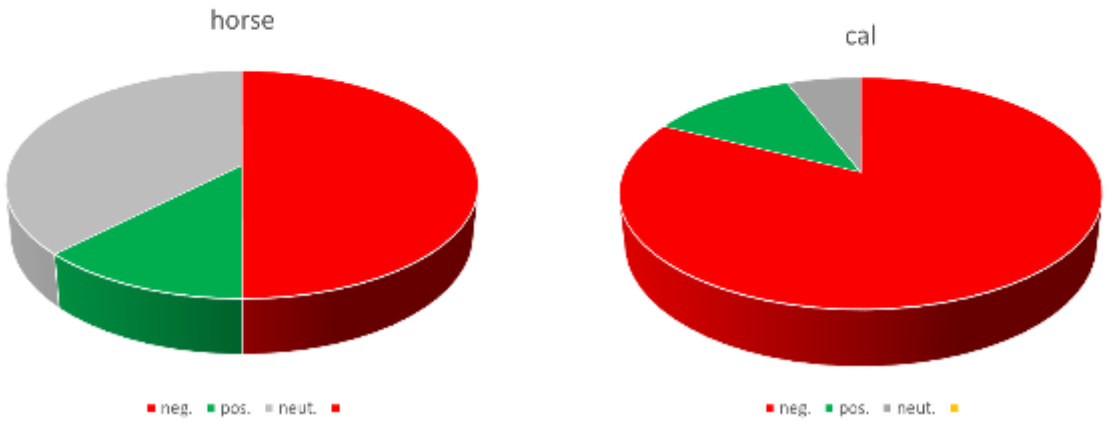
50's and 60's; now, they are both obsolete); 12. horse feathers = nonsense, baloney; 13. to horse around = to aimlessly play around; 14. change horses in the middle of the stream = change the method or the leader during a crisis; 15. to drive a coach and horses through = fig. to expose weak points or "holes" in an argument, alibi, or criminal case by [figuratively] driving a horse and carriage through them; 16. a mare's nest = a false discovery, illusion, or deliberate hoax; a place, condition, or situation of great disorder or confusion.
POSITIVE: 1. wild horses won't / wouldn't / couldn't drag / draw it out of someone = to keep a secret at any price; 2. straight from the horse's mouth = a reliable tip, piece of advice or information; 3. to get back on the horse (that bucked you) = to return to or resume an activity that one has previously failed at, had difficulty with, or which has previously caused one harm; 4. to be a willing horse = to be ready and eager to work.
NEUTRAL: 1. a dark horse = somebody whose chances are unknown; 2. horseplay = noisy, rough play, usually in fun; 3. a horse of a different colour = a different matter; 4. eat/work like a horse = eat/work a lot; 5. to hold one's horses = to wait a moment; not to be in a hurry; 6. a stalking horse = in politics, someone who stands against the leader of the party to test the strength of any opposition to the leader and who will withdraw in favour of a stronger challenger if the leader is likely to be defeated; 7. horses for courses = different people are suitable from different things or kinds of situation, and this ought to be taken into account when making choices in particular cases; 8. horse opera = a Western movie or television series; 9. not to spare the horses = to hurry; 10. horse trading = negotiation marked by hard bargaining and shrewd exchange; 11. horse's hoof (Australian) / iron hoof (British) = homosexual (rhyming slang of *poof*, which means *a gay man*); 12. (to be) a one-horse race = a competition in which one of the participants is a lot better than the others and it is obvious who the winner will be.

ROMANIAN IDIOMS WITH "CAL"

NEGATIVE: 1. (a-și căuta) cal de mire = being too choosy; 2. a umbla după (cai verzi pe pereți) = looking for something that does not exist; to be with your head in the clouds – wild goose chase; 3. calul dracului = (the devil's horse) an old and bad woman; 4. față de cal = a rather ugly person; 5. a-și juca calul = to play your horse, meaning to do whatever you want, usually with a negative connotation; 6. a face din cal măgar = (to turn a horse into a donkey) to turn something relatively good into something of an inferior quality; 7. a face din țânțar armăsar (to turn a mosquito into a stallion) to give too much importance to a minor problem; to exaggerate or to overreact; 8. a ajunge cal de poștă = to work too much and for everybody; 9. la Paștele cailor = (at the horses' Easter) never; 10. a umbla după potcoave de cai morți (somehow similar to "a umbla după cai verzi pe pereți") looking for horseshoes form dead horses means to look for something which does not exist; 11. cal nărăvaș = bad behavior; 12. a sări calul = (to jump over the horse) to push it too far; 13. cal de bătaie = a person who does all the hard work or a problem that constantly reappears and everybody is trying to fix it; 14. a cunoaște ca pe un cal breaz (to know someone like you know a famous horse) to know someone very well.
POSITIVE: 1. Mănânci, calule, ovăz? = Do you have to ask? 2. o fugă/alergătură de cal = (as far as a horse can run) not too far.
NEUTRAL: 1. a bate șaua ca să priceapă iapa = to say one thing while meaning something different;

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Animal / aspect of idiom	Negative	Positive	Neutral
Horse 32	16 (50%)	4 (12.5%)	12 (37.5%)
Cal 17	14 (82.3%)	2 (11.8%)	1 (5.9%)



Horse' and 'cal' negative, positive and neutral idioms

Last, but not least, mention should be made of the idioms including the nouns 'bull/ ox' in English and 'taur/ bou' in Romanian, respectively. Similarly to the idioms including the other three nouns taken into discussion, the 'bull/ ox' and 'taur/ bou' idioms are mostly negative in meaning, there being fewer positive and neutral idioms.

ENGLISH IDIOMS WITH "BULL/OX"

NEGATIVE: 1. bull session = a period of earnest or bombastic but shallow conversation; 2. bull's wool = nonsense something illusory, nonexistent; 3. to bulldoze = to force someone into doing something; 4. a bull in a china shop = somebody who says or does something that offends or upsets people or cause trouble; 5. a red rag to a bull = something that always makes a person very angry; 6. (to be) bull-headed = people who are determined to do whatever they want to do without thinking of what other people want; 7. a cock-and-bull story = a story or explanation which is not true; 8. (to be) full of bull = to often say far-fetched, nonsensical, erroneous, or ignorant things; 9. not to be able to hit a bull in the a** with a bass fiddle = to be very clumsy; not to be able to aim correctly; 10. mess with the bull and you get the horns = if you anger someone, you will face retaliation; 11. to wear the bull's feather = to have an adulterous wife (the horn of a bull used to be called bull's feather); 12. not to know B from a bull's foot = to be completely ignorant; to know nothing (even to be illiterate); 13. to have a bull on the tongue = not to be willing to speak usually because having been bribed;

POSITIVE: 1. to take the bull by the horns = to face and deal with a difficult situation without trying to avoid it; 2. hit the bull's eye = to be exactly right; 3. a bull market = a period of time when the investors are optimistic;

NEUTRAL: 1. a company bull = a detective or a guard who works for a private farm; 2. to shoot the bull = to chat or to gossip;

ROMANIAN IDIOMS WITH "TAUR/ BOU"

NEGATIVE: 1. s-a dus bou și s-a întors vacă = (he went away ox and he came back cow) he/she did not make any progress, despite the effort; 2. ca vițelul/boul la poartă nouă = (like an ox before a brand new gate) confused, mainly because of own stupidity; 3. a scoate pe cineva din boii lor = (to take someone out of their oxen) to make someone angry; 4. a nu-i fi

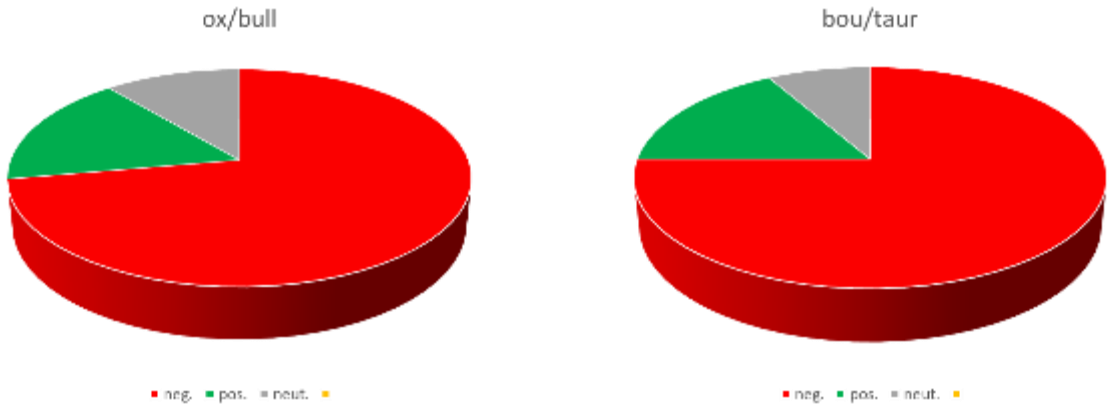
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boii acasă = (not to have the oxen at home) to be in a bad mood; 5. a-și băga boii în jug cu cineva = (to put the yoke on the oxen with somebody) to want to pick up a fight; 6. a lua cuiva boii de dinainte = (to take somebody's oxen right from the front) to cause somebody to become poor as a church mouse; 7. a scoate pe cineva la drum de boi = (to make someone get to the road for the oxen) to make someone very poor; 8. a nu face cu cineva boi bălțați = (to not make streaked oxen with someone) to go along with someone just for a short period of time; 9. a merge (ca) cu boii / carul de boi = (to walk as if with / with the oxen / the wagon pulled by oxen) to walk slowly and painfully.

POSITIVE: 1. a lua taurul de coarne = to take the bull by the horns; 2. Boii bătrâni fac brazda dreaptă. = (It is the old oxen that plough in a straight line) the people with experience find the good solutions. Note: this can be the case of a proverb-idiom because the reality does not exist any longer and it became quite metaphoric.

NEUTRAL: 1. a lăsă pe cineva în boii lui = (to leave someone in his oxen) to leave someone alone.

Animal / aspect of idiom		Negative		Positive		Neutral	
Ox/Bull	18	13	(72.2%)	3	(16.7%)	2	(11.1%)
Bou/Taur	12	9	(75%)	2	(16.7%)	1	(8.3%)



'Bull/ox' and 'taur/bou' negative, positive and neutral idioms

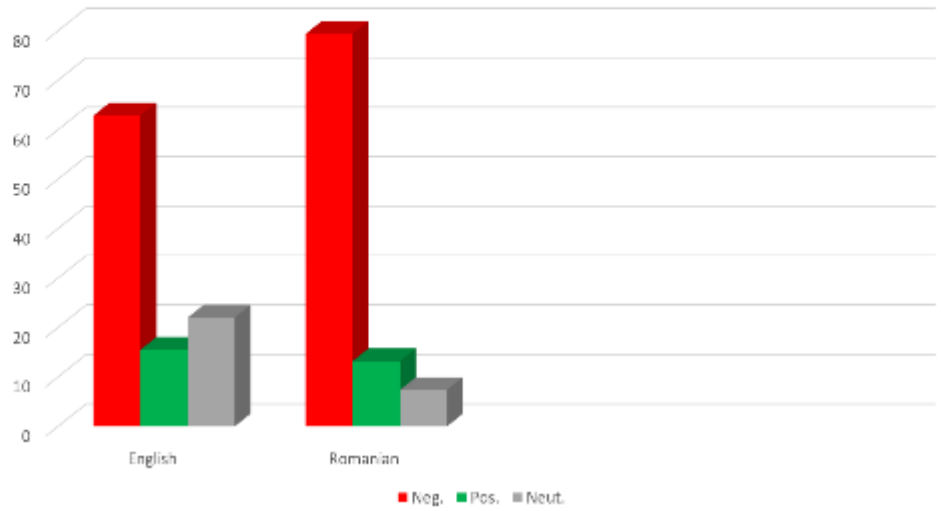
Comparing the 96 English idioms to the 54 Romanian structures, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- the Romanian 'câine' 'pisică/mâță', 'cal', 'bou/taur' idioms are, in average, more negative by aproximately 17.5% then their English counterparts;
- the same Romanian idioms are less positive than their English counterparts by approximately 2%;
- in the neutral area, the difference is almost as big as in the negative area, the Romanian idioms analysed here being less neutral by approximately 14.6%;
- a significant difference between the two languages, in as far as the idioms researched in this paper are concerned, is in the negative area, the "winner" being the Romanian language;
- the most relevant difference, however, is noticeable in the neutral area, especially in the case of 'dog' idioms. The fact that there are no neutral Romanian idioms including this noun could lead to the conclusion that the Romanians are more determined and put more passion in their relations with the domestic animals they have. The reference to these animals is made especially in terms of the positive-negative distinction as shown in the table below.

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The table below shows the exact situation:

Language/ aspect of idiom	Negative	Positive	Neutral
English 96	62.85%	15.15%	22%
Romanian 54	79.37%	13.22%	7.37%



Instead of a conclusion, the four animals under discussion are still useful even though houses are now watched by complicated locks or alarm systems, the rodent population is kept under control by using modern methods, people no longer hunt unless they have a passion for killing animals and the land is no longer worked using the raw muscular power of oxen. Dogs are used nowadays to help blind people move from one place to another, to help the police detect drugs and explosives or to look for lost people or simply for entertainment. Cats are used for mere relaxation and horses are used for equitation and horse races (but there are still countries where they pull wagons and are used to transportation). As for oxen/bulls, they are used mostly for people's entertainment in rodeos or in bull fights. Even though their traditional roles have changed, their presence in a series of idiomatic structures is still noticeable. The fact that the majority of the 'dog', 'cat', 'horse' and 'ox/bull' idioms are negative is not a surprise, since numerous idiomatic structures seem to talk about negative human characteristics. Without going into details, if we compare idioms about being stupid people and idioms about smart individuals, the fact may be easily noticed that the idioms in the former category are far more numerous than those in the latter one. The same difference may be noticed when comparing idioms about ugliness and beauty, about craziness and normality etc. It is human nature to make fun of the negative things and to cope with negativity by mocking it, by laughing at it and by sugar-coating it. Consequently, since people are often surrounded by negative aspects, why should they not have fun at their expense?

Further research directions

As scientific research more often than not would have it, the analysis presented in this paper raises more questions than there were at first. These quotations are some head scratchers which may as well turn into new directions for further research:

1. What have those animals ever done to us to be used for expressing so much negativity?

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2. Do those idioms, no matter negative, positive or neutral, say something about our relations with the four useful and beloved animals? If yes, can we say what?
3. Do those idioms provide relevant insights into the mentality of one people or another?
4. Does the age of the written literature have anything to do with the production of idioms?
5. Are there negative idioms with animals we are afraid of?

I believe there is an answer to every question, but the truth is yet to be revealed.

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