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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS  
OF TRANSPARENCY OF SELECTED IDIOMS

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I hereby declare that this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my own work, except for other sources of information acknowledged in the text.

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#### Abstract:

This thesis deals with selected Czech and English idioms and their transparency. Its main aim is to verify that in an idiomatic expression, the knowledge of the meaning of its individual constituents might help to decrease the opaqueness of the idiom but it does not tend to suffice to make the expression absolutely transparent. The theoretical part of the thesis is focused on the definition of an idiom and transparency, idiom processing and interpretation, differences between the Czech and English language and the correspondence of the selected Czech and English idioms. The practical part describes a research with the native speakers of Czech and English, which was conducted in order to verify the main hypothesis of this thesis.

Key words: idiom, transparency, metaphor, metonymy, conventional knowledge, Proto-Indo-European, analytical language, synthetic language, correspondence

#### Abstrakt:

Tato práce se zabývá vybranými českými a anglickými idiomy a jejich transparentností. Jejím hlavním cílem je ověřit tvrzení, že znalost významu jednotlivých komponentů idiomu může pomoci snížit jeho neprůhlednost, avšak zpravidla není dostačující proto, aby se idiom stal zcela transparentní. Teoretická část je zaměřena na definici idiomu a transparentnosti, zpracování a interpretaci idiomů, rozdíly mezi českým a anglickým jazykem a korespondenci vybraných českých a anglických idiomů. Praktická část popisuje výzkum s českými a anglickými rodilými mluvčími, který byl proveden za účelem ověření hypotézy této bakalářské práce.

Klíčová slova: idiom, transparentnost, metafora, metonymie, všeobecná znalost, protoindoevropský jazyk, analytický jazyk, syntetický jazyk, korespondence

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# **1 Introduction**

As the title suggests, this thesis is concerned with selected idiomatic expressions and their transparency. The reason for focusing on idioms is their topicality and pervasiveness in everyday language as it has been estimated that every minute of speech produces approximately four figurative expressions (Cieślicka 115), which makes idioms an interesting field for examination.

The main objective of this thesis is to verify the hypothesis that when interpreting an unknown L2 idiom, the knowledge of the meaning of its components might help to decrease the opaqueness of the whole expression, yet it does not tend to be sufficient for making the idiom absolutely transparent. Furthermore, the thesis also aims to investigate the role of correspondence between selected Czech and English idiomatic counterparts, presuming that, if not absolute, it does not necessarily mean that the L2 idioms become more transparent.

The theoretical part of this work is devoted to the phenomena that are relevant to the purposes of this work, particularly to defining an idiom and transparency, to idiom processing and strategies of its interpretation. Moreover, since the thesis focuses on Czech and English idioms, the first part also addresses the differences between these two languages and the correspondence of their selected idiomatic counterparts.

The second half of the thesis provides an overview of the research that was undertaken in order to prove the hypothesis that was presented above. It describes its aims, participants, method and materials as well as the results that were achieved, followed by their interpretation. Although it is impossible to generalize about language from a restricted research such as this one, it is hoped that this thesis will make a modest contribution to the idiom investigation.

## **2 Definition and Characteristics of an Idiom**

There have been many studies focused on idiomatic expressions and even more sources presenting their various definitions. This chapter will, therefore, introduce only a fragment of relevant theories of what an idiom is.

First of all, there are general sources, such as dictionaries, which are not focused exclusively on idioms but offer a brief definition of this phenomenon, satisfactory for a common language user. For instance, according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* an idiom refers to “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words” (740). Similarly, *The Penguin English Dictionary* defines an idiom as “an expression that has become established in a language and that has a meaning that cannot be derived from the meaning of its individual elements” (696).

Another group of sources is represented by books and materials that are primarily targeted at students of the English language. There is, for example, a publication called *Illustrated American Idioms*, which follows a definition that understands idioms as “the assigning of a new meaning to a group of words which already have their own meaning” (Curry i). *In the Know: Understanding and Using Idioms* gives a similar but briefer explanation: idiom is a “group of words which combine to form a new meaning” (Leaney vi). Furthermore, Seidl and McMordie's work *English Idioms and How to Use them* also looks at idioms from the point of view of their meaning, stating that idiom can be defined as “a number of words which, when taken together, have a different meaning from the individual meanings of each word” (Seidl and McMordie 13).

As such, general sources and sources intended for language learners present definitions that explore idioms rather

one-dimensionally. They indicate one main feature of idiomatic expressions, their non-compositionality, which denotes the fact that the meaning of an idiomatic expression is not equal to the sum of the meanings of its individual constituents. However, some linguists such as Kavka, who claims that non-compositionality is not shared by all idioms (17), do not acknowledge this criterion as sufficiently defining. It is more accurate to say that idiomatic expressions display different degrees of non-compositionality (Maienborn 445).

As opposed to general sources, more complex and detailed definitions of idiomatic expressions may be found in works and studies of various linguists, showing that defining idioms is not simple. For example, Cruse emphasizes two aspects of an idiom: first, it is lexically complex (i.e. it consists of more than one lexical constituent) and second, it should be a single minimal semantic constituent. In other words, “an idiom may be briefly characterized as a lexical complex which is semantically simplex” (Cruse 37).

Cruse further describes idioms as one lexical unit with certain internal cohesion, thus also commenting on their syntactic behaviour, claiming that idioms typically resist interruption and reordering (38). This refers to their syntactic frozenness, which is related to non-compositionality since being perceived as a single unit, idioms do not tend to behave in a regular way as far as grammatical and syntactic processes are concerned. Yet, this characteristic is also not ubiquitous in all idiomatic expressions. Glucksberg, for instance, realizes their rigidity, classifying idioms (also with compounds, names, book titles etc.) as a subgroup of fixed expressions (68). However, he points out that there appears to be certain syntactic flexibility in some idioms that can take both the active and passive form (*the cat*

*was let out by George*) or be internally modified, such as *he didn't spill a single bean* (69).

Finally, in *A Book on Idiomatology* Kavka presents several criteria which define idioms: conventionality, figuration, proverbiality, informality and effect. Put differently, use of idioms is based on convention; they have a non-literal meaning and often reflect some folk wisdom; they are typically associated with an informal register and are used in situations that are hardly neutral (Kavka 17-18).

For the purpose of this thesis, all the aforementioned definitions and characteristics of idiomatic expressions are taken into consideration. Based on that, an idiom is understood here as an expression whose meaning, traditionally, is not equal to the sum of meanings of its constituents. The features to which the attention is especially paid are (non)compositionality, conventionality, figuration and most importantly, transparency, which is further discussed in the following chapter.

### **3 Transparency of Idioms**

As stated in the title of this thesis, the aspect of idioms that this work is most focused on is their transparency. Based on a thorough study of various sources, it ensues that there is a significant nonuniformity among the different approaches concerning this notion, with many linguists using additional terms as synonyms to transparency. This chapter will, therefore, provide a brief overview of this phenomenon, concluding with theoretical concept that is relevant to the purposes of this work.

The general characteristics of idiomatic expressions, presented in the previous chapter, showed that idioms, as word combinations, are largely fixed, from both the syntactic and semantic point of view. On the scale from free-word combinations (i.e. combinations

composed of the meanings of their constituents) to rigid-word combinations, idioms are placed closely to the latter end, displaying a significant level of semantic rigidity (Baron 1). In other words, as it has already been stated, the meaning of an idiomatic expression, traditionally, is not equal to the sum of the meanings of its constituents.

Put in another way, from the semantic perspective, idiomatic expressions are not very transparent. However, that is not completely true about all the idioms because transparency, understood as “the extent to which an idiom’s meaning can be inferred from the meanings of its constituents” (Glucksberg 74), is distributed among the idioms in different degrees. Some idiomatic expressions are considered relatively transparent, such as *break the ice*; whereas others are understood as rather opaque, for example, *kick the bucket*.

Furthermore, what is very closely connected to transparency is the notion of decomposability. Both terms are frequently used as synonyms as they both presume potential derivation of the idiomatic meaning from its individual components. For example, Abel uses “semantically transparent” as a synonym to “decomposable”, even though she later points out that, in the narrow sense, there is a minute difference between these two notions. She states that transparency refers to the relationship between the idiomatic and constituent meanings, whereas decomposability refers to the possibility of determining the whole-word meaning from the constituent meanings” (Abel 344). Nevertheless, even in this way, their synonymous quality suggests itself. Moreover, decomposability is sometimes referred to as compositionality, analysability or transparency (Wulff 35) yet sometimes seen as subordinate, a type of compositionality (Harast and Proost 280).

In addition, when discussing to what extent the meaning of an idiomatic expression is inferable from the meanings of its components, two more terms are sometimes attached: motivation and predictability. Kövecses, for instance, uses motivation to denote semantic transparency. He understands motivation as a weaker notion than predictability, arguing that a motivated idiom, i.e. one whose meaning is not absolutely arbitrary, does not automatically entail that its meaning will be fully guessed or predicted (201). More importantly, Kövecses further claims that “the transparency, or motivation, of idioms arises from knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms (metaphor, metonymy, conventional knowledge)“, which connect idiomatic meanings to literal ones (202). These mechanisms will be explained in the following chapter.

Taking everything into consideration, the concept of transparency of an idiomatic expression defined for the purposes of this thesis includes all the notions presented in this chapter. Transparency is thus used in a broad sense, to denote the extent of potential inference of the meaning of an idiom from its individual components, which is, naturally, based on its decomposability (compositionality or analysability), motivation and predictability.

## **4 Idiom Processing and Interpretation**

### **4.1 Current Views on L1 Idiom Processing**

Research into idiom processing and interpretation has had a long tradition and many different approaches to this matter have emerged. For the purposes of this thesis, only a small fragment of theories that might be related to the focus of this work will be briefly explored; more precisely, what will be presented are three

compositional views: the decompositional hypothesis, the configuration hypothesis and Phrase-Induced Polysemy model.

Traditionally, idioms were treated as non-compositional strings whose figurative meaning and the literal meanings of their constituents were not related (Cieślicka 117). Afterwards, however, there appeared a tendency which acknowledged the role that the meanings of individual words play in the comprehension of the whole expression because, as Vega-Moreno states, “the relationship between the idiomatic meaning and the linguistic form of most idiomatic expressions is often not completely arbitrary” (77). In other words, the meaning of an idiom is partially composed of the meanings of its elements, which helps to analyse the idiom. This idea, as Vega mentions (based on Nunberg’s *The Pragmatics of Reference*), is known as the decompositional hypothesis. Nunberg divides idioms according to their degree of compositionality, from non-compositional (opaque) idioms, whose components do not contribute to the meaning of the whole expression, to idioms, where the constituents contribute to the interpretation of the figurative meaning, which should be therefore easier to process (qtd. in Vega-Moreno 77).

Another account of idioms which emphasizes their compositional nature is the configuration hypothesis. It assumes that when an idiomatic expression is encountered, it is initially processed as any sequence of words, literally, until “idiomatic key” (or also “configuration key”, i.e. the key content word) is recognized, which leads to the activation of the figurative interpretation. Since then, both the literal and figurative processing run in parallel until the literal meaning is rejected and the idiomatic meaning is accepted as the intended interpretation (Cieślicka 118).

The configuration hypothesis was further developed into the Phrase-Induced Polysemy Model. Vega-Moreno explains

that this approach highlights the polysemous character of words, based on their repeated figurative use, and the correct interpretation of an idiomatic expression is determined by choosing the appropriate sense of each element of the idiom. For example, in *spill the beans* the lexical form *spill* involves the extra sense of “reveal” and the lexical form “beans” carries the figurative sense of “secret” (Vega-Moreno 78).

These three theories are only a few examples of all the views on processing idioms, compositional or non-compositional (traditional). However, they appear as the most relevant to this thesis as they highlight the role that individual constituents of idiomatic expressions might have during processing and interpreting second language idioms.

#### **4.2 Strategies of Interpreting Idioms**

From what has already been mentioned, it might seem that idioms are difficult to interpret because their meaning is not literal. However, as Bílková mentions, “idioms are conceptually motivated in the sense that there are cognitive mechanisms, such as metaphors, metonymy, and conventional knowledge, which link literal meaning with figurative idiomatic meaning” (22). By connecting literal and figurative meaning, these cognitive devices may be used to help interpret the meaning of idiomatic expressions.

First of all, there is the mechanism of metaphor. Its connection with language has been studied, prominently among others, by Lakoff and Johnson who argue that language is largely metaphorical in the sense that its use is motivated by metaphorical schemas which are based on our experience of the world and stored in our mind (Vega-Moreno 78). In other words, our thinking is, to a great extent, metaphorically grounded. Conceptual metaphor theories,

as explained in Keysar and Bly's work, assume that the way in which we conceptualize stands on a basic set of experience-grounded concepts thanks to which we can understand the less basic concepts via mapping them onto the basic set (90).

Maienborn also emphasizes the close link of idioms and metaphors in general, claiming that many idioms even contain metaphors (Maienborn 445). Their being defined as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is applied to another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them" (*The Penguin English Dictionary* 872) demonstrates the similar nature that metaphors share with idioms, figurativeness. For example, *jungle* is often used as a metaphor for something dangerous or severe. Knowing this metaphor, contained, for example, in the expression *it's jungle out there*, should make the expression easier to interpret (Maienborn 445).

Another cognitive mechanism that constitutes an important part of our conceptual system is metonymy, whereby "people take one well-understood aspect of something to represent or stand for the thing as a whole" (Everaert 111). To illustrate the link between metonymy and idioms, let us look at an example used by Bílková. In the idiomatic expression *heads will roll*, *head* stands for the whole *life*, which might be based on the fact that in the past, people were executed by decapitation for having committed a serious crime; thus, the expression *heads will roll* implies that somebody will be punished for having done something wrong (Bílková 37). As such, conceptual metonymies, as well as metaphors, provide connection between the knowledge of the world and the figurative meaning of a particular idiom (Bílková 33). However, as Kövecses states, in some cases, there is no conceptual motivation for the meaning of idioms at all (201).

The example of *heads will roll* showed yet another cognitive device which is largely used when interpreting idioms: general conventional knowledge. This term refers to the sum of information about the world that people have, which is used subconsciously when they speak (Bílková 33). Furthermore, Kövecses mentions that it is everyday knowledge that is shared in a given culture and includes standard information about parts, shape, size, use, function and other aspects of particular domains of our knowledge (207). In *heads will roll*, it is the knowledge of the fact that people were executed by decapitating for having committed a serious crime that helps to unveil the conceptual metonymy and further interpret the idiomatic expression.

### **4.3 Processing and Interpreting L2 Idioms**

So far, processing and interpreting idioms has been discussed only from the point of view of a mother tongue. But considering second language learners, it seems obvious that their ways of processing and interpreting L2 (second language) idioms are likely to be different. There appear to be two main attitudes concerning L2 learners' comprehension of idioms: as Saberian and Fotovatnia assert, some researchers suggest that second language learners comprehend idioms by "direct retrieval of their figurative meaning", whereas others emphasize the importance of literal meanings, claiming that the learners "first process idioms literally and only then access their figurative meaning" (1232).

Supporting the latter approach, Kecskes claims that L2 learners lack metaphorical competence in the second language and consequently, they are likely to rely on literal meanings and their L1 conceptual system when interpreting figurative expressions (qtd. in Cieślícka 119). Furthermore, Matlock and Heredia suggest

that when processing L2 idioms, the importance of literal and figurative meanings depends on the learner's proficiency in the second language. Less proficient L2 learners, as they explain, comprehend L2 idioms in three steps. First, they translate the idiom literally into their mother tongue. Then, they access the literal meaning of the expression and attempt to make sense of it. Finally, in the third step, they access the figurative meaning. More advanced learners, on the other hand, might process and interpret idiomatic expressions without accessing the literal meaning, i.e. in the same way as native speakers (qtd. in Cieřlicka 120). This seems quite reasonable considering the fact that L2 learners are taught literal meanings primarily, with the knowledge of idiomatic expressions being associated with an advanced level.

Also, what should be mentioned in connection with comprehension of L2 idioms is the effect of the learner's mother tongue and cultural background as it is rather predictable that a second language learner might search for a corresponding expression in their mother tongue, which could help them interpret the L2 idiom. Saberian and Fotovatnia present several studies concerned with this phenomenon: for example, Kellerman's research, which reached a conclusion that the native language does play a role in L2 idiom processing. Also, Irujo, who examined the role that mother tongue plays in comprehending second language idiomatic expressions, concluded that understanding L2 idioms was better with higher correspondence in form and meaning between L1 and L2 idioms. Similarly, Yoshikawa's research focused on the similarity between the native and the second language idiomatic expressions and it proved that the more semantic similarity between the languages (here Japanese and English), the more understandable the L2 expressions will be (Saberian and Fotovatnia 1233).

These results show that the role of mother tongue and cultural background is definitely not insignificant. Since the research of this thesis is concerned with comprehension of L2 idioms, more precisely with the transparency of Czech and English idioms to non-native speakers, the next two chapters are devoted to comparing and contrasting the two languages in order to present any potential correspondence that would be relevant to understanding the foreign idiomatic expressions.

## **5 Language Characteristic of Czech and English**

This bachelor thesis concerns idioms in two languages, Czech and English, therefore it is appropriate to explore the differences that exist between them. Two classifications that will be commented on below to support the distinction of Czech and English are the genetic and typological classification.

Genetic classification of languages, also known as genealogical classification, is a historical approach, where groups of languages are compared in order to find differences and similarities, in relation to the common ancestor, a parent language to a large group of world's most widely spoken languages, called Proto-Indo-European (Lehman 66). Both Czech and English are part of the group, which means that in spite of the geographical distance, there is a shared proto-language that they originate from and thus, there should be a certain number of idiomatic expressions that are very similar in both these languages.

However, the Indo-European family, i.e. all the languages that descend from this common ancestor, is subdivided into several groups that are genealogically close, such as Germanic, Italic or Slavic languages. To classify the two languages that are of main importance to this thesis, English comes from the Germanic branch,

more precisely the West Germanic group, as well as, for example, German and Dutch do. Czech, on the other hand, belongs to the Slavic branch, which suggests that there are considerable differences between the two languages in question (Crystal 367).

As opposed to genetic classification, typological classification divides languages into several types based, primarily, on their formal similarities, in other words on phonology, grammar and lexis. One of the earliest, yet still currently quite popular, typologies distinguishes three language types, isolating, inflecting and agglutinative, on the basis of their morphological form. The two types that are relevant for this work and will be briefly commented on are isolating (also called analytical) and inflecting (synthetic). English is largely an analytical language; as such, there is almost no sign of inflection and the grammatical meanings are expressed through the use of extra words and word order, whereas Czech, being predominantly synthetic, abounds with inflection. (Crystal 369).

Even though, as it has already been mentioned, this typology is based on the language form, a short remark on word meaning should be made. Thanks to inflection, Czech words are more context-independent (than English ones) because, as Vachek claims “if taken out of their syntactic contexts, [they] convey a much clearer idea of their semantic content than their English counterparts” (Vachek 325). Put another way, English words (when in isolation) have the tendency of being ambiguous and thus, a little less transparent than Czech words.

All in all, the above mentioned classifications suggest that Czech (Slavic and synthetic) and English (Germanic and analytical) are not likely to provide a high number of idiomatic counterparts that are similar or even identical. However, having both a common ancestral language, there might appear several similarities in their idiomatic inventory.

## **6 Correspondence of Idioms**

As it was mentioned in the previous chapters, when interpreting unknown second language idioms, the effect of the person's mother tongue might be quite significant. Language learners tend to rely both on their knowledge of the meanings of the individual words constituting the expression and the knowledge of idioms that exist in their native language. They are likely to translate L2 idioms literally, operating with the constituents in order to comprehend the figurative meaning, and search for an L1 idiom that would correspond, at least partially, with the second language expression. Although Czech and English are typologically different, the fact that they share a common ancestral language (Proto-Indo-European) might have contributed to the existence of some idioms that are similar in both languages.

The similarities are, however, distributed in different degrees, i.e. the idiomatic counterparts in the two languages differ in the extent of their mutual correspondence. The following categorization of idiom correspondence is inspired by the methodology that Jana Vokáčová uses in her dissertation. She distinguishes three main levels of correspondence, according to the stylistic, semantic, and formal similarities: total correspondence, partial correspondence and non-correspondence (Vokáčová 62-67). In order to explain these levels, this chapter will use the corpus of idioms that was created for the purposes of the research for this thesis. Since the corpus was focused on animal idioms, one more category, animal idiom/non animal idiom correspondence, is added here.

## 6.1 Total Correspondence

Total correspondence refers to the relationship between L1 and L2 idioms that agree on all the three levels (stylistic, semantic, and formal). It means that totally corresponding idioms are used in the same style, their meaning is identical and their components agree in terms of their form. This category is further divided into two subcategories, 100% correspondence and overall correspondence (Vokáčová 62), but since this thesis aims to investigate transparency of Czech and English idiomatic counterparts, idiomatic expressions that correspond totally were not included in the corpus, being considered too transparent for the L2 speakers. However, total correspondence might be exemplified, for instance, by *to lose face* and *ztratit tvář* (Vokáčová 63), which are used in the same style and denote the same meaning expressed in the same form (both as far as grammatical structure and individual lexemes are concerned).

## 6.2 Partial Correspondence

This category, as suggested by the title, includes idioms that display a lower degree of correspondence than the previous category (but a higher degree than non-corresponding idioms). Idiomatic expressions that would be classified as partially corresponding are neither totally correspondent nor totally different (Vokáčová 74). They agree on the semantic level, denoting the same meaning, but they are different in terms of the other levels. This can be achieved in various ways, two of which are represented in the corpus of idioms that was created for this thesis.

First, some partially corresponding idioms may differ in the particular animal lexeme that they contain:

to be for the <b>birds</b>	je to pro <b>kočku</b>
<b>dog's</b> ears	<b>oslí</b> uši
he is no spring <b>chicken</b>	není už žádný <b>zajíc</b>
to play <b>possum</b>	dělat mrtvého <b>brouka</b>

This animal lexeme may be also modified in one of the languages, such as *spring chicken* in *he is no spring chicken* or *mrtvého brouka* in *dělat mrtvého brouka*.

Secondly, idioms in this category might vary in other lexical means than the animal lexeme only, or even in both the animal lexeme and the rest of the expression:

to let sleeping <b>dogs</b> lie	nebodat do <b>vosího</b> hnízda
it is like putting the <b>cat</b> near the goldfish bowl	to je jako udělat <b>kozla</b> zahradníkem

These expressions, however, have the same meaning and contain an animal lexeme, thus they are considered as an example of partial correspondence. In addition, in cases like *it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl* and *to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem*, there is also the same grammatical means (comparison structure).

Moreover, Vokáčová (64-67) describes other kinds of divergence of partially correspondent idioms, such as expressiveness versus neutrality (*chcípnout jako pes* versus *to die like a dog*), using hyponyms or hyperonyms (*to have a long arm* – *mít dlouhé prsty*) and grammatical difference (e.g. verbal expressions versus nominal ones).

### 6.3 Animal Idiom/Non Animal Idiom Correspondence

This category, established for the purposes of this thesis, concerns idiomatic expressions in which the degree of correspondence is slightly lower than in partially corresponding idioms. The pairs of L1 and L2 expressions denote the same meaning,

which distinguishes them from non-correspondent idioms, but one of the couple does not include an animal lexeme. As it is a very broad category, there might appear certain differences, which would subdivide the idiomatic expressions into several different subgroups (Sučková 14).

For example, some idioms from this category share one corresponding lexeme.

<b>to let</b> the cat out of the bag	<b>vyložit</b> karty na stůl
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In this case, it is *to let* and *vyložit* that refer to the action of releasing something. Furthermore, some of the expressions that have a corresponding lexeme in common also use the same grammatical means:

<b>to drink like</b> a fish	<b>pít jako</b> duha
<b>to flog</b> a dead horse	<b>mlátit</b> prázdnou slámu
<b>to worm one's way</b> out of something	<b>vykroutit se</b> z něčeho

In *drink like a fish* and *pít jako duha* a certain correspondence is relatively obvious as both idioms contain a comparison structure and there is a pair of corresponding lexemes (*drink* and *pít*). In the second pair, it might seem less apparent as the Czech equivalent of *to flog* is *bičovat*, rather than *mlátit*. However, both these lexemes denote the action of beating something and, in addition, both idioms have the same pattern (verb-object, here both objects also premodified). Similarly, *to worm one's way* refers to a twisting movement expressed by the Czech counterpart *vykroutit se* and both verbs take a prepositional object.

Finally, animal idiom/non animal idiom correspondence also contains a group of idioms which share no common grammatical or lexical feature, only denote the same meaning:

to be bitten by the bug	zbláznit se do něčeho
to be the cat's whiskers	sníst všechnu moudrost světa
to have bats in the belfry	straší mu ve věži

#### **6.4 Non-correspondence**

Non-correspondence includes idioms that either do not have an idiomatic equivalent in the other language or those that are expressed non-idiomatically (Vokáčová 67). As such, this category is not relevant for the purpose of this work as the main focus here is on Czech and English idiomatic counterparts.

So far, this part of the thesis has presented basic facts regarding idiomatic expressions that are relevant to this work, and laid the grounds for the following part. There, my current research on transparency of selected Czech and English idioms is described, using the corpus of idiomatic expressions that were introduced in the last chapter of this part. The results of this research are thus based on the theoretical background explored in the first six chapters of this thesis.

## **7 Method and Materials**

This chapter presents a thorough description of the method and materials that were used for the purposes of my research, which constitutes an important part of this thesis.

### **7.1 Aims and Participants**

The aim of the research was to investigate transparency of selected Czech and English idioms and prove the hypothesis that the knowledge of the meanings of individual constituents of an idiom might help to decrease the opaqueness of the whole expression; however, this knowledge does not tend to be sufficient for making the idiom absolutely transparent. Since the research concerns idiomatic expressions in two different languages, it also aims to examine the role of their correspondence when interpreting L2 idioms, predicting that the correspondence of L1 and L2 idioms, if not absolute, does not necessarily entail that the L2 idioms become more transparent.

There were two groups of volunteers who participated in the research. The first group included sixty Czech native speakers, aged 16-54, who studied or have been studying English as their second language. Their knowledge of English varied from level A2 to B2 and majority of them also speak another foreign language (German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian or even Hebrew or Latin). The second group consisted of twenty-five native speakers of English (fifteen Americans, seven Englishmen, two Canadians and one Irish), aged 18-50. They had no or only a little knowledge of Czech and their level of another foreign language (French, Spanish, Italian, Russian or Chinese), compared to the Czech speakers, was, naturally, rather low (for details see Appendix A, tables 15 and 16). All the participants, the Czech especially, were chosen

on the basis of the level of the second language in question (level B2 being the maximum) in order to prevent their potential familiarity with the idiomatic expressions.

## 7.2 Materials and Procedure

The research materials consisted of two sets of idioms: thirteen English idioms for the Czech participants and the same number of their Czech idiomatic counterparts (in terms of their meaning) for the native speakers of English. The sources of the expressions were *Anglicko-český frazeologický slovník* and the Internet website *Learn English Today*, from which the English idioms were selected, all of them containing an animal lexeme. The reason for focusing on animal idioms is that animals are one of the most frequent sources of idioms, based on the fact that people and animals have always had a close mutual relationship (Vokáčová 50). Only those English animal idioms that have a Czech idiomatic counterpart were accepted for this research, some of the Czech expressions also including an animal lexeme. These pairs of idioms can be seen below.

Table 1: English and Czech idioms used in the research and their meaning

<b>English Idiom</b>	<b>Czech Idiom</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
to be for the birds	je to pro kočku	to be worthless
to be bitten by the bug	zbláznit se do něčeho	to develop sudden interest
to have bats in the belfry	straší mu ve věži	to be crazy
to drink like a fish	pít jako duha	to drink alcohol excessively
to let the cat out of the bag	vyložit karty na stůl	to reveal a secret
dog's ears	oslí uši	a turned-down corner of a page in a book
to flog a dead horse	mlátit prázdnou slámu	to waste time to achieve something impossible

to let sleeping dogs lie	nebodát do vosího	not to instigate troubles
it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl	to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem	to entrust a wrong person to do something
to play possum	dělat mrtvého brouka	to pretend to be asleep in order to avoid something
he is no spring chicken	není už žádný zajíc	to be quite old
to worm one's way out of something	vykroutit se z něčeho	to use devious means to avoid doing something
to be the cat's whiskers	sníst všechnu moudrost světa	to think one is better than everyone else

Both the sets were divided into four parts (three parts with four idioms, the last part including only one), representing four different tasks: choosing the correct interpretation of an idiom used in a sentence; selecting the sentence in which an idiom was used with its correct meaning; choosing the situation which refers to the correct interpretation of an idiom; creating or describing a situation in which it would be appropriate to use the idiom. In the first three tasks, there were always three given options, from which the participants had to choose only one. The Czech participants had the sentences containing an idiom written in English but the native speakers of English, assuming that they would not be able to understand a whole Czech sentence, were presented with sentences in which the idiom was in Czech and the rest of the sentence in English (for the whole set of the four tasks see Appendix B.1 and B.2).

In some cases, the false options that were created for testing each idiom differ in the Czech and English version – this was done in order to have the incorrect options as believable as possible (e.g. in the pair *she is no spring chicken* and *není už žádný zajíc*, the animal lexemes both induce different associations; thus, the false options for *she is no spring chicken* were *somebody who hates getting*

*up early and somebody who hates spring*, whereas for *není už žádný zajíc* they were *somebody who cannot run fast and somebody who is ugly*).

As it would be of a very little use to investigate transparency of L2 idioms where the participants do not understand any of the idioms' constituents, each idiom was accompanied by literal translations of its individual components into the respondents' mother tongue. Although this concerned mainly the native speakers of English, these translations were given to the Czech participants as well - but not to all of them. In order to prove that the knowledge of the meaning of the idiom's components might help to decrease the opaqueness of the whole idiom, i.e. that without this knowledge L2 idioms are, naturally, even more opaque, all the translations were given only to twenty participants; forty participants had them added to a half of the idioms (twenty to the even ones, twenty to the odd ones).

As such, the test was estimated to take 10-15 minutes and the participants were asked not to use any dictionaries or additional help. Afterwards, all the data were analysed and the results that were achieved are presented in the next chapter.

## **8 Results**

The previous chapter explained the main aim of the research that was conducted for the purposes of this thesis and described the set of idioms that were used as well as the four tasks involved. This chapter is, therefore, focused on the results that were achieved in this research.

## 8.1 Czech Participants

As it was mentioned earlier, there were sixty native speakers of Czech who took part in the research. The outcomes resulting from their answers are quite noteworthy. On average, they interpreted correctly 52% of idioms, i.e. approximately six out of the twelve expressions (the idiom used in the last task was analysed separately), with the lowest score being three and the highest ten correct answers (for details see Appendix A, table 15).

A half of the twelve idiomatic expressions that were tested in the first three parts were matched with their correct meanings by the absolute majority of participants, whereas the other half was misinterpreted. The rate of successful interpretation of the individual idioms is presented in table 2, in which the idioms are organized in a descending order from those that were most frequently interpreted correctly to the less frequently understood ones (the number refers to the number of participants, out of the total sixty, who chose the right meaning, also transferred to percentage).

Table 2: English idioms and the rate of their successful interpretation

it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl	50 (83%)
to worm one's way out of something	47 (78%)
to let sleeping dogs lie	44 (73%)
to flog a dead horse	39 (65%)
to have bats in the belfry	32 (53%)
to drink like a fish	31 (52%)
to be for the birds	29 (48%)
to be bitten by the bug	26 (43%)
he is no spring chicken	21 (35%)
dog's ears	20 (33%)
to play possum	19 (32%)
to let the cat out of the bag	17 (28%)

Moreover, there were five cases of an incorrect interpretation outnumbering the correct one, as can be seen in table 3, where both the numbers of correctly (C) and incorrectly (I) chosen answers are displayed (excluding the third, less frequent option). The table also includes the idiom *to be bitten by the bug*, for which the results were very close.

Table 3: Numbers of correct and incorrect interpretations of the English idioms with the success rate lower than 50%

	<b>C</b>	<b>I</b>
to be for the birds	29	30
she is no spring chicken	21	37
dog's ears	20	36
to play possum	19	21
to let the cat out of the bag	17	26
to be bitten by the bug	26	23

In the last task, regarding the idiom *to be the cat's whiskers*, there were five participants who managed to decode the correct meaning; two of them, however, had already known it. Twenty-three people either gave no answer or said that they did not know. The remaining thirty-two offered an interesting variety of interpretations: the most frequent ones were *to be sensitive* (7 participants), *cunning* (3), *curious* (2) and *indispensable* (2) – for the complete list see Appendix D, table 20.

## **8.2 Native Speakers of English**

Among the English native speakers, the rate of successful interpretation of the selected idioms was higher: on average, they managed to interpret correctly nine out of the twelve idioms (more precisely, 76%). Their scores varied from seven to eleven

correctly interpreted idioms out of the twelve that were tested in the first three parts (for more details see Appendix A, table 16).

As far as the individual idioms are concerned, all except one were interpreted correctly by the majority, including three expressions with 100% success rate. The only idiom that was not understood correctly by more than a half of the respondents was *psí uši*: the right option was not chosen at all, the answers spread between the two incorrect options. The following table shows the individual idioms and the number of participants who interpreted them correctly (out of the total twenty-five).

Table 4: Czech idioms and the rate of their successful interpretation

zbláznit se do něčeho	25 (100%)
vyložit karty na stůl	25 (100%)
vykroutit se z něčeho	25 (100%)
nebodat do vosího hnízda	22 (88%)
to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem	22 (88%)
straší mu ve věži	21 (84%)
pít jako duha	21 (84%)
dělat mrtvého brouka	20 (80%)
není už žádný zajíc	18 (72%)
mlátit prázdnou slámu	17 (68%)
je to pro kočku	13 (52%)
oslí uši	0 (0%)

Finally, the idiom that was used in the last task, *snědl všechnu moudrost světa*, achieved similar results to that of its Czech counterpart. There were two successful cases of decoding its correct meaning, five participants who did not present an answer and eighteen people who tried to interpret the expression, providing various explanations: the most frequent ones were that the idiom refers to *someone who is a bookworm or loves learning*

(6 participants), *somebody who knows everything about a certain subject* (3) and *somebody who has overly prepared for an exam* (2) – all the answers can be seen in Appendix D, table 21.

Subsequently, all the results that were achieved, were analysed and interpreted, the outcome of which is presented in the following chapter.

## 9 Discussion

This chapter aims to interpret the results which were achieved in the research that was described above. It comments on the transparency of the selected English animal idioms, followed by the comparison with their Czech counterparts.

First, the attention will be paid to the six idiomatic expressions that were interpreted correctly by the absolute majority of Czech participants, namely *it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl*, *to worm one's way out of something*, *to let sleeping dogs lie*, *to flog a dead horse*, *to have bats in the belfry* and *to drink like a fish*.

The idiom that was interpreted correctly by most of the participants, i.e. in the sense of this thesis, the one that was the most transparent, was *it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl*. Its success rate can be seen in table 5 (the correct answer is highlighted).

Table 5: Occurrence of each option: *it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl*

<b>it is like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl</b>	number of participants
to have something safely guarded	<b>3</b> (5%)
to entrust a wrong person to do something	<b>50</b> (83%)
to let two people who do not like each other work together	<b>7</b> (12%)

As the results show, the words on which most participants seemed to have focused when decoding the idiom were *cat* and *goldfish*. It is the conventional knowledge that cats eat fish what might have made the idiom more transparent and easier to interpret. The results of its Czech counterpart support this assumption as well:

Table 6: Occurrence of each option: *to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem*

<b>to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem</b>	number of participants
to ask somebody clumsy to help you	<b>3</b> (12%)
to entrust a wrong person to do something	<b>22</b> (88%)
to ask an expert to do a job	<b>0</b> (0%)

Here, however, the connection between *a billy goat (kozel)* and being a wrong person to be *a gardener (zahradník)* may be less explicit because one has to infer that, based on conventional knowledge, the goat would eat whatever there is in the garden. Yet, this does not seem to have caused many problems.

The results which concern the idioms *to worm one's way out of something/ vykroutit se z něčeho* and *let sleeping dogs lie/ nebudat do vosího hnízda* display a similar tendency. These expressions appear to have had a relatively high degree of transparency for both groups of participants as the incorrect interpretations were chosen by only a few Czechs and no English native speaker (for the exact ratio see Appendix C, table 17 and 18). Again, conventional knowledge might have helped to interpret these idioms: in the first case, it was probably the image of a worm's movement that contributed to decrease the opacity; in the latter one, it may have been the fact that not all dogs are kind and by waking those up one can make them angry.

The following two idioms, *to flog a dead horse* and *to have bats in the belfry*, are special in the sense that they both contain a lexeme

(*flog* and *belfry*) which, when not accompanied by the translation, was unfamiliar to some Czech participants and thus probably did not help to decrease opaqueness of the whole expression. This does not seem to have affected the idiom *to flog a dead horse* too much because out of the twenty participants who did not have its translation, eleven chose the correct answer (see Appendix E). As table 7 shows, the idiom proved to be relatively transparent, with the correct interpretation being chosen by the majority:

Table 7: Occurrence of each option: *to flog a dead horse/mlátit prázdnou slámu*

<b>to flog a dead horse/mlátit prázdnou slámu</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
about something that was very easy	<b>5</b> (8%)	<b>0</b> (0%)
to beat a football team (e.g. 10:0)	<b>16</b> (27%)	<b>8</b> (32%)
to waste time/effort	<b>39</b> (65%)	<b>17</b> (68%)

What may have contributed here, apart from conventional knowledge (flogging a dead horse has no effect as the animal is already dead and the person only wastes time and effort), was the fact that the potential interpretation that something is very easy already appeared in the previous part of the test as an option for the idiom *to be for the birds*. There, thirty participants chose this (incorrect) option and only two of them selected this interpretation again, for the idiom *to flog a dead horse*; i.e. twenty-eight of these participants might have eliminated this option because they had already chosen it before. The English native speakers showed the same tendency: out of the twelve participants who selected *to be easy* for *to be for the birds*, no one chose it again for *to flog a dead horse*.

As opposed to the idiom *to flog a dead horse*, the absence of translation of *belfry* in *to have bats in the belfry* appears to have had a stronger effect on the idiom's transparency: only five

participants, out of twenty, who did not have the translation, chose the correct interpretation (see Appendix E); some of the fifteen unsuccessful ones later claimed that had they known the meaning of *belfry*, they would have chosen a different answer. However, the success rate of this idiom was still above 50%, even though, as a few respondents mentioned, the idiom could refer to all the three options because they are all negative, like bats. Since *belfry* is close to *tower (věž)*, it is possible that the Czech counterpart *straší mu ve věži* interfered here, helping to make the idiom more transparent.

Table 8: Occurrence of each option: *to have bats in the belfry/ straší mu ve věži*

<b>to have bats in the belfry/ straší mu ve věži</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to be crazy	<b>32 (53%)</b>	<b>21 (84%)</b>
to be messy	<b>9 (15%)</b>	<b>0 (0%)</b>
to have bad intentions	<b>19 (32%)</b>	<b>4 (16%)</b>

As table 8 demonstrates, the Czech equivalent of this idiom seems to have been more transparent since its correct meaning was chosen by 84% of the English native speakers.

Finally, the last idiom that was interpreted correctly by more than a half of the participants is *to drink like a fish/ pít jako duha* (to drink alcohol a lot). The transparency of the English expression appeared lower than that of the Czech idiom (see Appendix C, table 19), although there does not seem to be an apparent reason for connecting *rainbow (duha)*, rather than *fish*, with alcohol.

So far, this chapter has focused on the idioms whose success rate was above 50%. The following part will deal with the other half, where the correct interpretations were chosen by less than a half of the participants and the prevailing answers were very frequently the incorrect ones. A borderline example could be the expression *to be for the birds*:

Table 9: Occurrence of each option: *to be for the birds/je to pro kočku*

<b>to be for the birds/je to pro kočku</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to be interesting	<b>1</b> (2%)	<b>0</b> (0%)
to be easy	<b>30</b> (50%)	<b>12</b> (48%)
to be worthless	<b>29</b> (48%)	<b>13</b> (52%)

In both languages, the participants saw *the birds* and *the cat (kočka)* in these expressions as something rather negative, ignoring the positive option that something *for the birds* might be interesting. Yet, whether it refers to something easy or worthless was not chosen unanimously, since probably nothing about these two animals signals a particular inclination towards one of the options.

Another animal that was considered a negative one was a bug. It might seem logical because, based on conventional knowledge, a bug bite is never a good thing. Here, however, *to be bitten by the bug* refers to something positive, which resulted in the idiom's frequent misinterpretation (the numbers of correct and incorrect answers being very close):

Table 10: Occurrence of each option: *to be bitten by the bug/zbláznit se do něčeho*

<b>to be bitten by the bug/zbláznit se do něčeho</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to be discouraged	<b>23</b> (38%)	<b>0</b> (0%)
to develop sudden interest	<b>26</b> (44%)	<b>25</b> (100%)
to discover one's talent	<b>11</b> (18%)	<b>0</b> (0%)

Its Czech counterpart, contrastingly, was absolutely transparent for the English native speakers probably because *crazy (bláznivý)* is often used for people who are very enthusiastic about something (*to be crazy about something*).

Similarly, interesting results were achieved for the idiom *she is no spring chicken*. As seen in table 11, the absolute majority of the Czech participants interpreted the expression as *somebody who hates getting up early*. This might have been caused by the participants' incorrect connecting it with the Czech expression *být ranní ptáče*, referring to a person who likes getting up early, even though *a chicken* and *a bird* (ptáče) do not necessarily correspond.

Table 11: Occurrence of each option: *she is no spring chicken/ není už žádný zajíc*

<b>she is no spring chicken</b>	number of participants	<b>není už žádný zajíc</b>	number of participants
to be old	<b>21</b> (35%)	to be old	<b>18</b> (72%)
to hate getting up early	<b>37</b> (62%)	not to be able to run fast	<b>7</b> (28%)
to hate spring	<b>2</b> (3%)	to be ugly	<b>0</b> (0%)

The most surprising results were achieved for the idiom *dog's ears/ oslí uši*. The words on which most participants seemed to have focused when decoding the idiom were the animal lexemes, *dog* and *donkey* (*osel*). The conventional knowledge that dogs have a very good hearing ability and the fact that a donkey (an ass) is often used as an insult for somebody who is stupid might have influenced the participants' interpretations to a great extent. The correct interpretation of the expression was chosen by only one third of the Czechs and, more shockingly, by no native speaker of English:

Table 12: Occurrence of each option: *dog's ears/ oslí uši*

<b>dog's ears/ oslí uši</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
a turned-down corner of a page in a book	<b>20</b> (33%)	<b>0</b> (0%)
about somebody stupid	<b>4</b> (7%)	<b>10</b> (40%)
extremely good hearing ability	<b>36</b> (60%)	<b>15</b> (60%)

Furthermore, *dog's ears* is one of the idioms that display the highest degree of correspondence in the whole set used in this research: partial correspondence with only a different animal lexeme being used. Thus, these results show that the correspondence of English and Czech idiomatic equivalents, if not absolute, does not necessarily mean that the L2 idiom seems more transparent. Another example might be *to be for the birds*, described above.

The last two idioms, *to let the cat out of the bag* and *to play possum*, differ from the rest in one aspect: the correct interpretation was the least frequently chosen one. Their Czech equivalents, on the other hand, were quite successful, as can be seen in table 13.

Table 13: Occurrence of each option: *to let the cat out of the bag/ vyložit karty na stůl*

<b>to let the cat out of the bag</b>	number of participants	<b>vyložit karty na stůl</b>	number of participants
to let off steam	<b>17</b> (28%)	to tidy one's room	<b>0</b> (0%)
to have a messy room	<b>26</b> (44%)	to take a credit card out of one's purse in order to pay	<b>0</b> (0%)
to reveal a secret	<b>17</b> (28%)	to reveal a secret	<b>25</b> (100%)

In the first case, letting the cat out the bag may associate, in general, something wild happening – it could be related to its consequent making mess or even to letting off steam. Thus, all the three options are fairly believable as the cat here does not imply anything that would be close to the correct answer, whereas the conventional knowledge that concerns uncovering one's cards might have made the Czech counterpart more transparent.

If the cat did not help much to decrease the opaqueness of the idiom, the possum (opossum) helped even less. Conventional knowledge provides probably no link between this animal and one of the three potential interpretations, which resulted in all the answers being chosen almost in a balance:

Table 14: Occurrence of each option: *to play possum/ dělat mrtvého brouka*

<b>to play possum/ dělat mrtvého brouka</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to boast about work that somebody else did	<b>21</b> (35%)	<b>1</b> (4%)
not to have one's own opinion	<b>20</b> (33%)	<b>4</b> (16%)
to pretend to be asleep in order to avoid something	<b>19</b> (32%)	<b>20</b> (80%)

A *bug (brouk)*, on the other hand, especially with its premodification *dead (mrtvý)*, might have helped more to increase the transparency as the success rate of the Czech idiom is much higher than that of the English idiom.

*Possum* was also intended (as *flog* and *belfry*) to prove that without understanding its constituents, an idiom becomes less transparent, i.e. that the knowledge of the idiom's components may help to decrease its opaqueness. There were only two participants (out of the twenty who were presented with the translation for the word *possum*) who chose the correct answer (see Appendix E); however, what this example showed was the fact that the knowledge of the meaning of the individual constituents is very often not sufficient (as the success rate was only 32%).

This hypothesis was further supported by the idiomatic expression that was used in the last part of this research, in which the participants were asked to describe a situation for which the idiom would be appropriate. As opposed to the previous tasks, there was absolutely no context, i.e. no choice of answers, which, naturally, resulted in a very little number of participants who managed to decode the correct meaning. One of the participants described this phenomenon precisely, saying that guessing the idioms is much easier when he is given some options to choose from rather than having to come up with the meaning on his own. Nevertheless, the participants tried to increase the transparency

of the idioms, *to be the cat's whiskers/ sníst všechnu moudrost světa*, by focusing on the key words of each expression and exploring the possible metaphors connected to them. The word on which most participants seemed to have focused when decoding the English idiom was *whiskers*, which lead to (incorrect) interpretations such as *to be sensitive, cunning or curious*; for the Czech idiom, the key words were probably *eat (sníst)* and *wisdom (moudrost)*, reflected in all the interpretations (for details see Appendix D).

As it was mentioned before, the English native speakers were more successful in decoding the meaning of the idioms than the Czech participants. In other words, the overall success rate of the Czech idioms was higher than that of their English equivalents, which might suggest that the selected Czech idioms were more transparent than their English counterparts. Since all the participants were volunteers, it is not probable that they used a dictionary or additional help as it would have required much more time and effort. Also, regarding the native speakers of English, it is highly unlikely that their little knowledge of Czech, if any, helped them to understand the idioms better. Therefore, it may be assumed that it was the higher level of transparency what made the Czech idioms more easily decodable.

All in all, the results of the research proved the following: when interpreting an unfamiliar L2 idiom, the knowledge of the meaning of its constituents is necessary but, typically, it does not tend to be sufficient for the correct interpretation of the whole expression. Moreover, the role of correspondence between L1 and L2 idioms varies yet, if not absolute, it does not necessarily entail a higher degree of transparency of the L2 idioms.

## **10 Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, the main aim of this thesis was to prove that when interpreting an unknown L2 idiom, the knowledge of the meaning of its components might help to decrease its opaqueness but it does not tend to suffice to make the idiom absolutely transparent. In order to verify this hypothesis, a research with Czech and English native speakers was conducted, focusing on the transparency of selected Czech and English idioms. This research was built on a thorough study of various sources concerning this phenomenon and phenomena that are closely related, which were presented in the first part of this thesis.

Firstly, the two key terms, an idiom and transparency, were defined, based on the definitions provided by different sources. For the purpose of this thesis, an idiom was understood as an expression whose meaning, traditionally, is not equal to the sum of meanings of its constituents, with transparency being one of its features, referring to the extent of potential inference of the meaning of an idiom from its individual components. The following chapters dealt with idiom processing, strategies of their interpretation and, since the thesis focused on idioms in two languages, a comparison of Czech and English, concluding with an analysis of the level of correspondence of the selected idioms.

The second part of the thesis was devoted to the description of the research, its method and materials, followed by its results and their interpretation. Apart from proving the aforementioned hypothesis, it showed that the role of correspondence between Czech and English idioms, if not absolute, does not necessarily entail a higher degree of transparency of the non-native idioms.

Therefore, it may be concluded that this thesis achieved the objectives that had been set for it.

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## Appendix A

Table 15: Information about the Czech participants

	<b>version<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>correct answers</b>	<b>gender, age</b>	<b>education<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>level of English</b>	<b>other languages</b>
KS	A	3/12	M, 22	obchodní akademie	B1	/
SZ	A	4/12	M, 54	ČVUT	A1-2	/
JM	A	5/12	M, 21	SŠ (umělecký truhlář)	B1	/
XX	A	5/12	M, 33	IT	B1	Spanish – B1
AD	A	5/12	F, 23	česko-italské gymnázium	B1	Italian – C1
JZ	A	5/12	M, 19	SOŠ	B1	/
MP	A	6/12	F, 17	SPŠ (stavební)	B1	/
DR	A	6/12	M, 22	PedF (IT-PG)	B1	German-A2
HZ	A	7/12	F, 51	SŠ (učitelství)	A2-B1	/
KR	A	7/12	F, 35	VŠ (psychologie)	A2-B1	/
MR	A	7/12	F, 31	SŠ (ekonomie)	A2-B1	/
SZ	A	8/12	M, 22	ČVUT	B1-B2	/
PP	A	8/12	M, 54	ČVUT	A2	Russian – A2/B1
VP	A	8/12	M, 24	PedF (IT-PG)	B1	/
TV	A	8/12	M, 23	PedF (M)	B1-B2	German – A2
MT	A	8/12	F, 25	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B1	German – B1
FH	A	8/12	M, 23	PedF (IT-PG)	A2	/
TK	A	8/12	M, 29	JAMU (pedagogika tance)	B2 (FCE)	/
VP	A	8/12	F, 19	ekonomické lyceum	B2	German – B1
JK	A	10/12	F, 26	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ), FF	B2	Fr. – C1, Heb.-A2

<sup>1</sup> version A = translations of the individual components added to all the idioms

<sup>2</sup> the terms denote specifically Czech institutions, thus they are not translated into English

	<b>version<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>correct answers</b>	<b>gender, age</b>	<b>education</b>	<b>level of English</b>	<b>other languages</b>
SP	B	4/12	F, 49	ČVUT	B1-B2	Russian – B1
RS	B	4/12	F, 22	PedF (M-PG)	B1-B2	German – B1
TM	B	5/12	F, 26	VŠ (marketingová komunikace)	B1	German – B2
LE	B	5/12	F, 28	VŠ (andragogika.)	B1	/
MV	B	6/12	F, 25	VŠ (archeologie)	B1-B2	German – B1
LO	B	6/12	F, 22	VOŠ (cestovní ruch)	B1-B2	It.-B1, Russ.-A2
IX	B	6/12	M, 26	ČVUT	B1	German – B1
KC	B	6/12	F, 25	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B1	/
PK	B	6/12	F, 29	SPŠ	A2-B1	/
XN	B	6/12	F, 46	SŠ s maturitou	B1	Russian – A2/B1
IC	B	6/12	F, 22	SŠ (ekonomie)	B1-B2	German - A2
ZM	B	6/12	F, 24	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B1	French – B2
KN	B	6/12	F, 19	všeobecné gymnázium	B1-B2	German – A2
BH	B	7/12	F, 24	všeobecné s maturitou	B1 (maturita)	Ger.- A2, Fr - A1
LH	B	7/12	F, 21	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B1-B2	German – A2
XY	B	7/12	M, 17	gymnázium	B2 (FCE)	French – A2
XZ	B	7/12	M, 23	ČVUT (multimédia)	B1	/
KS	B	7/12	F, 25	VŠ (hotelnictví)	B1	German – B1
MN	B	8/12	F, 21	PedF (FJ-PG)	B1-B2	Fr- –C1, Latin
XE	B	8/12	F, 31	VŠE	B1-B2	French – B1

<sup>3</sup> version B = translations of the individual components added only to even-numbered idioms

	<b>version<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>correct answers</b>	<b>gender, age</b>	<b>education</b>	<b>level of English</b>	<b>other languages</b>
JS	C	3/12	M, 24	VŠ (zemědělství)	A2	/
PJ	C	3/12	M, 23	VŠE	B1	/
VH	C	5/12	F, 26	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B1-B2	German – B1
KZ	C	5/12	F, 26	SŠ (pedagogické lyceum)	B1	Ger. - B1, It. -A0
KP	C	5/12	F, 16	gymnázium	B1	German – B1
MK	C	5/12	F, 22	PedF (IT-PG)	A2 – B1	/
KX	C	6/12	F, 17	gymnázium	B2 (FCE)	German – A2
AP	C	6/12	F, 23	ČVUT	B1-B2	German – A2
AS	C	6/12	F, 28	VŠ (religionistika)	B1	German – A2
AX	C	6/12	F, 18	gymnázium	B2	German – B1
BK	C	6/12	F, 21	VOŠ (publicistika)	B2	French – A2
DV	C	6/12	F, 42	SŠ (ekonomická)	B1	German – A2/B1
MS	C	6/12	F, 21	VŠE	B2	Spanish – C2
JR	C	6/12	M, 29	gymnázium + SOŠ	B2	German – A1
AH	C	7/12	F, 28	VŠ (sociální a masová kom.)	B2	Spanish – A1
EH	C	7/12	F, 24	PedF (1. stupeň ZŠ)	B2	German – A1
KV	C	7/12	F, 17	gymnázium	B1-B2	German – A2/B1
JZ	C	7/12	M, 28	VOŠ (elektrotechnická)	A2	/
XJ	C	7/12	F, 26	VŠ (sociologie)	B2	German – B1
MO	C	8/12	F, 22	VŠE	B2	Sp. – B1, It. – A2

Total: 374/720 (52%)
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<sup>4</sup> version C = translations of the individual components added only to odd-numbered idioms

Table 16: Information about the native speakers of English

	<b>correct answers</b>	<b>gender, age</b>	<b>education</b>	<b>experience with Czech</b>	<b>other languages</b>
UK 2	7/12	F, 23	university degree (zoology)	/	French – beg.
UK 3	8/12	M, 32	English teacher	/	French (A-level)
UK 5	8/12	M, 41	university degree, now teacher	/	French
CA 1	8/12	M, 26	business	little	/
US 5	8/12	F, 25	archaeology/anthropology	taking a beginner course	Chinese, Spanish
UK 1	8/12	F, 26	bachelor	little	/
IR	8/12	F, 19	high school graduate	4 months of weekly lessons	/
US 15	8/12	F, 18	accounting	/	/
US 6	9/12	M, 43	MFA (painting)	little	/
US 7	9/12	F, 35	M.A. (Mental Health Counselling)	advanced beginner	French – begin.
US 1	9/12	F, 35	bachelor of science (journalism)	little	/
US 2	9/12	M, 48	doctorate (law)	little	Italian - poor
US 4	9/12	M, 36	bachelor of arts (philosophy)	little	German - begin.
US 13	9/12	F, 19	theatre arts	/	/
UK 6	9/12	M, 50	broadcast journalism	/	/
US 9	10/12	M, 29	B.A. (political science)	little	German – A2
US 10	10/12	M, 25	bachelor (audio-visual production)	little	/
CA 2	10/12	M, 47	UNI (English)	little	Russ.- B1, Sp.- A2
US 11	10/12	M, 42	politics, business	little	Sp. - little
US 12	10/12	M, 26	internat. relations + Europ.studies	little	Sp. - fluent
UK 7	10/12	M, 49	math teacher	/	German+ Fr. - little
UK 4	10/12	F, 23	B.A. (linguistics)	been studying for a year	/
US 3	11/12	M, 50	bachelor (computer science)	little	French - basic
US 8	11/12	M, 27	bachelor (history, anthropology)	beginner	Fr., G., Sp., Ch. – beg.
US 14	11/12	F, 19	undergraduate college	/	/

Total: 229/300 = 76%
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## Appendix B.1 – Complete set of tasks for the Czech participants

**ČÁST I** – u otázek 1-4 vyberte jednu možnost, která nejlépe vystihuje zvýrazněnou frázi v zadané větě.

1. The language course was **for the birds**.

- a) zajímavý                      b) jednoduchý                      c) k ničemu

**for** – pro  
**the birds** - ptáci

2. Sarah started playing tennis and was immediately **bitten by the bug**.

- a) byla odrazena                      b) nadchlo ji to                      c) objevila v sobě talent

**bitten** – kousnut  
**by the bug** - broukem

3. He has **bats in the belfry**.

- a) je blázen                      b) má doma nepořádek                      c) má špatné úmysly

**bats** – netopýři                      **in** – v  
**the belfry** - zvonice

4. Tom **drinks like a fish**.

- a) pije hodně alkohol                      b) pije zřídka alkohol                      c) pije pouze vodu (žádný alkohol)

**drinks** – pije                      **like** – jako                      **a fish** - ryba

**ČÁST II** – u otázek 5-8 vyberte vždy jednu větu, ve které je zvýrazněná fráze použita ve správném významu

5. a) He studied hard so after the test he went to the bar and **let the cat out of the bag**.

b) His room is messy – it looks as if he **let the cat out of the bag**.

c) I wanted it to be a surprise but Jim **let the cat out of the bag**.

**let** – pustit                      **the cat** - kočka  
**out** – ven                      **of** – z                      **the bag** - pytel

6. a) Careful with the book - there will be **dog's ears**!

b) He is very stupid - he has **dog's ears**.

c) Jane can hear everything. She must have **dog's ears**.

**dog's** – psí                      **ears** - uši

7. a) The test was very easy – it was like **flogging a dead horse**.

b) We beat the other team 10:0 – it was like **flogging a dead horse**.

c) Trying to persuade Peter to go skiing with us is a waste of time – it is like **flogging a dead horse**

**flogging** – bičování  
**dead** – mrtvý                      **a horse** - kůň

8. a) It is a secret so you can't tell anybody and must **let sleeping dogs lie**.

b) Don't tell him that he was wrong, it will cause troubles. **Let sleeping dogs lie**.

c) When she heard that her father was dead she **let sleeping dogs lie**.

**let** – nechat  
**sleeping** – spící  
**dogs** – psi  
**lie** - ležet

**ČÁST III** – u otázek 9-12 vyberte jednu odpověď na uvedenou otázku

9. Ve které situaci byste řekli „**it's like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl**“ ?

a) když necháte něco cenného pečlivě strážít

b) když svěříte něco nepravé osobě

c) když vidíte spolupracovat dvě osoby, které spolu nevycházejí

**it's** – je to                      **like** – jako  
**putting** – umístění                      **the cat** – kočka  
**near** – blízko                      **bowl** - miska  
**the goldfish** – zlatá rybka

10. O kom byste řekli tuto větu: **"He plays possum."** ?

- a) o někom, kdo vydává práci někomu jinému za svou
- b) o někom, kdo nemá na nějakou věc svůj vlastní názor
- c) o někom, kdo předstírá, že spí, aby se něčemu vyhnul

**he** – on  
**plays** – hraje si (na někoho)  
**possum** - vačice

11. O kom byste řekli tuto větu: **"He is no spring chicken."** ?

- a) o někom, kdo je starý
- b) o někom, kdo nerad vstává brzy ráno
- c) o někom, kdo nemá rád jaro

**she** – ona    **is** – je (zde: „není“)  
**no** – žádný    **spring** – jarní  
**chicken** - kuře

12. O kom byste řekli tuto větu: **"He wormed his way out of it."** ?

- a) o někom, kdo zabloudil např. v lese a poté našel cestu ven
- b) o někom, kdo se dokázal vyvlíknout z nějaké povinnosti
- c) o někom, kdo se uzdravil z nemoci

**he** – on  
**worm** – červ (zde: sloveso – "prolezl")  
**his** – jeho    **way** – cesta    **out** – ven  
**of** – z    **it** - toho

**ČÁST IV** – pro následující větu vymyslete situaci, ve které byste ji použili, aby byl význam správný

He thinks that he **is the cat's whiskers**.

**is** – je    **the cat's** - kočičí  
**whiskers** – vousky

## Appendix B.2 – Complete set of tasks for the native speakers of English

**PART I** – (questions 1-4) choose one option that is closest to the meaning of the highlighted phrase

1. The language course was **pro kočku**.

- a) interesting      b) easy      c) worthless

**pro** – for    **kočku** – a cat

2. Sarah started playing tennis and immediately **zbláznila se do toho**.

- a) she was discouraged      b) she developed sudden interest  
c) she discovered her talent

**zbláznila se** – she got crazy  
**do** – into    **toho** – it

3. **Straší mu ve věži**.

- a) he is crazy    b) he is messy      c) he has bad intentions

**straší mu** – he has ghosts  
**ve** – in    **věži** – (his) tower

4. Tom **pije jako duha**.

- a) drinks alcohol a lot      b) seldom drinks alcohol  
c) drinks only water (no alcohol)

**pije** – (he) drinks  
**jako** – like    **duha** – a rainbow

**PART II** – (questions 5-8) from each group of three, choose one sentence where the highlighted phrase is used correctly (in terms of its meaning)

5. a) Your room is so messy! You should **vyložit karty na stůl**.

- b) He went to the cashier, took out his purse and **vyložil karty na stůl**.  
c) We don't have secrets here so you should **vyložit karty na stůl**.

**vyložit** – lay out  
(**vyložil** → past=laid out)  
**karty** – cards  
**na** – on    **stůl** – a table

6. a) Careful with the book - there will be **oslí uši**!

- b) He is very stupid - he has **oslí uši**.  
c) Jane can hear everything. She must have **oslí uši**.

**oslí** – donkey's    **uši** – ears

7. a) The test was very easy – it was like **mlátit prázdnou slámu**.

- b) We beat the other team 10:0 – it was like **mlátit prázdnou slámu**.  
c) Trying to persuade Peter to go skiing with us is a waste of time – it is like **mlátit prázdnou slámu**.

**mlátit** – to beat  
**prázdnou** – empty  
**slámu** – straw

8. a) **Nebodej do vosího hnízda** and tell the truth!

- b) Don't tell him he was wrong, it'll cause trouble. **Nebodej do vosího hnízda!**  
c) **Nebodej do vosího hnízda** - trying to persuade him is worthless.

**nebodej** – don't stab  
**do** – in(to)  
**vosího** – bee's  
**hnízdo** – nest

**PART III** – (questions 9-12) choose one option for each question

9. In which situation would you say “*to je jako udělat kozla zahradníkem.*” ?

- a) when you ask somebody clumsy to help you
- b) when you entrust a wrong person to do something
- c) when you ask an expert to do a job

*to je* – it is    *jako* – like  
*udělat* – to make (appoint)  
*kozla* – a male goat  
*zahradníkem* – a gardener

10. About whom would you say the following sentence: “*Dělá mrtvého brouka.*” ?

- a) about somebody who boasts about work that somebody else did
- b) about somebody who doesn't have their own opinion
- c) about somebody who pretends to be asleep in order to avoid something

*dělá* – he's doing (playing)  
*mrtvého* – dead  
*brouka* – a bug

11. About whom would you say the following sentence: „*Není už žádný zajíc.*” ?

- a) about somebody who is old
- b) about somebody who can't run fast
- c) about somebody who is ugly

*není* – he is not  
*už* – any more  
*žádný* – no    *zajíc* – hare

12. About whom would you say the following sentence: „*Vykroučil se z toho.*” ?

- a) about somebody who got lost, e.g. in a wood, but managed to find the right path out
- b) about somebody who managed to get out of some duty
- c) about somebody who got rid of an illness

*vykroučil se* – he wriggled out  
*z* – of    *toho* – it

**PART IV** – describe briefly a situation where you would use the following phrase so that it is correct

(in terms of its meaning): *snědl všechnu moudrost světa*

*snědl* – he ate  
*všechnu* – all  
*moudrost* – the wisdom  
*světa* – of the world

## Appendix C

Table 17: Occurrence of each option: *to worm one's way out of something/ vykroutit se z něčeho*

<b>to worm one's way out of something/ vykroutit se z něčeho</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to manage to find the right path after having got lost	<b>4</b> (7%)	<b>0</b> (0%)
to manage to get out of some duty	<b>47</b> (78%)	<b>25</b> (100%)
to get rid of an illness	<b>9</b> (15%)	<b>0</b> (0%)

Table 18: Occurrence of each option: *let sleeping dogs lie/ nebodat do vosího hnízda*

<b>let sleeping dogs lie</b>	number of participants
to keep a secret (not allowed to tell anybody)	<b>14</b> (23%)
not to instigate troubles	<b>44</b> (74%)
to let the dead rest in peace	<b>2</b> (3%)
<b>nebodat do vosího hnízda</b>	number of participants
to stop lying/ not to lie	<b>3</b> (12%)
not to instigate troubles	<b>22</b> (88%)
not to waste time	<b>0</b> (0%)

Table 19: Occurrence of each option: *to drink like a fish/pít jako duha*

<b>to drink like a fish/pít jako duha</b>	number of Czech participants	number of English native speakers
to drink alcohol a lot	<b>31</b> (52%)	<b>21</b> (84%)
to seldom drink alcohol	<b>8</b> (13%)	<b>4</b> (16%)
to drink only water (no alcohol)	<b>21</b> (35%)	<b>0</b> (0%)

## Appendix D

Table 20: Interpretations of the idiom *to be the cat's whiskers* (with the correct answer highlighted)

<b>to be the cat's whiskers</b>	number of participants (out of 60)
to think one is better than the others	5 (8%) /2 had known/
to be sensitive	7 (12%)
to be cunning	3 (5%)
to be curious	2 (3%)
to be indispensable	2 (3%)
to be cute	1 (1,7%)
to be handy/skilled	1 (1,7%)
to be neat and clean	1 (1,7%)
to be very hairy	1 (1,7%)
to be in style (e.g. to have a new gadget)	1 (1,7%)
to look pretty	1 (1,7%)
to be brave	1(1,7%)
not to want to be involved in something	1(1,7%)
to be somebody's favourite	1(1,7%)
to do something and not be punished for it	1(1,7%)
to come up with a good idea	1(1,7%)
to think only about themselves	1(1,7%)
to explore a place before going there	1(1,7%)
to have a sweet tooth	1(1,7%)
to have the sixth sense	1(1,7%)
to know where everything is	1(1,7%)
not to be easily deceived	1(1,7%)
not to say one cannot do something without trying	1(1,7%)
does not know	23 (38%)

Table 21: Interpretations of the idiom *sníst všechnu moudrost světa* (with the correct answer highlighted)

<b>sníst všechnu moudrost světa</b>	number of participants (out of 25)
to think one is better than the others	2 (8%)
to be a bookworm or love learning	6 (24%)
to know everything about a certain subject	3 (12%)
to prepare for an exam overly	2 (8%)
to take advantage of a learning situation	1 (4%)
to take in everyone's advice	1 (4%)
to ignore convention (and things didn't work out)	1 (4%)
to overcome hardship because one is wise	1 (4%)
to learn from personal experience rather than books	1 (4%)
to find a perfect teacher	1 (4%)
to learn some of life's lessons	1 (4%)
does not know	5 (20%)

## Appendix E

Table 22: Occurrence of each option for all the idioms <sup>1</sup>

version →	option a				option b				option c			
	A	B	C	total	A	B	C	total	A	B	C	total
to be for the birds	1	0	0	<b>1</b>	8	5	17	<b>30</b>	11	15	3	<b>29</b>
to be bitten by the bug	8	7	8	<b>23</b>	8	8	10	<b>26</b>	4	5	2	<b>11</b>
to have bats in the belfry	15	5	12	<b>32</b>	1	5	3	<b>9</b>	4	10	5	<b>19</b>
to drink like a fish	10	10	11	<b>31</b>	0	2	6	<b>8</b>	10	8	3	<b>21</b>
to let the cat out of the bag	8	2	7	<b>17</b>	6	13	7	<b>26</b>	6	5	6	<b>17</b>
dog's ears	6	9	5	<b>20</b>	3	1	0	<b>4</b>	11	10	15	<b>36</b>
to flog a dead horse	1	3	1	<b>5</b>	7	5	4	<b>16</b>	12	11	15	<b>39</b>
to let sleeping dogs lie	5	4	5	<b>14</b>	15	15	14	<b>44</b>	0	1	1	<b>2</b>
it's like putting the cat near the goldfish bowl	0	2	1	<b>3</b>	19	14	17	<b>50</b>	1	4	2	<b>7</b>
to play possum	3	9	9	<b>21</b>	7	4	9	<b>20</b>	10	7	2	<b>19</b>
he is no spring chicken	10	3	8	<b>21</b>	9	16	12	<b>37</b>	1	1	0	<b>2</b>
to worm one's way out of something	3	0	1	<b>4</b>	14	19	14	<b>47</b>	3	1	5	<b>9</b>

<sup>1</sup> blue = correct answer; grey = answers without translations of the individual components added to the idiom (i.e. the translations of the individual components added: version A = to all the idioms; version B = only to even-numbered idioms; version C = only to odd-numbered idioms)