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A Comparative View of English, Czech, French and German Idioms

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Idioms represent an area of language full of figurativeness and reflect the way people perceive the world. It is not easy to define what an idiom is; there exist numerous points of view and furthermore, there exists an enormous number of idioms. This paper concentrates on a comparison of idioms in four different languages - English, Czech, French and German. It is not possible to cover all existing idioms in this paper and therefore it was decided to concentrate on one area of idioms defined by the subject matter or the lexical field – human body idioms.

1 Introduction

The aim of my paper is to discuss idioms in four languages – English, Czech, French and German. Idioms represent a wide area of language and this paper does not intend to create a detailed comparative study of all existing idioms in the four languages, it only focuses on one idiom area – *human body*.

This contribution is meant to test my hypothesis that there exist more corresponding idioms in Czech and German than in Czech and English or Czech and French. The paper is based on my research carried out for the purpose of PhD dissertation. However, the concern of that dissertation is broader, it covers three more idiom areas – animals, colors, and similes with comparisons. Because the research is still in progress, it will only be possible to draw final conclusions based on the whole corpus of idioms when I have finalized my work. Still, the human body idioms represent a proportionate sample of the total amount of idioms (432 human body idioms out of about 1000 idioms dealt with).

1.2 Hypothesis and theoretical considerations

By examining the corpus of idioms, I will try to test the hypothesis of more corresponding idioms in Czech and German than in Czech and English or Czech and French. What makes me think so is the fact that not only the Czech language but also the society and culture have been under the influence of German speaking society because Czech and German (or rather Austrian) nations have lived in a common geographical area.

Common European Heritage

The geographical closeness of Czech and German nations is the predominant phenomenon in defining my hypothesis. On the other hand, Ancient Roman and Greek cultures influenced all four languages compared and the culture also plays its role. This means that there will also be idioms corresponding in Czech and French or Czech and English but not Czech and German. That could be explained by the fact that English and French used Latin as their source much more than other languages, such as German, for example.

There will be some interference of the common European territory. It may be speculated that the situation would be different if the idioms compared belonged to languages outside the scope of European culture.

English, Czech, French and German – language characteristics

In addition to the influences of languages, their typology is taken into consideration. Two types of classifications are relevant for this study – *genetic* and *typological*. They lead to two assumptions.

First, because of their common ancestor, *Proto-Indo-European*, English and German might have some idioms in common. This genetic closeness might have some impact on idioms in English and German; on the other hand, however, there has not been so much cultural contact as between English and French.

Second, because English and French are analytic languages, these two languages are very likely to share some idioms.

The typology is probably unlikely to have an effect on similarity or difference in semantics as it is rather connected with the form.

1.3 What is an idiom?

It must be stated that there exists no single definition of an idiom. I introduce my own understanding of an idiom for the purpose of my paper. Idioms are:

- expressions consisting of one or more words with a meaning different from their constituent parts;
- a fuzzy category (Nunberg 1994);
- semantically opaque and metaphorical (Moon 1998);
- anomalous combinations of language elements (Filipec and Čermák 1985), usually transformationally defective structures (Bílková 2000);
- units which can only be varied within certain limits (Fernando 1996, Ifill 2002);
- expressions where there is a difference between what is said and what is *meant* (Laval 2003).

1.4 Reasons for concentrating on human body idioms

Idiomatic language is *human-centered*, human body serves as a significant source of idioms. It is easier to understand an idiom if it contains a part of human body because human body is an area which is close to any human being, both physically and metaphorically.

1.5 Corpus and method of idioms analysis

It was decided to use a corpus created specifically for the purpose of this dissertation. It contains about one thousand idioms in four languages, i.e. almost four thousand idioms, most of which were collected from dictionaries.

The crucial concept in examining the idioms is *correspondence*. *Correspondence* is defined semantically, i.e., the comparison of idioms takes into consideration the meaning of the idiom as a whole and this meaning is composed of the meanings of the individual parts of the idiom in question. With most idioms in the corpus, the central part of the idiom is a noun; as a result, the comparison is in great part made with regard to this noun. The correspondence is then based on the fact whether this key word can be regarded as corresponding in the languages compared.

The form of the idiom is secondary in the comparison. It is a commonly accepted view that English – unlike Czech, for instance – has a tendency towards nominal expression (Vachek 1976: 324), Mathesius (1975: 104). Czech, on the other hand, tends to express the corresponding English nominal phrases verbally. And therefore, the formal criterion will be taken into consideration only in idioms where it will play a relevant role.

2 Analysis

The analysis examines idioms in the corpus and proceeds from total correspondence to partial correspondences, giving examples where appropriate.

2.1 Total correspondence

This part presents idioms which meet the requirement of being corresponding in meaning and to a certain degree even in form and are found in English, Czech, French and German.

The research has revealed that there are 56 body idioms demonstrating total correspondence, which represents almost 13 per cent of the total number of human body idioms. This group of corresponding idioms does not prove nor contradict the hypothesis, it is only introduced to confirm that four different languages can possess corresponding idioms. An example is introduced.

To lose face	Ztratit tvář	Perdre la face	Das Gesicht verlieren
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1. Meaning: to be embarrassed or humiliated, especially publicly (AHDI); to do something which makes other people stop respecting you (CIDI)

2. Explanation: Both the concept and the idiomatic expression come from Asia; the term itself is a translation of the Chinese *tiu lien*. To be lowered in the esteem of others through an affront to one's dignity is a matter of especial concern in the Far East. The idiom dates to the late 1800s (AHDI).
3. Commentary: All four languages agree.

2.2 Partial correspondence

In this section, first, idioms which agree in three languages (triplets) are treated and then idioms which have corresponding counterparts in two languages (couplets).

2.2.1. Body idioms triplets

This subgroup of idioms is divided into four parts, each of which contrasts idioms of one language against the three others. This implies that two of these parts bring results necessary for the hypothesis – first, corresponding Czech, French and German idioms against English idioms and second, corresponding English, Czech and German idioms in contrast to French idioms. The percentage will be given for the two remaining parts to create a complete picture of all the triplets in the corpus.

Czech, French and German versus English

These triplets represent the largest group among corresponding idioms in three languages. They reach the number 43, which constitutes 10 per cent of all body idioms and 42 per cent of all triplets.

To give sth the thumbs up	Dát čemu zelenou	Donner le feu vert à qch	Für etwas grünes Licht geben
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1. Meaning: to show approval for something (AHDI); to show that you like or approve of something or that you are happy for something to happen (CIDI)
2. Explanation: The idiom alludes to crowd signals used in Roman amphitheatres and was first recorded in English about 1600 (AHDI). In ancient times, the meaning of the gesture was opposite to the meaning it bears nowadays, it indicated rejection. The reversal of meaning is believed to have occurred in the late 1800s (DIO).
3. Commentary: Czech, French and German use a symbol applied in traffic - *to give something green light*.

English, Czech and German versus French

The second largest group among the triplets contains 30 cases, i.e. 7 per cent of all body idioms and 29 per cent of triplets.

To eat out of s'one's hand	Zobat komu z ruky	Obéir qu'un comme un chien	Jmdm. aus der Hand fressen
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1. Meaning: to be manipulated or dominated by another, be submissive (AHDI); to do what someone else wants; to obey someone eagerly (NTCAID)
2. Explanation: The metaphor alludes to a tame animal eating out of one's hand. It has been used since the early 1900s (AHDI).
3. Commentary: English, Czech and German idioms correspond. French employs *to obey s'one like a dog*.

Czech, French and English versus German

As can be seen from the number of idioms in this group (16, which corresponds to 3.7 per cent of all body idioms and 15.5 per cent of the triplets), there exist fewer corresponding idioms in Czech and English and Czech and French, which proves my hypothesis.

English, French and German versus Czech

The last group of triplets, opposing Czech idioms to idioms in the three remaining languages, is the least numerous, it includes 14 idioms, i.e. 3.2 per cent of all body idioms and about 13.5 per cent of the triplets.

The results of the body idiom triplets have proved that there exist more corresponding body idioms in Czech and German than in Czech and English or Czech and French.

2.2.2 Body idioms couplets

After body idioms triplets (which formed 24 per cent of all body idioms), body idioms couplets are introduced. They constitute 36 per cent of all body idioms and are divided into nine parts, each of which contrasts idioms of two languages against the two other languages.

English and Czech versus French and German

Idioms corresponding in English and Czech are contrasted with corresponding French and German idioms. The number of idioms is four, which represents less than one per cent (0.9 per cent) of all body idioms and 2.5 per cent of the couplets.

English and Czech versus French, German

The present section is close to the previous one (as it opposes English and Czech idioms with French and German) but unlike the previous section it contains idioms which are not corresponding in French and German. There are 18 idioms, which forms four per cent of all body idioms and 11.5 per cent of the body idioms couplets.

Because the two sections are very close, one example is given to illustrate them.

To save one's neck	Zachránit si krk	Sauver sa peau	Seinen Kopf retten
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1. Meaning: to rescue one from a difficult situation or harm (AHDI); to prevent something bad from happening to someone (CIDI)

2. Explanation: The idiom alludes to saving one's life, it refers to beheading and dates from the late 1600s (AHDI).

3. Commentary: Czech and English idioms agree, French uses *to save one's skin*, which is an existing variant in English as well. The German idiom runs *to save one's head*.

French and German versus English, Czech

The section contrasts expressions corresponding in French and German with different English and Czech idioms. There are nine examples, which represents two per cent of all body idioms and 5.7 per cent of the couplets.

English and French versus Czech and German

This section contains idioms corresponding in English and French against corresponding Czech and German idioms. The number of idioms is 14, which means 3.2 per cent of the total and nine per cent of the body idioms couplets.

To have eyes in the back of one's head	Mít oči i vzadu	Avoir les yeux derrière la tête	Auch hinten Augen haben
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1. Meaning: to be more aware of what is happening than is generally realized (AHDI); to know everything that is happening around you (CIDI)

2. Explanation: The idiom alludes to the human ability to sense what is happening outside of one's vision. It dates from the mid-1500s (AHDI).

3. Commentary: English and French are more specific in introducing the position of the *eyes*. Czech together with German use *to have eyes even at the back*.

English and French versus Czech, German

This section is close to the previous one (as it opposes English and French idioms) but unlike the previous section it introduces idioms which are not corresponding in Czech and German. The figures are 11 (number of instances), 2.5 per cent of the total and 7 per cent of the body idioms couplets.

Czech and German versus English, French

The present section contrasts corresponding Czech and German idioms with non-corresponding English and French idioms. With its 48 idioms, it is the most numerous section of couplets, constituting 11 per cent of all body idioms and 30.5 per cent of the couplets.

To win/beat s'one hands down	Snadno zvítězit	Gagner haut la main	Müheles/spielend gewinnen
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1. Meaning: to win easily, without effort (AHDI); to win easily (CIDI)

2. Explanation: The idiom comes from the world of horse racing. When a jockey feels assured of certain victory, he stops whipping and forcing his horse on, and relaxes, dropping his hands and allowing his mount to run on past the winning post (DIO). The idiom was first recorded in the mid-1800s (AHDI).

3. Commentary: The Czech *to win easily* can be seen as an equivalent to the German *to win effortlessly*. The French *to win hand up* contains the key noun *hand* as the English idiom but it is used together with an opposite preposition than in English.

English and German versus Czech and French

This section includes idioms corresponding in English and German and contrasted with corresponding Czech and French idioms. It contains seven idioms, which is 1.6 per cent of all body idioms and 4.5 per cent of couplets.

To be thick-skinned	Mít hroší kůži	Avoir la peau dure/une peau de rhinocéros	Dickfellig sein
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1. Meaning: to be insensitive to criticism or insult (AHDI); not to notice or get upset when people criticize you (CIDI)
2. Explanation: The idiom transfers an impervious outer coating to mental or emotional toughness. It dates from the mid-1500s (AHDI).
3. Commentary: The English and German idioms are corresponding. In corresponding Czech and French idioms a simile is made with *a rhinoceros – to have the skin of a rhinoceros*.

English and German versus Czech, French

This section is close to the previous one (as it opposes English and German idioms with Czech and French ones) but the difference lies in introducing idioms which are not corresponding in Czech and French. They reach the number of 15, i.e. 3.5 per cent of all body idioms and 9.6 per cent of couplets.

Czech and French versus English, German

Expressions in this section are corresponding in Czech and French and at the same time different from English and German which are not corresponding either. They reach the number of 31, which represents seven per cent of all body idioms and 19.7 per cent of couplets.

To be at s'one's / one's elbow	Být po ruce	Être sous la main	In Reichweite/bei sich sein
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1. Meaning: to be immediately beside someone, close by (AHDI); to be near someone, often in order to help them (CIDI)
2. Explanation: It is not known why the idiom focuses on the elbow rather than the arm or some other body part. Moreover, it can mean either that someone is so nearby as to constitute a nuisance or in order to readily provide assistance. The idiom dates from the mid-1500s (AHDI).
3. Commentary: Czech and French idioms both use *hand* in the position of the English *elbow*. The German expression could be translated *within reach*.

To sum up this subchapter, the results of the body idiom couplets have proved that there exist more corresponding body idioms in Czech and German (62 idioms out of 157 couplets, i.e. 39 per cent of all couplets) than in Czech and French (40 occurrences, i.e. 25 per cent of the couplets) or Czech and English (22 cases, i.e. 14 per cent of the couplets).

2.2.3 Body idioms where every language expresses the reality differently

There are 70 occurrences in the corpus, which represents 16 per cent of all body idioms; nevertheless because of being totally different, these idioms do not prove nor contradict the hypothesis.

2.2.4 Body idioms/expressions with missing equivalents in some language/languages

What has been stated about the idioms in the previous section holds true for the idioms in the present section. Their number (46) and percentage (11 per cent) is given to have a complete picture of the body idioms.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, the idioms corresponding in all four languages compared represent 13 per cent of the body idioms, which suggests that even four different languages can have corresponding idioms.

As for the triplets, forming 24 per cent of all human body idioms, the two parts grouping Czech and German corresponding idioms represent 71 per cent of all the triplets.

As regards couplets, Czech and German ones represent 39 per cent of all couplets (i.e. 62 idioms out of 157 couplets), which makes them the most numerous among all couplets as opposed to Czech and French with their 25 per cent of the couplets (i.e. 40 occurrences) or Czech and English which form 14 per cent of the couplets (22 cases).

To sum up, the study of the corpus of body idioms proved the hypothesis that there exist more corresponding idioms in Czech and German than in Czech and English or Czech and French.

List of abbreviations

AHDI	The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms
CIDI	Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms
DIO	Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins

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