

## **Idiomatic expressions in multicultural integration: a cross-linguistic perspective**

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*Abstract:* Idioms constitute one of the most elusive areas in intercultural exchanges. Apparently, fixed expressions have a relativist nature and are culture bound. However, if we have a closer look at the conceptual world behind idiomatic phrases, a universal world of concepts arises. Universality lies behind the conceptual metaphors shaping the idiom. The most ubiquitous concepts are grounded in the human body, and these include primarily the expressions of emotions. In this article, we look into the common pool of conceptual knowledge across cultures, taking as an example the idiomatic expressions concerning emotions in English, Polish and Spanish. Since classifications rooted in subordinate-level concepts appear infelicitous for universal links to be detected, we look into their image-schematic basis. A substantial number of idioms and fixed expressions have been collected from speakers of the three languages involved. Attention has been paid to the core conceptual metaphor motivating the idiom and the trans-cultural correspondence underlying the linguistic form. The results seem to indicate that there is a significant correspondence between a universal concept and its different cultural realisations, which can be used as a tool for promoting intercultural integration.

*Key words:* cognitive linguistics, idioms, conceptual metaphors, universality of emotions, intercultural integration

### **1. Introduction**

Discovering ubiquitous patterns of thought encapsulated in various languages seems to go a long way towards promoting intercultural exchanges. Therefore, linguists of any theoretical affiliation are often intrigued by the possible existence of universals and, by the same token, by the nature of the relationship between thought and language. If the thesis concerning a common conceptualising capacity is justified, we are most likely to pinpoint universal patterns within spheres of life relevant to all of us.

Emotion is by far one of the most central and pervasive aspects of human experience. Its cognitive veracity is evidenced by human language, behaviour and physiology. The study of emotions cannot be then felicitously carried out without resorting to interdisciplinary research. If we are to examine the possible existence of cross-cultural commonalities via studying idiomatic expressions, it seems most plausible to conduct our research within the framework of cognitive linguistics.

#### A. Cognitive linguistics

Cognitive linguistics is a modern school of linguistic thought that originally emerged in the early 1970s. The cognitive enterprise is firmly rooted in the advent of modern cognitive science and, consequently, draws upon the proliferation of research in psychology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, anthropology and philosophy. Cognitive linguists assume that language reflects our conceptual structure and organization. Moreover, they argue that there exists a common conceptualising capacity, which derives from shared aspects of human cognition. Therefore, instead of seeing language as the output of a set of innate universals that are specialized for language,<sup>1</sup> cognitive linguists posit a universal set of cognitive abilities, which serve to both facilitate and constrain the development of our conceptual systems and, hence, delimit what is possible to express in language.

The constraints that guide the conceptualising capacity as reflected in language include the following:

- embodiment: given that we share similar cognitive and neuro-anatomical architecture, it follows that the nature of human experience and the nature of human conceptual systems will be constrained (e.g. the category of colour);
- environment: given that the environment humans inhabit has a number of commonalities (e.g. gravity), there will be limits to what it is possible to experience at the cognitive level;
- perception: there exists unconscious perceptual mechanisms (Gestalt principles) that facilitate our constructing of wholes out of incomplete perceptual input;
- experience: there are two broad categories of experience, namely sensory and subjective. The first type is related to image schemas while the other includes emotions.<sup>2</sup>

One way in which embodied experience manifests itself at the cognitive level is in terms of image schemas. These are rudimentary concepts like OBJECT, CONTAINER, VERTICALITY, FORCE or MOTION, which are meaningful by virtue of being linked to human pre-conceptual experience.<sup>3</sup> Embodied concepts of this kind can be extended to provide more

abstract concepts with structure. The conceptual projection thus emerging is referred to as conceptual metaphor.<sup>4</sup>

Conceptual metaphors are structured, unidirectional mappings of elements from a more concrete domain, called the source domain, onto a less tangible target domain (e.g. AN EMOTION IS AN OBJECT). Metaphors are general cognitive mechanisms that manifest themselves in human thought, language, and action. Therefore, metaphorical expressions (e.g. *give somebody love* or *throw fear upon somebody*) should be viewed as mere evidence of conceptual pairings. Conceptual metaphors often interact with conceptual metonymies, which are contiguity relations within one domain. For example, the CAUSE FOR EFFECT mapping has been successfully applied to the study of emotions by means of establishing a general metonymic principle: THE PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF AN EMOTION STAND FOR THE EMOTION.<sup>5</sup>

This lexical approach has been widely applied to the study of the structure of emotions and has led researchers to postulate a possible universality of some conceptual metaphors, among which THE BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS seems most ubiquitous.<sup>6</sup> However, cross-linguistic patterns within the domain of emotions go beyond the realm of metaphors.

## 2. The structure of emotions

Emotions are par excellence target domains since they are primarily understood by means of metaphor. Consequently, ANGER, FEAR, or LOVE are experientially motivated by, for instances, forces, containers, or hot liquids. Research into the structure of emotions within cognitive linguistics concentrates on basic-level categories including ANGER, HATRED, SADNESS, FEAR, JOY, and LOVE.<sup>7</sup> A standard analysis involves determining physiological and/or behavioural reactions co-occurring with a particular feeling (e.g. increase in body temperature), as well as establishing a possible set of metonymies and conceptual metaphors. For instance, physical agitation as a reaction to a particular event gives rise to the PHYSICAL AGITATION STANDS FOR THE EMOTION metonymy, which, in turn, motivates a number of FORCE-related metaphors: AN EMOTION IS A NATURAL FORCE, AN EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL FORCE or AN EMOTION IS MAGIC. Moreover, specific stages of an emotion scenario may be highlighted to concentrate on the most prominent aspects of a given feeling. In other words, linguistic evidence confirms temporal organization of emotions, within which causality, intensity and loss of control are the most prominent aspects.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, we are going to provide a lexical study of the concepts of FEAR and LOVE in English, Polish, and Spanish. In search of universal tendencies promoting intercultural understanding, we are going to address the following research questions:

4 Idiomatic expressions in multicultural integration: a cross-cultural perspective

- which of the possible human reactions accompanying emotions are universal?
- which of the common symptoms give rise to concepts manifested via language?
- are there any universal source domains motivating conceptual metaphors?
- which aspects of human experience are most common in cross-linguistic data and should thus surface in multicultural integration?

A. Universality of physiological effects

Interdisciplinary evidence converges upon a prototypical set of reactions accompanying FEAR and/or LOVE.<sup>9</sup> However, cross-linguistic evidence signals that only some symptoms, marked “+” in the table, are accessible to us as conventionalised concepts.

Table 1. Physiological symptoms of FEAR and LOVE in English, Polish, and Spanish.

FEAR	ENGLISH	POLISH	SPANISH
eyes widen			
pupils dilate			
lips stretch horizontally			
upper lip rises			
brows draw together			
jumping			
covering the face and head			
dryness of mouth			
disrupted functioning of digestive system			
1. drop in body temperature	+	+	+
2. blood leaves face	+	+	+

3. perspiration	+	+	+
4. tightening of muscles	+	+	+
5. drooping posture	+	+	+
6. inability to move	+	+	+
7. flight	+	+	+
8. body hair standing up	+	+	+
FEAR/ LOVE			
9. general physical agitation	+	+	+
10. increased pulse rate	+	+	+
LOVE			
11. interference with accurate perception	+	+	+
12. increase in body temperature	+	+	+
13. brightness of the eyes	+	+	+
14. physical closeness	+	+	+
redness in face and neck area			

The following conclusions can be drawn from Table 1. above:

6 Idiomatic expressions in multicultural integration: a cross-cultural perspective

- there is a high degree of universality in human physiological reactions since there are as many as 14 metonymic bases for FEAR and/or for LOVE;
- symptoms common for more than one emotion (examples 9-10) should be given particular attention since they are most likely to constitute cross-cultural universals.

B. Universality of linguistic expressions

Universality judgments included in Table 1. above came as an offshoot of a comparative linguistic study of 182 idioms and metaphorical expressions related to FEAR and LOVE in each of the three languages. The basis of comparison was established by referring to the already existing sets of English phrases connected with the domain of emotions<sup>10</sup>, as well as consulting bilingual dictionaries and native speakers' intuitions. The results indicate that universality is detectable at conceptual and linguistic levels. Where possible, the data is arranged with reference to physiological metonymies. Literal equivalents are given in italics while important differences are provided in brackets. The concept of FEAR is analysed first.

The predominant metaphor motivated by physiological reactions is FEAR IS A FORCE. Driven by the nature of the image schema, the source domain highlights causality and/or intensity and lack of control (examples 1-11 below):

FEAR IS A FORCE

DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE AND PHYSICAL AGITATION

STAND FOR FEAR

ENGLISH	POLISH	SPANISH
1. send shivers down one's spine	przyprawić kogoś o dreszcze (cause somebody shivers)	sentir escalofríos (feel shivers)
2. <i>shake with fear</i>	<i>trząść się ze strachu</i>	<i>temblar de miedo</i>
3. <i>shake like a leaf</i>	<i>drżeć jak liść</i>	<i>temblar como una hoja</i>

PHYSICAL AGITATION AND INCREASED PULSE RATE STAND FOR FEAR

4. *hysteria* | *histeria* | *histeria*

DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE AND PALENESS STAND FOR FEAR

5. *turn pale/white* | *zblednąć ze strachu* | *palidecer de miedo*

INABILITY TO MOVE STANDS FOR FEAR

6. <i>be paralysed by fear</i>	<i>być sparaliżowanym ze strachu</i>	<i>paralizado de miedo</i>
7. <i>be petrified with fear</i>	<i>skamienieć ze strachu</i>	<i>quedarse petrificado</i>
8. <i>hold one's breath</i>	<i>wstrzymać oddech</i>	<i>aguantar/contener la</i>

		<i>respiración</i>
BODY HAIR STANDING UP STANDS FOR FEAR		
9. hair stands on end	włosy się jeżą (one's hair gets spiky)	poner los pelos de punta (something puts your hair spiky)
DROOPING POSTURE AND/ OR FLEEING STAND FOR FEAR		
10. <i>shrink with fear</i>	<i>skulić się ze strachu</i>	<i>encogerse del miedo</i>
11. recoil with fear	wzdrygnąć się ze strachu	retroceder espantado (recoil scared)
<p>The FEAR IS A FORCE metaphor can be elaborated by tapping to various types of forces. Although the metonymic bases become far less prominent in the ensuing conceptualisations (12-15 below), the expressions still highlight the same aspects as those above, namely, intensity and lack of control.</p>		
FEAR IS AN ATTACKER		
12. seized by fear	opanywany przez strach (controlled by fear)	ser presa del miedo (be a pray of fear)
FEAR IS A SUPERNATURAL FORCE		
13. <i>panic</i>	<i>panika</i>	<i>pánico</i>
FEAR IS A SOCIAL FORCE		
14. <i>a campaign of terror</i>	<i>kampania terroru</i>	<i>una campaña de terror</i>
15. <i>a reign of terror</i>	<i>panowanie terroru</i>	<i>un reinado de terror</i>
<p>Another set of metaphorical expressions related to FEAR is rooted in the OBJECT schema (examples 16-22). The only physiological basis detected for this conceptualisation may be the following:</p>		
FEAR IS AN OBJECT (A LIQUID)		
DROP IN BODY TEMPERATURE AND PERSPIRATION STAND FOR FEAR		
16. <i>cold sweat</i>	<i>zimne poty</i>	<i>sudor frío</i>
<p>Other instantiations of the FEAR IS AN OBJECT metaphor seem motivated by human sensory experience and the overall universality of the sense of touch.</p>		
FEAR IS AN OBJECT		
17. <i>feel fear</i>	<i>poczuć strach</i>	<i>sentir miedo</i>
18. <i>have a fear</i>	<i>mieć stracha</i>	<i>tener miedo de algo</i>
19. instil fear	napelniać strachem (fill somebody with fear)	meter miedo (put fear)
20. arouse fear in somebody	wzbudzić w kimś strach	dar miedo a alguien (give fear to somebody)

A further elaboration of the OBJECT schema is the CONTAINER gestalt:

FEAR IS AN OBJECT (A CONTAINER)

21. <i>live in fear</i>	<i>żyć w strachu</i>	<i>vivier con miedo</i>
22. get into a panic	wpaść w panikę	entrar pánico (I came into panic)

The 22 metaphorical expressions and idioms related to FEAR display substantial cross-linguistic consistency since as many as 15 of them are equivalent in the three languages analysed at both conceptual and linguistic levels.

Similarly to FEAR, the concept of LOVE is also predominantly structured by the FORCE image schema. Consequently, causality, intensity, and lack of control over the emotion are highlighted (examples 23-28 below):

LOVE IS A FORCE

INCREASE IN BODY TEMPERATURE STANDS FOR LOVE

23. <i>have the hots for somebody</i>	<i>być na kogoś napalonym</i>	<i>me pone caliente</i>
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INCREASED PULSE RATE STANDS FOR LOVE

24. his heart leapt	serce zabiło mu mocniej	me dio un vuelco el corazón
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25. <i>set somebody's pulse racing</i>	<i>sprawić, że komuś serce zaczyna bić szybciej</i>	<i>me pone a cien</i>
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INTERFERENCE WITH ACCURATE PERCEPTION STANDS FOR LOVE; A LOVER IS AN OBJECT

26. he has eyes only for her	świata poza nią nie widzi (he sees no world behind her)	sólo tiene ojos para ella
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27. be blinded by love	być zaślepionym miłością	me ciega el amor (love blinds me)
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BRIGHTNESS OF THE EYES STANDS FOR LOVE

28. <i>eyes shine with love</i>	<i>oczy mu błyszczały</i>	<i>le brillan los ojos</i>
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The FORCE domain gives rise to the concepts of SUPERNATURAL FORCE (examples 29-30), INSANITY (examples 31-33), and AN ILLNESS (examples 34-35):

LOVE IS MAGIC

29. <i>cast a spell on somebody</i>	<i>rzucić urok na kogoś</i>	<i>me hechizó</i>
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30. <i>break the spell</i>	<i>sprawić, że czar pryska</i>	<i>romper el encanto</i>
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LOVE IS INSANITY

31. rave about somebody	zachwycać się kimś (admire somebody)	estar loco por alguien
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32. <i>his whole life revolves around her</i>	<i>jego całe życie obraca się wokół niej</i>	<i>todo su vida gira entorno a ella</i>
33. <i>have good vibes</i>	<i>wysyłać dobre fluidy</i>	<i>tienen buenas vibraciones</i>

## LOVE IS AN ILLNESS

34. <i>be lovesick</i>	<i>usychać z miłości (dry up from love)</i>	<i>tener mal de amores (have the illness of love)</i>
35. <i>have a weakness for somebody</i>	<i>mieć słabość do kogoś</i>	<i>tener debilidad por alguien</i>

Another metaphor dominant for the notion of ROMANTIC LOVE in the three languages is LOVE IS A UNITY:

## LOVE IS AN OBJECT (A UNITY)

## PHYSICAL CLOSENESS STANDS FOR LOVE

36. <i>be made for somebody</i>	<i>być dla kogoś stworzonym</i>	<i>estar hechos el uno para el otro</i>
37. <i>his better/other half</i>	<i>jego lepsza/druga połowa</i>	<i>ser su media naranja (be his/her half orange)</i>
38. <i>their marriage turned sour</i>	<i>ich małżeństwo popsuło się</i>	<i>se amargaron (they turned sour)</i>

As evidenced by examples 36-38 above, the concept of UNITY is based on the OBJECT schema. Examples 39-41 below also highlight metaphorisation through objectification:

## LOVE IS AN OBJECT (A BOND)

39. <i>have tender feelings for somebody</i>	<i>mieć sentyment do kogoś</i>	<i>sentir ternura por alguien</i>
40. <i>there are romantic ties between them</i>	<i>są między nimi więzy miłości</i>	<i>hay lazos de amor entre ellos</i>
41. <i>there is something between them</i>	<i>jest coś między nimi</i>	<i>hay algo entre ellos</i>

The last set of metaphorical expressions for LOVE views PARTS OF THE BODY AS CONTAINERS FOR EMOTIONS or PRECIOUS OBJECTS and LOVERS AS OBJECTS (examples 42-44 below):

42. <i>steal somebody's heart</i>	<i>skraść komuś serce</i>	<i>robar el corazón</i>
43. <i>fix one's eyes on somebody</i>	<i>utkwić wzrok w kimś</i>	<i>fijarse en alguien</i>
44. <i>lose one's head over somebody</i>	<i>tracić głowę dla kogoś</i>	<i>perder la cabeza por alguien</i>

Of the 22 metaphor-based expressions for LOVE in the three languages as many as 15 show literal sameness. Interestingly, the concepts

employed for grasping the target domain of LOVE are similar to those used for the construal of FEAR.

On a more general note, the study highlights a non-trivial degree of universality at the levels of physiology, cognition, and language in the three languages analysed.

### **3. Implications for cross-cultural integration**

In view of the current comparative analysis, metaphorical motivation of many idioms and collocations, particularly those related to human subjective experience, e.g. emotions, becomes evident. Moreover, the study conducted for FEAR and LOVE in English, Polish, and Spanish clearly demonstrates the ubiquity of two source domains, namely FORCE and OBJECT.

The FORCE gestalt seems to encapsulate the very nature of subjective emotional states, particularly if we refer to our cultural roots encapsulated in etymological definitions. Namely, the word *emotion* is derived from physical motion, stirring, or agitation,<sup>11</sup> which, obviously, motivates the implementation of the FORCE image schema for expressing causality, intensity, or lack of control.

The OBJECT schema is related to the nature of the target domain itself, i.e. the ontology of things. As such, it is very strongly linked to the human sense of touch, which seems the most fundamental and primeval of all senses for the following reasons:<sup>12</sup>

- touch is a whole body sense,
- touch provides the closest contact with matter,
- the foetus is sensitive to stimulation of the skin by the 8th week of pregnancy,
- touching organs, hands and mouth, have the biggest neuronal representation in the brain structures.

The above evidence from ontogenetic development, together with the embodiment commitment and the dominance of Gestalt principles, provides very strong motivation for considering the OBJECT image schema a primary universal concept.

Finally, it appears that our claim for the cross-cultural ubiquity of the OBJECT schema can be placed within the universal hierarchy of beings which has dominated Western thought.<sup>13</sup> *The Great Chain of Being* is a model of the world based on the hierarchy of creatures, from God through humans, animals, and plants to inorganic things. Each level is defined by species-specific attributes, which, however, can be metaphorically inherited. The most important thing for propagating multicultural integration, though, is the fact that all the levels are ultimately rooted in the OBJECT schema. In other words, if we want to promote mutual understanding, we should appeal

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not only to embodied concepts but also to those which we share due to our common heritage.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Noam Chomsky *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*.
- <sup>2</sup> Vyvyan Evans & Melanie Green *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, pp63-66
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Mark Johnson *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, George Lakoff & Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By*
- <sup>5</sup> Zoltan Kövecses *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Study of Concepts* pp28-32
- <sup>6</sup> Zoltan Kövecses *Metaphor - A Practical Introduction*, pp165-170
- <sup>7</sup> P.N. Johnson - Laird & K.Oatley.1992. 'Basic emotions and folk theory' in *Cognition and Emotion* (Vol 6: 201-223)
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Friedrich Ungerer & H.-J. Schmid *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*, p141
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p132
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Zoltan Kövecses *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Study of Concepts*
- <sup>11</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*
- <sup>12</sup> Aleksander Szwedek 'Objectification in metaphorical processes – some philosophical issues' in *Lingua Posnaniensis* (XLVI: 121-130)
- <sup>13</sup> George Lakoff & Mark Turner *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, p171

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12 Idiomatic expressions in multicultural integration: a cross-cultural  
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