Grasping the Idea

The Use and Understanding of Figurative Language in a First and a Second Language - A Matter of Language Skills or a Matter of Age?

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Bachelor of Arts in Education, 270/300/330 credits

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Abstract

This essay aims to shed light on the comprehension of idiomatic expressions among pupils in secondary school and students in high school. Research performed aimed at elucidating how age, language skills, and familiarity with the concept of idioms may be relevant to the understanding of common Swedish and English idiomatic expressions. Pupils in years seven and nine in secondary school and students in high school were asked to interpret Swedish and English idiomatic expressions and to write down previously known idioms in both languages. The results indicated that the informants from year nine and high school are more familiar with the overall concept of idioms than the informants from year seven. Proper interpretations were made to both semantically opaque and semantically transparent idioms, hence, the level of transparency and compositionality played no significant role to comprehension. The discrepancy between the age groups in reference to the number of previously known idioms was marginal. As for idioms occurring in both English and Swedish, evidence revealed that if an informant knew an English idiom he or she was likely to know its Swedish equivalent too.

Keywords: idiomatic knowledge, figurative speech, linguistic development
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1 Introduction

We are daily dealing with different kinds of figurative language, like idiomatic expressions, metonymies and metaphors. Some of them are considered conventional while some of them may be created as we speak (Caillies & Declercq 2011:207). Accordingly, the comprehension of the former, usually idiomatic expressions, depends on retrieval of a figurative meaning stored in memory, whereas the comprehension of the latter, usually metaphors, depends on an online sense creation process (Caillies & Declercq 2011:219). According to Glucksberg, “metaphors and idioms reflect both universal and culture-specific ways of thinking” (2001:88) as well as being “the traps in the language” (ibid.).

Is the ultimate knowledge of a language when the idiomatic expressions of that language are mastered? Some teachers in Swedish high schools do emphasise the importance of learning idiomatic expressions for the reasons put forward by Glucksberg, but what does it look like, the path to developing that knowledge? Is such knowledge decided by the age of the person acquiring a language or is it decided by social context, for example, by the teacher’s approach to using figurative language, and is the learning of idioms more difficult than the learning of single words?

Previous research indicates that semantic analysis is an early developing skill used for processing the meaning of an idiom and that young children more often succeed in explaining transparent idioms, whose meaning can be understood by semantic analysis of the literal meaning, compared to opaque ones that cannot be broken down word by word (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009:281). It is, nevertheless, important to remember that the research results in this area may depend on the children’s ability to explain. While some researchers conclude that semantic analysis skills increase with age, others point to the fact that younger children may have lower expressive language skills as well as comprehension skills.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this essay is to shed light on Swedish pupils’ use and understanding of figurative language: metaphors and/or idiomatic expressions in Swedish and in English, respectively. Idiomatic expressions will be in main focus. The following questions will be specifically addressed:
To what extent do Swedish pupils understand common English and Swedish idiomatic expressions?

In what way does the understanding of English idioms correlate with the understanding of the corresponding Swedish ones?

How does age, i.e. familiarity with the concept of idioms, affect recognition of idioms as compared to language skills?

How does the progression of the understanding of metaphors/idioms look between the pupils in secondary school and high school?

1.2 Method and Material

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was handed out to a total of 64 informants in Norrbotten schools, 19 pupils in year seven and 21 pupils in year nine in secondary school, as well as 24 students in year two in high school. By the means of the questionnaire and, in addition, complementary interviews, the informants were specifically asked about their understanding of some Swedish and English metaphors/idiomatic expressions presented before them in predefined lists. Consequently, the outcome of the questionnaire presented in this essay is exclusively based upon the responses given by a limited number of Swedish pupils and students.

The use of a questionnaire made it possible to perform a study on a larger group of people but since this method gives little or no space for elaborated answers, and since especially younger pupils may be reluctant to give complex answers in writing, complementary interviews were performed.

The questionnaire was distributed in three different classes: year seven and year nine in secondary school, and year two in high school. It comprised questions regarding ten different idioms, with three fixed answering alternatives for each idiom and two final alternatives where free writing about previously known idioms, five at a maximum, was asked for. In addition, after answering the questionnaire, one informant from each year was interviewed. They were presented with two idiomatic expressions, a Swedish and an English one, and asked to describe how they were reasoning while trying to find a suitable interpretation. Knowledge about how they had been thinking gave valuable input for comparisons with previous research in this field.

The idioms used in the survey were chosen to meet a purpose of variation of characteristics in regards of compositionality and transparency, where the level of transparency decides if an
idiom can be understood by the literal meaning or not, and the level of compositionality decides if its constituents have a semantic relation to the idiomatic meaning or not. Conventional interpretations of the idioms (see Appendix 4), as stated by dictionaries, have been used as a key when analysing and discussing the results of the questionnaire and the interviews.

To ensure comprehension, the questions were given in Swedish. The only exceptions to this were the English idiomatic expressions which, of course, were given in English. In consequence, some questions and answers have been translated into English in the Result and Discussion chapters of this essay. Most of the answers given by the informants have not been translated since some semantics risk getting lost in the translation from Swedish into English. However, to facilitate reading, obvious spelling mistakes have been corrected.

2 Background

A learner of a language is able to build a body of prefabricated sequences of words to use in different situations and to become proficient some level of knowledge and mastery is required. “Formulaic sequences play an important role in everyday language use and this component of the mental lexicon is enormous” (Kersten 2010:88). Since mastering the art of using idioms in a language is considered important as well as difficult (Glucksberg 2001:88) the path to idiomatic knowledge is of great interest. According to Glucksberg, phrasal expressions are part of the mental lexicon, just like single words, but they behave differently.

2.1 Metaphors and Metonymies

The definition of a metaphor is, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them”. Metonymies interact with metaphors in many ways but are more straightforward in the sense that in a metonymy the word used in place of another is usually referring to the original word, thus, is from the same semantic field. For example, the White House stands for The President (Ungerer & Schmid 2006:131).

2.2 Idiomatic Expressions

The significance of idiomatic expressions is the lack of logic and the lack of relation between the linguistic meaning and the idiomatic meaning. One usual definition for many idioms is “a construction whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its constituents”
Glucksberg (2001:68). Minugh (2008:119) exemplifies how idioms may involve metaphors, as in take the bull by the horns, and metonymies, as in count heads. To take the bull by the horns is based on the assumption that approaching a bull and holding it by its horns is a brave and distinct action, thus, the metaphor implies that someone is confronting a difficult problem (The Free Dictionary). To count heads refers to the counting of people, where heads simply stands for the concept people. As pointed out by Caillies and Declercq, “[i]t’s commonly assumed that idiomatic expressions have lost their metaphoricity over time and now exist as frozen metaphors” (2011:206). Even so, the view shared by Glucksberg that idioms exist as long words of arbitrary substance will be further expounded on below.

Since there is generally no logical relation between an idiom and its semantic meaning, idioms may be seen as long ordinary words, whose semantics are indiscriminate and learned by memorising (Glucksberg 2001:69). The idea that sequences of words, like, for example, idioms, are treated like single big words is supported by Kersten (2010:89). According to Kersten, the working memory handles structures similarly to words. An aggravating circumstance regarding the memorising of idioms is, nevertheless, that they sometimes are possible to modify in a way that single words are not (Glucksberg 2001:69). Since idioms are phrases they, for example, behave like phrases and not like words when it comes to using them. They can, for instance, be used in several different tenses and individual constituents of an idiom can be replaced or referred to using a pronoun. If the idiom to spill the beans is used in a question like “Who spilled the beans?” the tense has been altered. The question may then be answered with “They were spilled by Sam”, thus, replacing the beans with a pronoun that refers back to the semantic beans in the question. In addition, it is also possible to modify to spill the beans and say “he did not spill a single bean”. Had idioms been equal to just long words, such modifications would have been unfeasible.

2.2.1 Categorisation of Idioms

Glucksberg (Glucksberg 2001:74) identifies four different groups of idioms and divides them in terms of transparency, syntactic analysability and semantic compositional ability.

A compositional idiom may have different characteristics. The constituents of a fully compositional idiom have a semantic relation to the idiomatic meaning. Breaking the ice is an example in which “the word break corresponds to the idiomatic sense of abruptly changing an uncomfortable social situation, and the word ice corresponds to the idiomatic sense of social or interpersonal tension” (Glucksberg 2001:74). A partly compositional idiom does not need
the relation above but can be regarded compositional for its ability to be altered regarding tense. For example, the constituents of the opaque idiom *kick the bucket* definitely do not have a clear relation to the idiomatic meaning *to die* but are possible to alter regarding tense: he *kicked* the bucket, he *is likely* to kick the bucket. The compositional idiom *Don’t give up the ship* can also be used in different tenses, like *kick the bucket* but it can, added to that, be correctly interpreted even if a word is substituted, which makes the idiom very flexible. Not just any substitution would do, though. “*Hell, he gave up the whole fleet*” would work while “*He gave up the boat*” would not (Glucksberg 2001:69, my italics).

The constituents of a **noncompositional idiom** have no relation to the meaning of the idiom. *By and large* has no literal meaning and it is not possible to alter or paraphrase.

The transparency of an idiom is expressed in the two terms **semantically transparent** and **semantically opaque**. When the meaning of an idiom cannot be inferred from the meaning of its constituents, it is called opaque, whereas when the meaning of an idiom can be inferred from the meaning of its constituents, it is called transparent (Glucksberg 2001:72). This idea is supported by Cain, Towse and Knight (2009:281), who elucidate that transparent idioms may be understood by semantic analysis of the literal meaning while opaque idioms cannot be broken down word by word.

Hence, *kick the bucket* is partly compositional since it may be altered regarding tense, but it is also semantically opaque, since it is not possible to break down *kick the bucket* word by word and get the idiomatic meaning *to die*. *By and large* is noncompositional since it has no relation to the semantic meaning *generally* and it cannot be altered regarding tense. It is also semantically opaque, since it is not possible to arrive at its meaning by interpreting the individual words. Similarly, the semantically opaque idiom *to be wet behind the ears* cannot be understood as *to be young and immature* by breaking it down word by word (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon 2005:67). The idioms *breaking the ice* and *don’t give up the ship* are, as mentioned above, fully compositional but also semantically transparent since the literal and figurative meanings of the idioms are overlapping. Yet another example of a transparent idiom is *to get away with murder*. This idiom may be broken down word by word and the literal meaning would still imply the idiomatic meaning, i.e. that someone who has done something really bad successfully escapes the consequences (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon 2005:67).
2.2.2 How Idioms Are Handled in the Mental Lexicon

Fixed expressions are, according to Glucksberg, recognised the same way as single words, via “a process of elimination” (2001:70). This means that the beginning of a word or a compound permits the listener or reader to predict its ending. Aitchinson calls this memory process the “bathtub effect” (2003:138). She compares words to a human body immersed in a bathtub. Only the beginning and the end of the body are visible to the observer, just like the beginning and the ending of a word are said to appear clearer to the memory than the middle. However, regarding expressions like idioms, there may be many beginning with the same word. Thus, predicting the end of an idiom is harder. The prediction depends on when the “keyword” (Glucksberg 2001:71) appears. An idiomatic expression where the keyword appears early may be recognised faster than an idiom where the keyword appears late. For example, the idiom *yummy, yummy, yummy* may be recognised by the second “yummy”, whereas the idiom *hit the nail on the head* cannot be properly predicted until “head” appears. The former idiom has an early keyword while the latter has a late one.

An important aspect put forward by Minugh (2008:126) is that idioms, like any other lexical items, can disappear merely as a consequence of falling out of fashion and that such idioms are not always recognised by adolescents. *It’s raining cats and dogs* is, according to Minugh, maybe the most famous idiom on the list of old-fashioned idioms. Yet, it seems to be the “most-taught but least-used idiom in English” (Minugh 2008:127).

Caillies and Declercq (2011:207) state that many dimensions affect the comprehension of metaphors. One of them is the semantic similarity between the words constituting a metaphor. Another aspect is the mental imagery, which supports comprehension increasingly as the mental picturing processes are evoked. Metaphors which stimulate the online creation of mental pictures are considered easier to understand. Naturally, the familiarity of a metaphor, i.e. how frequently it occurs, also has impact on how it is understood.

Results from a study where people were asked to decide whether an idiomatic expression was compositional or noncompositional and whether the former was easier to understand than the latter show that people easily tell the compositional idioms from the noncompositional ones and that the former are more quickly understood (Glucksberg 2001:74). People’s ability to categorise idioms has, according to other research, been clearly established (Tabossi, Fanari & Wolf 2008:315). Moreover, studies referred to by Caillies and Declercq support the conviction that compositional idioms are easier to understand (2011:206). According to
Cooper (1999:236), people, in fact, try to analyze idioms in regards of compositionality and to assign independent meanings to the constituents of an idiom, which will shape the overall figurative interpretation. When it is possible to assign meanings to the individual words composing an idiom, like in *don’t give up the ship*, it is also easier to combine these meanings to form a figurative interpretation, as opposed to when meanings cannot be assigned to the individual constituents like in *kick the bucket*.

Children acquiring their native language learn compositional and transparent idioms fairly easy and they treat idioms just as ordinary language (Glucksberg 2001:86). Nonetheless, this way of treating the constituents of an idiom just like any other word is sometimes a problem for second language learners since they try to translate the literal meaning into their native language. This especially becomes a problem when the language learner lacks culture-specific knowledge and the idioms refer to cultural phenomena (Glucksberg 2001:87). For example, the Spanish idiom *there are no Moors on the shore* (as literally translated into English by Glucksberg) refers to historical conflicts between Spain and North African people. Despite that it grammatically and semantically allows literal translation, it will be considered opaque by people from the North American culture, where the corresponding idiom is *the coast is clear*. Very few idioms may, according to Glucksberg (ibid.), be literally and successfully translated into a foreign tongue, whether they are compositional or not, and regardless of transparency.

Previous research adds yet another parameter to the question of understanding figurative language (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009:282). Comprehension of idioms is affected by context. Transparent idioms that are not understood by very young children, despite their transparency, can be understood when presented in context. As children grow a little older, the context becomes less necessary, but generally both children and adolescents find it easier to interpret idioms presented in context than idioms presented out of context (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009:282). The figurative understanding of idioms is to some extent still improving even for adults. For example, the ability to explain the meanings of idioms is enhanced up to the age of 55 (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon 2005:66). However, a higher degree of transparency as well as context facilitates the general understanding of an idiom (Cain Oakhill & Lemmon 2005:67).

In addition, the understanding of an idiom is also depending on if the idiom is used conventionally, i.e. as an idiom, or unconventionally, that is, literally (Gibbs 1980:150). Gibbs found that when an idiom like *he’s singing a different tune* was used in a sentence as a
conventional idiom, with the semantic meaning “he has now changed his mind”, it was more rapidly recognised and explained by the subjects than when used unconventionally in a sentence, with the literal meaning “he’s not singing the same song”.

2.3 Figurative Language in a Foreign Tongue

When it comes to understanding figurative language in a foreign language it is of course important that children master the literal meaning of a word. Understanding a figurative extension of any word depends on knowing the literal meaning (Piquer-Piriz 2008:196). Empirical studies show that to a native speaker or a highly proficient speaker of a language idiomatic expressions are not more difficult to understand or use than literal speech (Kersten 2010:89). However, second language learners generally have better knowledge of idioms whose meaning can be inferred from their literal meaning (Glucksberg 2001:87). Glucksberg’s view is supported by research carried out among advanced learners of English. For example, studies addressing the process and comprehension of idioms among Spanish native speakers show that the participants most easily and accurately understood and produced transparent idioms that were commonly used and had simple vocabulary and structure (Cooper 1999:237).

Previous research shows that when young people know the literal origin of figurative speech in a foreign language, they find it easier to comprehend and remember that speech (Piquer-Piriz 2008:191). According to Piquer-Piriz, “the mental ability to understand a concept in terms of something else is based on our bodily experience and our interaction with the world” (2008:191). Even so, Kersten states that understanding word strings at a holistic level is sufficient enough for children to be able to use them (2010:90).

Results from studies carried out among Spanish children show that seven-year-old children seldom use their Spanish language knowledge of a metaphor to interpret the corresponding or a similar metaphor in English (Piquer-Piriz 2008:203). They rather use metaphorical and associative reasoning to explain how they interpret figurative language, which to some extent contradicts Glucksberg’s (2001) view that learners of a second language often unsuccessfully try to translate the literal meaning from their native language. Piquer-Piriz suggests that promoting associative reasoning in English in the English classroom may more efficiently support the learning of figurative language amongst young children, as opposed to the traditionally encouraged use of interlingual identification, i.e. by transferring knowledge between the mother tongue and the foreign language (Piquer-Piriz 2008:204).
3 Results and Analysis

3.1 The Questionnaire

The questions comprising the questionnaire are also presented in Appendix 2 together with a complete list of answers given by the informants. Correct and acceptable answers are written in *italics*. Some answers to the questionnaire are addressed from two different angles in the tables in Appendix 3. On the one hand, an informant may be of the opinion that he or she knows or believes that he or she might know the interpretation of an idiom. For those two cases the alternatives “I know…” and “I think I know…” have been used, and the number of these alternatives is presented in the tables in Appendix 3. On the other hand, the informant’s interpretation written alongside the alternatives “I know…” and “I think I know…” may have turned out to be correct, approximate or totally wrong. In order to shed light on actual knowledge, a column comprising the good enough interpretations, “acceptable interpretations”, have been added. For example, for the idiom *väck ej den björn som sover*, the interpretation “starta inte ett bråk eller håll inte på med den bråkiga när det är tyst” has here been regarded acceptable, as opposed to ”att man inte ska reta en som lätt blir sur”, which has here been regarded too approximate. The correct interpretations to all idioms used in the questionnaire and in the presentation of the results below are listed in Appendix 4.

Idiom Number One

![Read Between the Lines](image)

**Figure 3-1**, Answers given to idiom number one, in per cent/ age group

The transparent and compositional idiom *read between the lines* was familiar to 75% of the high school students, while 32% of the pupils from year nine and 19% of the pupils from year seven knew the correct interpretation (see Figure 3-1). The level of transparency of the idiom may have contributed to the high level of comprehension among the high school students, a standpoint generally supported by, for example, Cain, Towse and Knight (2009:281). However, this transparency seems to have been useful to a lesser degree to the younger informants.
Idiom Number Two

Let sleeping dogs lie, which is both transparent and compositional and, added to that, has the Swedish equivalent väck ej den björn som sover, was not widely known among the informants. Despite the transparency, only 5% of the pupils from year seven and 11% of the pupils from year nine managed to explain this idiom (see Figure 3-2). Among the high school students, 25% could mention a proper semantic interpretation.

Idiom Number Three

In the nick of time also has a Swedish equivalent in i grevens tid but is both opaque and noncompositional. This may have had some effect on the low number of acceptable interpretations made by the students from high school and, hence, on the one hand support Glucksberg’s (2001:74) view about a significant relation between an idiom’s transparency and intelligibility. On the other hand, however, the students from year nine did not as clearly show any difficulties understanding the idiom, and as many as 42% gave a reasonable interpretation of the idiom.
Idiom Number Four

According to the results of the questionnaire, the informants from year nine and year seven in particular experienced the idiom *to pull somebody’s leg* as one of the most difficult to explain. Only one pupil from year nine and none of the pupils from year seven knew the correct interpretation.

Idiom Number Five

81% of the pupils from year seven were not acquainted with the idiom *smell a rat*. In general, the informants from high school, but especially the pupils from year nine, gave less “I do not know” answers than the informants from year seven. In fact, regarding all idioms the “I do not know” alternative was used by between 62% and 90% of the pupils from year seven.
Idiom Number Six

Figure 3-6, Answers given to idiom number six, in per cent/age group

To the idiom in Figure 3-6, *våck ej den björn som sover*, the informants suggested many interpretations which were not considered acceptable. Several of the proposals seemed quite close to good enough interpretations and might possibly have been considered viable had they been orally expanded on, but the written answers given in the questionnaire were not detailed enough and consequently they were regarded erroneous.

Idiom Number Seven

Figure 3-7, Answers given to idiom number seven, in per cent/age group

*Gå över ån efter vatten* is yet another idiom whose constituents may disclose its semantic meaning. Despite the fairly high level of transparency a large quantity of “I do not know” answers were given. The number of “I do not know” answers amounted to between 54%, from the high school group, to 90%, from the year seven group (see Figure 3-7). Minugh (2008:127) claims that idiomatic expressions fall out of fashion and it is reasonable to believe that *gå över ån efter vatten* may for such reasons be less familiar to a younger audience.
Idiom Number Eight

![Göra en höna av en fjäder](image)

Similarly, the idiom *göra en höna av en fjäder* (see Figure 3-8) was very difficult to understand for the pupils from year seven and none of them managed to come up with any interpretation serving the semantic purpose of the idiom. Overall, the results presented in Figures 3-7 and 3-8 show that few informants were familiar with these two idioms.

Idiom Number Nine

![I grevens tid](image)

*I grevens tid* has the English equivalent *in the nick of time*. The comprehension of the Swedish variety, however, exceeded the comprehension of the English one. Whereas only 10% of the answers from the informants from year seven could be considered acceptable regarding *in the nick of time*, 24% were accepted regarding the Swedish equivalent.

Idiom Number Ten

![Ana ugglor i mossen](image)

Figure 3-8, Answers given to idiom number eight, in per cent/ age group

Figure 3-9, Answers given to idiom number nine, in per cent/ age group

Figure 3-10, Answers given to idiom number ten, in per cent/age group
The transparent and compositional idiom *ana ugglor i mossen* was familiar to one third of the high school students. Almost half of the pupils from year nine and one fifth of the pupils from year seven knew the correct interpretation (see Figure 3-10). The idiom’s high level of transparency may have contributed to a considerable level of comprehension among the year-nine informants, a view generally supported by, for example, Cain, Towse and Knight (2009:281). Nevertheless, it is interesting how this transparency seems to have been useful to a lesser degree to the high school informants.

3.2 The Complementary Interviews

One informant from each class was interviewed about two idiomatic expressions which were not part of the questionnaire, a Swedish and an English one. Thus, three informants in total were interviewed, one at the time. They were all asked to describe with their own words how they were thinking or associating in order to come up with a suitable semantic meaning to the two idioms.

*Sila mygg och svälja kameler* was the first idiom presented to the informants. Semantically this implies “being preoccupied looking into irrelevant details while forgetting about what is really essential and important” (see Appendix 4). None of them had ever heard this Swedish idiom previously and they all had obvious difficulties trying to figure out a probable semantic meaning. Despite the apparent unfamiliarity with the idiom, the informant from high school described how he/she was actually able to visualise someone performing the act of *sila mygg och svälja kameler*, and how he/she thought of it as being very tiresome to swallow a camel. The informant in year nine focused more on the tricky act of filtering the tiny mosquitoes, while the informant from year seven stated that neither filtering mosquitoes, nor swallowing camels, is even possible. All the informants had in common that they seemed to create an image of the idiom in order to come up with a plausible semantic interpretation. The constituents of the idiom were, however, not revealing the semantic meaning so the pupils expounded upon possible theories. The informant from year seven believed that the semantic meaning was “something is very difficult” while the informant from year nine came to the conclusion that the idiom implied “that someone is missing the fundamentals (of something)”. Finally, the informant from high school had two different proposals, one of them suggesting that “someone is being very ambitious” and the other one that “someone is making things more difficult than necessary”. In conclusion, the informants above were interpreting the idiom by trying to analyse them in regards of compositionality, a strategy which, according to Cooper (1999:236), is commonly used. The examples from the result of the interviews,
expanded on above, show to some extent that the informants were quite clear on the fact that the semantic meaning could not be derived from the constituents of the idiom, and none of them chose a literal interpretation in the end. Thus, *sila mygg och svälja kameler* belongs to the group of opaque idioms which, according to Cain, Towsie and Knight (2009:281), are generally harder for young people to understand. The fact that the idiom was unfamiliar to the informants seems to have increased the level of difficulty and may give evidence to Caillies and Declercq’s (2011:206) view that familiarity does facilitate the understanding of idioms.

The second idiom presented was *go the extra mile* which, according to Longman Idioms Dictionary, implies “making a special or extra effort in order to achieve something”. It was somewhat familiar to the informants from year nine and high school, while the informant from year seven had never heard of it before. Nevertheless, it seemed fairly easy for the latter to make a guess about the semantic meaning as he/she suggested “to do something properly and not stop half-ways”. The informant from year nine at first tried out the quite literal translation “man går den extra milen” but then expounded on it and eventually went for “when someone is really passionate about something and goes the extra mile even though he or she does not have to”. A literal translation of the expression was merely used as a key to the figurative meaning. Finally, the informant from high school made the semantic interpretation “to put some extra effort in doing something because it will be worth it in the end”. None of the informants mentioned mental pictures of someone actually walking the distance of a mile. Perhaps the fact that the idiom was fully transparent, i.e. the constituents of the idiom revealed the semantic meaning, provided them with sufficient information. They simply did not have to create an imaginary picture of the act of “going the extra mile” in order to make a good guess. Research by Glucksberg (2001:87) here proves to be relevant in regards of the understanding of idioms whose meaning can be inferred from their literal meaning.

The three individual interviews indicated that a common approach to an opaque and non-familiar idiom seems to be the creation of an image of the idiom previous to coming up with a plausible semantic interpretation. Similarly, the informants approached a transparent idiom with an initial literal translation that seemed to be the key to the figurative meaning. Acceptable interpretations were made to both opaque and transparent idioms, thus, in general, the level of transparency and compositionality played no significant role to comprehension.
Due to the limited number of informants interviewed the interview results may not be representative for all pupils and students in the overall survey. Nevertheless, they may provide insight into how the informants have been approaching the task of idiom comprehension. Since the results show some homogeneity, for example, in regards of literal translation and the use or non-use of imagining the idioms in order to decipher them, this corresponds to some of the findings in previous research as presented by, for instance, Piquer-Piriz (2008:203).

4 Discussion

4.1 Unsuccessful Literal Translations

Some literal translations made by the informants imply that Glucksberg’s view, that second language learners’ strategies often involve a word by word translation, may be well grounded since some of the answers from the year seven informants clearly show evidence of that. One of the informants in year seven used literal translation for all his/her answers. For example, Read between the lines became “läs genom linjerna”, and no reasonable explanation was given in addition. Furthermore, let sleeping dogs lie became “låt sovande hundar ljuga”. Likewise, the idiom to pull somebody’s leg became “att spärka på någons ben” and is another example of a literal translation, however, not a very successful one when it comes to language skills. This particular informant was clearly translating the idioms literally and due to lack of sufficient literal knowledge, the translations are awkward or incomprehensible to someone who is not familiar with the original. Literal knowledge may, as Piquer-Piriz (2008:196) suggests, be of importance for understanding idiomatic expressions in a foreign language which is supported by the findings of the translations above. Moreover, during the individual interviews, the informant from year nine at first tried out the quite literal translation “man går den extra milen” to the idiom go the extra mile. Whoever coined the English idiom may object to the extended walk suggested by the Swedish translation. Even though this was not the informant’s conclusive interpretation, it exemplifies the significance of both the literal knowledge mentioned by Piquer-Piriz, and the cultural knowledge stressed by Glucksberg (2001:87). In contrast, among the high school informants literal translation was only found to one of the English idioms in the questionnaire, a finding that contradicts Glucksberg’s view on second language learners. Several informants believed that the idiom smell a rat concerned a bad smell but only one informant made the literal translation “lukten av en råtta”. Thus, to the informants in high school, literal translation may be regarded as a minor issue.
4.2 Successful Literal Translations

Very few idioms may, as indicated by Glucksberg (2001:87), be literally and successfully translated to a foreign tongue. Still, an example of a successful literal translation occurred in years seven and nine, as five informants wrote that *read between the lines* is equal to “läsa mellan raderna”. What distinguishes these five answers from others is that no further explanation was suggested in addition to “läsa mellan raderna”, i.e. it is not clear if the semantic meaning was actually known. This leads to the assumption that these five answers were pure word by word translations. To some extent, this is an example of a fact stated by Cain, Towse and Knight (2009:281) that transparent idioms are the ones which may be understood by semantic analysis of the literal meaning. Apart from being transparent and fully compositional, the idiom *read between the lines* is culturally insensitive regarding an English-into-Swedish translation, which makes a literal translation successful. However, it is not possible to tell if the informants did understand the semantic meaning of the idiom.

4.3 Familiar Idioms Incorrectly Remembered

Among the informants from year seven, some of the idioms were believed to be recognised but they were apparently mixed up with similar idioms. For example, the idiom *to pull somebody’s leg* seems to have been mixed up with the idiom *break a leg* which was not part of the questionnaire. This may imply that the informant who wrote the Swedish equivalent “Lycka till!” to the former, at least had some previous experience and understanding of idiomatic expressions as fixed phrases, the idiom *break a leg* in particular. Moreover, it shows that this informant is aware of the fact that the literal meaning and the semantic meaning of an idiom usually deviate from each other. Since the questionnaire was anonymous it is not possible to state what part of the idiom that led to the erroneous explanation but the lowest common denominator could have been the word “leg”. Thus, referring to previous conclusions about keywords made by Glucksberg (2001:71), the keyword that this informant used to recognise the idiom *to pull somebody’s leg*, was the word “leg”. Hence, had the keyword been the word “pull”, the informant would probably have mistaken the idiom for one consisting the word “pull”. Likewise, an informant from high school seemed to have similar keyword strategies to explain the idiom *to pull somebody’s leg*. The explanation proposed was that it meant “att man slickar någons ben”, which, according to the informant, means that “someone does almost anything to get their own advantages in a situation” (my translation). Once again, the keyword that led to the explanation, even if it was incorrect, seems to be “leg”.
The hypothesis that idioms are learned and memorised as long words, supported by, for example, Kersten (2010:89), is evidenced by the fact that a couple of informants seem to have known a particular idiom but forgotten the exact words or the exact wording. This was noticed in the questionnaire, in the section where the informants were asked to mention other idioms they were familiar with. Hence, the idiom *kick the bucket* was, for instance, known by two informants from year nine as “hit the bucket”. Moreover, *skrattar bäst som skrattar sist* was known by another informant as ”skrattar först som skrattar sist”. Forgetting a part of a familiar idiom may in this regard be as natural as forgetting a part of any ordinary word. Hence, Aitchinson’s theory about a bathtub effect (2003:138), and that the forgotten part of a word usually is the middle part, is true for the example ”skrattar först som skrattar sist” in particular.

According to Piquer-Piriz (2008:203), seven-year-old Spanish children seldom use their native language knowledge of a metaphor to interpret the corresponding or a similar one in English. As for the informants in year seven, only one of them used a Swedish idiom to interpret a corresponding English one. It may in fact have been the other way around too, as some of the idioms listed in the questionnaire were asked about both in the Swedish and in the English section. It is impossible to tell whether the English idiom or the Swedish idiom was recognised first, since the questionnaire does not support a specific sequence in answering, i.e. the questions may have been randomly answered.

**4.4 Informant’s Coping with Opacity and Transparency**

Among the informants the idiom *to pull somebody’s leg* was subject to a number of unconventional interpretations (see Appendix 2), assumingly due to having been mixed up, partly forgotten or possibly due to its opaque characteristics. In addition, this was one of the most difficult idioms, according to the results from the questionnaire, and only one informant knew the correct semantic meaning. Several informants from high school have, however, given their own semantic reasoning to a literal translation of the idiom, and suggested interpretations like “att man saboterar för någon/stoppar för någon att inte lyckas”. Due to possible awareness of the arbitrary meanings of idioms, the informants from high school may, furthermore, consciously have aimed to find a semantic meaning which was not equal to the literal translation. Hence, *to pull somebody’s leg* could logically be interpreted as “make someone fall over, loose his or her balance and be unable to go on with business”, i.e. “att man saboterar för någon/stoppar för någon att inte lyckas”. Yet another informant, from year nine, made a similar interpretation.
Despite the fact that this interpretation is far from the one considered established for this particular idiom, it may nevertheless be a result of the informants’ creating a mental picture of the act implied, i.e. *to pull somebody’s leg*, in the same manner as the three informants in the complementary interviews described their handling of the opaque idiom *sila mygg och svälja kameler*. Assuming this was due to the opaque characteristics of the idiom, i.e. that the semantic meaning is not equal to the meanings of the individual constituents, these findings support previous research stating that the understanding of idioms depend on their level of transparency (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009:281) and compositionality (Glucksberg 2001:74). On the other hand, an analysis of the total numbers of answers (see Appendix 2) shows that there is no consistency in the quality of the answers based on level of transparency (see Figure 4-1).

For example, “vet ej” has not been more frequently given to questions regarding opaque idioms as compared to transparent ones and while one transparent idiom has been found easy to interpret, another one has not. The idioms *våck ej den björn som sover* and *gå över ån efter vatten* can both be considered transparent and compositional, i.e their literal and figurative meanings overlap and tense variations are allowed, but the scores for the alternative “vet ej” from the year-nine informants nevertheless vary from 10 per cent for the *våck ej den björn som sover* to 89 per cent for *gå över ån efter vatten* (see Appendix 3). Thus, compositional transparent idioms have not generally been easier to interpret, but obvious examples where transparency may have been significant to a successful interpretation do exist. The semantically transparent and compositional idiom *read between the lines* was, for instance, recognised by 75 per cent of the high school students.
4.5 Informants’ Further Examples of Idioms

Some of the informants’ further examples of idioms will be expanded on below. The complete list of idioms suggested is found in Appendix 2.

When the informants were asked about what other idioms they could come up with it may seem likely that they would mention idioms that they frequently hear or are more familiar with. Among the high school informants a great number of the idioms mentioned were euphemisms for “not being very intelligent”. Hence, this semantic field seems to be well covered in the high school group. Many of these idioms were expressed as, or similar to, “inte ha alla hästar hemma”, which is one of many Swedish idiomatic expressions denoting someone’s lack of common knowledge, whereas a couple of them were less conventional variations of that expression. Bussen har ingen chaufför and Inte den fräschaste frukten i fruktskålen are both results of changing the original constituents of an idiom without losing the semantic meaning. It is unclear what the exact wording of the original idiom is since many different variants exist but the most familiar or conventionalised ones, among the informants, seem to be inte ha alla hästar i hagen/hemma and hissen går inte ända upp. The substitution of words in a compositional idiom, as exemplified by Glucksberg (2001:69) and above, makes it very flexible. The apparent use of a wide range of idioms denoting the same semantic meaning, and the creation of new unconventionalised equivalents, show that the informants in high school are aware of the idiomatic meaning, and that they are interpreting the phrases as a concept rather than literally.

There are two more examples of less conventional, modified compositional idioms that were mentioned by the informants. The first idiom is “gräset är inte grönare på andra sidan” and the second is ”man kan lära gamla hundar sitta”. These idioms have been subject to inversion and a different phrasing, gräset är alltid grönare på andra sidan (which was mentioned by two other informants) and man kan inte lära gamla hundar sitta could probably be recognised as the unmodified versions. According to Glucksberg’s analysis, both variants will work when an idiom is compositional and possible to alter, as in Glucksberg’s own examples to spill the beans and the modified version “he did not spill a single bean” (Glucksberg 2001:69).

Among the year-nine informants, the Swedish idiom kasta inte sten i glashus, seemed to have undergone modifications similar to the ones made to “inte ha alla hästar hemma” among the high school informants. Some constituents of the former had been substituted which rendered the less conventional “kasta inte bäver i trähus”. This particular change of words may be
considered fairly brave since the resulting semantic meaning deviates from the original and would not pass the set of rules applied to compositional idioms described by Glucksberg (2001:69). Glucksberg exemplifies how substituting “the whole fleet” for ship would work while “boat” would not.

Finally, some rather unexpected examples of figurative language were given by an informant in year seven, viz abbreviations used for text messaging purposes, “lol” (laughing out loud) and “rofl” (rolling on the floor laughing). Nevertheless, they represent a variant of figurative language since the reader is expected to understand the semantic meaning of the quite opaque “lol” and “rofl”. Hypothetically they could apply to Glucksberg’s definition of idioms: “a construction whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of its constituents” (2001:68). Realistically, they may not be considered conventionalised idioms but rather contemporary abbreviations.

4.6 About the Number of Answers Given

The vast majority of the pupils in year seven answered just a few questions each. This was not surprising since some of the questions, i.e. the idioms listed, were quite difficult in order for the questionnaire to be usable in the higher grades as well. As many as six pupils returned the questionnaire without anything at all written in it, but those pupils did not really seem too enthusiastic about participating. Consequently, it is difficult to tell whether they truly have no knowledge of idiomatic expressions or whether they just did not appreciate the exercise. Another observation that needs to be taken into account is the fact that several of the pupils in year seven experienced the questionnaire as an exam, despite having been repeatedly informed of the contrary. This may or may not have contributed to some pupils’ unwillingness to participate. Yet another possible reason for the, generally, low rate of answers amongst the year seven informants may be, as suggested by Cain, Towse and Knight (2009:281), that they simply have lower expressive language skills. In consequence, in year nine and in high school, where language skills are expected to have improved due to age, more questions were answered, but as in year seven some empty questionnaires were still handed in.

It is reasonable to believe that the outcome of the questionnaire would have been different if the idioms listed had been given a context. According to previous research, comprehension of idioms is affected by context (Cain, Towse & Knight 2009:282). Hence, the kind of reluctance noticed in year seven, originating from the anxiety of producing incorrect interpretations to the fairly difficult idioms, could possibly have been avoided if facilitating
contexts had been added. It is impossible to establish to what extent context would have influenced the informants’ understanding, but generally both children and adolescents are said to interpret idioms presented in context more successfully than idioms presented out of context.

4.7 General Differences between Ages

Some general differences between the age groups regarding believed knowledge of idioms, actual comprehension of idioms and the level of deviation between these variables are shown in the Figures 4-2, 4-3 and 4-4 below.

Figure 4-2, Believed comprehension in per cent (the sum of “I think” and “I know” answers) compared to the acceptable interpretations of the idioms number 1 to 10, given by pupils in year 7.

Comparing the percentage of acceptable answers from year seven and year nine clearly indicates that the older pupils are more familiar with the overall concept of idioms. The informants from year seven tend to use the alternative “jag tror att jag vet…” as opposed to “Jag vet…” to a higher degree than the informants from year nine and high school, even when they give the correct answers. They also make guesses that turn out to be incorrect to a higher degree as regards here acceptable answers.
A comparison between year nine and high school generally displays less obvious divergence between believed and actual comprehension. Occasionally, there are significant differences, but these seem to be haphazard and sometimes in favour of year nine, and sometimes in favour of the high school group. Here, “in favour” refers to showing better knowledge of idioms.

Figure 4-4, Believed comprehension in per cent (the sum of “I think” and “I know” answers) compared to the acceptable interpretations of the idioms number 1 to 10, given by pupils in high school.

Perfect symmetries between the informants’ believed knowledge and their actual knowledge, i.e. instances where the number of “I think-/I know answers” equals the number of “acceptable interpretations” occur in the results from the high school students and from the year-seven pupils but never in the results from the year-nine pupils.

Apart from differences of comprehension of the idioms in the questionnaire, differences were also found regarding the knowledge of other idioms exemplified by the informants. For
instance, the many euphemisms for not being very intelligent, such as “inte ha alla hästar i hagen”, which were found among the high school informants were not found among the younger informants, with the exception of one pupil from year seven who mentioned “inte den vassaste kniven i lådan”. This may be due to the possibility that these idioms have come into fashion and become familiar in the high school group just like idioms may fall out of fashion (Minugh 2008:126), whereas among the younger pupils this topic might still be approached without using euphemisms.

To sum up, a visible progression of idiomatic knowledge can be found between year seven and year nine, while the seemingly unstable progression, due to inconsistent results of the questionnaire, between year nine and high school should be addressed with caution. Regarding previous knowledge of other idioms than the ones listed in the questionnaire, the difference between the age groups is negligible. The diffusion of knowledge, i.e the average number of known idioms per person, varied between 1.23 and 1.31 for the three participating groups. Such average numbers may not give valuable information about each informant’s true individual knowledge since they also include results from informants who have not mentioned any idioms at all, but may nevertheless be used as a measure to compare their knowledge on a group level.

**4.8 English Language Skills, Age or Pure Luck?**

An analysis of the overall number of recognised idioms indicates a better knowledge of English idioms in year nine and in high school, whereas in year seven the understanding of Swedish idioms is slightly better than the understanding of English idioms (see Figure 4-5).

![Unfamiliarity with the Idioms in the Questionnaire](image_url)

Figure 4-5, The percentage of the “I don't know” answers regarding the ten idiomatic expressions listed in the questionnaire. The bars 1-5 display Swedish idioms and the bars 6-10 display English idioms.
When it comes to the high amount of “vet ej” answers given by the informants from year seven to the English and Swedish idioms this may be due to lack of literal knowledge or to unfamiliarity with the concept of idiomatic expressions. Hence, it is possible that the younger informants are experiencing difficulties understanding English and lack familiarity with the concept of idiomatic expressions. Here, the lower answering rates could support an insufficient English knowledge while the literal translations found could support a lack of familiarity with the concept. Another possible alternative would of course be an overall lack of literal knowledge, not just English writing and reading skills, but that moves the focus from the original question if knowledge of idioms derives from English skills or from age. Thus, regarding the pupils from year seven it is reasonable to believe that age has played a substantial role, since the results also show a progress in familiarity with idioms between year seven and year nine/high school.

This reasoning is supported by the fact that the informants from year nine have given less “vet ej” answers to all the questions than the pupils from year seven (see Figure 4-5), and so have the informants from high school. Hence, the older pupils have proved to be more acquainted with idiomatic expressions than the younger pupils, regardless of language. They have proven to be as skilful in English as in Swedish, and regarding the idioms in the questionnaire, their knowledge of English has only marginally exceeded their Swedish knowledge (see Figure 4-5). In sum, their idiomatic advantage may be due to improved English literal skills and the familiarity with idioms that comes with age. However, when looking for differences between the two groups of older informants, it becomes less obvious that age is a continuously significant factor since the differences are haphazard and inconsistent, regardless of the characteristics of the idioms. Nonetheless, it must not be forgotten that the reasons underlying these findings may be due to other developmental facts out of scope of this survey.

Some of the idioms used in the questionnaire occur in the English section as well as in the Swedish section. A way to find out if an informant is well aware of the concept of idioms would possibly be to find out if idiomatic expressions are mastered in both languages. For example, if the semantic meaning of the Swedish idiom väck ej den björn som sover is known to an informant, it is likely that let sleeping dogs lie is also known.

The consequence using such reasoning would be that the opposite is likely to occur as well, i.e. that a pupil who does not know the semantic meaning of the Swedish version will probably not know the English one either. These arguments assume that literal knowledge is
not a problem. In order to find possible correspondences between the knowledge of a Swedish idiom and its English equivalent, the questionnaires have been analysed individually in regards of the suggested interpretations. A summary of the results is given in Table 4-1 below. Here, informants who have answered “vet ej” to any of the idioms in an idiom pair are consequently not included in the table. The left hand most column describes the idiom pairs, i.e. the English idiom and the equivalent Swedish one. In the right columns, the number of the correct interpretations for the idiom pair is added. “Both” stands for “both idioms in a pair have been acceptably interpreted” and “None” stands for no idiom in a pair has been acceptably interpreted”. Finally, “Eng”, for English and “Swe”, for Swedish describe the occasions where an idiom has been acceptably interpreted in one of the languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4-1, Results of the interpretation of idiom pairs, i.e. Swedish and English equivalents from 33 informants. Informants who answered “vet ej” to any of the idioms in an idiom pair are not included.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year Seven</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let sleeping dogs lie &amp; Väck ej den björn som sover, In the nick of time &amp; I grevens tid, Smell a rat &amp; Ana ugglor i mossen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year Nine</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let sleeping dogs lie &amp; Väck ej den björn som sover, In the nick of time &amp; I grevens tid, Smell a rat &amp; Ana ugglor i mossen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let sleeping dogs lie &amp; Väck ej den björn som sover, In the nick of time &amp; I grevens tid, Smell a rat &amp; Ana ugglor i mossen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4-1, there are altogether 62 occasions where an informant knows none of the idioms of a pair and 31 occasions where an informant knows both idioms. Taken into account as a whole, in 93 cases an informant knows either both or none of a pair. In addition, there are 33 occasions where an informant knows just the Swedish one and three where an informant knows just the English one. Based on the overall findings of acceptable interpretations made for idioms occurring in both languages, some correspondences exist between the knowledge of an English idiom and its Swedish counterpart. The 31 occurrences of “Both” support this theory. However, the 62 instances of “None”, shows that if an idiom is not known in language one, it is not known in language two either. Hence, for idioms occurring in both languages, evidence exists that if an informant knows an English idiom he
or she is likely to know its Swedish equivalent too. Similarly, if an idiom is unknown to an informant, it is generally not known in any of the two languages.

As previously mentioned, successful interpretations of both idioms in a pair, i.e. of the Swedish and English equivalents, may occasionally be instances of interlingual identification luck rather than idiomatic knowledge, since it is impossible to tell whether the English idiom or the Swedish idiom was recognised first.

One of the informants in year seven was perfectly aware of the correspondence between some English and Swedish idioms denoting the same conceptual meaning, for example, *let sleeping dogs lie*/väck ej den björn som sover, *in the nick of time*/grevens tid and *smell a rat*/ana ugglor i mossen (see Appendix 2). He or she did not just use the Swedish idiom to translate the English idiom and vice versa, but semantically valid explanations using his/her own words. The transparency of the idioms varied and altogether they represented both compositional and uncompositional types of idioms. In this sense it is not possible to draw any parallels to the results of Glucksberg’s research (2001:74) showing that compositional idioms are more easily understood. It may, however, be the case that by coincidence this particular informant was presented with idioms he or she was previously acquainted with, and that this is the reason behind the correct explanations. In addition, when asked for further examples of idioms, the same informant could mention several other idioms, thus indicating that he or she might have an overall good knowledge of idiomatic expressions.
5 Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to shed light on the comprehension of idiomatic expressions among pupils in secondary school and students in high school. The research and analysis particularly aimed at elucidating how age, language skills, and familiarity with the concept of idioms may be relevant to the understanding of common Swedish and English idiomatic expressions.

By the means of a questionnaire, pupils in years seven and nine in secondary school and students in high school were asked to interpret five common Swedish, and five common English idiomatic expressions. Furthermore, the informants were asked to write down previously known idioms, five of each language at a maximum. Finally, three informants, one from each age group, were asked for a more thorough description of how they were thinking while trying to find a suitable interpretation of two more idioms.

A comparison of the percentages of correct or acceptable answers to the questionnaire clearly indicates that the informants from year nine and high school are more familiar with the overall concept of idioms than the informants from year seven. On the other hand, comparisons between the two groups of older informants show less convincing differences. Acceptable interpretations were made to both opaque and transparent idioms, thus, in general, the level of transparency and compositionality played no significant role to comprehension. Regarding knowledge of idioms not listed in the questionnaire, the difference between the age groups is negligible. As for language skills, an analysis of the overall numbers of recognised idioms points towards a better knowledge of English idioms among the informants from year nine and high school, whereas in year seven the comprehension of Swedish idioms is marginally better than the comprehension of English ones. For idioms occurring in both languages, some quite convincing evidence exists that if an informant knows an English idiom he or she is likely to know its Swedish equivalent too but this may occasionally be instances of successful ad hoc translations rather than idiomatic knowledge.

This study was based on the understanding of idiomatic expressions as read in isolation and among a limited number of informants. Further studies might include the comprehension of idiomatic expressions in context, and the scope could be wider as to include one or two more age groups, one of them adults. If no general apparent progression is visible between the informants in year nine and high school, at what age does it become visible again? Adding more age groups might, thus, give a better overall picture of the progression of comprehension.
Bibliography


Appendix 1: Questionnaire

I denna enkät följer några frågor om ENGELSKA och SVENSKA uttryck och din uppgift är att berätta om du känner till uttrycken eller inte. Förklara de uttryck du kan förklara eller dra till med en gissning!

Gör så här:
Efter varje fråga följer tre svarsalternativ. KRYSSA för ett alternativ med ett tydligt X och skriv dina förklaringar på de tomma raderna bredvid. Extra skrivutrymme finns på bifogat pappersark!

Jag är ☐ flicka/kvinna ☐ pojke/man Ålder:………..
Jag går i årskurs ☐ 7 ☐ 9 ☐ Gymnasiet

1. Vad betyder uttrycket "Read between the lines"
   ○ Vet ej
   ○ Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
   ○ Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

2. Vad betyder uttrycket "Let sleeping dogs lie"
   ○ Vet ej
   ○ Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
   ○ Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

3. Vad betyder uttrycket “In the nick of time”
   ○ Vet ej
   ○ Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
   ○ Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

4. Vad betyder uttrycket "To pull somebody’s leg"
   ○ Vet ej
   ○ Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
   ○ Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

5. Vad betyder uttrycket “Smell a rat”
   ○ Vet ej
   ○ Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
   ○ Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)
6. Vad betyder uttrycket ”Väck ej den björn som sover”

( ) Vet ej
( ) Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
( ) Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

7. Vad betyder uttrycket ”Gå över ån efter vatten”

( ) Vet ej
( ) Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
( ) Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

8. Vad betyder uttrycket ”Göra en höna av en fjäder”

( ) Vet ej
( ) Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
( ) Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

9. Vad betyder uttrycket ”I grevens tid”

( ) Vet ej
( ) Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
( ) Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

10. Vad betyder uttrycket ”Ana ugglor i mossen”

( ) Vet ej
( ) Jag vet att det betyder (förklara betydelsen)
( ) Jag tror att det betyder (förklara vad du tror att det betyder och varför du tror så)

11. Ge exempel på andra uttryck eller talesätt som du känner till

A: ( ) Jag känner inte till fler SVENSKA uttryck.
( ) Här följer några av de SVENSKA uttryck som jag känner till (Ange max 5):

B: ( ) Jag känner inte till fler ENGELSKA uttryck.
( ) Här följer några av de ENGELSKA uttryck som jag känner till (max 5):

12. Berätta var du tror att man stöter på uttryck och talesätt, och hur man lär sig vad dom betyder!

____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________
____________________________________________

Extra skrivutrymme finns på bifogat pappersark!
Appendix 2: Results from the Questionnaire

1 What Does the Expression “Read Between the Lines” Mean?

1.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
- Att förstå någonting som inte sägs eller skrivs, att fatta ett andra budskap.
- Inte ha så bråttom.
- Läs genom linjerna.
- *Läs mellan raderna, two occurrences.*
- Man ska ta reda på saker innan man drar slutsatser.
- Man ska tänka själv.
- *Texten har ett budskap men det står inte riktigt på raderna.*

1.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Att man inte ska ta något för seriöst.
- Att man ska tänka efter när någon säger något.
- Att man ska tänka efter innan man gör nåt.
- *Man ska analysera så att man förstår vad texten menar, eller personen känner.*
- *Fatta bättre, typ.*
- *Läs mellan raderna, three occurrences of a similar wording.*
- *Läsa mellan raderna. En person säger inte rakt ut vad han/hon menar, utan man måste läsa mellan raderna för att få reda på det.*
- Man ska inte se in i framtiden.
- Man ska tänka innan man gör en sak.

1.3 Year Two in High School
- *Att läsa mellan raderna, five occurrences of a similar wording.*
- *Att man förstår det underförstådda även om det inte är det som är skrivet.*
- *Att förstå det egentliga budskapet.*
- *Att man kan förstå mer än vad som är sagt eller skrivet.*
- *Att man ska fördjupa sig i det som egentligen står.*
- Att man har en aning om hur något kommer att bli, är, var osv. Ex du kommer att ångra det här, du kommer att få stryk.
- Att man inte ska vara för seriös.
- *Att man kan säga en sak och menar egentligen, typ läs mellan orden. Ta inte allt svart på vitt.*
  *Man kanske säger att allt är bra men är helt rödgåten i ögonen.*
Att man läser mellan raderna när man läser eller har en konversation. Man kan ta ut och uppfatta saker som inte personen säger men kanske egentligen menar.

Att man ska se bakom det som är, se mellan raderna på det som ingen sa, eller som inte stod.

Att man ska läsa mellan raderna, att man ska läsa mer utförligt.

Att man ska läsa mellan raderna, man ska förstå vad som händer i texten även fast det inte står ordagrant.

Att man ska läsa mellan raderna betyder att det finns något mer som den menar än vad som står.

Det betyder att man inte ska läsa rad efter rad utan istället försöka sammanfatta kort.

Läsa mellan raderna, man ser vad någon menar fast den inte uttrycker det.

Läsa mellan raderna (tex om nån berättar en privat sak offentligt med dig och inte vill att dom andra ska förstå så kanske personen formulerar sig på ett annorlunda sätt och då ska du ”läsa mellan raderna”.

När någon säger något ska man vara mer noggrann och inse någonting.

2 What Does the Expression “Let Sleeping Dogs Lie” Mean?

2.1 Year Seven in Secondary School

Att inte röra om någonting, att t.ex. undvika slagsmål.

Att man inte ska lägga näsan in blöt.

Att man inte ska lägga sig i.

Låt sovande hundar ljuga.

Samma som ”Väck ej den björn som sover”, att man inte ska reta nån som lätt blir arg, eller håller på med något viktigt.

2.2 Year Nine in Secondary School

Att det ska vara tyst, de är tysta.

Det betyder antingen att man låter det förflutna förbliva förflutet, eller att man inte ska orsaka något illa när det går att undvika, som att hundar börjar slåss när de väcks.

För att dom inte ljuger när dom sover.

Låt den liggande hunden ligga.


Man ska inte väcka den björn som sover. Man menar att man ska lämna något ifred för man vet inte vad som kan hända om man drar upp det.

Prata inte skit om någon.

Väck inte den hund som sover.
Typ att man inte ska göra någon argare än vad den redan är. Att väcka en sovande hund blir sällan en glad hund.

Väck inte den hund som sover.

2.3 Year Two in High School

- Att ifall man är oengagerad i något sammanhang så bryr de andra sig inte om det. Att man får skylla sig själv och ta konsekvenserna.
- Att man inte ska störa.
- Att någon gör något som man inte orkar bry sig om och helt enkelt bara låter det vara.
- "Man ska inte väcka den hund som sover". Om man har en konflikt och det har lugnat sig ska man inte dra upp konflikten igen och göra den större.
- Ungefärligt som svenskans "väck inte den björn som sover. Tex att man inte ska ta upp saker som kan skapa konflikter om det för tillfället är lugnt.

3 What Does the Expression “In the Nick of Time” Mean?

3.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
- Det var på tiden.
- Komma precis i tid, t.ex. deadline.
- Samma som ”I grevens tid”, det betyder att man hann precis i tid.
- Tiden är inne.

3.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Antingen i sista stunden eller i precis rätt tid.
- Att något händer i sista sekund.
- Det var på tiden, two occurrences.
- I exakt rätt tid.
- I rätt tid, two occurrences.
- Om du har tid.
- Precis i tid, på häret, att man hann i tid.
- Precis i rätt tid.
- Uttrycket betyder att man klarat eller åstadkommit något precis i tid.

3.3 Year Two in High School
- Att det var på tiden. Nåt gick fort.
- Att man hinner precis i tid, eller i slutet av något.
Att man är precis i tid.
Det var på tiden. Att något man väntar på kommer sent eller i sista stund.
I tidens slut.

4 What Does the Expression “To Pull Somebody’s Leg” Mean?

4.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
- Att sparka på någons ben.
- Att hjälpa någon.
- Lycka till!

4.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Att man skapar förhinder för någon, tex lura dem till något eller sätta sig emot dem på diverse sätt.
- Att fälla någon.
- Att skämta, skoja.

4.3 Year Two in High School
- Att förstöra för någon, göra så att något går fel.
- Att hjälpa någon med nåt.
- Att man gör något elakt åt en person så att det förstör för den personen.
- Att man saboterar/stoppar för någon att inte lyckas.
- Att putta/sparka på någons ben.
- Att svika någon.
- Att försvåra för/jävlas med någon annan
- Jag tror att det betyder ungefär som att man slickar någons ben, alltså att man kan göra vad som helst för att få bra för sig själv.
- Kanske lite som att hugga någon i ryggen. Gå inte bakom någons rygg och gör något dumt.

5 What Does the Expression “Smell a Rat” Mean?

5.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
- Att nånting lurt är på gång, att man känner misstankar.
- Att man känner lukten av en ond person.
- Att det är nåt konstigt med nät, nåt som inte riktigt stämmer.
- Man anar en förändring.

5.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Ana ugglor i mossen, two occurrences.
- Att man ska lukta illa.
- Att det luktar illa.
- *Att något är fel.*
- Att nåt e på gång.
- Att någonting är på gång.
- *Att något konstigt ska hända.*
- *Att det är någonting lurt på gång.*
- *Det är något konstigt som händer.*
- Luktar som en råtta.
- Man anar att något är fel, inte riktigt som det ska.
- Man anar oråd.
- När man anar att någonting är skumt eller mystiskt. Man förstår att någonting inte står rätt till.
- När något man inte gillar kommer.

5.3 **Year Two in High School**

- *Att det inte är okej. Att det är något som inte riktigt stämmer, att det är eller hänt något.*
- *Att man anar att det är något lurt på gång.*
- Att man luktar illa och inte vill ha den personen nära sig.
- Att man luktar äckligt.
- *Att man misstänker att nåt står fel till.*
- *Att man känner på sig att något inte står rätt till.*
- Att man ser en person som är otrevlig, man tycker inte om personen.
- Att man ogillar personen och vill inte ha någonting med personen att göra. Ex. samma sak som ”screwyou”.
- Lukten av en rätta.
- Luktar illa.
- Luktar äckligt.
- Man ser någon man ogillar som gjort en besviken eller så.
- Någon man inte tycker om.
- Någon man inte tycker om eller tycker är konstig/elak.

6 **What Does the Expression "Väck ej den björn som sover " Mean?**

6.1 **Year Seven in Secondary School**

- *Att inte röra om saker och ting.*
- Att man inte ska reta nån som lätt blir arg, eller håller på med något viktigt.
Inte lägga sig i.
Man ska inte säga nånting om det är nåt den inte behöver veta.
Som ”Let sleeping dogs lie”, inte röra om nånting, undvika slagsmål, bråk
Var försiktig.

6.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Att man inte ska reta en som blir lätt sur.
- Att man inte ska reta någon som blir lätt sur.
- Att man inte ska väcka den som sover för det kan gå illa.
- Att man inte ska störa nån för dom kan bli arg.
- Björn är farlig. Starta inte ett bråk eller håll inte på med den bråkiga när det är tyst.
- Gör inte någon arg.
- Den Svenska versionen av ”Let sleeping dogs lie” tror jag, den har en viss likhet.
- Det är väl motsvarigheten till ”Let sleeping dogs lie”, man ska alltså inte väcka en björn/hund som sover, det kan göra den arg.
- Man ska inte väcka dom större.
- Mucka inte med nån som är större.
- Man ska inte mucka med en större och starkare.
- Reta inte den lugna personen så den blir riktigt arg.
- Reta inte upp någon om du inte vill ha problem.
- Samma som ”Let sleeping dogs lie”, dra inte upp gammalt som redan ligger.
- Väck inte den som sover, han kan reagera.
- Väck inte någon i onödan.

6.3 Year Two in High School
- Att den man väcker blir arg.
- Att man inte ska göra något som utsätter en för risk eller nåt annat otrevligt.
- Att man inte ska arga upp någon.
- Att om en person är sur ska man inte hetsa upp den ännu mera. Om den har lugsat ner sig ska man inte hetsa upp den igen.
- Att om min kompis är arg då ska jag inte hetsa upp henne mer.
- Att man inte ska ta upp något som kan skapa konflikt om det för tillfället är lugnt.
- En (slags) varning, two occurrences of a similar wording.
- Inte göra någon arg och irritera den.
- Man ska ej störa.
- Man ska ej störa den som gör något.
Man ska inte göra den personen som är arg argare.
Man ska inte trigga igång någon så att man tappar stubinen. Att man inte går för långt.
Man ska inte trigga igång någon så att den tappar tålamodet och blir arg.
Man ska inte väcka nån som sover.
Reta inte upp någon som redan är sur/arg, three occurrences of a similar wording.
Samma som ”Man ska inte väcka den hund som sover”. Om man har en konflikt och det har lugnat sig ska man inte dra upp konflikten igen och göra den större.

7 What Does the Expression “Gå över ån efter vatten “ Mean?

7.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
Gör det inte saker svårare än vad de är.
Gör det inte svårare än det är.

7.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
Man gör något onödigt.
Det är dumt, om man gör det så ramlar man i vattnet.

7.3 Year Two in High School
Att man inte alltid behöver göra mycket arbete. Vissa saker kan vara lättare. Man behöver inte göra något i onödan.
Att söka efter något man redan har.
Att lösningen kan vara närmare än man tror.
Att man ska tänka sig för, det är ju helt onödigt att gå över ån efter vatten.
Att man går för långt, gör onödiga saker.
Du ska inte ta mer saker än du har framför dig.
Göra att nånting blir krångligare.
Man ska inte gå efter ett visst mönster.
Man ska inte leta efter något som man har precis framför näsan.
Man tar den enklare vägen.
Ta den enkla vägen.

8 What Does the Expression “Göra en höna av en fjäder “ Mean?

8.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
Att en liten fjäder kan göra en höna i sinom tid, att tålamod kan hjälpa.
Påsk.
8.2 Year Nine in Secondary School

- Att göra en stor sak av en liten grej.
- Att göra en stor grej utav något litet.
- Göra mycket av lite.
- Göra något stort av en liten sak.
- Koka soppa på en spik.
- Koka soppa på en spik, göra något omöjligt.
- Någon kan säga ”Man kan inte göra en höna av en fjäder” och mena att det man ska göra kanske inte går.
- *Man ska inte göra någonting större än vad det är.*
- *Man ska inte göra en stor grej av en liten grej.*

8.3 Year Two in High School

- Att göra en stor grej av något som egentligen inte är så viktigt.
- Att göra för mycket, spela över.
- Att göra en stor sak av något oväsentligt/göra ett problem större än det är.
- Att man inte ska göra en så stor sak av något som egentligen inte är så viktig. Brukar ofta vara så när man bråkar över inget.
- Att något är omöjligt.
- Gör inte en liten sak till en stor, förstora inte upp saker i onödan.
- Man bygger upp någons självförtroende, gör så att en person syns.
- *Man ska inte göra något större än det är, t.ex. en konflikt/problem.*
- *Man ska inte göra någon stor grej av något litet.*
- *Man ska inte låta små saker bli stora i onödan.*
- Man ska inte tro man kan för mycket.
- Överdriva saker och ting.

9 What Does the Expression “I grevens tid” Mean?

9.1 Year Seven in Secondary School

- Att komma precis i tid.
- Att man kom precis.
- Att man hann precis i tid.
- Precis i tid.
- Precis innan tiden är slut. Han gjorde mål när det var 2 sekunder kvar, han gjorde mål i grevens tid.
9.2 Year Nine in Secondary School

- Att man kommer precis i sista stund till något.
- Att det var nästan för sent, det var i absolut sista tiden.
- Att det var som länge sen.
- Det är nästan för sent. Det var på tiden.
- Det var på tiden, two occurrences.
- I exakt rätt tid, i sista stunden.
- I sista sekunden händer det något bra.
- I rätt tid, i rätt stund.
- I dödens tid, liksom att man kom i tid, men just i tid, inte mycket tidigare.
- Kom precis i tid.
- När tiden är inne.
- Nästan för sent.
- Nära men i tid.
- Samma sak som “in the nick of time”. Man klarar något precis i tid.

9.3 Year Two in High School

- Absolut den tid som gäller.
- Att det var just i sista minuten, eller att man är sarkastisk att man är sen och använder sig av det uttrycket.
- Att man är sen.
- Att man är ute i sista sekund.
- Det var precis att du hann i tid.
- Det var på tiden.
- Det var på tiden.
- Du kom ”precis i tid”, man är lite sen typ.
- I absolut sista sekund.
- I sista sekunden. Att det är sista chansen att göra något. ”Det var i grevens tid att du kom”, som att det var på tiden.
- Typ, äntligen.
- Vad tiden gått fort.
- ”Vad i grevens tid håller ni på med?”/ ”Vafan gör ni?”

10 What Does the Expression "Ana ugglor i mossen" Mean?

10.1 Year Seven in Secondary School

- Att man märker att något inte stämmer.
- Att man tror att allting inte är som det ska.
- Det är mystisk stämning/Det är mystiskt.
- Fundersam.
- Som ”smell a rat”. Det är nånting lurt på gång.

10.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Att man är vilsen i sina tankar.
- Att man känner på sig att någonting kommer att hända, two occurrences.
- Att det är något fel eller på lurt.
- Att något är på lurt.
- Att nånting är på gång.
- Att man anar att något skumt ska hända.
- Ana oråd, likt ”smell a rat”. Man tror sig veta att någonting inte står rätt till.
- Att det är nåt lurt på gång.
- Det är något mysteriskt på gång.
- Då händer det nönting farligt.
- Man anar att något står fel till, något som inte stämmer.
- Något konstigt haller på att hända.
- Svensk motsvarighet till ”Smell a rat”, man anar oråd.

10.3 Year Two in High School
- Anar att det är något lurt på gång.
- Det är något lurt på gång.
- Att det är något på gång som man inte vet.
- Att man anar någonting om nån fast personen inte säger det så tror du att hon ljuter och att du anar något annat.
- Att man anar något som är fel.
- Att man tror att det är något.
- Att man tycker att något är misstänksam.
- Att någon ljuter om en sak eller försöker dölja något.
- Att nönting inte känns rätt eller att nät är på tok.
- Man anar något som är svårt.
- Man har en känsla av att någon ser en.
- Man misstänker att något inte står rätt till.
11 Exemplify other expressions that you know of

11.1 Year Seven in Secondary School
- An eye for an eye.
- It’s raining cats and dogs.
- The bigger they are, the harder they fall.
- Gräset är (alltid) grönare på andra sidan, two occurrences of a similar wording.
- Han simmar med fiskarna nu Kasta inte sten i glashus, two occurrences of a similar wording.
- Skit i det.
- Sota för det där.
- Sältsmöret och tappat pengarna, two occurrences of a similar wording
- En nål i en höstückk
- Vara ute på djupt vatten
- Inte skarpaste kniven i lådan
- LOL (Laughing Out Loud)
- ROFL (Rolling On the Floor Laughing)

11.2 Year Nine in Secondary School
- Det tar sig sa han som hade eld i håret.
- En storm i ett vattenglas.
- Fem myror är fler än fyra elefanter.
- Kasta inte sten i glashus, three occurrences.
- Kasta inte bäver i trähus, three occurrences.
- Skrattar bäst som skrattar sist.
- Skrattar först som skrattar sist.
- Släng inte sten i ett glashus.
- Somliga straffar gud på direktten.
- Som en katt på nålar.
- Som man bäddar får man ligga.
- Be in the dog house
- Clever as a fiddle.
- Elvis has left the building.
- Hit the hay
- Hit the bucket, two occurrences.
- Kick the bucket.
- Like a storm in a tea cup.
- Once in a blue moon.
- Pretty as a picture.
- Turn the lights off
- When pigs fly, three occurrences.

11.3 Year Two in High School

- Break a leg.
- Drop dead, two occurrences of a similar wording.
- (It) is the little things that matter.
- You don’t know what you’ve got until you’ve lost it.
- Bussen har ingen chaufför.
- Det ligger en hund begraven.
- Det regnar i Paris.
- Du har inte alla hästar i hagen/hemma, six occurrences of a similar wording.
- Du har inte alla indianer i kanoten.
- Gräset är inte grönare på andra sidan.
- Helt bakom flötet, five occurrences of a similar wording.
- Hissen går inte ända upp, three occurrences of a similar wording.
- Hungrig som en varg.
- Inte den fräschaste frukten i fruktskålen.
- Inte den vassaste kniven i lådan.
- Inte köpa grisen i säcken, two occurrences of a similar wording.
- Inte ropa hej förrän man är över bäcken.
- Kasta ej sten i glashus.
- Kasta ögonen på.
- Listig som en räv.
- Liten tuva stjälper ofta stora lass.
- Lyset tänd men ingen hemma.
- Man kan lära gamla hundar sitta.
- Man ska inte ta räven efter svansen.
- När det regnar i öknen.
- När katten far dansar råttorna på bordet.
- När man talar om trollen.
- Som man bäddar får man ligga, three occurrences of a similar wording.
- Sparka benen på ryggen.
- Spetsa öronen.
### Appendix 3: Results from the Questionnaire, Tables

Table 1, Number of answers to each question

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<tr>
<th>English Idioms</th>
<th>Number in Questionnaire</th>
<th>&quot;Vet ej&quot;</th>
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<th>&quot;Jag tror att ...&quot;</th>
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|                |                         | 85       | 38                | 52                |        |        |            |        |        |            | 20     | 57     | 68         |

Table 2, Number of answers to each question, given in per cent

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Appendix 4: Idioms as Interpreted in Dictionaries

The translations/interpretations have been obtained from both Swedish and English dictionaries, which is why a mix of Swedish and English is used below.

English Idiomatic Expressions

Read between the lines

“to be able to understand the full meaning of something you hear or read, even though you have not been given all the details”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:215)

Let sleeping dogs lie

“Väck inte den björn som sover” (Svartvik & Svartvik 2003:227), “to deliberately avoid mentioning a subject or problem, because you know it will cause trouble if you do”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:90)

In the nick of time

“I grevens tid” (Svartvik & Svartvik 2003:252), “just before it is too late, or just before something bad happens”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:244)

To pull somebody’s leg

Att driva med någon (Svartvik & Svartvik 2003:154), "to tell someone something that is not true, as a joke”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:206)

Smell a rat

"ana oråd, ana argan list“ (Svartvik & Svartvik 2003:204), ”Ana ugglor i mossen” (Johansson & Carlstedt 2006:73), “to begin to think that someone is trying to deceive you, or that something about a situation is wrong”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:281)

Go the extra mile

“to make a special effort or do more than you have been asked to do, in order to achieve something”

(Longman Idioms Dictionary 2000:229)
**Swedish Idiomatic Expressions**

*Väck ej den björn som sover*  
"let sleeping dogs lie" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:118), "inte locka fram en slumrande fara" (Målande uttryck 1996:9)

*Gå över ån efter vatten*  
"göra sig onödigt besvär" (Målande uttryck 1996:152), "göra sig onödigt besvär" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:38)

*Göra en höna av en fjäder*  
"beskriva ngt obetydligt såsom viktigt" (Målande uttryck 1996:50), "förstora, överdriva betydelsen av en obetydlig händelse" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:38)

*I grevens tid*  
"i sista ögonblicket" (Målande uttryck 1996:35), "i allra sista stund innan det var för sent" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:50), "in the nick of time" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:50)

*Ana ugglor i mossen*  
"ana att ngt misstänkt är nära förestående" (Målande uttryck 1996:137)

*Sila mygg och svälja kameler*  
"hänga upp sig på småsaker men låta allvarliga missförhållanden passera" (Målande uttryck 1996:53), "hänga upp sig på småsaker men inte bry sig om viktigare saker som man borde reagera på" (Hübinette & Odenstedt 1988:82)