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ON THE MEANING OF IDIOMS

The latest trends of specialized literature in linguistics that deal with semantics cannot avoid the question (especially after having produced certain results in the examination of lexical and actual meaning) as to how we attribute meaning to those special semantic units of language that arc bigger than a lcxcmc, callcd idioms? What mcchanisms makc it possible for an infinite number of word combinations to settle in fixed relations and attain a special meaning that cannot or can only be partly traced back to the original meaning of the components? Let us just think about what an important role idiomatic expressions play in teaching foreign languages, in translation, or in the language of advertisements for example. Thus, from the point of view of language theory and applied linguistics these questions are essential indeed. Before attempting to answer them however, let us just briefly look at what we really mean by meaning.

Meaning is traditionally determined as the notional content that a linguistic sign recalls in our conscience. The sequence of the sounds in a p p l e [alma] will recall the fruit of an apple tree [almafa] (Malus pumilla Mill) in the conscience of Hungarian speakers. It denominates a specific thing, but at the same time it includes a number of reference possibilities, since we can apply the word for the well-known shiny, red and round shaped Jonathan apple, to the sharp and pointed deep red Starking, to the golden, oval shaped Golden Delicious, the scented, greeny yellowish type etc. These technical terms are only used in the specialist language, while colloquial Hungarian can do with the lexeme apple [alma]. The word apple as a semantic category is in opposition with other related semantic categories such as grapes [szőlő], cherry [cseresznye], nuts [dió].

Within the hierarchy of the vocabulary the aforementioned lexemes are at the same level: they all represent a sub category of the hyperonym FRUIT [GYÜMÖLCS]. Their morphological characteristics are identical and they behave in the same way when it comes to declination and derivation. At a deeper level, the usage and interpretation of the lexeme apple [alma], beyond requiring knowledge of the signifier apple as an element of the Hungarian language code system, is based on that universal human ability of ours to categorize the elements of reality, and then through mental transformations identify and articulate these elements:

fruit

apple, grapes, cherry, nuts etc.

Jonathan, Starking, Golden Delicious etc.

The phrase I'm eating an apple [almát eszem] is interpreted by knowing the meanings and syntactical rules applicable in the Hungarian language, i.e. on the bais of barely linguistic information stored by our mental lexicons.

In the case of idioms, however, the mechanism of interpretation does not work in quite the same way. This is because we are dealing with more than one type of meanings simultaneously. The expression bite into a sour apple [beleharap a savanyú almába] can be interpreted at two different levels:

1. By the linear interpretation, that is divided into lexemes, the meaning is the sum of actual word meanings and syntactical rules. The syntagm is compositional and formed in a regular way semantically.

2. In a contracted, lexeme interpretation its meaning is 'reluctantly start doing something unpleasant'. The syntagm is not a linear, compositionally built structure, but a consolidated expression, an idiom that has an associative power.

It is surprising that by the second interpretation the notional content that is primarily recalled in our conscience by the idiom's key word, apple [alma], is not a building component of the expression.

Similar interpretation possibilities are offered with idioms like sour grapes [savanyú a szőlő]: 'to dislike something because you cannot have it'; have cherries with someone from the same plate [egy tálból cseresznyézik]: 'to cooperate with someone; of the same mould'; a hard nut to crack [kemény dió]: 'a difficult task'. These examples clearly show that the idiomatic meaning cannot be deducted from the semantic content of the central element of the idiom. That is why it has become generally accepted in the linguistic literature that idiomatic meaning is not compositional, as opposed to compounds like apple tree [almafa], which was formed from lexemes that had originally been independent. Consequently, the representatives of various recent linguistic trends are limited by the boundaries of their own theories.

Structuralism
    There are several essays of structuralistic nature dealing with the question of idioms in the linguistic literature.

    Following Saussure, European structuralism declares the autonomy of the linguistic sign. Structuralistically founded semantic examination is looking for distinctive features in the semantic stucture of words, with the help of which it can designate a place of a given word within the linguistic system. Representatives of the influential word field theory belong to this group, emphasizing the importance of revealing the semantic relations between words. Applying the method of compositional analysis, they strive for the pure description of word meanings, excluding the application of all other so called encyclopaedic information. This approach seems quite problematic in the case of idiomatic expressions. The majority of idioms contain a metaphorical, associative structure that is based on a reality beyond language. The phrase do not budge a bit from '48 [nem enged a negyvennyolcból], meaning 'stick to one's guns, stand firm' is understood by the average Hungarian speaker, even if they are not aware of what dramatic historical event the number forty-eight refers to. The simile (the meaning of the idiom is based upon) can however only be grasped by the ones who know what happened in Hungary in 1848 and the decades following it. The development of the meaning is clear: literally, the phrase expresses sticking to the laws of 1848; at the end of the 19th century obviously only those politicians were regarded as being determined and consistent persons who stood by the claims expressed in 1848. In time the political connotation of the idiom faded, and nowadays it is used in the general, figurative sense indicated in the paraphrase. Additional examples could be cited, but especially being familiar with the Hungarian linguistic literature, further demonstration seems unnecessary. The well-known idiom interpretations of Gábor O. Nagy (O. Nagy, 1988) are based on the realization that in the meaning of idiomatic expressions linguistic information and the one beyond language (encyclopaedic information) interweave. But since according to structuralistic authors' theory word meaning is fixed in the autonomous and the linguistic system, they will never reach to the stage of the semantic characterizing of idioms from this standpoint. They primarily focus on the syntactic characteristics of idiomatic expressions. Their method can be applied in their classifications when describing the syntactic differences of verbal, nominal, adjectival and adverbial phrases.

Generative grammar

As is well-known, semantics in Chomsky's theory is a stepchild, i.e. it is regarded as a secondary phenomenon, depending merely on syntactic relations. Fillmore and Katz, however, attempt to rehabilitate semantics, with the proviso that it can be exclusively componential meanings that constitute the basis of examination. They regard idioms as exceptions that strenghten the rule.

Weinreich (1969) includes the question of idioms within the frame of generative theory. He points out that one of the most characteristic traits of idiomatic expressions is transformational defectivity. This means that not all the syntactical operations that can be applied to the literal meaning of idiomatic expressions are possible to be carried out on idiomatic phrases. Weinreich's assumption is that a relationship exists between the idiom's transformational defectivity and its semantical specialization, i.e. the lack of componential meaning. These characteristics, at the same time, are in conflict with the essential method of generative grammar; it is obvious that expressions characterized by transformational defectivity and semantical specialization cannot be generated without a problem, yet this should be the role of generative grammar (Verstraten 1992).

The question of idioms could not be incorporated within the theoretical frame of generative grammar without encountering controversy. I have been unable to find an explanation in the linguistic literature for the phenomenon of how it is possible that there exist different deep structures of the same surface structures, depending on whether a certain expression such as sour grapes [savanyú a szőlő] is used in the literal or the figurative sense. Representatives of the transformational school disregarded the ambiguity of language.

Cognitive linguistics

The last thirty years have produced a determining change in viewpoints in the field of linguistics. Psycholinguistic research has been booming, centering around the question of which categorizing principles human thinking is based upon. Another fundamental question has been how the phenomenon according to which we can denominate different things with the very same word can be explained, i.e. how it is possible that a word can have referentially different ways of use? Let's just go back to the example of the apple [alma] mentioned in the introduction. How is it possible that according to the apple example the referentially different applications are connected conceptually in the same category?

Also, on the basis of which principles do we form conceptual categories and how does our classifying skill work when it comes to cognition of reality?

With these questions the cognitive trend came along, which not based on Saussurean axioms any more, but in analysing the complex human knowledge structure and, at the same time, in attempting to explore the principles on which the classifying ability of our thinking is based. On the strength of examination results, the 'prototype theory' took shape in cognitive psychology by the middle of the 1970's. It was first formulated by Eleanor Rosch in 1975. It is not essential from any perspective that classical parts that can be classified into categories based on identity be identical with each other; it is sufficient that there exists an analogy between them from any point of view. It is simply all about an overall similarity, and it is not possible to make an inventory of characteristics that would cover the entire usage of a category as a necessary and sufficient definition. Standing on the ground of cognitive psychology, Rosch – as pointed out by many in the Dutch linguistic literature – is in fact following the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein with her prototype theory. Wittgenstein formulated a similar idea related to the apparent conceptual identity in 1953. As soon as this identity is thoroughly analyzed it falls apart to sets of applications that overlap:

> „ Betrachte z.B. einmal die Vorgänge, die wir 'Spiele' nennen. Ich meine Brettspiele, Kartenspiele, Ballspiele, Kampfspiel u.s.w. Was ist allen diesen gemeinsam ? – Sag nicht: ' Es muss ihnen etwas gemeinsam sein, sonst hiessen sie nicht 'Spiele', - sondern schau, ob ihnen allen etwas gemeinsam ist. (...) Und das Ergebnis dieser Betrachtung lautet nun: Wir sehen ein kompliziertes Netz von Ähnlichkeiten, die einander übergreifen und kreuzen. Ähnlichkeiten im Grossen und Kleinen. Ich kann diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht besser charakterisieren, als durch das Wort >>Familienähnlichkeiten<<, denn so übergreifen und kreuzen sich die verschiedenen Ähnlichkeiten, die zwischen den Gliedern einer Familie bestehen: Wuchs, Gesichtszüge, Augenfarbe, Gang, Temperament etc. etc. Und ich werde sagen: die 'Spiele' bilden eine Familie.[1]'

Consequently, Wittgenstein interprets the relationship between the different applications of a word as being of a certain 'family resemblance'.

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[1] *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, 1953, pp. 66-67.

Rosch borrows the term 'family resemblance' from Wittgenstein, but develops it from a theoretical point of view, and backs up and supplements the Austrian philosopher's theory with her own analytical devices.

According to Rosch human thinking classifies the objects of reality with the help of extremely clear and representative examples, the so-called prototypes. In Rosch's model the robin is the most characteristic representative of the bird category, due to its being so wide-spread in North America. In Europe in turn, a similar analysis would most likely put the sparrow or the blackbird in the same place, simply because these are most wide-spread specimen here. Consequently, the sparrow is a prototypical, while the penguin is a peripheral representative of the bird category. As proved by Rosch, when hearing the word 'bird', we first think of a creature that can fly, but the ablity of flying is not necessarily a characteristic of each bird. This means that it is not a single common feature that is repeated as a linking connection with each member of the category, but it is rather sets of variable characteristics that link the members to each other, resulting in a similarity, a 'family resemblance', within a certain category. The member possessing the most recurring features is the prototype of the category. It is considered a novelty in Rosch's theory that it emphasizes the existence of a core part, the prototype, within the system of family resemblances.

Rosch's theory was favourably received in recent Anglo-Saxon and Dutch-Belgian linguistic theory. Dirk Geeraets, professor of Löwen University chose Rosch's prototype theory as the theoretical framework of his semantic research (Geeraerts, 1989). His significant innovation stands in the use of the notion of category in a different sense than Rosch does. In cognitive psychology category classifies the referents of a word, i.e. objects, while in Geeraerts' interpretation category groups the meanings of a word. Through his approach words are natural sense categories, whose inner structure is identical with the inner structure of the bird type categories. Just as certain birds are more representative members of the bird category than others, words also have several peripheral meanings beyond the central, 'representative' sense. To a speaker the most representative meaning of a word is its prototypical sense: the model of the semantic category 'bird':
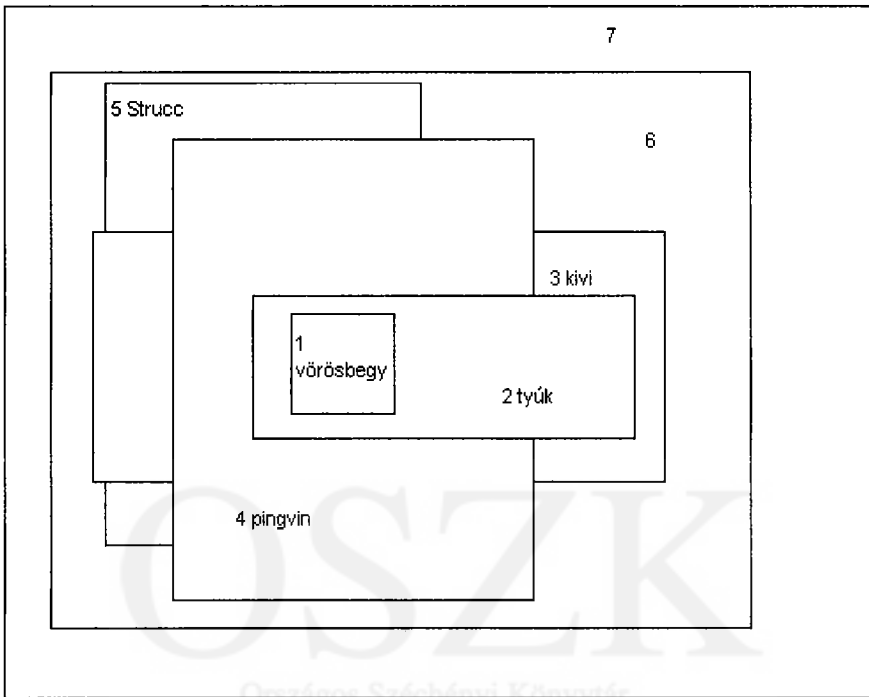
1 robin
2 hen
3 kiwi
4 penguin
5 oyster
6
7

Explanation

1. 'can fly'
2. 'has got a recognizable plumage'
3. 'of the shape of #2'
4. 'poultry'
5. 'not domesticated'
6. 'lays eggs'
7. 'has got a beak'

Idiomatic meaning structures from a cognitive semantical approach

On a cognitive semantical basis we suppose that the meaning of idioms is not an accidental, but rather a motivated one. Even though it is often non-transparent on the basis of which mechanisms we attribute a new, lexeme-equivalent meaning to certain lexeme combinations, the aforementioned theory of prototypical-peripheral meaning, as well as encyclopaedic knowledge, sheds light on the fact that information beyond language also plays a role in the development of meaning. We can prove that the meaning of idioms is a motivated meaning if we bring this to the surface.

First, we need to differentiate between idiomatic expressions that have a double meaning, and those which have not. The latter are called endocentric idioms, since their nominal or verbal component holds the same meaning in the idiomatic expression as in its paraphrase, such as in plain (clear) speaking [tiszta beszéd] 'comprehensible, meaningful speaking'; he speaks Hungarian clearly [tisztán beszél magyarul] 'he speaks Hungarian intelligibly, without an impediment'. The other main component (the lexeme 'clear' [tiszta] in our example, and the adverb derived from it) does not, on the other hand, function in its usual ('not dirty') sense. The meaning of consolidated expressions that were formed by connecting components of this sort is non-transparent. In the following collocations we can gradually follow the semantical structure grow more obscure: pure silk [tiszta selyem] 'genuine silk' – pure rhyme [tiszta rím] 'harmonious rhyme' – as pure as his father [tiszta apja] (a Hungarian expression, the English equivalent would be a chip off the old block) 'look similar to one's parents'. The degree of semantical untransparency in these idioms is determined by the actual meaning of the lexeme pure [tiszta], in a direct proportion with its distance from the prototypical meaning.

The more peripheral the meaning of a certain word in a consolidated expression is, the less transparent the surface structure is. Lack of transparency, however, should not be mixed up with lack of semantic motivation. This is demonstrated by the figure and analysis below:

The model of the sense category of the word pure [tiszta] in Hungarian
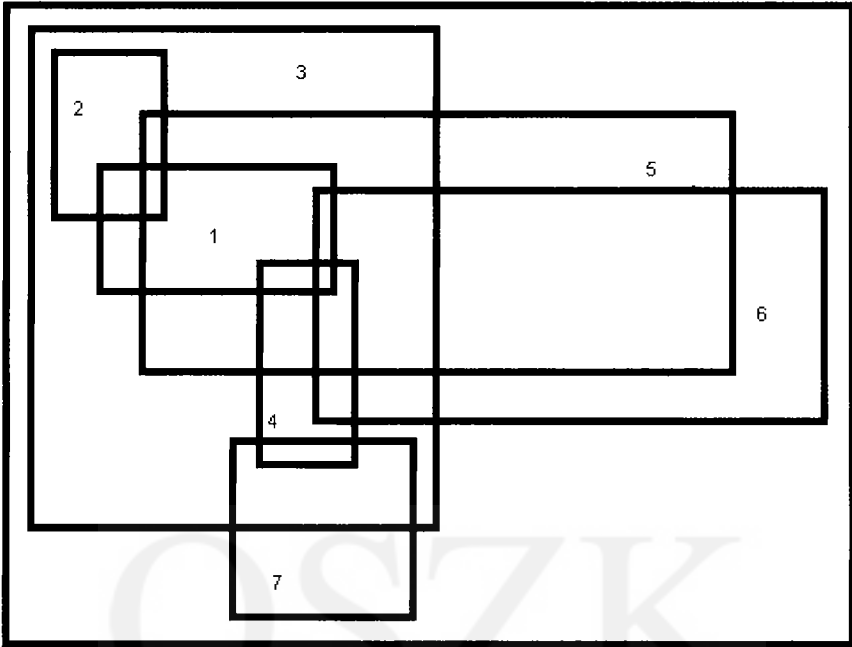
The numbered fields map the main applications of the word pure [tiszta]. Ferenc Póra's collection of examples (1907, 1991) was used as a resource for separating semantic variants.

Field 1:   'free from other things, not dirty, not soiled'
              e.g. clean clothes
              [tiszta ruha, tiszta pohár, tisztaszoba, tisztába teszi a gyereket]

Field 2:   'transparent, translucent, undisturbed'
              e.g. clear water, clear sky, it is clear that, clear as crystal, one's head is clear
              [tiszta víz, tiszta égbolt, tiszta tekintet, tiszta a feje vki-nek, tisztában van
              vmivel]

Field 3:'clear, articulate, understandable, determined'
              e.g. plain speaking, speak a language clearly, clear enough!
              [tiszta beszéd, tiszta sor, tisztán beszél vmilyen nyelvet]

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Field 4:   'simple, unmixed, unadulterated, genuine'
e.g. realgold, genuine leather, pure alcohol
[tiszta arany, tiszta szesz, tiszta selyem, tiszta piros, színtiszta]

Field 5:   'virtuous, moral, taintless, untouched, innocent'
e.g. of high moral standards, pure heart
[tiszta élet, tiszta erkölcs, tiszta szív, tiszta szűz, tiszta a keze vmiben]

Field 6:   'uncomplicated, undisturbed'
e.g. clear voice, pure rhyme
[tiszta hang, tiszta rím]

Field 7:   'sheer, total, perfect'
e.g. a perfect idiot, pure dirt, pure chance
[tiszta hülye, tiszta apja, tiszta piszok(!)]

The different ways of use are connected by Wittgenstein's family resemblance, as each usage contains one or more semantical components that ensure connection with a different meaning. Prototypes are, at the same time, points of reference, to which new semantic extensions of the meaning category can be compared. These are collocations and idiomatic expressions formed by means of metaphorisation. Distance from the prototype determines how idiomatic an expression is: in the idiom it's all pure dirt [tiszta piszok] the distance is so long that on the surface the lexeme pure [tiszta] is connected to an antonymous word. In the deep structure, however, there is no contradiction: 'pure dirt, with no other substance mixed with it'.

Still, not all idiomatic expressions can be analyzed in this way. Expressions that can be interpreted in two ways have a different deep structure; they are exocentric formations, i.e. in these syntagms none of the semantic variants of any component recur in the paraphrase: e.g. a clear head [tiszta a feje] 'the ability to think quickly and clearly';a clear conscience [tiszta a keze] 'a knowledge that you have done the right thing'. These formations are interpreted not on the basis of the distance the meaning of a component is from the prototype, but rather on grounds of metaphorisation and metonymysation of the linear reading, and their combinations respectively.

Interpretation of the idiom bite into a sour apple [beleharap a sa-
vanyú almába] requires knowledge of everyday reality and the ability of
metaphorisation. The idiom recalls an image, the memory of an act,
whose unpleasant physiological effect is so familiar that hearing this ex-
pression we can almost feel the taste of the slightly burning fruit acid
and, as an effect, we start salivating and grimacing by reflex. After the
first bit, however, the fresh, sour taste seems pleasant. Digestion of the
experience triggered by the phrase bite into a sour apple [beleharap a
savanyú almába] happens by overlapping an experience stored earlier in
our memories; we are dealing with a colloquial metaphor, in which the
image (concrete unpleasant action) and the notional content indirectly
triggered by it (a reluctant approach to something) covers a large span,
but can easily be interpreted on the basis of one's everyday experience.

A significant group of idioms, the so-called somatisms, often have
double meanings. Somatisms are idiomatic expressions containing a
lexeme that specifies a part of the body. The shift from the concrete as-
pect to the abstract one is easy to trace in such expressions. It is noticed
that it is the government these expressions take that makes the distinc-
tion between the metaphorical reading and the actual one: one's head
hurts [fáj a feje] – one's head hurts because of something [fáj a feje
vmiért] 'be troubled about something'; one's heart hurts [fáj a szíve] –
one's hearts hurts for someone [fáj a szíve vkiért/vmiért] 'be longing for
someone'. The cognitive semantic trend, which is a hallmark of Lackoff-
Langacker, emphasizes the importance of the human body and the per-
ception of certain physiological processes in expressing abstract linguistic
content. They draw attention to the fact that from time immemorial the
most important point of reference of human beings has been themselves,
and support this with examples taken from the English language. Man
divided the world around him into binary oppositions, compared to his
own body: IN THE FRONT OF – BEHIND; UNDER – ABOVE; RIGHT –
LEFT; INSIDE – OUTSIDE etc. Consequently, it is not surprising that
the human body and visual recall of parts of it occur so often in idiomatic
expressions: to break someone's heart [összetöri a szívét vkinek] 'to make
somebody extremely sad by ending a romantic relationship with them';
without batting an eyelid [szemrebbenés nélkül] 'to not seem to be sho-
cked, surprised or embarrased'; rack one's brains [töri a fejét vmin] 'think
very hard for a long time' etc. We need to make a difference between
somatisms with an idiomatic sense and consolidated expressions contain-
ing the name of a body part, that are not used in an idiomatic sense, the
latter being called kinegrams. In kinegrams the image of the human
body occurs without the figurative sense. These expressions are mere lin-
guistic representations of generally known and conventional nonverbal

signals: shrug one's shoulders [megvonja a vállát], pull a face [ráncolja a homlokát], hold your head high [felemeli a fejét] etc.

In somatisms observation of the human body is expressed. Let's take a look at what associative connections semantic changes from concrete to abstract are based upon, with the help of the onomasiologic analysis of the concept of ANGER [HARAG].
Examples are given both in Hungarian and English, but are not necessarily exact equivalents.

Heat metaphors

The visual material of heat metaphors reflect how physical symptoms grow stronger together with the intensity of anger. Anger flaring up is accompanied by the color red and the sensation of heat, which can increase to the boiling point. Accumulated energy then will look for an escape and just like the steam of a boiling liquid, will explode its vessel, the human body. The emotional process abates when the angry person can in some way discharge energy generated by rage. Finally, just like steam evaporates, our anger vanishes, too.

elvörösödik mérgében /dühében / haragjában / indulatában
vörös a méregtől / dühtől / haragtól / indulattól
haragra gerjed / lobban / gyullad
haragra gerjeszt / lobban / gyújt
forr benne a harag /düh / méreg / indulat
haragot forral
felforr a vére / az agya / az epéje
majd szétveti a harag / méreg / düh / indulat
majd szétpattan 6 szétrobban a haragtól / dühtől / indulattól
majd megpukkad mérgében
mérges, mint a pulyka
kifújja / kiadja a mérgét / dühét / haragját
elpárolog a haragja
elszáll a haragja

go red with anger
see red
get red with rage
fly into a rage/passion/frenzy
get incensed/to inflame
blaze up
boil/seethe/simmer with anger

in a blaze of anger
go straight up in the air
explode with fury
boil over with rage
be fuming
give vent to one's fury
vent one's rage on somebody

Flood/storm metaphors
Rage in these expressions functions as an independent entity, that captures us regardless of our will, and sweep us away, just like a torrent or a gale does. Its elemental strengths are tangibly suggested by the image of a volcanic outburst or a foaming flood.

elönti / elfutja / elragadja a harag / méreg / indulat
kijön a sodrából – kihoz a sodrából
kiönti a haragját / mérgét / dühét
szabad folyást enged a haragjának / mérgének /dühének / indulatának
kitör belőle a harag / a méreg / a düh / az indulat
tombol haragjában / mérgében / dühében
tajtékzik a dühtől

to get a rise out of somebody
to rub somebody the wrong way
to take a rise out of somebody
get carried away by anger
an unresisted flow of anger
burst out with dash
flame out
to rave with fury
rave and storm

Digestion metaphors
These are images of a quiet, suppressed anger, and rage also functions as an independent entity, that slowly damages personality. Accumulated anger leads to physical sickness, nausea and disgust.

eszi a méreg
emészti a harag / az indulat
dúl-fúl haragjában / mérgében
torkig van
elönti az epe

to fume
to huff
to fret and fume
to be fed up with
to be sick of something

Absurd movements
An infuriated person can loose sontrol and be capable of absurd things

méregbe / dühbe gurul
a falra mászik haragjában
a plafonon van

to be off the handle
to bristle up
to fly off the handle
hit the ceiling
hit the roof

Aggressive acts

ökölbe szorul a keze
viszket a tenyere
földhöz vág
hajba kapnak
kitölti a haragját
ölre megy

grow savage
to knock down
to send somebody flying
to row
to come to grips with somebody

Crossing the limits, boundlessness

féktelen / feneketlen harag / düh / indulat
elveszíti a fejét
eszeveszetten dühöng

unbounded/boisterous fury/dash
rampage about/be on the rampage

Anger is an emotion accompanied by characteristic physical manifestations. These are well-known to all of us from our own experience: the angry person has a high blood pressure, his heart is beating faster, his body temperature is increasing, which means he is getting hot. The somatisms assigned to the concept of ANGER are formed in a similar way: as it came through in the examples mentioned before, within the base metaphor, idiomatic expressions form an organic system of images. The visual context reflects those partly universal, partly culturally specific associative processes, that are rooted in the experiences of our everyday life and rule our naive outlook on the world.

Not all fully assimilated compounds can be approached on the basis of our everyday experience, though. Language contains several set phraseological units that carry the traces of life, cultural conditions, habits and important events of old times. To understand the semantic structure of such pharases one needs to have knowledge of life in old times.

According to recent psycholinguistical research (Schweigert & Moates, 1988) the time it takes to process idiomatic expressions is not at all longer than time necessary to process lexemes. On the contrary, if an expression is used in its literal sense in an appropriate context, its processing takes longer than if we used it in the idiomatic meaning. Thus, idiomatic expressions are stored in our mental lexicons as simple lexemes. When we encounter a new idiomatic expression we attempt to establish a connection between semantic categories of the compounds and the meaning of the idiom as a whole. This is not always successful with the help of linguistic knowledge only. Consequently, when interpreting such a phrase we use all of our encyclopaedic knowledge and cognitive skills, especially the ones that enable us to grasp metaphors and follow associations.

The cognitive process of metaphorisation and metonymisation, on the other hand, that is of a reflective nature, makes us capable of naming an unknown thing, notion or phenomenon using the linguistic devices available, while we compare it to existing concepts. These mechanisms ensure the open, infinite character of language and, at the same time, render interpretation and learning of a language possible. Therefore, metaphors and metonyms are not artificially created, secondary rethoric devices, but basic structuring elements of the language. As stated by Jacques Lacan: 'the essence of language is that it is metaphorical and metonymical.' (Lacan, 1998)

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