

**Patterns of Idiomaticity in English, Italian and Romanian**

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**Abstract**

The paper starts from the idea that the meaning of words in such patterns of Idiomaticity is different from their individual meanings. They are at least delexicalized. This is the necessary correlate of co-selection. The selections are not independent, one selection depending on another. Consequently, there must be a result and effect on the meaning of idiomatic patterns as a whole.

**Key words:** idiomaticity, idioms, collocations

Starting from the idea that patterns of idiomaticity are closely related to the ‘national character’ of a language, to its stylistic peculiarities, the present paper aims at proving that there are quite numerous instances when the patterns of idiomaticity in different languages are similar or even identical.

To begin with, it should be pointed out that the meaning of the words used in patterns of idiomaticity is different from their individual meanings. Words are delexicalized and this is the necessary correlate of co-selection. Moreover, the selections operated at the semantic level are not independent, one selection depending on another. Consequently, there is a result and effect of the idiomatic patterns meaning as a whole.

However, “a view of idiomaticity which does full justice to the rich diversity of word combinations must recognize that the meaning of a combination may be related to those of its components in various ways and must also take into account the possibility of internal variation, or substitution of part for part” (Cowie, Mackin, McCaig 1993: XII).

The term *idiomaticity* is used to refer to the semantic property of an idiom, whereas the term ‘*idiematology*’ (Hartman 1981 apud Gläser 1988: 265) roughly corresponds to

phraseology, i.e. to the linguistic description of set expressions whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of their constituent elements. The lexical family is completed by the term '*idiomatic*' which refers to "the use of expressions that mean something different from the literal meanings of the words making up the respective expressions" (Lombardo, Haarman, Morley, Taylor 1999: 298).

In an attempt to describe idiomacity, linguists referred to this phenomenon in terms of 'transferred', 'isolated' or 'anomalous' meaning.

Mention should be made of the fact that the idiomacity of a word group is the result of a diachronic process of idiomatization, interpretation of context meanings and of the communicative functions of a set phrase compared to its possible variants. For example, the denotational idiomatic meaning of *wet blanket* (informal) is "a person whose low spirits or lack of enthusiasm has a depressing effect on the others". It also has an expressive connotation which implies a negative value judgement as derogatory and a stylistic connotation at the informal, colloquial level.

According to Fernando and Flavell (1981: 19 apud Gläser 1988: 270) there are 'varying degrees' of idiomacity correlating with different types of categories of idioms. Their classification of idioms is based on the degree of motivation, therefore on *semantic intelligibility*. A distinction is made among four categories of idioms:

1. **Transparent expressions**, such as *to cut the wood*, *to break the eggs*, which are not idioms, but free collocations with a literal meaning derived from the meanings of the constituent words;

2. **Semi-transparent idioms**, such as *to skate on thin ice*, *to add fuel to the fire*, which can be regarded as metaphors having a counterpart with a literal meaning

3. **Semi-opaque phrases**, such as *to burn one's boats*, *tarred with the same brush*, metaphor idioms which are not completely intelligible;

4. **Opaque phrases**, such as *to pull somebody's leg*, *to pass the buck* which are full idioms whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the component words.

This scale of idiomacity is not very useful and rather vague in that metaphors can hardly be separated from idioms (in classes 2 and 3), considering that metaphORIZATION (along with metonymy) is a general property of idiomacity (id. *ibid.*).

The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (1993) uses the term idiom with reference to all kinds of set expressions and provides a ‘top-down’ approach to idioms distinguishing four classes of such word groups:

1. **Pure idioms** - ‘petrified’ or ‘congealed’ phrases resulting from the process of idiomatization of a fixed word group: e.g. *kick the bucket, blow the gaff, carry coals to Newcastle*;
2. **Figurative idioms**, which are on the border of idioms, hardly allowing any variation: e.g. *to burn one’s boats, to beat one’s breast, to go to the dogs, to burn the candle at both ends*;
3. **Restricted collocations** (semi-idioms), combining one constituent with a transferred meaning and one with a literal meaning. Such collocations are possible variants of noun idioms with a certain collocational range: e.g. *a cardinal error/sin/virtue*;
4. **Open collocations**, which are free or loose syntactic structures with each constituent used in a common literal sense.

The grading of idiomacity (Weinreich 1972 apud Gläser 1988: 271) according to the semantic relationship of those constituents of a group which have a transferred, idiomatic meaning and those which have a literal meaning allows a different classification of idioms into three classes:

1. **Unilateral idioms**, which are made up of one self-explanatory constituent, e.g. *cold war, black market*;
2. **Bilateral idioms**, which are made up of two constituents having both transferred meaning, so that the meaning of the idiom cannot be derived from the meanings of its constituents, e.g. *early bird, white lie*;
3. **Multilateral idioms**, which cover such nominations and propositions as: *once in a blue moon, a bird in the hand or beggars cannot be choosers*.

The classifications provided cover only some of the most important aspects involved in the complex phenomenon of idiomacity. However, they have been chosen due to their usefulness for the purpose of the paper.

The impressive number and variety of domain-related idioms are factors which have conditioned and determined the selection of only one class of idioms, namely that of colour idioms, to serve my intention of pointing out similarities and dissimilarities between

patterns of idiomacity in English, Italian and Romanian. However, such an approach can be extended to any other domain-related idioms as well.

Colours are part and parcel of human life. People are surrounded by colours and not few are the instances when colours influence people's state of mind and heart. Colours are also important to people from the perspective of the things they symbolize. There are numerous situations when different cultures share the same view with respect to colour symbols. For instance, red is the colour commonly accepted as a symbol of love, white is the mark of purity and yellow is the colour symbolizing jealousy.

Common views on colours and on their significance are traceable not only at the level of human experience, but also at the linguistic level, and idioms are perfect illustrations of the similar or identical way in which colour terms are integrated and used in different language systems.

It should be mentioned here that, although the three languages under discussion, i.e. English, Italian and Romanian, have a series of colour idioms in common, the number of such word groups corresponding to the each of the colour terms analysed varies substantially from one language to another. (see appendix 1).

With respect to the integration of these idioms in the different classes suggested by the classifications provided, it should be pointed out that there are situations when the three languages under discussion share the same pattern of idiomacity, others in which only two languages have common idiomatic structures, and instances when certain idioms are singularly used in one of the three languages, proving thus the 'national character' of the respective patterns.

**Transparent expressions** and **semi-transparent phrases** are the most representative classes for the cases of shared patterns of idiomacity between English, Italian and Romanian. Idiomatic word groups such as: *a white night, to be as red as a (boiled) lobster, to be the black sheep of the family, to give green light, to have blue blood*, have the same representation and meaning in Italian and Romanian: *a white night* → *una notte bianca* → *noapte albă*, *to be as red as a (boiled) lobster* → *essere rosso come un gambero* → *a fi roșu ca un rac (fiert)*, *to be the black sheep of the family* → *essere la pecora nera della famiglia* → *a fi oaia neagră a familiei*, *to give green light* → *dare onda verde* → *a da undă verde*, *to have blue blood* → *avere il sangue blu* → *a avea sânge albastru/nobil*.

It is interesting to notice that the idiomatic pattern *to be as red as a lobster* and the corresponding Romanian structure may have the additional semantic feature [+ boiled]. Moreover, it also has variants in the three languages, such as: *as red as a beetroot/rose/turkey-cock* → *rosso come un peperone/ pomodoro* → *roșu ca sfecla/ sângele/ focul/ para focului* which are also frequently used by the speakers of the three languages.

Non-native speakers of one of these languages are unlikely to misuse such idiomatic structures because their structure is very similar or identical and the meaning can be derived from the meanings of their constituents.

There are also cases when *transparent phrases* are represented in a similar way only in two of the three languages. For instance, *to be as black as thunder* has a different representation and a rather limited collocational range in comparison with the Italian *essere nero come l'inchiostro/ il carbone* and the Romanian *a fi negru ca cerneala/catranul/ abanosul/ cărbunele/ fundul ceaunului/ noaptea/ păcatul/ corbul/ pana corbului/ smoala/ tăciunele*.

Furthermore, mention should be made of the fact that *semi-opaque phrases*, i.e. those metaphor idioms which are not completely unintelligible, are in most cases culture specific. Idiomatic structures such as: *a white lie, a white/ blue-collar worker/job, to be in the red* have a totally different representation in Italian or Romanian: *a white lie* → *una bugia pietosa* → *o minciună inocentă*, *a white/blue-collar worker* → *un impiegato/ un operaio* → *un funcționar/ muncitor*, *to be in the red* → *essere in debito* → *a avea datorii*. The same situation can be traceable when metaphor idioms such as: *il pericolo giallo, essere vivo e verde, accettazione in bianco* or *a aduna bani albi pentru zile negre* have to be rendered into English. However, the semi-opaque English idiom *black list* which means 'list of suspects' has formally and semantically equivalent structures both in Italian and Romanian: *la lista nera* → *lista neagră*.

There are instances when the semantic content of a word group is preserved in two of the three languages, but with a change in the colour term used. For example, the semi-opaque phrase *a blue film* may be translated into Italian by using a semantically equivalent structure, *un film a luci rosse*, but the colour terms used in the two languages are obviously different.

*Opaque phrases*, i.e. the full idioms whose meaning cannot be derived from the meanings of the component words, represent a challenge when different language cultures are brought into contact. The fact that the words making up such phrases are never used with the literal meaning makes their semantic decoding impossible for the non-native speakers. The number of colour-related opaque phrases used in English is quite high, but Italian and Romanian are also well represented:

**E:** a *white* elephant, to bleed somebody *white*, a *red* neck, a *red* tape/tapist, *blue* chip, *blue* funk, a bolt from the *blue*, once in a *blue* moon, to have the *blue* devils, a true *blue*, *black* dog, in someone's *black* books.

**I:** arte *bianca*, di punto in *bianco*, prendere il *bianco* per il *nero*, andare in *rosso*, essere al *verde*.

**R:** a merge/căuta până în pânzele *albe*, burtă-*verde*, a avea o bilă *neagră*.

Given the reduced semantic intelligibility of such idiomatic structures, special attention should be paid when transferring them from one language into another.

As suggested by Croitoru & Dumitrașcu (2006), colour idioms such as: *to be in the red*, *to be worth a red cent*, *to draw a red herring*, *to go into the red*, *to see red*, *green as grass*, *black and blue*, *to be in the black*, etc. have to be translated by using the **modulation strategy**, which allows the transformation of English structures into patterns or strings specific to Italian and Romanian. This differs from the translation of *transparent* and *semi-transparent phrases*, which has nothing to do with **modulation** due to the (partial) formal and semantic equivalence between the three languages.

Moreover, mention should be made that, irrespective of the types of idioms taken into consideration, translators need to have a well-developed phraseological competence. "They have to know the ready made phrases used in various registers in the language cultures brought into contact, as well as to match them and to evaluate them from a socio-linguistic point of view" (Croitoru, Dumitrașcu 2005).

The classification of idioms into *pure*, *figurative*, *restricted collocations* and *open collocations* is also worth taking into consideration, as it is a means of raising the speakers' awareness with respect to the degree of formal and semantic flexibility in the case of such word groups.

Considering the class of colour idioms, one should mention that idiomatic word groups such as: *to be caught red-handed, to have the blue devils, once in a blue moon, to be the pink of politeness/perfection, to see pink elephants, to show the white feather* are ‘petrified’ structures which allow no variation in English. Similarly, idiomatic word groups such as the Italian: *essere vivo e verde, essere al verde*, and the Romanian *a aduna bani albi pentru zile negre, a merge/căuta până în pânzele albe*, display the same rigidity, being considered *pure idioms*.

**Figurative colour idioms** are situated on the border of pure idioms, being structures which hardly allow any variation: e.g. *to have red ideas, to see the red light, to be blue with cold, to be a green hand*, etc., or *vedere tutto rosa, essere verde d’invidia, essere nella verde eta, a fi galben de invidie, vânăt de frig, negru de mânie*, etc.

In opposition with the first two classes, **restricted** and **open collocations** are more accessible to the speakers due to the fact that they have at least one constituent used with the literal meaning: *a red neck, a blue book, a blue-eyed boy, a blue film, the yellow press, a black list, the black sheep of the family*. From this point of view a parallel can be drawn between **restricted collocations** and **semi-transparent phrases** on the one hand, and between **open collocations** and **transparent phrases**, on the other.

To conclude, I should say that the existence of common patterns of idiomacity in English Italian and Romanian, i.e. languages of different origins, proves that idioms cannot always be regarded as strictly culture-bound elements. Moreover, they seem to be the result of a commonly shared human experience.

Although idioms’ accessibility is hindered in many cases by formal and semantic restrictions they represent an extremely interesting and valuable resource equally challenging for non-native linguists and common speakers.

## Appendix 1 – Colour idioms in English, Italian and Romanian

English	Italian	Romanian
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<p>a <b>white</b> Christmas, a <b>white</b> coffee, a <b>white</b>– collar work(er)/job, the <b>white</b> flag, a (little) <b>white</b> lie, a <b>white</b> night, a <b>white</b> paper, the <b>white</b> of the egg, <b>white</b> sale, <b>white</b> sauce, a <b>white</b> slaver, as <b>white</b> as a sheet/ghost/snow, to bleed somebody <b>white</b>, to go <b>white</b>, to show the <b>white</b> feather, to stand in a <b>white</b> sheet;</p>	<p>il <b>bianco</b> dell'uovo, il <b>bianco</b> dell'occhio, la fiera del <b>bianco</b>, una pagina <b>bianca</b>, arte <b>bianca</b>, una settimana <b>bianca</b>, uno spazio <b>bianco</b>, di punto in <b>bianco</b> , accettazione in <b>bianco</b>, cucitrice in <b>bianco</b>, un matrimonio in <b>bianco</b>, una notte in <b>bianco</b>, pesce in <b>bianco</b>, andare in <b>bianco</b>, dare il <b>bianco</b> a una casa, diventare <b>bianco</b> per la paura, essere <b>bianco</b> come un panno lavato, far venire i capelli <b>bianchi</b>, lasciare in <b>bianco</b> una parola, mangiare in <b>bianco</b>, prendere il <b>bianco</b> per il nero;</p>	<p><b>albul</b> ochiului, <b>alb</b> ca varul/zăpada/hârtia, noapte <b>albă</b>, steagul <b>alb</b>, zile <b>albe</b>, a aduna bani <b>albi</b> pentru zile negre, a merge/căuta până în pânzele <b>albe</b>, nici <b>albă</b> nici neagră;rasa <b>albă</b>;</p>
<p><b>yellow</b> gum, the <b>yellow</b> of an egg, the <b>yellow</b> press;</p>	<p>un film/libro <b>giallo</b>, il <b>giallo</b> dell'uovo, la febbre <b>gialla</b>, il pericolo <b>giallo</b>, un <b>giallo</b> irrisolto;</p>	<p>a se face <b>galben</b> ca ceara/ca făclia de ceară/ lămâia/ turta de ceară, <b>galben</b> de frică, mânie/spaimă ,<b>galbeni</b> venetici, friguri <b>galbene</b>, rasa <b>galbenă</b>, a i se face <b>galben</b> în fața ochilor;</p>
<p>a <b>pink</b>–collar work(er)/ job, the <b>pink</b> of politeness/ perfection, to be in the <b>pink</b> of condition, to be in the <b>pink</b> of health, to see <b>pink</b> elephants;</p>	<p><b>giallo rosa</b>, romanzo <b>rosa</b>, il mistero si è tinto di <b>rosa</b>, vedere tutto <b>rosa</b>;</p>	<p>a vedea totul în <b>roz</b>;</p>
<p>a <b>red</b> - brick university, the <b>red</b> carpet, a <b>red</b> herring, a <b>red</b> letter day, a <b>red</b> neck, a <b>red</b> rag, <b>red</b>, tape, a <b>red</b> tapist, not to be worth a <b>red</b> cent, to be <b>red</b> with anger, to be/turn as <b>red</b> as a beet/ beetroot/(boiled) lobster/rose/turkey-cock, to be in the <b>red</b>, to catch someone/ be caught <b>red</b>–handed, to draw a <b>red</b> herring, to go into the <b>red</b>, to have <b>red</b> ideas, to see <b>red</b>, to see the <b>red</b> light;</p>	<p>il <b>rosso</b> dell'uovo, un pesce <b>rosso</b>, un film a luci <b>rosse</b>, andare in <b>rosso</b>, essere <b>rosso</b> come un gambero/ peperone/ pomodoro, essere <b>rosso</b> di rabbia, vedere <b>rosso</b>, <b>rosso</b> di sera buon tempo si spera, la Croce <b>Rossa</b>, uova <b>rosse</b> ;</p>	<p><b>roșu</b> ca un rac fierț/ sângele/ focul/ para foculu/ sfecla/ gotca, Gărzile <b>Roșii</b>, Armata <b>Roșie</b>, ouă <b>roșii</b>, <b>roșu</b> cum e gotca</p>
<p>a <b>blue</b> book, a <b>blue</b> chip, a <b>blue</b> - collar work(er)/ job, a <b>blue</b>-eyed boy, a <b>blue</b> film/ movie, a blue jacket, a true <b>blue</b>, a in a <b>blue</b> funk, once in a <b>blue</b> moon, a bolt from the <b>blue</b>, out of the <b>blue</b>, to be <b>blue</b> with cold, till one is <b>blue</b> in the face, to disappear/ vanish/ go off in the <b>blue</b>, to have <b>blue</b> blood, to have the <b>blue</b> devils to scream/cry <b>blue</b> murder;</p>	<p>avere il sangue <b>blu</b>;</p>	<p>inimă <b>albastră</b>, a avea sânge <b>albastru</b>, tristețe <b>albastră</b>, a fi cam <b>albastru</b>;</p>
<p>a <b>green</b> belt, <b>green</b> hand, a <b>green</b> Christmas, <b>green</b> years, <b>green</b> as grass, to be <b>green</b>, to be <b>green</b> about the gills, to be <b>green</b> with envy, to give someone/get the <b>green</b> light, to have <b>green</b> fingers;</p>	<p>anni <b>verdi</b>, legna <b>verde</b> nella <b>verde</b> età, essere al <b>verde</b>, essere <b>verde</b> d'invidia, essere vivo e <b>verde</b>;</p>	<p>a fi <b>verde</b>, a spune <b>verde</b> în față, valet de <b>verde</b>, burtă-<b>verde</b>. a da undă <b>verde</b>, a vedea stele <b>verzi</b>, a visa cai <b>verzi</b> pe pereti, piele <b>verde</b>, femeie de <b>verde</b>, a i se face <b>verde</b> înaintea ochilor, adio si-un praz <b>verde</b>.</p>
<p><b>grey</b> matter, to go/turn <b>grey</b></p>	<p>cielo <b>grigio</b>, materia <b>grigia</b>, una vita <b>grigia</b>;</p>	<p>-</p>
<p><b>black</b> economy, <b>black</b> ice, a <b>black</b> leg, a <b>black</b> list, a <b>black</b> look, <b>black</b></p>	<p>disperazione <b>nera</b>, giornata <b>nera</b> pensieri <b>neri</b>, periodo <b>nero</b>, vedere</p>	<p>post <b>negru</b>, bursa <b>neagră</b>, lista <b>neagră</b>, magie <b>neagră</b>, a avea o bilă</p>



magic, a **black** mark, **black** market, the **black** sheep of the family, a **blackout**, a **blackspot**, as **black** as thunder, not as/so **black** as one/it is painted, in **black** and white, in someone's **black** books, to be **black** and blue, to be in the **black**, to swear **black** is white;

tutto **nero**, assumere dipendenti in **nero**, essere **nero** come l'inchiostro/ carbone, essere di umore **nero**, mettere **nero** sul bianco;

**neagră**, a fi oaia **neagră** a familiei, a fi **negru** ca cerneala/ catranul/ abanosul/ cărbunele/ fundul ceaunului/ noaptea/ păcatul/ corbul/ pana corbului/ smoala/ tăciunele, a vedea/a i se face **negru** în fața ochilor, a vedea totul in **negru**, **negru** pe alb, nici cât **negru** sub unghie, rasă **neagră**, a face albul **negru**, a avea- a- i fi inima **neagră**, a face cuiva zile **negre**;

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