

## 11 CONCLUSIONS AND MAIN RESULTS

### 11.1 Preliminary Remarks

According to one line of early phraseology research, idioms were considered to be a highly distinctive part, if not the innermost part of a language, which led to the idea that idioms of one language had no parallels in the idioms of other languages and that they were ultimately untranslatable. The idea that the figurative lexicon of a given language provides the basis for an idiosyncratic cultural worldview that mirrors some national-cultural character and mentality originated in national romantic thinking, which thought of nations as being identical to languages or cultural communities – something that even in Europe alone is nowhere the case.<sup>1</sup> This idea has largely been disproved and abandoned since. More recent studies have occasionally pointed to the fact that there are indeed extensive similarities among the figurative lexicons of several European standard languages. For example, there are more than one thousand idioms that are almost identical both lexically and semantically in German and Finnish,<sup>2</sup> and the number of such “similar idioms” in languages that are less distant geographically than German and Finnish is estimated to be much higher.

There has been little information so far, however, on the occurrences of nearly identical idioms across a larger variety of languages, and the results from the project “Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond”, which had access to idioms from 73 European languages, came as a surprise, both in terms of the amount of figurative units that are truly widespread – more than 380 idioms were identified to constitute a “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” – and in terms of the languages involved: it is not rare to see entries in this “Lexicon” that include idiom equivalents in 30, 40, 50 or more languages.

Only half of our collected data, 190 widespread idioms, could be discussed at length in the present volume. Any conclusions must therefore be considered preliminary until the second half of our widespread idioms has been analyzed in detail as well. In this book, we have looked at those widespread idioms that go back to identifiable textual sources and thus can be analyzed in terms of intertextuality. The following summary of the main results will focus on the issue of potential causes of the similarities of these

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Teliya et al. 1998, Wierzbicka 1997, 1999 for related ideas.

<sup>2</sup> Kari Keinästö (2010: 110) gained unexpected results by simply counting those idioms that are shared by German and Finnish.

idioms, their wide dissemination and related areal linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects.

By studying the idioms of this volume alone, it seems reasonable to assume that there is no mono-causality but that various factors are involved in the development of a certain uniformity of the idioms of European languages.

## 11.2 Attempts at Explaining Cross-linguistic Similarities of Idioms

The issue of common features in different languages has often been the subject of research. Cross-linguistic similarities can be encountered at all levels of the language and, therefore, can be discussed in a larger context. According to Comrie (1981) there are, in principle, four reasons for similarities between two languages:

First, they could be due to chance. Secondly, they could stem from the fact that the two languages are genetically related, and have inherited the common property from their common ancestor. Thirdly, the two languages could be in areal contact: one language could have borrowed the property from the other, or both could have borrowed it from some third language, either directly or through the mediation of yet other languages. Fourthly, the property could be a language universal, either absolute or a tendency. (Comrie 1981: 194)

For the present study, we want to reject reason one and four. Idioms of different languages which are identical simply by chance, so-called false friends, have been excluded from our data (cf. Section 3.1.1 and 3.2.4), and we cannot speak of “universals” in view of the small number of languages, less than 100 mainly European languages, we have analyzed.

Below, we will give a short overview of possible explanations of cross-linguistic similarities of idioms found in the literature on phraseology. The differences compared to the reasons listed by Comrie result from the semantic peculiarity of idioms, comprising literal and figurative meanings. There have been various attempts at explaining cross-linguistic similarities of idioms:

- (i) One attempt is the earlier view that *genetic affiliation* of the languages might have played a role.
- (ii) Recent observations of the increasing *influence of English* on many other languages of Europe have also been proposed.
- (iii) In the context of the “Europeanisms” or “internationalisms” that have been postulated (cf. Section 1.4), the so-called *common European cultural heritage* – which mainly focuses on classical, biblical, and literary

traditions – has often been quoted to explain lexical and semantic correspondences among idioms in several languages.

- (iv) *Polygenesis*, or spontaneous coinages of figurative units in various languages, has been put forward as another explanation.
- (v) Finally, the entire complex of phenomena associated with contact linguistics, i.e. *loan translations*, *calques*, *borrowings*, etc., is usually brought into play.
- (vi) Independent recourse of individual languages to *one single textual source* has been postulated almost exclusively for idioms of biblical origin.

In the following, let us take a closer look at these six approaches to potential explanations of the spread of idioms across a variety of languages and then check them against our data. We will exemplify these approaches specifically by means of the 60 most widespread idioms in the European languages and also consider them in the context of the sociolinguistic and areal linguistic situation in Europe.

#### (i) Genetic Affiliation

The first two causes considered for the wide distribution of idioms are not in line with historical evidence. Earlier ideas – which can occasionally still be found in recent studies – that the same genetic affiliation of two or more languages could be a factor disregard the fact that the origin of the majority of idioms does not go back to a common “proto-language” of an early past. As becomes obvious from the widespread idioms, the genetic affiliation does not influence the distribution of idioms: the areal distribution of the idioms cuts across genetic boundaries. None of our WIs are restricted to one language family (say e.g. Indo-European). Instead, it is even one of our definition criteria that WIs are represented in at least one other phylum (e.g. a Finno-Ugric or Turkic language), and they can often also be found in Maltese, Georgian or Basque.

#### (ii) Influence of English

The influence of English on many other languages of Europe, especially the adoption of lexical elements of modern Anglo-American provenance, has been observed for some decades and has also been referred to as a cause of the spreading of idioms across many languages.<sup>3</sup> A valuable contribution to this question was made by Görlach’s work on European Anglicisms (2001)

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<sup>3</sup> A representative of this view is Mokienko (1998), among others.

as it documented, for the first time, reliable facts about the actual circulation of recent English expressions, including idioms, from a broader viewpoint than that of only a few European languages (cf. Section 1.3). Görlach's compilation of more than 3,000 anglicisms shared by various European languages shows without doubt that the European languages become more similar to one another in particular areas of their lexis – most probably under the pressure of globalization, i.e. an increasing Anglo-American influence in economic, technological, and political terms, accompanied by an impact of English on other languages. To what extent this modern layer of cross-linguistic contacts, i.e. borrowings and translations from recent Anglo-American idioms, is involved in the uniformity of idioms across numerous languages, cannot be determined on the basis of Görlach's book. Although there is a large number of research papers on all kinds of anglicisms in individual European languages (Görlach's bibliography, 2002, lists no less than 1,409 titles), the influence of English idioms on other languages has almost never been the topic of systematic and multilingual research.<sup>4</sup> For the impact of globalization on proverbs see Mieder (2009c, 2010c).

The data dealt with in this volume contain one idiom, (D 12) *to have a skeleton in the closet/cupboard*, for which all informants agreed that the equivalents came into their languages only recently and were definitely loan translations of the English idiom. There was no such clear and unanimous statement for any other widespread idiom. Instead, most WIs discussed in this book (and in the remaining widespread idioms) show that the convergence of idioms across languages is a much older phenomenon and that the Anglo-American influence in this field can be regarded as rather weak. These findings may probably have to be revised somewhat if more research in this field would have been carried out.

A clear distinction must be made between the actual etymology of an idiom and the possibility of double borrowings or reborrowings in face of the increasing influence of the English language. The idiom *in a nutshell* 'concisely, in a few words' may serve as an example. The oldest instances of this idiom date from Roman antiquity, and it has been used in literary works of various languages for centuries. Its increased occurrence today, in texts of various languages, however, seems to be due to a reborrowing from Eng-

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<sup>4</sup> Investigations into the influence of English phraseology on the German language (Fiedler 2006, 2010), for example, have shown how expressions coined on the model of English idioms are becoming established in the contemporary German press and other published texts, e.g. calques based on *not to be one's cup of tea*, *in a nutshell*, *to pull the plug* or *at the end of the day* – there are no widespread idioms among these.

lish.<sup>5</sup> In order to show such a most recent layer of borrowings from English (often American English), substantial research would be required for each individual language. Such research would have to ascertain the earliest records of an idiom and carry out large-scale corpus analyses based on contemporary linguistic data. Idiom research is only just beginning to embrace this type of work.

### (iii) Common European Cultural Heritage

Similarities among the idioms of the European languages are often ascribed to a so-called “common European cultural heritage of classical and Christian provenance”, a concept that itself would require a precise explanation.<sup>6</sup> Included in this term are cultural traditions from antiquity, Christianity, biblical and Medieval Latin literature to Renaissance, Humanism, and the Enlightenment all the way to works of world literature. Indeed, large domains of our “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” could be subsumed under this term, especially the idioms discussed in Chapters 5 through 7. By contrast, works of world literature (Section 8.2) are not as important for widespread idioms as the concept of a “common European cultural heritage” would suggest.

Most probably, such a concept would not include literary works that were written *outside of Europe*, for example in North America or India, even though these works contributed a number of widespread idioms to our “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” (Section 8.3). Similarly, it is not evident whether this term is supposed to include post-classical figurative units that have evolved alongside the development of the individual European vernacular languages. The origins of widespread idioms such as (E 10) *to be armed to the teeth* or (E 13) *to wear the breeches (at home/in the family)* have never been attributed to this “European cultural heritage” (see Sections 9.2–9.4). Usually, verbal products of folklore, such as folk narratives, jests or legends have not been listed under this concept either, although these literary traditions have produced numerous widespread idioms. WIs like (F 24) *to fight like cat and dog* or (F 27) *to shed crocodile tears* stemming from these domains are usually categorized as “animal idioms”, not as originating from the “cultural heritage of folk literature” (cf. Sections 10.3–10.5).

<sup>5</sup> In his “Natural History” (7, 21), Pliny the Elder claims to have seen a copy of the Iliad which was so small that it would fit in a walnut shell (*in nuce*); cf. Brewer 2005: 707f; Fiedler 2010: 144f; see also the previous footnote, above.

<sup>6</sup> Researchers also refer to a *common West European heritage* with its core elements of antiquity, the Middle Ages, Reformation and Humanism, cf. Keinästö 2010: 109, among others.

Our central question, however, namely why it is precisely these idioms that were found to be widespread across various languages while many other idioms were not, cannot be answered on the basis of this concept. Surely, the reversal of the argument does not apply: there are thousands of further idioms in European languages that could be covered by the idea of a “common European cultural heritage” but that are by no means spread across any remarkable number of languages (cf. Sections 5.5 and 6.5). Thus, the term in question remains quite vague and it is of no use for our purposes.

#### (iv) Polygenesis

The idea that similar figurative units have come into being independently in various languages, is a serious factor in our study. This concept, which is also referred to as *analogous* or *parallel proverbs/idioms*, runs through proverb research almost from its beginning,<sup>7</sup> and we can touch on it only briefly here. It is likely that many more parallel figurative units that arose spontaneously in independent parts of the globe could be discovered if all of the more than 6,500 languages supposed to exist in the world were investigated in view of their figurative lexicon.

A good example comes from Inari Saami, spoken by an indigenous people in northernmost Europe: *tot ij tääidi kievâ kuullâd* “he will probably not hear the cuckoo”. This idiom often refers to a weak, sick reindeer who is presumed to die during the winter but also to a weak and sick person (Idström 2010: 169). It has clear parallels in other linguistic varieties, for example in a Low German dialect (Wml.): *he häört den Kuckuck nich mähr roopen* “he does not hear the cuckoo calling anymore” ‘he will die soon’ (Pirainen 2000: 2, 239). Both idioms can be interpreted as ‘he will not be able to hear the cuckoo’s call anymore because he will not experience the next spring’ and have evolved independently of each other.

Polygenetic origin as a cause of a wide dissemination of an idiom is most likely to be assumed for idioms that are predominantly based on common human experiences or general perceptions of the world. Moreover, it is due to polygenesis that even the earliest written texts may already share the same image, independently from one another, which later also appears in idioms of many modern languages. Let us recall idiom (C 15), *someone’s hair stands on end*. Its literal reading conveys a bodily experience, a feeling ‘as if one’s hair was standing up’. This bodily reaction to horror or fright is found in several ancient writings. Prominent texts like the “Book of Job”, the “Iliad”, and “Aeneid”, may have contributed to the wide spread of idiom equiv-

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<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon has been treated, among others, by Taylor (1931: 46) and Tallgren-Tuulio (1932: 292).

alents across at least 58 European languages, so that we can observe an interaction of multilayered intertextuality and natural experiences.

For most of our widespread idioms, however, polygenetic origin alone cannot be assumed to be the cause of their popularity. This is particularly true for idioms that show a very distinctive image across a variety of languages, such as (C 10), *a wolf in sheep's clothing*. Equivalents of this idiom could be found in 61 European and several non-European languages, and the idiom's origins are exclusively of an intertextual nature (namely from Aesop's fable and the Sermon of the Mount). Idioms whose roots cannot be identified as clearly in ancient or recent texts are more difficult to assess. Let us look at idiom (F 14), *to search for a needle in a haystack*, which also provides a well-elaborated image. Equivalents have been reported to exist in 60 European languages, showing a very consistent lexical and semantic structure. Therefore, we can exclude 'spontaneous coinages' in all of these languages. Things are different with, for example, an idiom like Vietnamese *mò kim đáy bể* 'to look for a needle on the seabed', which almost certainly has been coined independently of WI (F 14).

Apart from individual borrowings (see (v) below), we would suggest an intertextual link here as well. Most likely, idiom (F 14) alludes to a once popular folktale about a fool who was searching for a needle in a haystack or hay cart, although the textual source could not be definitely established (see (vi) below).

The idiom (F 8), *to fish in troubled/muddy waters*, has sometimes been placed in the context of 'polygenesis' and has been traced back to world knowledge about an old fisherman's trick of troubling the water in order to catch fish more easily (cf. Husarciuc/Bibri (2010: 334) and Āurčo (2007: 732). In view of the well-established textual source, an Aesopic fable, and the idiom's wide spread even in antiquity and across more than 50 current languages of Europe and beyond – with a very similar form and meaning –, 'polygenesis' cannot be the main cause but at best has an additional function in supporting the wide dissemination.

At this point, it is worth mentioning Perry's finding regarding narrative motifs, which also works for common figurative units: "A story, whether written or oral, is the creation of an individual mind. Individuality does not repeat itself; unless, conceivably, by a miraculous accident, comparable to finding two men with identical fingerprints" (Perry 1959: 17f).

#### (v) The Contact Linguistic Model

Many cross-linguistic studies share one explanation for the dissemination of idioms across several languages. They start from the well-known contact linguistic model of lexical transfer from one language to another (Weinreich

1953). According to this model, idioms of languages that are in close geographic and cultural contact to one another, especially in situations of bilingualism, are “wandering” across language boundaries. A language may adopt a new idiom by using it first as a calque, loan coinage or loan translation, before it then becomes conventionalized, i.e. transformed into a unit of the figurative lexicon of the new language.

Undoubtedly, this contact linguistic model can be used to explain the wide spread of idioms to a certain extent, particularly in view of the intensive cultural contacts across the languages of Europe, or to be precise, the contacts that the speakers of the various European languages maintained. It is well-known that there have been close cultural ties among scholars who spoke many diverse individual languages in different countries of Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, and Latin was the scholarly *lingua franca*. Alluding to Weinreich’s well-known work “Languages in Contact” (1953), Reiter (1991: 1) considers it “a fundamental ontological fallacy” to speak of convergence of languages on the ground that it is not *languages* that are in contact but *people* who strive for linguistic assimilation. From our research on widespread idioms, we would like to add that it was actually the educated, literate speakers who were in contact. Before the age of globalization, let alone that of digital literacy, any intense exchange of thoughts across geographically distant languages could only be based on the writing and reading of books, the exchanging of letters, etc.

However, we did not detect a “center”, a dominant source language from which the idioms would have found their way into all the languages under consideration. It is more likely that the contact linguistic model can be applied within the area of smaller regional distributions of idioms. We can assume that idioms are acquired from the more dominant or roofing languages by the smaller ones (e.g. from Finnish to Saami, from Lithuanian to Karaim, from English to the Celtic languages, from Italian to Sardinian, and so on). However, we must not draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of the linguistic data alone, which were collected synchronically by our surveys. Careful analyses within the philologies of all the individual languages, examining the idioms’ development from the earliest instance onwards, would be needed to answer questions as to how each individual WI was spread, how a donor language can be identified, and how an idiom can be judged to be a borrowed one.

The contact linguistic approach of explaining the reasons for the existence of widespread idioms should be seen, therefore, in the wider context of con-

tact-induced linguistic transfer and changes.<sup>8</sup> Phenomena of interference and borrowing, mutual influences, exchange, and balancing among languages have been well-known since the earliest documented written texts,<sup>9</sup> from various periods throughout the centuries where languages existed side by side in one multicultural area up to the present where there is talk of mixed languages and language mixing.<sup>10</sup> These omnipresent phenomena are well-known for all linguistic levels, and our research on widespread figurative units can be seen as a contribution to this huge field of research.

**(vi) Independent Recourse to the Same Textual Source**

Among the attempts of explaining the wide spread of idioms, there is yet one further consideration, namely the independent recourse of various individual languages to one single textual source. For idioms of biblical origin, there is usually no doubt that most of them go back to direct access to one of the diverse translations of the Bible into individual languages, and the contact linguistic model of borrowing has hardly ever been postulated for this group of idioms. However, as the documentation section of our “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” has shown, there are many other widespread idioms that also go back to once well-known texts, to writings of classical authors, fables, folktales, and other narratives, to literary works, and even to titles of books and movie films. For these widespread idioms, it may be true as well that they are not primarily or not exclusively borrowed from one language into the other in each individual case (cf. idioms C 10, F 14, and F 8 discussed above).

Since they clearly go back to one single source text, as is the case with biblical idioms, their use in many languages can best be explained in the same way: the individual languages may have independently derived these idioms from the texts that were once well-known in the individual language communities. Restricted regional borrowings – usually from major to minor languages (cf. (v) above) – may be additional factors for their broad dissemination. In many cases, a conclusion may be that it is not only the idioms that are spread across many languages but the texts themselves were widely dis-

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<sup>8</sup> Here we should mention the large-scale projects on loan words worldwide. For an overview of the abundance of borrowings across the languages of the world, see Haspelmath (2008) and Haspelmath/Tadmor (2009), among others.

<sup>9</sup> Early Sanskrit texts, for example, already reveal numerous non-Indo-European words which cannot be explained except by borrowing from neighboring languages (Burrow 1946). Another good example is the Greek-Latin contact situation of the ancient and early medieval world (cf. Leiw 2002; Adams 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Compare the mixed language debate (Matras/Bakker 2003), with Maltese as an example of a candidate for a mixed language (Stolz 2003).

eminated so that they both *caused* and *supported* the wide spread of the idioms.

### **11.3 The Most Widespread Idioms and Probable Causes of their Wide Spread**

As outlined above, it is not unreasonable to assume that the wide distribution of idioms cannot be attributed to one single cause. In order to answer our most challenging question about the reasons for WIs, we need to return to the observation that several potential causes have come together in bringing about truly widespread idioms and then try to find common tendencies. For the sake of simplicity, I would like to examine this issue in more detail by means of only a limited number of WIs, namely the most widespread ones. First, let us look more thoroughly at the six most widely disseminated idioms, represented in 62–69 European languages. After that, we will list the 60 most widespread idioms overall, against the background of their cultural foundation, i.e. the categories of textual sources from which they have been derived. The number of European languages that have been reported to use the idioms is given in square brackets. The final numbers of languages involved may vary slightly if more investigations are carried out, but they are nevertheless meaningful.

#### **The six most widely disseminated idioms:**

**(C 25) *night and day* [69].** It does not seem surprising that this idiom is among the most widespread because it combines everyday world knowledge and cultural knowledge: the fundamental, even universal human experience of the alternation of day and night that is behind the idiom, on the one hand, and the fact that it has been strongly established in cultural codes since earliest times, on the other (cf. idiom C 15, above, which reveals similar traits).

**(F 24) *to be/fight like cat and dog* [68].** The fact that this idiom is the second most widespread idiom across the European languages came as a real surprise. It occurs neither in the Bible nor in classical writings. Furthermore, the observation of the animals' behavior in nature as one explanatory factor of its popularity seems negligible because in reality, the two animals are not in competition for food nor do they actually squabble all the time. It is one of the old semiotizations in the European cultural area that cat and dog are considered to be prototypical related animals (like, e.g., dog and monkey in East Asia, cf. Section 10.5 and 10.6). In fact, the explanation of the wide distribution of this idiom lies in well-known narrative motifs about a dog and a cat who were friends at one point until certain events led to their enmity – motifs once widespread and richly documented across Europe.

**(C 26) to be someone's right hand [64].** In this case, all the potential causes of a wide distribution come together. The literal reading of the idiom contains strong symbolizations known since ancient times, even beyond the European cultural area, such as RIGHT carrying the meaning of 'good' and HAND/ARM acting as symbols of 'help'. The right hand is usually the more important hand, which means that this conceptualization is of physical origin, based on natural experience, and it has been handed down through literary traditions since Roman antiquity.

**(E 21) to play with fire [64].** The wide spread of this idiom was surprising as well. It has not been identified in the Bible or other ancient sources. Spontaneous coinage in several different languages seems to be a plausible cause, in conjunction with an old proverb that can be reconstructed from some vernacular languages from early modern times onwards, even though this proverb has not been established definitely.

**(B 23) to take someone under one's wings [62].** The literal reading of the idiom evokes a vivid image, that of a bird or more precisely a mother hen protecting her young by gathering them under her wings. This picture is rooted in observations of nature and used to be part of people's everyday experience. Most likely, it was this clear and memorable image which supported the popularity of the idiom. The actual causes of this popularity, however, are the famous verses in the Psalms and St. Matthew's Gospel.

**(C 14) to tear/pull one's hair out [62].** Various factors come together in this case. The literal reading of the idiom conveys a gesture of mourning, a violent reaction to deep despair, which used to be performed in the past and is found in various ancient writings. Prominent texts like the "Iliad" and the "Book of Job" may have contributed to the wide spread of idiom equivalents. Thus, we can observe an interaction of multilayered intertextuality, a culturally loaded gesture performed in the past, and natural experiences (cf. C 15 and C 25 above).

There are certain qualities that are shared by most of these six very widespread idioms. Apart from the second idiom (F 24), there is the combination of several strands of cultural traditions and fundamental human experiences (in idioms C 25, C 26, E 21, and C 14) or observation of nature (in B 23, accompanied by a highly comprehensible image). The examples show that – despite the heterogeneous manifestations of the widespread idioms – the analyses of their etymologies and underlying images can reveal at least some common features which may serve as explanations of their wide dissemination. Further findings may result from the list of the 60 most widespread idioms, now categorized according to their origins in textual sources and

chronological layers. The number of European languages involved here ranges from 46 to 69.

**The 60 most widespread idioms listed according to their textual origins:**

**A** Antiquity as a source is represented by five idioms out of 37:

(A 20) *to add fuel to the fire/flames* [59], (A 23) *to have one foot in the grave* [59], (A 16) *the lesser evil* [49], (A 17) *the die is cast* [49], (A 19) *to be all in the same boat* [48].

**B** The Bible as a source is represented by twelve idioms out of 42:

(B 23) *to take sb. under one's wings* [62], (B 3) *by the sweat of one's brow* [59], (B 20) *to wash one's hands of sth.* [54], (B 29) *to separate the wheat/grain from the chaff* [52], (B 34) *to build on sand* [52], (B 19) *to be a thorn in sb.'s eye/side* [51], (B 25) *a voice crying in the wilderness* [51], (B 35) *to bear one's cross* [51], (B 8) *the black sheep in the family* [49], (B 22) *to clench the teeth* [49], (B 40) *to cast the first stone* [48], (B 39) *to leave no stone unturned* [47].

**C** "Various Ancient Sources" are represented by 21 idioms out of 36:

(C 25) *night and day* [69], (C 27) *to be sb.'s right hand/arm* [64], (C 26) *from head to toe/foot* [62], (C 14) *to tear/pull one's hair out* [62], (C 10) *a wolf in sheep's clothing* [61], (C 9) *to swim against the current/stream* [58], (C 15) *sb.'s hair stands on end* [59], (C 24) *to be nothing but skin and bones* [59], (C 28) *\*to have got up with the left/wrong leg* [57], (C 2) *to be in seventh heaven* [56], (C 12) *to go through fire and water* [55], (C 23) *to prick one's ears* [55], (C 1) *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth* [53], (C 20) *to open sb.'s eyes* [54], (C 21) *to close one's eyes to sth.* [53], (C 22) *not to be able to hurt a fly* [52], (C 29) *to have a heart of stone* [50], (C 7) *to make a name for oneself* [48], (C 19) *to follow in sb.'s footsteps* [47], (C 8) *one's better half* [47], (C 35) *to be in one's element* [46].

**D** Post-classical literature as a source is represented by six idioms out of 21:

(D 5) *to tilt at windmills* [53], (D 15) *the moment of truth* [50], (D 1) *the beginning of the end* [50], (D 7) *a storm in a teacup* [48], (D 18) *the last of the Mohicans* [46], (D 20) *the tip of the iceberg* [46].

**E** Proverbial units of medieval and reformation times as sources are represented by ten idioms out of 23:

(E 21) *to play with fire* [64], (E 3) *to take the bull by the horns* [55], (E 22) *to show one's teeth to sb.* [54], (E 7) *to break the ice* [53], (E 9) *to beat one's head against a brick wall* [50], (E 5) *to buy a cat in the sack/a pig in a poke* [48], (E 2) *to be the fifth wheel on the carriage* [47], (E 17) *to go in at one ear and out at the other* [48], (E 20) *to reopen old wounds* [47], (E 10) *to be armed to the teeth* [46].

**F** Fables, tales, and legends as sources are represented by six idioms out of 31:

(F 24) *to be/fight like cat and dog* [68], (F 14) *to look for a needle in a haystack* [60], (F 30) *to lead a dog's life* [58], (F 27) *to weep/shed crocodile tears* [55], (F 25) *to play cat and mouse with sb.* [54], (F 8) *to fish in troubled/muddy waters* [51].

For a number of these 60 very widespread idioms, we can find the same explanatory factors as for the six most widespread ones analyzed above, but not for all of them. Some cases remain rather mysterious.

The idioms of group A can be looked at together with those of group C, which also go back to antiquity. Most of them have been derived from texts of the once very popular authors Horace, Cicero, Homer, and Vergil (cf. Section 5.5). In the same way, idioms of group B can be considered together with those of group C, which are rooted in verses of the Bible. Again, they can be traced back to the most popular texts, i.e. the Books of Moses and the Gospel of St. Matthews (Section 6.5). Additionally, several WIs of the groups A, B, and C reveal very impressive images (e.g. *to add fuel to the flames*, *to have one foot in the grave*, *to follow in sb.'s footsteps*, *not to be able to hurt a fly*) and/or are based on natural or bodily experiences (*by the sweat of one's brow*, *to clench one's teeth together*, *to be nothing but skin and bones*, etc.). Idiom (C 9), *to swim against the current/stream*, is a good example of the combination of these and further factors. It is used in a biblical text and in various Latin texts; it displays a very clear image, based on natural experiences, and it was promoted by the works of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Pieter Bruegel the Elder's famous painting.

Apart from (D 5), *to tilt at windmills*, the very widespread idioms of group D came as a surprise. One explanation for the spread of some of the idioms is the fact that they were endorsed not only by one author but by several more or less prominent people (*the beginning of the end*, *a storm in a teacup*), a quality that idioms of this group share with WIs of the other groups. In contrast to that, the most widespread idioms of groups E and F leave us at a complete loss; none of the factors mentioned so far can serve as convincing explanations for their wide use. Again, it is Erasmus (E 7) and Bruegel (E 9, E 10, F 8, F 14) who contributed to the popularity of these idioms, while their real backgrounds, proverbs and narratives once widespread, fell into oblivion and it would take thorough philological studies to rediscover them.

The contribution of the two prominent personalities Erasmus of Rotterdam and Bruegel the Elder to the uniformity of idioms across a large number of European languages now becomes more clear. Here follows an overview of their participation in the widespread idioms.

**WIs discussed in works of Erasmus of Rotterdam:**

(A 2), (A 3), (A 4), (A 5), (A 8), (A 10), (A 13), (A 14), (A 17), (A 19), (A 20), (A 21), (A 22), (A 23), (A 24), (A 25), (A 28) / (B 34) / (C 3), (C 4), (C 9), (C 11), (C 13), (C 19), (C 22), (C 25), (C 26) / (E 6), (E 7), (E 8), (E 12) / (F 1), (F 3), (F 6), (F 8), (F 14), (F 27), (F 31).

**WIs depicted in paintings of Bruegel the Elder:**

(A 9), (A 17) / (B 27), (B 33) / (C 1), (C 9), (C 18) / (E 4), (E 9), (E 10), (E 11), (E 12), (E 13), (E 14), (E 16), (E 18) / (F 1), (F 6), (F 8), (F 21).

As has been mentioned earlier, it was unpredictable which idioms would actually constitute the “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units”. The idioms of group E and F were the biggest surprises. Hardly any of the 60 extremely widespread idioms listed above were mentioned in connection with the discussion of so-called “internationalisms”, “Europeanisms” or even “universals” (cf. Section 1.3.3). Instead, the “classic Europeanisms” so often quoted, such as (A 8) *to sweep the Augean stables* or (A 4) *to suffer the torments of Tantalus* (both of which are only present in 34 European languages) are not among the top 60 most widespread idioms.

**11.4 Sociolinguistic and Areal Linguistic Aspects**

This leads us to consider the most widespread idioms (and the idioms of our entire “Lexicon”) from a *sociolinguistic* and an *areal-linguistic* viewpoint. The wide distribution across 50, 60 or more languages is, on the one hand, due to the fact that equivalents of the idioms are also known in most of the *lesser-used languages*. This means that these idioms do not belong to a high register of language, for which there would be no place in the non-official languages (as is the case with the two “educated” idioms from Greek mythology, (A 8) and (A 4), mentioned above). On the other hand, these very widespread idioms do not reveal significant *gaps in their areal distribution*. Several widespread idioms are missing in the Romance languages, which is enough to reduce the number of languages involved by a dozen or more (see below). Let us look at both of these phenomena in more detail.

Among the European languages of this study, there are 38 major or standard languages and 35 varieties that can be subsumed, for the most part, under “lesser-used languages” (cf. Section 4.5.2). Through our research on widespread idioms, we are able to provide information on the question as to what extent the figurative lexicon of these smaller languages shows similarities with that of the major languages. West Frisian and Upper Sorbian reveal the greatest consistency with the “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units”, while the endangered languages Inari Saami and Komi-Zyrian as well as Mari – which stem from cultural traditions that are very different from those of

most of the other European languages – are at the opposite end.<sup>11</sup> As the following overview shows, the two minor languages Inari Saami and Komi-Zyrian contributed to the “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units”, but only to some of the very widespread idioms. Most of these idioms include human experiences and observations of nature and/or can be clearly identified as borrowings from the standard languages. As above, the number of European languages involved is given in square brackets.

### Two minor languages involved in the wide spread of idioms:

#### Inari Saami

- (F 24) *eellid tegu kissá já peemuv* “to live like cat and dog” [68]  
 (E 21) *sierádid tuuláin* “to play with fire” [64]  
 (B 3) *pivástáh káálust/pivástáh uáivist* “sweats in the forehead/in the head” [60]  
 (C 12) *moonnâd veikâ tuulân kiännii peelest* “to go even into the fire for sb.” [54]

#### Komi-Zyrian

- (B 23) *босьтны кодӧскӧ ас борд улӧ* “to take sb. under one’s wing” [64]  
 (C 26) *веськыд ки* “the right hand” [64]  
 (C 14) *юрси нетикыны* “to tear one’s hairs out” [62]  
 (C 9) *ва паныд катны* “to swim against the stream” [58]

Often there are no equivalents in the declining languages North Frisian, Kashubian, the Celtic and the smaller Romance languages nor in the Permic and Volgaic languages of Northeastern Europe. As far as their idioms are concerned, most of these languages are not integrated into the European uniformity to the same degree as is the case with the standard languages. From the viewpoint of the “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” the Arabic dialects represented in our study are more “European” than these declining European varieties. We encountered 40 Arabic equivalents, most of them in Chapter 7 “Various Ancient Sources” and Chapter 10 “Fables, Folk Narratives and Legends” but also in the chapters on idioms of biblical, classical and other intertextual origins.

What is striking is not so much the frontier of the European continent to the outside, toward languages of North Africa and the Eurasian transition zone, but a boundary inside of the languages of Europe. It is the sociolinguistic division between the well-established standard languages with long literary traditions and the declining minor and minority languages.

Particularly interesting is the case of Basque, which looks back on independent cultural traditions that have lasted for centuries and nevertheless is

<sup>11</sup> The declining or almost extinct Cornish shows a similar picture, due to other causes. Cornish WI examples are: (C 25) *a ben dhe woles* “from top to bottom” [62], (C 22) *lymma an dhywscovarn* “to bare/prick one’s ears” [54], (C 21) *trelya lagas dall* “to close one’s eyes to sth. [52], (B 19) *bos dreynen y’n kyk* “to be a thorn in the flesh” [51] and (E 5) *prena cath yn sagh* “to buy a cat in a bag” [48].

represented in our “Lexicon” to some extent. Things are similar with Maltese. However, we cannot decide to what extent we are dealing with recent calques or borrowings here and would like to leave these issues to the experts in the field. We do not want to look into this subject in more detail but instead have a brief look at the areal situation.

Contrary to expectation, the languages spoken at the periphery of Europe (e.g. Icelandic, Finnish, Estonian, Maltese or Greek, even Armenian, Georgian and Turkish) are not marginal figures but central to the “European uniformity”, while several minor and minority languages in Central Europe are clearly outside of it. Our study includes, among other things, the Indo-European language families Germanic, Celtic, Romance, Baltic, and Slavonic (as well as the isolated languages Albanian, Greek, and Armenian). Out of these language families, the Slavonic languages mostly appear in perfect unity. Only occasionally is an idiom missing in one of the Slavonic languages (among them Kashubian, as outlined above). The Germanic languages show a similar picture; idioms of the smaller languages are less represented in our data. English idioms are missing in 20 of the 190 widespread idioms discussed in this book. The complete absence of the Celtic languages in many cases can be explained by the sociolinguistic factors already mentioned. The Baltic languages are fairly well represented; they are absent only in a few cases.

The situation is different with the West Romance languages, where we detected major gaps. The following overview lists those widespread idioms which are completely unknown or show big gaps in the West Romance languages and those WIs which show gaps in the languages of the Iberian Peninsula.

### **Overview of gaps in the West Romance languages:**

#### **Completely absent from the West Romance languages:**

(A 31) *the golden mean/middle way*, (D 4) *the tooth of time*, (D 19) *to go to the happy hunting ground*, (E 1) *to foul/befoul one's own nest*, (E 14) *to look through the fingers*, (E 23) *to catch/grasp at a straw*, (F 11) *to carry water in a sieve*, (F 31) *to be a red rag to a bull*.

#### **Big gaps in the West Romance languages:**

(A 12) *(to know) the place where the shoe pinches*, (B 19) *to be a thorn in sb.'s eye/side*, (B 41) *the scales fall from sb.'s eyes*, (F 10) *\*to do sb. a bear's service*, (E 4) *to fall between two stools*.

#### **Gaps in the languages of the Iberian Peninsula:**

(B 12) *to be groping in the dark*, (C 12) *to go through fire and water for sb.*, (C 17) *to throw/cast dust into sb.'s eyes*, (C 30) *to take something to heart*, (E 2) *to be the fifth wheel on the carriage*, (E 5) *to buy a cat in a sack/a pig in a poke*, (E 6) *to howl with the wolves*.

From this areal perspective, a comparison of our results with those produced by other Europe-wide oriented linguistic disciplines, especially by the Eurotyp project which focusses on Europe as a linguistic area, would be instructive. Findings of this large-scale research work on linguistic typology are based mainly on grammatical structures, morphologic and syntactic data from a large variety of European languages (cf. Section 1.2.2) and therefore can hardly be compared with our results gained from analyzing the figurative lexicon of many languages of Europe. It remains only to determine significant differences in terms of areal phenomena.

In the conclusion of his book on adverbial constructions in the European languages, van der Auwera (1998) postulates a specific European linguistic area. Based on five aspects in the field of adverbials, he outlines a “Charlemagne Sprachbund” including German, French, and Dutch at its core, Italian and Polish in a first outer circle, and English, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Sardinian as well as Slovene and Bulgarian in a second outer circle (van der Auwera 1998: 823–825). The concept of a European linguistic area was further developed in the framework of the Eurotyp project, based on a greater number of linguistic data. Revealing numerous common features in the European languages, this research has confirmed the existence of a European “Sprachbund” whose core is supposed to consist of French, German, Dutch, and northern Italian dialects (cf. König/Haspelmath 1999: 111–133, Haspelmath 2001: 1493–1501, among others). The idea of “core European languages” is discussed in various places, cf. e.g. Heine’s and Kuteva’s (2006: 7–10) overview of the assumption of Europe’s linguistic structure in terms of “a centre and a periphery”.<sup>12</sup>

It became apparent from the rich data of the different Europe-wide research projects that the domains of grammatical structures, on the one hand, and of figurative language – to the extent that the small section of idioms analyzed here can be considered representative – on the other, are organized in different ways. The West Romance languages, considered to belong to a “core Europe” from the viewpoint of structural linguistic disciplines do not always share the important similarities of the European languages in the realm of the figurative lexicon, while the Slavonic languages and other languages spoken in Southeastern Europe contribute greatly to the uniformity of the languages of Europe. We wanted to touch on these findings only briefly here. The cooperation of experts from different fields of research, notably linguistics in a broad sense, cultural history, classical philology, comparative folklore, etc. would be needed to deal with such complex issues.

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<sup>12</sup> For revised concepts of linguistic areas and “Sprachbund”, in particular, see Matras et al. (2006), Stolz (2006b), Tornow (2010: 69f).

### 11.5 Outlook

We have presented the data we collected with the help of many linguistic informants unabridged to make the wide distribution of these figurative units clear. We attempted to deal with them in the framework of the “Conventional Figurative Language Theory” (see Section 2.1.2) and consider the cultural background of each individual idiom, taking advantage of the “geographic-historical method” developed by significant Finnish folkloristic studies (cf. Kuusi 1956 among others; see Section 1.3.2).

The focus has been on issues of the nature of figurative language, the linguistic situation of Europe, and the cultural similarities among the languages of Europe in view of the figurative lexicon, but the results may also be useful for further questions both in terms of theory and applied linguistics. One possible benefit could be to adopt the notion of *widespread idiom* into phraseography: idiom dictionaries, especially bilingual ones, could give a brief reference to the (Europe-) wide spread of certain idioms. This might be instructive for cross-linguistic and other comparative studies, and even idiom teaching could profit from it. This book, therefore, is not to be regarded as the completion of a research project but as an encouragement to carry out further comprehensive work in this promising field including all kinds of figurative units of the lexicon.

The search for common features in the area of figurative language – among partly well-studied languages of Europe and beyond –, however, should not lead to neglect an even more important linguistic topic, i.e. the study of the figurative lexicon of those languages which are on the verge of extinction. According to Hale et al. (1992) at least half of the world’s languages will disappear forever within the present century, many of them without a trace.<sup>13</sup> Figurative units such as idioms are among the most vulnerable elements of language; they begin to vanish in the first phase of a language becoming endangered. The documentation and research on these “vanishing figurative units” is an even more urgent task for linguists in the future than is the study of widespread idioms in Europe and beyond.

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<sup>13</sup> Compare further standard works like Crystal (2000), Nettle/Romaine (2000), Harrison (2007, 2010) and the *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*. See Idström/Piirainen (2012) for more details.