

FIGURATIVE AWARENESS AND IDIOMATIC COMPETENCE IN THE BILINGUAL MENTAL LEXICON: EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH–ROMANIAN LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigates how bilingual learners represent and process idiomatic expressions across two languages, focusing on the relationship between idiomatic knowledge, figurative awareness, and translation strategies. The data were collected from 24 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in an English Studies programme in Romania (academic years 2023–2024), who completed a bidirectional idiom task requiring (a) the production of English and Romanian idioms, (b) identification of the figure of speech underlying each idiom, and (c) translation between English and Romanian. A total of 720 idiom tokens were analysed using a fine-grained coding scheme capturing figurative categorisation accuracy, translation strategy (equivalent, partial, literal, lexical, erroneous), and error type (metalinguistic, conceptual, literal, non-idiomatic).

The results reveal a systematic dissociation between idiomatic competence and figurative awareness. While participants frequently produced appropriate idiomatic equivalents in both translation directions, explicit identification of figurative mechanisms (e.g. metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy) was highly inconsistent and often inaccurate. Metalinguistic under-specification emerged as the dominant error type, alongside recurrent conceptual mismatches in Romanian–English translation. Importantly, higher figurative awareness did not reliably predict higher translation accuracy, suggesting that idioms may often be processed as unanalysed meaning units rather than as figuratively structured expressions.

The findings are consistent with usage-based and exemplar models of the bilingual mental lexicon, in which idiomatic meaning can be accessed independently of explicit figurative analysis. The study contributes empirical evidence from an under-researched language pair (English–Romanian) and highlights the need to distinguish between procedural idiom knowledge and metalinguistic figurative competence in bilingualism research.

Keywords: Bilingual mental lexicon; Idiomatic competence; Figurative awareness; Formulaic language; Idiom translation; English–Romanian bilingualism.

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1 Introduction

Idiomatic expressions constitute a persistent challenge for bilingual language users and have long occupied a central position in research on the mental lexicon, figurative language, and cross-linguistic representation. Idioms are conventionally defined as multiword expressions whose overall meaning cannot be fully derived from the meanings of their individual components (Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994; Moon, 1998). Their non-compositionality, cultural specificity, and frequent figurative grounding make them particularly informative for investigating how meaning is stored, accessed, and transferred across languages in bilingual minds.

Within bilingualism research, idioms have been approached from multiple perspectives, including lexical access (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Libben & Titone, 2008), cross-linguistic influence (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2002), and translation equivalence (Fernando & Flavell, 1981). A recurring question concerns whether idioms are processed as holistic lexical units or whether their figurative structure plays an active role during comprehension and production. This question becomes especially salient in bilingual contexts, where idiomatic meaning must often be mapped across languages that differ in figurative conventions, lexicalisation patterns, and cultural grounding.

Two broad theoretical positions dominate the literature. On the one hand, compositional and hybrid models argue that figurative structure—typically metaphorical or metonymic—contributes to idiom comprehension, particularly for transparent or decomposable idioms (Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs & Nayak, 1989). On the other hand, usage-based and exemplar models propose that idioms are primarily stored and accessed as conventionalised form–meaning pairings, with figurative motivation playing a limited or secondary role, especially for proficient speakers (Bybee, 2010; Wray, 2002). In bilingual speakers, these positions raise the further question of whether figurative awareness is necessary for successful idiom use and translation across languages.

Despite extensive research on idiom comprehension and processing, relatively little empirical work has examined the relationship between idiomatic competence and explicit figurative awareness. In much of the literature, figurativity is either assumed to be transparent to proficient speakers or inferred indirectly from performance measures, rather than being operationalised and tested as an independent variable. As a result, it remains unclear whether successful idiom processing in bilinguals necessarily entails explicit awareness of figurative structure.

This gap is particularly evident in research on idiom translation. While numerous studies have documented common translation strategies, such as the use of equivalent idioms, paraphrase, or literal translation (Baker, 2018; Fernando & Flavell, 1981), far fewer have examined whether the ability to identify figurative mechanisms is systematically related to translation accuracy. In other words, it is not yet well understood whether bilingual speakers who can explicitly categorise the figurative nature of idioms also demonstrate greater idiomatic competence in cross-linguistic transfer.

The present study addresses this issue by examining figurative awareness and idiomatic competence in a group of English–Romanian bilingual learners. Romanian is an under-researched language in bilingual idiom studies, despite its rich idiomatic inventory and partial overlap with English in metaphorical conceptualisations. Investigating this language pair allows for the exploration of both shared and divergent figurative patterns, as well as potential asymmetries in translation direction.

To this end, second-year undergraduate students enrolled in an English Studies programme completed a bidirectional idiom task requiring them to (a) produce idioms in English and Romanian, (b) identify the figure of speech underlying each idiom, and (c) provide translations between the two languages. This design makes it possible to examine three related but distinct components of idiom knowledge: idiomatic competence, explicit figurative awareness, and cross-linguistic mapping. By analysing patterns of accuracy and error across these dimensions, the study aims to clarify the extent to which figurative awareness is associated with idiomatic performance in bilingual learners.

Against this background, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent do English–Romanian bilingual learners accurately identify the figurative mechanisms underlying idiomatic expressions?
2. How accurately do they translate idioms between English and Romanian, and which translation strategies do they employ?
3. Is explicit figurative awareness related to idiomatic competence in bilingual idiom translation?
4. Do asymmetries emerge between English→Romanian and Romanian→English processing with respect to figurative awareness and translation accuracy?

Previous studies have documented successful idiom comprehension and translation in the absence of explicit figurative explanation, but have typically inferred figurativity indirectly from performance measures or have not required participants to explicitly categorise figurative mechanisms. As a result, it remains unclear whether successful idiom performance reflects implicit figurative knowledge, procedural lexical access, pedagogically acquired labels, or task-specific strategies. The present study addresses this limitation by requiring the co-presence of figurative categorisation and idiom translation within the same task, allowing direct observation of alignment and misalignment between the two. Under such conditions, a systematic dissociation constitutes evidence against accounts that treat explicit figurative awareness as a necessary component of idiomatic competence, without presupposing a specific processing architecture.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Idioms, figurativity, and lexical representation

Idiomatic expressions have long posed a challenge for theories of lexical representation because they combine conventionalised meaning with varying degrees of internal semantic and figurative transparency. Traditionally, idioms have been defined as multiword expressions whose meanings are not fully predictable from the meanings of their constituent parts (Nunberg, Sag, & Wasow, 1994). However, subsequent research has demonstrated that idioms differ substantially in their degree of semantic decomposability and figurative motivation, calling into question strictly holistic accounts.

Early psycholinguistic models treated idioms as fixed lexical entries accessed as whole units, independent of literal meaning (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988). From this perspective, figurative structure plays little role during online processing, and idiom comprehension proceeds via direct access to stored meaning. In contrast, compositional and hybrid models argue that at least some idioms retain internal semantic structure and are processed with reference to their figurative components, particularly when they are transparent or decomposable (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Titone & Connine, 1999).

A major contribution to this debate comes from work on figurative motivation. Gibbs (1994) argues that many idioms are grounded in conceptual metaphors and that speakers' knowledge of these metaphors facilitates idiom comprehension and use. According to this view, figurative structure is not epiphenomenal but constitutes an integral part of idiomatic meaning. Relatedly, Glucksberg (2001) proposes that metaphorical mappings contribute to meaning construction even in highly conventionalised expressions.

At the same time, usage-based approaches challenge the necessity of explicit figurative analysis for idiom processing. From a usage-based perspective, idioms are learned through repeated exposure and are stored as form–meaning pairings whose internal structure may become increasingly opaque over time (Bybee, 2010; Ellis, 2003). Wray (2002) similarly emphasises the role of formulaic language in reducing processing load, suggesting that idioms may be retrieved as prefabricated units without recourse to their figurative origins. These accounts predict that speakers can demonstrate high idiomatic competence even in the absence of explicit awareness of figurative mechanisms.

The tension between figurative motivation and holistic storage remains unresolved, particularly with respect to how idioms are represented in multilingual mental lexicons. This question becomes more complex in bilingual contexts, where idiomatic expressions must often be mapped across languages with different figurative conventions. It should be noted that strong figurative-motivation accounts do not necessarily predict uniform success in explicit categorisation tasks, particularly when figurative labels are pedagogically acquired rather than conceptually grounded. From this perspective, inaccurate or inconsistent figurative

labelling may reflect category instability or instructional conventions rather than absence of figurative knowledge per se. The present study does not deny the role of figurative motivation in idiom learning; rather, it highlights the methodological risk of treating explicit figurative awareness as a reliable proxy for idiomatic competence without direct empirical alignment between the two.

2.2 Idioms in the bilingual mental lexicon

Research on bilingual idiom processing has shown that idioms constitute a particularly sensitive domain for cross-linguistic influence. Early work by Irujo (1986) demonstrated that bilingual learners' ability to comprehend and produce idioms in a second language is influenced by the degree of similarity between idiomatic expressions in the two languages. Idioms with close cross-linguistic equivalents are generally processed more easily than those without direct counterparts, suggesting that bilinguals draw on shared conceptual or lexical representations when available.

Subsequent studies have confirmed that bilingual idiom processing is shaped by both language-specific and language-general factors. Liontas (2002) argues that idiomatic competence in a second language develops gradually and depends not only on linguistic proficiency but also on familiarity with culturally embedded figurative conventions. From this perspective, idioms are not merely lexical items but sites where linguistic, conceptual, and cultural knowledge intersect.

More recent psycholinguistic research has examined how bilinguals access idiomatic meaning online. Libben and Titone (2008) provide evidence that bilingual speakers activate both literal and figurative meanings during idiom processing, with relative activation modulated by proficiency, familiarity, and cross-linguistic overlap. These findings support hybrid models in which idioms are neither purely holistic nor fully compositional, but dynamically processed depending on contextual and experiential factors.

Importantly, however, much of this work focuses on comprehension and reaction-time measures, rather than on bilinguals' explicit knowledge about idioms. As a result, relatively little is known about how figurative awareness—understood as the ability to consciously identify and label figurative mechanisms—relates to idiomatic competence in bilingual speakers. In many studies, figurativity is treated as an explanatory construct rather than as an empirical variable in its own right.

2.3 Figurative awareness, metalinguistic knowledge, and idiomatic competence

The distinction between implicit linguistic knowledge and explicit metalinguistic awareness has been extensively discussed in second language acquisition research (Bialystok, 2001; Hulstijn, 2015). Bialystok (2001) argues that bilingualism enhances metalinguistic awareness in some domains, but this enhancement is neither uniform nor automatic. Similarly, Hulstijn (2015) distinguishes between procedural

knowledge used in fluent language use and declarative knowledge that supports conscious reflection on linguistic form.

Applied to idioms, this distinction raises the question of whether successful idiom use presupposes explicit knowledge of figurative mechanisms. While some studies suggest that awareness of metaphorical motivation can facilitate idiom learning (Boers, 2000), others indicate that idiomatic competence can develop independently of explicit figurative analysis, particularly through repeated exposure and usage (Wray, 2002; Ellis, 2002).

In bilingual contexts, the relationship between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence is further complicated by translation. Translation requires not only access to idiomatic meaning but also the ability to select appropriate equivalents or strategies in the target language. Research on idiom translation has identified a range of strategies, including use of idiomatic equivalents, paraphrase, and literal transfer (Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Baker, 2018). However, the extent to which these strategies depend on figurative awareness remains underexplored.

Crucially, few studies have systematically examined cases in which bilingual learners successfully translate idioms despite misidentifying or failing to identify the underlying figurative mechanism. Similar dissociations between idiomatic performance and explicit figurative awareness have also been observed in studies of English–Romanian learners (Popescu, 2015; Popescu, 2022). The present study addresses this issue by jointly examining figurative categorisation, translation accuracy, and error types in a bidirectional English–Romanian idiom task. This question is theoretically significant, as it bears directly on how idioms are represented in the bilingual mental lexicon. Demonstrating idiomatic competence in the absence of figurative awareness would support models in which idioms are stored primarily as conventionalised meaning units rather than as figuratively analysed constructions.

The present study addresses this gap by jointly examining figurative categorisation, translation accuracy, and error types in a bidirectional English–Romanian idiom task. By disentangling these dimensions, it aims to clarify the role of figurative awareness in bilingual idiom processing and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of idiomatic representation in the bilingual mental lexicon.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants were 24 second-year undergraduate students enrolled in an English Studies programme at a Romanian university during the 2023–2024 academic year. All participants were native speakers of Romanian and advanced learners of English, having received formal instruction in English for a minimum of ten years. Participation took place as part of regular coursework activities, and all data were anonymised prior to analysis.

3.2 Task and data collection

Data were collected through a written idiom task administered as part of regular coursework. The task required participants to complete two sections:

1. English → Romanian section: participants were instructed to write a list of 15 idiomatic expressions in English, identify the figure of speech expressed by each idiom, and provide a Romanian translation.
2. Romanian → English section: participants were instructed to write a list of 15 idiomatic expressions in Romanian, identify the figure of speech expressed by each idiom, and provide an English translation.

No restrictions were imposed on the choice of idioms, allowing participants to select expressions they considered familiar or salient. This open-ended design was chosen to elicit naturalistic representations of idiomatic knowledge rather than performance on a controlled test. Participants completed the task individually outside class time.

Only submissions containing all required components for both sections—namely, 15 idioms per language, an explicit figurative label for each idiom, and a translation into the other language—were included in the final dataset.

3.3 Dataset

The final dataset consisted of 720 idiom tokens produced by 24 participants, corresponding to 30 idiomatic expressions per participant (15 in English and 15 in Romanian). Only submissions containing all required components for both sections of the task—namely, idiom production, explicit identification of the figure of speech, and translation into the other language—were included in the analysis.

The dataset reflects the open-ended nature of the elicitation task. As a result, the idioms produced vary with respect to lexical form, figurative transparency, familiarity, and degree of conventionalisation. Individual idioms may occur only once in the dataset or may be repeated across participants. No attempt was made to control for idiom frequency, transparency, or cross-linguistic equivalence, as the aim of the study was to examine learners' naturalistic idiomatic choices rather than performance on a predefined or standardised set of expressions.

All idiom tokens were treated as analytical units for the purposes of descriptive analysis. The dataset was used to examine patterns of accuracy, error type, and translation strategy across the three dimensions of interest: idiomatic competence, explicit figurative awareness, and translation behaviour. Given the exploratory and descriptive scope of the study, the analysis does not aim at statistical generalisation beyond the participant group.

3.4 Coding scheme

All idiom tokens were coded along three analytical dimensions: figurative awareness, idiomatic competence, and translation strategy. Coding was applied at the level of individual idiom tokens and was based on participants' written responses.

Although the single-coder approach is methodologically appropriate for the study's descriptive aims, it nevertheless limits replicability and should be addressed in future work.

3.4.1 Figurative awareness

Figurative awareness was operationalised as the explicit ability to identify and label the figure of speech underlying each idiomatic expression. For each idiom produced, participants were asked to indicate the figurative mechanism involved. Responses were evaluated with reference to conventional figurative categories, including metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, and related figurative devices.

Figurative awareness was coded dichotomously as accurate or inaccurate. Responses were coded as accurate when the figurative label corresponded to the conventional classification of the idiom. Inaccurate responses included misclassification, underspecification (e.g. vague labels such as *figure of speech*), and omission of a figurative label.

Cases in which figurative identification was inaccurate but the idiomatic translation was appropriate were treated as instances of metalinguistic error, reflecting a dissociation between explicit figurative categorisation and idiomatic competence.

3.4.2 Translation strategy

Translations were coded into one of five categories:

- Equivalent (EQ): an established idiomatic equivalent in the target language.
- Partial equivalent (PAR): a non-idiomatic paraphrase preserving core meaning.
- Literal (LIT): a word-for-word rendering reflecting source-language structure.
- Lexical (LEX): a single-word or minimally idiomatic translation.
- Erroneous (ERR): a translation involving conceptual mismatch or incorrect meaning.

3.4.3 Error types

When figurative identification or translation was inaccurate, errors were further classified as:

- Metalinguistic errors (ET-META): incorrect or absent identification of figurative mechanisms.
- Conceptual errors (ET-CON): mismatches in meaning between source and target idioms.
- Literal errors (ET-LIT): inappropriate literal transfer.

- Non-idiomatic errors (ET-NONID): production of expressions not idiomatic in the target language.

3.5 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics were used to establish overall accuracy rates for figurative identification and translation strategies across both languages. Second, error distributions were examined to identify dominant patterns of metalinguistic and conceptual difficulty. Third, comparisons were made between English→Romanian and Romanian→English directions to explore potential asymmetries in idiom processing.

Relationships between figurative awareness and translation accuracy were examined at the token level, allowing for the identification of cases in which idiomatic competence was present despite inaccurate figurative categorisation.

4 Results

The results reported below are descriptive. Frequencies and percentages are used to characterise distributional tendencies within the dataset, without implying inferential claims or population-level generalisation.

Because multiple tokens were produced by the same participants, the distributions reported here should be interpreted as descriptive patterns rather than statistically independent observations.

The results are organised in accordance with the research questions and are based on 720 idiom tokens produced by 24 participants. Tokens are treated as analytical units for identifying recurrent patterns of alignment and misalignment between figurative awareness, translation strategy, and error type.

4.1 Figurative awareness accuracy (RQ1)

RQ1 examined the extent to which English–Romanian bilingual learners accurately identified the figurative mechanisms underlying idiomatic expressions.

Table 1. Overall accuracy of figurative identification

Figurative identification	Tokens	Percentage
Correct (YES)	403	56.0%
Incorrect (NO)	313	43.5%
Partial / unclear	4	0.5%
n/a	23	—

As shown in Table 1, figurative identification accuracy was moderate overall, with slightly more than half of all tokens (56%) correctly classified. However, a substantial proportion of idioms (43.5%) were accompanied by incorrect figurative labels. Errors typically involved overgeneralisation of broad categories such as *metaphor* or *personification*, or the use of non-analytic labels such as *idiom* or *idiomatic expression*, which were coded as metalinguistically insufficient.

4.2 Translation strategies and errors (RQ2)

RQ2 addressed how accurately learners translated idiomatic expressions between English and Romanian and which translation strategies they employed.

Table 2. Distribution of translation strategies

Translation strategy	Tokens	Percentage
Equivalent idiom (EQ)	437	60.7%
Partial equivalent / paraphrase (PAR)	162	22.5%
Literal translation (LIT)	40	5.6%
Lexical translation (LEX)	6	0.8%
Erroneous translation (ERR)	75	10.4%

As Table 2 shows, participants most frequently employed idiomatic equivalents (EQ), accounting for over 60% of all translations. Partial equivalents and paraphrases constituted just over one fifth of the data, while literal and purely lexical translations were relatively rare. Fully erroneous translations accounted for approximately 10% of tokens and typically involved conceptual mismatch rather than formal error.

4.3 Relationship between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence (RQ3)

RQ3 examined whether figurative awareness was associated with translation success.

Table 3. Figurative awareness \times translation success

Figurative identification	EQ	Non-EQ	Total
Correct	275	128	403
Incorrect	159	154	313
Partial / unclear	3	1	4

As shown in Table 3, correctly identified figurative tokens were more frequently translated using idiomatic equivalents than non-equivalent strategies. At the same time, a substantial number of idioms accompanied by incorrect figurative labels were nevertheless translated using idiomatic equivalents. Specifically, 159 idioms (22.1% of all tokens) were translated with idiomatic equivalents despite inaccurate figurative categorisation.

4.4 Directionality effects (RQ4)

RQ4 investigated potential asymmetries between English→Romanian and Romanian→English processing.

Table 4. Figurative awareness by language direction

Language	Correct	Incorrect	Partial
English	206	152	3
Romanian	197	161	1

Table 5. Translation strategies by language direction

Language	EQ	PAR	LIT	LEX	ERR
English	219	88	24	6	24
Romanian	218	74	16	0	51

Figurative identification accuracy was comparable across languages, with no strong asymmetry between English and Romanian. Translation strategies likewise showed similar proportions of equivalent and partial translations in both directions. A higher number of erroneous translations was observed in Romanian→English translation.

4.5 Illustrative examples

The examples discussed below are selected illustratively rather than exhaustively and are intended to highlight recurrent patterns of figurative awareness, translation strategies, and error types observed across the dataset.

A. Correct figurative awareness without idiomatic translation

(1) P01 (EN)

Source idiom: *bite the bullet*

Figure identified (student): *metaphor (correct)*

Learner translation: *a înghiți momeala*

Translation strategy: *ERR (ET-CON)*

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher)¹: *a strânge din dinți*

Although the learner correctly identifies the figurative nature of the English idiom, the Romanian translation reflects a conceptual mismatch. While *bite the bullet* conventionally denotes enduring hardship with resolve, *a înghiți momeala* refers to being deceived or trapped, invoking a different underlying scenario. This example illustrates a conceptual error (ET-CON): figurativity is preserved, but idiomatic

¹ Target equivalents are provided by the author for illustrative purposes.

meaning is misaligned. The case demonstrates that correct figurative awareness does not guarantee successful idiomatic mapping across languages.

(2) P15 (EN)

Source idiom: *A dime a dozen*

Figure identified (student): *metaphor* (correct)

Learner translation: *un ban pe duzină*

Translation strategy: ERR (ET-CON)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *pe toate gardurile/drumurile / la tot pasul*

The learner correctly recognises the metaphorical nature of the English idiom but produces a literal calque (*un ban pe duzină*) that is not idiomatic in Romanian. While the intended meaning (“something very common”) is explicitly stated by the student, it is not realised through a conventionalised Romanian idiom. This constitutes a conceptual error (ET-CON), as idiomatic meaning is understood but mapped through an inappropriate figurative structure. The example further supports the dissociation between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence, showing that recognising metaphor does not ensure access to language-specific idiomatic conventions.

(3) P14 (EN)

Source idiom: *As cool as a cucumber*

Figure identified (student): *simile* (correct)

Learner translation: *la fel de liniștit ca un castravete*

Translation strategy: **LIT (ET-LIT)**

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *de un calm imperturbabil / calm ca o zi de vară / foarte calm* (depending on whether an idiomatic or paraphrastic equivalent is preferred)

The learner correctly identifies the idiom as a simile and demonstrates clear understanding of its intended meaning (“remaining calm and composed”). However, the Romanian translation is a word-for-word rendering that does not correspond to any conventional Romanian idiom. This constitutes a literal transfer error (ET-LIT), where figurative structure is preserved formally but fails pragmatically. The example illustrates that even when figurative awareness and semantic comprehension are both present, idiomatic competence may still be constrained by language-specific conventionalisation.

(4) P10 (RO)

Source idiom: *A fi un ghimpe în coaste*

Figure identified (student): *metaphor* (correct)

Learner translation: *to be a thorn in someone's ribs*

Translation strategy: ERR (ET-CON)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *to be a thorn in someone's side / to be a constant annoyance*

The learner correctly identifies the Romanian idiom as metaphorical and demonstrates clear understanding of its intended meaning (“a constant annoyance”). However, the English translation reflects literal structural transfer (*thorn* → *ghimpe*; *ribs* → *coaste*), resulting in a non-conventional expression. Although the learner subsequently supplies an acceptable paraphrase (*to drive someone up the wall*), the initial translation reveals a conceptual error (ET-CON), whereby figurative meaning is accessed but mapped onto an inappropriate target-language construction. This example illustrates how close cross-linguistic imagery can encourage calquing, even when a well-established idiomatic equivalent exists in the target language.

B. Idiomatic translation despite inaccurate or absent figurative identification

(5) P10 (EN)

Source idiom: *At arm's length*

Figure identified (student): *idiom* (incorrect / non-analytic)

Learner translation: *la o aruncătură de băț*

Translation strategy: EQ (ET-META)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *la o aruncătură de băț*

In this case, the learner fails to identify the underlying figurative mechanism of the English expression, classifying it simply as an “idiom” without further metalinguistic specification. Nevertheless, the Romanian translation is fully idiomatic and pragmatically appropriate. This constitutes a case of metalinguistic error (ET-META) without impact on translation success. The example provides strong evidence for the dissociation between explicit figurative awareness and idiomatic competence, suggesting that idiomatic meaning can be accessed and transferred accurately even in the absence of analytic figurative categorisation.

(6) P02 (RO)

Source idiom: *A ști ca pe Tatăl Nostru*

Figure identified (student): *(none)* (incorrect)

Learner translation: *to know it like the back of your hand*

Translation strategy: EQ (ET-META)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *to know something like the back of your hand*

In this example, the learner does not identify any figurative mechanism underlying the Romanian idiom, leaving the figurative category unspecified. Despite this lack of explicit figurative awareness, the English translation is fully idiomatic and accurately conveys the intended meaning (“to know something completely”). This constitutes a metalinguistic error (ET-META) without impact on translation success. Together with Example (5), this case provides strong evidence that idiomatic competence can operate independently of explicit figurative categorisation in the bilingual mental lexicon.

(7) P13 (RO)

Source idiom: *A bate apa în piuă*

Figure identified (student): *idiom* (incorrect / non-analytic)

Learner translation: *to flog a dead horse*

Translation strategy: EQ (ET-META)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *to flog a dead horse*

In this example, the learner classifies the Romanian expression simply as an “idiom”, without identifying any specific figurative mechanism. Despite this metalinguistic under-specification, the English translation is fully idiomatic and pragmatically appropriate. This constitutes another case of metalinguistic error (ET-META) without consequences for translation accuracy. Together with Examples (5) and (6), this case reinforces the finding that idiomatic meaning can be accessed and transferred successfully even in the absence of explicit figurative awareness.

C. Directionality and conceptual error in Romanian → English translation

(8) P07 (RO)

Source idiom: *A ajunge la sapă de lemn*

Figure identified (student): *definition* (incorrect)

Learner translation: *he's gone to the woodshed*

Translation strategy: ERR (ET-CON)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *to hit rock bottom / to be reduced to poverty*

In this example, the learner provides a definitional explanation (“a ajuns sărac”) rather than identifying a figurative mechanism, indicating the absence of explicit figurative awareness. Although the learner initially suggests *to hit rock bottom*, the final translated sentence employs *he's gone to the woodshed*, which does not conventionally express the meaning of severe material deprivation in English. Instead, *to go to the woodshed* typically evokes punishment or reprimand rather than poverty. This constitutes a conceptual error (ET-CON), where the learner accesses a figurative expression in the target language but maps it onto an inappropriate semantic domain. The example highlights the difficulty of Romanian → English idiom translation when figurative meaning is inferred pragmatically rather than anchored in conventionalised idiomatic knowledge.

(9) P08 (RO)

Source idiom: *A vinde castraveți grădinarului*

Figure identified (student): *metaphor* (incorrect/underspecified)

Learner translation: *to pull the wool over one's eyes*

Translation strategy: ERR (ET-CON)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): *to teach one's grandmother to suck eggs*

In this example, the learner correctly recognises that the Romanian expression is figurative, identifying it broadly as a metaphor. However, the English translation

reflects a conceptual mismatch. While *a vinde castraveți grădinarului* refers to offering expertise or goods to someone who already possesses them, *to pull the wool over one's eyes* denotes deception. Although both idioms involve interpersonal interaction, they draw on distinct conceptual domains (redundant instruction vs. deception). This constitutes a conceptual error (ET-CON), illustrating how partial semantic overlap can mislead learners into selecting an inappropriate idiomatic equivalent in the target language, particularly in Romanian → English translation.

D. Non-idiomatic source expressions

(10) P06 (RO)

Source idiom/expression: *A căpa din zbor*

Figure identified (student): *metaphor* (incorrect)

Learner translation: *to catch from flight*

Translation strategy: ERR (ET-NONID)

Target idiomatic equivalent (researcher): (*none – non-idiomatic expression*)

(*Closest paraphrase: to seize an opportunity unexpectedly, to manage by chance*)

This example represents a case of non-idiomatic production (ET-NONID). The Romanian expression *a căpa din zbor* is not a conventionalised idiom in standard Romanian, but rather a non-standard or idiosyncratic formulation, possibly influenced by analogy with other idiomatic patterns. The learner nevertheless treats it as a metaphorical idiom and attempts a literal English translation (*to catch from flight*), which does not correspond to any established English idiom. This case differs qualitatively from literal or conceptual errors in that the source expression itself lacks idiomatic status, making successful translation impossible. Notably, errors of this type were attested only in Romanian, suggesting that learners rely more heavily on hearsay and informal exposure when producing L1 idioms, whereas English idioms are more likely to be validated through dictionaries or instructional sources.

These examples illustrate that (i) accurate figurative awareness does not ensure idiomatic competence, (ii) successful idiomatic translation can occur in the absence of explicit figurative categorisation, and (iii) translation direction and language-specific conventionalisation strongly condition error patterns. The qualitative evidence thus reinforces the quantitative findings and preserves the idiomatic richness of the data.

4.6 Summary of results

Across the dataset, figurative identification accuracy was variable and frequently inaccurate in both English and Romanian. Errors in figurative categorisation included misclassification, underspecification, and omission of figurative labels. These patterns were observed across participants and idioms.

By contrast, a majority of idioms were translated using idiomatic or near-idiomatic equivalents. Successful translations were attested both when figurative identification was accurate and when it was inaccurate or absent. Token-level

comparisons showed that correct figurative identification was more frequently associated with idiomatic translations, but that idiomatic equivalents were also produced in a substantial number of cases involving incorrect figurative categorisation.

With respect to directionality, figurative identification accuracy was comparable across English and Romanian. Differences between translation directions were more apparent in translation outcomes, with a higher number of erroneous translations occurring in Romanian→English translation than in English→Romanian translation.

5 Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence in English–Romanian bilingual learners by jointly analysing figurative categorisation accuracy, translation strategies, and error types within a bidirectional idiom task. In doing so, it addressed a longstanding question in idiom research: whether successful idiom use and translation presuppose explicit awareness of figurative mechanisms. The findings indicate that, in the context examined here, idiomatic competence does not consistently depend on stable or accurate figurative categorisation.

5.1 Idiomatic competence without stable figurative awareness

One of the most salient findings of the study is the systematic misalignment between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence. Although figurative identification accuracy was moderate and characterised by frequent misclassification, participants nevertheless translated a majority of idioms appropriately, often using established idiomatic equivalents. This pattern is consistent with usage-based and exemplar models of lexical representation (Wray, 2002; Bybee, 2010), which propose that idioms are primarily stored and accessed as conventionalised form–meaning pairings rather than as figuratively analysed constructions.

Because the task explicitly prompted reflection on figurative form and was completed under off-line, reflective conditions, the observed misalignment cannot be attributed to lack of opportunity for metalinguistic analysis. Instead, the persistence of idiomatic competence despite inaccurate or absent figurative categorisation under these conditions suggests that explicit figurative awareness is not consistently required for successful idiom use. Figurative motivation may play an important role in the diachronic emergence of idioms, but it does not necessarily remain cognitively salient for language users during comprehension or translation.

These findings align with previous research showing that speakers can process and use idioms fluently without conscious access to their figurative underpinnings (Swinney & Cutler, 1979; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988), as well as with recent case-study evidence from Romanian learners indicating that successful idiom

interpretation does not necessarily entail explicit figurative analysis (Herteg, 2022). In the bilingual context examined here, idiomatic meaning appears to be accessible even when learners are explicitly prompted to reflect on figurative form.

5.2 Metalinguistic under-specification and overgeneralisation

Errors in figurative identification were dominated by metalinguistic under-specification, particularly the use of non-analytic labels such as *idiom* or the overgeneralisation of broad categories such as *metaphor* and *personification*. This pattern suggests that participants possess an awareness that idioms are “figurative” in a general sense, but lack stable conceptual boundaries between different figurative mechanisms.

This finding resonates with Bialystok’s (2001) distinction between linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness. While bilingual experience may enhance sensitivity to language structure in some domains, explicit categorisation of figurative mechanisms does not appear to develop automatically as a consequence of advanced language proficiency. The results further support Hulstijn’s (2015) distinction between procedural knowledge, which underlies fluent language use, and declarative knowledge, which supports conscious reflection on linguistic form. In the present study, procedural idiomatic knowledge was clearly more developed than declarative figurative knowledge.

5.3 Translation strategies and conceptual mapping

The predominance of idiomatic and near-idiomatic translations indicates that participants were generally successful in mapping idiomatic meaning across languages. At the same time, the occurrence of conceptual errors—particularly in Romanian–English translation—highlights the role of language-specific conventionalisation in bilingual idiom processing. Even where figurative motivation appears broadly similar across languages, idiomatic meaning does not always align straightforwardly, and learners may rely on partial semantic overlap or surface similarity when selecting translations.

Importantly, many successful translations occurred despite inaccurate figurative categorisation, reinforcing the view that translation decisions are guided primarily by access to stored idiomatic meaning rather than by explicit analysis of figurative structure. This finding extends previous work on idiom translation strategies (Fernando & Flavell, 1981; Baker, 2018) by showing that figurative awareness and translation success are not tightly coupled in advanced bilingual learners.

5.4 Directionality effects and the bilingual mental lexicon

Directionality effects were observed primarily in translation accuracy rather than in figurative awareness. While figurative categorisation accuracy was broadly

comparable across English and Romanian, Romanian–English translation yielded a higher proportion of conceptual errors. This asymmetry is consistent with previous findings that production in a second language places greater demands on lexical selection and conventionalisation than translation into the first language (Irujo, 1986; Liontas, 2002).

From the perspective of the bilingual mental lexicon, this pattern is compatible with the view that idiomatic representations may be asymmetrically entrenched across languages. While idiomatic meaning can be accessed in both directions, selecting an appropriate target-language idiom requires familiarity with language-specific conventions that may be less firmly established in the non-native language. Importantly, this difficulty does not appear to stem from differences in figurative awareness, further underscoring the relative independence of figurative categorisation from idiomatic competence.

An additional asymmetry emerged in the form of non-idiomatic source expressions, which were attested exclusively in Romanian productions. This suggests that learners may rely more heavily on informal exposure when producing L1 idioms, whereas English idioms are more likely to be mediated by instructional or lexicographic sources.

5.5 Implications for models of idiomatic representation

Taken together, the findings of this study are consistent with models of the bilingual mental lexicon in which idioms can be accessed and translated without stable or accurate explicit figurative analysis. While figurative motivation may contribute to idiom transparency and learning in some cases, it does not appear to be a necessary component of idiomatic competence in the bilingual context examined here. These results challenge approaches that implicitly assume a close alignment between figurative awareness and idiom processing and highlight the importance of treating these constructs as empirically separable.

By demonstrating that bilingual learners can use and translate idioms successfully without being able to reliably articulate their figurative structure, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of idiomatic representation and processing. It suggests that future research should distinguish more carefully between figurative awareness as a metalinguistic skill and idiomatic competence as a component of lexical knowledge.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between figurative awareness and idiomatic competence in English–Romanian bilingual learners by analysing figurative categorisation accuracy, translation strategies, and error patterns in a bidirectional idiom task. In doing so, it addressed the question of whether explicit awareness of

figurative mechanisms is a necessary condition for successful idiom use and translation in bilingual contexts.

With respect to RQ1, the results showed that figurative awareness, operationalised as analytic figurative categorisation, was variable and frequently inaccurate across both languages, even among advanced learners. Errors predominantly involved metalinguistic under-specification and overgeneralisation of broad figurative categories. In contrast, findings related to RQ2 indicated that participants were generally successful in translating idioms, most often employing idiomatic or near-idiomatic equivalents, with relatively few literal or purely lexical translations.

Addressing RQ3, token-level analyses demonstrated that figurative awareness and idiomatic competence were only partially aligned. While accurate figurative identification increased the likelihood of idiomatic translation, a substantial number of idioms were translated successfully despite inaccurate or absent figurative categorisation. This pattern indicates that explicit figurative awareness is not consistently required for idiomatic competence in the bilingual learners examined here.

With regard to RQ4, directionality effects emerged primarily in translation outcomes rather than in figurative awareness. Figurative categorisation accuracy was comparable across English and Romanian, whereas Romanian–English translation yielded a higher incidence of conceptual errors, pointing to greater challenges in target-language idiomatic selection in the non-native language.

Taken together, these findings contribute to ongoing debates on idiomatic representation by providing systematic empirical evidence that metalinguistic figurative awareness and idiomatic competence are empirically separable dimensions of bilingual lexical knowledge. The results are compatible with usage-based and exemplar approaches, in which idioms can be accessed and mapped across languages as conventionalised meaning units without stable reliance on explicit figurative analysis. At the same time, the study does not make claims about online processing or representational architecture, but remains grounded in descriptive evidence from production and translation data.

Several limitations should be noted. The study relied on a relatively small, intact cohort and an open-ended task design, prioritising ecological validity over experimental control. In addition, coding was conducted by a single researcher. Future research could extend this approach through multi-coder designs, controlled stimuli, or online processing measures, and by examining whether explicit instruction in figurative mechanisms affects idiomatic competence over time or across different language pairs.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of distinguishing between knowing how to use idioms and knowing how to analyse them. Treating figurative awareness and idiomatic competence as related but distinct components of bilingual lexical knowledge offers a more accurate account of idiom use in bilinguals and opens new avenues for investigating figurative language across languages. The contribution of the study is therefore conceptual and methodological rather than

predictive, calling into question how figurative awareness is operationalised and interpreted in idiom research.

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