

# Understand our student's idiomatic phrase?

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**Abstract-** The teachers of German should have their work *close at heart, day and night, and should be as busy as bees*, because, contrarily, they will start *mincing words* and their students will *pretend innocence*.

Idiomatic expressions are a very important segment in each and every language. They enable the users of a particular language *to read between lines* and they also highlight the profound cultural features of that language. This paper makes an attempt to put to the foreground that specific small segment of linguistics, culture and national feature of a foreign language, or more precisely, it tackles the case of the Macedonian learners of the German language.

The analysis is carried out on a corpus comprising books assigned as additional reading materials to students who study the German language. In fact, the selected books are primarily analyzed from the perspective of the incidence of idiomatic expressions in them, which is subsequently followed by conducting a survey which targeted students of German who, upon their graduation, would work as teachers of German. The aim of the survey is to test students' understanding of the meaning of some idiomatic expressions as well as the ways in which students go about interpreting them in the additional reading materials that have been assigned to them.

At the end of the paper the obtained results are being presented and commented on. The conclusion highlights the necessity of teachers undertaking a creative approach on their way towards achieving one of the most crucial goals in teaching German as a foreign language which refers to both vocabulary and enabling students to communicate effectively in German. The attempts to translate German idiomatic expression into Macedonian face us with the fact that in that respect in these two languages there are absolute equivalents, semi-equivalents as well as unpredictable idiomatic expressions which could also be treated in the teaching process by providing descriptions and explanations of their meanings.

**Index Terms-** equivalents, idiomatic expressions, intercultural communication, teaching German, semi-equivalents

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the process of teaching German as a foreign language in the Republic of Macedonia, the Education Development Bureau at the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia has set some general and specific goals.

"Bearing this in mind, students who have successfully completed this subject will be able to:

- communicate in German in everyday life as well as in academic context;

- communicate in German in a specifically directed context of general-educational and mundane character;
- to develop personal skills necessary for their successful functioning as citizens in a democratic society."<sup>1</sup>

In order for students to be able to communicate in everyday and academic context, they should have acquired a certain vocabulary load. In fact, the concrete goals of the 7th component, Vocabulary2, within the curriculum of teaching German proposed by the Education Development Bureau point to the fact that students should enrich their vocabulary by learning new meanings of the already acquired words as well as new words and expressions necessary for taking active participation in communication. This also involves enabling students to make use of bilingual dictionaries.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference<sup>3</sup>, the vocabulary needed for reaching B1 level amounts to 3 500 words<sup>4</sup>. In this context, one should also take into consideration the idiomatic expressions, which although are expected to be mastered at B2 level, yet should be introduced much earlier, i.e. at the lower levels of education. The need for dealing with idiomatic expressions is especially pronounced in the process of teaching the German language as a second language in the second year of high school education<sup>5</sup>.

The 8<sup>th</sup> component, dubbed *Culture*, highlights that "the actual goal of the culture component is to enable students to acquire knowledge and understanding of the socio-cultural characteristics of other countries via vocabulary content and communicative models. This is important as it will ensure building positive attitude towards contributing to both one's own and other people's culture which, in turn, will boost mutual understanding and cooperation ...". In this context, there are examples provided which explicitly advocate the usage of "sayings, proverbs, riddles, idioms and collocations"<sup>6</sup>. According to Friedrich the idiomatic expressions are a specific type of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bro.gov.mk/docs/gimnazisko/zadolzitelniPredmeti/NastavnAprograma-Germanskijazik-I-GO-vtor.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://bro.gov.mk/docs/gimnazisko/zadolzitelniPredmeti/NastavnAprograma-Germanskijazik-II-GO-vtor.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.europaischer-referenzrahmen.de/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://dafdiesunddas.wordpress.com/2012/09/19/empfohlene-stunden-pro-niveaustufe/>

<sup>5</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://bro.gov.mk/docs/gimnazisko/zadolzitelniPredmeti/NastavnAprograma-Germanskijazik-II-GO-vtor.pdf>

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expressions whose meaning differs from the meaning of the individual words they are composed of<sup>7</sup>.

This is the main reason why idiomatic expressions should be included in teaching German as a foreign language and why their meaning should be brought closer to students so that they would be able to understand them and use them when they use German. For instance, let's consider the idiomatic expressions: *die Katze im Sack kaufen* ('buy a cat in a sack'), *eine harte Nuß knacken* ('crack a tough nut') and *durch den Kakao ziehen* ("drag sb through cocoa"). These expressions have nothing to do with cats, nuts or cocoa, in fact, they refer to something completely different. The fact that 'buying a cat in a sack' is, in fact, buying something which the buyer is unfamiliar with; then, 'cracking a tough nut' is overcoming some great, and 'dragging sb. through cocoa' is making fun of somebody, is what makes these expressions idiomatic expressions<sup>8</sup>. Hypothetically, if one is unfamiliar with these idiomatic expressions, he/she may start wondering where the cat, the nut and the cocoa are.

## II. THE LAYOUT OF THE RESEARCH

One of the goals for achieving successful communication in a foreign language is undoubtedly vocabulary acquisition which on its part could be a very complex task. The teacher's approach to reaching this goal could vary considerably depending on a host of factors: the teaching material used in the teaching process; the course books approved for teaching German; the additional materials at teachers' disposal; the creative approach of the teachers themselves in teaching the new vocabulary; how and to what extent the teachers use dictionaries in teaching German and whether they instigate their students to use dictionaries in the process of learning the language etc. Students' vocabulary could not be enriched solely by their attending lectures and writing homework, but also by a lot of other additional activities (e.g. reading texts, short stories, tales, novels, watching films, doing exercises provided online by the publishing houses such as Hueber, Klett-Langenscheidt, Cornelsen etc.) introduced by their teachers or instigated by the environment they live in.

However, with reference to the acquisition of vocabulary which is necessary for everyday communication according to the common goal for learning German in the process of teaching German, one should not lose sight of the fact that the idiomatic expressions should be taken into a very serious consideration. The importance of mastering these word formations in German<sup>9</sup> is especially significant for everyday communication, whereas the opposite tendency can lead to major obstacles in the intercultural communication.

Irrespective of whether we are discussing press, personal correspondence, everyday conversations etc., idiomatic expressions play a major role. The more idiomatic expressions

one knows, the more one is up to date and capable of understanding a text or a conversation completely<sup>10</sup>.

This paper analyzes the acquisition of vocabulary, i.e. of idiomatic expressions present in the extracurricular literature – reading materials intended for A2/B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference. Thus, the corpus subjected to analysis here comprises the following:

1. "Der Mond war Zeuge" Ein Fall für Patrick Reich DaF-Lernkrimi A2/B1 Volker Borbein und Marie-Claire Lohéac-Wieders Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2009
2. "Tödlicher Irrtum" Ein Fall für Patrick Reich DaF-Lernkrimi A 2/B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2009
3. "Das Missverständnis" Großstadtgeschichten DaF-Lektüre A2/B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2013
4. "Die Spur führt nach Bayern" Ein Fall für Patrick Reich DaF-Lernkrimi A2/B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2009
5. "Tödliches Testament" Ein Fall für Patrick Reich DaF-Lernkrimi A2/B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten und Thomas Ewald Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2011
6. "Der letzte Kuss" Ein Fall für Patrick Reich DaF-Lernkrimi A2-B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten und Thomas Ewald Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2010
7. "Großstadtliebe" Großstadtgeschichten DaF-Lektüre A2/B1 Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten Cornelsen Verlag Berlin 2012

The analysis was carried out from two distinct perspectives a) an analysis of the books (literary works and crime novels intended for learning the German language as a foreign language) and b) a survey conducted among students who have read these selected literary works assigned to them as homework.

More precisely, the corpus consists of literary works assigned as additional reading materials to students of German at the Faculty of Education – Bitola. All these books are intended for A2/B1 linguistic level according to the Common European Framework of Reference.

## III. THE RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The analysis of the books yielded the results presented on Table 1 below. In fact, the table depicts the titles of the analyzed books, the names of the authors, the genres of the analyzed books, the number of pages of each book and the number of idiomatic expressions present in them. The idiomaticity of the identified idiomatic expressions has been verified by consulting Friedrich's *Idiomatics* and Herzog's *Idiomatic Expressions A-Z*.

<sup>7</sup> W. Friedrich, *Moderne deutsche Idiomatik*. München: Sprachen der Welt Hueber Verlag, 1976, p.7

<sup>8</sup> W. Friedrich, *Moderne deutsche Idiomatik*. München: Sprachen der Welt Hueber Verlag, 1976, p.7

<sup>9</sup> V. Ilieva, *Die Wichtigkeit der Redewendungen im Deutschunterricht*. 2014, submitted for publication.

<sup>10</sup> A. Herzog, *Idiomatische Redewendungen von A-Z*. Langenscheidt, 1993

	titles	authors	genre	no. of pages	idiomatic expressions
1.	„Der Mond war Zeuge“	Volker Borbein und Marie-Claire Lohéac-Wieders	DaF-Lernkrimi	47	4
2.	„Tödlicher Irrtum“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten	DaF-Lernkrimi	47	2
3.	„Das Missverständnis“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten	DaF-Lektüre	47	3
4.	„Die Spur führt nach Bayern“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten	DaF-Lernkrimi	47	4
5.	„Tödliches Testament“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten und Thomas Ewald	DaF-Lernkrimi	47	4
6.	„Der letzte Kuss“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten und Thomas Ewald	DaF-Lernkrimi	47	10
7.	„Großstadtliebe“	Volker Borbein und Christian Baumgarten	DaF-Lektüre	48	7

**Table 1**

What follows is a presentation of the idiomatic expressions detected in the analyzed books as well as their meanings according to Friedrich's *Modern German Idiomatics* as a highly relevant source of idiomatic expressions in German:

1. **Der Mond war Zeuge** (a crime novel): *die Nase voll haben* (p.12), *Gespenster sehen* (p.18), *nicht aus dem Kopf gehen* (p.20), *ins Schwarze treffen* (p.34).
2. **Tödlicher Irrtum** (a crime novel): *aus dem Weg räumen* (p.25), *über alle Berge sein* (p.25).
3. **Das Missverständnis (novel)**: *die Übung macht den Meister* (p.8), *etwas auf dem Herzen haben* (p.15), *wie Schuppen von den Augen fallen* (p.36).
4. **Die Spur führt nach Bayern** (a crime novel): *auf den Geschmack kommen* (p.7), *Gespenster sehen* (p.19), *dicht auf den Fersen sein* (p.31), *das Handwerk legen* (p.37).

5. **Tödliches Testament** (a crime novel): *sich einen Ruck geben* (p.11), *unter die Lupe nehmen* (p.25), *wie ein Häufchen Elend aussehen* (p.30), *seinen Augen nicht trauen* (p.36).
6. **Der letzte Kuss** (a crime novel): *die Schnauze halten* (p.8,19), *wie ein Häufchen Elend aussehen* (p.8), *sich näher kommen* (p.10), *Gespenster sehen* (p.19,21), *etwas in der Tasche haben* (p.26), *die Schnauze halten* (p.27), *ein Stein vor Herzen fallen* (p.37), *seinen Augen nicht trauen* (p.38).
7. **Großstadtliebe** (novel): *mit sich und der Welt zufrieden* (p.4), *stellt auf den Kopf*(p.4), *sitzen geblieben*(p. 11), *siehst Gespenster*(p.26), *im siebten Himmel*(p.32), *Himmel und Hölle*(cmp.35), *aus heiterem Himmel*(p.39), *im Stich gelassen* (p.39).

German idiomatic expression	explanation provided by Friedrich or Herzog <sup>11</sup>	Macedonian equivalent
<i>die Nase voll haben</i>	<i>etwas satt haben, nicht mehr wissen wollen von etwas</i> S.335 F	преку глава му е ("head over heels")
<i>Gespenster sehen</i>	<i>Dinge sehen, die gar nicht da sind</i> S.158 F	гледа духови ("seeing ghosts")
<i>nicht aus dem Kopf gehen</i>	<i>immer an etwas (oder jemanden) denken (müssen)</i> S.265 F	не му излегува од глава ("to get sb out of one's head")
<i>ins Schwarze treffen</i>	<i>genau das Richtige sein, großen Erfolg haben</i> S.433 F	погоди право в срце ("to hit sb straight in the heart")
<i>aus dem Weg räumen</i>	<i>(Hindernisse, j-n usw., beiseite schieben</i> S.528 F	си го исчисти теренот ("to sweep out of the way")
<i>über alle Berge sein</i>	<i>(längst) verschwunden sein</i> S.49 F	замина во белиот свет ("the big white world")
<i>etwas auf dem Herzen haben</i>	<i>eine Bitte (oder Beschwerde) haben, die man nicht leicht ausspricht</i> S.210F	има нешто на срце ("to have smth at heart")

<sup>11</sup> A. Herzog, *Idiomatische Redewendungen von A-Z*. Langenscheidt, 1993

<i>wie Schuppen von den Augen fallen</i>	<i>von jemandem plötzlich klar erkannt werden S.429 F</i>	<i>ме фати</i> ("The scales fell from my eyes.")
<i>auf den Geschmack kommen</i>	<i>allmählich Gefallen finden an etwas S.156 F</i>	<i>пополека дојде на моето</i> ("to acquire a taste for it")
<i>dicht auf den Fersen sein</i>	<i>jemanden verfolgen S.121 F</i>	<i>Зад петици е</i> ("to be at sb's heels")
<i>das Handwerk legen</i>	<i>jemanden daran verhindern, etwas Schlechtes zu tun S.194 F</i>	<i>му ги врза рацете</i> ("to put a stop to sb.'s activities")
<i>sich einen Ruck geben</i>	<i>sich zusammennehmen, sich überwinden, energisch etwas anfangen S.390 F</i>	<i>Се надмина себе си и започна нова работа</i> ("to make an effort")
<i>unter die Lupe nehmen</i>	<i>etwas sorgfältig prüfen, exakt beurteilen S.306 F</i>	<i>гледа нешто под лупа</i> ("put under a microscope")
<i>wie ein Häufchen Elend aussehen</i>	<i>ein Mensch der völlig verzweifelt, verängstigt dasitzt S.196 F</i>	<i>изгледа како мизерија</i> ("to look like a picture of misery")
<i>seinen Augen nicht trauen</i>	<i>etwas so Überraschendes sehen, dass man es nicht glauben kann S. 31F</i>	<i>не си верува на сопствените очи</i> ("can't believe one's eyes")
<i>die Schnauze halten</i>	<i>den Mund halten (aber viel grober) S.420 F</i>	<i>да ја затни муцката</i> ("shut up")
<i>sich näher kommen</i>	<i>mit jemandem menschlich vertraut werden S.332 F</i>	<i>се здужија</i> („to close up on sb.,“)
<i>etwas in der Tasche haben</i>	<i>etwas sicher haben S.482 F</i>	<i>го пикна в џеб</i> ("to put smth. in one's pocket")
<i>ein Stein vo Herzen fallen</i>	<i>jemand fühlt sich durch das, was er gehört hat, sehr erleichtert S. 462 F</i>	<i>му падна камен од срце</i> ("to take a load of sb's mind")
<i>auf den Kopf stellen</i>	<i>völlig verdrehen, entstellen S.263 F</i>	<i>Газ преку глава</i> ("upside down")
<i>sitzen bleiben</i>	<i>nicht in e-e höhere Klasse versetzt werden S.446 F</i>	<i>Кепна</i> ("to stay down (a year)")
<i>im siebten Himmel sein</i>	<i>von den Gefühlen höchsten(Liebens)Glücks erfüllt sein S.214 F</i>	<i>е на седмо небо</i> ("be over the moon")
<i>Himmel und Hölle in Bewegung setzen</i>	<i>alles Erdenkliche tun, alle Möglichkeiten versuchen S.214 F</i>	<i>мртвите од гроб да ги станиш</i> ("to move heaven and hell")
<i>aus heiterem Himmel</i>	<i>völlig überrraschend, ohne dass jemand etwas Böses ahnte S.214 F</i>	<i>од ведро небо</i> ("out of the blue sky")
<i>im Stich lassen</i>	<i>jemanden bei einer Gefahr verlassen S.446 F</i>	<i>го остави на џедило</i> ("leave sb. in the lurch")

The analysis of the students' survey suggests that the meaning of some of the idiomatic expressions was not difficult to deduce and the students could immediately come up with their Macedonian equivalent. However, arriving at the meaning of some of the other idiomatic expressions was not that straight forward and the students resorted to literal word by word translation and, eventually, ended up misinterpreting the meanings of the idiomatic expressions. The survey was conducted as a homework assignment as it is assumed that since students have reached B1 and B1+ level have already mastered the idiomatic expressions in the course of their primary and secondary education.

The assignment set in the survey was conceptualized in three separate stages. Firstly, the students were asked to read out the idiomatic expressions listed in a table; then, they were asked to translate them into Macedonian, i.e. to find their Macedonian equivalent. Finally, on the basis on the information about their exact location in the sentences or the paragraphs they were asked to state whether they understand the idiomatic expression in the context or not.

The processing of results of the survey was organized in several categories:

- A) Idiomatic expressions which have been correctly translated and interpreted by providing a Macedonian equivalent;

- B) Idiomatic expressions whose meaning has been understood but no Macedonian equivalent has been provided;
- C) Idiomatic expressions whose knowledge has not been understood and no Macedonian equivalent has been provided.

Out 15 surveyed students and 25 idiomatic expressions included in the survey, 375 entries have been processed -198 entries in the category A, 122 entries in the category B and 55 entries in the category C.

Some of the idiomatic expressions (“be over the moon”, “be at sb’s heels”, “to take a load of sb’s mind”, “out of the blue sky”, “to be close at sb’s heart”, “not believe one’s eyes” etc.) were completely identical in both German and Macedonian. Some of the idiomatic expressions (“get one’s foot in the door”, “looks like a wet blanket”, “shut up”, “have something in the bag”) were correctly interpreted but no Macedonian equivalent were provided by the students. The last category referred to the idiomatic expressions whose meaning was unclear to the students and for which the students were not in a position to offer any Macedonian equivalent idiomatic expressions (“it gets better and better”, “falls like a curtain in front of one’s eyes”, “one’s hands are tied”).

The third and the last part of the assignment involved reading the entire sentence or a paragraph and trying to deduce the meaning of the idiomatic expressions from the context. The results of the survey showed that in the case of 27 entries the context proved to be completely unhelpful in clarifying the meaning of the idiomatic expression.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On the basis of this research it could be concluded that Macedonian learners of the German language could easily recognize the meaning of those idiomatic expressions which have Macedonian equivalents. These idiomatic expressions, according to Plotnikov<sup>12</sup>, could be classified as absolute equivalents. However, considering the fact that there are many idiomatic expressions which do not have absolute equivalents, it is easy to assume that they could very easily hinder the communication of Macedonian learners with German speaking interlocutors. Hence, this category of idiomatic expressions should be dealt with by means of various creative exercises and the efforts of the both teachers and students should be directed at finding their semi-equivalents (which will have the same meaning but different subjects or objects).

The most intricate case is understandingly the case of those idiomatic expressions which are nonexistent in the Macedonian learners’ mother tongue, as their meaning (which could sometimes be derived from the context, but not always) should be described. However, this hindrance could also be overcome provided that teachers are sufficiently committed to this task and are willing to apply a creative approach which will boost pupils and students’ acquisition of German. This is very important since, at the end of the day, the understanding and usage of idiomatic expressions and phraseologies is, in fact, one of the

most important indicators of the extent to which a particular foreign language has been mastered by its learners<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> B. A. Plotnikov, *Frazeologija*. Minsk 1983 pp.221-236

<sup>13</sup> S. Velkovska, *Notes on Macedonian Phraseology*. Institute of Macedonian language 2002 p.82

