

Idioms and the Directness of Language in Politics

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This is a functional study of the use of idioms in publications on politics, simultaneously deliberating on the question of how the directness of language forms its result and how it functions in the social context of native speakers. Idioms are shown to have been widely used in publications on politics and their expressive meaning has been exploited with a purpose in political contexts. Semantic and functional analysis of idioms has shown that, despite their direct and pointed meaning, idioms are favoured by journalists much to the satisfaction of their audience. An analysis of diplomatic language in one article indicated a contrast with the journalistic language without criticizing it. Both styles of language have been found to have their audience and appreciation. But the direct language of journalists appears to oblige the author to comply with a license of usage, which only a native speaker can satisfy.

Introduction

This paper asks whether the tone and attitude in political articles to which the use of idioms contributes is their appreciated feature. The fact is that idioms, although recommended in use, are not very frequent in modern conversation if we exclude phrasal verbs, nor are they very frequent in modern fiction, except in some novels which incorporate idioms stylistically (cf., quite frequent idioms on ten opening pages of the novel, *The Seven Sisters*, by Margaret Drabble). The material for this article has been collected in three years while listening to the BBC World Service and reading publications on their website, at www.bbcworldservice/news, reading quality papers in the British (The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Spectator), and American press (The Washington post, The New Yorker) online for three years (2018-2021). The material has been analysed by close reading and contextual methods. Semantic analysis of the idioms collected has also been used. But the approach has been and generalizations have been made within the framework of functional linguistics.

To detail on the methods used, close reading is a way of study-like reading focusing on facts and constituent details in the text to discover individual and striking features of the text and its composition together with the author's focus and the line and reason of his argument.¹ This analytical reading is based on

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1. Patricia Kain, *How to Do a Close Reading* (Writing Center, Harvard University, 1998).

inductive reasoning and was most widely used in the analysis of poetry.² In the present paper, close reading was the first step in the analysis of political articles to understand the author's focus, to draw parallels with the events as generally reported on, to find out the sense and point in his use of idioms. Simultaneously, the meaning of individual idioms was studied while differentiating whether the definitions were given in the Aristotelian or the functional model, especially that the standard dictionaries did not include all the idioms that were found current in political articles and such resources as www.google.com/search had to be used additionally. Differences in the kinds of definitions of the idioms were most prominent when rare (as for example, *canary in the coal mine* = an early warning of danger; *as vanilla as they come* = ordinary, with no extra features; etc.) or occasional idioms (for example, Bollocks to Brexit, conducted on the hoof, pig's in a trough moment, aware of bottleneck, rebottled under new name, Stockholm syndrome, etc.) were defined. In the latter case, the Aristotelian definition was rare because most of these idioms were defined on www.google.com/search specifically interpreting the meaning of the concrete idioms in concrete articles. These were obviously singular cases of the use of the idioms and only the model of the functional definition could be used. The meaning of idioms and semantic differences in their definitions were helpful in gathering proof of the author's argument and his line of reasoning while minding the author's possible individual preferences.

The contextual method, which means "situating" the text within the milieu of its times and assessing the roles of author, readers (intended and actual)... in the perception of the text,"³ was the method which grounded the functional evaluation of the use of idioms and was the closing stage in the analysis. Technically, this stage was also the least detailed and a contrast to the close reading method, but it was a consecutive build-up on the previous analysis.

An Overview of Known Publications

The term 'idiom' is used in this paper to mean what is sometimes called idioms proper or "a group of (more or less) fixed words having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words."⁴

2. A Short Guide to Close Reading for Literary Analysis. 2021. DOI=<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/closereading/>. [Accessed 14 July 2021].

3. Behrendt, *Using Contextual Analysis to Evaluate Texts* (2008) DOI=<http://English.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html>. [Accessed 14 July 2021].

4. Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 195.

This succinct definition does not elaborate on the meaning of idioms, which is not limited to the general concept which sums up their content. For instance, *to see the light*, which means 'to finally understand or accept sth, especially sth obvious', and *to jump the gun*, which means to do sth too soon, before the right time', are stylistically neutral. Except for the concrete word 'gun', which is suggestive, these idioms do not imply anything about the attitude of the speaker when they are used. But most idioms are not stylistically neutral. For instance, apart from the meaning 'to do sth that upsets the situation and causes problems', the idiom, *to rock the boat*, is informal, which means that the speaker who uses it treats the situation and the participants casually, perhaps even negligently. Similarly, *the spoils of office*, which means 'the advantages or profit that somebody gets from being in a certain position', is not neutral either. It is formal or literary, and so the speaker who uses it covers somewhat the advantages implied and puts his meaning delicately. In the previous case of an informal idiom, the speaker may offend, and in the latter case of a formal idiom, the speaker may sound polite and reserved. Although these idioms are not included in the illustrative examples further in this article, they have been taken from articles on politics in which informal and bold idioms are many.

The stylistic and attitudinal meaning of idioms is latent in the dictionary definition of their meaning but becomes activated when idioms are used. That is why the latent meaning of idioms is referred to in this paper as their potential meaning. The potential meaning of a language is a substantial subject and spreads over verbal units of different kinds.⁵

Modern American authors⁶ have found drawbacks in the concise definition of idioms quoted above. They amplified on the definition and elaborated the interpretation of the meaning of idioms within the transformational framework.

Without taking a thorough overview, studies in English idioms have been mainly descriptive and pedagogical. Over one hundred years ago, Berlitz⁷ published *English Idioms and Grammar*, in which he proposed a way of teaching English through reading, retelling and discussing anecdotes, which are the shortest stories, and through memorizing the vocabulary in the stories. This method of learning a language through reproducing stories orally and in writing has been retained to this day, but back then, the recommended vocabulary was essentially idioms, plus individual words and a few chunks, in present-day terms. Except for *The Essentials of English Grammar* in the second part of this book, nothing more is said of idioms by Berlitz.

5. Marija L. Drazdauskiene-Rutkauskaite, *Language and Usage: Potentialities and Problems* (Wszotechnica Polska Szkoła Wyższa w Warszawie, 2016), 26-27, 169-214.

6. Geoffrey Nunberg, Ivan A. Sag and Thomas Wasow, "Idioms," *Language* 70, no. 3 (1994): 491-538.

7. M. D. Berlitz, *English Idioms and Grammar* (New York, Paris, London: The Berlitz School, 1915).

A little earlier, a study of English and German idioms⁸ based on the method of Gaspey-Otto-Sauer was published with a claim that a student who “wishes to acquire a thorough knowledge of a language” will find it “absolutely necessary ... to master its ‘idiomatic’ intricacies”. This author clarified the distinction between a phrase and an idiom and found idioms arranged under certain headings a preferred way of idiom presentation in his book to the alphabetical order of words which was more fitting in a work of reference. He further stated that thematically arranged idioms were to be “a book the contents of which should gradually be committed to memory” (p. iv). About 3000 English and German idioms were recorded in groups under the headings of Advantage, Age, Error, Escape, Harmony, Time and others. It is interesting that he included groups of idioms for prepositions, such as For, Within, Without and others. This publication witnessed the age of translation-grammar method based on reading rather than conversation practice.

Owing to their fixed structure, rich and literally non-deducible meaning often evaluative and informal, idioms proper and even idiomatic expressions or chunks always attracted the attention of teachers and insightful learners. This interest can be motivated even theoretically because their verbal and contextual (informal, formal, humorous, disapproving, literary, etc.) meaning make idioms a major lexical resource of the potential meaning of language in which the expository power of language resides. Learners were supposed to learn idioms as ready units, which were to improve their fluency in conversation. But idioms proper do not seem to be very frequent in daily conversation in the twenty-first century, mainly because of their sharp stylistic meaning. It seems wise to warn foreign learners of this meaning of idioms and to caution them not to be too relaxed in dropping idioms casually without having given them a thought and without having had a deep understanding of their meaning. It seems twice wise to remind learners of the difference between what is allowed to a native speaker and a foreigner. No foreigner would go far wrong if he minds the sharp meaning of idioms.

Focusing on native speakers, authors of recent studies of idioms have found that idioms in conversation “draw people together in a way that plain speech doesn’t.”⁹ This is credible because of the rich evaluating meaning of idioms in which individual listeners have a sharing.

Yet minding the stylistic meaning of idioms, it is only the person who owns the language that can pick and use idioms indiscriminately. Such a person is familiar with the subtle shades of meaning of every idiom, with their customary currency and can be bold. His reactions are instinctive and trustworthy. But a

8. Franz Lange, *Handbook of English and German Idioms* (Heidelberg: Julius Groos, 1893).

9. Paul Drew and Elizabeth Holt, “Complainable Matters: The Use of Idiomatic Expressions in Making Complaints,” *Social Problems* 35, no. 4 (1988): 398-417.

foreigner, who often knows the meaning of an idiom only approximately and has no familiarity with its currency, is quite likely to err. It would be disastrous if such a foreigner spoke with confidence and missed the right stress and emphasis on the idioms chosen, because errors in bold speech trigger irritation in the listening native speakers.¹⁰ If hypercorrect pronunciation accompanied by faulty grammar triggers a native speaker's aggravation, semantic errors may be even more disastrous.

As grievances of the War receded, humanitarian studies amplified. A couple of decades after the Second World War, descriptive studies of idioms of different languages were abundant in the 1960s and 1970s in Eastern Europe, which was in line with descriptive linguistics of the century. The incentive to studies of idioms was again their rich, colorful and autonomous meaning.¹¹ Doctor Kameneckaite's name should be highlighted among these authors: her work was really essential because of her exceptional knowledge of the languages of which she wrote. Otherwise, like all descriptive studies, descriptive studies of idioms, ended with what they had started: it was the material analysed more or less deeply that won the day.

As with Charles Fries and, later, with L G Alexander, the learning of English was turning to activating structural patterns, idioms were commented on in textbooks in as much as the sense of the texts in them required. Idioms were not difficult to memorize because of their colorful meaning but learners were not always advised against too liberal use of idioms by foreigners. As every idiom or an idiomatic unit presents a little story in itself, which accounts for its meaning, idioms were also used as a resource in exercises to initiate learners to speak.

As dictionaries of idioms increased in number¹² and were practically more useful than their descriptive studies, the latter gradually diminished. Functional

10. Karol Janicki, *The Foreigner's Language in a Sociolinguistic Perspective* (Poznan: UAM, 1982), 55-64.

11. N. Kameneckaite, *Sinonimi w angijskiej frazeologii* (Moskva: Meždunarodnije Otnošeniya, 1971); A. V. Kunin, *Anglijskaja frazeologija* (Moskva: Higher School, 1970); Kunin, *Frazeologija of Modern English Language. A Systemic Description* (Moskva: Meždunarodnije Otnošeniya, 1972); N. A. Shekhtman, *A Handbook of English Idioms and Idiomatic Usage* (Leningrad: Prosveshchenije, 1971); I. Shishkina and R. Finkelstein, *Geflügelte Worte, Their Origin and Meaning* (Leningrad: Prosveshchenije, 1972); V. P. Felitsyna and Y. E. Prokhorov, *Russian Proverbs, Sayings and Winged Words. A Sociolinguistic Dictionary* (Moscow: The Russian Language, 1979); V. M. Ogoltsev, *Common Russian Similes. An Illustrated Dictionary for Speakers of English* (Moskva: The Russian Language, 1984).

12. Longman, *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (Longman Group Limited, 1979); John Ayto, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (Oxford University Press, 2010); "Something to Crow About". A Concise Collection of American English Idioms for Everyday Use (Washington, D.C.: The Materials Development and Review Branch, 1993).

studies of idioms have not been widely known¹³ nor have been studies of the potential meaning of idioms. Modern books for teaching English idioms¹⁴ have been very well worked out and help learners to master English idioms. They are not limited only to colorful idioms, either, and include more mundane expressions such as *a grey area*, *to get the picture*, *up to speed*, *rack your brains* and other idioms of this kind. Other modern authors¹⁵ claim they supplement the existing sources with very modern idioms from current use because “most teaching and reference materials on English idioms are intuition based and include seldom used idioms and incorrect descriptions of their meaning”. This is almost true as numerous idioms which are used in the press appear not to be recorded in available dictionaries.

Thematic studies of idioms have been rare.¹⁶ In this book, the author discusses analytically components in the notion of work, such as professions of the persons in idioms, jobs and the measurement of work (pp. 35-47, 58-62), their qualifications, quality of work and its evaluations (pp. 58-75), man as worker and a worker as man and his inclination to work (pp. 76-98), interpersonal relations at work, professions of persons at work (pp. 20-21, 98-108) and relations at work (pp. 98-108), their qualifications and evaluations, quality and evaluations (pp. 76-84), and the semiotic symbolism of work (pp. 109-125). The book concludes on the worlds of work as collective memory of the speaking community, which reflects social and historical heritage (pp. 126-157), and which is summed up as national conceptual content. It is relevant to mention here that Fedosov (1977) mentioned above also states that culture and national character are reflected in connotative rather than denotative content of idioms. Dr Kameneckaite discussed these questions drawing on the meaning of English, French, German, Russian and Lithuanian idioms. Because of rich and inclusive meaning of idioms, the mentioned aspects of the notion of work were deducible and could be illustrated. The semiotic symbolism of work in idioms in this book deserves a highlight.

The author describes the semiotic symbolism of work in idioms of five languages. She finds that *the hand* is the common and typical symbol of the principal tool for work in all five languages. “The richest is the semiotic representation of work in Lithuanian phraseology” (p. 109). In the group of kinetic symbols of work in Lithuanian, she singles out *the feet* in different movements, accompanied by idioms which include other anatomical parts of the body: *the*

13. I. A. Fedosov, *The Functional-Stylistic Differentiation of Russian Phraseology* (Rostov University Press, 1977).

14. Felicity O’Dell and Michael McCarthy, *English Idioms Advanced with Answers* (2010); Sandra Anderson and Cheryl Pelteret, *Work on Your Idioms* (HerperCollins Publishers, 2012).

15. D. S. Liu, *The Most Frequently Used Spoken American English Idioms: A Corpus Analysis and its Implications* (Tesol Quarterly. Wiley Online Library, 2003).

16. Nedda Strazhas-Kamenckaite, *The World of Work* (Graz: Gazer Linguistische Monographien 6, 1990).

back, the hump, the navel, mainly in verbal idioms. In contrast to *the hand, the foot* idiomatically expresses superficial performance at work. "Lithuanian is the only language which symbolises hard work by images of parts of the face" (pp. 110-112). Parts of the hand (finger(s), nail(s)) often symbolize the quality of work and measure the amount of work. While symbolising manual work, the nail seems to symbolize man's very first tool, according to Lithuanian phraseology (p.113). Work is so essentially symbolised in Lithuanian idioms that "death is deemed not as an end to life, but as an end to work" (p. 119).

"Like in Lithuanian, the French upper limb is represented by three images, *le bras, la main* and *le doigt*" (p. 119). But in contrast to Lithuanian idiomatic symbolism, where 'the finger symbolizes a small amount of work, *le doigt* symbolises high quality craftsmanship" (p. 120). The peculiarly "French coherent semiotic set centers around the symbol of *breath*" and *the foot* (pp. 120-121). In contrast to Lithuanian, *the foot* is an efficient instrument in French idiomatic symbolism.

In English work phraseology, *arm, hand* and *finger* feature and carry symbolic meaning, but their "semantic domains and representations are quite different" (p. 121). The symbol of the tool is not as abstract as in Lithuanian. "The semantic domain of *the hand* in the function of tool is strictly limited" (p. 122). It indicates stages of work and duration process by concrete reference, supposedly in accord with analytic semantics of this language. *The finger*, which appears episodically in English work phraseology, indicates hard work like it does in Lithuanian phraseology.

Only one symbol of work, *ruka* – hand, appears in Russian phraseology. It appears most frequently as a symbol of tool, but "does not build as much as a semiotic set" (p. 122). Russian verbal phraseology with *hand* has analogies in Lithuanian. But "when the Russian idiom has an identical or close counterpart in Lithuanian, the latter phraseology has more synonyms to express the notion whereas in the Russian it is usually the only one" (p. 123). Like in Lithuanian, *the foot* is an "anti-instrument" in Russian phraseology.

The arm, the finger and *the nail* have different symbolic functions in German phraseology, but *the hand* takes a significant part among coherent images of work. Like in English, the German *hand* symbolises careless work but only when it is left. *The bone* is a specific symbol in German work phraseology where it indicates exhaustion and hard work (pp. 124-125). This overview indicates the volume of work phraseology and of the subject in the five languages.

The world of work generally, (Part IV of the book under review), is represented colourfully in idioms of the five languages while indicating the landscape of the country, the workers and their spirit. This is mainly the picture in Lithuanian phraseology, which is not devoid of humour and of essential respect for hard work. The world of work in French idioms indicates division between physical and mental work, different social classes at work, different institutions and people of all walks of life. In contrast to Lithuanian, peasants take

only a small part in French phraseology. *The horse*, for instance, in French idioms is mainly a riding horse rather than a draft animal. Praise is rare and reserved in Lithuanian phraseology, while French idioms lavish praise and compliments. If the idle are urged directly to work in Lithuanian phraseology, French idioms express negative feelings, ranging from scorn to mockery, to overzealous exertion (p. 142).

Social stratification is also traced in German world of work. Farmers are represented even less than in French idioms, but industrial work and landscape is richer in German phraseology where even names of work and office places are included. Work idioms in German bypass familiarity through colloquial. Like French idioms, German idioms reflect the importance of and reverence to social groups at work. Elevated attitude to work also shows in German literary quotations from their classics, which have been assimilated in German idioms. The omniscient voice in German idioms is neutral or level in tone, while the commanding voice of the superior urging someone to do his duty is loud and clear (pp. 145-146). There is quite "a lot of praise of the skilled workman which, more like in Lithuanian than in French, is rather reserved and free of exaggeration" (p. 147).

The world of work in Russian phraseology is fragmentary. Russian idioms reflect the image of the street, different social voices of those at work and non-urban activities. Attitude to lazy and vigorous work is also reflected in Russian idioms. "The joy at well-done work is expressed with exhilaration verging on jubilation (as if anticipating a well-deserved celebration)" (p. 150).

The English working world is "as stratified as French and German" (p. 151). Quite heavy images associate with farm work, and peasantry is related to the image of the horse. Craftsmen and servants also feature as images in English idioms. Employees and officials "do not at all enjoy the respect and certainly not the veneration of their German counterparts" (p. 151). Industrial labour is quite central in the world of work in English idioms. The attitude to the worker is low. He is reduced to a quality less than that of a human being. The atmosphere in the world of work is bleak and social differentiation is not marked. Hard work is "additionally referred to by ... phrasal verbs (which pithily disclose the essence of the activity)" (p. 153). More idioms than in other languages describe forced hard work in English phraseology, as they do "orders to start work, work better, faster" (p. 154). In topical contrast, "an impressive number of idioms ... denote an easy and/or lucrative job in different spheres" in English (p. 154). "Praise of good work is very scarce. The poetical *a son of toil* stands in complete isolation: ..." (p. 154). Criticism of hard work is as scarce. English idioms in the world of work indicate "two antagonistic classes – the employers and the employed" (p. 155). "There is no trace of the *joie de vivre* /in English idioms/ which emanates from the Lithuanian world in which people work no less but in different social conditions" (p. 155).

Dr Strazhas-Kameneckaite finds all five work phraseologies ... markedly individual. Similarities and differences “in the phraseological reflection of the concept of work are determined entirely by the *experiential* factor and not linguistic contact or absence thereof” (p. 156). Idioms are found to reflect the speaking community’s cultural and historical heritage.

Dr Kameneckaite’s systemic study of the world of work in idioms of the five languages shows how rich in content these units are. It is an exhaustive study but neither its methodology nor its discoveries could be used as a model in the present study of idioms in politics. Her analysis of idioms and insights into their meaning, though, have been a guidance and resource for the present study. The present study generalises within the framework of functional linguistics as it focuses on idioms in use.

Analysis of the Material

Idioms in political articles online, in the press and on radio are frequent. They make a varied collection. Topically, idioms in political publications differ thematically and stylistically: they include those referring to endurance (*to stick it out,*), difficulties, stress and challenge (*to have cold feet, infml, to be in hot water, to be put on the hook, ‘cold turkey’ jobless surge*), disregard (*throw caution to the wind*), drawing limits (*defending red lines*), respect, tolerance, help (*to give sb the benefit of the doubt, to bail sb out of sth*), changes (*to turn a corner,*), postponement, future (*to kick down the road,*), influence and coercion (*to bring sb to heel, eating out of his hand, to take sb down, to take the wind out of their sails, infml, to pull the plug on sth*), liberation (*to let sb off the hook,*), neglect (*to throw into the long grass,*) to react, to find a way (*to think on your feet, to cut corners, disapproving, to fill their shoes*), evaluation (*too good to be true, not a whit, was completely bananas*), completing, performing (*may have done his dash*), to improve ameliorate (*to sugarcoat*), to criticise (*to throw cold water on sth.*). This list is endless.

Presenting an overview of the idioms descriptively, it has been found that idioms related to political processes make the largest group. E.g.:

1. High stakes Democrat debate has Sanders *in crosshairs* (A title. BBC News, 26 Feb 20)
2. Trump’s State of the Union speech writers *have thrown in the towel* (*infml*) The Guardian, 5 Feb 20)
3. Democrats *begged to differ* with IO and RT ... staging a walkout... (The Guardian, Wed Briefing, 5 Feb 20)
4. The promise ... to “limit arbitrary tax advantages for the wealthiest in society” was *hot air* (*infml, disappr.*) (The Guardian, 12 March 20)

5. The government has made tweaks to the benefit system but it has not addressed *the elephant in the room*: the five-week delay for universal credit (The Times & Sun Times, 13 March 20)
6. It (*ie Teresa May's announced Office for Tracking Injustices*) doesn't exist – it is never going to exist"... "It *has been thrown into the long grass*. ..."
(www.theguardian.com..., 22 March 20)
7. ... 2020 is going to be a '*make-or-beak*' year for Brasil, ... (bbc.com, 23 March 20)
8. ... that it's time *to cut the government some slack* (*infml*) (www.theguardian.com..., 8 May 20)
9. Boris Johnson was accused of *being out of his depth* by critics and even by some supporters... (The Spectator, 20 May 20)

Yet, except for the rather formal 'begged to differ', the meaning of most of these idioms is general and so they can be used intelligently in any context. There have also been recorded idioms which were closer bound to political contexts judging by their specific meaning or by the language in which they were used. E.g.:

10. Big UK firms have been accused of *dragging their feet* on diversity targets (The Guardian, Wed briefing, 5 February 20)
11. We devote three pages to... the victims... and the drugs that might one day *bring it to heel* (The Economist, 12 March 20)
12. If you want to understand why older people had to "*take it on the chin*", look to Boris Johnson's government (The Guardian, 8 May 20)
13. Miliband was *as vanilla as they come* and was still crucified (The Guardian, 5 Feb 20)
14. The FT *goes off piste* with UK admitting "German testing model offers route out of virus lockdown" (The Guardian briefing, 8 Apr 20)
15. Andrew Haywood, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at University College London, said that the country was "*on the cusp*" of being able to vaccinate older populations and it would be tragic "to throw away the gains made in suppressing coronavirus (The Telegraph, 19 Nov 20)
16. ... it was the second world war ... that national security, even national survival, required shared sacrifice, and that public support ... was necessary and appropriate *quid pro quo* (The Guardian, Mon briefing, 30 March 20)

Except for 'throw in the towel', 'hot air' and 'cut some slack', most of the idioms quoted above are neutral or technical and so appropriate in political contexts. But idioms of more general meaning which seem to be borrowed from

routine are also used in articles on politics and add different evaluative senses to the contexts. E.g.:

17. On the other side, we have populists seeking *to fight* populism *tooth and nail*, even if this means playing into arguably not-so-democratic relations... (The Guardian, 14 Feb 20)
18. On Tuesday night, Biden tried *to take him* (ie Steyer) *down a peg*, by criticising Steyer's investment in a company that ran private prisons... (bbc.com/news..., 26 Feb 20)
19. ... Joe Biden expressed exasperation, sardonically saying, "I know you *cut me off* every time, but I'm not going to be quiet anymore" (bbc.com/news..., 26 Feb 20)
20. ... Japan has warned that the coronavirus outbreak could "*throw cold water*" on preparations for Tokyo 2021 (The Guardian, 5 Feb 20)
21. The Telegraph has "social media bosses face duty of care protection with heads of companies to be *put on the hook* for online harm)The Guardian, 6 Feb 20)
22. We asked three experts what the rules of social distancing are, and how to maintain them if you live with someone who's *throwing caution to the wind* (The Guardian, Tue briefing, 17 March 20)
23. As the Prime Minister appears *to turn a corner*, fit 40-year-old Dani Schuchman tells how he never thought the virus would hand him in intensive care (The Telegraph, 8 Apr 20)

As the quoted examples show, the topically neutral idioms have been drawn from the contexts of sport and the pandemic, which are political only in as much as these matters happen to be politicized and as they are attended to by governments. When the contexts are not strictly political, the thematic character of the idioms seems to alter accordingly.

In contrast to idioms used in routine, authors writing on politics use idioms related to sports, games and contest. E.g.:

24. Donald Trump *has gained ground* on his probable challenge in November presidential election and is in a "*near tie*" with Joe Biden, ... (The Guardian, 29 March 20)
25. According to the realclearpolitics.com polling average, ..., Wisconsin *is a tie* (The Guardian, 29 March 20)
26. A Huawei executive and a Pentagon official *met toe to toe* in San Francisco this week,,, (The Telegraph, 28 Feb 20)
27. But unlike New York City, where Pabon lived previously and found people usually *hold their cards close to their chest*, residents here are "always willing to listen and provide sound advice" (bbc.com/news..., 23 March 20)

28. ... the PM has undertaken screeching U-turn on Brexit before, so an extension could very quickly *return to the cards* (The Guardian, 15 Apr 20)
29. Earlier this year, Boris Johnson described fighting coronavirus as being a bit like '*whack-a-mole*'. That game has only become more intense since then, with the UK death toll now passing 60,000 and a talk of a fourth tier of even tougher restriction for areas where the virus continues to spread. /.../ And none of these issues are short-term ones, either. It's going to be a very long winter of *playing whack-a-mole* for the Prime Minister. (The Spectator, Evening blend, 27 Oct 20)

(**Whack-a-mole** is a game in an amusement arcade in which players use a mallet to hit toy moles, which appear at random, back in their holes (google.com/oxford - languages, 19 May 21)).

The use of sports terminology in politics is an international stereotype. It is unobtrusive in the politics of major countries but may be ludicrous in small countries, in which politicians are made to struggle in the grip of various minor and nasty wicked groups. So, politics in small countries becomes really like the game whack-a-mole and therefore the stereotypical sport-like reference is ludicrous or cynical.

Authors of articles on politics also use idiomatic expressions, quotations and allusions drawn from original contexts in which the quotations were initially used. The meaning of these units is no less colorful than that of idioms proper, while their use compares or suggests a comparison with earlier ways and actions of politicians to make the reader and even the politicians wiser. E.g.:

30. (*Politics ain't a beanbag*, as the old saying goes (bbc.com/news/world-us-canada..., 26 Feb 20)
31. ..., Biden was ready with his rejoinder, "*Where we come from, that's called Tommy come lately*", he quipped (bbc.com/news/world..., 26 Feb 20)

According to [www.google.com/search?...](http://www.google.com/search?), *politics ain't a beanbag* is one of the best known aphorisms Peter Dunne originated, referring to the rough side of political campaigns. This quote was a fitting choice by Joe Biden in earlier stages of the election campaign. *Tommy come lately* comes from the words of the same speaker and context. It means someone who has only recently started a job or activity and has suddenly become very successful. It was Joe Biden's rejoinder in his critical and ironical response to Steyer's statement, in the Democratic debate, in which Steyer claimed he had sold his stock in private prisons known for human-rights abuses and had helped fund a bank to support black-owned businesses. Drawn from a novel published in the nineteenth century, this quote

was a precise and biting quip to the man who pretended to have elevated his moral stance.

Other quotations and allusions of this kind are too obvious to require a lengthy introduction. E.g.:

32. Barry Eichengreen says there is reason to hope that current crisis could *pound the last nail into the coffin* of the Thatcher-Reagan revolution (The Guardian, Tue briefing, 30 March 20)
33. As Fraser Nelson points out in his column, Cummings' brand of damn-the-rest, relentless focus and ruthlessness *bailed the Tories out of a very deep hole* last autumn (The Telegraph, 13 Nov 20)

As the idiom, *last nail in(to) the coffin of sb*, has an international currency and as Margaret Thatcher was a contemporary of the yet living generation of people, this idiom requires no comment, except that to write *to pound the last nail* instead of *to drive it* is to hyperbolise it by way of laying emphasis on the unwanted economic changes initiated by the then British PM Margaret Thatcher and the American President of that time. The second idiom (33) is limited to a concrete issue to which the criticised adviser to the PM contributed while rescuing the Conservatives from a difficult political situation a year before. The article states that, as the PM himself was not very consistent nor successful in his actions, the criticised adviser in his cabinet was helpful despite the latter's disagreeable tactics among other likewise weak members of the cabinet.

It can be noticed that, however expressive and context-bound, most of the idioms quoted above are not limited in their use to exceptionally political contexts. Because of the wealth of the content of each individual idiom, most of the idioms quoted above can also be used in routine contexts. Cf: *What do you mean to drag your feet like the state companies in diversity targets?* Like all repeat references and allusions, this kind of back reference to a political context would make the idiom richer in meaning. Yet, some of the quoted idioms retain their neutral fixed idiomatic meaning whether in politics or fiction. Cf.:

34. Boris Johnson was accused of *being out of his depth* by critics and even by some supporters... (The Spectator, 20 March 20)
35. 'It won't be my fault if it (*ie a bridesmaid's dress*) doesn't. I told you to come home earlier to have it fitted. And as for sending your measurements in centimetres, Miss McCabe (*the dressmaker*) *was quite out of her depth.*' 'There aren't any inches in Paris.' (Margaret Drabble. *A Summer Bird-Cage*. Penguin, 1967, p.13).

To sum up at this point, it can be said that the language of authors and journalists writing on political questions or on questions in the news is colourful and emotion-marked rather than tentative. Neutral and informal idioms proper

come in succession with colourful non-idiomatic phrases, emotive hyperboles, metaphors and context-bound humorous expressions. E.g.:

36. ...France's president Emmanuel Macron was among *the first out of the gate* when his government refused to give stimulus funds to airlines that would not take steps to dramatically reduce emissions (The Guardian, 10 Dec 20)
37. This recovery is a chance to undertake visionary, transformative investments that were previously deemed too risky or expensive and push *while the door is ajar*. The opportunity won't last forever (The Guardian, 10 Dec 20)
38. "Dishi Rishi the influencer *falls flat* in his big budget moment (A title – The Guardian Today, 4 March 21)
39. DUP leader Arlene Foster and Sinn Féin Vice President Michelle O'Neill *locked horns (infml)* over whether the Irish and British governments could be trusted to fix the Northern Ireland protocol (The Spectator, 4 March 21)
40. Labour will be holding a lunchtime event in Stevenage featuring Dawn Butler, the shadow minister for women and equalities, who announced last night she would be *throwing her hat into the ring* for the job of deputy Labour leader (The Guardian, 8 Nov 19)
41. Amid shutdowns and snowstorms, small businesses stretch to keep staff safe, dinners warm and inspectors *out of their hair* (The New Yorker, 22 Feb 21)
42. The Express amplifies the government's "blame the French" line with "What a cheek! EU blocks talks *at 11th hour*" (The Guardian, Fri briefing, 4 Dec 20)
43. Boris Johnson has made a "*cast iron*" *pledge* that he will not allow Scotland to hold a second independence referendum, regardless of the election result, ... (The Guardian, 8 Nov 19)
44. Senator Bernie Sanders said that Republican senators were "afraid *to stand up to* Trump, despite knowing he had lost. ...we should all be nervous about ... the degree to which Trump intimidates and scares *the hell out (infml)* of Republican members of Congress", he said (The Guardian, 12 Nov 20)
45. A Labour spokesperson said: "On the day the UK became the first country in Europe to report 50,000 coronavirus deaths and the public endure another lockdown, Boris Johnson's government is *fighting like rats in a sack over* who gets what job" (The Guardian, 12 Nov 20)
46. A book by an anonymous "senior official" at the White House has described Donald Trump as being *like a "12-year-old in an air traffic control tower"*, ... (The Guardian, 8 Nov 19)
47. Don't count on it (i.e., a 12 December general election), says James Forsyth, politics has never been more changeable, never harder to predict.

In his diary, Nick Timothy says that the Tories are making a better fist of the strategy set for his old boss, Teresa May: he says she was on the right lines but '*folded faster than a Brompton bike*' in the face of EU intransigence (The Spectator. Weekly highlights, 31 Oct 19)

48. From the beginning of the Democrats impeachment inquiry in September to the end on Wednesday, the nation has been divided on whether Trump should be removed from office. And – surprise – Americans' opinions on impeachment are *baked into their political views* (The Washington Post, 6 Feb 20)

Idioms are also used paraphrased depending on the context and on the intended emphasis or point made. E.g.:

49. Boris Johnson says he wants *to have his cake and eat*, but the true master of *cakeism* is Orban. He simultaneously uses both the Brussels cake and lurid "stop Brussels" propaganda to consolidate his own power (The Guardian, 21 June 19)

The idiom, *to have your cake and eat it*, means to have the advantages of sth without its disadvantages or to have both things that are available. The reference to Boris Johnson here is, firstly, direct in the context of Brexit negotiations. But, secondly, the British PM is an allusion to bring out Victor Orban, the Hungarian counterpart's, brazen behaviour in Europe's political context. That is why, even a neologism 'cakeism' is used to strike the note about Victor Orban, which is backed by a further blunt interpretation of Hungary's role.

50. Neither she nor EU leaders want a hard no-deal Brexit. But probably the only way for her to avoid it is *to eat the humblest of humble pies* and jog back to the deal her departed Brexit secretary, David Davis, naively thought he had been mandated to negotiate – a more conventional free trade agreement based on Canada's deal with the UK (The Spectator, 21 Nov 18).

The idiom, *to eat one's humble pie*, means to admit that one is wrong or say that one is sorry for something that one has done or said. In the article quoted, the author, Robert Peston, is openly critical of the former British PM, which the periphrasis in the superlative shows and the informality of the idiom confirms. This is not a single case of open criticism in the political press. It again confirms the journalists' inclination to be emphatic and expressive in making a point.

An analysis of concrete articles while focusing on the use of idioms reveals a similar picture. The article, *For the populist right, free expression is everything – unless you're taking a knee*, (The Guardian, 10 December 20), Owen Jones argues that words and actions of representatives of the populist right show their biased or

even dishonest and cynical tactic to avoid supporting “even a most basic expression of anti-racism”. The author’s example is Nigel Farage’s reaction to “Millwall fans booing their own team as they *took a knee*” in a gesture of anti-racist solidarity”. He quotes Mr Farage’s appreciation of the booing company for having “sussed out BLM as a Marxist mob”. But Mr Farage’s conclusion that “there must be no more taking knee” led the author of the article to repeat his argument that *taking a knee* “as a repudiation of racism” was not binding professionally and remained “an objective feature of modern western civilization”. He reasserted his claim by reiterating that “taking a knee isn’t owned by any organization” and, “as an expression of solidarity”, it goes back to US civil rights movement. Then the author laconically analyses how those representing the populist right become infuriated “by the mere mention” of the damage “to the life chances and experiences of black and brown people” made by “prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices”. He also remarks, ironically, that the same subjects “clothe their resentment in respectability” by pretending to have nothing against expression of anti-racism is general, just opposing one single particular act.

The author finds further the populist right guilty of political misconception in ignoring the disposition of “a Conservative government with an 80-seat majority” and casting the “woke left” as Britain’s real authoritarian rulers “guilty of the neglect of “white privilege”, which they themselves weaponize to extremes. The conclusion is that those who “denounce the left as easily offended “snowflakes” who revel in victimhood”, are themselves guilty of such behaviour.

It is the author’s argument and sarcasm that make this article sharply critical rather than idioms used. Idioms have been used sparingly in it. ‘Taking a knee’ has been used as the key reference without any connotation except for the expression of solidarity. The slang ‘snowflakes’ in the gist line and in conclusion is an insult of the political right to the political left and has been used to emphasise their disrespect. The “woke left” has been a term of late in political articles and has been used like a lamely applied name in this article. The informal, “sussed out BLM as a Marxist mob”, in the first paragraph emphasised the familiarity and perverse criticism of Nigel Farage.

‘Knee-jerk rage’ (*disapproving*, = produced automatically without any serious thought) in the first paragraph of the article described a mechanical rather than a thought-out attitude of the political right to any mention of “prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices” against black people. The idiom is descriptive rather than emotive but no less unfavourable. While emphasizing the pervert criticism of the populist right of ‘*taking a knee*’, the author compares their pretence to respectability with the attitude to same-sex attraction of some people. In this comparison, the attitude highlighted identifies with persistence rather than with the fact which the idiom ‘*shove it down our throats*’ describes.

“Expressing fealty” used about the prescribed sense to the footballers’ taking a knee is not an idiom proper, but, being an old use of an oath of loyalty, this

collocation idiomatically expresses the overdone emphasis of the populist right on the sense of taking a knee.

“Pushing back against the demands of black people” (= refusing to accept or trying to prevent the demands) emphasizes the reactionary attitude of some to black people, which is ignored in the “inverted reality” made up by the populist right rather than criticizing the fictional regime of the “woke left”. This idiom is quite neutral and nominal.

“Graft and skill” (roughly meaning their own toil and ability), used as a defining notion in any interpretation of privilege, is not an idiom proper, but ‘hard work’ as an informal meaning of the word ‘graft’ in this collocation makes the phrase idiomatic and aptly concise in describing the interpretation of privilege.

“The market is king” used as a descriptor of economy by evasive politicians is not an idiom proper, either. It is rather a quotation shared by journalists, which colorfully conveys the economic principle and an attitude. There is only one stylistically colored and ironic idiom which closes the article while explaining the reluctance of some people to discuss “culture-war tactics” because efforts in this direction “merely play(s) to those stirring the pot” (= that is, those, agitating the situation and causing trouble). This idiom gives a new name to the populist right in conclusion, which repeatedly shows their reactionary disposition, whether in their desire to “invert reality” or camouflage their own intentions.

Some idioms in this article are neutral but the slang ‘snowflakes’, the informal ‘shove down our throat’ and ‘those stirring the pot’ are crude and ironic. The tone of the article is sharp. The idioms have been used here to make points at certain turns in the author’s argument. This is in line with the typical way of using idioms in British political articles. Another trend in British journalists’ writing on politics is the use of idioms in the title or/and in conclusion for emphasis, one case of which has just been described.

A short article, titled *Government in a pickle over contempt proceedings* (The Guardian, 5 Dec 18), dealt with the entanglement of the British government and members of Parliament. The government, who refused to publish a full legal advice on Theresa May’s Brexit deal, was subject of an emergency debate of MPs on whether ministers were in contempt of Parliament. The article called it “an ancient offence”. The government maintained that it was “against national interest to publish a document which lays out in technical detail every weakness the UK (had) ahead of the second half of the negotiations. The problem was that the majority of those calling for the document to be published did not want the UK to get to the second half of the negotiations if it meant backing that agreement.” This article was published before the vote and the entanglement was resolved positively for the government. The informal idiom in the title summed up the problem aptly but brazenly, as is usual in journalism. This short article of twenty lines was written by a sharp-witted author, Katy Balls. Even with only one more informal idiom in the text (*most likely ... kicked out of Parliament...*- made

go away for a limited time and miss the important vote for the government), the article had a sharp critical tone and implied a disrespectful view of the government. The informal idiom, *in a pickle*, in the title named the difficult and unpleasant situation, to the people who understood the idiom, while adding common and familiar dislike and disrespect. The article concluded in a pacifying statement of the problem, "It's going to be a long day, again", which laid a becoming tone on government matters.

Another short article, which reported on how an Independent Group in the British Parliament formed and questioned whether this group could work together to get attention in Parliament or only be "a band of mates sitting together in a corner of the Chamber", was titled, *Is the Independent Group a flash in the pan?* (The Spectator, Evening blend, 20 Feb 19). This idiom means success that lasts only a short time and is not likely to be repeated, which was an open and pointed indication of the view and opinion of the Group.

The article, which warned of Joe Biden's vulnerability in the face of Trump's effectiveness at "destroying establishment politicians", was titled, *Stop saying Biden is the 'most electable'. Trump will run rings round him* (The Guardian, 4 Jan 20), summed up the claim, pointedly and informally, again, by the use of the idiom in the title.

A short article of the classical structure on an argument about the necessity "to respect the experience and knowledge of the educators" in order to avoid further chaos in English schools in conditions of the pandemic, titled, *Mass Covid testing at the drop of a hat is the latest bad idea for England's schools* (The Guardian, 22 Dec 20), offered criticism of decision makers directly and informally by the idiom in the title. Again, the author followed a tradition of the democratic press to speak openly to the public when cutting respect to the subjects in focus.

Idioms in titles strike the point, attract attention and focus the reader. This makes the use of idioms effective.

To contrast the sharp-witted journalism, it is pleasant to refer to another article for comparison. It is a little longer article than the previously mentioned, titled, *Will Joe Biden be good for Britain? Here's what my time in Washington taught me* (www.theguardian.com..., 11 Nov 20). Written by Lord Darroch, the British ambassador to the US from 2016 to 2019, this article overviews the run of Trump's presidency with his dedicated campaign director in seven paragraphs and characterizes Joe Biden in four. There is no argument how one or the other did something and why bad or good it was. There is no argumentative proof of anything in it. The article is a personal narrative in which the author takes a view of the persons and the events from an elevated stance. The events are described in sentences made longer because of precise vivid verbs and homogeneous parts which reflect the dynamics of change and sum up the chaos of the result. There are no labels or biting idioms in it. There are descriptions of events in quick succession vivid to a touch while employing details and using an occasional metaphor. For example, the Trump presidency was described as "a rollercoaster

drawn by Escher, composed solely of descents. In the British embassy, we experienced it daily. Wake one morning and..." These statements, clean from criticism, are covert. To understand how the "rollercoaster" was drawn, the reader has to know that Escher was a Dutch artist known for works which trick the eye. This is an informative and colorful statement without familiarity or sharp criticism because of the transferred sense. Very few neutral and informal idioms (*to spin out the meeting, presciently foreshadowed the wild ride, may be cool initially, that unhinged*) were also used impersonally.

Although the tone is impersonal and devoid of open criticism in the first part of the article, it is warm and elegant in the second. This should imply the persons in focus. There is no direct praise of Joe Biden in the second part of the article but the description is elevated. Even a single personal idiom (*he likes to shoot the breeze*) is elegant. The presentation of the two presidents in this article is in no way biased, skewed or untrue. It is correct and real given by the person who learnt it first hand while serving in Washington. Both experience and subtle intelligence permeate the article. The verbal skill of the author makes it delightful reading.

Discussion

The material presented in this article has confirmed that idioms are frequent in articles on politics in the press, that they vary in meaning and style and convey direct criticism, much favoured by common readers with respect to politicians. The tone and attitude in the articles, which considerably depends on the use of idioms, contribute to the personal presentation of the news and enhance interest of the readers. Frequent idioms make the language and criticism direct and bold. This is also appreciated by common readers. Apart from directness and criticism, idioms also add a sense of humor quite frequently, which is relaxing. But rich potential meaning of idioms has its own effect: idioms measure the license of the writing author by indicating what is allowed to the author who is a native speaker and what may be trespassing for a foreigner. Idioms also indicate the taste and refinement of the author.

The tentative comparison of two styles (critical journalistic and cautious diplomatic) of writing on politics in the press requires a generalization. A majority of journalists and reporters employ a sharp-witted style of writing marked by the use of biting idioms, regular emphasis and a mixture of formal and informal. A major section of the material in this paper has shown precisely this way of presentation. The one article analysed in conclusion has been different in style and the mind behind it. Both ways of writing are acceptable to an educated intelligent reader, although the article in elevated style may exclude the common reader who is likely to pause and wonder at the indirect expression or metaphoric refinement.

The emphatic and critical attitude common in journalism is favoured by common readers because it speaks in their own manner. Idioms, too, are a common feature to the common reader, they echo their own choices, strike the note and ring the bell. But the bold style of journalists which does not bypass a strong idiom functions by a kind of a license. It requires a native journalist to choose words so boldly and to write so directly. A stranger or an alien would insult the audience if wrote in the style of British and American journalists. Language is a cultural idiom while verbal idioms refer to cultural heritage of the native speakers of the language. It is in this kind of communication that the potential of a language comes to be exploited to the full and its power has to be minded by the user. Authors experienced in political publications (Alistair Cooke) happened to notice that wit, (and the choice of idioms indicates wit), can make "large audiences feel uncomfortable". This had to have been said about public speaking. Idioms in the press have the same effect if one focuses on their meaning, which was highlighted by illustrative material in this paper. Generally, idiomatic wit is milder in reading, while politicians remain the permanent target of criticism. The opposition of the criticizing commentators has already been deplored to the favour of the criticised by Polly Toynbee, in an article, *As we lose respect for our politicians, democracy itself is taking a hit* (The Guardian, 29 June 2021). It has to be reiterated again that sensitive readers and listeners react to the meaning and implications of idioms used. This should additionally warn the users of what potential power they employ when they choose to use idioms.

Conclusions

To state the obvious, is to say that the language of journalists in articles on politics is direct and critical. The use of idioms contributes to this stylistic effect. Although critical idioms when frequent may jar occasionally, idioms are favoured both by journalists and common readers. Aware of a different style of writing, one can question the acceptability of the typical idiomatic use in journalism. Although conclusion of different readers may differ on this, an analyst who is aware of the meaning and substance of idioms in political articles tends to appreciate the direct, idiom-marked style of journalists. The style of journalists expresses vigor and liveliness which increases the appeal of their writing. The moment an analyst realizes this, he becomes aware of the other extreme to which elementary pretence and especially mannerisms may take the writer. In view of these two extremes, the analyst is compelled to favour the present style of journalists illustrated in this article. Articles on politics in the British and American press are lively without bypassing a strong word and idiom and the sense of humor. This is commonly engaging.

There can be no doubt as to the refinement of style and the mind in the closing article analysed in this paper. Yet, as has been mentioned earlier, it may

leave common readers wondering at points. If English idioms in the world of work indicate social stratification, idioms used in articles on politics imply similar differences between authors and their audience. The conclusion, then, should be that the language of journalists in articles on politics is bold and direct because, the authors differ as does their language and their audience, which has been confirmed by the material. These authors exploit the most powerful potential of their native language to which they have an unwritten license. Although much one may appreciate the style of writing of Lord Darroch, one has to give credit to the field of his expertise and experience. The engagement determines the elegance of expression and defines the audience.

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