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TECHNOLOGY OF MODERN TIMES AS A SOURCE OF
THE “LEXICON OF COMMON FIGURATIVE UNITS”

Abstract: The topic of this paper is widespread idioms (WIs) originating from the domain ‘modern technology’. These idioms are only a small part of the entire “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” (i.e. the inventory of idioms which exist in a large number of European languages in a similar lexical structure and in the same figurative core meaning). The six idioms discussed here belong to one of the most recent layers of the common European figurative language.

Keywords: Lexicon of Common Figurative Units, intertextuality, languages of Europe, modern source concepts of idioms, widespread idioms

1. Introduction

Idioms reflecting aspects of the technological age, of modern industrialization and mechanization, are not frequent in the European languages in general. The German idiom *die Schallmauer durchbrechen*, for example, originates from the domain ‘aviation’ which has left only few traces in figurative lexical units. The literal reading of the idiom refers to a type of aircraft that were particularly known only since the 1950s and, therefore, the idiom seems to be among the most modern ones of the source domain of technology. Initially, the expression was applied to airplanes which had reached supersonic speed, but then developed secondary figurative meanings like ‘to break an unparalleled record, to exceed a limit which was regarded as insurmountable, etc.’

This idiom was part of the project “Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond” which is aimed at identifying those idioms which are common to many languages of Europe.¹ Our surveys carried out with the help of many experts from a total of 70 European and some non-European languages have shown that the idiom is not widespread: More than a dozen European languages possess expressions which can be translated literally as “to break

the sound barrier”); most of them, however, are not used in the secondary figurative meanings, as is the case with the German idiom.² Such results are unpredictable and can only be achieved by extensive empirical work.

About 50 further potentially widespread idioms from the source concept ‘modern technology’ have been tested for many languages via questionnaires. Only six WIs from this domain have been observed so far. Their source frames do not make reference to the latest high technology but to technical achievements from early modern times. Two of them go back to motorized transport and railroad technology, (section 2), one to radio broadcast or telecommunication (section 3), two refer to steam engine technology, gears and engine mechanics (section 4), while one WI refers to electricity (section 5).

2. Motorized transport and railroad technology

Source frames like ‘modern transportation’, ‘railway system’ or ‘motorcar’ can be recognized in several idioms. However, only two of them gained a wide distribution across the languages of Europe.

- (1) *to give someone the green light* ‘to encourage or allow someone to proceed, to give someone permission to do something that they were planning to do or have asked to do’

Idiom (1) evokes the image of a traffic light that switches to green authorizing the road users to go ahead. The image originates in the late 1800 for the signal used by railroads to indicate that a train could proceed and has been transferred to more general use in the first half of the 1900s. As our research shows, the idiom is remarkably widespread; it exists in at least 52 European languages and, moreover, in various standard languages spoken outside Europe. Most of these languages use also the nominal phrase, “green light” ‘permission to do something’, or forms such as “to give green light to a project, plan, etc.” Let us look at the data given by our informants.

Indo-European Languages in Europe*Germanic Languages*

Icelandic	<i>að gefa e-rjum grænt ljós</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
Faroese	<i>at geva einum grønt ljós</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
Norwegian	(Bokmål) <i>gi noen grønt lys</i> (Nynorsk) <i>gje nokon grønt lys/ljos</i>	“to give sb. the green light” “to give sb. the green light”
Swedish	<i>ge någon/något grönt ljus</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
Danish	<i>give ngn. grønt lys</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
English	<i>to give sb. the green light</i>	
Scots	<i>tae gie a body the green licht</i>	“to give at sb. the green light”
Dutch	<i>het licht op groen zetten</i> <i>iem. het groene licht geven</i>	“to set the light at green”
North Frisian	(Sylt) <i>hoken green Leecht dö</i>	
West Frisian	<i>immen it griene ljocht jaan</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
German	<i>jm. grünes Licht geben</i>	“to give sb. green light”
Luxembourgish	<i>engem d'gréng Luut/Luucht ginn</i>	“to give sb. the green light”
Swiss Germ.	<i>öpperem grüens Liecht gäh</i>	“to give sb. green light”

(No equivalents for Low German and Yiddish)

Celtic Languages

Irish	<i>olas glas a thabhairt do dhuine</i>	“to give green light to a person”
Welsh	<i>rhoi'r golau gwyrdd i rywun</i>	“to give the green light to sb.”

(No equivalents for Cornish and Breton)

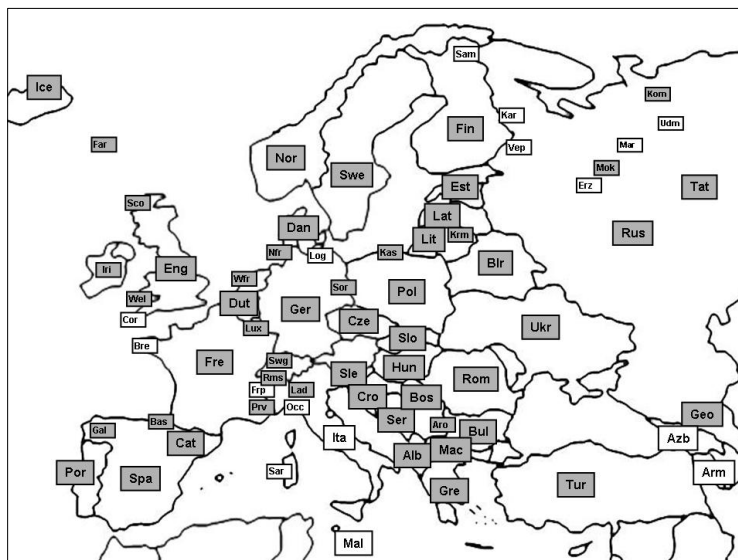
Romance Languages

French	<i>donner le feu vert à qqn.</i>	“to give the green traffic lights to sb.”
Ladin	<i>ti dè löm vërda</i>	“to give green light”
Romansh	<i>dar glisch verda ad insatgi</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
Spanish	<i>dar a alguien la luz verde</i>	“to give the green light to sb.”
Catalan	<i>donar llum verd a algú</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
Galician	<i>dar luz verde a alguén</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
Portuguese	<i>dar luz verde a alguém</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
Romanian	<i>a da cuiva undă verde</i>	“to give sb. green wave”
Aromanian	<i>lj-fatsi cali s-treacã</i>	“to give sb. the green light”

(No equivalents for Occitan, Francoprovençal, Italian and Sardinian)

Baltic Languages

Latvian	<i>dot zaļo gaismu kādam</i>	“to give (the) green light to sb.”
Lithuanian	<i>duoti kam žalią šviesą</i>	“to give (the) green light to sb.”



Map 1: Equivalents of “to give sb. the green light” in European languages

Slavonic Languages

Russian	<i>дать зелёный свет кому-л.</i>	“to give (the) green light to sb.”
Belorussian	<i>даць зялёнае святло</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Ukrainian	<i>дати комусь зелене світло</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Czech	<i>dát někomu zelenou</i>	“to give sb. green ”
Slovak	<i>dat' niekomu zelenú</i>	“to give sb. green ”
Polish	<i>dać komuś zielone światło</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Kashubian	<i>pòkazac kòmùs zelony wid</i>	“to show sb. (the) green light”
Sorbian	<i>zelenu swěcu dać někomu</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Slovene	<i>dati komu zeleno luč</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Croatian	<i>dati komu zeleno svjetlo</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Bosnian	<i>dati kome zeleno svjetlo</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Serbian	<i>dati kome zeleno svetlo</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Macedonian	<i>дава зелено светло некому</i>	“to give sb. (the) green light”
Bulgarian	<i>давам зелена улица на няког</i> <i>давам зелена светлина</i>	“to give green street to sb.” “to give (the) green light”
Albanian	<i>jep dritën jeshile dikujt</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
Greek	<i>δίνω (το) πράσινο φως σε νβ.</i>	“to give (the) green light to sb.”
Armenian	<i>kanatsch lujs tal</i>	“to give green light to sb.”

Finno-Ugric Languages in Europe*Ugric Languages*

Hungarian	<i>zöld utat ad vkinek</i>	“sb. gives sb. the green road ”
	<i>zöld utat biztosít vkinek</i>	“sb. provides the green road for sb.”

North-Finnic Languages

Finnish	<i>näyttää vihreää valoa jklle</i>	“to show green light to sb.”
Estonian	<i>kellelegi rohelist teed andma</i>	“to give sb. the green road ”
	<i>kellelegi rohelist tuld näitama</i>	“to show sb. the green light”
Karelian	<i>ozuttua zelenästii valguo</i>	“to show the green light”
(No equivalent for Veps)		

Permic Language

Komi-Zyrian	<i>турунвиж би сетны</i>	“to give the green light”
(No equivalent for Udmurt)		

Volgaic Languages

Moksha	<i>киндиге сянгяря тол</i>	“to give the green traffic light
Mordvin	<i>максомс мезевок тиемс</i>	to sb. to do sth.”
(No equivalents for Mari and Erzya Mordvin)		

Turkic Languages in Europe

Karaim	<i>ješil ot jandyрма</i>	“to switch the green light”
Turkish	<i>birinel/birşeye yeşil ışık yakmak</i>	“to switch on the green light for sb.”
Tatar	<i>яшел ум бұры /yashel uram birerge</i>	“to give a green street ”
(No equivalent for Azerbaijani)		

Georgian	<i>mtsvane shukis anteba</i>	“to give green light to sb.”
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Maltese	No equivalent	
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Basque	<i>argi berdea eman</i>	“to give green light”
	<i>argi berdea erakutsi</i>	“to show sb. the green light”

Esperanto	<i>doni verdan lumon</i>	“to give the green light”
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Non-European Languages

Egyptian Arabic	<i>iddii-lu l-achdar</i>	“to give sb. the green ”
	<i>iddii-lu l-loon il-achdar</i>	“to give sb. the green color ”
Tunisian Arabic	<i>ja'fī ddaw laxdar</i>	“he gives the green light”
Farsi	<i>cheragh saby neshandadn</i>	“to show green light”
Kirghize	<i>бирогоо ачык жол берүү</i>	“sb. gives the green light”
Mongolian	<i>ногзоон гэрлээр хийх</i>	“to do sth. with/at green light”
Chinese	<i>kāi lù dēng</i>	“to open green light”
Vietnamese	<i>bật đèn xanh cho ai</i>	“to switch on the green light for sb.”
Korean	<i>cheong-shinho ida</i>	“this is green/blue signal ”
Japanese	<i>ao shingou wo dasu</i>	“to give green/blue signal ”
Thai	<i>hai fai-kiew</i>	“to give green light”

Usually, the idiom is seen as a good example for the increasing impact of Anglo-American English on the languages of Europe.³ The explanation of its wide distribution, however, cannot be based on one single cause (like borrowing from English into all the other standard and lesser-used languages) but must include several reasons, among them extra-linguistic ones. The sudden dissemination of a technical innovation such as traffic lights has certainly supported the spread of the idiom.

A large group of idioms are lexically almost identical to the English one, apart from the use of the article (definite article vs. no article). Other idioms reveal some differences (marked in bold type above), cf. the verbs meaning ‘to show’ in Kashubian, Finnish, Estonian, Karelian and Basque as well as verbs meaning ‘to switch (on)’ in Karaim and Turkish. Especially worth mentioning are the variants among the nouns: Apart from French *feu* ‘traffic light’, Czech *zelenou* and Slovak *zelenú* ‘(the) green’ or Romanian *undă* ‘wave’, several idioms show words for ‘road’ or ‘street’: Bulgarian *улица* ‘street’, Hungarian *utak* ‘road’ (accusative), Estonian *teed* ‘roads’ and Tatar *uram* ‘street’. Most different is the Dutch *het licht op groen zetten*. These idioms probably cast doubt on a direct influence from English. The Bulgarian and Estonian variants with “green light” are much younger and are used only in journalism of very recent times, as stated by our informants. The same holds for an Italian expression *dare la luce verde* “to give the green light” which can be understood figuratively, but is not

yet an idiom. A near equivalent idiom is *dare via libera*, literally “to give free way/street”. Because it contains no adjective for ‘green’ we do not count it among the WI (1). Apart from Italian neither Sardinian nor Maltese possess the idiom which points to areal connections.

In contrast to idiom (1), the wide spread of idiom (2) has not been noticed before.

(2) *to see the light at the end of the tunnel* ‘to get an indication, that a long period of hardship or adversity is nearing an end; to get hope for the future and for the end of an unpleasant situation’

The idiom literally refers to the distant light at the end of a railway tunnel, which is seen when a train travels in the dark. It has been used with reference to an economic upturn since the 1920s and is said to have been exploited by Winston Churchill in 1940 and 1941 (Mieder and Bryan 1995: 288; Brewer 2005: 818).

Indo-European Languages in Europe

Germanic Languages

Icelandic	<i>sjá ljós við enda hinna myrky ganga</i> <i>sjá ljós við endann á göngunum</i>	“to see light at the end of the dark tunnel” “to see light at the end of the tunnel”
Norwegian	<i>se lys i enden av tunnelen</i>	“to see the light in the end of the tunnel”
Swedish	<i>se ljuset i (slutet av) tunneln</i> <i>se ljuset i tunnelns andra ände</i>	“to see the light in (the end of) the tunnel” “to see the light in the tunnel’s other end”
Danish	<i>se lys for enden af tunnelen</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
English	<i>to see the light at the end of the tunnel</i>	
Scots	<i>tae see licht at the end o the tunnel</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Dutch	<i>het licht zien aan het einde van de tunnel</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
West Frisian	<i>der is ljocht oan it ein fan de tunnel</i>	“there is light at the end of the tunnel”
German	<i>Licht am Ende des Tunnels sehen</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”

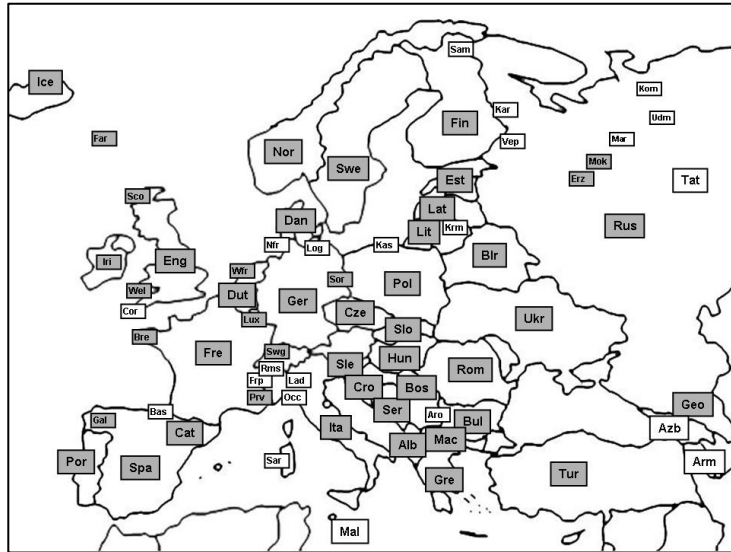
Luxembourgish	<i>et gesait een rem Luut um Enn vum Tunnel</i>	“one sees again the light at the end of the tunnel”
Swiss German	<i>Liecht am Ändi vom Tunne gseh</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”

(No equivalents for Faroese, North Frisian, Yiddish and Low German)

Celtic Languages

Irish	<i>solas ag deireadh an tolláin</i>	“light at the end of the tunnel”
Welsh	<i>(gweld) golau ar ddiwedd y twnel</i>	“(to see) the light at the end of the tunnel”
Breton	<i>(gweled) penn an tunnel</i>	“(to see) the end of the tunnel”

(No equivalent for Cornish)



Map 2: Equivalents of “to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
in European languages

Romance Languages

French	<i>voir le bout du tunnel</i>	“to see the end of the tunnel”
Provençal	<i>veire lou but dei tunnel</i>	“we see the end of the tunnel”
Italian	<i>vedere la luce in fondo al tunnel</i>	“to see the light in bottom of the tunnel”
	<i>vedere la luce alla fine del tunnel</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”

Spanish	<i>ver luz al final del tunel</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”
Catalan	<i>veure la llum al final del túnel</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Galician	<i>ver a luz ao final do túnel</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Portuguese	<i>ver a luz ao fundo do túnel</i>	“to see the light at the bottom of the tunnel”
Romanian	<i>a vedea luminița de la capătul tunelului</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”

(No equivalents for Occitan, Ladin, Romansh, Francoprovençal, Sardinian and Aromanian)

Baltic Languages

Latvian	<i>gaisma tuneļa galā</i>	“the light at the end of the tunnel”
Lithuanian	<i>matyti šviesą tunelio gale</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”

Slavonic Languages

Russian	<i>(у)видеть свет в конце туннеля</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Belorussian	<i>(у)бачыць святло ў канцы тунэл</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Ukrainian	<i>світло в кінці тунелю</i>	“the light at the end of the tunnel”
Slovak	<i>vidieť svetlo na konci tunela</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Czech	<i>vidět světlo na konci tunelu</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Polish	<i>(w)idać światło/światelko w tunelu</i>	“(one can see) light/little light in the tunnel”
Sorbian	<i>swěca/swětło w tunlu</i>	“the light in the tunnel”
Slovene	<i>videti luč na koncu predora</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Croatian	<i>vidjeti svjetlo na kraju tunela</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Bosnian	<i>vidjeti svjetlost na kraju tunela</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Serbian	<i>угледати светло на крају тунела</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
Bulgarian	<i>виждам/вижда се светлина в (края на) тунела</i>	“sb. sees light in (the end of) the tunnel”

(No equivalents for Kashubian and Macedonian)

<i>Albanian</i>	<i>te shohesh driten ne fund te tynelit</i>	“to see the light at the end of the tunnel”
<i>Greek</i>	<i>βλέπω φως στην άκρη του τούνελ</i>	“to see light at the other side of the tunnel”
<i>Armenian</i>	No equivalent	

Finno-Ugric Languages in Europe

Ugric Languages

<i>Hungarian</i>	<i>már látni az alagút végét</i>	“the end of the tunnel already can be seen”
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North-Finnic Languages

<i>Finnish</i>	<i>nähdä valoa tunnelin päässä</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”
<i>Estonian</i>	<i>tunneli lõpus valgust nägema</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”
(No equivalents for Karelian and Veps)		

Permic Languages No equivalents

Volgaic Languages

<i>Moksha Mordvin</i>	<i>туннельть омба пняльде ши валда няемс</i>	“to see light of the day at the end of the tunnel”
<i>Erzya Mordvin</i>	<i>неемс тол туннельень пецэ</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”
(No equivalent for Mari)		

Turkic Languages in Europe

<i>Turkish</i>	<i>tünelin sonunda ışık göründü</i>	“at the end of the tunnel light has been seen”
(No equivalents for Karaim, Tatar and Azerbaijani)		

Georgian	<i>gvirabis bolos sinatlis danakhva</i>	“to see the light at the end of a tunnel”
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Maltese and Basque No equivalents

Esperanto	<i>vidi lumon je la fino de la tunelo</i>	“to see light at the end of a tunnel”
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Non-European Languages

Vietnamese	<i>(nhìn)thấy ánh sáng cuối đường hầm</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel
Korean	<i>tennel-ui kkeut-i boin-da</i>	“to see the end of the tunnel”
Mongolian	<i>хонгулуйн үзүүрм зэрэл харax</i>	“to see light at the end of the tunnel”
Aklanon	<i>kasiga sa punta it tanel</i>	“light at the end of the tunnel”

The material sent in by our informants reveals that equivalents of the idiom are known in at least 44 European and some non-European languages with a quite consistent syntactic and lexical structure (cf. the words in bold type above for some differences).⁴ Most languages have also the shorter nominal form “light at the end of the tunnel”, meaning figuratively ‘hope for the future, after a long and difficult period’ (e.g. Albanian *drite ne fund te tunelit*, Estonian *valgus tunneli lõpus*). Other variants omit either the word for ‘end’ (like Polish and Sorbian): Greek *βλέπω φως στο τούνελ* “to see light in the tunnel” or the word for ‘light’ (like French and Provençal): Dutch *het einde van de tunnel zien*, Catalan *veure el final del túnel* and Galician *ver o final do túnel* “to see the end of the tunnel”.

3. Radio broadcast or telecommunication

Modern forms of radio- and telecommunication are the source frames of various figurative units in individual languages. The German idioms *eine Antenne für etwas haben* ‘to have a feeling for sth.’, *es herrscht Sendepause* ‘there is deadly silence’ or *eine lange Leitung haben* ‘to be slow in the uptake’ are typical of the colloquial language, but they have not spread far beyond this linguistic variety. Out of our pretested “WI candidates” from these domains only one widespread idiom has been found to exist, cf. (3). The source concept is ‘radio transmission’ where the broadcasting transmitter and the receiver must be on the same frequency. A radio program cannot be heard unless the radio is tuned to the correct wavelength.

- (3) *to be on the same wavelength as someone* ‘to have similar ideas, interests, and opinions (to another person’s); to understand each other very well’

The material from our informants confirms that equivalents of the idiom occur in 36 European languages. The idiom has also been reported for Korean (*ju-pa-su-ga matt-da* “sb. has the same wavelength as sb.”). Many of the lesser-used languages do not possess the idiom.

Indo-European Languages in Europe

Germanic Languages

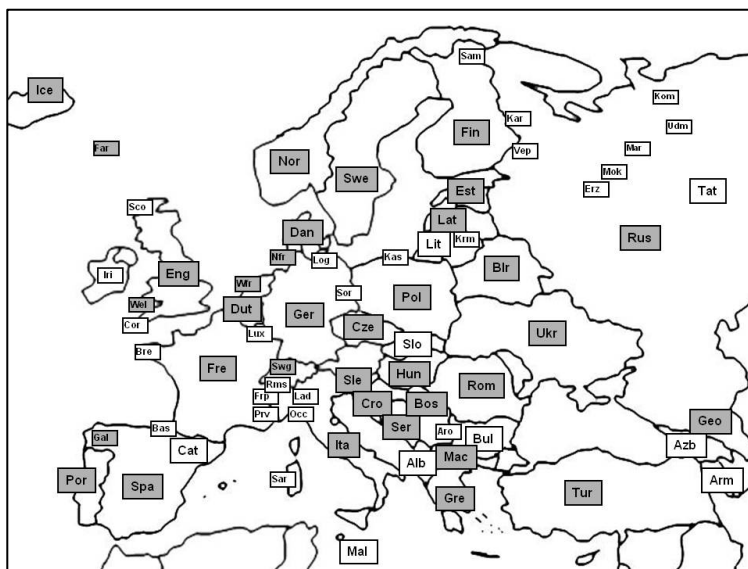
Icelandic	<i>að vera á sömu bylgjulengd (og e-hver)</i>	“to be on the same wavelength (as sb.)”
Faroese	<i>at vera á bylgjulongd (við einum)</i>	“to be on the wavelength (with sb.)”
Norwegian	<i>være på (samme) bølgelengde (med noen)</i>	“to be on the (same) wavelength (with sb.)”
Swedish	<i>vara på samma våglängd (med ngn)</i>	“to be on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
Danish	<i>være på bølgelængde (med ngn)</i>	“to be on the wavelength (with sb.)”
English	<i>to be on the same wavelength as sb.</i>	
Dutch	<i>op dezelfde golflengte zitten (met iem.)</i>	“to sit on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
	<i>op gelijke golflengte zijn</i>	“to be on similar wavelength”
North Frisian	<i>üp di salew Welenlengdi wüis</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
West Frisian	<i>op deselde golflingte sitte</i>	“to sit on the same wavelength”
German	<i>(mit jm.) auf der gleichen Wellenlänge</i>	<i>liegen</i> “to lie on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
Swiss German	<i>uf dr glüiche Wällelengi süi</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”

(No equivalents for Scots, Luxembourgish, Yiddish and Low German)

Celtic Languages

Welsh	<i>bod ar yr un donfedd â rhywun</i>	“to be on the same wavelength as”
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(No equivalents for Irish, Cornish and Breton)



Map 3: Equivalents of “to be on the same wavelength” in European languages

Romance Languages

French	<i>être sur la même longueur d’onde (avec qqn)</i>	“to be on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
Italian	<i>essere sulla stessa lunghezza d’onda</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
Spanish	<i>estar en la misma onda</i>	“to be on the same wave ”
Galician	<i>estar na mesma onda</i>	“to be on the same wave ”
Portuguese	<i>estar na mesma onda</i>	“to be on the same wave ”
Romanian	<i>a fi pe aceeași lungime de undă</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
(No equivalents for Francoprovençal, Provençal, Occitan, Ladin, Romansh, Catalan, Sardinian and Aromanian)		

Baltic Languages

Latvian	<i>būt uz viena viļņa</i>	“to be on the same wave ”
(No equivalent for Lithuanian)		

Slavonic Languages

Russian	<i>быть с кем-л. на одной волне</i>	“to be with sb. on one wave ”
Belorussian	<i>быць на адной хвалі</i>	“to be on one wave ”
Ukrainian	<i>бути на одній хвилі</i>	“to be on one wave ”

Czech	<i>být na stejné frekvenci (s někým)</i>	“to be on the same one wave (with sb.)”
Polish	<i>działać/myśleć/... na tej samej fali</i>	“to act/think/... on the same wave ”
Slovene	<i>biti na isti valovni dolžini</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
Croatian	<i>biti na istoj valnoj dužini/duljini</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
Bosnian	<i>biti na istoj talasnoj dužini</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
Serbian	<i>biti na istoj talasnoj dužini</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
Macedonian	<i>na ista branova dol'ina e so</i>	“to be on the same wavelength”
(No equivalents for Slovak, Kashubian, Sorbian and Bulgarian)		
<i>Albanian</i>	No equivalent	
<i>Greek</i>	<i>είμαι/εκπέμπω στο ίδιο μήκος κύματος (με κάποιον)</i>	“to be/ radiate on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
<i>Armenian</i>	No equivalent	

Finno-Ugric Languages in Europe

Ugric Languages

Hungarian	<i>egy/azonos hullámhosszon van vkivel</i>	“sb. is on the same/on one wavelength with sb.”
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North-Finnic Languages

Finnish	<i>olla samalla aaltopituudella (jkn. kanssa)</i>	“to be on the same wavelength (with sb.)”
Estonian	<i>ühel lainel olema (kellegagi)</i>	“to be on the same wave (with sb.)”

(No equivalents for Karelian and Veps)

Permic and Volgaic Languages No equivalents

Turkic Languages in Europe

Turkish	<i>birisiyle aynı frekansta olmak</i>	“to be on the same frequency with sb.”
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(No equivalents for Karaim, Tatar and Azerbaijani)

Georgian *ert talgaze kopna* “to be on the same wave”

Maltese and Basque No equivalents

Esperanto *esti je la sama ondolongo* “to be on the same wavelength”

No particular emphasis should be laid on the morpho-syntactic structures: Types such as “to be/lie/sit on the same wavelength (with sb.)” and “to have the same wavelength (as sb.)” or “the two have the same wavelength” are used side by side in many languages. Some lexical variants should be noticed as well. The word used for ‘same’ can be omitted (as in Faroese and Danish), just as the element meaning ‘length’ (e.g. Spanish, Latvian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Georgian). Similar to ‘wavelength’ is ‘frequency’ in Turkish. Whereas all the idioms listed above have the same figurative meaning, the seemingly similar Bulgarian idiom *на същата вълна съм* “I am on the same wave” reveals a different semantic structure. It turns out to be a “false friend” in view of its figurative meaning ‘I busy myself with the same problems or with similar ideas (as sb.)’.⁵

4. Steam engine technology, gears and engine mechanics

Source frames like technical engineering, gears and other means of mechanization have left some traces in figurative units of individual languages but contribute to the “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units” with only two WIs. Korhonen (1997: 162) assumes an “international” distribution for the idioms *to have a screw loose/missing* ‘to be slightly crazy’ and *to let off steam* ‘to abreact, work off (anger, tension)’. This assumption could not be confirmed by our investigation (both idioms have only few near-equivalents in other languages).

Idiom (4) has no literal counterpart in English (cf. *the dead center*):

- (4) German *der tote Punkt/ein toter Punkt* “the/a dead spot/point”
 ‘a stage when no progress can be made; a state of greatest exhaustion or stagnancy; at a standstill’

The idiom originates from (steam) engine technology. It refers to the moment (technically two moments) in the cycle of an engine when the connecting rod and the crankshaft form one straight line. At this point, the connecting rod moves neither forward nor backward but reverses its direction, and there is temporarily no turning force.

Idiom equivalents occur also in verbal constructions such as “to surmount the dead spot” (German *den toten Punkt überwinden* ‘to recover from fatigue; to overcome the point of exhaustion or

stagnation’) or “to reach the dead spot” (Estonian *surnud punkti jõudma* ‘to become completely exhausted, tired or to reach the point that something cannot move on’). However, all of our informants recorded the noun phrase in the first place (varying only in the use of the article). For reasons of space we will present our data in a short overview and with a schematic grid instead of a map. The grid represents 36 European major languages.⁴ Languages marked on gray rectangles possess equivalents.

Norwegian *et dødpunkt*, Swedish *en död punkt*, Danish *et dødt punkt*, West Frisian *it deade punt*, Dutch *het dode punt*, French *le point mort*, Italian *un punto morto*, Spanish *el/un punto muerto*, Portuguese *um ponto morto*, Romanian *punctul mort*, Russian *мёртвая точка*, Belarusian *мёртвы пункт*, Ukrainian *мертва точка*, Czech *mrtvý bod*, Slovak *mŕtvý bod*, Polish *martwy punkt*, Sorbian *mortwy dypk*, Slovene *mrtva točka*, Croatian *mrtva točka*, Bosnian *mrtva tačka*, Serbian *mrtva tačka*, Bulgarian *мъртва точка*, Albanian *pikë e vdekur*, Greek *νεκρό σημείο* and Finnish *kuollut piste*. The Hungarian compound *holtpont* “dead-point” is a full equivalent. Both Baltic languages use a different syntactic structure, “the point of the death”: Lithuanian *mirties taškas* and Latvian *nāves punkts*. A semantic shift can be observed in Icelandic. Expressions such as *sjaldan/aldrei dauður punktur í e-u* “rarely/never a dead point in sth.” can be used figuratively in the sense of ‘there is always something going on, that’s where the action is.

Ice	Nor	Swe	Fin	Est	Lat
Eng	Dut	Dan	Lit	Blr	Rus
Fre	Ger	Pol	Cze	Slo	Ukr
Sle	Cro	Hun	Rom	Geo	Azb
Cat	Ita	Bos	Ser	Mac	Bul
Por	Spa	Mal	Alb	Gre	Tur

Idiom (5) originates from a similar concept. The image is that of a machine consisting of many small interlocking gearwheels, where an individual gearwheel, or cog, only transmits or receives motion but has no power or control itself.

- (5) *to be only a cog in the wheel/machine/works* ‘to be only one of many entities in a large business, organization, system (in a subordinate position, function, without personal responsibility)’

Although nowadays the idiom will most probably be associated with “modern” engines, we cannot rule out the possibility that the original cultural concept underlying the idiom is different, since cogwheel gears are much older (cf. e.g. construction of watermills or clockwork mechanism in bygone days). The idiom occurs with a quite consistent syntactic and lexical structure across the languages, varying just between the words for “wheel/cog” and “machine, machinery”. Here follows a short overview of our data and a grid.

Icelandic *vera tannhjól í gangverki e-s* “to be (a) cogwheel in sb.’s gears”, Swedish *vara en kugge i maskineriet* “to be a cog in the machine”, German *nur ein Rädchen im Getriebe sein* “to be only a little wheel in the gears”, French *n’être qu’un rouage (parmi d’autres rouages)* “to be only a wheel (among other wheels)”, Italian *non essere che la rotella/rotellina di un ingranaggio* “to be only the little wheel of a gears”, Lithuanian *mažas (didelio mechanizmo) sraigtelis* “a little wheel in the big gears”, Russian *быть только колесиком в механизме* “to be only a small wheel in the gears”, Ukrainian *бути лише дрібний гвинтик* “to be only a small cog”, Czech *být jen kolečkem v mašinérii* “to be a little wheel in the machinery”, Slovak *byť len kolieskom v súkolí* “to be only a wheel in the gears”, Polish *być tylko trybikiem w maszynie* “to be only a cog in the machine”, Sorbian *być kolesko w mašineriji* “to be a small wheel in the gears”, Hungarian *vki (csak) egy (apró) fogaskerék/csavar a gépezetben* “sb. is (just) a (small) cog/bolt in the machine”, Finnish *olla vain pieni ratas koneistossa* “to be only a small cog in the gears” or *olla yksi koneiston pyöristä* “to be one of the wheels in the gears”, Estonian *vaid väike mutrike/rattake suures masinavärgis olema* “to be only a little wheel/cog in the big gear”. Different lexical structures can be found in Dutch *een klein radertje in het geheel zijn* “to be a small wheel in the whole” or in idioms with ‘screw’, e.g. Serbian *бути ситан шраф у механизму* “to be a screw in the mechanism” (a Russian variant is *быть только винтиком в механизме*; in Latvian it is the only form: *tikai skrūvīte ritenī* “only a little screw in the wheel”) and ‘bolt’: Bulgarian *винтче в машината* “a little bolt in the machine”.

Ice	Nor	Swe	Fin	Est	Lat
Eng	Dut	Dan	Lit	Blr	Rus
Fre	Ger	Pol	Cze	Slo	Ukr
Sle	Cro	Hun	Rom	Geo	Azb
Cat	Ita	Bos	Ser	Mac	Bul
Por	Spa	Mal	Alb	Gre	Tur

5. *Electricity*

Only one widespread idiom has been found which can be traced back to the modern technical domain of ‘electricity’, cf. (6).

- (6) *to recharge one’s batteries* ‘to take a break from a tiring or stressful activity in order to relax and recover one’s energy, to regain one’s energy after working hard for a long time’

The idiom is based on a comparison of a person’s physical shape with the state of an electric motor or an engine that needs electricity to start. If the battery of the electric device is too low, the battery needs recharging before work can continue. The idiom is attributed to Winston Churchill in a letter of February 1921 (Allen 2006: 51). The idiom is quite young and not registered in all dictionaries. Several informants found evidence for the existence of the idiom in the Internet, e.g. in tourism advertising. As the grid shows, the idiom exists in the majority of the European standard languages. Lexical variants can be set aside. The variants with “battery/batteries” clearly dominate over such with “accumulator”.

With “battery/batteries”:
Icelandic *hlaða batterín*,
Norwegian *lade batteriene*,
Swedish *ladda batterierna*,
Danish *at lade batterierne*
op, Swiss German *sini Batterie wider uflade*, French *recharger ses batteries*,

Ice	Nor	Swe	Fin	Est	Lat
Eng	Dut	Dan	Lit	Blr	Rus
Fre	Ger	Pol	Cze	Slo	Ukr
Sle	Cro	Hun	Rom	Geo	Azb
Cat	Ita	Bos	Ser	Mac	Bul
Por	Spa	Mal	Alb	Gre	Tur

Italian *ricaricare le batterie*, Spanish *(re)cargar (las) baterías/pilas*, Catalan *carregar les piles*, Portuguese *recarregar as baterias*, Romanian *a-și (re)încărca bateriile*, Latvian *uzlādēt savas baterijas*, Czech *dobít si baterky*, Slovak *nabit’ si znovu batérie*, Slovene *napolniti baterije*, Croatian *napuniti baterije*, Bosnian *napuniti baterije*, Serbian *napuniti baterije*, Bulgarian *зареждам си батериите*, Albanian *i mbush bateritë*, Greek *γεμίζω τις μπαταρίες μου*, Estonian *patareisid laadima*, Maltese *tiċċargja l-batterija*; with “accumulator”: Dutch *de akku opladen*, Polish *naładować akumulatory*, Finnish *ladata akkunsaa*; with both variants: West Frisian *de batterijen/de akku oplade*, German *seine Batterie/seinen Akku wieder aufladen*, Polish *naładować*

baterielakumulatory. Expressions without one of these words, however, as Russian *зарядиться энергией* “to charge oneself with energy”, Ukrainian *зарядитись енергією* “to charge energy” or Hungarian *feltöltődik* “to charge oneself”, must be excluded”.

6. Outlook

Unlike cross-linguistic phraseology which usually focuses on two or three languages, our project “Widespread Idioms in Europe and Beyond” has included all European languages accessible to idiom research. Among the 70 European languages we analyzed are also such languages which were hardly ever the subject of idiom research (although they are known in paremiology), such as the Celtic, Permic and Volgaic languages or Albanian, Maltese, Azerbaijani and Basque. However, there is currently no access to another 70 languages spoken in Europe, i.e. to the many (partly declining) minor and minority languages of east and southeast Europe.

The objective of the project was to systematically discover figurative units which are common to many languages, in order to create a “Lexicon of Common Figurative Units”⁷ (Pirainen forthcoming). More than half of the ca. 350 units of this lexicon fall under the umbrella term of *intertextuality*, i.e. they originate from texts like classical writings, the Bible, fables, folk narratives, light fiction, cinema films or quotations from prominent people. Except for idioms originating from ‘modern technology’, to the most recent layers of the common figurative language belong idioms from the domains of ‘historical events of the recent past’, ‘modern warfare’, ‘financial system’ and ‘sports’. These widespread idioms have been identified by extensive empirical studies and distinguished from others (which probably also occur in various languages) according to strict criteria (cf. Pirainen 2010a: 16). It was unpredictable and surprising in many cases which these common figurative units in fact are and which items fell short of our criteria. Therefore, one should not speak of “widespread” or “international” idioms without appropriate investigations.

Not all WIs of the modern layers can be traced back to recent Anglo-American influence: Idiom (4) does not exist in English. Parallels of idiom (1) in other languages are “to set the light at green” or “to give green street/way to sb.”, among other things, where English as donor language can be excluded. On the other

hand, the role of intertextuality should be considered here as well. Early instances of both idiom (2) and idiom (6) are ascribed to Winston Churchill. Maybe the domain of modern technology is not the major factor here, but the quotation of a prominent personality. All these questions can only be answered on the basis of thorough investigations. The study presented here should be regarded as a first step into this direction.

Notes

¹See Piirainen (2010a, b, c) and www.widespread-idioms.uni-trier.de for more details.

²These idioms are, for instance, French *franchir le mur du son*, Italian *superare il muro del suono*, Spanish *romper la barrera del sonido*, Portuguese *quebrar a barreira do som*, Romanian *a sparge barierele (sonore)*, Slovene *prebiti zvočni zid* or Polish *przekraczać barierę dźwięku*. Secondary figurative meanings can be excluded definitely for expressions like Croatian *probiti zvučni zid*, Greek *σπάω το φράγμα του ήχου* or Turkish *ses duvarını aşmak*.

³The statements in dictionaries are contradictory: According to Brewer (2005: 614), the English idiom dates from the 1970s. The French equivalent is frequent since 1955-1960 (Rey/Chantreau 1993: 357) and the German idiom is recorded from the 1960s (Spalding 1959ff: 1156). Several studies refer to the idiom as *internationalism* (e.g. Korhonen 1997: 161; Mieder 1010: 449).

⁴The abbreviations stand for Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, English, Dutch, Danish, Lithuanian, Belorussian, Russian, French, German, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Ukrainian, Slovenian, Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, Catalan, Italian, Bosnian, Serbian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Portuguese, Spanish, Maltese, Albanian, Greek and Turkish.

⁵The Celtic idioms are recent calques: in Breton from French and in Irish and Welsh from English. The Irish idiom is sometimes seen as *sólás ag deireadh an tolláin* “solace at the end of the tunnel”, a word-play on the English translation.

⁶The antonymous idiom is just as frequent: Bulgarian *на друга вълна съм* “I am on the other wave”, meaning ‘I occupy myself with different problems, I am thinking about something very different’.

⁷The focus is not so much on “European” because many WIs exist also in non-European languages; cf. also Paczolay 1997.

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