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**ON THE HARMONIZATION OF IDIOMATIC LANGUAGE**  
**WITH SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

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*Abstract*

Is there such thing as harmony between science, technology and language? This could be an interesting question if it were not naïve. Languages evolve almost simultaneously with science and technology because, with new technology, new words are needed. Languages constantly adapt to the new realities, whether scientific, social or cultural. New words replace old ones when the surrounding realities ask for it, when it is necessary to name realities which have never been seen before. The same holds valid in the case of idioms. The newer generations have already forgotten many of the idioms which are still familiar to the older generation. In English, for example, to rain cats and dogs or to paint the town red are considered old and are even laughed at by very young people. In Romanian, «a fi într-o bujie» or «a-i fila o lampă» (he/she works with only one spark plug and one of his/her lamp flickers, both of them meaning to be a little crazy) no longer have a meaning to people in their early twenties or younger. New realities modify old idioms, make them disappear, or give birth to brand new ones, such as the engine is running, but there is nobody behind the wheel or he/she drives uphill with the clutch slipping. The present paper aims at showing how this happens and at giving an answer to the real question: is there a certain type of idioms which does not keep pace with science and technology?

**Keywords:** idioms; proverbs; evolution; influence; technology; science;

**1. INTRODUCTION**

As a not native-speaker of English I have always tried to keep up with what is new in English, especially in as far as idioms and slang are concerned, and I have always considered that the language used in television, especially in sitcoms, is the most vivid and up-to-date language. I started getting aware of this fact when, in such a sitcom, one of the main characters was being mocked at by the others for using out-of-date idioms, such as to paint the town red and to be in a pickle. I had fun watching him being laughed at for using "old slang" (as another main character suggested), but the same was to happen to me just a few months later, while having a casual conversation with a Canadian teacher of English. I used an idiom which I thought would make her feel like home: it is raining cats and dogs. She was

surprised to hear it and, being asked why, she simply said that nobody used it in Canada any more, except for very old people. After that eye-opening conversation I used the Internet to do some research, and this is how I found out that it is raining cats and dogs, the English idiom referred to in most studies and articles on idioms, has one big problem: nobody uses it nowadays. This is what a native English-speaking American citizen wrote on a site dealing with idioms: "I have NEVER actually heard anyone use the phrase 'It's raining cats and dogs.' It's funny, because it is such a common example of an English expression or idiom that even in the U.S. everyone thinks that it must be used somewhere, but nobody has ever heard it." He then continued giving examples of how people in his country talk about heavy rain: "It's pouring' is common. 'It's a downpour' is common. And, yes, 'coming down in buckets' is common." (<https://www.italki.com/question/256447>, last visited on May 3rd, 2018, at 5:12 p.m.).

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My conclusion was that when the reality of cats and dogs literally falling through the fetched roofs of the 16th century English houses disappeared, the idiom started dying slowly out until it became a fossil. It is well known that words become obsolete and disappear when the realities denominated by them no longer exist, but what about idioms? They are metaphors, their meaning is not literal and they are small samples of language art, therefore they should not disappear. Still, many of them do. What makes them lose ground in favor of the new ones? Doing more research, looking through more books on idioms (both in English and Romanian) and using the Internet extensively, I realized that some idioms have disappeared and others have been transformed due to a very important aspect of our lives: technology. I have found traces of its influence in the most prolific patterns which created idioms throughout the centuries, with one notable exception: proverbs. There are proverbs whose meaning is not literal (I believe that only such proverbs should be considered idioms) and whose origins can be traced thousands of years ago. What kept them alive, almost unchanged? How are those idioms which are also proverbs different from the idioms which have not reached the complexity of a proverb, in as far as their longevity in language is concerned? A possible answer is to be found in the present article.

From the very beginning, mention should be made that there are no studies or articles dedicated to the evolution of idioms according to the progress made in science and technology. There are some authors who only noticed that an idiom can have various forms according to time and place, but they do not go beyond the role of mere observers.

"A living language, like English, is constantly on the move. Trying to describe it is like trying to take a snapshot of a flowing river. As a language passes through time and space, it is altered in innumerable ways. And it is continually replenished, refreshed, and rejuvenated.

Time. A river flowing through the centuries picks up some new pebbles and discards some old. It reshapes the existing ones, polishing them to show new hues, accentuate new angles. It brings some to the surface and buries others below layers (sometimes those pebbles can pop up again!)." (Garg, 2005:1)

This phenomenon happens in every living language. For example, Liviu Groza detects more types of variation in Romanian, from phonetic variations to variations caused by changing the word order. However, reference will be made only to what the author names spontaneous phraseological changes (Groza: 38). The most numerous variations labeled spontaneous are those in which one element is replaced by a synonym. The reasons for these changes can vary, but the main reasons are the greater popularity of the replacing word in one region, on the one hand, and the fact that one individual might like the replacing word better than the replaced one, on the other. Here is one example: "a-și ieși din fire / pepeni / răbdări / țâțâni / balamale / șine". (Groza: 39) Of course, it is normal for idioms to vary, since they are not mathematical entities, but products of the human artistic talent. In mathematics, one and one is always two, but in language, what Romanians in one region name țâțâni (hinges), people in other regions call balamale (not considering register, or metaphorical meaning). To all appearances, it is not only about the region where idioms are used. According to Groza, the word țâțână comes from the Latin, titina, whereas the second one, balama comes from Turkish. Since the Romans were here first and the word țâțână does not sound as a neologism, one may suppose that the newest word is balama.

Going to the roots of some of the most common idiomatic expressions in English, Călina Gogălniceanu (2007) offers aspects of technology influence on idioms without necessarily trying to demonstrate the evolution of the idioms through technology, but rather through time. Funny bone in "with that hilarious story he hit my funny bone" (Gogălniceanu 2007: 33), for instance, evolved from the literal meaning of the nerve which runs down the inside of the elbow, named the ulnar nerve, the one which causes a funny feeling in the form of a dull pain when it is hit, to the abstract meaning of feeling like laughing or at least having fun. This happened when science gave the longest bone in the human arm a name: humerus. The already existing word in English, humorous, "ceased" the opportunity and changed the meaning of humerus bone into humorous bone, which is, in other words, the funny bone. Most probably, had it not been for science and its words from Latin, the funny bone would have remained just a bone, and the idiom funny bone would have never been created.

There are many examples of technology and science influencing idioms or even giving birth to them, through semantic transfer, such as: beat around the bush, where the technology of catching birds at night by beating the ground around the bushes in which they were hiding gave birth to idioms meaning to deliberately avoid the real issue (Gogălniceanu 2007: 14), or between the devil and the blue sea, which is believed to come from a real marine situation (Gogălniceanu 2007: 16).

What surprises me is that, obvious as this phenomenon is, I found no books or articles specifically approaching the harmonization of idiomatic language and science. There are many examples to support the existence of this linguistic phenomenon among which: a few bricks short of a load – a few cards short of a deck – a few sandwiches short of a picnic – a few screws short of a hardware store – a few fries short of a Happy Meal – a few keys short of a keyboard. Although not documented, the evolution of the pattern "a few units short of a whole" is obvious, from the ancient bricks to the very modern keys on a keyboard. Some of them may have been created during the same period of time, just for the sake of variety, but this does not change the fact that, once technology was here (screws, keys and even sandwiches), new idioms were created.

A more important aspect of the evolution of idiomatic expressions, whichever form they may take, is the influence of science progress onto proverbs, with a key question: Have proverbs, in general, changed their form and meanings over the centuries? The answer is negative and supporting arguments in this respect will be provided in what follows.

Languages evolve just like technology and adapt to the new technological realities. Let us have a look at the series of idioms previously mentioned: a-și ieși din fire / pepeni / răbdări / țâțâni / balamale / șine. The word-for-word translation is to snap out (or get out, come out) of one's common sense / watermelons / patience / hinges / railway tracks, and the meaning is to go crazy. The evolution is clear: common sense, one of the most basic senses after the five senses of the body, then watermelons (the humanity evolved and started growing their own food), patience (a more advanced way of controlling ourselves seen as a sign of evolution and even of a cultivated spirit, as opposed to the animal instinct), hinges – a sign of technology – and the last one, railway tracks, when the humanity was on its way to the glorification of technology (and on its way to becoming addicted to it – not necessarily a positive thing). But why did the evolution of the idiom based on the formula to get out of..., meaning to lose it, stop here? Where is a-și ieși de pe autostrada sa (to snap out of one's highway), or a-și ieși din rețea / a scoate pe cineva din rețea (to snap out of/to be made go out of the net), a-și ieși / a fi scos de pe cric (to snap off of/to be taken down of the jack)? Is it too soon for them? Have people lost interest in this pattern? Have they already stopped creating idioms because of the pace of life today? Is there simply no time for this any longer? Will people become, slowly but surely, the machines which have been invented for centuries?

Another intriguing aspect which made me further investigate on how science and technology influence the appearance and disappearance of language expressions was the disappearance of two Romanian idioms which I used a lot when I was a child: a-i fila o lampă and a fi într-o bujie (literally translated, one of his/her lamp flickers and he/she works with only one spark plug, both of them meaning to be a little crazy, practically the equivalent of to have a screw loose). I asked tens of university students, just months ago (the spring of 2018), whether they knew what these two Romanian idioms meant, and very few of them knew their meaning. The fact that those very few students were in their 30's is worth mentioning.

While I was aware of the fact that not having electronic devices working on lamps any longer lead to the disappearance of *a-i fila o lampă*, I did not understand how an expression such as *turn on/off the light* is still in use, since we no longer turn anything to get something working, except for some cars, but not all, since more and more cars have buttons to press in order to start the engine. Why is this happening? Is it because the English language is much older than the Romanian, therefore having a lot stronger inertia? Is it because the Romanian language is more dynamic and it gets rid of whatever does not have a correspondent in reality more quickly than English? It is neither the first, nor the second variant. The answer lies within the close connection between language and technology. The verb *turn on/turn off* is still in use because, even to this day, there are devices using a knob designed to be turned in order to decrease or increase light or sound. It is still used in cars' radios, hands free devices and light dimmers. We might not turn on and off electric and electronic devices any longer, but we still turn up and down light and sound. When this technology becomes obsolete, we will witness the death of these lexically related phrasal verbs.

### **3. FINDINGS**

Judging by how technology and science influence them, idioms can be divided into two large groups: a) idioms which underwent modifications in their lexical content under the influence of science in general and b) idioms which remained unchanged over the decades and even over the centuries.

The starting point was the observation that some of the idioms found in books or in the collective memory of the people born in the 1970's, for example, are no longer in use, even though the meaning might be known to the younger generations. Furthermore, there are idioms which the people born in the 1970's still use and which have no meaning for the younger generation. How is this possible? The distance in time between two generations is not that significant. Despite this fact, small experiments conducted personally by me showed that young people under the age of 25 (but older than 18) do not know the meaning of some idioms still used (or at least recognized) by people a little over 30.

Another fact which led to the present research was the survival of proverbs, the oldest idioms, both in Romanian and English, which have not changed their structure over the centuries (or, if they did, they suffered minor modifications). An answer was needed to this question: How come an idiom such as "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" is still in use and "It is raining cats and dogs" is not? Of course, the proverb underwent some modifications, but not caused by technology and not essential to its structure or meaning. The first variant seems to have been found in John Heywood's 1546 glossary, 'A dialogue containyng the nomber in effect of all the prouerbes in the englishe tongue': "Better one byrde in hande than ten in the wood." (<https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/a-bird-in-the-hand.html>, last visited on May 9th, 2018, at 03:02 p.m.)

Another irrefutable piece of evidence that the evolution of technology has had an insignificant impact in the creation of proverbs is the fact that there are not too many proverbs related to technology. The most modern proverbs seem to have originated in an era where blacksmiths were very important: "Strike while the iron is still hot. In the first 200 proverbs presented in Flonta (1995), only 4 idioms seem to have been influenced by technology: Air slays sooner than the sword. The anvil fears no blows. When you are an anvil, hold you still; when you are a hammer, strike your fill. An arrow shot upright falls on the shooter's head." (Flonta 1995: 10, 12, 13) The last one can be barely considered a proverb influenced by technology, and no matter how hard one tries to find traces of technological influences upon proverb - idioms, only proverbs which survived in the same form as they were when created will be found. The intuition tells us that, being samples of written language, they were used by writers along the centuries. Once a proverb is used by writers and is made well known to an entire community, the proverb is sentenced to being frozen in time. Why a proverb such as "A new broom sweeps clean" did not turn into "A new vacuum cleaner vacuums clean"? It is because the original proverb said it all and because we still use brooms. How about "Do not put the cart before horses"? While in Romania of the 21st century we still have carts pulled by horses, in England this reality has long died out. Why has the proverb not evolved into something like *Do not put the engine before the chassis*? Another factor which lead to preserving proverb-idioms almost in their original shape is that knowing the proverbs of your language

shows a cultivated spirit, therefore changing them would be a blasphemy and a sign of lack of respect for the culture which produced them. Although this statement is true, changing proverbs while knowing the original is common in journalism, for example, or on blogs. Journalists change them to draw attention and, eventually, to make their readers smile, while bloggers do it for fun.

According to Flonta (1995), people started creating proverbs when they began working the land, at the dawn of agriculture. Due to the excess of food, they had the necessary time to sit and think of rules and laws by which the community should function, and those rules and laws were formulated in the form of proverbs. The first example given in the above mentioned book is a proverb allegedly known by the Sumerians 6,000 years ago: "Câteaua de pripă își naste căteii fără ochi" (Flonta 1995:2), roughly translated as The dog without a master gives birth to blind puppies. The word pripă (haste) was probably wrongly used here, the intended word being pripas, meaning without a master among other meanings. Used for didactic reasons, the proverb is what all the proverbs are: a sample of wisdom, a life lesson, in the shape of a metaphor. Of course, female dogs, having a master or not, give birth to "blind" puppies, but that was not the point of the proverb, which turns it into an idiom.

In the modern era, we have electricity, cars and other means of transportation. What did they produce, idiom-wise? In Romanian, we have *îi filează o lampă*, *e într-o bujie* and a very new one, which might catch, although I doubt it, because I personally heard it from a single person: (*ăsta*) *ziua fură curent* which means that the person in case has suffered a short circuit and, now, "steals" electricity (word-for-word translation: that person steals electricity during the day). Since I could not find it in any Romanian dictionaries of idioms, I did what any other person with enough computer knowledge would do: I googled it. I found only three websites which mention this idiom in the first 40 websites brought to me by Google, one of them giving the definition: "Mulți cred că e vorba de curentul ăla de care ai nevoie ca să faci lumină, dar de fapt că „fură curent” se spune despre o persoană care exagerează, aberează sau e nițel nebună." (Many people think that it is about the electricity you need to have light, but, in fact, we say that a person steals electricity when that person exaggerates, talks nonsense or is a little crazy.) (<https://www.kissfm.ro/article/9110/Cele-mai-amuzante-expresii-din-limba-romana>).

There was a comment on another website: "Nu-i normal omul ăsta, fură rău current și n-are toate țiglele pe casă. Pericol public." (That man is not normal, he steals a lot of electricity and he does not have all the tiles on the roof. Public danger.) (<https://portalsm.ro/2017/12/fotovideo-smecherasul-care-distruso-terasa-cu-masina-comis-o-din-nou/>, last visited on June 12th, 2018, at 10:42). The proverb have all the tiles on the roof means have a screw lose.

Only one or two sites are not enough, but they represent a start. I have heard, from the same person, a few months later, a variant of this idiom: (*Ăsta*) *ziua fură curent, iar noaptea dă la masă* (That person steals electricity during the day and is in short circuit at night). Could that person be the one who actually came up with the variant? The question is worth asking because the above mentioned variant cannot be found anywhere, not even on the Internet. At this point the question should be asked if idioms are the product of a collective author or, on the contrary, they are produced individually and then spread with the chance of becoming popular?

The evidence that technology influenced idioms in both Romanian and English is overwhelming and I would have been surprised if it had been any different. There is one noticeable fact that has to be brought to our attention: most idioms are negative, talking about craziness, ugliness, stupidity etc. Trying to find ten idioms about craziness and ugliness, for example, and then ten idioms about being sane and beautiful revealed the fact that there are a lot more idioms describing negative facts, features, attitudes etc. This fact may show an inclination of people towards humiliating other people, but it may very well be our need to present negative things in a funny way, so as to sugar coat the reality. How many idioms related to technology are there in Romanian and in English, regarding craziness or stupidity? If we count the Romanian ones, including the lost *e într-o bujie* and *îi filează o lampă*, there are 5: *nu are toate țiglele pe casă*, *fură curent* (*ziua fură current, iar noaptea dă la masă*), *îi lipsește o doagă* (he/she misses a stave) and the two mentioned above as being already forgotten. In English, there are many more such idioms: a few bricks shy of a load, a few cans short of a six pack, the elevator doesn't go all the way to the top, the lights are on but nobody's home, half a bubble off plumb, a few sandwiches short of a picnic, one more brain-cell and he could be considered dangerous, a few French fries short of a happy meal, working with

an unformatted disk, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, got a screw loose, lights are on but no one's home, he's/she's not firing on all cylinders, he's/she's a 75 watt bulb in a 100 watt world, drives uphill with the clutch slipping, gates are down, the lights are flashing, but the train isn't coming, he's/she's so dense, light bends around him/her etc. (<https://www.webmasterworld.com/forum9/7910.htm>, last visited on June 12th, 2018, at 11:09).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The conclusion can be drawn that idioms in the form of proverbs stopped evolving hundreds of years ago, being preserved almost as they were when created, with few changes, but not under the influence of modern technology. There are no "The-phone in the hand is worth two in the store" or "It is the early buyer who catches the promotion" etc., whereas idioms which are not proverbs, belonging to the spoken language, have evolved permanently. The same idea is pointed out by Flonta (1995) who states that: "E interesant că, în timp ce se asistă la o diminuare a folosirii proverbului în secolul trecut, fenomen care continua și în secolul nostru, publicarea de culegeri de proverbe în toate limbile a luat o mare amploare tocmai în aceste două secole: proverbele românilor sunt culese și publicate în monumentală lucrare a lui J. Zanne (1895-1912), iar Institutul de limbă finlandeză al Universității din Helsinki finalizează, încă înainte de 1930, culegerea și clasificarea unui număr record de circa 1.425.000 de proverbe, pentru a nu da decât aceste două exemple" (Flonta, 1995: 3).

In addition, it is obvious that the written language strives to preserve the language of its decade, with its rules and laws, while spoken language, free and spontaneous, still gives births to new idioms, even though the frequency with which these idioms appear is not high. The only reason for which idioms do not change as fast as they are created is that many of them are not accepted/used by enough people and on a large enough territory to become national. Examples such as «ziua fură curent și noaptea dă la masa», a se încălța cu fesul (to put the cap on your feet, an idiom strictly used by one of my cousins, and which means to be stupid, clumsy) or a face ca drujba în ciot (to make like a chainsaw in a stump, an idiom brought to my attention by a colleague of mine, learned from her mother, meaning to be highly agitated), are definitely inventive, but have not made it to mass usage. Maybe, in the future. Who knows?

It has been shown that idioms are prone to be changed and "upgraded" by technology except for those complex idioms in the form of proverbs, and the conclusion has already been drawn: proverbs are bound to stay unchanged due to the fact that they belong to the literary, cultivated language. What has to be determined in the future is how much we use proverbs in our daily conversations.

Without having solid evidence, I tend to believe that proverbs have become items in a museum of language history. We know them, we like to look at them, but we do not use them any longer to illustrate our thoughts. When is the last time you used one? The other idioms are more popular and, being part of the spoken language, are still used on a large scale. Will they become what proverbs are today? Will communication continuously become more efficient and these metaphors be forgotten in the process? Will they even be forbidden in the future? Forbidding them seems to be a stretch, but there is at least one movie in which this fact is a reality (a fictitious reality, if there is such a thing).

Of course, a science-fiction movie, about our world in the future: *Demolition Man*, 1993, with Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes and Sandra Bullock. It is a movie about "a police officer (who) is brought out of suspended animation in prison to pursue an old ultra-violent nemesis who is loose in a non-violent future society." (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106697/>, last visited on June 12th, 2018, at 11:31). Below are some representative fragments from the script.

1990's Captain Healy: 'Dammit, Spartan. I'm sick and tired of this "Demolition Man" shit! You're not supposed to come down here, you're not supposed to apprehend Simon Phoenix single-handedly, and you're not supposed to blow anything up!'

John Spartan: 'It wasn't me this time, he dumped the gas and had the placed rigged to blow.'

Captain Healy: 'Yeah right, and you had nothing to do with it. I know you've been trying to nail this psycho for 2 years. But try to remember a little thing like official police procedure. Now where are the hostages?' (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106697/characters/nm0434676>, last visited on June 11th, 2018, at 11:34 a.m.)

After 60 years:

Chief George Earle: 'I monitored your disheartening and distressing comments to the warden this morning. Do you really long for chaos and disharmony? Your fascination with the vulgar 20th century seems to be affecting your better judgment. You realize you're setting a bad example for other officers and sworn personnel.'

Lenina Huxley: 'Thank you for the attitude adjustment, Chief Earle. Info assimilated.' (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106697/characters/nm0348409>, last visited on June 11th, 2018, 11:36 a.m.).

Aware of the fact that a society in which everything is by the book and nothing is left to its fate does not allow too much freedom in... anything, the language used by the people in the future, in this movie, lacks creativity. Once again, the absence of idioms shows that they really are a product of our creativity, of a ludic sense:

Lenina Huxley: 'Ah, smoking is not good for you, and it's been deemed that anything not good for you is bad; hence, illegal. Alcohol, caffeine, contact sports, meat...'

John Spartan: 'Are you shitting me?'

Moral Statute Machine: 'John Spartan, you are fined one credit for a violation of the Verbal Morality Statute.'

John Spartan: 'What the hell is that?'

Moral Statute Machine: 'John Spartan, you are fined one credit for a violation of the Verbal Morality Statute.'

Lenina Huxley: 'Bad language, chocolate, gasoline, uneducational toys and anything spicy. Abortion is also illegal, but then again so is pregnancy if you don't have a licence.' (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106697/characters/nm0000113>, last visited on June 11th, 2018, at 11:45)

Is future going to be like that? Are people going to be so obsessed with finding ways of communicating efficiently that idioms will be forgotten? Personally, I do not think so, and neither do the authors of the Demolition Man script, because, in the movie, the people living underground use idioms, eat meat and militate for freedom. The end of the movie gives hope that normality will be re-established and people will stop talking like robots.

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