1.0 Overview

This study is about the ways that second language learners perceive idiomatic expressions in their native language (L1), and how these perceptions affect their judgments about the direct translation of such expressions into a second language (L2). An investigation of this nature requires a dual approach: on one hand we will need background in vocabulary processing models specifically related to idioms; on the other hand, we will need a framework in second language learning theory, specifically related to transfer.

In 1977, Eric Kellerman published an influential paper on precisely the intersection of these two topics. His study looked at the ways that Dutch native speakers perceived the translatability of various senses of the polysemous verb *breken*, 'to break'. In Dutch, as in English, the verb 'to break' has a range of meanings, from the literal meaning of breaching physical integrity (*he broke the cup*), to peripheral uses which are figurative or idiomatic in nature (*the wave broke on the shore, the cushion broke my fall*). Kellerman found that Dutch learners of English were reluctant to accept translations of more figurative meanings of 'to break,' showing that learners have intuitions about the translatability of items from their first language. In particular, elements which are perceived as "language-neutral" are more likely to be judged transferable than elements which are seen as "language-specific" or unique to the mother tongue. Kellerman concluded that the transfer of a linguistic item is influenced by three interacting factors:

1) the learner's perceptions of the typological distance between the L1 and the L2 (psychotypology),
2) the learner's perceptions of the markedness of a given item in his own mother tongue (prototypicality), and
3) the learner's proficiency in the L2 (1977).

Although Kellerman's research was about the various meanings of a single lexical item, he asserted that "idioms are one class of language items that are generally *not* transferred" (1977,

p.101, emphasis original). In this thesis, I address Kellerman's claim. Unlike a polysemous word, which has multiple meanings, a given idiom does not generally have shades of meaning; however, I hypothesize that *as a class*, idioms can be judged along a "language-specific - language-neutral" continuum. That is, certain idioms can be seen as more "prototypical" and therefore less transferable. I will focus on the second and third factors in Kellerman's (1977) study, examining learner perceptions of idioms in their native language and observing the degree to which intermediate and advanced learners accept the transfer of idiomatic expressions into an L2. Will learner judgments about literal translations vary according to a quality of the idiom itself -- its 'language-specificity' -- and/or to a particular quality of the learner, namely his or her L2 proficiency?

1.1 Idioms: Key Concepts and a Working Definition

What are idioms? How are they processed and how are they represented in the mental lexicon? Figurativeness and formulaicity are two important concepts in addressing these questions. An idiom is usually defined as "an expression whose meaning cannot always be readily derived from the usual meaning of its constituent elements" (Cooper, 1999, p.233). A significant part of this difficulty in deriving meaning is the non-literal nature of idiomatic expressions. What could it mean to literally *change one's mind*? Clearly, it is impossible. The meaning of this idiom comes from a commonly agreed upon metaphorical or figurative interpretation. Even when an idiom does have a possible literal meaning as in "she really *has both feet on the ground*," it is the figurative interpretation that conveys the true meaning of the utterance. Figurativeness, therefore, is an important defining characteristic of idioms.

Recent vocabulary and corpus research has recognized the ubiquity of formulaic utterances, including idioms and many other types of collocations (Sinclair, 1991; MacKenzie, 2000; Wray

& Perkins, 2000; Liu, 2003; Spöttl & McCarthy, 2003). According to Wray and Perkins (2000), a formulaic sequence is:

> A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar (p.1).

Idioms are formulaic in the sense that they have a relatively fixed structure. They can be syntactically quite rigid. For example, many idioms lose their metaphorical meaning in the passive. Hence, expressions such as *the bullet was bitten by Bob* or *the bucket was kicked by Bob* are grammatically acceptable, but not idiomatic. Idioms also often have an idiosyncratic word order. Expressions such as *up and running* and *sooner or later* lose their idiomaticity if reversed.

On the other hand, some idioms allow a degree of syntactic manipulation (Cutting & Bock, 1997, p.58) or lexical substitution (Gibbs, Nayak, Bolton, & Keppel, 1989). For example, the insertion of adjectives and quantifiers is permitted in "Mary really touched a couple of nerves," as is topicalization in "The strings that John was able to pull seemed to be the right ones for getting the job" (Cutting & Bock, 1997, p.58). Similarly, *blow your top/stack* and *give/lend a hand* are acceptable lexical substitutions.

Idioms appear to be stored with information about their internal syntax and semantics, in a kind of multilayered idiom lemma[1] (Levelt, 1989). Mental representations of idioms are "linked to information about the grammatical class of their constituents, about their overall syntactic structures, and about literal meaning" (Cutting & Bock, 1997, p.69). As a result, we are able to transform and manipulate idioms in linguistically sensible ways (and know when this is not

[1] In Levelt's model, lexical access consists of two steps: lemma and lexeme retrieval. A lemma is stored information of a word's semantic and syntactic properties such as word class, grammatical gender and so forth, while a lexeme specifies morphophonological form.

possible), and even produce idiom blend "errors" that consistently involve structurally and semantically similar components (Cutting & Bock, 1997, p.66). The formulaicity of idioms, coupled with (unconscious) information about their semantic and syntactic qualities, make possible the modifications we are able to perform, either unwittingly as error or consciously for emphasis, variety, or humorous effect.

For the purposes of this study, idioms are defined as figurative and formulaic dependent clauses consisting of three or more words. In order to reduce experimental variables, I do not include single words with idiomatic uses like *lemon* or *hip*, two-word phrasal verbs such as *put aside* or *look into*, or independent clauses such as *the apple doesn't fall far from the tree*. The implications of figurativeness and formulaicity will be further discussed in the mental representation and processing models described below.

1.2 Idiom Processing and Mental Representation

Researchers have long focused on how idioms are processed and represented in the mental lexicon. When and how is the figurative meaning of an idiom accessed? Are idioms part of the normal lexicon, or a separate idiom lexicon? Are they stored simply as one big word? Or are they "decomposable" – analyzable according to their constituent parts?

Initial approaches in idiom research focused on whether the figurative or literal meaning is retrieved during idiom comprehension, and in which order this retrieval occurs, if both meanings are accessed. Along this line of inquiry, Bobrow and Bell (1973) posited one of the earliest idiom comprehension models, the Idiom List Hypothesis. This model proposes that idioms are stored in chunks in an idiom lexicon separate from the mental lexicon. Further, like Searle's (1975) three-stage model for processing indirect speech acts, the Idiom List Hypothesis claims that the literal meaning of a phrase is accessed first, then checked against context. If the literal

meaning is incompatible with the context, the idiom list is consulted for retrieval of the figurative interpretation. In this model, the literal meaning of an idiom is always accessed before figurative meaning.

In contrast, Swinney and Cutler's (1979) Lexical Representation Hypothesis asserts that idioms are stored in the normal lexicon as long words, that is, as single word entries. Both literal and figurative meanings are accessed simultaneously, and context determines which meaning is ultimately chosen. In this study, participants saw idiomatic and non-idiomatic phrases and performed a timed lexical decision task. Participants identified idioms as meaningful grammatical phrases significantly faster than they identified matched control strings. Swinney and Cutler concluded that the idiomatic phrases were recognized more quickly because they were processed whole, in effect as one long word, whereas the control phrases required parsing.

A third model, the Direct Access Hypothesis (Gibbs, 1980), claims that the figurative meaning of an idiom is accessed directly from the mental lexicon, and literal meaning is rarely processed at all. Gibbs presented participants with short vignettes that provided context for either a literal or figurative interpretation of an idiom in the final sentence. Even in contexts that supported literal interpretation, participants were slower to choose the literal meaning, leading to the conclusion that idioms are processed figuratively by default.

Finally, Cacciari and Tabossi (as cited in Titone & Connine, 1994) present the Configuration Hypothesis, which claims that literal meaning is activated until the recognition of an *idiomatic key*, or point at which literal processing is switched off and idiomatic interpretation emerges. This model proposes that idiom meaning is a function of the weights of connections between the lexical nodes that compose an idiom. For example, the nodes in *shoot the breeze* are more strongly weighted for figurative interpretation than the nodes in *shoot the gun.* This idiomatic

phrase will be processed for literal meaning until the idiomatic key, presumably the initial syllables of "breeze," are encountered. In this study, idiom predictability, defined as a function of familiarity and non-decomposability (discussed below), is an important factor in processing. The more predictable the idiom, the faster the key will activate figurative meaning.

These processing models have rested on assumptions about the representation of idioms in the mental lexicon. One of the most disputed assumptions is the notion that idioms are stored as "big words." Editors Cacciari and Tabossi (1993) present a volume of articles exclusively on the topic of idiom processing, many of which challenge the idea that idioms are stored as dead metaphors or big words on the grounds that these conceptualizations are unable to account for the semantic and syntactic complexity of idioms. The syntactic variations and lexical substitutions described above pose a challenge for big word models since it seems unlikely that every modification template (or rule prohibiting modification) could constitute an individual entry. Rather, the individual components of an idiom must have some relationship to its overall meaning.

Gibbs and Nayak (1989) explore the relationship between the meaning of an idiom and its constituent parts in their Idiom Decomposition Hypothesis. Along a continuum of (de)compositionality, decomposable idioms contain individual words which contribute to figurative meaning, while non-decomposable idioms do not. For example, *miss the boat* is decomposable because the metaphorical relationship between missing a boat and missing an opportunity is apparent. Here, the individual words in the idiom contribute to its figurative meaning. Conversely, in the classic example of a non-decomposable idiom *kick the bucket*, the meaning of the constituent parts (knocking over a pail) has no clear relationship to the figurative meaning of the idiom (to die). The Idiom Decomposition Hypothesis suggests that idioms have

significantly different form-meaning relationships than single words. Not only does an idiom consist of multiple words (each with its respective meaning), the idiom can be understood figuratively as a whole, or literally, as a sum of its parts.

Along similar lines, Nayak and Gibbs (1990) question other long-standing assumptions about the mental representation of idioms. They criticize the conceptualization of idioms as "frozen" or "dead metaphors," since this idea suggests that an idiomatic form has become so automatically associated with a given meaning as to be arbitrarily related to the meaning of its constituent parts. They assert that "when speakers judge that the idiom *let off steam* is analyzable or decomposable, they are essentially finding some relation between the components *let off* and *steam* with their figurative referents 'release' and 'anger'" (p.316). Thus, rather than being frozen, the meaning of an idiom can be partially motivated by a recognition of a metaphoric relationship between the words in an idiom and its meaning as a whole. They also challenge the assumption that the figurative meaning of an idiom is a rough equivalent to a literal paraphrase, such that *spill the beans* means "to reveal" and *get on your nerves* means "to annoy." While this kind of simple equivalence is possible, Nayak and Gibbs call attention to the semantic complexity of idioms, particularly in expressing nuances of meaning. For instance, *blow your stack, lose your cool, flip your lid, get hot under the collar* and *hit the roof* all express the idea of "getting angry," yet with different shades of meaning. They point out that no model proposes links between semantically related idioms such as these, although models of the mental lexicon propose links between semantically related words (Cruze, 1986).

This section has explored some of the ways that researchers have conceptualized idiom processing and representation in monolinguals. The following section introduces idioms in a

bilingual context. I begin with a discussion of transfer, an important concept in second language acquisition theory, and conclude with detailed descriptions of bilingual idiom studies.

1.3 Background: Transfer and Second Language Acquisition

Within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), there is much debate over the interaction between one's native language and subsequently learned languages. As Jarvis (2000) states, "perhaps no area of second language research has received as much attention and remained as elusive as the influence of first language" (p.2). The interplay between a first language (L1) and second language (L2) has been studied under a variety of names including *interference*, *transfer*, *mother tongue influence*, *cross language influence*, and most recently, *crosslinguistic influence* (CLI). This taxonomic evolution reflects theoretical development in the field of SLA generally, as new models of second language learning have given rise to new ways of thinking about transfer.

Early research on transfer emerged during the Contrastive Analysis period of the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when structural linguistics and behaviorist views of language learning predominated (Bou Franch, 1998). Behaviorist theory asserted that all learning, including language learning, was an exercise in repetition, imitation, and habit formation (Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986; Gass & Selinker, 1993). Within this model, language acquisition was thought to be characterized by the development and elaboration of increasingly complicated linguistic structures.

During this era, SLA researchers were primarily concerned with language teaching and the development of pedagogical materials and methodology (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Gass & Selinker, 1993). In particular, contrastive studies which recorded systematic similarities and

differences between languages were thought to be useful in materials development. In the words of Fries (1945):

> The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner (as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, p.52).

The research that resulted from this view led to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957), which proposed that areas of similarity between the L1 and L2 would lead to positive transfer, whereas differences would lead to negative transfer, or interference.

Underlying the Contrastive Analysis hypothesis was the assumption that one's native language had a substantial impact on the learning of a second language. While some of the effect could be expected to be positive, it would inevitably have a negative effect as well, presenting obstacles for the learner. Importantly, these errors could be predicted, based on the similarities and differences of the L1 and L2 in question. In a behaviorist context, this meant helping the learner recognize and overcome L1 habits while acquiring new habits in the L2. Through contrastive analysis, it was believed that learner errors – potential bad habits in the L2 - could be predicted and swiftly trained out of the learner (Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986; Odlin, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Noam Chomsky's 1959 landmark review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* (1957) marked the beginning of a radical shift away from behaviorism and structural linguistics, and toward transformational linguistics and cognitive approaches to second language learning (Odlin, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Bou Franch, 1998). Where behaviorists had emphasized habit formation and rote learning, new thinking stressed the role of creativity, problem solving, and other cognitive capacities in language learning. Earlier concerns about documenting language differences through contrastive analysis gave way to interest in the notion of language universals.

Whereas an earlier generation of scholars disregarded the role of biological predispositions to language acquisition, new thinking focused on innate language capacities (Odlin, 1989) and the developmental nature of language acquisition, placing little emphasis on the role of the L1 in second language learning (Bou Franch, 1998).

These and other developments led to a decline in interest in transfer and to the discredit of contrastive analyses in particular. Specifically, empirical studies on actual learner errors did not necessarily correlate with the predictions of contrastive analysis. Moreover, it was noted that learners from distinct L1 backgrounds followed a regular developmental progression in the L2, often highly similar to L1 development, suggesting that the native language did not have such a central effect on second language acquisition (Kellerman & Sharwood Smith, 1986; Odlin, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Finally, the contrastive analysis hypothesis was criticized for depending too heavily on learner output, especially errors, to make assumptions about psycholinguistic processes (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Eventually, transfer regained a place as an important aspect in the field of second language acquisition not only because it is a pervasive phenomenon that was difficult to ignore, but also because notions of transfer evolved with advances in SLA theory. Conceptualization of errors as an obstacle to learning, for example, developed into a recognition of errors as an inevitable part of language learning, and an illustrative part of a learner's interlanguage (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Mitchell & Myles, 1998). It was recognized that developmental learning sequences and L1 transfer were not mutually exclusive. In these ways, notions of transfer were able to survive beyond behaviorist theories of habit formation. Indeed, investigation of the role of the L1 expanded to include other aspects of language learning such as avoidance, language loss, and influence on third language acquisition.

Transfer has continued to be a dynamic concept, provoking much debate among researchers. In the introduction of their collection on transfer, Dechert and Raupach (1989) describe over ten meanings and applications used throughout the book. Terms such as *interference* and even *transfer* have been criticized as problematic because of their associations with specific theories of learning, namely behaviorism. Corder (1993) asserts that these two designations "may perhaps quite unconsciously constrain one's freedom of thinking about the particular topic" (p.19). Many scholars continue to use the term *transfer* in current research, and while Corder's rejection may be radical, it can be understood as an appeal to search for theory-neutral definitions of L1 influence. To this end, Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986) proposed the term *crosslinguistic influence* (CLI) to include transfer, interference, avoidance, borrowing, and L2-related aspects of language loss. Gass and Selinker (1993) conclude that transfer is "the use of native language (or other language) knowledge – in some as yet unclear way – in the acquisition of a second (or additional) language" (p.234). They add that it can include avoidance, overproduction, overgeneralization, rule transfer, and strategy transfer. While recognizing the distinctions other authors draw, I will use the terms *CLI* and *transfer* interchangeably.

These notions of CLI are clearer within particular second language learning theories which seek to explain fundamental aspects of second language learning and why it differs so markedly from first language acquisition. While there is invocation of Universal Grammar, and speculation as to the degree of its availability for second language acquisition, many CLI researchers understand second language acquisition as "controlled by general human cognitive learning capacities rather than by the same domain-specific module which guarantees success in first language acquisition" (Bley-Vroman, 1989, p.44). Further, there is recognition of the

importance of the learner's creativity and choices in his or her learning (Kellerman, 1986). Second language learning is seen as a constructive process "in which learners are interacting with their environment to produce an internalized representation of the regularities they discover in the linguistic data to which they are exposed" (Corder, 1993, p.20).

1.4 Bilingual Idiom Research

Idioms present an interesting challenge for second language learners. Because idioms require a figurative interpretation, their meaning may not always be transparent to the learner. And their formulaic nature means that prior experience is needed for target-like production. As Swan (1997) points out,

> Paradoxically. . .unpredictable utterances can be easier to produce in a foreign language than routine expressions. 'Why is there a dead cat on the floor of your shop?' can be constructed out of simple lexical and grammatical building blocks; 'Thank you, I'm being served' cannot be made in the same way – either you know how to say it or you don't " (p.177).

How is a learner to know which of all of the grammatically correct possibilities is the idiomatic one? Unfortunately for the learner, the majority of conventionally preferred collocations -- including idioms -- do not cross linguistic boundaries (Swan, 1997), so the L1 will not be of much help. There is no way of knowing without learning the item itself.

Researchers have studied the ways that learners use, and avoid using, idioms in a second language. Idiom decomposability and idiom translatability have been two important variables in bilingual idiom research. As we have seen, decomposability refers to the relationship between an idiom's overall meaning and its constituent parts. Idiom translatability refers to the degree to which an idiom can be translated from one language into another. Depending on the two languages in question, some idioms co-exist as word-for-word equivalents, some idioms are similar to each other both formally and semantically, and others are unique to a given language.

Irujo (1986) investigated whether second language learners use their knowledge of first language to comprehend and produce idioms in an L2. Participants in this study were native speakers of Spanish, advanced learners of English. Irujo identified 15 English language idioms identical in form and meaning to their Spanish language equivalents, 15 similar idioms, and 15 idioms with equivalent meaning, but different form in the two languages. Participant comprehension was tested in a multiple-choice test and an open-ended definition test. Recall and production were tested with a discourse completion task and a translation test. Results showed that identical idioms were the easiest to comprehend, recall, and produce. Similar idioms were comprehended almost as well but showed interference from Spanish, in the form of word-for-word translation. Different idioms were the most difficult to comprehend and produce, but showed less interference. English language idioms which were comprehended and produced most correctly were semantically transparent, syntactically simple, and contained high frequency vocabulary.

Irujo (1993) used the same target stimuli in a similar study investigating avoidance of idiom production. Using a translation task, she found that fluent Spanish-English bilinguals who were native speakers of Spanish did not appear to avoid producing idioms in their L2. Results showed no correlation between production and idiom frequency and only a weak correlation between production and semantic transparency. The most important predictor of idiom production in the L2 was its similarity to an idiom in the L1. Irujo points out that the construct of avoidance may be more complicated in the case of idioms. In most contexts, when unsure of how to proceed, a learner has several options: L1 transfer, avoidance, message abandonment, circumlocution, or paraphrase. But in the case of idioms, there is also the option of literal communication, since the

meaning of an idiom can always be expressed non-idiomatically. Therefore it is difficult to identify when idiom use is truly being avoided.

Laufer (2000) also investigated idiom avoidance, focusing on the effect of formal similarity in the L1 (Hebrew) and L2 (English). Laufer distinguished four types of idioms:

1) total formal similarity (identical form and meaning in Hebrew and English)
2) partial formal similarity (similar form and same meaning)
3) lack of formal similarity (different form but same meaning)
4) distributional difference (English language idioms with no idiomatic counterpart in Hebrew).

First-, second- and third-year learners of English completed a fill-in translation task, translating five idioms from each category "in any way they felt most comfortable with" (p. 191). Participants were also tested on their familiarity with the target stimuli, to verify that they were aware of the idioms and therefore potentially avoiding them. As in Irujo (1993), learners did not avoid idioms generally; however, expressions which were partially similar and those with no L1 equivalent (types 2 and 4 above) were avoidance inducing factors. L2 proficiency also affected avoidance, with the second- and third-year learners producing more idioms in the L2 than the first-year learners.

Bortfeld (2003) examined cross-linguistic influence and idiom comprehension, but focused on the variable of decomposability, referred to as *analyzability* in her study. Following Gibbs and Nayak (1989) described above, Bortfeld identified three different kinds of idioms: normally analyzable, abnormally analyzable, and unanalyzable. Normally analyzable idioms are those with a relatively transparent relationship between the surface structure of an idiom and its meaning, for example *lose your temper*. Abnormally analyzable idioms require more analysis to distinguish the metaphorical relationship between the literal meaning and the underlying figurative concept. For example, the idiomatic phrase *lose one's marbles* can only be understood

if one knows that “marbles” are a metaphor for “mental stability” Finally, unanalyzable idioms are those whose surface structure has little relation to the intended figurative meaning, as in *to be a basket case.*

In Bortfeld (2003), native speakers of Latvian and Mandarin rated idioms in their language for analyzability according to the three categories described above. For each language, seventy-five idioms (twenty-five from each category) were translated literally into English, and native English-speaking participants determined the figurative meaning of each phrase. Results showed a direct relationship between an idiom’s analyzability and the speed and likelihood of correctly determining its meaning. While acknowledging that the three levels of analyzability are artificial distinctions, Bortfeld endorses the theoretical utility of a continuum of decompositionality which is “anchored at less metaphorical (and more literal) on one end, becoming increasingly metaphorical as one moves away from that end, and finally becoming relatively arbitrary, or culturally and/or historically based at the opposite end” (p.227).

In an exploratory study, Cooper (1999) investigated the on-line processing strategies of non-native speakers in their attempts to decipher the meanings of English language idioms. Using a think-aloud procedure, he found that participants used the following strategies, in descending order of use: guessing from context, discussing and analyzing the idiom, using literal meaning, requesting information, repeating or paraphrasing the idiom, using background knowledge, and referring to an L1 idiom. In other words, L1 transfer was the least used strategy.

The aforementioned studies describe some of the important theoretical considerations and findings of bilingual idiom research. Each investigation has attempted to understand how second language learners derive the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Is the analyzability of internal components an important factor? What happens when idioms are similar in the L1 and L2, or

different? What strategies do learners use to get at meaning? Research has found that, indeed, an idiom's internal components and its translatability play a role. Specifically, the more decomposable and translatable an idiom, the more likely its figurative meaning will be correctly interpreted by L2 learners. But of course, characteristics of the idiom are not the only factors at play. Learners themselves use many strategies to decipher the meaning of idiomatic expressions. These findings offer a general context to think about bilingual idiom processing, which the next section will discuss in greater detail. Kellerman's work (1977, 1978, 1983) is particularly relevant to this discussion and provides the conceptual foundation for this thesis. It is this topic to which I now turn.

1.5 Conceptual Foundations

Kellerman's (1977) article proposes three important aspects which influence transfer: the perceived language distance between the L1 and L2, learner proficiency in the L2, and the markedness of the item in question. According to Kellerman, transfer, both positive and negative, is more likely to occur in situations where the learner believes the L1 and L2 are typologically similar. Of course, this perception on the part of the learner may or may not correspond to the typological facts of the languages in question, since "the learner does not have the advantages of the linguist's bird's eye view of the two languages. His comparisons are made gradually and incrementally" (p.103). Hence the importance of learner proficiency. In beginning stages, Kellerman hypothesizes that students are "relatively naïve, linguistically speaking , and . . .will be forced to rely on their own 'feel' for the languages concerned" (p.114). With increased exposure to the L2, the learner will develop greater metalinguistic awareness with which to judge the appropriateness of transfer.

It is the third factor, markedness, which has the most complex implications for the present study. Kellerman (1983) states that "if a feature is perceived as infrequent, irregular, semantically or structurally opaque, or in any other way exceptional, what we could in other words call 'psycholinguistically marked,' then its transferability will be inversely proportional to its degree of markedness" (p.117). He defines these L1 items which the learner considers marked in some way as 'language-specific'. Here, Kellerman establishes a relationship between semantic opacity, markedness, and language-specificity, and correspondingly, a connection between semantic transparency, non-markedness, and language-neutrality. The following figure illustrates:

Applying the notion that idioms are differentially transferable and not categorically marked, it follows that a semantically opaque idiom will be less transferable than a semantically transparent idiom.

1.6 The Present Study

The present study adopts Kellerman's notion of a language-specific/language-neutral continuum of transferability, with an important modification. Kellerman considers idiomatic expressions in general to be marked, and therefore language-specific and *not* likely to be transferred. He writes,

> It is not difficult to see why idiomatic expressions should be seen as marked, since they are, amongst other things, transformationally defective, and the sum of the parts rarely equals the meaning of the whole. Nor do they allow the free and easy commutablity of their non-idiomatic counterparts. Thus, the learner's reasoning might go, such forms, being already 'marked' in the [L1], and so typical of it, are hardly likely to have an identical parallel existence in the [L2] (1978, p.62).

And yet Kellerman (1983) concedes that "the transferability of idioms, while generally low, is still gradable" (p.118). This thesis explores the idea that idiomatic expressions are differentially marked. To what degree can idioms be judged along a continuum of transferability, with some idioms more 'language-specific' and others more 'language-neutral'?

The present study makes a basic distinction between idioms, separating them into categories: semantically opaque and semantically transparent. Semantically opaque idioms are those which have an obscure form/meaning relationship. That is, the meaning of the expression appears to have no relationship to the sum of its constituent parts, often because the etymology of the idiom is lost or no longer widely known. An example of a semantically opaque idiom is *at sixes and sevens*, which means 'in a state of confusion or disarray' and may have its origin in a biblical passage, a guild dispute, or a medieval game.[2]

Semantically transparent idioms are separated into two subtypes: similes and metaphorical images. A simile is considered semantically transparent because it establishes an analogy between an abstract entity (e.g. busy) and a stereotypical quality of a known entity (e.g. bee), yielding the idiom *busy as a bee*. If one has sufficient knowledge of both bees and the state of being busy, the relationship between form and meaning is relatively clear. Similarly, some idioms make use of symbolic images or situations to express meaning figuratively. An example of this type of idiom would be *butterflies in my stomach* to convey nervousness or anxiety. This expression creates a link between an abstract entity and a metaphorical image. Again, the form/meaning relationship is clear if one has knowledge of the feeling of nervousness and can imagine having butterflies in one's stomach.

[2] As cited in World Wide Words. (2004). Retrieved April 4, 2005 from http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-six1.htm and Words at Random. (2000). The Mavens' Word of the Day. Retrieved April 4, 2005 from http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20000331

This study has several objectives. First, it looks at the ways that second language learners perceive idiomatic expressions. Do they have a sense that some idioms are more transparent than others? Secondly, do learner perceptions correspond with the ways that I as the researcher have classified idioms along a continuum of semantic transparency/opacity? Thirdly, how do their assessments of semantic transparency correspond with their judgments about direct translation into an L2? That is, do learners accept the direct translation of an idiom that they judge to be semantically transparent? And finally, how do judgments of direct translation differ according to proficiency level in the L2?

In light of these questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Native speakers of English will be able to sort English language idioms into two categories: semantically transparent and semantically opaque, and this sorting will correspond to the ways that the researcher has classified the idioms.
H2: Acceptability judgments of direct translation into Spanish will vary according to this sorting. Idioms identified as semantically transparent will be judged more acceptable in direct translation than idioms identified as semantically opaque.
H3: Intermediate learners of Spanish will be more willing to accept the direct translations of idioms than advanced learners of Spanish.

These hypotheses were tested in three-part experiment. First, participants were asked to rate the acceptability of English language idioms that had been translated literally into Spanish. In the second task, participants were asked to sort target items into two categories: semantically opaque or semantically transparent. And finally, they were asked to provide information about their language background. These steps will be explained in detail in the next chapter.