4.0 Discussion

The first hypothesis of this study predicted that participants would sort idioms into the two semantic categories that I had defined: semantically transparent and opaque. I wanted to establish that learners discern these qualities in idioms and so validate the distinction of semantic transparency/opacity for the population of this study. This hypothesis was confirmed, as the majority of experiment participants organized the idioms according to these categories. The second hypothesis predicted that perceptions of semantic transparency/opacity would have a strong effect on judgments of acceptability. I based the second hypothesis on Kellerman (1983), who states, "although idiomatic expressions are generally stigmatized by learners, their potential acceptability also depends crucially on their semantic transparency" (p.118). Results did not strongly support this claim, however, since idioms identified as semantically transparent were not necessarily judged more acceptable in direct translation than idioms identified as semantically opaque. There are several explanations for these results.

The work of Keysar and Bly (1995) offers a cautionary perspective on the notion of semantic transparency. Using a set of 15 archaic idioms in the English language, they taught participants the original "correct" figurative meaning or the opposite meaning. For example, one group of participants learned that *to lay out in lavender* meant "to chastise harshly and in no uncertain terms", while another group learned that it meant "to sweet talk, to flatter" (p. 94). Following the lesson, participants rated the learned meaning as more transparent than the non-learned meaning, regardless of which meaning they had been taught. These results suggest that semantic transparency is not necessarily a function of underlying metaphoric concepts or semantic elements; rather, it may be the result of idiom knowledge and use. In a sense, the conclusion is tautological: we think a particular idiom is semantically transparent because we have well-

established connections between form and meaning. This idea is particularly interesting in light

of the "exceptional" case of *put two and two together*, for example. For native speakers of U.S.

English, the meaning of this idiom may seem transparent, as it was for the majority of

participants in this study, because they know that the idiom refers to "adding two and two to

equal four". Furthermore, the notion of "understanding" is metaphorically linked to mathematics

in other figurative expressions such as *adding it all up* or *figuring it out*. Especially if it is heard

out of context, speakers of other languages may not find *put two and two together* so transparent

and may be apt to wonder what two things are being put together and why.

It is also likely that learners account for much more than an idiom's imagery in their

assessments of transferability. Intuitions of cultural elements, phrasing, or vocabulary frequency

may also be important factors. It is probably very rare to find an idiom that is free from these

effects, which may explain why Kellerman asserts that "learners size up their own language, and

evaluate idiomatic expressions as 'marked'" (1978, p.62). For example, although I classified *feel*

like a million bucks as transparent because the metaphor is semantically accessible, there are

problems with its translation into Spanish. The verb "feel" would be reflexive, and there is the

problem of translating the word "bucks", a culturally specific term. Translating it as "dólares"

would result in an implausible idiom in Spanish since Spanish-speaking nations have other

words for their currency. Such considerations of syntactic, lexical and cultural content probably

impacted judgments of transferability. This may explain why perceptions of semantic

transparency were only moderately correlated with judgments of acceptability in translation.

The third hypothesis of this study predicted that less proficient learners would work under the

assumption that the L2 functioned much like the L1 and would therefore be more apt to accept

direct translations. I based this prediction on the general consensus that L2 proficiency is an

important factor in L1 transfer (Kellerman, 1977, Ringbom, 1986; Odlin, 1989; Swan, 1997; Müller-Lancé, 2003, Murphy, 2003) and on research of the bilingual mental lexicon which has proposed that in early stages, learners may automatically recur to L1 transfer (Kroll & DeGroot, 1997; Altarriba & Mathis, 1997; Hall, 2002). It seemed plausible that less proficient learners are more consciously and unconsciously reliant on the L1. Results of the present study, however, show that intermediate learners of Spanish are not more willing to accept the direct translations of idioms than advanced learners. In fact, intermediate and advanced learners have extremely similar opinions about the acceptability of word-for-word translations. These findings support Kellerman (1978), wherein "despite a wide range of proficiency, years of exposure, and age among subjects, the judgments of transferability were remarkably stable across groups of learners" (as cited in Kellerman, 1983, p.118).

Why did the participant groups in the present study have such similar judgments? It could be that the two groups were not sufficiently different in terms of L2 proficiency to produce divergent results. And yet, the advanced group contained 11 individuals with L3 experience, while none in the intermediate group had this metalinguistic "advantage", making the parity in results for both groups even more remarkable. The context of the experiment may have also played a role. The experiment was conducted in the highly culturally and linguistically diverse state of California, and it is possible that incidental contact with other languages influenced the metalinguistic awareness of the participants.

The similarity of participant judgments may have a more deep-rooted explanation, as suggested in Bley-Vroman (1989). He proposes that learner perceptions of the L1 facilitate second language learning. Since adult learners do not seem to have full access to Universal Grammar for the purposes of L2 acquisition, they use their intuitions about language universals

to consciously shape their knowledge of the new language. Bley-Vroman sees the learner as actively constructing a kind of "surrogate" for Universal Grammar, partially through L1 transfer. As he states, "the native language must be sifted: That which is likely to be universal must be separated from that which is an accidental property of the native language" (52). In other words, learners share similar intuitions about which items are specific to the L1, and which are neutral and likely to exist in the second language.

4.1 Methodological Concerns

Several methodological issues merit comment. Salient issues involve both the instrument development and the participant pool. To begin, the selection of target stimuli for the experiment involved collaboration with many individuals, not only to determine idiom translatability, but also to establish the most frequent and familiar idioms. This process was inherently imprecise because it involved individual subjective judgments. For example, speakers of Mexican Spanish determined idiom non-translatability (see Section 2.2), but speakers from other Spanish-speaking regions, indeed, even a different population of Mexican Spanish-speakers, would likely have had different judgments.

The subjectivity of individual judgment was also a factor in the selection of the most frequent and familiar idioms (see Section 2.2). Idiom frequency and familiarity were assumed to be important for transfer, and age and place of residence were assumed to impact idiom familiarity and use. To my knowledge, no idiom study has controlled for these variables or mentioned their significance, but it seemed reasonable that generational and regional linguistic variation would extend to idioms. As a result, the age and place of residence were tracked for all participants during phases of target stimuli selection and data analysis. It is notable that the majority of experiment participants (76.1%) were from California, while the majority (81.9%) who chose the

most frequent and familiar idioms were from other states. It is possible that the participants who determined the target items had very different opinions of what was "frequent and familiar" (and therefore potentially more transferable) than the participants who ultimately took part in the experiment. And is it almost certain that a different set of raters would have selected different idioms as target stimuli.

Relying on individual judgments for the selection and refinement of target stimuli in this way is inherently arbitrary. Liu (2003) cautions that intuition-based selection of idioms for the purposes of teaching and research often yields seldom-used expressions and fails to include those which are frequently-used. He suggests that mass corpora contain a truer reflection of idiom use and frequency. Future studies could explore corpus analysis as a method to determine or complement the selection of target stimuli.

Also notable was the different number of idioms used as target stimuli in each of the semantic categories. The transparent category included 15 metaphorical images and 15 similes, for a total of 30 idioms, while the opaque category contained only 15 opaque idioms. These categories should have contained an equal number of target stimuli for a more valid comparison of results.

Finally, the language background questionnaire contained a question that only tangentially addressed psychotypology. I asked participants to rate their opinion of the similarity of Spanish and English in general, on a scale of one to ten. This study does not investigate the role of psychotypology in transfer, and the question itself did not adequately address the topic. This question should have been omitted.

4.2 Pedagogical Implications and Future Research

Research indicates that second language learners want to learn idioms (Liontas, 2002). This thesis shows that learners already have tools to help use idioms appropriately in an L2, namely, they are not indiscriminate about transfer. A cautious approach will often serve them well because many idioms are not directly translatable; however, as Irujo (1986, 1993) demonstrates, some idioms have a parallel existence in various languages, others are similar, and others are unique. Language instructors can point out these variations, since learners may be unaware. As Kellerman (1977) comments, "I have often noted the amazement on our students' faces when they do discover the existence of [L1] idioms in [the L2]" (p.111).

It is important to emphasize that this study makes no predictions about actual behavior. A high acceptability rating does not necessarily mean that a learner will be more likely to attempt to produce a literal translation of an idiom. And of course, even an erroneous direct translation may be intentional, for word play or to underscore solidarity with another learner[1], as in expressions such as *colgar afuera* (to hang out) and *eso chupa* (that sucks)[2]. As Odlin (1989) remarks, "the importance of transfer in any situation varies largely according to social context" (p.145).

This study only analyzed participant judgments of non-translatable idioms. Time constraints precluded a more thorough analysis of data, which would have examined participant responses to the translatable fillers. Would translatable items receive higher acceptability ratings? Would more proficient participants display more "knowledge" in this area compared to less proficient participants? Further research could investigate these questions.

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[1] Kellerman (1995) asserts that intentional crosslinguistic wordplay "unites [L2 learners] as fellow-sufferers with a common language" (p. 135), suggesting the sociopragmatic function of transfer in this circumstance.
[2] These examples were used by an instructor of a class in the experiment. He used these expressions to humorously illustrate the literal translation of an idiom.

Results showed that intermediate and advanced learners have essentially similar judgments about L1 items in translation, and as discussed above, these two groups may simply be too close in proficiency for scores to differ considerably. It is possible that the intermediate level participants are already too proficient, too experienced to rely naively on the L1. It would be very interesting to ask monolinguals their opinion of which idioms could be said in an L2. Such a study could reveal whether intuitions about the L1 change significantly with L2 proficiency, or if these intuitions are something more stable and shared, as Bley-Vroman (1989) suggests.

It is still unclear how learners arrive at their judgments about the transferability of idioms. They could be guessing, reasoning, using the sound or look of the phrase, linguistic folk knowledge, or any number of conscious strategies or unconscious processes not explored in this study. These are issues of interest to both teachers and researchers. The very extensive topic of collocations, including idioms, but also extending to other formulaic speech such as greetings, fillers, euphemisms, and discourse connectors provides a largely untapped area to examine the influence of the L1 and learner intuitions about how these ubiquitous expressions are used in an L2.

4.3 Conclusion

This thesis was motivated by Kellerman's assertion that learners generally reject the transfer of idioms. I wondered how learners would approach idioms. Would they blithely accept direct translations from their first language? Or would they be more skeptical? Would learner judgments change depending on their proficiency? On the idioms? The participants in this study showed similar patterns of acceptance toward idiom translations independent of proficiency level or idiom type. These results prompt other questions about both the effect of proficiency level and semantic characteristics. It is intriguing that in this study intuitions about transferability

were essentially the same for both levels, although it may be that the two groups here were too similar in proficiency for results to differ considerably. It is even more interesting that semantic qualities are layered in such complex ways, and that one's view of meaning may be largely influenced by years of exposure and use, as suggested by Keysar and Bly (1995). This calls into question dichotomous distinctions such as transparent/opaque or figurative/literal. It may be that our intuitions of such distinctions are as multifaceted and potentially "incorrect" as our intuitions of transferability.