To make a mountain out of a molehill

- A comparative study of the metonymical and metaphorical structures of three semantically identical, but lexically different, idioms in English, Swedish and German

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Abstract

This study revolves around the different underlying metaphorical or metonymical structures of three specific idioms, one English, one Swedish and one German, but with equivalent semantics. The structure of the source and target domains was analysed, as well as the mapping from source to target. The lexical features and the cognitive concepts involved were analysed as well. The method used for this study was an analysis based on cognitive linguistics and conceptual metaphor theory. The result shows a structure of conceptual metaphor within the English and German idioms: MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIG ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION. The Swedish idiom consists of a conceptual metaphor but with a metonymic structure: THE PART FOR THE whole IS EXAGGERATION. The result also suggests a difference in meaning of the definitions of the idioms, indicating that the form of exaggeration varies depending on which idiom is used.

Keywords

Conceptual metaphor, conceptual metonymy, mapping, source domain, linguistics
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1 Introduction

Is it possible for a feather to share characteristics with a mosquito? Or what about a molehill? One would not normally think of a close relationship between these three objects. However, they might have more in common than what meets the eye. This study will revolve around an analysis of three idioms, namely:

- The English idiom *to make a mountain out of a molehill*
- The Swedish idiom *att göra en höna av en fjäder* (*to make a hen out of a feather*)
- The German idiom *aus einer Mücke einen Elefanten machen* (*to make an elephant out of a mosquito*)

Here we can see what the molehill, the feather and the mosquito have in common. The feather is being turned into a hen, the mosquito into an elephant and the molehill is being turned into a mountain. Thus, the feather, the mosquito and the molehill for example, all represent the same part of the structure of an idiom, they are objects being turned into something bigger. My study will examine the conceptual metaphors involved in these idioms. Gibbs (1997, p.150) argues that conceptual metaphors are universal and an important part of human understanding and conceptualization. Therefore, examining the underlying metaphorical structure of idioms in three different languages can help us understand how we conceptualize abstract entities in the world. What is more important, it can help us understand how different languages have developed different metaphorical structures for the same abstract entity.
2 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the underlying metaphorical structure of three idioms to find out how it is possible for them to share the same meaning, but be structured differently, as well as their semantic development from source to target domains via mapping into the same meaning. I will focus on the structural differences between the source and target domains involved in the mapping of these idioms. In my study, I will thus try to answer these questions:

- What are the structures of the source and target domains and what are the structures of the mappings involved?
- What conceptual metaphor or metonymy are we dealing with?
- How are the idioms defined in their respective language?
- Do the idioms’ lexical features belong to the same cognitive categories and how are these lexical features related?
3 Theoretical framework

Ungerer and Schmid (2013, p.114-117) state that people often use metaphors and other linguistic expressions in everyday language. They are frequently occurring phenomena and “powerful cognitive tools” to help us understand the world and conceptualize abstract elements. Gibbs (1997, p.142) says in his article Metaphors in Idiom Comprehension that idiomatic phrases, according to the traditional view of linguistics, are not considered to be especially metaphorical since the phrases are often structured by dead metaphors. Dead metaphors are metaphors that have been conventionalized to the point that we use them unconsciously (Ungerer & Schmid, 2013, p.117). Kövesces (2010, p.231) also describes the traditional view, which says that idioms are considered a matter of language only, they exist in our mental lexicon, and not part of a conceptual system. Gibbs (1997, p.142), however, argues that if one takes a close look at idiomatic phrases, it is shown that they actually reflect a system of conceptual metaphors, and not just being units in the lexicon. Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.3) state that we are not aware of our conceptual system, the way we think and act, and that the conceptual system is “metaphorical in nature”, thus, our everyday experiences and our way of thinking is a question of metaphor. Gibbs (1997, p.150) argues in his article that conceptual metaphors are “an important, and ubiquitous, part of everyday cognition.” He bases this on the important role conceptual metaphors play in motivating, for example, language understanding. Furthermore, the data Gibbs presents in his article implies that metaphoric thought may be involved in our immediate understanding of some idioms in everyday speech. Moreover, he also (1997, p.141) presents four different hypotheses concerning “the interaction between metaphoric patterns of thought and different aspects of language use and understanding”. What these four hypotheses have in common is that they address what role metaphoric thought, as conceptual metaphors, plays in people’s understanding and use of language. The hypotheses are grounded in the theory that metaphor represents an important part of human cognition. Importantly, the third hypothesis, with ideas from Lakoff and Johnson, suggests an existing bond between conceptual metaphors and how people understand different verbal expressions (Gibbs, 1997, p.141).
3.1 Explaining key concepts

Conceptual metaphor
Conceptual metaphor is a common topic within the field of cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p.3) define conceptual metaphor as “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.”, and that our conceptual system “is fundamentally metaphorical in nature”. A conceptual metaphor is for instance LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which means we conceptualize or understand the abstract concept LIFE in terms of the more concrete concept JOURNEY (Kövecses, 2010, p.4). In other words, metaphor means understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain, for instance ARGUMENT IS WAR or LOVE IS A JOURNEY. An example of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY could be: Our relationship isn’t going anywhere. Isn’t going anywhere literally means travelling nowhere specific, i.e. without a distinct destination. However, in the relevant context, our relationship isn’t going anywhere we still interpret this expression as being about love, not a journey. It’s the relationship that is not developing, not going anywhere, instead of two travellers on a physical journey (Kövecses, 2010, p.8). Thus, a conceptual metaphor is how we think about a concept, that is, the way we think about love as a journey. We think about the lovers as travellers, the goal of the relationship as the journey’s destination and the troubles in the relationship as the obstacles we face on our journey (Kövecses, 2010, p.9). When we use these metaphors in speech they are called linguistic expressions of language. Linguistic expressions are real-life, written or spoken manifestations of the conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2010, p.7).

Idiom
According to Kövecses (2010, p.231), an idiom is a type of metaphorical linguistic expression. The cognitive view of idioms suggests that idioms are a part of the conceptual system and not just words or phrases from the lexicon. This means that there is a conceptual domain involved in the process, for instance the concept FIRE, and not simply the lexical word fire (Kövecses, 2010, p.233). Idioms which involve the conceptual domain FIRE can be: He was spitting fire or The killing sparked off riots in the major cities (Kövecses, 2010, p.232). The meaning of idioms is usually not
arbitrary, it can often be motivated. What motivates the meaning of idioms is our knowledge and experience of the world, which means that the motivation of idioms is derived from conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2010, p.236).

**Metaphor and metonymy**
Metaphor and metonymy are figurative language. It means we use words figuratively and not literally, i.e. we refer to one thing by speaking of another thing. According to Ungerer and Schmid (2013, p.115) the difference between them is that metaphors are based on similarity or comparison between the literal and the figurative meaning while metonymy is based on closeness. In a conceptual metaphor attributes from the source domain are mapped from one cognitive category onto the target domain of another cognitive category. Metonymy, on the other hand, indicates a relationship in which one thing stands for another thing, for instance the part for the whole or the author for the book. In other words, the mapping between source domains is from entities within the same specific cognitive category.

**Domains and mapping**
Kövecses (2010, p.4) says that a conceptual metaphor consists of two domains (concepts): the source domain (or domain/concept B) and target domain (domain/concept A). The source domain is the concrete domain which we use to understand another abstract domain. The target domain is thus the abstract domain that we are trying to conceptualize by using the source domain (Kövecses, 2010, p.91). In short, we can say that we understand A in terms of B. This process is called mapping. However, mapping is only partial, which means that only parts of the source domain, specific attributes, are mapped on the target domain (Kövecses, 2010, p.91).

**Cognitive category and attributes**
People categorize objects and entities in their surroundings on a daily basis. This is a mental process called categorization where objects are categorized according to their attributes such as shape, colour, size etc. The product of this process is a cognitive category, or a ‘concept’ (Ungerer & Schmid, 2013, p.8). A concept, according to
Ungerer and Schmid (2013, p.25), consists of different properties or attributes. Attributes can be explained as characteristics or typical aspects of a specific concept. For example, the concept of JOURNEY has attributes such as ‘travelling’, ‘path’ or ‘ways’, while the concept of DOG has attributes such as ‘barks’, ‘four legs’ or ‘wags tail’.

**Conventional knowledge**

An idiom can be based on metaphor, metonymy or conventional knowledge. Conventional knowledge means that people from the same culture share experiences of a certain conceptual domain. This can be experiences or knowledge of the shape, size, parts, use and function of that specific domain (Kövesces, 2010, p.243).

**Lexical features**

Lexical features, as I will be using the term, are the lexemes, the words, from which the idioms are constructed, for instance: *hen or mountain*.

### 3.2 Previous Research

There have been many studies conducted on the subject of idioms and some very similar to this one, however, there does not exist a study exactly like this one. A study by Gibbs, *Metaphors in Idiom Comprehension* (1997), concerned whether people access conceptual metaphors each time an idiom is encountered in discourse, and if so, how quickly they are accessed. The result shows amongst other that people do access conceptual metaphors when understanding idioms and that the time it takes to process an idiom is the same as when processing a literal paraphrasing of the idiom. In addition, Book (2016) conducted a study called *Cognitively Motivated Meanings for Idioms: The Metaphorical and Metonymical Structures of two Semantically Equivalent but Structurally Different Idioms in English and Swedish*. This study analysed the semantically similar idiom-pair to *step into someone’s shoes* and att axla någons mantel (*to shoulder someone’s mantle [lit]*), while searching for similarities and dissimilarities in the structure of the pair as well as possible motivations for the meaning of the idiom. The result shows that the idioms consist of the same conceptual metaphor,
RESPONSIBILITY IS CLOTHES, which could motivate how these idioms can be semantically similar.

Furthermore, Andersson conducted a study called *A thorn in the side and its equivalents in French and Swedish: One sense realized as three different idioms* (2014). This study revolved around idioms in Swedish, French and English and the purpose was to analyse how these idioms can share meaning while being structured differently. The result suggests that the idioms can convey the same meaning because they are motivated by the same conceptual metaphor.
4 Material and method

This is a qualitative study and therefore, limitations were set in order to not make it too extensive. Thus, the idioms were narrowed down to three: one Swedish, one German and one English. German was added to broaden the scope of the study in an interesting way, giving the study more material to analyse and to get a generally applicable result.

To begin with, dictionaries of idioms in Swedish were used to identify a suitable and, to me, interesting idiom. Once an idiom was identified, dictionaries of idioms in Swedish and online dictionaries in German and English were consulted to examine if an idiom with the equivalent meaning existed in those languages. The dictionaries consulted in English were: The Oxford English Dictionary Online as well as the Oxford English Reference Dictionary, Longman Dictionary, Cambridge Dictionary and Merriam-Webster. The dictionaries consulted in Swedish were: Svensk Ordbok, Svenska Idiom, Nordstedts Stora Svenska Ordbok and Bonniers Svenska Ordbok. The dictionaries consulted in German were: The Free Dictionary, Duden and Redensarten Index. Once a Swedish idiom was chosen, the idiom’s English and German counterparts were identified as well and the meanings of the idioms were analysed and compared. The Swedish and the German idioms were then translated into English for the analysis.

Furthermore, Google was used in order to search for the idioms in newspapers. The idioms were found in newspaper articles in their respective language. The Swedish idiom was for instance found in Expressen, a Swedish well-known tabloid, in an article from 2017. The English idiom was found in the British newspaper The Guardian, where it had been used recently in articles from 2016 and 2017. The German idiom was also found, but in the well-known German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung, also used in a recently published article from 2017. Along with newspapers, the idioms were searched for on Twitter where examples of all idioms were found. The search for the idioms in newspapers and on Twitter was done to see whether the idioms are still actively used today, in all three languages. The findings of the twitter search are presented in Appendix 1.

Books on cognitive linguistics were consulted to gain enough knowledge to be able to conduct the research properly. For this, Ungerer and Schmid’s An introduction to cognitive linguistics was used, because it provides a person unfamiliar with the subject a
good analysis without being too complex. Furthermore, books on conceptual metaphors were consulted more thoroughly in order to correctly describe and analyse the mapping, and to secure an acceptable result of the idiom-set’s underlying metaphorical structure. Two books on conceptual metaphors were used: in particular *Metaphor. A practical introduction* by Zoltan Kövecses but also Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors we live by*. Lakoff and Johnson was used because it is more detailed and provides the reader with a more in-depth analysis of conceptual metaphor.

The lexical structure of the idioms i.e. the individual words and their lexical meaning were analysed as well. Firstly, the main components of the idioms were identified: all containing two objects and one process. Since these were the concepts to be analysed, they were isolated and examined with the use of dictionaries. The individual words were initially only examined in English by using: *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary* and the online version of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Merriam Webster, Cambridge Dictionary* and finally *Longman Dictionary*. These specific dictionaries were used due to them being well-known. By doing this I was able to find the attributes which characterize the concepts involved, and was able to see whether or not different attributes were used to characterize a concept in different dictionaries, but also if the different concepts shared similar attributes. The German lexical features were examined using *The Free Dictionary* and Swedish lexical features were examined by using *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok (SAOB)*. This was done in order to develop the study in an interesting way, since the meaning of a word in one language might differ from that of another language.

Lastly, once having identified the attributes I began analysing the mapping of the conceptual metaphors involved. Firstly, the conceptual metaphors (the source and target domain as well as the meaning of the idiom) were identified to get an overview of the structure. The attributes of each of the units in the idioms were then analysed to find similarities and/or differences between the units.
5 Result and analysis

5.1 Source and target domain structure

The target domain of the conceptual metaphor is the abstract notion of an exaggeration, in other words, the target domain is structured by a small matter which is turned into a big matter. Since there are three idioms, there are three source domains to the target domains, which means that there are three different mappings. The result shows that the underlying conceptual metaphors and metonyms involved in these source domains are structured by three components: two objects and one process. The objects consist of two components where one is smaller in relation to the other component, which then is bigger than the smaller one. The process involved in the idiom, the process of ‘making’, remains the same in all idioms. Also, the source domains differ in terms of which lexical features or words are used to describe the target domain.

Starting with the English idiom, it consists of the lexical features: a molehill, a mountain and the action of ‘making’; the molehill is made into a mountain. In contrast to the English idiom, the Swedish one includes a feather, a hen and the action ‘making’: to make a hen out of a feather. Continuing with the German idiom, it consists of a mosquito, an elephant and the action of ‘making’: the mosquito is made into an elephant. This suggests that the source target is an expansion of sorts, since an expansion means that a smaller entity turns into a bigger entity. In other words, when looking at the structures of the idioms, the English and German idioms seem to indicate a relationship of a smaller entity being turned into a bigger entity, which suggests the conceptual metaphor MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION. The Swedish idiom, on the other hand, seem to indicate a relationship where the part is turned into the whole. This suggests a conceptual metaphor with a metonymical structure, that is, MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE IS EXAGGERATION. This will be analysed further in section 5.4.
5.2 Definitions of the idiom-set

To make a mountain out of a molehill

- Merriam-Webster:
  ‘to make something seem much more difficult or important than it really is’
  Example: She thought that he was making a mountain out of a molehill by complaining about the placement of the silverware.

- Longman Dictionary:
  ‘to treat a problem as if it was very serious when in fact it is not’
  Example: She was only five minutes late! You’re making a mountain out of a molehill.

- Oxford English Dictionary:
  ‘to attribute great importance to something, esp. a difficulty or a grievance, which is insignificant in reality; to make a lot of fuss over a minor matter.’

  ‘exaggerate the importance of a minor difficulty’

- Cambridge Dictionary:
  ‘to make a slight difficulty seem like a serious problem’
  Example: You’re making a mountain out of a molehill. You wrote one bad essay - it doesn't mean you're going to fail.

Att göra en höna av en fjäder (To make a hen out of a feather)

- Svensk Ordbok (2009, p. 1289):
  ‘To describe something insignificant as more significant than it is, especially regarding gossip.’
  Example: De kände sig förföljda av mediedrevet och hävdade att tidningarna hade gjort en höna av en fjäder.
  made a hen of a feather
  They felt persecuted by the media and claimed that the newspapers had made a mountain out of a molehill.
• Svenska idiom (Luthman, 2002, p. 32):

‘To make something more extraordinary than it is, make a small matter bigger.’
*make a hen of a feather*

*I think you are making a mountain out of a molehill. The problems are not that big.*

• Norstedts Stora Svenska Ordbok:

‘To describe something insignificant as more significant than it is, especially regarding gossip.’

• Bonniers Svenska Ordbok:

‘To describe something insignificant as more significant than it is.’

**Aus einer Mücke einen Elefanten machen (To make an elephant out of a mosquito)**

• The Free Dictionary

‘To describe something harmless and relatively unimportant as a very serious problem.’
‘Strongly exaggerate’

• Duden

‘Colloquial language: To make something important or meaningful out of an insignificant matter; to exaggerate something significant’

• Redensarten index

‘To make something worse than it really is; to make a small matter much bigger; exaggerate.’

The definitions of the idioms are very similar to each other, both within the individual language and among the languages. The general meaning of all definitions is that a small matter is somehow turned into a larger matter. However, the result shows a few differences between the definitions. For instance, while all definitions include meanings such as ‘serious problem’, ‘make a small matter bigger’ or
‘small/insignificant matter’, one of the German definitions include the word ‘meaningful’ and ‘harmless’ whereas one of the Swedish definitions include ‘extraordinary’. These could indicate a difference in meaning between the definitions. Furthermore, two of the Swedish definitions link the Swedish idiom to gossip. In turn, gossip is defined by *Merriam Webster* as a rumour of intimate nature and by *Cambridge Dictionary* as “conversation or reports about other people’s private lives that might be unkind, disapproving, or not true”. Also, *Longman Dictionary* describes gossip as being of an ‘unkind’ or ‘untrue’ nature. Thus, one can draw the conclusion that the meaning of the Swedish idiom is of a more negative kind than the other two, or that the idiom is used in a context where the topic of conversation is gossip.

5.3 **Attribute distribution of the lexical items in English**

The result of the research on the idiom’s lexical features is shown in Table 1 on page 20, where we can see the most salient of the lexical features’ attributes found in the English dictionaries. When analysing the mapping of the idiom-set, I found that the lexical features that were used had very different attributes that characterize them as concepts. However, my study shows that they did have a few attributes in common, in other words, the attributes show a relationship between the lexical features. Kövecses (2010, p.91) states that mapping is partial, meaning that only a part of the source concept is transferred onto the target. Kövecses continues by saying that the parts that are transferred are thus highlighted, in other words, they are the parts in the mapping brought into focus. As Table 1 shows, *mountain* and *elephant* have attributes that resemble each other: ‘large’, ‘very large’, ‘huge’, ‘big’, ‘high’. These attributes can be mapped onto the target domain, when the insignificant problem has become a ‘big’ or a ‘large’ one. In contrast to *mountain and elephant*, *molehill* and *mosquito* only share one important attribute: ‘small’. Since ‘small’ and ‘big’ are gradable antonyms, they are only ‘small’ or ‘big’ in relation to one another, meaning that, for instance, *mosquito* is only small when compared to *elephant*, and *molehill* is ‘small’ when compared to *mountain* etc. The ‘small’ attribute is mapped onto the beginning of the exaggeration, when the problem is that of a small and insignificant character. These are the parts of the source domain that are highlighted. The German and English idioms thus have very
similar underlying metaphorical structures. Both idioms use small objects turning them into bigger objects to understand the abstract target domain.

Unlike these two idioms, the units of the Swedish one do not seem to share the relationship of ‘big’ or ‘small’. Hen has the attributes ‘adult’, ‘animal’ or ‘female’ while feather has the attributes ‘light’, ‘external covering of birds (hen)’, ‘cover a bird’s body’ and ‘appendages of bird’. All these attributes point to feather being the small unit because of its ‘being a part of the hen’ attribute. Being a part of something means being a part of a bigger unit, the hen, thus making the feather the smaller unit in the context. In additions to that, when looking at the lexical features of the Swedish idiom in a SAOB it says that the lexical feature feather (fjäder) historically has a figurative meaning to it, that is: ‘a word for something very insignificant’ or ‘unimportant: the very smallest.’

Just like the Swedish idiom, the units of the English idiom also show an existing relationship among them. Molehill shows similar attributes to mountain, for instance molehill has the attributes: ‘mound of earth’, pile of earth’ and ‘ridge of earth’. Just as molehill, mountain has attributes connected to earth, such as: ‘mass of land’, raised part of earth’s surface’ or ‘elevation of earth’s surface’. This shows that the two units of this idiom consist of earth of some sort and therefore they share a very close relationship. As a result, the process of ‘making’ is a process that could technically speaking be performed. On the contrary, the units in the German idiom, mosquito and elephant, do not show an especially close relationship since the only attribute they share is ‘animal’. Therefore, the only bond that these units show is that of a ‘smaller to bigger’ relationship. When looking at the lexical features Mücke(mosquito) and Elefant(elephant) in German dictionaries, they did not show any additional meaning than what the English dictionaries stated.
Table 1 – Distribution of attributes.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOUNTAIN</td>
<td>‘big’ ‘higher than hill’ ‘mass of land’</td>
<td>‘very high hill’</td>
<td>‘much larger than hill’ ‘raised part of earth’s surface’</td>
<td>‘elevation of earth’s surface’ ‘high’ ‘large’ ‘steep’</td>
<td>‘elevation of earth’s surface’ ‘larger and higher than hill’ ‘steep’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEATHER</td>
<td>‘external covering of birds (hen)’ ‘light’ ‘part of animal’</td>
<td>‘cover a bird’s body’ ‘light’ ‘soft’</td>
<td>‘cover a bird’s body’ ‘light’ ‘soft’</td>
<td>‘fine strands’ ‘growing from skin of bird’ ‘hairy hollow stem’</td>
<td>‘appendages of bird’ ‘hairy nature’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOLEHILL</td>
<td>‘mound of earth’ ‘small’ ‘used by moles’</td>
<td>‘made by mole’ ‘pile of earth’ ‘small’</td>
<td>‘made by mole’ ‘pile of earth’ ‘small’</td>
<td>‘mound’ ‘small’ ‘thrown up by mole’</td>
<td>‘small’ ‘mound’ ‘ridge of earth’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4 Mapping and cognitive categories

The result of the mapping also shows the structure within the idioms. The Swedish idiom shows something close to a metonymic structure, that is THE PART FOR THE WHOLE, where the part (feather) is to be made into the whole (hen). In other words, the conceptual metaphor of the Swedish idiom is based on metonymy. Thus, the idiom consists of the conceptual metaphor MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE IS EXAGGERATION. A conceptual metonym is based on one entity that “can provide mental
access to a target entity when the two entities belong to the same domain.” (Kövecses, 2010, p.173). Kövecses also states that these two entities are linked very closely in our experience of the world, and that they are closely related to each other in a conceptual space. (2010, p.174). Therefore, hen and feather are tightly linked and they are contiguous in conceptual space.

The German and the English idioms, on the other hand, do not indicate a metonymical structure. Instead, they show a metaphorical structure, meaning that they consist of the conceptual metaphor MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION. Besides having a metaphorical structure, they also show an underlying structure of conventional knowledge. Starting with the units of the German idiom, elephant and mosquito, when looking at the result of the distribution of the attributes, the only attribute elephant and mosquito share is ‘animal’. Their relationship is nothing more than a small animal being turned into a big, completely different animal. If based on conventional knowledge, then the idiom is based on the fact that people know that a mosquito is small in relation to an elephant, and an elephant is big in relation to a mosquito, and therefore this relation is transferrable onto the idiom. Just like the units of the German idiom, the units of the English one also have a relationship based on one being small and the other big. But in contrast to elephant and mosquito, molehill and mountain also share a relationship, they are made out of material existing in nature, mountain from rock and molehill from soil or ground. People’s knowledge of a molehill being a small object and a mountain a larger object, as well as the idea of making an object of a specific material bigger by adding a similar material, in this case adding rock to soil, explains why these two entities can be used to describe an exaggeration.

Furthermore, the attribute analyses reveal additional information concerning whether the idioms’ lexical features belong to the same cognitive category. First of all, as already discussed, mountain and molehill are made from rock and soil, two materials/entities found in nature. This then means that they could be members of the same cognitive category, for instance: MATERIALS OF THE EARTH, MATERIALS FOUND IN NATURE or ORGANIC MATERIAL. Secondly, three of the lexical features, hen, mosquito and elephant, display an obvious relationship of being different kinds of animals. Hence, they all fall into the cognitive category ANIMALS. Feather on the other hand does not seem to fall into these categories. Also, the processes involved in the idioms, the
‘making’ of an entity into a bigger entity, are the same in all three idioms. What can be seen here is that the lexical features of the English idiom belong to the same cognitive category, and the lexical features of the German idiom belong the same cognitive category as well. *Hen* and *feather* however, do not. *Feather* is more likely an attribute to *hen* and would fall under a cognitive category such as *EXTERNAL COVERAGE OF ANIMALS*. This also shows the difference in the idioms’ structures, where the Swedish structure stands out from that of the other two idioms.

### 5.4.1 Overview of the mapping

**Conceptual metaphor:** MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION

**Source domain:** EXPANSION/MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY  
**Target domain:** EXAGGERATION  
**Mapping:** small unit, process of making, big unit

**Conceptual metaphor:** MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION

**Source domain:** EXPANSION/MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY  
**Target domain:** EXAGGERATION  
**Mapping:** small unit, process of making, big unit

**Conceptual metaphor:** MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE IS EXAGGERATION

**Source domain:** EXPANSION/MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE  
**Target domain:** EXAGGERATION  
**Mapping:** the part, process of making, the whole
6 Discussion

6.1 Conceptual metaphor or metonymy

The result of my research shows that we are dealing with two cases of the same kind of conceptual metaphor, and one case of a conceptual metaphor that is based on metonymy. The conceptual metaphor of the English idiom *make a mountain out of a molehill* and the German idiom *aus einer Mücke einen Elefanten machen (make a mosquito out of an elephant)* is MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION. The Swedish idiom *göra en höna av en fjäder (to make a hen out of a feather)*, one the other hand, consists of the metonymically structured conceptual metaphor MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE IS EXAGGERATION. However, unlike most metonymic structures, *feather* is not used instead of *hen*, it is turned into *hen*. This makes it possible for the metonym to be transferred onto the abstract notion of exaggeration.

6.2 Definition of the Swedish idiom

As the result shows, the different definitions of exaggeration vary slightly. They are all very similar except two of the Swedish definitions which associate exaggeration with gossip. When searching for the Swedish definition of the word *gossip (skvaller)* in the Swedish dictionary SAOB, it defines gossip as ‘slander, rumour, often offensive, derogatory or inferior’. It is also defined as ‘meaningless; idle talk, chatter and nonsense, unfounded talk’. Since gossip in Sweden has negative connotations, that could mean that the meaning of the Swedish idiom is more negative than the other two. Perhaps the idiom is used, or was meant to be used, when it comes to gossip or rumours. This is also shown in the result of the idioms in context (see Appendix 1) where a Swedish tweet by Mikael Udén was used about rumours, saying that some rumours are standard and that those are often exaggerated: a hen is made out of a feather.

Moreover, both the large and the small matter are described in various ways. The English definitions describe the large matter as: ‘much more difficult or important’, ‘very serious’, ‘a lot of fuss’, or ‘a serious problem’, and the small matter as: ‘a slight
difficulty’ and ‘a minor matter’. The Swedish definitions describe the large matter as: ‘more significant/extraordinary than it is’ and the small matter as ‘something insignificant’ and ‘a small matter’. In addition, the German definitions describe the large matter as: ‘a very serious problem’, ‘something important or meaningful’ or ‘make something worse’ while the small matter is described as: ‘insignificant’, ‘harmless and relatively unimportant’ or ‘a small matter’. This shows that the three languages use mostly the same words to describe the meaning of the idioms, however, they slightly disagree on some points, e.g. ‘extraordinary’ or ‘meaningful’ compared to ‘serious problem’.

The English definitions use mostly words with negative connotations, such as ‘difficult’, ‘fuss’ and ‘problem’. The Swedish ones, on the other hand, use the words ‘significant’ and ‘extraordinary’ which have more neutral, if not positive connotations, but become words we associate with problems when associating them with exaggeration. When looking at the German definitions, they slightly contradict themselves when using both words with negative connotations such as ‘problem’ and ‘worse’ when at the same time they use ‘meaningful’, which has positive connotations. Furthermore, the small matter is described among others as a ‘small difficulty’ in English and something ‘harmless’ in German. These two words differ as well concerning positive or negative connotations. This could mean that the idioms have different meanings and can be used in various ways, for instance, to exaggerate something insignificant into something meaningful, or exaggerate a small matter into a serious problem. The definitions of the English idiom did not show much variation since they essentially describe something negative. Only on one occasion was the large matter described as ‘important’. Thus, the English idiom is most likely used in similar ways, describing an issue with negative connotations of sorts. The Swedish and German definitions on the other hand might point to the fact that the idioms can be used in both negative and more neutral ways, depending on the context.

6.3 The lexical features

A parallel can be drawn between the gossip that is identified in the definition of the Swedish idiom, and the attribute ‘female’ to the lexical feature hen. Gossiping is generally seen as a female attribute; something females do when they talk to each other.
In Sweden, a synonym to female talk, for instance gossip, is *kackla*. This word means ‘chatter’ and especially chatter between many female human beings. However, *kackla* also means the sound a hen makes. This could motivate why it is specifically a hen that is used as the Swedish target domain when trying to understand the source domain *exaggeration*. Furthermore, unlike the other lexical features, *fjäder* (*feather*) in Swedish shows an additional figurative meaning. It was historically a word which also meant ‘something very insignificant’. Evidently, we can draw a clear parallel between the figurative meaning of the lexical feature *fjäder* and the component in the Swedish idiom, *fjäder*, which is the original, insignificant problem. This could explain why it is specifically a feather that is used to understand the exaggeration.

Regarding the lexical features of the German idiom, there is no parallel to be drawn between them and the definitions of the idiom. One argument for why these specific words are used is simply because both a mosquito and an elephant are common animals whose existences are known by most people and a mosquito is one of the smallest common or ordinary animals while an elephant is a very well-known animal as well as the largest living animal on land. Thus, the German idiom is most likely based on conventional knowledge because most people know that a mosquito is small while an elephant is big. Moreover, this way of thinking can be applied to the English idiom, where the molehill is one of the smallest hills and the mountain the largest kind of hill.

### 6.4 Different forms of exaggeration

Maybe languages have differently structured source domains for the same target because the form or size of the target, i.e. the exaggeration, is different. Starting with the English idiom, the difference in size between the two objects is immense. We have most likely taken the smallest kind of hill imaginable, a molehill, and the largest kind of hill, a mountain. In contrast, the difference in size between a mosquito and an elephant is huge, but not as huge as a mountain and a molehill, whereas the difference in size between a hen and a feather is not big at all. This could then mean that the exaggeration in the English idiom is bigger than that of the other two and that perhaps this idiom could be one of degree. The English idiom could actually be carried out; one could add rocks and other organic materials to the molehill and make a mountain. This then means that you could decide the size of the mountain, you do not have to go as far as making
the biggest mountain imaginable, you could technically make it into a smaller sized mountain. This might then apply to the idiom, so that users of the English idiom can choose to what degree they want to exaggerate.

The German idiom on the other hand is impossible to carry out in the real world. One cannot add material to a mosquito or mould the existing mosquito into an elephant. It either is one or the other, there can be no in-between. Thus, this could mean that the users of the German idiom have no choice, unlike the English idiom, the exaggeration of making an elephant out of a mosquito is not one of degree. Then by using this idiom, you mean that the exaggeration is an impossible and thus unreasonable action. This also means that the end-product, the ‘serious problem’, of the exaggeration does not resemble the original smaller “matter” at all, since mosquito and elephant share no attributes besides ‘animal’.

Like the German idiom, the process of making a hen out of a feather is also impossible to carry out in real life. However, the objects of the idiom share a much closer bond than the objects of the German one, since a feather is already a part of a hen, and there is not a big difference in size between them. This could mean that the exaggeration is of a smaller kind. The exaggeration is not far from the small “issue” or “problem” that existed originally.

These differences in the definitions and meanings of the idioms could be one of the reasons as to why they are structured differently. Kövecses (2010, p.96) states that we need different source domains because the target domain contains several aspects, and to highlight these different aspects, we use different sources. Thus, German, Swedish and English might highlight various aspects of the target domain; the English idiom highlight the huge difference in size between the smaller and the bigger “problem”, whereas the German highlight the act of doing the impossible, one has made the smaller “problem” into something completely different and unrecognizable. The Swedish idiom on the other hand, highlights a “problem” that has not gone out of proportion, it still resembles the original “problem” but instead being more of a smaller but gossipy nature.
7 Conclusion

To summarize, the target domain, the exaggeration, might vary depending on the idiom. The exaggeration of the English idiom could be one of degree, whereas the exaggeration of the German idiom is unreasonable. The exaggeration of the Swedish idioms is rather one of closeness, the difference between the stages of the exaggeration is not so big.

Furthermore, there is no clear answer to why these idioms have come to mean what they mean, only speculations regarding their semantic development through mapping from source to target can be made. The English and the German idiom pairs have a common underlying structure of conceptual metaphor. The conceptual metaphor involved is MAKING A SMALL ENTITY INTO A BIGGER ENTITY IS EXAGGERATION. The attributes that are mapped onto the target domain are the same, that is, a bigger - smaller relationship where the small concept is made or built into a bigger concept. The English idiom however shows a closer relationship between its lexical features, i.e. being made of organic material, than the German idiom, which shows no such relationship and is presumable also based on conventional knowledge. The Swedish idiom on the other hand has a slightly different structure. The underlying structure of the idiom is that of a conceptual metaphor but based on metonymy: MAKING THE PART INTO THE WHOLE IS EXAGGERATION. Thus, the lexical features involved share a tight bond and a different kind of closeness than do the English ones. The only thing the Swedish idiom has in common with the German and English is the process, the making, involved in the idioms. Lastly, the Swedish idiom shows signs of having a slightly different definition, since the exaggeration involved gossip.
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Appendix 1

The idioms in twitter posts

The result of these twitter posts indicates that the idioms are used today. It also indicates that the idioms can be and are used by anyone, not only by professional writers, such as the authors of the newspaper articles.


  English: Municipals refrain from #easterfeathers due to ethical reasons. The comment sections are filled with hate. “It is the immigrants’ fault”. – To make a hen out of a feather”.

- "Bra inspiration till krönika/text/rant kan ju vara att göra en arg höna av en upplevd fjäder.” – by Glad Kille (@Moosbricka).

  English: "Good inspiration to a chronicle/text/rant can be to make an angry hen out of an experienced feather.”


  English: Think that kind of rumours are pretty standard. Easily becomes a hen out of a feather of those. But sure, would be better if there were no rumours at all.”


  English: ” He says for God’s sake that he COULD murder, not that he actually planned on doing it. Talk about people making a hen out of a feather.”

- "Statsminister Stefan Löfven (S) åter aktuell i stor muthärva - en tickande bomb eller höna av en fjäder?” – by Lasse Olerius (@lasseole).
English: “Prime minister Stefan Löfven (S) again involved in bribery case – a ticking time bomb or a hen out of a feather?”

- “7yrs back bijoy was angry when dixits called him a thief, Dev asked him not to make mountain out of a molehill bt 2day he did the same #KRPKAB” – by 🐇 (@AKfathima11).

- “She made a mountain out of a molehill 😂” – by Bülbül (@AntaaNdiaye).

- Chris Retweetade Chris:
  “Sure hope I’m making a mountain out of a molehill, Trump talks and his ignorance makes me thing DOOM” – by Chris (@Portland_Chris).

- ”Warum muss man am Montag eigentlich aus einer Mücke einen Elefanten machen -.-” – by kieliscalling (@kieliscalling).

  English: “Why do you really have to make an elephant out of a mosquito on Mondays -_-“.


  English: “There are women who make a mosquito out of an elephant, and there is me. I drink beer.”


  English: “Why make a mosquito out of an elephant when you can also make a tweet out of it?”