A thorn in the side and its equivalents in French and Swedish

One sense realized as three different idioms

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyse how three idioms, in English, French and Swedish, despite different lexical compositions are capable of conveying the same meaning. The idioms in question are *a thorn in the side*, *une épine au pied/dans le pied* and *en nagel i ögat*. This study is concerned with how different metaphorical images are used to express the same meaning. Furthermore, it examines what it is in the semantics of the lexical items that enables these idioms to express the same idiomatic meaning. Using a cognitive linguistic approach the analysis is conducted at a linguistic and a conceptual level. The analysis shows that these three different idioms are capable of conveying the same idiomatic meaning because they are motivated by the same conceptual metaphor.

**Keywords:** Idioms, Cognitive linguistics, Concepts, Conceptual metaphors, Conceptual correspondences
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1 Introduction

Being Swedish and studying to be a French and English teacher I constantly make comparisons among these three languages. Knowing a language implicates having knowledge of its idiomatic expressions and they often have figurative meanings. Figurative language is fascinating but also a challenging part of language for a non-native speaker. Many idioms have both a literal and figurative meaning but knowledge of the literal meaning is not sufficient when it comes to understanding an idiom. Word-to-word translations of idioms often result in non-idiomatic expressions, sometimes even incomprehensible ones.

Idiomatic and figurative expressions entail a further aspect: the relationship between language and thought, or to be more precise, the relationship between metaphorical linguistic expressions and the conceptual metaphors that motivate these expressions. Some conceptual metaphors are conventional, which means that they are fixed ways of thinking about and understanding an abstract concept (Kövecses, 2010: 34). Metaphorical linguistic expressions can differ across languages and still be motivated by the same conceptual metaphor, which means that different metaphorical linguistic expressions may arise from the same thought (Kövecses, 2005: 151).

I want to look more closely at idioms that have different lexical make-ups in English, Swedish and French but are nevertheless capable of conveying the same meaning. Similar comparative studies have been conducted before, more precisely, studies of an idiomatic meaning which is realised differently in two languages. However, this study concerns an idiomatic meaning with different lexical make-ups in three different languages and this type of study does not seem to be very frequent. The main reason for conducting this research is to learn more about this vast subject but hopefully also to make a contribution to the cross-linguistic study of idioms.

One idiom that caught my eye is the conventionalized1 idiom a thorn in the side/flesh. Comparing this English idiom with its equivalent idioms in Swedish and French, I found that all three languages use different body parts: side, eye and foot:

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1 A conventionalized metaphorical linguistic expression is a well worn, sometimes even clichéd, metaphorical linguistic expression (Kövecses 2010: 34).
2 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/thorn?q=thorn#thorn; accessed on May 20th 2014
2 thorn in the side (or flesh)

En nagel i ögat: literally meaning ‘a nail in the eye’ (my translation)
Une épine au pied/dans le pied: literally meaning ‘a thorn in the foot’ (my translation)
‘a source of continual annoyance or trouble’^2

2 Aim and research questions

The idioms chosen for this study seem to have the same idiomatic meaning and their lexical make-ups are not entirely different. However, the English, Swedish and French languages, respectively, employ different body parts as components in these idioms. The aim of this study is to analyse how the idioms, despite the difference in lexical composition, are still capable of conveying the same meaning. My study will be concerned with the following research questions:

- How are different metaphorical images used to convey the same meaning?

- Despite different lexical compositions, what is it in the semantics of the employed objects and body parts that enable these idioms to convey the same meaning?

^2 http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/thorn?q=thorn#thorn; accessed on May 20th 2014
3 Theoretical framework

First of all relevant key notions are defined and then a cognitive linguistic view of metaphors and idioms is presented. This view is concerned with the relationship between language and thought, specifically metaphors in language and in thought.

3.1 Key notions

Lexical item: word

Idiom/idiomatic expression: institutionalized, or conventionalized, metaphorical multiword expression, such as *a thorn in the side, spill the beans, twist someone round your little finger and rain cats and dogs.* The form is often fixed or frozen: for example *rain cats and dogs, not *rain dogs and cats* (See Knowles and Moon, 2006: 20).

Concept: the mental representation of a word, as opposed to an actual lexical item, such as the abstract concepts IDEA and ANNOYANCE. Concepts can also be more concrete, such as FOOD, THORN and SIDE\(^3\). The concepts, or conceptual domains, that make up a conceptual metaphor are called *source concepts* and *target concepts*: for example, FOOD and IDEA from the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD. Ungerer and Schmid (2006: 118) use the terms *source concept* and *target concept* when it comes to conceptual metaphors.

Attribute: a certain property or typical aspect of a concept

Conceptual domain: see *concept.* In the present study, the terms *conceptual domain* and *concept* are used synonymously. Kövecses (2010: 324) seems to use these terms interchangeably: “a conceptual domain is our conceptual representation, or knowledge, of any coherent segment of experience. We often call such representations “concepts,” such as the concepts of BUILDING or MOTION”.

\(^3\) According to the convention used in this research paper, concepts, or conceptual domains, and conceptual metaphors are indicated with small capital letters (small caps).
**Conceptual metaphor:** one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another conceptual domain, or, a source concept is used to understand a target concept, for example: IDEAS ARE FOOD or ANGER IS FIRE. We think and talk about one thing in terms of another thing. As opposed to linguistic metaphor, or metaphorical linguistic expression.

**Conceptual correspondences/mappings:** conceptual correspondences between concepts are thought of as constituent conceptual elements of a concrete concept, such as FOOD, corresponding to constituent elements of an abstract concept, such as IDEA.

### 3.2 Metaphors – conceptual versus linguistic

In traditional views metaphor is considered as a figure of speech and a matter of language. In accordance with these views, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines metaphor as follows:

A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable; an instance of this, a metaphorical expression…

*(OED)*

However, metaphors are more than just a stylistic way of expressing ideas, they can be a way of thinking about things (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006: 118). A cognitive linguistic view on metaphor was first developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and has been further developed by Kövecses, among others. This view distinguishes conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions, the latter being words or expressions that stem from metaphorical conceptualizations (Kövecses, 2005: 5). Expressions such as *food for thought* and *devour a book* stem from the metaphorical conceptualization IDEAS ARE FOOD. In other words, metaphorical linguistic expressions, or linguistic metaphors, are concrete realizations of our way of thinking (Kövecses, 2005: 4-5). Thus, there are two levels of metaphoricity to keep in mind. Kövecses (2010) and Knowles and Moon (2006) make the distinction between *conceptual metaphor* and *metaphorical linguistic expression (or linguistic metaphor)*, i.e. between a
metaphorical conceptualization and its linguistic realization, and this distinction is also made in this paper.

### 3.3 Concepts and lexical items

Ungerer and Schmid (2006) define the term *concept* as the result of a mental process of classification, or categorization, which underlies language comprehension and language production. Since cognitive processes are involved when we produce and understand language, categorization is “something that takes place in our minds, and the categories resulting from it can be understood as mental concepts stored in our mind” (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006: 40). Furthermore, they explain that when a sentence is being processed by a hearer or reader, “the words call up […] the mental concept we have of the objects in the real world” (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006: 48).

If we look more closely at the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD, it consists of the two concepts IDEA and FOOD. In addition to being a concept, FOOD is a lexical item in the metaphorical linguistic expression *food for thought*. However, the same cannot be said about the abstract concept of idea. IDEA is not a lexical item in the expression *food for thought*, but a concept connected to the metaphorical meaning of this expression (Kövecses, 2010: 83).

The idiomatic and metaphorical meaning of an expression gives rise to other concepts than the literal meaning does. In the present paper the term *concept* is used in the sense of ‘mental representation’, e.g. the concepts FOOD and IDEA or THORN and ANNOYANCE. To be more precise, the term *concept* refers to the mental representation of a lexical item such as *food, thorn* or *side*. These words in turn are lexicalized components in idiomatic expressions. Besides referring to lexical items, the term *concept* refers to concepts connected to the metaphorical meanings of idiomatic expressions, such as IDEA and ANNOYANCE in the expressions *food for thought* and *a thorn in the side*. Moreover, concepts have certain attributes associated with them. Ungerer and Schmid (2006: 30) consider attributes as a descriptive tool and, as an example, give the following common attributes for the concept BIRD: ‘lays eggs’, ‘has a beak’, ‘has feathers’ and ‘has two wings and two legs’. When it comes to the comparative analysis of idioms and the concepts that differ among them, attributes could be an important tool.
According to the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another and these two domains combined constitute a conceptual metaphor. Regarding conceptual domains Kövecses (2010: 4) provides the explanation that a conceptual domain is “any coherent organization of experience”. Furthermore he defines conceptual metaphor as “CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN A IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN B”, that is, one conceptual domain is understood or construed in terms of another (Kövecses, 2010: 4) and this is the definition used in the present paper. Conceptual domain A is the target concept and conceptual domain B is the source concept, where the latter is used to understand the target concept. A conceptual metaphor generally includes a target concept that is more abstract than its source concept, which in turn is more concrete or physical in nature. The source domain of a conceptual metaphor is the domain that gives rise to the metaphorical linguistic expressions (Kövecses, 2010: 7).

Examples of conceptual metaphors are when we talk and think about arguments in terms of war or about life, or love, in terms of journeys (Kövecses, 2010: 4). Conforming to Kövecses’ line of reasoning (2010), conceptual domain A, say \textit{ARGUMENT}, is understood in terms of conceptual domain B, say \textit{WAR}, because there are conceptual correspondences between the source and the target. Moreover, conceptual correspondences between concepts are thought of as constituent conceptual elements of B corresponding to constituent elements of A. Let us look more closely at an example of conceptual correspondences, also called \textit{mappings}: the conceptual metaphor \textit{IDEAS ARE FOOD}. In this metaphor the abstract concept \textit{IDEA} is structured by the more concrete concept \textit{FOOD}. As stated by Kövecses (2010: 83) a set of systematic mappings for this conceptual metaphor can be laid out as follows:

- Cooking \rightarrow thinking
- Swallowing \rightarrow accepting
- Chewing \rightarrow considering
- Digesting \rightarrow understanding
- Nourishment \rightarrow mental well-being
These mappings per se can be laid out as conceptual metaphors, in other words as submappings of the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD:

THINKING IS COOKING: “Let me stew over this.”
ACCEPTING IS SWALLOWING: “I can’t swallow that claim.”
CONSIDERING IS CHEWING: “Let me chew over the proposal.”
UNDERSTANDING IS DIGESTING: “I can’t digest all these ideas.”
MENTAL WELL-BEING IS PHYSICAL NOURISHMENT: “He thrives on stuff like this.”
(Kövecses, 2010: 84)

The conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD is concretely realised in these metaphorical linguistic expressions. Kövecses (2010: 83) lays out the similarities between the concepts FOOD and IDEAS in the following way: we cook food and we think about ideas, we swallow or refuse to eat food and we accept or reject ideas, we chew food and we consider ideas, the body digests food and the mind understands ideas, and finally, digested food provides nourishment just as understanding provides mental well-being.

As previously stated, one type of metaphorical linguistic expression is an idiomatic expression, or idiom.

### 3.5 Idioms

Idiomatic expressions are particularly challenging for non-native speakers since knowledge of the constituent words is insufficient to know their figurative meanings. Kövecses (2010: 231-232) states that the majority of traditional scholars share the belief that idioms comprise two or more words and that the overall meanings of these words are not predictable from the meanings of the individual words. He claims that idioms are assumed to be a matter of language and, in common with words, classified depending on their sense and syntactic properties. In traditional views, idioms are linguistic expressions separated from any conceptual system (Kövecses, 2010: 232). Accordingly, the Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definition of the term idiom:
A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., used in a distinctive way in a particular language, dialect, or language variety; spec. a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from the meanings of the individual words

(OED)

In contrast, the cognitive linguistic view regards the meaning of an idiom as a representation of the human conceptual system and encyclopedic knowledge of language users. In accordance with this view, Knowles and Moon (2006: 82) offer the following definition of the term idiom:

Idioms are institutionalized metaphorical expressions with meanings which are sometimes transparent and sometimes obscure.

Kövecses (2010: 233) claims that idioms are generally not just a matter of language, nor do they have arbitrary meanings. He states that the meaning of an idiom “arises from our more general knowledge of the world embodied in our conceptual system” and that most idioms are products of this system (Kövecses, 2010: 233). He acknowledges that there is not conceptual motivation for the meaning of all idioms: as in the case of the idiom kick the bucket, but claims that most idioms are conceptually motivated. In other words most idioms are conceptual in nature.

Furthermore, he explains that the motivation for the occurrence of certain words in many idioms can be seen as a cognitive mechanism, connecting domains of knowledge to idiomatic meanings. Examples of such cognitive mechanisms, relevant when it comes to many idioms, are: metaphor and conventional knowledge (Kövecses, 2010: 232-233). When one of these mechanisms is the link between the literal meaning of the constituent words and the idiomatic meaning of these words collectively, the meaning of an idiom seems natural, or “transparent” (Kövecses, 2010: 324). Thus, transparency exists when the meaning of an idiom is conceptually motivated. One of the examples Kövecses (2010) mentions is the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS FIRE, which provides conceptual motivation for idioms such as spit fire. Moreover, he explains that this conceptual metaphor motivates the general meaning of the idiom spit fire but that its more precise meaning, which is ‘to be very angry’, is motivated by the conceptual mapping INTENSITY OF FIRE IS INTENSITY OF ANGER (Kövecses, 2010: 234-238).
Even though *spit fire* may be a somewhat weak example of an idiom, it conforms to the condition that idioms are conventionalized metaphorical multiword expressions.

As previously mentioned, conventional knowledge is another cognitive mechanism and this knowledge signifies common information that people in a certain culture share regarding a concept (Kövecses, 2010: 243). Let us take the concept *foot* as an example, one of the constituent words in the French idiom chosen for this study. Conventional knowledge regarding the human foot involves, for instance, information about the use and function of the human foot, that we use our feet to stand and move around. The assumption that people share conventional knowledge regarding concrete concepts such as the human foot is supported by a similar example given by Kövecses (2010). He discusses conventional knowledge of the conceptual domain of the human hand:

> This shared everyday knowledge includes standard information about the parts, shape, size, use, and function of the human hand, as well as the larger hierarchy of which it forms a part (hand as a part of the arm, etc.)

(Kövecses, 2010: 243)

Subsequently, the meaning of an idiom is conceptually motivated if one of these cognitive mechanisms is at play but in some cases the meaning is motivated by more than one cognitive mechanism, which Kövecses (2010: 245) calls multiple motivation for idioms. In this study the term *idiom* refers to conventionalized metaphorical multiword expressions such as *rain cats and dogs* and *spill the beans*, where the former means ‘rain very heavily’ and the latter ‘reveal a secret’ (*OED*). To consider idioms from a metaphorical perspective enables us to make sense of their idiomatic meanings, to understand how these meanings developed and to have mental images founded on their metaphors (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 19).

Cognitive tools like conventional knowledge and conceptual metaphor can clarify the underlying structure of the idioms that are chosen for this study: *a thorn in the side*, *une épine au pied/dans le pied* and *en nagel i ögat*. More precisely, these cognitive tools can clarify how these idioms, despite different literal meanings and concrete images, are capable of conveying the same idiomatic meaning.
4 Method and material

Using a cognitive linguistic approach I studied how three different lexical compositions are capable of conveying the same idiomatic meaning across different languages. I chose to confine the study to the idioms *a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied* and *en nagel i ögat* because they all consist of lexical items denoting a sharp object and a body part but the employed body parts differ.

Semantic information about the idioms was collected from a large number of dictionaries, such as *Macmillan English Dictionary* (2005), *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (2004) and *Bonniers Svenska Ordbok* (2006). Some of the definitions were found in online dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Larousse Dictionnaires* and *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista*. In addition to definitions from monolingual dictionaries, I included translations from bilingual dictionaries, such as *Norstedts Stora Engelsk-Svenska Ordbok*, *Norstedts Stora Svensk-Engelska Ordbok* (2000) and *Norstedts Stora Franska Ordbok fransk-svensk/svensk-fransk* (2008). Bilingual dictionaries were of vital importance for establishing whether the idioms had the same meaning and translations into the other two languages are given for each idiom. All dictionaries were randomly chosen. The majority of them are modern but in order to have a large number of dictionaries a few older ones were included.

To be able to compare the metaphorical meanings of the idioms and the literal meaning of their lexical components, I included definitions of the lexical items denoting objects in the idioms: *thorn, épine* and *nagel*. The idioms in question were mainly found in dictionary entries of these words. Regarding the definitions of the lexical components of the idioms, only those relevant to my line of reasoning are presented in this paper. More precisely, defining features that were not relevant to the meanings ‘sharp object’ and ‘body part’ were left out. When it comes to, for example, the definition of *thorn* given in *Merriam-Webster* dictionary online, I included the following features: ‘a sharp rigid process on a plant; specifically: a short, indurated, sharp-pointed, and leafless modified branch’ and ‘something that causes distress or irritation – often used in the phrase *thorn in one’s side*’. Features such as ‘woody plant’, ‘any of various sharp spinose structures on an animal’ and ‘the runic letter þ used in Old English and Middle English’ were excluded. Consequently, only the attributes relevant to the meanings ‘sharp object’ and ‘body part’ are presented in this paper.
This was followed by an analysis at a linguistic level, where the similarities among the idioms were discussed. Their lexical differences were examined individually, idiom by idiom, in terms of the concepts and attributes relevant to each idiomatic expression. Regarding the concepts discussed in this paper, a selection of attributes associated with these concepts was collected from dictionaries, *Macmillan* (2005) and the *Oxford Dictionaries* online, and also from my own experience and general knowledge about these concepts. In other words, the given attributes represent a combination of features found in dictionaries and my own general knowledge about the concepts in question.

In addition to a semantic analysis of each idiom, example instantiations were identified in order to analyse how these idiomatic expressions are used and, to some extent, if they appear in similar contexts. With the help of the search engine Google, I searched for these three expressions and chose only to look at hits involving journalistic contexts. Among these, I finally randomly selected nine example instantiations from well-known online newspapers, three for each idiom. Considering that the semantic and conceptual analysis was the main focus of this study, this number of example instantiations seemed reasonable.

After having conducted a semantic and lexical analysis, I analysed these idioms at a conceptual level in order to identify possible underlying metaphors enabling the idioms to have the same meaning. This type of analysis, in turn, involved conceptual domains, such as source and target domains, which constitute conceptual metaphors, and mappings, or conceptual correspondences, between elements within these domains. I searched on Google for variations as to the lexical make-up of these idioms, specifically examples where the idioms contained adjectives, and selected a few such example instantiations. They were used in order to linguistically illustrate some of the conceptual correspondences.
5 Presentation and analysis

At a linguistic level, the idioms chosen for this study obviously have lexical items in common. Nevertheless, different body parts are employed and one of the constituent words in the Swedish idiom denotes a different object compared to the word employed in the French and the English idiom.

Initially definitions and translations are presented for each of the idioms. Then follows an analysis of the lexical make-ups of the idioms, where their similarities are discussed. The lexical make-up of each idiom is also analysed separately, with regards to concepts and their attributes, and a few example instantiations are given in order to show how each idiom is used. Then follows a comparative discussion about the use of the three idiomatic expressions and their lexical make-ups. Finally, the last section is concerned with the metaphorical implications of these idioms. In other words, the analysis starts at the linguistic level and then proceeds to the conceptual level and the underlying cognitive structure of the idioms.

5.1 Definitions and translations

The semantic information about the idioms has been collected from various dictionaries. Some of the entries deal with individual words, i.e. one of the lexical units that constitute the idioms (thorn, épine, nagel), and others deal with an entire idiomatic expression. Judging from the lexical evidence offered by many of the dictionaries consulted, the idiomatic meaning of the idioms seems to be the same in all three languages: ‘a source of continual annoyance or trouble’ (OD). For practical reasons this study focuses on the variant a thorn in the side, and not a thorn in the flesh, because side denotes a body part whereas flesh denotes an organ that covers the whole body. Below follow some of the definitions and translations for the idioms chosen for this study.
Table 1. Definitions and translations of the idiom A thorn in the side

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>A thorn in the side</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition: idiom</td>
<td><em>A thorn in the flesh or side:</em> a constant affliction, a source of continual</td>
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<td></td>
<td>grief, trouble, or annoyance (<em>OED</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition: idiom</td>
<td><em>A thorn in someone’s side:</em> a person or thing that causes a lot of problems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>for someone (<em>Macmillan</em>, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition: thorn</td>
<td><em>Thorn:</em> a sharp rigid process on a plant; <em>specifically:</em> a short, indurated,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>sharp-pointed, and leafless modified branch [...] something that causes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>distress or irritation – often used in the phrase <em>thorn in one’s side</em> (<em>MWD</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation:</td>
<td><em>Thorn:</em> (on plant, bush) <em>épine to be a thorn in sb’s side:</em> être une épine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English - French</td>
<td>dans le pied de <em>qn</em>⁴ (<em>CED</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translation:</td>
<td><em>Thorn</em> [törn] tagg, törne, torn; <em>a thorn in the (one’s) flesh (side)</em> <em>en nagel</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English - Swedish</td>
<td><em>i ögat</em> (<em>Norstedts Stora Engelsk-Svenska Ordbok</em>, 2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows three definitions and two translations of the idiom *a thorn in the side* and/or its lexical component *thorn*. This lexical component is translated to *épine* and one example definition of the idiom is ‘a constant affliction, a source of continual grief, trouble, or annoyance’. As to the translations of *a thorn in the side*, the idioms *en nagel i ögat* and *une épine au pied/dans le pied* are used.

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⁴ Here follows a clarification of the abbreviations: *sb’s:* someone’s and *qn:* quelqu’un [someone] (my translation)
Table 2. Definitions and translations of the idiom Une épine au pied/dans le pied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Une épine au pied/dans le pied</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition: idiom</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition: épine</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Translation: épine &amp; idiom</strong></td>
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<td><strong>French - Swedish</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Translation: French - Swedish</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Translation: French - English</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows two definitions and three translations of the idiom *une épine au pied/dans le pied* and/or its lexical component *épine*. This lexical component translates to the word *thorn*, which is the English equivalent. One example definition of the idiom *une épine au pied/dans le pied* is ‘a cause for concern or anxiety’ and this idiom is translated to *a thorn in the side* and *en nagel i ögat*.

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⁵ Except for the online dictionaries www.collinsdictionary.com and www.wordreference.com, I have not been able to find the idiom *une épine au pied/dans le pied* in any modern French or English-French dictionaries. Another related metaphorical expression *enlever, tirer, ôter une épine du pied*, which literally means ‘to remove a thorn from the side’ (my translation), is listed instead. However, the idiom *une épine au pied/dans le pied* occurs in both modern Swedish-French dictionaries and modern French journalistic contexts.

⁶ [thorn/prickle on a plant → needle] (my translation)

⁷ First published 1934 but reprinted with corrections 1966.
Table 3. *Definitions and translations of the idiom* En nagel i ögat

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>En nagel i ögat</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition: nagel</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Definition: nagel</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition: nagel &amp; idiom</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Translation: Swedish - French</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Translation: Swedish - English</strong></td>
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</table>

Table 3 shows three definitions and two translations of the idiom *en nagel i ögat* and/or its lexical component *nagel*. Besides the sense ‘thin protective transparent horny covering over the end of a finger or toe’, all three definitions of the lexical item *nagel* include the sense ‘a small metal spike’. When it comes to the translations of the idiom *en nagel i ögat*, the idioms *une épine dans le pied* and *a thorn in the side* are used.

[^8]: Here follows a clarification of an abbreviation: *sms* sammansättningar [compounds] (my translation)


5.2 Comments on the definitions and translations

An interesting aspect is that the lexical items thorn and épine independently, i.e. without being components in the idioms in question, have a figurative meaning: ‘something that causes distress or irritation’. However, the Swedish lexical item nagel does not have a figurative meaning. With regard to the figurative meaning of the idioms a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied and en nagel i ögat, a large number of the monolingual and bilingual dictionaries that I have consulted offer the following definitions: ‘a constant affliction, a source of continual grief, trouble, or annoyance’, 'a person or thing that causes a lot of problems for someone' or ‘a cause for concern or anxiety’. What these definitions have in common is that all of them express a state of mental annoyance of some sort. Consequently, it seems evident that these idioms have the same idiomatic meaning.

Another indication that the idioms have the same core meaning is the fact that the English and French nouns have adjectival derivations, thorny and épineux, which also have figurative meanings relating to ‘annoyance’ and ‘difficulties’. An equivalent Swedish adjective related to the lexical item nagel does not seem to exist. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following figurative sense of thorny:

Pricking or piercing to the mind; full of points painful or wounding to the feelings; painful, distressing; harassing, vexatious, irritating.

(OED)

The French adjective épineux has the figurative sense: “qui est plein de difficultés, de désagréments”⁹ (Larousse). The aspect of something that is problematic and difficult to deal with, even pricking and painful, is conveyed by these adjectives. Similarly this aspect is conveyed by the idioms in question.

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⁹ [which is full of difficulties, of unpleasantness] (my translation)
(http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/épineux/30459?q=épineux#30374; accessed on May 20th 2014)
5.3 Analysis of the lexical make-ups of the idioms

In addition to their figurative sense, each of the idioms conveys a concrete image, which in turn stems from the literal and nonidiomatic meaning of the constituent words. As the literal meanings of a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied and en nagel i ögat differ, the same can be said of their images. To have a thorn in the side is not the same as having a thorn in the foot and neither of those is the same as having a nail in the eye, especially since the part of the body being affected differs in each case. Nonetheless, there are syntactic and semantic parallels between the idioms and some of the lexical components correspond cross-linguistically. These similarities will be presented, followed by a discussion of each idiom individually and the lexical items that differ.

The same syntactic form applies to all three idioms: indefinite noun phrase + preposition phrase, and these syntactic parallels are illustrated in Figure 1. However, these languages express the indefinite and definite form in different ways and, as Figure 1 shows, it is the Swedish definite article that performs differently compared to the others. Moreover, it is worth noting that whether the cause of annoyance or trouble is a person or a thing is not lexically represented in the present syntactic forms of these idioms. This lexical representation would require context and compositions such as X is a thorn in Y’s side\(^{10}\) or X is thorn in the side of Y\(^{11}\).

![Figure 1. The syntactic parallels between the idioms](image)

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\(^{10}\) The construction Y’s stands for different alternatives, e.g. my, your, his/her, our, your and their

\(^{11}\) This composition is presented in Section 5.3.1.
These three idioms all have one lexical item in common: a preposition with the sense of ‘in’. Ungerer and Schmid (2006: 167) state that relations like ‘in-out’ can be characterized as orientational image schemas, or mental pictures. They describe these mental pictures as:

[S]imple and basic cognitive structures derived from our bodily interaction with the world, and more specifically, our orientation in the world around us (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006: 167).

The literal sense of the preposition constituting the idioms chosen for this study is ‘within an object’ (Macmillan, 2005) and denotes a physical position. At a general linguistic level the preposition in is not the only semantic parallel between these idioms. As Figure 2 illustrates, the first NP is a “(painful) object” – THORN, ÉPINE, NAGEL - with an indefinite article and the second NP is a “body part” – SIDE, PIED, ÖGA - with a definite article or possessive pronoun.

![Diagram of semantic parallels between the idioms]

Figure 2. The semantic parallels between the idioms

In addition to the concepts that correspond to the lexical items constituting these idioms there are other concepts, i.e. mental representations, to take into consideration. The idiomatic meaning of the idioms provides two concepts ANNOYANCE and PERSON, which can be identified in all three cases. These concepts are not realised linguistically but pertinent to the figurative and idiomatic sense of the idioms: ‘a source of continual
annoyance or trouble’ (OD). In these idioms the concept ANNOYANCE corresponds to the lexical items thorn, épine and nagel but this emotion concept is obviously interchangeable with other emotion concepts such as TROUBLE or ANXIETY. An emotion concept presupposes an experiencer of the emotion and consequently the concept PERSON emerges. The concept ANNOYANCE comprises attributes like: ‘an experiencer of the emotion’, ‘a cause for the emotion’, ‘a negative emotion’, ‘a feeling of anger’ and ‘a feeling of impatience’. As far as the attributes associated with the concept PERSON are concerned, it seems sufficient to say that PERSON involves a human being, i.e. the experiencer of the emotion. Moreover, this concept indicates that we are concerned with conceptual metonymy, where a part of the body conceptually stands for the whole person. Kövecses (2010: 324) defines conceptual metonymy as “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, […], provides mental access to another conceptual entity, […], within the same conceptual domain”. In the case of the idioms chosen for this study, one entity (side, foot, eye) provides mental access to another entity (person). Kövecses (2010: 179) calls this particular metonymic variant: A PART OF A THING FOR THE WHOLE THING and explains that body parts can be used to stand for the whole person.

To sum up the similarities among the idioms chosen for this study, there are syntactic and general semantic parallels between the idioms and the components in common are a preposition with the sense of ‘in’ as well as the concepts PERSON and ANNOYANCE.

5.3.1 A thorn in the side

Besides the preposition in, this idiomatic expression contains the lexical items thorn and side. The former denotes a sharp object and the latter a body part. If we consider the concept THORN, it comprises attributes like: ‘a projection/growth on a plant or bush’, ‘sharp-pointed’, ‘woody’, ‘thin’, ‘small’ and ‘ability to afflict pain to the body of animate beings’. The concept SIDE, denoting parts of the body, comprises attributes such as: ‘left or right side of the body’, ‘a large area of the body from head to feet’ and ‘flesh and skin’. Considering these attributes, this part of the body is not only large but also not clearly delineated. Interestingly enough, a side of the body includes numerous large body parts such as the neck, arm, leg and hip. In the light of these facts, having a thorn
in the side of the body suggest that any of these body parts mentioned above could be the one being directly affected.

One example definition of the idiom *a thorn in the side* is ‘a nagging problem that persists and is hard to get rid of’\(^ {12}\). This example definition, which is rather metaphorical, illustrates the connection between the figurative meaning of the idiom and the literal meanings of the constituent words. Having a thorn in the side of the body signifies not only physical pain infliction but also that some amount of effort may be required before a removal of the thorn is achieved.

In order to show how this idiom is used figuratively a couple of example instantiations will be given. These examples are headlines in online articles and address different problematic issues in contemporary political contexts.

Shadow minister for older people is a 'thorn in the side' of the coalition\(^ {13}\) *(The Guardian)*

Absentee teachers are a thorn in our side\(^ {14}\) *(Mail & Guardian)*

Why NATO is such a thorn in Russia's side\(^ {15}\) *(CNN)*

As previously mentioned, there is a bit of variation as to the form of this idiom. Although frozen form is often mentioned as a criterion, there can be variation as to the form of an idiom (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 20). In the first example above, the idiom has the form *X is thorn in the side of Y*, where *Y* equals *the coalition*. In the other two examples, the idiom has the form *X is a thorn in Y's side*, where *Y* equals *our* and *Russia*. Hence, the experiencer does not have to be an embodied person. *Y* can also refer to a more abstract type of organization that consists of people such as a political party, government, country, company, organization, fund etc. In these examples *X* equals *shadow minister for older people, absentee teachers* and *NATO*. The cause of annoyance is a person, or a group of people, in the first two examples, whereas it is an organization in the third example.

\(^{12}\)http://www.idiomquest.com/learn/idiom/thorn-in-your-side; accessed on April 12th 2014


\(^{14}\)http://mg.co.za/article/2013-03-10-absentee-teachers-are-a-thorn-in-our-side; accessed on May 20th 2014

5.3.2 Une épine au pied/dans le pied (‘a thorn in the foot’)

The only concept that differs from the ones constituting the English idiom is the body part FOOT. This concept comprises attributes such as: ‘a body part’, ‘the lower extremity of the leg’, ‘includes the heel and toes’ and ‘you stand and move around on it’. Having a thorn in the foot is painful and also affects the ability to move.

The idiomatic expression une épine au pied/dans le pied does not seem to appear in modern French dictionaries. According to some dictionaries the expression is dated and used in literary language. In modern dictionaries another metaphorical expression tirer, enlever, ôter à qqn une épine du pied is listed, which means ‘to get someone out of a spot’ or ‘to get rid of a difficulty or cause for concern’ (my translation). However, for a thorn to be removed from the foot, this incontestably preconditions that there is a thorn in the foot to begin with.

Furthermore, the idiom une épine au pied/dans le pied can be found in contemporary journalistic contexts where it is used figuratively. In common with the example instantiations of the English idiom, the following examples are headlines in online articles and address different problematic issues in contemporary political contexts.

Pourquoi l’intégration est la nouvelle épine dans le pied du gouvernement\(^\text{17}\)  
\((\text{Francetv info})\)

L’Ukraine, nouvelle épine dans le pied du FMI\(^\text{18}\)  
\((\text{Courrier international})\)

Une épine en moins dans le pied d’Amina\(^\text{19}\)  
\((\text{Libération})\)

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\(^{16}\) « Épine au pied « sujet d’inquiétude », s’est employé seul au XVIe s. ». [Épine au pied was used alone in the 16th century] (my translation) (Dictionnaire des expressions et locutions, 1993).

« Le sens figuré de « difficulté » (av. 1475) […] est aujourd’hui d’emploi littéraire » [The figurative sense « difficulty » is nowadays used in literary language] (my translation) (Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, 1992)

\(^{17}\) [Why integration is the new thorn in the side of the government] (my translation)  

\(^{18}\) [Ukraine, a new thorn in the side of the IMF] (my translation)  

\(^{19}\) [One less thorn in Amina’s side] (my translation)  
In the first two examples, the cause of annoyance is either integration or a country: l’intégration and L’Ukraine, whereas it is not lexicalized in the third example. A wider context is required in order to determine the cause of annoyance in this example. In the first two examples both the cause of annoyance and the experiencer are abstract organizations or concepts of some kind. The experiencer is either le gouvernement (‘the government’), le FMI (‘the IMF’) or Amina. Only in the last example is the experiencer an embodied person. As to the example with l’intégration (‘integration’), the cause of annoyance is not even an organisation consisting of people but in fact an abstract concept or idea. The last example shows that additional lexical items can appear as components in the idiom une épine au pied/dans le pied: une épine en moins dans le pied de X. Therefore the form of this idiom is not entirely fixed.

5.3.3  En nagel i ögat (’a nail in the eye’)

In contrast to the English and the French idiom, the sharp-pointed object employed in the Swedish idiom is a nail. This idiom employs the lexical item nagel and, similar to its English counterpart nail, nagel has two senses that are relevant with regards to the idiom en nagel i ögat. One denotes ‘nails that grow over the ends of our fingers and toes’ and the other denotes ‘a small metal spike’. However, there is another Swedish word, spik, which denotes the latter sense of nagel. Since spik is the conventionalized word to express the sense ‘a small metal spike’, there is reason to assume that this sense of the word nagel is not considered common knowledge in the Swedish speech community. Moreover, the Swedish word nagel in the sense ‘a piece of metal’ nowadays seems to belong to language for special purposes (Norstedts Svenska Ordbok + Uppslagsbok, 1999). This is in contrast to the English word nail, where both senses are to be considered common knowledge in the English speech community. However, in order to make this study as thorough as possible, both senses of the word nagel will be considered.

The concept NAIL in the sense ‘finger-, or toenail’ comprises attributes such as: ‘part that grows over the ends of your fingers and toes’, ‘somewhat sharp-pointed’, ‘horny covering’ and ‘thin, small and hard’. If we then look at the concept NAIL in the sense ‘metal object’, it comprises attributes like: ‘sharp-pointed’, ‘thin, small and hard’, ‘metallic material’ and ‘joins things together and serves as a hook’. Whether the lexical component in the Swedish idiom denotes a metal spike or a nail that grows over a finger
or toe, they share significant attributes such as hard and sharp-pointed objects. Regardless of which of these objects should be stuck in the eye of a living creature, it would be painful.

The expression *the eye of a living creature* brings us to the body part and concept *EYE*, which is employed in the Swedish idiom. This concept comprises attributes such as: ‘a body part’, ‘the visual organ’, ‘situated in the face’ and ‘globe-shaped’. This body part is also an organ, indispensable for the ability to see. In addition to unpleasantness and pain infliction, having a thorn or nail in the eye would result in reduced or defective visibility. In contrast to the French and the English idiom, getting a nail in the eye is more far-fetched than getting a thorn in the foot or in the side. Whereas we can accidentally get a thorn in the side or in the foot, to get a nail in the eye is probably less accidental and most likely demands an outer agent, i.e. a person who inflicts damage to another person’s eye. Moreover, this applies regardless if the object involved is a fingernail or a small metal spike. Given these circumstances, the idiom *en nagel i ögat* seems less transparent than its French and its English counterpart. A further piece of evidence that this idiom is less transparent than the other two is the existence of the incorrect form: *en vagel i ögat*, which literally means ‘a sty in the eye’ (my translation). An inflamed swelling on the eyelid is painful and annoying and is more likely to have in the eye than a sharp-pointed object. Therefore the meaning of this form of the idiom, although incorrect, is more transparent than the correct form *en nagel i ögat*.

Like the example instantiations of the French and the English idiom, the following examples show the figurative use of *en nagel i ögat* and are headlines in online articles that address different problematic issues in contemporary political contexts.

Even though newspaper advertisements continued to be a thorn in the side of socialistic newspaper editors most of them realised that these were essential for financing the publication.20 (my translation)

(Svenska Dagbladet)

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20 ”Även om tidningsannonser fortsatte att vara en nagel i ögat på socialistiska tidningsredaktörer insåg de flesta att de var nödvändiga för att finansiera utgivningen.” (http://www.svd.se/kultur/understrecket/reklamen-satte-arbetarpressen-i-en-ravsax_389791.svd; accessed on May 5th 2014)
Like the thorn in the side that Pérez Becerra was, the Colombian government decided to orchestrate an arrest when he was in Venezuela.\textsuperscript{21} (my translation) 

\textit{(Värmlands Folkblad)}

A thorn in Vladimir Putin’s side\textsuperscript{22} (my translation) 

\textit{(Dagens Nyheter)}

These examples show the following composition: \textit{(vara) en nagel i ögat på Y}, which literally means (‘to be a nail in the eye of Y’). In the first example the cause of annoyance is newspaper advertisements and in the second example it is a person. Interestingly enough, newspaper advertisements are neither people nor organizations consisting of people but pieces of written text. As far as the third example is concerned the cause of annoyance is not lexicalized and thus not possible to determine without a wider context. In the first example there are several experiencers and these are embodied people, more specifically newspaper editors. Also in the third example the experiencer is an embodied person, whereas it is an abstract organization in the second example. In this case the organization is a government.

\textbf{5.3.4 Comparative analysis of the idioms}

Judging from the linguistic evidence offered by the example instantiations that are chosen for this study, all three idioms appear in similar contexts and are used similarly. The experiencer can either be an embodied person/people or an abstract organization of some kind, which consists of people. When it comes to the cause of the annoyance, it can either be a person/people, an abstract organization of some kind or pieces of written text. As far as their compositions are concerned, a few variations have been observed: \textit{X is a thorn in Y’s side} and \textit{X is thorn in the side of Y}, as well as, \textit{X est une épine au pied de Y} and \textit{X est une épine dans le pied de Y}. The examples containing the Swedish idiom show the following composition: \textit{vara en nagel i ögat på Y}. Finally, an interesting

\textsuperscript{21} “Som den nagel i ögat Pérez Becerra var, bestämde sig så den colombianska regeringen för att orkestrera ett gripande när han befann sig i Venezuela.” (http://www.vf.se/asikter/debatt/ett-fall-som-maste-uppmarksammas; accessed on May 5th 2014)

\textsuperscript{22} “En nagel i ögat på Vladimir Putin” (http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/en-nagel-i-ogat-pa-vladimir-putin/; accessed on May 5th 2014)
observation is that the form of the French idiom is not entirely fixed since it can have additional lexical components.

Each of the idioms *a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied* and *en nagel i ögat* conveys a concrete image and these differ mainly due to the fact that they employ different body parts. Both a thorn and a nail, regardless if the material is horny or metallic, inflict pain to the body. Which body part is affected implicates slightly different effects, a diminished ability to move properly or to see clearly. Consequently, it can be assumed that having a nail in the eye is slightly more disturbing, let alone more dangerous, than having a thorn in the foot or in the side. These features are actually conventional knowledge that most people have about concrete concepts such as THORN, NAIL, SIDE, FOOT and EYE.

In the case of the employed body parts, a side of the body includes the neck and the arm, as well as the leg and the hip. A foot and an eye, in their turn, obviously include small body parts such as heel and toes and eyelid, respectively. However, unlike a foot or an eye, the side of the body includes several larger body parts and due to this fact the exact position of the thorn is undetermined. The concept SIDE is less clearly delineated, and therefore more generic, than the concepts FOOT and EYE. As a result, the concrete image conveyed by the literal and nonidiomatic meaning of the English idiom is less precise than the concrete images conveyed by the French and the Swedish idiom. Regarding *en nagel i ögat*, since having a nail in the eye is rather far-fetched and the incorrect form *en vagel i ögat* exists, the Swedish idiom is less transparent than the French and the English idiom. Conventional knowledge is probably the reason for the existence of the incorrect form. That is, the likelihood of having a sty in the eye is higher than having a nail in the eye.

How each of the idioms, respectively, conveys its literal and concrete meaning has been discussed. Different body parts are employed in each idiom and the Swedish idiom employs a lexical item denoting a different sharp-pointed object compared to the French and the English idiom. Denoting a sharp-pointed object, which inflicts pain to the body, is the aspect that the idioms have in common in terms of concrete images. Subsequently, how these different metaphorical images are able to convey the same meaning is due to an underlying structure and this is where the cognitive tool conceptual metaphor comes in.
5.4 Analysis of the conceptual structure of the idioms

Even though the nonidiomatic meanings and concrete images differ, the idioms still convey the same idiomatic and figurative meaning: ‘a source of continual annoyance or trouble’ (OD). As previously discussed, the emotion concept ANNOYANCE comprises attributes such as ‘negative emotion’ and ‘slightly angry feeling’. Dictionaries define this emotion concept by using another emotion concept, in this case ANGER. Kövecses (2010: 212) suggests that the metaphorical expression a pain in the neck is motivated by the conceptual metaphor THE CAUSE OF ANGER IS PHYSICAL ANNOYANCE. This metaphorical expression, a pain in the neck, has the following figurative sense: ‘an annoying or tedious person or thing’ (OD), whereas the idiom a thorn in the flesh or side is defined in the following way: ‘a source of continual annoyance or trouble’ (OD).

Aside from the aspect of continuity, it seems as if a pain in the neck is near-synonymous to a thorn in the side. Although Kövecses (2010) suggests PHYSICAL ANNOYANCE as the source domain, it can be assumed that this conceptual domain more specifically signifies physical pain when it comes to both of these metaphorical expressions. Physical pain is a sort of physical annoyance and considering the fact that sharp-pointed objects are pain afflicting, I would claim that PHYSICAL PAIN is more to the point in terms of source concept than PHYSICAL ANNOYANCE. However, in contrast to the idioms chosen for this study, the concept of pain is concretely realised as a lexical item in the idiom a pain in the neck.

In the case of a thorn in the side, it seems more accurate that the emotion being conveyed is mental annoyance and not anger since annoyance only is a slight form of anger. Kövecses (2010: 174-175) characterizes conceptual metaphor as the similarity between two concepts, or conceptual domains, where one of them typically is more concrete than the other. In agreement with his line of reasoning, the cause of mental annoyance is similar to physical annoyance, or more precisely, physical pain. This line of reasoning results in the conceptual metaphor THE CAUSE OF MENTAL ANNOYANCE IS PHYSICAL PAIN, where the source domain PHYSICAL PAIN is more concrete than the target domain THE CAUSE OF MENTAL ANNOYANCE.

A constituent conceptual element of any emotion concept is that there is a cause of emotion, whatever the cause may be. If this element is left implicit, we find a slightly modified conceptualization and that is mental annoyance understood in terms of
physical pain, which gives rise to the conceptual metaphor MENTAL ANNOYANCE IS PHYSICAL PAIN. Consequently, the metaphorical linguistic expressions a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied and en nagel i ögat are concrete realizations of the conceptual metaphor MENTAL ANNOYANCE IS PHYSICAL PAIN.

Kövecses (2010: 7) describes a set of mappings as a set of systematic conceptual correspondences. In the case of the idioms chosen for this study, this means that constituent conceptual elements of the source domain PHYSICAL PAIN correspond to constituent conceptual elements of the target domain MENTAL ANNOYANCE. Mappings typically go from the more concrete domain to the more abstract domain, in this case PHYSICAL PAIN maps onto MENTAL ANNOYANCE. A set of systematic correspondences, or mappings, between the source PHYSICAL PAIN and the target MENTAL ANNOYANCE could be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: PHYSICAL PAIN</th>
<th>Target: MENTAL ANNOYANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The cause of physical pain</td>
<td>the cause of mental annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The object causing physical pain</td>
<td>the situation or thing causing the annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The state of physical pain affliction</td>
<td>the state of mental annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The physical injury</td>
<td>the mental impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The degree of pain</td>
<td>the degree of annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The duration of pain</td>
<td>the duration of mental annoyance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A pain not easily relieved</td>
<td>an annoyance or problem difficult to get rid of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relief of the pain</td>
<td>the end of the annoyance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This set of mappings shows that the concrete source domain PHYSICAL PAIN helps structure the more abstract target domain MENTAL ANNOYANCE. It is important to point out that the target-source order of the conceptual metaphor is reversed into source-target in terms of the presentation of the correspondences. This convention is used to highlight that understanding generally “goes from the more concrete to the more abstract concept”, in line with Kövecses’ argument (2010: 9). The cause of mental annoyance can be understood as the cause of physical pain, or, the situation or thing causing the annoyance can be understood as the object causing physical pain, and so forth.
According to Kövecses (2010: 121) only a small number of elements of the source are mapped onto the target concept. When rich additional knowledge about the source is carried over to the target Kövecses calls it “metaphorical entailment”. If we look more closely at the last four mappings, additional knowledge is mapped from source to target concept and the figurative sense of the three idioms ‘a source of continual annoyance or trouble’ therefore becomes richer. Given that we have knowledge about the concrete world and its objects and their effects, at least to some extent, I would like to claim that these conceptual correspondences are the results of metaphorical conceptualization combined with conventional knowledge about the human body and sharp-pointed objects. Moreover, all of the conceptual correspondences illustrated above can be explained and understood as more precise conceptual metaphors such as the CONTINUAL DURATION OF MENTAL ANNOYANCE IS THE CONTINUAL DURATION OF PHYSICAL PAIN or THE END OF ANNOYANCE IS THE RELIEF OF THE PAIN.

The conceptual correspondence ‘the end of the annoyance is the relief of the pain’ is concretely realised as the conventionalized French idiomatic expression: enlever, tirer, ôter une épine du pied à quelqu’un, which idiomatically means ‘to get sb out of a spot’ (Larousse). This idiom is previously mentioned in the section concerning une épine au pied/dans le pied and has the literal meaning ‘to remove a thorn from sb’s foot’ (my translation). The English and Swedish languages, on the other hand, do not seem to have any conventionalized idiomatic expressions that are equivalent to the French expression.

With regard to the concrete images of the linguistic expressions chosen for this study, two of the conceptual correspondences presented above could be made even more concrete:

An object not easily removed → an annoyance or problem difficult to get rid of
The removal of the object → the end of the annoyance

By conceptualizing in terms of a physical object instead of pain ‘an annoyance or problem difficult to get rid of’ could be understood as ‘an object not easily removed’ and, likewise, ‘the end of the annoyance’ could be understood as ‘the removal of the object’. These mappings are linguistically realised in the following examples:
The last few years Desmond Tutu has been a stubborn thorn in the side of the South African political elite\textsuperscript{23} (my translation)

\textit{(Dagens Nyheter)}

Brevets: Facebook veut retirer de son pied l’épine Yahoo\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{(ITespresso.fr)}

High price to remove a thorn in the side\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{(The Australian)}

In the first example, which is a Swedish example translated to English, it is the adjective \textit{stubborn} that specifies that the annoyance or problem is difficult to get rid of. A stubborn sharp-pointed object equals an object that is not easily removed. The other two examples provide linguistic evidence for the conceptualization: ‘the end of the annoyance is the removal of the object’. The French example conveys that one organization wants to get rid of the annoyance or problem caused by another organization and once the thorn is removed the state of annoyance ends. The metaphorical expression \textit{remove a thorn in the side}, which is illustrated in the third example, is in fact an English equivalent to the French idiomatic expression \textit{enlever, (re)tirer, ôter une épine du pied à quelqu’un}. However, judging from the lexical evidence offered by the dictionaries consulted, this type of expression is not a conventionalized English idiomatic expression. Expressions such as \textit{remove a thorn in the side or remove a thorn from the side} seem to be rarely mentioned in dictionaries but some example instantiations can be found on Google. As far as the Swedish idiom is concerned, expressions equivalent to \textit{enlever, (re)tirer, ôter une épine du pied à quelqu’un} and \textit{remove a thorn in the side/from the side} have not been found either on Google or in any of the dictionaries consulted.

\textsuperscript{23} “Desmond Tutu har varit en envis nagel i ögat på Sydafrikas politiska elit de senaste åren” (http://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/tutu-en-nagel-i-ogat-pa-anc/; accessed on June 9\textsuperscript{th} 2014)

\textsuperscript{24} [Patents: Facebook wants to remove the thorn Yahoo from its foot] (my translation) (http://www.itespresso.fr/brevets-facebook-veut-retirer-de-son-pied-lepine-yahoo-52206.html; accessed on July 5\textsuperscript{th} 2014)

\textsuperscript{25} (http://m.theaustralian.com.au/business/opinion/high-price-to-remove-a-thorn-in-the-side/story-fng7vglp-1226965637033; accessed on July 5\textsuperscript{th} 2014)
Furthermore, we think of ‘the degree of physical pain’ in terms of ‘the degree of mental annoyance’ and this conceptual correspondence is linguistically realised in the following example instantiations:

Eric Schneiderman is a big thorn in Bank of America’s side.26

(Forbes)

La cour des comptes, une grosse épine au pied de Martelly27

(Le Nouvelliste)

Downloading online is a big thorn in the side of the global music industry28 (my translation)

(Aftonbladet)

All three examples contain an adjective denoting the size of the sharp-pointed object: big thorn and grosse épine. In all three languages this adjective increases the specific meaning of the idioms. We conceptualize the abstract in terms of the concrete. More precisely, there are different degrees of pain and in the same way there are different degrees of mental annoyance.

Kövecses (2010: 238) claims that it is the conceptual correspondences particular to an idiom that provide its more precise meaning. In agreement with his line of reasoning I would say that conventional knowledge also helps specify the meaning of these versions of the idioms. More specifically, the bigger the sharp-pointed object is the more pain afflicting it is and the more force is needed to remove it from the body and, likewise, the bigger the problem is the more annoying it is and the more difficult it is to get rid of.


27 [The Court of Auditors, a big thorn in Martelly’s side] (my translation)


28 “För musikbranschen i hela världen är nedladdningen på internet en stor nagel i ögat”

(http://www.aftonbladet.se/pryl/article10444715.ab; accessed on July 5th 2014)
6 Summary and conclusions

This study is concerned with how different metaphorical images are used to convey the same meaning and what it is in the semantics of the lexical items that enables the idioms to convey the same meaning. In order to answer these questions the analysis has been conducted at both a linguistic and a conceptual level.

At the linguistic level the idioms, *a thorn in the side, une épine au pied/dans le pied* and *en nagel i ögat*, have different lexical compositions and metaphorical images. Having a nail in the eye is not the same as having a thorn in the side or in the foot. Different parts of the body and different abilities are affected, the ability to move and the ability to see properly in the Swedish case. Nevertheless, all three images involve the aspect of physical pain. Although these idioms employ different lexical items, they all have in common that the employed objects and body parts denote sharp-pointed objects and, regardless of which body part, pain is afflicted to some part of the body.

Despite having different lexical compositions, these idioms are capable of conveying the same idiomatic and metaphorical meaning and the reason why can be found at the conceptual level. On the basis of the findings illustrated in the present paper it seems likely to conclude that the idioms have an underlying conceptual metaphor, MENTAL ANNOYANCE IS PHYSICAL PAIN. More precisely, these idioms are motivated by the same conceptual metaphor and therefore they are capable of conveying the same idiomatic meaning. However, since having a nail in the eye is rather far-fetched and an incorrect form of the Swedish idiom exists in consequence, there is every reason to assume that the Swedish idiom is less transparent than its French and its English counterpart. Nevertheless, since all three idioms convey the same idiomatic meaning and this meaning is conceptually motivated, all three idioms become transparent to some extent.

Considering the knowledge that we have regarding concrete concepts such as sharp-pointed objects and body parts, as previously claimed in the analysis, there is reason to assume that the meaning of the idioms in the present study is motivated in multiple ways. In addition to conceptual metaphor, conventional knowledge contributes to the motivation of these idioms and links the literal meaning of the constituent words to the idiomatic meaning of these words collectively. As a language teacher I see the advantages of providing learners of foreign languages with cognitive motivation for
idioms. In line with Kövecses thoughts, I believe that drawing attention to the fact that
the meaning of many idioms can be conceptually motivated, and giving examples of
such conceptualizations, will facilitate language learners’ understanding and use of
idiomatic expressions.

A suggestion for further research could be to analyse these idioms in terms of their
history and further examine their contextual use, as well as to compare these idioms to
related metaphorical linguistic expressions.
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