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**The Dream-Language of Idioms: Psychoanalytic Reflections on
Symphony in Slang**

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Prepared by ChatGPT Model o3.

Hypothesis:

Idiomatic expressions used habitually by patients in psychoanalytic sessions are not merely figures of speech, but can function as *symptomatic expressions*—manifestations of the unconscious attempting to communicate with the therapist. These idioms, often repeated unconsciously, may carry symbolic weight or latent imagery connected to the patient's internal conflicts, emotional states, or personal history. The therapist's task is not to decode these idioms mechanically or apply rigid interpretations, but rather to treat them as part of a *symbolic reservoir*—a living, culturally shaped language through which the unconscious might speak. Deep familiarity with idiomatic language enables the therapist to listen more sensitively and respond more meaningfully in the context of each unique analytic relationship. At the same time dreams may represent phantastic imaging as literal idioms.

Article Objective:

To explore this hypothesis in a long-form essay that blends academic rigor with clinical insight, using a tone that reflects my personal style—conversational yet precise, intuitive yet grounded in theory.

Content Guidelines:

- Draw selectively on psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Freud, Ferenczi), especially as it relates to dreams, primary process thinking, symbolic language, and the therapeutic encounter.
- Use the 1951 cartoon *Symphony in Slang* as a central metaphor to illustrate how idiomatic expressions may be visualized or internalized literally by the unconscious.
- Focus on idioms in English and Mexican Spanish, offering examples that are culturally resonant.
- Include endolinguistic analysis of selected idioms when relevant, particularly in terms of binary/ternary consonantal codes and archetypal fields of meaning.
- No images are required at this stage; mark suggested image placements where appropriate.
- Emphasize the clinical utility of recognizing idioms as symbolic fragments that may inform therapeutic interpretation *in context*.

Process

After the initial response from the model o3 I selected the main parts and reviewed each paragraph. If something was missing or something that needed more information I added it personally. Some concepts, words or phrases were edited across the document to reflect the core hypotheses and ideas. Several paragraphs were removed. If the content or context needed more explanation then more paragraphs were added.

The Dream-Language of Idioms: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Symphony in Slang

Idioms as Indirect Communications from the Unconscious

In everyday speech, we often rely on idioms – those colorful phrases like “carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders” or “swallowing my pride.” Traditionally, idioms are viewed as cultural tropes or figurative language, not to be taken literally.

However, in the psychoanalytic consulting room (setting), therapists sometimes notice that the idioms a patient habitually uses can carry an uncanny resonance with the patient’s internal conflicts or emotions.

This raises an intriguing hypothesis: perhaps idioms aren’t just figures of speech, but symptomatic expressions – indirect communications from the unconscious, revealing themselves through the language of everyday metaphor. In other words, what if a person’s choice of idioms is not random, but serves as a clue to their unspoken feelings or latent psychological themes?

The idea that language can betray hidden meanings is not new to psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud famously explored how unconscious thoughts slip into our speech via jokes, slips of the tongue, and dream imagery in his famous *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens*. Later, Jacques Lacan would encapsulate this view by stating that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” composed of “chains of repressed signifiers” that follow their own rules of metaphor and metonymy.

Idioms themselves are ready-made metaphors and metonyms. We learn them from our culture, but the unconscious may seize upon them as a vehicle to express itself. A patient who repeatedly says she feels “stuck in a rut,” for example, might unknowingly be painting a picture of her emotional reality – feeling trapped, unable to move forward – in a way that is richly symbolic if taken literally. This essay

explores the psychoanalytic perspective that habitual idioms can function much like dream symbols or symptoms, communicating underlying psychic truths in a coded, roundabout way.

Freud's Primary Process and the Literal Language of Dreams

Freud's model of the mind offers a foundation for understanding how idiomatic language might carry unconscious meaning. In Freudian theory, the primary process is the mode of thinking of the unconscious mind. Primary process thinking is not logical or linear; it is associative, image-driven, and often literal in its representations. The literal representation is key as the censorship provided by the individual wouldn't be taken in that way thus function as the perfect cover.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud describes how the "dream-work" operates via mechanisms like condensation and displacement to disguise latent (hidden) thoughts as manifest (visible) content.

Abstract thoughts or repressed wishes get translated into concrete images or linguistic twists. Notably, Freud observed that words themselves can undergo this process: "Generally speaking, words are often treated in dreams as things, and therefore undergo the same combinations as the ideas of things," he wrote. The result can be "comical and bizarre" combinations – essentially, puns and literal enactments of language in visual form .

This aspect of dream formation is strikingly similar to what happens with idioms. An idiom is a phrase where the literal meaning (e.g. "raining cats and dogs") is not the intended meaning ("raining very heavily"). In a dream or unconscious fantasy, however, the mind might take that literal image and run with it. Freud documented cases where a play on words revealed the hidden kernel of a dream-thought.

For instance, a patient's dream about traveling "to Italy" (Gehen nach Italien in German) was interpreted as a veiled wish concerning the "genitals" (Genitalien), exploiting the phonetic overlap between Italien and Genitalien. Here the unconscious seized on a linguistic coincidence to express a taboo idea indirectly. This is reminiscent of how a person might unconsciously choose an idiomatic phrase that sounds like or embodies an emotional truth. The idiom's double meaning – the colloquial sense and the literal imagery – makes it an ideal vessel for condensation. Just as a dream image can condense multiple ideas, an idiom carries an obvious meaning alongside a latent symbolic one.

One overlooked linguistic dimension in Freud's *Little Hans* case lies in the child's dream involving a giraffe. In the dream, Hans describes a "big giraffe" and a "crumpled giraffe," a scenario Freud famously interprets through the lens of the Oedipus complex. Yet no mention is made of the child's real surname: **Herbert**

Graf. Phonetically, *Graf* and *Giraffe* (*Giraffe* in German) bear a noticeable resemblance. It is entirely plausible that the child was engaging in an early form of **language play or condensation**, unconsciously associating the giraffe with himself through a punning identification. Hans might not simply have dreamed of a giraffe, but may have dreamed *himself as* the giraffe — the “Graf-Giraffe” code G-R-F — symbolically inserting himself into a scene of competition and rivalry. This would resonate with Freud’s own observation elsewhere that in dreams, *words are often treated as things*, and names can be reworked through **sound similarity** and **substitution**. If so, this moment provides an elegant example of how unconscious processes operate through the material of language itself — not just via imagery or content, but via **phonetic and nominal structure**.

Freud’s concept of displacement is also relevant. Displacement in dreams involves a shift of emphasis: something seemingly trivial in the manifest content actually represents something significant that’s kept out of awareness. An idiom, by packaging a strong feeling into a familiar saying, can serve as a displacement. For example, rather than directly saying “I’m deeply anxious and my chest tightens when I think about this,” a patient might chuckle and say “Ha, I got cold feet.” The idiom “getting cold feet” (meaning to lose courage) might be a socially accepted, minimal way to express reluctance — but metaphorically it points to a bodily reaction of fear. In psychoanalytic terms, the affect (emotion) has been displaced onto an image of “cold feet.”

If we take that image literally for a moment, we see a picture of circulation cut off, of life’s warmth retreating — a possible somatic mirror of terror. The patient may not consciously intend this imagery, yet the idiom provides a kind of camouflage for it. In therapy, when we gently attend to such phrases, we often discover they resonate uncannily with the client’s deeper story.

Ferenczi: Every Tongue Has Its Own Dream-Language

While Freud laid the groundwork with dream analysis, Sándor Ferenczi — one of Freud’s close colleagues and an innovative psychoanalyst — took special interest in language itself as a medium of the unconscious. Ferenczi observed that the language we speak shapes how our unconscious expresses itself. In fact, Freud credits Ferenczi for the remark that “every tongue has its own dream-language”. We usually cannot translate a dream wholesale into another language without losing something essential, because the particular words and idioms of our native tongue carry unique associations.

This implies that each language has a repertoire of symbols — a dream-code — imbued with unconscious meaning for its speakers. The unconscious mind will make use of the materials at hand, which include the phrases, sayings, and wordplays endemic to one’s mother tongue.

Ferenczi went further in considering the origins and function of linguistic symbols. He “defends the mimesis between words and things,” meaning he believed there is an inherent imitative or symbolic link between a word and the object or idea it represents.

In an almost poetic view, Ferenczi spoke of the sensitive, magical experience of words – the notion that words themselves carry emotional weight and a kind of enchantment. From this perspective, when a patient speaks in vivid idioms or even in seemingly nonsensical word combinations, it is not simply a sign of deficit or confusion.

Instead of dismissing literal or bizarre speech as “word salad,” Ferenczi encourages us to view it constructively: as potential clues to the person’s internal world. The therapist’s task is to listen for the symbolic resonance, much as one might listen to a dream. An idiom or an odd phrase that emerges in a session could be the unconscious speaking in its mother tongue, so to speak, using the ready-made imagery of that language’s culture.

For example, if a Hungarian patient uses a Hungarian proverb in a key moment, or a Mexican patient uses a Mexican Spanish saying while describing their feelings, Ferenczi’s insight prompts us to take note. There may be layers of meaning in that proverb – emotional connotations or homophones – that precisely fit the patient’s unconscious narrative.

Ferenczi’s idea that each language has its own “dream vocabulary” means that the symbols in our dreams (or symptoms) often draw from the idioms, puns, and stories native to our culture. The patient and therapist effectively meet in the between-the-lines space of language, where healing might mean finding just the right words for previously unformulated experiences.

An often-overlooked dimension of this phenomenon appears in bilingual or polyglot individuals—or in anyone regularly exposed to more than one language. In such cases, idioms and expressions may blend, shift, or appear in dreams with altered form or hybrid structure. These mixed expressions can serve to *mask* or *transpose* latent content, making it harder to detect but no less meaningful. The unconscious may exploit linguistic ambiguity, switching between tongues as a way of both revealing and concealing. For the therapist, this requires a double sensitivity: not only to the patient’s chosen language, but to the symbolic possibilities that emerge *across* languages.

Seeing Slang Literally: Symphony in Slang as a Metaphor

An amusing illustration of how literal and symbolic meanings can diverge is Tex Avery’s 1951 cartoon *Symphony in Slang*. In this short film, a hip young man arrives at the Pearly Gates and recounts the story of his life entirely in contemporary

slang and idioms. Saint Peter and Noah Webster (keeper of the dictionary) stand by, utterly baffled by the phrases.

As the man speaks, the cartoon shows sight gags of the literal interpretation of each idiom. In one scene it's "raining cats and dogs," and sure enough, the animation depicts felines and canines pouring down from the sky.

In another, the narrator says "I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth," and we see a baby with an actual giant spoon in his mouth. Each turn of phrase – "I grew up overnight," "I was short on cash," "she ate like a horse," "the cat had her tongue," and so on – spawns a literal-minded visual joke. (If this were an illustrated text, here one might insert a still image from *Symphony in Slang* depicting, for example, the idiom "raining cats and dogs" as cats and dogs falling from the sky.)

The charm of *Symphony in Slang* lies in how it externalizes metaphor – making the hidden image explicit. What makes us laugh is precisely the absurdity of taking figurative language at face value. Yet, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, this is very much what the unconscious does. The "dream-work," as Freud described, takes language at face value in order to circumvent the censorship of our rational mind.

The cartoon's hilariously literal visuals are akin to dream imagery or the bizarre symptoms seen in neurosis: they don't make sense to the logical mind, but they do make a kind of symbolic sense once we get the idiom behind them. In a nightmare, if someone feels overwhelmed, the unconscious might not present an abstract algebraic equation for overwhelm – it might show a person being buried under a pile of work (a literal image for "buried in work").

In a psychosomatic symptom, a person who "cannot stomach" a rejection might literally develop a sour stomach or nausea. These are the psyche's symphonies in slang: idiomatic expressions transposed into the language of dreams, images, and bodily feelings.

Using *Symphony in Slang* as a metaphor in our context, we can imagine the therapist and patient somewhat like Saint Peter and Noah Webster at the gates – puzzled at first by the patient's idiomatic expressions, but gradually learning to "decode" them. The film actually ends with Noah Webster desperately flipping through his famous dictionary, unable to find these slang terms – he has to learn anew from the protagonist.

Similarly, therapists often find that standard textbook interpretations don't neatly apply; each patient's symbolic idiom is personal and alive. The cartoon reminds us to stay curious about the images lurking in everyday speech. Where the conscious mind hears "just a figure of speech," the unconscious might be showing a whole internal drama.

The task is to appreciate both levels: the communicated meaning and the imagery. In therapy, humor and metaphor can be powerful allies. Sometimes, joining a patient in a bit of playful literalism – “It sounds like you really have the world on your shoulders every day; no wonder your neck is stiff!” – can open up a conversation about stress that a more direct question might not reach. The cartoon’s exaggerated literalness underscores how rich in imagery even the most casual utterances can be.

Idioms in English and Mexican Spanish: Shared Symbols and Cultural Nuances

Idioms are deeply tied to culture, and comparing languages can highlight both universal themes and unique local flavor. English and Mexican Spanish offer a fascinating contrast. Both languages, for instance, use body parts and visceral images to convey emotion.

In English, one might say “I have butterflies in my stomach” to describe nervous excitement; in Spanish, a comparable expression is “tengo un nudo en la garganta” (“I have a knot in my throat”) to describe holding back tears or emotions. The specific imagery differs – butterflies fluttering vs. a tied knot – yet both capture a physical sensation of an emotional state.

The heart, a classic symbol of love and sorrow, appears in both languages’ idioms. An English speaker’s “heartbroken” is not far from a Spanish speaker’s “tener el corazón roto” (to have the heart broken). Likewise, where English encourages one to “follow your heart,” Spanish might say “hazle caso a tu corazón” (pay heed to your heart). These parallels suggest an archetypal substratum: across cultures the heart symbolizes the emotional core, so it naturally finds its way into common expressions of feeling.

On the other hand, some idioms are uniquely local, and their literal images reflect cultural context. Consider the experience of being born into wealth. An English idiom for that is “born with a silver spoon in one’s mouth,” conjuring an image of a privileged infant fed with fancy silverware. Mexican Spanish conveys the same idea with a different image: “nacer en cuna de oro,” literally “to be born in a golden cradle.”

Both idioms imply wealth at birth, but one culture visualizes it as an ornate crib, the other as a utensil in the mouth. The unconscious may make use of these specific images. A Mexican patient who feels guilt over his advantages might dream of a golden cradle, whereas an American patient might dream of choking on a silver spoon – each symbol emerging from the idiomatic palette of their native language.

We also see idioms addressing courage and endurance that differ intriguingly. In English, if one must do something painful or difficult, we say “bite the bullet.” This

phrase harks back to battlefield medicine (biting a bullet to endure pain) – an image of steeling oneself through agony.

Mexican Spanish has an idiom with a very different picture: “hacer de tripas corazón,” which literally translates as “to make a heart out of guts”. The colloquial meaning is equivalent – to muster courage or force oneself to do something unpleasant.

The archetypal idea is the same – transforming fear into courage – yet English locates it in the act of withstanding pain (the bullet between teeth) while Spanish locates it in an internal transmutation (guts to heart).

Such differences enrich the therapist’s understanding. If a patient says “vamos, hay que hacer de tripas corazón,” we are invited to hear not just “we must bite the bullet,” but also the nuance of that gut-heart metaphor: perhaps the person feels they must swallow something nauseating (tripas) and convert it into strength.

But the literal vision evoked by the idiom “*hacer de tripas corazón*” (“to make a heart out of guts”) borders on the alchemical. It stages a visceral transmutation: taking one’s entrails—the symbolic seat of fear, revulsion, and raw, instinctual emotion—and forging them into a heart, the emblem of courage, love, and moral resolve. We might picture, with a blend of horror and poetic resonance, a figure shaping a heart from their own intestines: grotesque, yes, but profoundly symbolic. The image speaks to a transformation of affect—what is base, animal, or abject becomes elevated, structured, even heroic. It is the work of the psyche under duress: *converting the unbearable into the noble*.

However, when placed in a **cultural context saturated with symbolic or repressed sadism**—contexts where emotional expression is shaped by stoicism, nationalism, machismo, or religious guilt—such metaphors can be misread or weaponized. In these contexts, therapists may be unconsciously influenced by the cultural lexicon of emotional repression and interpret such expressions with an emphasis on **aggressiveness** or pathological strength. But this aggressiveness is not always intra-psychic; it may be a **cultural script**, internalized by the patient and expressed through metaphor. The apparent violence or harshness of the image (turning guts into heart) may not reflect the patient’s core psychic structure, but rather the **emotional cost of adapting to a cultural norm** that demands the concealment of fear and vulnerability.

This is crucial: in such idioms, the violence is often **symbolic**, a reflection of the cultural imagination’s way of narrating transformation under pressure. The therapist must resist the urge to psychologize this too quickly as personal aggression or masochism, and instead ask: *What cultural work is this idiom doing? What does it mean to this patient, in this body, in this history, to make a heart from guts?* What might appear as resilience may mask a **repressed call for empathy**, a

deeply ingrained demand to keep going, to “tough it out,” even at the expense of one’s own softness, one’s own entrails.

Another culturally flavored example: when someone is overwhelmed by trivial problems, English says they are “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Mexican Spanish paints an even more pitiful picture: “ahogarse en un vaso de agua,” or “drowning in a glass of water.”

Both idioms gently mock an overreaction, but the Spanish image is strikingly dramatic – a person thrashing in a tiny glass as if it were an ocean. A patient prone to anxiety might indeed feel like they are drowning even when objectively the “water” is just a glassful. If that idiom comes up in therapy, it provides a vivid symbol to explore: What does the water represent? Do they feel small and helpless inside a container that others see as minor? By tapping into the literal image of the idiom, the therapist can enter the patient’s subjective experience more deeply. The idiom becomes a tiny allegory of the patient’s emotional reality.

It’s noteworthy too that some idioms cross languages, either by shared heritage or universal human experience. “Killing two birds with one stone,” meaning solving two problems at once, exists almost word-for-word in Spanish: “matar dos pájaros de un tiro.” This likely reflects a shared old proverb (possibly with roots in hunting practices).

Such an image – a single action felling two creatures – carries a slightly ruthless ingenuity in both languages. If a bilingual patient uses the phrase in either tongue, the mental picture (however unconscious) is the same. In therapy, one might gently ask, “What are the ‘two birds’ here for you?” to learn what dual goals or issues the person is grappling with. The idiom’s persistence across tongues hints that certain symbolic scenarios (like the idea of a clever kill to achieve multiple ends) resonate broadly with human psychology. These are part of what we might call the collective symbolic reservoir of humanity, adapted into each language’s idioms.

Archetypal Patterns and Linguistic Codes in Idioms

Delving a layer deeper, some endolinguistics suggest that even the sounds and structures of words carry unconscious significance. Endolinguistics explores binary and ternary consonantal codes underlying language.

The premise is that patterns of consonant sounds (for example, a two-consonant cluster or a three-consonant root) might repeat across words and languages, pointing to a hidden systemic semantic thread. In other words, beyond the obvious meaning of an idiom, the very letters that form its key words could be echoing ancient concepts or archetypes.

This might sound esoteric, but consider a simple cross-linguistic pattern: the “M-T-R” or “M-D-R” consonant grouping that appears in words for mother (English

mother, Latin *mater*, Spanish *madre*, Persian *madar*). It's as if the "M-T/D-R" sound is a primeval code for the mother archetype in many Indo-European languages. Such common codes could reflect how fundamental experiences (like the bond with a mother) became encapsulated in sound symbols millennia ago.

When we apply this thinking to idioms, we might search for recurring sound patterns that carry an archetypal charge. For instance, the "heart" concept discussed earlier: in Spanish *corazón*, in Italian *cuore*, in French *cœur*, in English *heart*, in German *Herz* – we see a consonantal skeleton of K-R or H-R (*cor*, *cor*, *cœur*, *hrt*, *hrz*). That *cr/hrz* pattern might correspond to the ancient idea of the heart as core. Indeed, the English word *core* (meaning center) is etymologically linked to *cor* (heart).

An endolinguistic analysis might point out that when someone says an idiom like "to the heart of the matter," the word *heart* not only brings its dictionary meaning, but also resonates with that deep code of centrality and vital importance. Likewise, Spanish uses "*al meollo del asunto*" (to the marrow of the issue) – *meollo* carrying the M-L sound that might align with *miel* (honey) or *médula* (marrow) in a web of meanings about essence and sweetness. We start to see how words in idioms can be connected by sound in a way that hints at shared substrata of meaning beyond surface differences.

Another intriguing angle is homophony and punning across languages. Freud and his followers noted that the unconscious is quite capable of multilingual wordplay – it cares more for sound and symbol than for grammar.

A patient who speaks both Spanish and English might make a slip of the tongue that blends the two, or choose an idiom in one language because a key word in it sounds like something emotionally salient in the other. For example, a Spanish-English bilingual might say in English, "I felt really alone," but unconsciously be resonating with the Spanish word "alone" (which is not a Spanish word, but let's say it made them think of *luna*, moon, symbol of loneliness) – this is a hypothetical, but it illustrates how the mind can connect sounds to feelings in roundabout ways.

In one real case, a bilingual Spanish speaker described a stressful family gathering by saying in English, "It was pure chaos," pronouncing it as /chaos/ with a Spanish *ch* sound. The analyst noted the word sounded like "caos" in Spanish (same meaning), but the patient immediately added, "¡Sí, un caos... *como el caos del caos!" mixing languages. It turned out *caos* also phonetically echoed a family nickname used in that event. Such coincidences enthrall the psychoanalyst's ear, because they suggest that beneath the intended meaning, another story is trying to be told – one that might only be pieced together by listening to the inner rhymes and rhythms of the patient's speech.

Freud's forgotten name episode on the train to Italy—famously analyzed in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901)—offers more than a glimpse into repression; it reveals how the unconscious forms **cross-linguistic condensations** rich in symbolic meaning. The name *Signorelli*, which Freud failed to recall while discussing Renaissance art, was replaced in his mind by fragments such as *Herzegovina* and *Boltraffio*. Freud focused on death and sexuality as the repressed material behind the parapraxis, but a deeper linguistic reading uncovers a phonetic and symbolic web spanning German, Italian, and Slavic languages.

The Italian *Signorelli* begins with *Signore*—"Sir," "Lord"—evoking status and paternal authority. *Herzegovina*, meanwhile, carries multiple resonances: *Herzog* in German means "duke" or "count," a title of nobility; *Herr* (from the same root) means "sir" or "lord" in a more everyday sense. So we find *Herr-Zog-ovina*: a composite of *Herr* ("Sir"), *Zug/Zog* (the past participle of "ziehen"—to pull or move, but also related to *Zug*, train), and *-ovina*, the Slavic suffix meaning "land" or "territory." Thus, *Herzegovina* symbolically renders "the land of the Lord," or "the place of the count," with possible unconscious echoes of Freud's own journey (by train) through a charged landscape of status, mortality, and cultural foreignness.

Adding to this web, the intrusive substitute name *Boltraffio*—though seemingly irrelevant—invites an association with the German *treffen* ("to meet" or "to encounter"), subtly invoking the fateful **meeting** on the train itself that triggered the repression.

What emerges is a **cross-linguistic dreamwork**: a substitution not merely of names, but of functions—lordship, encounter, geography, status, repression—all condensed across languages and mapped onto Freud's psychic terrain. The forgotten *Signorelli* is reconstructed through elements of *Herr*, *Herzog*, *Signore*, and *-ovina*, with the unconscious drawing freely from **phonetics, social titles, and culturally charged words**. This rich parapraxis supports the idea that the unconscious doesn't just speak one language—it stitches meaning together from a polyglot reservoir, (the binary and ternary shared codes across languages), guided by emotional salience and symbolic weight rather than grammar. For those exposed to multiple languages, the unconscious may not only code-switch—it **code-fuses**, generating hybrid symbols that conceal and reveal at once.

The notion of archetypal meaning surfacing in idioms also invites us to consider myths or collective symbols embedded in language. Many idioms have origin stories that link to cultural myths or historical anecdotes, which themselves carry psychic weight. When we say "Pandora's box" (both English and Spanish use this phrase) we invoke an entire myth about curiosity and unforeseen consequences.

When someone in Mexico exclaims "¡Me cayó el veinte!" ("the 20 cent coin dropped for me," meaning I finally got it), it harks back to old payphones – but symbolically, it's about a delayed realization clicking into place.

Even if a young person today has never used a 20-centavo coin in a phone, the idiom persists, suggesting that our understanding often “drops” suddenly after a delay. In a therapy session, if a patient exclaims “me cayó el veinte,” they’re indicating an insight – and interestingly they choose a monetary, mechanical metaphor for it.

We might play with that: What “coin” finally dropped? What was the cost, or what mechanism released it? Here, the archetypal motif might be about exchange or value (coin) and communication (the phone) when understanding is achieved – hinting that insight, for this person, has a valuable, hard-earned quality.

While the technical details of binary and ternary consonantal codes are beyond the scope of a single essay, the key takeaway is that sound and symbol intertwine. Language operates on multiple levels: semantic (meaning), phonetic (sound), and even visual (the imagery words evoke). An idiom engages all these levels. Take the Mexican saying “le salió el tiro por la culata” (roughly, “the shot backfired on him,” literally “the shot came out the butt of the gun”). Phonetically, tiro (shot) and culata (butt of a gun) have a nice rhythmic contrast; metaphorically it’s about a plan going awry; visually it’s almost slapstick – imagine a rifle firing backwards.

The consonant cluster T-R runs through tiro and into tro of retró**ceso if we think of backfire, connecting with the archetype of reversal. If a patient uses this idiom to describe their own attempt at something that went wrong, the therapist has access to all these layers: the idea of aggression turned back (shot reversed), the possible humiliation (gun misfiring), and even the percussive T and R sounds, which might emphasize harshness or suddenness. These subtleties make idioms a rich text to analyze within the therapeutic dialogue.

The Therapeutic Encounter: Idioms as a Symbolic Reservoir

Listening to idioms in a psychoanalytic therapy session is a bit like panning for gold. Amidst the flowing conversation, an idiomatic phrase might glint for a moment, hinting at a nugget of significance beneath the surface. The therapist, oriented by theory but guided by empathy, can pick up this glint and gently explore it. It is crucial, however, that this exploration is done with sensitivity and context in mind. Idioms are a shared cultural language, but for the individual they may carry highly personal nuances. The phrase “home is a prison” could be a casual exaggeration – or, for a particular patient, it could resonate with literal truth if home was the site of trauma. As therapists, we must resist the temptation to apply a one-size-fits-all interpretation to any idiom. Instead, we treat the idiom as a symbolic Rorschach: a stimulus that can reveal something, but only in conjunction with the person’s associations and emotional tone.

In practical terms, one might respond to a patient's idiom by simply inviting elaboration: "You say you were 'carrying the weight of the world.' That sounds exhausting. Tell me more about how that feels." This opens the door for the patient to reflect on the image they've just used. They might say, "Well, I feel like I have everyone's problems on my back." Now the metaphor is coming alive – "on my back" brings to mind burdens, maybe even back pain. If appropriate, the therapist could even share an observation: "It strikes me that you often use phrases about weight and carrying... I wonder if your body literally feels that strain?" Such an insight ties the idiom to potential somatic experience, bridging unconscious and conscious. Indeed, patients have been known to unconsciously choose idioms that correspond to their symptoms or affective states. A client who frequently talks about "breaking down" might have a history of panic attacks where they felt they physically broke down. Another who says they "keep hitting a wall" may feel an inner block or might even suffer tension headaches (as if banging their head against a wall).

Using idioms as a therapeutic tool requires a light touch. The goal is not to play the "magician" who decodes every utterance, but rather to show curiosity about the patient's inner world as it spontaneously appears in their speech. At the end the therapist is learning the patient endolanguage little by little.

It's also important to acknowledge that not every idiom harbors a deep unconscious secret. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, as Freud purportedly quipped. A patient might say "I was on cloud nine" simply because it's a common way to say "very happy," with no particular unconscious weight for the session.

The art of therapy involves knowing when to look deeper and when to take things at face value. Clues lie in the context and emotional delivery. If the idiom comes at a charged moment, or if the patient seems struck by their own choice of words ("I don't know why I said it that way"), then it begs exploration. If it's said in passing with little affect, it may just be linguistic habit. The therapist develops a feel for these differences over time.

When an idiom does prove meaningful, it enriches the therapeutic dialogue immeasurably. The patient and therapist gain a shared symbolic language that is often more resonant than abstract clinical terms. Telling a trauma survivor that she exhibits "hypervigilance" is one thing; but when she tells you she "sleeps with one eye open" and you both recognize how literally true that feels, it's a bonding moment of understanding through metaphor. Now the therapy can work with that image – perhaps helping her find ways to let both eyes close, i.e. to truly rest. In this sense, idioms and metaphors become part of the healing process, not just diagnostic clues. They allow the therapy to speak in the patient's native imaginative language, which can be far more powerful than dry analysis.

Conclusion

Idioms live in the overlap between culture and psyche. They are taught to us by our language community, yet the unconscious repurposes them into personal symbols.

Freud gave us the insight that our dreams and slips of the tongue are not nonsense but meaning in disguise – and idiomatic expressions, when they recur in a patient's narrative, can be viewed in this same light.

Ferenczi reminds us that each language furnishes a unique set of symbols, a dream idiom that psychoanalysis must respect. The 1951 cartoon *Symphony in Slang*, with its literal portrayals of figurative phrases, serves as a whimsical but profound reminder that literal and figurative are just two sides of the coin: what is figurative in waking speech may become literal in the theater of the unconscious.

In psychoanalytic therapy, paying attention to a patient's slang, proverbs, and repeated sayings is like having a lexicon of dream symbols at one's fingertips. An idiom casually dropped in conversation might be the unconscious dropping us a hint.

Of course, interpretation must remain fluid and context-bound. The meaning of a symbol is not fixed – “water under the bridge” could mean relief and forgiveness for one person, but for another it might evoke the image of something important swept away and lost. Thus, we approach idioms not with a codebook of rigid meanings, but with an openness to intuitive exploration. They form a symbolic reservoir: a pool of potential images and narratives that therapist and patient can dip into together. In that reservoir swim the cultural archetypes and the personal memories, side by side.

Ultimately, exploring idioms in therapy highlights the poetic truth at the heart of psychoanalysis: our suffering and our healing often speak in metaphor. Whether it's English or Mexican Spanish or any other tongue, language is saturated with the psyche's echoes. By attuning to those echoes, we honor the depth in our patients' seemingly simple words.

A phrase like “I feel like I'm drowning in responsibilities” might be commonplace, yet when spoken by a particular individual in a particular moment, it can unlock a torrent of genuine feeling – panic, desperation, the memory of literally struggling for air in a childhood incident, or an overwhelm that needs compassionate attention. The idiom becomes a doorway to the unconscious narrative waiting to be heard.

In conclusion, idioms are more than colloquial decorations in our speech. They carry layers of significance – from the archetypal to the personal – and in the psychoanalytic setting they often function as symptoms in plain sight. They are the unconscious speaking in tongues, using the shared language of culture to hint at what is unspoken.

By drawing on Freud's insights into dream-work and Ferenczi's appreciation of linguistic symbolism, we can approach idioms with both intellectual rigor and imaginative humility. The therapy room, like the cartoon heaven in *Symphony in Slang*, becomes a place where even the most ordinary expressions may reveal a hidden storyboard.

If we listen with a third ear, we might catch those symbolic symphonies playing within our patients' slang – and perhaps within our own. In that meeting of minds and languages, new understanding can dawn, as gently and naturally as the break of day (or as one cartoon might literalize it, “at the crack of dawn,” with a visual crack in the horizon!).

Each idiom is an invitation to look beyond its surface and to find the living, unconscious image at its heart – an invitation that, when accepted with care, can deepen the therapeutic journey for both patient and analyst.

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