

UDC 811.111'373.45:811.161.2'25
DOI 10.31652/2521-1307-2025-41-13

Somatic Idioms in Business English: Semantic Features and Translation into Ukrainian

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Received: 21.08.2025 • Accepted: 19.10.2025

Abstract

The study analyzes somatic idioms used in business English, which constitute an essential part of the linguistic worldview of native speakers. Phraseological units recorded in lexicographic sources were analyzed, and 212 English somatic idioms were selected. The research examines the semantic classification of somatic idioms covering thematic groups such as *external human body parts*, *internal human body parts* and *external animal body parts*. Idioms referring to external human body parts form the most substantial category of somatic phraseological units, comprising 141 examples or 66.5% of the analyzed corpus. It is followed by idioms involving external animal body parts (45 idioms, making up 21.2%), while idioms with lexemes nominating internal human body parts form the smallest group (26 units, representing 12.3%). The idioms under study were classified by their level of semantic opacity into pure (32.4%), semi-idioms (41.4%), and literal (26.2%). Special attention was given to translation techniques applied for adapting somatic idioms in interlingual communication. Results show that the most common translation methods are analogy (34.9%) and near equivalent (27.4%), whereas absolute equivalents (14.6%), descriptive translation (19.8%) and calques (3.3%) are less frequently used. The *external human body parts* thematic group exhibited the greatest variability in translation methods, indicating the universality of this group for constructing metaphorical meanings. The study demonstrates that metaphorical expressions involving lexemes that nominate human body parts are a rich source of idioms across languages. Among them, references to external body parts tend to carry meanings that are widely understood and easily translatable across cultures. In contrast, idioms involving lexemes nominating internal organs or animal anatomy often reflect culturally specific associations, making direct translation more challenging and frequently requiring explanation or adaptation. The **originality** of this paper lies in its focus on semantic features of somatic idioms used in business English, a topic that has received limited attention in linguistic research. By grouping these idioms into thematic categories – *external human body parts*, *internal human body parts*, and *external animal body parts* – and analyzing their meanings and translation techniques employed in rendering them in Ukrainian, the study offers new insights into how figurative language works in professional communication. **Conclusion.** The study highlights the richness of somatic idioms in business English and their semantic features. It shows that idioms based on external human body parts are the most common and easiest to translate due to their universal meanings. In contrast, idioms involving internal body parts or animal anatomy tend to be more culture-specific, often requiring explanation.

Keywords: somatic vocabulary, phraseological units, semantic analysis, business discourse, level of transparency, translation methods, somatic idioms

УДК 811.111'373.45:811.161.2'25
DOI 10.31652/2521-1307-2025-41-13

Соматичні ідіоми в діловій англійській мові: семантичні особливості та переклад українською

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Надійшла до редакції: 21.08.2025 • Схвалено до друку: 19.10.2025

Анотація

У статті проаналізовано соматичні ідіоми, що функціонують у діловій англійській мові та є важливою частиною мовного світогляду носіїв мови. Дослідження базується на 212 фразеологічних одиницях, дібраних із лексикографічних джерел. Запропоновано семантичну класифікацію соматичних ідіом за трьома тематичними групами: *зовнішні частини тіла людини* (66,5%), *внутрішні частини тіла людини* (12,3%) та *зовнішні частини тіла тварин* (21,2%). Найбільшою є група ідіом із лексемами, що позначають зовнішні частини тіла людини, що мають універсальні значення та легко перекладаються. Ідіоми з компонентами на позначення внутрішніх органів або зовнішніх частин тіла тварин виявилися культурно детермінованими, що ускладнює їх переклад. За критерієм семантичної прозорості, більшість ідіом є частково прозорими. Окрему увагу приділено перекладацьким прийомам, що застосовують для адаптації соматичних ідіом у міжмовній комунікації. Виявлено, що найпоширенішими методами перекладу досліджуваних ідіом є використання фразеологічного аналога (34,9%) та часткового еквівалента (27,4%), тоді як описовий переклад, абсолютний еквівалент та калька використовують рідше.

Ключові слова: соматична лексика, фразеологічні одиниці, семантичний аналіз, діловий дискурс, рівень прозорості, методи перекладу

Introduction. Somatic idioms are a vital part of the linguistic worldview, reflecting important perceptions of the body and playing a key role in cross-linguistic communication. However, their semantic transparency, frequency of use, and role in various types of business discourse remain underexplored. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive research on translation techniques for adapting these idioms to target languages and cultural contexts limits their effective application in intercultural communication. This highlights the need for an in-depth investigation into somatic idioms, their semantic structure, and translation methods.

The translation of somatic terminology used in different functional styles is a topic of continuing relevance in modern linguistic studies, since this process demands careful consideration of lexical and grammatical properties, structure and cultural connotations. Incorporating somatic vocabulary into business discourse performs a pragmatic function by enhancing communication authenticity and providing metaphorical frameworks for abstract business concepts.

Objective of the paper. The purpose of the paper is to analyze somatic idioms within the context of business English, focusing on their semantic characteristics, and identify translation strategies used in rendering them in Ukrainian.

Review of recent publications. Studies into somatic phraseological units in business contexts are relatively scarce. Among researchers investigating somatic idioms, Professor M. Zhuikova analyzed four groups of body-part terms related to the head, chest, waist, and elbow, revealing patterns in their interpretation and showing how these definitions reflect native speakers' mental conceptualization of body parts (Жуйкова, 2020). M. Tomenchuk focuses on the corpus approach to the analysis of phraseological units with somatic components (Tomenchuk, 2022). A. Pirniyazova and S. Shinnazarova carried out research into cross-cultural comparison of somatic idioms, pioneering

the idea that animal body parts should also be counted as somatic components of phraseological units (Pirniyazova, Shinnazarova, 2023). Semantic and syntactic features of English phraseological units have been studied by C. Fernando (Fernando, 1996). A Ukrainian linguist A. Zubryk delved into challenges of rendering English somatic idioms in Ukrainian (Зубрик, 2015).

The limited scholarly attention to somatic idioms in business English as well as lack of systematic research into translation techniques of somatic terms used in business communication determine the **relevance** of the paper. The **subject** of the study is somatic idioms in business English. The **object** is the semantic features of somatic idioms used in business English; translation techniques applied in translating these idioms into Ukrainian. The material under study is represented by 212 selected somatic idioms.

Results of research. Somatic phraseological units are highly prevalent in business discourse and are actively used in different languages to enhance the figurative characterisation of processes, actions, situations. According to A. Zubryk, the names of body parts as components of phraseological units are intrinsically linked to how humans function and experience their physical selves, and they reveal the cultural and anthropological traits of a specific language group (Зубрик, 2015, с. 264).

As a fundamental part of language, body-related vocabulary *has evolved throughout time*, reflecting people's knowledge of how bodies function and their understanding of the world. *Across diverse ethnic groups, the human body serves as a foundational and universal template for the development of conceptual systems that penetrate both language and culture. This is evident in how bodily metaphors are used to describe abstract concepts like leadership and control (e.g., keep an eye on someone = watch over attentively, keep one's eye on the ball = stay focused on the most important task, put one's foot down = take a firm stand, exert authority, have the upper hand = be in an advantageous position, etc.),*

performance and effort (e.g., *earn one's wings* = prove one's merit and skill, *break one's back* = work hard, *have one's hands full* = be very busy, etc.), relationships (e.g., *smooth someone's ruffled feathers* = attempt to calm or placate someone who is annoyed, irritated, or upset, *claw me*, and *I'll claw thee* – a phrase used to describe a reciprocal relationship, *see eye to eye* = agree with someone, *give someone the cold shoulder* = deliberately ignore someone, etc.), **emotional states** (e.g., *have butterflies in one's stomach* = feel nervous or anxious, *get something off one's chest* = express feelings or concerns openly, *wear one's heart on one's sleeve* = display emotions openly, *keep a stiff upper lip* = remain brave and not show emotion, *lose one's head* = become very emotional or irrational, etc.), **intelligence and understanding** (e.g., *use one's head* = think logically, *have a good head on one's shoulders* = be sensible and intelligent, *wrap one's head around something* = understand a complex concept, *keep one's ear to the ground* = stay informed about current developments, *have eyes in the back of one's head* = be very observant, etc.), and **financial situations** (e.g., *cost an arm and a leg* = be very expensive, *live from hand to mouth* = survive on very little money, etc.).

In domestic linguistics, words denoting body parts are called somatisms and idioms with names of body parts are referred to as somatic idioms.

The term “somatic” has various interpretations, ranging from the general concept of the physical to the more specific notion that the body communicates. In the broadest sense, derived from the Greek word *σῶμα* signifying “body”, “somatic” pertains to anything related to the physical or bodily. This term finds its origins in the fields of biology and medicine, where it refers to physical processes and states. For example, it is defined as “relating to the body as opposed to the mind” (Cambridge dictionary); “1) of the body; bodily; physical; 2) pertaining to the body wall of an animal; 3) pertaining to or affecting the somatic cells, as distinguished from the germ cells (Dictionary).

Even though conventional definitions of the term “somatic” are limited to human anatomy, we are in

line with A. Pirniyazova and S. Shinnazarova who argue that body part terminology extends beyond human anatomy to encompass the entire animal kingdom (Pirniyazova, Shinnazarova, 2023, p. 73). It stands to reason that animal body parts in idioms perform the same linguistic functions as human body parts: they ground abstract concepts in concrete, embodied experience and serve as metaphors to convey abstract concepts and emotions. This linguistic phenomenon reflects the deep connection between humans and animals throughout history. For instance, idioms like *can't make head or tail of something*, *take the bull by the horns* and *feather one's nest* utilize animal imagery to express ideas of facing a problem, leadership qualities, and enjoyable experiences, respectively. Moreover, in such idioms as *put your foot down* or *dig in your claws* both human and animal body parts are used to express stubbornness.

The approaches to classifying somatic idioms by semantic features also vary. M. Zhuikova distinguishes a group of *partitives* – lexemes that name visible, external parts of the body, such as arm, head, shoulder, knee, finger, breast, etc., which are contrasted with ‘internal’ somatisms, such as bones, muscles, blood, heart, liver, etc. (Жуїкова, 2020). In her study, a Ukrainian linguist M. Tomenchuk claims that somatic phraseological units can be divided into three groups: “1) the body and the external parts of the body: *body, hand, finger(s), palm, thumb, mouth, wrist, elbow, shoulder, neck, lip, hair, belly, face, head, ear(s), eye(s), toe(s), heel; leg, foot, arm, nose, tongue, tooth, back, throat, waist, cheek, breast, chest, navel, etc.* 2) internal organs: *heart, brain, gut(s), spleen, etc.* 3) substances of biological character: *blood, skin, bone(s), skeleton, nerve etc.*” (Tomenchuk, 2022, p. 175). *However, investigation of medical terminology and classifications of external and internal body parts yielded new insights into the underlying factors to be taken into consideration in reshaping the above approach. For example, according to S. Moser and B. van der Eerden, bones, “being often thought of as static structures which only offer structural support”, are considered to function as an*

endocrine organs producing hormones (Moser, van der Eerden, 2018). This provides grounds for distributing the somatic idioms under study by semantic criteria as follows:

1. **External human body parts:** *head, neck, legs, body, ear, skin, arms, teeth, eye, nose, face, lip, nail, mouth, back, bottom, belly, hip, hand, finger, thumb, wrist, knuckle, elbow, shoulder, palm, knee, toe, heel, foot, chest*. For example, *break one's back* = work hard, *have one's hands full* = be very busy, *keep one's nose to the grindstone* = work hard and steadily, *get a leg up* = be assisted in either getting promotion or gaining a market share, *word of mouse* = free advertising that occurs when satisfied customers recommend products to their friends or associates, *joined at the hip* = very closely connected or inseparable, etc.

2. **Internal human body parts:** *heart, brain, tongue, gut, blood, bone, throat, stomach*. Examples include: *brain drain* = the situation in which large numbers of educated and very skilled people leave

their own company to work in another one where pay and conditions are better, *a bone of contention* = a subject or issue that causes a great deal of disagreement or argument, *cut-throat* = very intense, aggressive, and merciless, *get blood out of/from a stone* = make someone give or tell someone else something, when it is extremely difficult because of the character or mood of the person or organization someone are dealing with, *sick to one's stomach* = feeling extremely upset or disgusted, *heart-to-heart* = a sincere and open conversation about personal feelings, etc.

3. **External animal body parts:** *tail, horn, wing, claw, feather*. For instance: *get one's tail in gear* = get to work, get moving, *come out the little end of the horn* = be left with nothing; fail, *earn one's wings* = earn one's stripes, to prove oneself, *try wings* = test oneself, *give wings to* = inspire, etc.

The semantic grouping of phraseological units with somatic components is visually represented in Fig. 1.

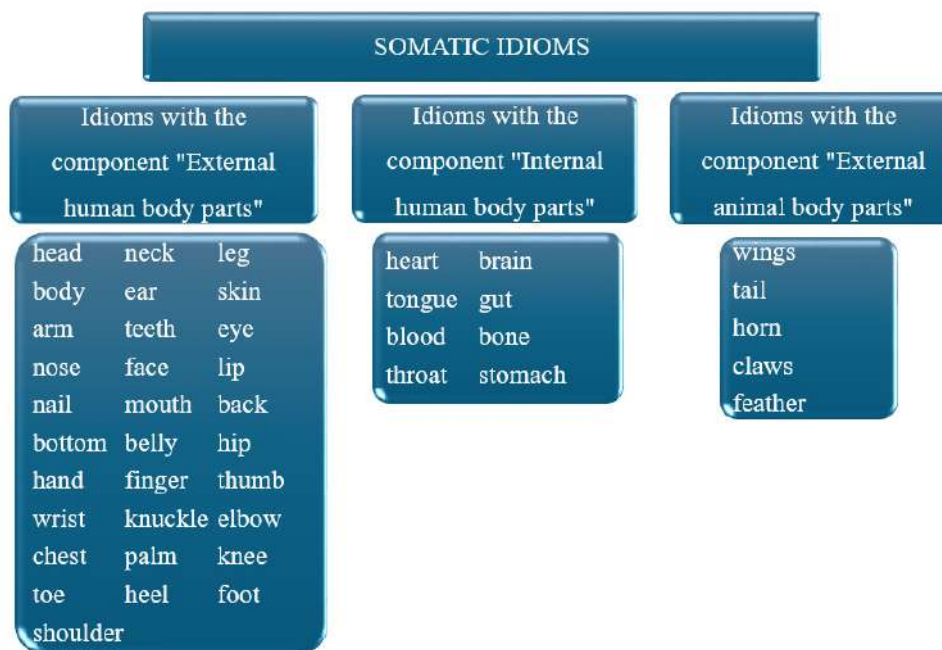


Fig. 1. Semantic classification of somatic idioms

The largest group of phraseological units with somatic components consists of idioms related to external human body parts (141 idioms, accounting

for 66.5% of the corpus). It is followed by idioms involving external animal body parts (45 idioms, making up 21.2%), while idioms with lexemes

nominating internal human body parts form the smallest group (26 units, representing 12.3%).

The dominance of external human body parts in somatic idiomatic expressions reflects the immediacy of bodily experience. External human body parts are our most direct interface with the world, because we see, touch, and consciously control them daily. Their constant presence in our everyday experience makes them especially accessible for metaphorical thinking. Furthermore, external human body parts have higher metaphorical productivity because they participate in more varied activities and contexts. A single external body part, for instance, “hand” can metaphorically represent power (*get the upper hand*), skill (*try one’s hand at something*), assistance (*give someone a hand*), agreement (*shake hands on a deal*), and control (*force someone’s hand*), generating multiple idiomatic expressions.

There are several criteria by which idioms are classified, the degree of semantic opacity or transparency being one of them. Using the classification by C. Fernando (Fernando, 1996, p. 125), we identified three categories of the somatic idioms under study:

- pure idioms, which are non-literary multi-word expressions with a conditional meaning, for example, *have some neck* = have audacity or boldness to do something inappropriate, *have one’s heart in the right place* = be sincere or well

intentioned, *give the elbow* = reject or dismiss someone abruptly, *have legs* = have the potential to continue or succeed over time, *eye up* = look at something with the aim of acquisition or assessment, *hit the nail on the head* = be absolutely right or accurate about something, *wing it* = improvise, do something on the fly etc.;

- semi-idioms – idiomatic expressions with both literal and non-literal components, for instance, *take something at face value* = accept something as it appears without further analysis, *have a nose for* = have a good instinct for opportunities or detecting something, *blue-eyed boy* = a favourite person or someone with special privileges, *pay through the nose* = pay too much money for something, *bite/snap someone’s head off* = speak angrily to someone, *wait in the wings* = be ready to act or be used at any time, etc.;

- literal (or transparent) idioms – idioms, that can be interpreted based on the meanings of their individual parts, for example, *clip somebody’s wings* = restrict someone’s freedom or ability to act, *go in one ear and out the other* = be forgotten immediately after being heard, *keep your eyes open* = remain alert and attentive, *keep one’s ear to the ground* = stay informed about what is happening, *turn a blind eye* = deliberately ignore something, *be under one’s wing* = be under someone’s protection or guidance, etc.

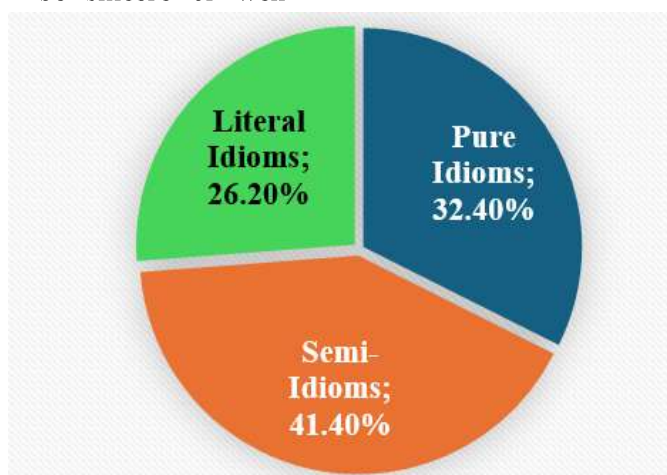


Fig. 2. Distribution of somatic idioms by the degree of idiomaticity

The pie chart illustrates that semi-idioms form the largest group, accounting for the largest share of the chart, at 41.4%. They are followed by pure idioms, which comprise nearly a third of the total at 32.4%, with literal idioms representing just over a quarter of the total at 26.2%.

Idioms are a fascinating element of language that often defy literal translation due to their culturally-specific and figurative nature. The challenge for a translator lies in accurately conveying the intended meaning of an idiom – which is not merely a collection of words but a single, meaningful expression – while also respecting the nuance and stylistic features of both the source and target languages. To properly translate a phraseological unit, a translator must consider its semantic structure, figurative character and cultural context. The somatic idioms under study were translated into Ukrainian by choosing *absolute equivalents*, *near equivalents*, *analogies*, and using *calque* and *descriptive translation*.

Analogy appeared to be the most frequently employed translation technique (74 instances accounting for 34.9%). This translation technique aims to convey the meaning of an expression or lexical item in the target language by selecting a linguistic device that retains a similar emotional, cultural or semantic effect, e.g. *work one's guts out* – працювати не покладаючи рук, *make a spoon or spoil a horn* – або пан, або пропав, *keep one's ear to the ground* – тримати руку на пульсі, *lose heart* – опустити руки, *give a black eye* – підставити під удар, *kick some tail* – надерти хвоста (комусь), дати прочухана (комусь), etc.

Near equivalents are target language phrases that, despite slight variations in words, grammar, or both, maintain the original meaning and stylistic tone of the source language's phraseological units. They were found in 58 cases (27.4%), e.g. *word of mouse* – з уст в уста, *to have a nose for* – мати нюх, *follow hot on the heels of something* – по гарячих слідах, *turn one's nose up at something* – крутити носом, *know something as one's ten fingers* – знати,

як свої п'ять пальців, *better be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion* – краще бути головою у риби, ніж хвостом у лева, etc.

Descriptive translation plays an important role in the business environment, where specific terminology, idioms and phrases are often used that do not have direct equivalents. This method allows you to convey the meaning of expressions. This translation method was used in 42 instances (19.8%), e.g. *bright-eyed and bushy-tailed* – сповнений ентузіазму та енергії, *smooth someone's ruffled feathers* – заспокоїти когось, *tail down* – в поганому настрої, засмучений, *wing it* – імпровізувати, робити щось експромтом, *half a shake of a lamb's tail* – миттю, вмить, *to keep one's nose clean* – уникати проблем, *give the elbow* – звільнити, *catch a tiger by the tail* – опинитися в дуже складній ситуації, etc.

Absolute equivalents were found in 31 cases, constituting 14.6%. These are words or expressions in the target language that fully corresponds to the meaning, style and usage of the word or expression in the source language. Examples include: *get it out of your head* – викинути з голови, *go in one ear and out the other* – в одне вухо влетіло, а в інше вилетіло, *grit one's teeth* – зціпити зуби, *take the bull by the horns* – взяти бика за роги, *the tail wagging the dog* – хвіст крутить собакою, *horn of plenty* – ріг достатку, etc.

Finally, the least frequent translation method used is *calque* – 7 instances that make up 3.3%. This method of translation implies literal rendering the meaning of a word or phrase, i.e. the structure of the word or phrase is preserved. For example, *blood, sweat, and tears* – кров, піт і слюзи, *cold-blooded* – холоднокровний, *get one's claws into someone* – вчепитися в когось кігтями, etc.

The high number of analogy and near-equivalent translations shows how certain concepts, especially those rooted in human experience, are often shared across cultures, even if the phrasing differs. For instance, the English idiom “to keep an eye on something” — which uses the

somatic component “eye” to suggest close attention — has a near-equivalent in Ukrainian: “не спускати очей” or “тримати в полі зору.” Both expressions rely on the metaphor of vision to convey mindfulness and care.

Below is the chart that illustrates the distribution of the utilized translation techniques —

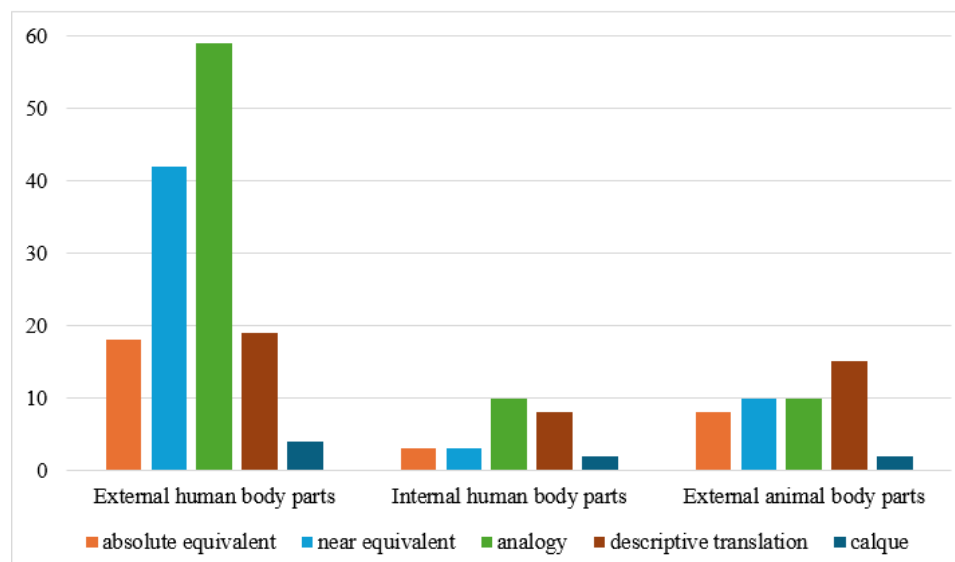


Fig. 3. Distribution of translation techniques across the semantic groups of somatic idioms

The results indicate that analogy was the most frequently employed strategy for translating idioms with components nominating external human body parts. They account for approximately 42% of translations, followed by near equivalent at 30%. Absolute equivalent and descriptive translation each contributed 13%, while calque was rarely used (2%).

In translating idiomatic expressions containing lexemes that nominate internal human body parts, analogy was used in 40% of cases, while descriptive translation accounted for 30%. Absolute equivalent and near equivalent each were applied in 11.5% of cases, with calque comprising only 7%.

For idioms containing lexemes nominating external animal body parts, descriptive translation was the dominant method (30%), followed by both near equivalent and analogy at 23% each. Absolute equivalent constituted 17% of the cases, and calque again showed the lowest proportion at 5%.

absolute equivalent, near equivalent, analogy, descriptive translation, and calque — across the three semantic groups of somatic idioms: external human body parts, internal human body parts, and external animal body parts. (Fig. 3).

The frequent application of analogy and near equivalent translation techniques indicate that the figurative concepts related to external human body parts are well-established in both languages, thus facilitating their translation into Ukrainian. In contrast, idioms with lexemes nominating internal human body parts and external animal body parts appear to be more culturally specific. The intensive use of descriptive translation for these categories shows that the specific metaphorical associations and connotations they carry are less common in the Ukrainian language.

Conclusion. The study confirms that somatic idioms constitute a significant component of business English, serving as powerful metaphorical tools for expressing abstract business concepts such as leadership, emotion, effort, relationships, thinking, and financial situations, highlighting the richness and versatility of bodily metaphors in language. Based on semantic criteria, the analyzed somatic

idioms were categorized into three thematic groups: *external human body parts* (66.5%), *internal human body parts* (12.3%), and *external animal body parts* (21.2%).

The analysis demonstrates that semi-idioms represent the largest category by semantic transparency (41.4%), followed by pure idioms (32.4%) and literal idioms (26.2%). This distribution indicates that most somatic idioms in business English maintain some connection to their literal meanings while developing figurative interpretations.

The study evidences that among translation techniques, analogy is the most frequently employed method (34.9%), followed by near equivalents (27.4%) and descriptive translation (19.8%). Absolute equivalents account for 14.6%, while calque represents the least common method (3.3%). The

predominance of analogy and near equivalents suggests that using the human body in metaphor is a robust and partly shared way of thinking in both English and Ukrainian.

This study also highlights the richness of somatic idioms in business English and their semantic features. It shows that idioms with names of external human body parts are the most common and easiest to translate due to their universal meanings. In contrast, idioms involving names of internal body parts or external animal body parts tend to be more culture-specific, often requiring explanation. Needed is further research into the syntactic and structural features of somatic idioms used within business English context, as well as the capacity of AI-based translation technologies to accurately and idiomatically process somatic idioms.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest