Intuitively, some (morpho-)lexical items are more multifunctional and general in their semantic domain than the prototypical representatives of the same syntactic/lexical category. Among verbs, the notion of the light (or empty) verb has attracted linguists’ attention at least since Jespersen’s monumental series of volumes on the structure of English (Jespersen 1909-1949). In our five-language study *Cross-linguistic Studies of Phrasal Idioms* we have systematically collected large corpora of verb phrase idioms of German, English, Swedish, Russian and Finnish and have analyzed their overall lexical composition (Niemi et al., 2010) and the idiomaticity of the noun complement (Niemi et al. 2013). The total number of the body-part idioms in our corpora is about 5,300 (German: ca. 1,300, English: ca. 550, Swedish: ca. 1,800, Russian: ca. 800, Finnish: ca. 830).

Since the notional attempts at defining the “light verb” have been shown to be difficult, if not impossible (Pottelberge 2000), we aim at explicating the category using an empirical method, i.e., by analyzing which verbs in language X (German, English, Swedish, Russian or Finnish) tend to appear in VP idioms with “diluted meaning” of their own (if any).

References


