

Réka Benczes *The semantics of idioms:
a cognitive linguistic approach*

Introduction

The category of idioms has been a source of intrigue due to the peculiar semantic character this group bears: the overall meaning of an idiomatic expression is not equal to the sum meaning of its constituents. Right until the late seventies the main trend in idiom analysis was to view these expressions as non-compositional items, whose meaning is arbitrary and does not have anything to do with the meaning of the constituents.

However, research in the past twenty years has shown that there is definitely more to the semantics of idioms than meets the eye. A large group does seem to be partially compositional in nature, that is the meaning of the constituents is connected to the overall meaning of the idiom. This view has been adopted by cognitive linguistics as well, which maintains that the “connection” between the constituents’ literal meaning and the overall figurative meaning arises from “motivation” stemming from the unconscious conceptual structures in the language user’s head.

The first part of the paper will be in a theoretical vein: it will outline the main tenets of the traditional approach and will then go on to discuss the basis for the conceptual view of idioms. Following in the footsteps of cognitive linguistics, in the second part of the paper I wish to undertake an analysis of a special set of English idioms, namely those which have the body part head within them.¹ The aim is to investigate what conceptual metaphors or metonymies underlie these idioms and what these conceptual vehicles might say about our everyday conceptualisations of the head.

¹ The idioms analysed in the paper are based on Gulland & Hinds-Howell (1994) and Nagy (1996, n.d.). See the Appendix for a list of the expressions.

1 The non-compositional view of idioms

One of the basic tenets of formal semantics is the compositionality of meaning, which is also referred to as *Frege's principle*. According to this theorem, the meaning of a sentence can be deduced from the meaning of its constituents (Kiefer 2000:17). Although the focus of Frege's principle is the sentence, the theory of the compositionality of meaning has played a predominant role in the semantic investigations of idioms.

Most linguists define an idiom as a polylexemic expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of its parts, though this broad definition is most often based on popular examples such as *kick the bucket* or *shoot the breeze*.² In effect, when learning a new idiom, the speaker has to form an arbitrary link between the idiom and its nonliteral meaning. Following this idea, Swinney & Cutler (1979, cited in Titone & Connine 1999:1657), proposed the *lexical representation model*, which suggested that idioms were stored and retrieved when needed in a similar fashion to long words. This supposition brought forth the view that the syntactic behaviour of idioms corresponded to the idiomatic meaning in a very direct way: the idiom *kick the bucket* was believed to behave syntactically as its semantic counterpart, 'to die' (Cruse 1991).

However, the grammatical restrictions³ which seem to characterise a rather large class of idioms resulted in the view that idioms are syntactically "frozen elements" (Gibbs 1994:271). Fraser (1970:33) suggested that idioms can be organised into a "frozenness hierarchy" ranging from expressions that are able to undergo nearly all the grammatical transformations without losing their figurative meaning (e.g., *lay down the law*) to idioms that are unable to undergo even the simplest transformation without losing their meaning (e.g., *face the music*).⁴

² It should be kept in mind, however, that phrasal verbs such as *give in* or *see through (somebody)* or compounds such as *redcoat* or *deadline* can also be included in the mixed bag of idiomatic expressions since the meaning of these examples cannot be deduced from the constituents. For a good summary of definitions on idiomaticity see Gibbs (1994:266–268).

³ For discussions on the syntactic limitations and idiosyncrasies of idioms see Allan (1986), Fraser (1970), Nunberg et al. (1994), Palmer (1986) and Weinreich (1969).

⁴ Nunberg et al. (1994:491) believe that the non-compositional view is flawed because "[m]uch of the literature on the syntax of idioms is thus based on the misconception that no such semantic compositionality exists." The authors put forth a number of claims to support their argument (pp. 500–501). E.g., some idioms are modifiable with adjectives or relative clauses (*kick the filthy habit*, *Your remark*

The “frozenness” of idioms comes up not only in their syntactic limitations, but also in their semantics as well. The non-compositional view of idioms regards many idioms as “frozen” or “dead” metaphors. According to Cruse (1991: 42), the metaphorical interpretation of a sentence or an idiom is most likely to be sparked off by an inappropriateness in the utterance’s literal meaning. However, if a metaphor is used frequently with a particular meaning, then it loses its individuality and hearers store the metaphorical meaning as one of the standard senses of the expression. Thus the interpretation of the utterance no longer requires the activation of the metaphorical approach, but merely requires the “looking up, as it were, of a dictionary entry” (*ibid.*). Most often the link between the metaphor and the literal meaning of the idiom is lost.

Gibbs (1994: 273) argues that the reason why idioms are often claimed to be “dead metaphors” is because linguists confuse dead metaphors with conventional ones. Since people usually have little knowledge of the original metaphorical roots of an idiom such as *be soft hearted*, it is believed that the comprehension of idioms is the same as knowing the meaning of individual words, which is based on convention. However, words which appear to be salient examples of dead metaphors have evident metaphorical roots. For example, Sweetser (1990: 32–33) gives an account of how the meaning of *see* in Indo-European languages regularly acquired the meaning of *know* due to the pervasive conceptual metaphor of KNOWING IS SEEING. As new words for seeing developed, the meanings of these were extended to their meanings of knowing as well, thus giving a motivated reason for semantic change. The KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor is still an integral part of our conceptual system, thus it would not be correct to suggest that the reason why *see* is related to *know* is based on a dead metaphor.

2 From compositionality to conceptuality

There have been a number of attempts to describe how idioms differ in their compositionality. Nunberg (1978, cited in Titone & Connine 1999: 1661) suggested a characterisation of idioms based on how the constituents’ literal word meaning contributes to the general meaning of the expression. According to this system, idioms can be grouped into three classes: normally decomposable idioms (a part of the idiom is used literally, e.g., *the*

touched a nerve that I didn’t even know existed), some idioms can be quantified (*That’s the third gift horse she’s looked in the mouth this year*), parts of idioms may be emphasised through topicalisation (*His closets, you might find skeletons in*).

question in pop the question), abnormally decomposable idioms (the referents of an idiom's parts can be identified metaphorically, e.g., *the buck in pass the buck*) and semantically non-decomposable idioms (the meanings of the constituents do not contribute at all to the figurative meaning, e.g., *kick the bucket*).

Nunberg's (1978) typology of idioms was further investigated by Gibbs & Nayak (1989, cited in Gibbs 1994:279). In a research carried out on the analysability of idioms, subjects were asked to rate the degree to which the components in idioms contribute to the overall meaning. The results indicated that American speakers had no difficulties in grouping idioms on the basis of their decomposability into three categories, which were similar to the categorisation suggested by Nunberg (1978).

In addition, a series of reading-time studies showed that it took much less time for subjects to process the decomposable idioms than to read the non-decomposable expressions (Gibbs et al. 1989, cited in Gibbs 1994:285). The normally decomposable and the abnormally decomposable idioms were processed faster than their literal control phrases, but it took longer to process non-decomposable idioms than their literal counterparts. Such results suggest that people do try to analyse the compositionality of idioms when understanding idiomatic phrases, by trying to give independent meanings to the individual words and recognising how the meaningful units make up the overall interpretation of the phrase. This questions the non-compositional view that speakers assign arbitrary meaning to idioms which are recalled from memory when needed.⁵

The analysability and compositionality of idioms point to the idea that the meaning of the constituents of idioms might be related to the concepts to which the idioms actually refer to. Lakoff (1987:447–448) states that conventional images (mental images which are shared by a cultural community) play a very crucial point in language, especially in the case of idioms. Conventional images not only help in forming new idioms but

⁵ In an experiment regarding the comprehension of idioms Giora & Fein (1999) came to a seemingly opposite conclusion to that of Gibbs et al. (1989). According to the results, the processing of familiar idioms in an environment biased towards the idiomatic meaning activated the figurative meaning only, without evoking the less-salient literal meaning. However, the authors do not give an account of the idioms they took under analysis, nor do they explain what they mean by "familiar idioms" and do not provide information on the decompositionality of the expressions either. The fact that the familiar idioms in an idiomatic context did not activate the literal meaning might stem from the decomposable nature of the idioms themselves, similar to the case of the English *shoot the breeze*.

can also be used to explain old ones. Lakoff asked hundreds of people what image they have of the expression *keeping someone at arm's length*, and quite remarkably there was a rather high degree of systematicity among the replies concerning such details as how the arm and the hand are held with respect to the body or whether the palm is open or not. These results prompted Lakoff to conclude that in a large number of idioms meaning is not arbitrary but motivated.⁶ Motivation arises from conventional images, conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymies, which provide the “link” between the idiom and its meaning. For instance, in the case of the idiom *keep someone at arm's length*, two metaphors, INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS and SOCIAL (OR PSYCHOLOGICAL) HARM IS PHYSICAL HARM map the literal meaning, i.e., the image, into the meaning of the idiom.

Gibbs & O'Brien (1990) wished to investigate further Lakoff's view in an experiment where subjects were asked to answer detailed questions on their mental images of twenty-five common idioms (e.g., *blow one's stack*, *crack the whip*, *button one's lips*, *lose one's marbles*, *spill the beans*). Their hypothesis was that meanings of many idioms are partially motivated by different conceptual metaphors which map information from one conceptual or source domain to a target domain. Gibbs and O'Brien found a surprisingly high level of similarity the way the subjects conceptualised the idioms: on average 75% of the subjects' mental images described similar general images. However, these general images were able to capture specific details within an image; e.g., both idioms *flip one's lid* and *hit the ceiling* mean 'to get angry', but subjects imagined a force causing a container to release pressure in a violent manner. Such similarity in people's understanding of idioms is based on conceptual metaphors. In the case of the anger-related idioms, it is the MIND IS A CONTAINER (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) and ANGER IS THE HEAT OF A FLUID IN A CONTAINER (Kövecses 1986) which motivate them.

There are many idioms where it is not a conceptual metaphor, but rather a conceptual metonymy and conventional knowledge which “link” the idiom to its meaning. Kövecses & Szabó (1996:337–344) took under close analysis those English idioms which have to do with the human hand. They have found that the conventional knowledge on the use of the hand

⁶ Lakoff defined motivation in the following way: “The relationship between A and B is motivated just in case there is an independently existing link, L, such that A-L-B ‘fit together.’” L makes sense of the relationship between A and B (Lakoff 1987:448).

give rise to the idioms *handful*⁷ and *with an open hand*,⁸ among others. One of the most popular metonymies in English for idioms based on the hand is the HAND STANDS FOR THE PERSON which motivates a large number of idioms, such as *a factory hand*, *from hand to hand* and *all hands on deck*. This metonymy is most probably based on the metonymy THE HAND STANDS FOR THE ACTIVITY. The prototypical person is an ACTIVE person, and if there is a conceptual metonymy such as the latter then it is natural that there is also a metonymy where THE HAND STANDS FOR THE PERSON (Kövecses & Szabó 1996:341).

Yet another consequence of the conceptual view of idioms is that people do not view the meanings of *spill the beans* and *reveal the secret* as equivalent (Gibbs 1994:303–305). Idiomatic expressions seem to possess very particular figurative meanings that result from the entailments of the underlying conceptual metaphors. *Spill the beans* cannot be paraphrased as ‘to reveal a secret’ because the former implies certain details about the action itself which the latter seems to lack. Gibbs & O’Brien (1990:44) have found that the idiomatic expression is used to describe a situation where the action was unintentional, it was caused by some internal pressure within the mind of the revealer and the action was judged to be performed in a forceful manner. Literal counterparts, such as *reveal a secret* are not motivated by the same conceptual metaphors as the idioms themselves⁹ and are thus less specific in meaning.

⁷ The explanation is the following: It is a part of our everyday knowledge that the hand is too small to hold too many things easily at the same time (Kövecses & Szabó 1996:338).

⁸ The explanation is the following: “The image of a person physically giving objects to another with an open hand implies the knowledge that nothing is held back and everything can be taken” (Kövecses & Szabó 1996:339).

⁹ In the case of the expression *spill the beans*, Gibbs & O’Brien (1990:38) suggest that the conceptual metaphors THE MIND IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL ENTITIES motivate the idiom’s meaning: ideas are communicated by taking them out of the mind, putting them into words, and sending them to other people. The conventional images for *spill the beans* show that the container is about the size of the human head, the beans correspond to the information or ideas which are supposed to be kept in the container, but which are accidentally let out through spilling.

3 The human body in language

Cognitive linguistics argues that our conceptual system is structured by conceptual metaphors and metonymies; that is, a large part of our abstract concepts are understood through the terms of other, more concrete concepts. Lakoff & Johnson (1980:59) maintain that people typically conceptualise the “nonphysical” in terms of the “physical”, and the main source of our physical experience in the world is our body and its interaction with the environment. Johnson (1987:209) claims that “[t]here is no aspect of our understanding that is independent of the nature of the human organism.”

Such views suggest that one of the most predominant source domains by which we understand target domains is the human body. Such a hypothesis is not new at all; Sperber in 1930 noticed that topics which “produce intense feelings or in some sense are problematic become centers of metaphoric attraction.” When this happens, concepts and terms from more familiar domains are used to understand the subject in question (Smith et al. 1981:912). Smith et al. (1981) wished to investigate Sperber’s hypothesis by analysing the use of figurative language in American literature between 1675–1975. They collected 1,882 figures of speech¹⁰ from 24 American authors and classified them on the basis of both the target and the source domains of the expressions. The results showed that the human body was the most often used source domain with 555 instances of usage, while nature, which came second, was a metaphorical vehicle only 384 times.

Heine’s (1995) findings further demonstrate that the human body is our primary source of experience and thus plays a crucial role in human understanding. Heine looked at the spatial expressions of 125 African languages and 104 Oceanic languages, and found that “if in a given language a lexical item is recruited for the expression of the spatial concepts ON, UNDER, FRONT, or IN, then the first choice will be a body part term” (1995:123).

The pervasiveness of the human body comes through the category of idioms as well. A frequency count of Nagy’s (n.d.) English idiom dictionary showed that out of the 12,000 entries more than 2,000 idioms were based on the human body. The most productive body parts were the hand (89 idioms), the head (69 idioms), the eye (62 idioms), the heart (61 idioms), the face (58 idioms) and the mind (58 idioms). It needs to be emphasised that the present paper does not wish to account for all the idioms of the

¹⁰ Smith et al. (1981) selected only “novel figures of speech” from the texts, phrases and expressions which were felt to be original ones coined by the author, or at least used in a new sense by the author.

head, as this would be an impossible enterprise. The aim of the paper is to put the cognitive linguistic theory on idioms into practice and analyse whether there are any visible tendencies among these idioms that can later be extended possibly to further idioms as well that do not appear in this study. (See the Appendix for a list of the idioms examined in this paper.)

4 Idioms with *head*

As the analysis will show, English *head* idioms are not expressions with random meanings, but are structured along perceivable cognitive vehicles. Many expressions are motivated by a very generalised container metaphor which conceptualises the head as a vessel of ideas and certain emotions. The idioms are also motivated by metonymies which provide a stand-for relationship between the head and mental ability on the one hand, and the head and control on the other hand. A smaller group of idiomatic expressions can be traced back to conventional knowledge about the properties of the head.

4.1 The head as a container

Cognitive linguistic theory views container metaphors¹¹ as a special type of ontological metaphors. The function of the latter is to give some sort of ontological status to general categories of abstract target concepts. It is with the help of ontological metaphors that speakers conceive of their experiences in terms of unspecified objects, substances and containers. Although this general level does not provide us with specific information about the target, it is, according to Kövecses (2002: 34–35) “a cognitively important job to assign a basic status in terms of objects, substances, etc. to many of our experiences. The kind of experiences that require this the most are those that are not clearly delineated, vague, or abstract.” Two common underlying ontological metaphors in the case of the head idioms are THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER and *ideas are physical objects*, as in expressions such as *get ideas into one’s head*, *put ideas into someone’s head*, *get something into one’s head* and *put out of one’s head*.

From the idioms above it emerges that the head is conceptualised as a bounded container into which ideas can be put into or taken out of. What is intriguing is that the ideas are located originally outside of the bounded

¹¹ Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 29) emphasise the importance of container metaphors, and argue that as physical beings our bodies themselves are containers, with an in-out orientation.

region of the head, as the phrasal verbs of the expressions indicate (*get into, put into, put out of*). However, by fixing the ideas in the contained space of the head, they become immediately accessible, quantifiable and they can also be referred to as “my idea” or “your idea.”¹²

Once ontological metaphors have been made use of to provide general structure to previously undelineated things, speakers can give further structure to conceptualisations with the help of more specific metaphors.¹³ Some elaboration can also be found on THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER and IDEAS ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS ontological metaphors. In the case of the idiom *have rocks in one’s head*, the head is weighed down by heavy, sturdy objects. If the place in the container is taken up by stones, then there is no space left inside for ideas, a situation which results in low mental ability. The idiom *having a thick head* hints at one way English speakers conceptualise the process of thinking. The expression implies that the head is visualised as a sieve through which ideas can enter. If the sieve has too thick walls, then it is difficult for substances — ideas — to pass into the container and the result is once again idiocy.

It has been mentioned above that by fixing and locating things in a contained space (as we do with ideas in the head), we are able to identify and access the previously unbounded objects. This characteristic is detectable in the expression *need to have one’s head examined*. If someone has strange thoughts, then the solution is to check what ideas — objects — are in the container. The notion of identification also comes up in the idiom *clear one’s head*. By clearing the container from unuseful ideas, new ones can enter the head.

The head does not contain only ideas, but is also a repository for the emotion conceit. Unlike ideas, conceit is not conceptualised as a physical object but as a fluid, as the idiom *get a swelled head* shows. Along with the expressions *go to someone’s head* and *give someone a big head* a quite coherent picture can be formed on how English speakers visualise conceit: conceit is a fluid which rises to the head and when this happens, the size

¹² Johnson (1987:22) argues that one of the consequences of the containment image is the “relative fixing or location within the container,” which means that the contained object becomes accessible. Kövecses (2002:35) also emphasises that once a thing is delineated, it can be immediately conceptualised as a possession.

¹³ E.g., the mind is conceptualised by the ontological metaphor THE MIND IS A CONTAINER. This conceptualisation is further elaborated on by the more specific metaphor THE MIND IS A MACHINE, for which a linguistic example is *my mind is rusty this morning* (Kövecses 2002:35).

of the head grows. This folk understanding might seem very naive at first sight, but actually it can be traced back to physiological observations. One of these is that all of us are familiar with the experience of having fluid in our bodies. In addition, according to Kövecses (1990: 102), a physiological effect which accompanies conceit is THE HEAD HELD UNNATURALLY HIGH which motivates the metaphor A CONCEITED PERSON IS UP/HIGH, as in the idioms *hold one's head up high* or *be head and shoulders above somebody*. When something is higher than usual it also seems bigger in size.¹⁴ Given these two basic experiences (fluid in our bodies and the correlation of height with size) we can easily account for the metaphors THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER and CONCEIT IS A FLUID IN A CONTAINER which motivate the idioms *get a swelled head*, *go to someone's head* and *give someone a big head*.

There are also a number of idioms, such as *a hothead*, *keep a level head* and *keep a cool head* which are related to the concepts of anger and calmness. Lakoff & Kövecses (1987) have analysed how anger is conceptualised in English in great depth and have come to the conclusion that anger is conceived of as a hot fluid inside a container, where the container is the body itself. When the intensity of the anger increases, the fluid rises in the container and eventually it might cause the container to explode (e.g., *my anger kept building up inside me*, *he was bursting with anger* and *when I told him, he just exploded*).¹⁵ The *head* idioms are also instances of the ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, although in this case the container is not the body, but the head. As long as the temperature of the fluid does not rise, we are able to remain calm and make sensible judgements, as the meanings of the idioms *keep a level head* and *keep a cool head* imply. However, if the heat increases, the temperature of the fluid also rises and our composure is lost, as suggested by the expression *be a hothead*.

4.2 Metonymy

Conceptual metaphor is not the only trope which can be used to explain the motivation behind idioms with *head*. Metonymy can also be detected in a number of examples, as in *have a good head for doing something*, *have a good head on one's shoulders* and *use one's head*. In these cases the conceptual metonymy THE HEAD STANDS FOR MENTAL ABILITY is at work. The idioms

¹⁴ The conceptual metaphors MORE IS UP and LESS IS DOWN (as in the examples *my income rose last year* and *he is underage*) are based on this physical experience (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 15).

¹⁵ Examples are from Kövecses (2002: 96–97).

put their heads together and *two heads are better than one* also belong to this category, however, they are at the same time instances of the metaphor MORE IS BETTER.

The idioms *lose one's head*, *go out of one's head*, *laugh one's head off* and *scream one's head off* are all related to intense emotions (viz., love or anger, love, enjoyment and fright, respectively) under which the experiencer “loses” his/her head. In these cases the metonymy THE HEAD STANDS FOR CONTROL (AND RATIONALITY) is at play and the image the idioms seem to suggest is that under the effect of an intense emotion the emotion “takes over” and mental abilities such as rational judgement are swept aside—that is, they are “lost.” A similar image is evoked by the idiom *let one's heart rule one's head* where rational judgement (interpreted metonymically as the head) is subdued under the emotions (that is, the heart).

4.3 Conventional knowledge

Apart from metaphor and metonymy, the nonscientific, folk understanding of particular domains shared by a linguistic community can also motivate idiomatic expressions. Conventional knowledge—as referred to in cognitive linguistic literature—includes standard, everyday information about the properties, functioning, shape and size of the head. For example, some of the general knowledge we possess about the properties of the head is that when a baby is born, a part of its skull is soft and hardens only a few months after birth. If a person has very low mental abilities, the idiom *be soft in the head* can be used, referring to the similarity between a new-born baby's mental abilities and that of the person in question. If the soft part of the baby's skull is damaged, mental disability might result. This conventional knowledge is reflected in the idiom *be touched in the head*. The expression *be bone-headed from the neck up* also illustrates the motivating power of conventional knowledge: if bone replaces the brain, then a person cannot possess any mental ability.

Our conventional knowledge also extends to common gestures involving the head. Scratching one's head is a tell-tale sign of being unsure or mystified—which is why *scratch one's head* means ‘to wonder, to be mystified’. The situation is similar with the expression *shake one's head*, which means ‘to give a negative response.’ Kövecses & Szabó (1996:339) claim that idioms based on gestures are special because the motivation for the meaning of the expression comes from what we know of the gesture itself—and not from our knowledge of the English language.

5 Conclusion

The meaning of idioms has been thought of in linguistic literature as largely conventional, where the sum meaning of the separate words is not equal to the literary meaning of the expression. This view—also known as the traditional or non-compositional approach—has been challenged by a number of linguists and it has emerged that compositionality does play an important role in the understanding of idioms. Cognitive linguistics has gone further by positing that most idioms are motivated, where motivation arises from conventional images, conceptual metaphors and conceptual metonymies, which provide the “link” between the idiom and its meaning.

Following the assumptions made by cognitive linguistics the paper examined English *head* idioms and found that the analysis gave a relatively clear picture of how the head is conceptualised in English: it is a CONTAINER of ideas, it stands for our MENTAL ABILITIES, it is the seat of the emotion of CONCEIT and also stands for CONTROL. The analysis has also shown that the various idioms stand in close relation to one another through variations on the metaphors and metonymies which underlie the conceptualisations of the head. It can be safely assumed that with the help of conceptual metaphor theory the future of idiom analysis has finally got a head start.

APPENDIX

Idiom	Meaning
a hot-head/hothead	a hot-tempered/excitable/restless person
be bone-headed from the neck up	to be completely stupid
be head and shoulders above sy/sg	to be superior to/better by far than sy or sg
be soft in the head	to be stupid
be touched in the head	to be mentally disturbed/slightly insane/unbalanced
clear one's head	to restore/regain one's mental balance
get a swelled head	to become conceited
get ideas into one's head	to have foolish thoughts/intentions
get sg into one's head	1. to insist on sg, 2. to comprehend/realise sg
get sg through sy's thick head/skull	to make sy realise sg
give sy a big head	to make sy conceited
go out of one's head	to be madly in love
go to sy's head	to make sy conceited
have a good head for doing sg	to have a natural talent for sg
have a good head on one's shoulders	to be very talented/intelligent
have/get a swelled head	to be conceited/overconfident
have a thick head	to be dull-witted/stupid

Idiom	Meaning
have rocks in one's head	to be stupid/crazy
hold one's head up/high	to show dignity/pride/self-esteem
keep a cool head	to act rationally under pressure
keep a level head/be level-headed	to remain calm and sensible
laugh one's head off	to shake with laughter
let one's heart rule one's head	to be too sentimental; to let one's emotions take over
lose one's head	1. to be irrationally in love, 2. to get angry about sg
need to have one's head examined	to be crazy
put ideas into sy's head	to make unwelcome suggestions to sy
put their heads together	to confer with/consult with each other
scratch one's head	to wonder; to be mystified
scream one's head off	to shout/scream
shake one's head	to give a negative answer
two heads are better than one	two minds can accomplish more than one
use one's head	to use sound/reasonable judgement

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