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## Idioms in English and Their Semantic Characteristics

### Abstract

This article is intended for the discussion of English idioms and their semantic features. By looking at a few chosen idioms from a cross-cultural standpoint, this study aims to categorize words and attempt to demonstrate how a word used in one language in accordance with the concept of equivalency is used in other languages in the same or different manner. It is noted that, depending on their form, these word combinations can have variations and are generally stable. The author emphasizes that idiomatic expressions have more to their semantic meaning than merely their literal meaning. They have deep cultural connotations while remaining cohesive. In the article, idioms that have the same meanings in English, Turkish, and Azerbaijani but are used differently are listed in the table. According to this research, most idioms show cultural differences originating from the English language while being translated with their general and specific meanings into Turkish and Azerbaijani languages. These disparities in culture draw attention and make people wonder. Despite this cultural diversity, it can be concluded that they are united by the fact that they have a common meaning.

**Keywords:** idioms, semantic, language, culture, Azerbaijani, Turkish, English

## İngilizce 'de Deyimler ve Anlamsal Özellikleri

### Öz

Bu makale İngilizce deyimleri ve onların anlamsal özelliklerini tartışmak amacıyla hazırlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, seçilen birkaç deyim kültürler arası bir bakış açısıyla ele alarak kelimeleri kategorize etmeyi ve bir dilde eşdeğerlik kavramına uygun olarak kullanılan bir kelimenin diğer dillerde aynı veya farklı şekilde nasıl kullanıldığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu kelime birleşimlerinin



*biçimlerine göre farklılıklar gösterebileceği ve genel olarak sabit olduğu belirtilmektedir. Yazar, deyimsel ifadelerin gerçek anlamlarından çok anlamsal anlamlara sahip olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Birbirine bağlı kalırken derin kültürel çağrışımlara sahiptirler. Makalede İngilizce, Türkçe ve Azericede aynı anlamlara sahip ancak farklı kullanılan deyimler tabloda listelenmiştir. Bu araştırmaya göre çoğu deyim, genel ve özel anlamlarıyla Türkçe ve Azerice dillerine çevrilirken İngilizce kökenli kültürel farklılıklar göstermektedir. Kültürlerdeki bu farklılıklar dikkat çekiyor ve merak uyandırıyor. Bu kültürel çeşitliliğe rağmen ortak bir anlama sahip olmaları nedeniyle birleştikleri sonucuna varılabilir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *deyimler, anlam bilgisi, dil, kültür, Azerice, Türkçe, İngilizce*

### **Introduction**

Language is a social phenomenon, a means of communication among people, and, at the same time, an integration link between people and culture. Language is the carrier of culture and an important tool in its dissemination. Each ethnic group celebrates and reflects its own culture and carries out cultural exchanges through its nationality. In addition, language is a system of vocabulary and grammar combined with sound and meaning. It is the most important means of communication for humans. It also serves as a link for human thought and the social transmission of information. Idiomatic expressions are important parts and basic materials of a language. They are relatively stable word combinations and can have variants depending on their form. The semantic meaning of idiomatic expressions is not just the addition of literal meaning. They are unified and, at the same time, have rich cultural meanings. During this process, language study and the branch of language should not only be studied but also its potential cultural connotations.

According to Taylor (2010), culture is a complex whole, including knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, and custom. And people acquire skills and habits as members of society. Language is a reflection of the objective world through the human brain. When the human brain becomes familiar with the object, the objective reality will be transformed into linguistic facts. Every word transmitted in every language is a symbol of arbitrary and legal convention. Language formation is arbitrary and, at the same time, influenced by social conventions. Saussure noted in his "General Course of Linguistics" that if we assume that the new semiotics accepts these natural symbols, its main object will remain the whole system based on the spontaneous generation of symbols. In fact, any means of expression used by people in society is, in principle, based on collective acts or, equally convention (Saussure, 1959). There is always an inherent connection between language and culture. As we know, there are great differences between eastern and western cultures, including the fact that the English language

is different from other languages, which will undoubtedly be reflected in idiomatic expressions full of cultural characteristics.

The actuality of the subject: It is very important to maintain the national culture in the source language and deal with the relationship among cultural differences with communicative effects in translation. The number of research papers on phraseological combinations and idioms in English is increasing day by day. From this point of view, the study of idioms and their semantic characteristics are considered one of the most important actual issues in linguistics. The object and subject of the research: The object of the research work is idioms, which are considered part of phraseologisms belonging to the syntax section in English, and the subject is the study of the semantic characteristics of idioms in this language and the linguistic interpretation of idioms.

The goals and objectives of the research work: The purpose of this study is to reveal the semantic essence of idiomatic expressions. It also aimed to make some classifications and try to show how a word used in one language according to the principle of equivalence is used in the same or different form in other languages by examining some selected idioms from a cross-cultural perspective. On the basis of which the following tasks are set:

- To interpret the semantic aspects of idiomatic expressions in English.
- To learn the relationship between the meaning of idioms and the meaning of the parts of idiom.
- To determine the role of the unity of language and culture in the formation of idioms.

In the research work, comparative-contrast method, data analysis method, data collection method, observational and experimental methods were used.

The lexical composition of each language is influenced by its culture and the way people organize their ideas about their environment. Having knowledge of the culture as well as the context of its use is a clue to better understanding and interpreting idioms. In this regard, Ponterotto states that *"even simple texts need to be understood in order to understand metaphoricality and its culture-specific connotation"* (Ponterotto, 1994, p. 3).

Idioms are an important part of language learning and are reflected in the competent learning of the language. In English, idioms are part of the cultural elements that must be mastered by learners. By developing a clear understanding of figurative language, such as idiomatic expressions, learners can further understand texts that have figurative and lexical meanings beyond the basic word level. In addition, culturally literate and language-impaired learners often encounter idioms. There are several different ways that students can improve

their understanding of idioms. Thus, when teaching idiomatic expressions, it is possible to use different types of innovative teaching approaches and ways of using methods. Innovative methods demonstrate the need to study idioms and idiomatic expressions to increase learners' awareness of unique words and expressions.

Idioms mostly reflect the national characteristics of the people. It is a figurative interpretation of reality and an emotional model of communication. Idioms are highly interactive elements. They are strong and colorful examples of intercultural relations. It is sometimes difficult to determine their origin. They are firmly assimilated in different languages and have become part and parcel of these cultures. The main difficulty when a non-native speaker tries to translate an idiom from his native language into English is whether the idiom is appropriate in the given context. This may make the listener confused. The problem is often related to collocation, a central feature of spoken language. The way native speakers use English in the real world is largely idiomatic, and this assumes that a fluent non-native speaker must be idiomatic in the same way. Because of this, idiomatic idioms vary greatly throughout languages. Idioms are usually more influential than non-idiomatic expressions due to their close identification with a particular language and culture (Nida, 2001). Idioms reflect the environment, lifestyle, history and culture of native speakers and are closely related to their inner spirit and feelings.

As we mentioned, culture plays an important role in the interpretation of idioms. In America, if someone is blamed for his crazy behavior, expressions like "off the wall" and "over the deep end" are used, that is, "strange, wacky, mad or unusual". In the United Kingdom, this expression is used as "sixpence short of shilling", "mad a bag of ferrets", "mad as a box of frogs".

Culture can be defined as consisting of the following aspects:

1. civilization – results of practical activity at different stages of the development of the people;
  2. socio-psychological – national character and mentality, moral instructions and rules;
  3. activity components – awareness of reality, perception and information transfer.
- The complexity and variety of cultural events greatly hinders the study of the interaction between language and culture, and the search for traces of culture in language. All the elements included in these three parts take the form of linguistic expression and start to be used in speech to define new ideas, thoughts, objects of reality. Finally, they can become a symbol, expand their semantic structure, develop transmitted meanings, participate in the formation of new words

and expressions, that is, participate in a continuous cognitive process. Thus, language acquires cultural connotations and starts to shape culture. Therefore, we can say that M. Heidegger is right in many ways when he claims that we do not speak in language, but language speaks to us. Man is in the power of language, because language suggests to him the picture of the world. Language is the result of cultural evolution of a nation. Its lexicon and grammar show the people's outlook and crystallized experience.

When analyzing idioms and expressions, it is worth noting that they serve to constantly change the language of a country as well as reflect society. Older generations may use some idioms, while younger generations may acquire others. For example, how many young people nowadays say, "It's raining cats and dogs!". However, people in their 20s in the UK today are probably saying, "It's chucking it down!". Apparently, the "It's not my cup of tea!" phrase is still in circulation among young people, but a more modern way of saying it might be "It's not really my thing!".

All languages have idioms and colloquialisms that are used in a non-literal sense; to translate them correctly requires a deep knowledge and understanding of both cultures, source and receptor, as they may not share the same cultural values.

Idioms are considered one of the most important means of expression for a language and ensure cultural transmission among generations by reflecting the cultural values of the society that speaks that language. Incorporating daily life, conveying much meaning with few words, and having attractive, enlightening, and transmissible expressions are the real issues attracting researchers' attention. Idioms not only provide a perspective on the character and identity of a society but also create an image of character that shapes human behavior and the philosophy of life by reflecting common knowledge and worldviews. Thus, cultural indicators or images allow us to analyze society from many aspects. Idioms that beautifully reflect the interaction between language and culture are one of the important issues in language learning in terms of intercultural communication and interaction.

Lack of teaching materials and lack of a clear methodology create obstacles for learners (Saleh & Zakaria, 2013). But learning idiomatic expressions in English can be beneficial for learners. First, since idioms constitute an important cultural element of language, they are a crucial factor in understanding the humor and character of this culture. Second, it makes them understand the characteristics of the English language.

Some idiomatic expressions refer to significant events and important historical figures inherent to certain cultures. For example, in the United States, the word "John Hancock" means

to sign. This phrase refers to John Hancock, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, whose signature is one of the largest and most distinctive of the signatures on the document. Another example is "Honest Abu." This phrase refers to the great integrity of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States.

The English language is full of idioms. An idiom is a mirror of culture and clearly reflects the cultural characteristics of the people. Sometimes, understanding idioms is quite difficult for language learners who do not belong to the source culture. So, it is important to study the cultural content of idioms related to geography, history, religion, customs, sports and entertainment, fairy tales, mythologies, and literary works, as they are parts of subcultures.

Language is a part of culture as well as a carrier of culture. The transmission of culture is inevitably achieved with the benefit of language. Language reflects the characteristics of a nation, which includes not only the cultural history and cultural background of a nation but also people's thoughts and lifestyles in life.

In the following table, idioms used in different forms but with same meanings in English, Turkish, and Azerbaijani have been selected.

English idioms about love	Turkish translation	Azerbaijani translation
Fall in love at first sight	Yıldırım aşkı olmak	İlk baxışdan vurulmaq
Fall in love	Aşık olmak	Aşiq olmak
Have a crush on someone	Abayı yakmak	Sevdalanmaq

English idioms about sadness	Turkish translation	Azerbaijani translation
Be in blue funk	Melankolik	Depressiyaya düşmək
Be down in the mouth	Karadenizde gemileri batmak	Qaradənizdə gəmiləri batmaq
Break a heart	Kalp kırmak	Qəlb qırmaq
Get in a jam	Dara düşmək	Dara düşmək
Cry one's heart out	İki gözü iki çeşme ağlamak	Gözyaşlarına boğulmaq

English idioms about fear	Turkish translation	Azerbaijani translation
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Curl somebody's toe	Korkudan tüyleri diken diken olmak	Tükleri biz-biz olmaq/ dəhşətdən tükləri ürpərmək
Curl up in a ball	Korkudan ölmək	Qorxudan ölmək
Turn as white as a chalk	Beti-benzi atmak	Rəngi qaçmaq

When we translate the idioms in the above table with their general and specific meanings into Turkish and Azerbaijani languages, most of them show cultural differences originating from the English language. These cultural differences attract attention and prompt them to question. For example, when someone cries with difficulty, in Turkish we use the idiom "İki gözü, iki çeşme ağlamak", and in Azerbaijani, we use the idiom "gözyaşlarına boğulmak", and its English equivalent is "Cry one's heart out". In a Turkish saying, the intensity of crying is compared to "water flowing down from a spring", which is often used in Anatolia. Fountains are an important part of Anatolian culture. But the same situation is expressed by a different object in English. This is because there is no "fountain" culture in England or America. Although there are cultural differences among the idioms of different languages, some idioms have cultural similarities. These idioms use the same sense and object in all languages. For example, "kalp kırmak", which is used to make someone sad in Turkish, "qəlb qırmaq" in Azerbaijani, is used in English as "break a heart" and so on. Another example is the use of a type of a cloth "aba" and the Turkish verb "yakmak" (to burn) is used to express the state of being in love with someone. It is equivalent to "a lighter used to light a fire" as an object and "to burn" as a verb meaning to set fire. The expression "abayı yakmak" comes from ancient times, when dervishes burned woolen vests called "aba" during religious conversations on winter nights. Dervish is so enthralled by the spiritual conversation that he already feels the hot fire. Later, this feeling became identified with love and began to be used as falling in love.

The way of guessing the meaning of idioms allows language learners both to be aware of new vocabulary and to actively revise previous knowledge, while at the same time contributing to the discovery of subtleties in the mother tongue. Language learners today definitely want a change in language courses and want to communicate in the target language as soon as possible. Classical grammar-based language courses are no longer appealing to students. Therefore, idioms play an important role in language teaching as authentic course material that increases the motivation of language learners, regardless of age. As a result, we can say that idiomatic expressions play an important role both in mother tongue Turkish and in the teaching of

multilingual languages. Idioms bring a dynamic aspect to language teaching and make the teacher's job easier.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is a cue to better understand and interpret idioms while acquiring knowledge of usage content. From this point of view, in order to correctly express even simple texts, it is necessary to understand artistic imagery and its cultural connotations. One of the important reasons why idioms are difficult to express is because of their cultural characteristics. Idioms represent qualities of the nature of their culture and predetermined customs and social relations.

Learning idiomatic expressions in English can be beneficial for language learners. First, learning the idiomatic expressions of another language is a crucial factor in understanding the humor and character of that culture, as idioms constitute an important cultural element of the language. Second, it makes them understand the characteristics of the English language. Idiomatic expressions are united with the essence of language and cannot be separated from culture.

In linguistics, there are idiomatic expressions that are used non-literally in different languages that do not share the same cultural values, and therefore a deep knowledge and understanding of both cultures is required to translate them correctly. The formation of idioms is arbitrary and rational. Besides having deep cultural meanings, they reflect the psychology of different nations and contain certain life customs.

When examining the Azerbaijani and Turkish equivalents of several English idioms, it was found that most of them show cultural differences originating from the English language. Despite this cultural diversity, they are united by the fact that they have a common meaning. Focusing on the use of idioms in language teaching, it can be concluded that many linguists and theorists emphasize the special importance of idiom use within the multilingual approach.

Our research on the role of idioms in teaching culture has shown that cultural differences among languages greatly attract learners' attention and encourage them to question, that is, to learn new aspects of the language. It should be noted that the most important indicator of progress in the language teaching process is when learners begin to ask questions. Thus, the more the cultural aspects of a language are taught, the easier it is for language learners to communicate in that foreign language.

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