

THE USE OF COMMON NAMES IN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20520141>**Abstract**

This article examines the use of common names in idiomatic expressions, analyzes their linguistic and cultural significance, explores their origins and semantic development, and discusses their role in language learning and intercultural communication. The study highlights how personal names become lexicalized elements within phraseological units and contribute to the richness and expressiveness of language.

Keywords: idiomatic expressions, common names, anthroponyms, phraseology, semantics, linguistics, cultural studies, English language.

Idiomatic expressions constitute an essential component of every language, reflecting cultural values, historical experiences, and social attitudes. Among the numerous types of idioms, those containing common personal names represent a particularly interesting linguistic phenomenon. Such expressions often employ names as symbolic representations of typical human characteristics, social roles, or behavioral patterns. In English, idioms such as “every Tom, Dick, and Harry,” “Peeping Tom,” and “Doubting Thomas” demonstrate how personal names can acquire figurative meanings that extend beyond their original referential function.

Language is not merely a system of grammatical rules and vocabulary; it is also a repository of cultural knowledge and collective experience. Idiomatic expressions represent one of the most vivid manifestations of this relationship between language and culture. They convey meanings that cannot always be interpreted literally and often reflect historical events, social practices, and cultural stereotypes.

Among the diverse categories of idiomatic expressions, those containing personal names occupy a distinctive position. These expressions use common names not only to identify individuals but also to symbolize specific qualities, behaviors, or situations. Over time, names that originally referred to particular people become generalized and acquire figurative meanings understood by members of a linguistic community.

The study of names in idiomatic expressions is important because it reveals the interaction between language, culture, and cognition. It also contributes to a better understanding of phraseology and semantic change. This article explores the role of common names in English idiomatic expressions and discusses their linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical significance.

The study of personal names belongs to the field of onomastics, while the study of idiomatic expressions is generally associated with phraseology. When personal names become part of idiomatic expressions, they undergo a process of semantic transformation. Rather than referring to specific individuals, they function as symbolic or metaphorical elements. Linguists have observed that names in idioms often lose their original referential meaning and become lexicalized components of fixed expressions. This process is closely related to metaphor, metonymy, and cultural conventionalization. Once an expression becomes widely accepted, speakers no longer interpret the name literally but recognize its figurative meaning automatically. According to phraseological theory, idioms are characterized by stability, reproducibility, and semantic unity. Names embedded in idioms contribute to these features by providing memorable and culturally recognizable references.

The use of personal names in idiomatic expressions has a long history. Many English idioms originated from biblical narratives, literary works, folklore, and historical events. Over centuries, these names became associated with specific character traits or actions. Biblical figures have contributed significantly to English phraseology. For example:

- “Doubting Thomas” refers to a skeptical person.
- “Good Samaritan” describes someone who helps others selflessly.
- “Prodigal Son” denotes a person who returns after a period of absence or wrongdoing.

Literary works have also played a major role. Characters created by famous writers often become symbols of particular human qualities. For instance, “Romeo” is associated with romance and passionate love, while “Scrooge” represents extreme miserliness.

Historical figures and folk characters have similarly entered everyday language. These examples demonstrate how cultural memory influences the development of phraseological units. One common category involves names that represent ordinary or average individuals. The most famous example is:

“Every Tom, Dick, and Harry.”

This expression refers to any ordinary person or to people in general. The names Tom, Dick, and Harry were historically among the most common male names in English-speaking societies. Their use together creates the impression of a random collection of ordinary people.

Similarly, expressions such as “Average Joe” or “Joe Public” symbolize the typical member of society.

Many idioms use names to symbolize particular personality characteristics.

“Peeping Tom” refers to a person who secretly observes others without their knowledge, especially in private situations.

“Doubting Thomas” describes a person who refuses to believe something without evidence.

“Smart Alec” refers to an individual who behaves in an annoyingly clever or arrogant manner.

In these examples, names function as labels for recognizable behavioral patterns.

Certain names become linked with social or occupational identities.

For example:

- “Johnny-on-the-spot” refers to a person who arrives promptly when needed.
- “Jack-of-all-trades” describes someone with skills in many different fields.
- “Jack Tar” historically referred to a sailor.

The name “Jack” appears particularly frequently in English phraseology because it was once one of the most common male names.

Names perform several important semantic functions within idiomatic expressions.

A name can symbolize a broader category of people or behaviors. “Doubting Thomas” symbolizes skepticism, while “Good Samaritan” symbolizes kindness.

Names often become generalized representations of social types. The expression “Average Joe” does not refer to a specific person named Joe but to an ordinary member of society. Many name-based idioms contain positive or negative evaluations. “Good Samaritan” conveys approval, whereas “Smart Alec” often expresses criticism.

The use of names in idiomatic expressions reflects cultural values and collective beliefs. Through such expressions, societies preserve historical memories and transmit cultural knowledge across generations.

For example, the expression “Good Samaritan” reflects values of compassion and generosity derived from biblical teachings. “Scrooge” reflects social criticism of greed and selfishness.

Different cultures develop different name-based idioms according to their unique histories and traditions. As a result, such expressions provide valuable insights into cultural worldviews. Cross-

cultural comparison reveals both similarities and differences. Many languages use personal names symbolically, but the specific names and meanings often vary. Understanding these differences is essential for effective intercultural communication.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, names in idiomatic expressions serve as conceptual shortcuts. Rather than describing a complex set of characteristics, speakers can simply use a familiar name.

For example, calling someone a “Romeo” immediately activates a network of associations related to romance, passion, and courtship. This process demonstrates how language users rely on shared cultural knowledge to communicate efficiently.

Cognitive linguists argue that such expressions are stored in the mental lexicon as complete units. Consequently, speakers process them holistically rather than analyzing each component separately.

Idiomatic expressions containing personal names present particular difficulties for learners of English as a foreign language. Learners often attempt to interpret names literally, leading to misunderstanding. For instance, a student may initially believe that “Peeping Tom” refers to a specific individual rather than a type of behavior.

Equivalent expressions may not exist in other languages. Translators often face challenges when attempting to convey both the literal and cultural dimensions of name-based idioms.

Because name-based idioms are common in authentic English communication, language teachers should incorporate them into vocabulary and cultural instruction.

Effective teaching strategies include:

1. Presenting idioms in meaningful contexts.
2. Explaining historical and cultural backgrounds.
3. Comparing equivalent expressions across languages.
4. Using literature, films, and media examples.
5. Encouraging learners to identify figurative meanings through contextual analysis.

Teaching idioms through stories and cultural narratives can significantly improve retention and comprehension.

Language is constantly evolving, and idiomatic expressions are no exception. Some traditional name-based idioms remain widely used, while others have become less common. At the same time, popular culture continues to generate new expressions based on celebrities, fictional characters, and public figures.

Digital communication and social media have accelerated this process. Names associated with famous personalities may quickly acquire symbolic meanings and enter everyday discourse. This demonstrates the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and society.

The use of common names in idiomatic expressions represents a fascinating intersection of language, culture, history, and cognition. Through processes of semantic change and cultural conventionalization, personal names evolve from simple identifiers into powerful symbolic elements of phraseology. Expressions such as “Doubting Thomas,” “Good Samaritan,” “Peeping Tom,” and “Every Tom, Dick, and Harry” illustrate how names can encode social values, cultural memories, and human experiences. Understanding these expressions is important not only for linguistic analysis but also for effective communication and language learning. As carriers of cultural knowledge and collective memory, name-based idioms continue to enrich the English language and reflect the evolving nature of human society.

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