

## NEUTRAL CHARACTER IDIOMS IN ENGLISH: SEMANTIC AND STRUCTURAL FEATURES

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores neutral character idioms in English language, focusing on their semantic, structural, and functional features. Neutral character idioms represent phraseological units that describe personality traits, behaviors, and characteristics without conveying positive or negative evaluations. Through the analysis of over 70 neutral character idioms collected from lexicographic sources and literary texts, this study identifies the main semantic fields, structural models, and cultural aspects of these expressions. The research reveals that English neutral character idioms primarily relate to appearance, behavior patterns, thinking style, and life experience. Structurally, these idioms demonstrate a preference for verb-based constructions and comparative patterns. The study also examines the translation challenges these idioms present and offers strategies for their appropriate rendering in other languages. The findings contribute to the fields of phraseology, linguoculturology, and translation studies.

**Keywords:** phraseological units, neutral character idioms, semantic fields, structural models, English language.

## INTRODUCTION

Phraseological units constitute a rich and expressive layer of any language, reflecting the cultural heritage, worldview, and values of a nation. Among these units, character idioms occupy a special place as they describe human personality traits, behaviors, and characteristics. While many character idioms express clearly positive or negative evaluations, a significant number of them can be classified as neutral—describing personality traits without explicit approval or disapproval.

Neutral character idioms represent a fascinating object of study as they reveal how a language conceptualizes human traits in a non-judgmental way. They describe habitual behaviors, appearance, thinking patterns, and life circumstances without imposing cultural value judgments. As such, they provide insights into the objective aspects of character description in a particular language community.

The study of neutral character idioms in English is particularly relevant for several reasons:

1. They form an understudied subcategory of character idioms, with most research focusing on clearly positive or negative expressions.
2. They reveal culturally significant patterns of character conceptualization that are not influenced by explicit evaluative judgments.
3. They present unique challenges in cross-cultural communication and translation due to their cultural embeddedness despite their evaluative neutrality.
4. They serve important pragmatic functions in communication, allowing speakers to describe character traits objectively.

The **aim** of this research is to analyze the semantic, structural, and functional features of neutral character idioms in English. To achieve this aim, the following **objectives** have been set:

1. To identify and classify neutral character idioms in English based on their semantic features;
2. To analyze the structural patterns and grammatical models of these idioms;
3. To explore the cultural aspects reflected in neutral character idioms;
4. To examine the pragmatic functions these idioms serve in communication.

The **research material** consists of over 70 neutral character idioms collected from English phraseological dictionaries, explanatory dictionaries, literary works, and internet resources. The methodology employed includes descriptive analysis, semantic field analysis, componential analysis, and pragmatic analysis.

## Main body

### 1. Semantic Classification of Neutral Character Idioms in English

Neutral character idioms in English can be classified into several semantic fields based on the aspects of character they describe. Unlike idioms that express clear approval (e.g., "heart of gold") or disapproval (e.g., "cold fish"), neutral character idioms primarily describe traits without evaluative judgment.

#### 1.1. Appearance-related Neutral Character Idioms

This group includes idioms that describe a person's physical appearance without expressing whether these features are attractive or unattractive:

*be the spitting image of* – to look exactly like someone else

*be in one's prime* – to be at the peak of one's physical condition

*as thin as a rake* – very thin

*middle-aged spread* – weight gain that occurs in middle age

*plain Jane* – an ordinary-looking woman

*all skin and bones* – very thin

*clean-cut* – neat in appearance with short hair and clean-shaven face

*fair-haired boy/girl* – a person with blonde hair

These idioms describe physical characteristics objectively, leaving the evaluation to contextual factors. For instance, "as thin as a rake" simply describes someone's thinness without suggesting whether this is desirable or undesirable.

### 1.2. Behavior and Temperament Neutral Character Idioms

This category encompasses idioms describing habitual behaviors, reactions, and temperamental traits without evaluative judgment:

*be set in one's ways* – maintaining the same habits and unwilling to change

*be a creature of habit* – preferring to follow routines and established patterns

*keep oneself to oneself* – being private and not sharing much about oneself

*be a man/woman of few words* – not speaking much; being reserved in speech

*play one's cards close to one's chest* – being reserved about one's thoughts or intentions

*march to the beat of one's own drum* – behaving independently and not conforming

*not say boo to a goose* – being very shy or timid

*take things as they come* – dealing with situations as they arise without planning

*cut one's own path* – living life according to one's own choices

*tough cookie* – a resilient person who can handle difficult situations

These idioms describe behavioral patterns that may be viewed positively or negatively depending on the situation and cultural values. For example, "being set in one's ways" might be seen as reliability in some contexts but stubbornness in others.

### 1.3. Thinking Style and Mental Processes Neutral Character Idioms

This group includes idioms that describe a person's typical thinking patterns, mental processes, and intellectual traits:

*have one's head in the clouds* – being dreamy or unrealistic

*have a one-track mind* – focusing exclusively on one thing

*be a dreamer* – having imaginative thoughts or fantasies

*be in a world of one's own* – being absorbed in one's thoughts

*live in the past* – focusing on past events rather than present reality

*think outside the box* – thinking creatively and unconventionally

*like an open book* – being easily understood; not concealing thoughts

*bookworm* – someone who reads a lot

*deep thinker* – someone who contemplates profound or complex ideas

*old school* – adhering to traditional or conventional methods

These idioms describe cognitive styles and mental orientations without necessarily suggesting that one style is superior to another. Whether "having one's head in the clouds" is positive or negative depends entirely on the context and expectations.

#### 1.4. Life Experience and Circumstance Neutral Character Idioms

This category includes idioms that describe a person's life experiences, circumstances, and background:

*be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth* – born into wealth and privilege

*be a self-made man/woman* – achieving success through one's own efforts rather than inherited advantage

*come from humble beginnings* – originating from a poor or modest background

*be in the same boat* – being in the same situation or facing the same challenges

*late bloomer* – someone who develops skills or talents later than usual

*old hand* – someone with long experience in a particular activity

*Jack of all trades* – someone with knowledge or skills in many areas

*citizen of the world* – someone who feels at home in different cultures

*rolling stone* – a person who moves from place to place frequently

*been around the block* – having considerable life experience

These idioms describe life circumstances and experiences without implying that one background is inherently better than another. While cultural preferences may exist, the idioms themselves are linguistically neutral.

## 2. Structural Features of Neutral Character Idioms in English

English neutral character idioms demonstrate several distinct structural patterns, reflecting the typological features of the English language:

## 2.1. Verb-based Structures

Many English neutral character idioms are built around verb phrases, particularly with the verbs "be" and "have":

1. **Be + Noun Phrase:**
  - *be a creature of habit*
  - *be a dreamer*
  - *be a self-made man/woman*
  - *be a rolling stone*
2. **Be + Preposition + Noun Phrase:**
  - *be in one's prime*
  - *be in a world of one's own*
  - *be in the same boat*
  - *be out of one's depth*
3. **Have + Noun Phrase:**
  - *have one's head in the clouds*
  - *have a one-track mind*
  - *have an old head on young shoulders*
  - *have itchy feet*

## 2.2. Comparative Structures

A significant number of neutral character idioms employ comparative structures:

1. **As + Adjective + As + Noun:**
  - *as thin as a rake*
  - *as quiet as a mouse*
  - *as cool as a cucumber*
  - *as sharp as a tack*
2. **Like + Noun Phrase:**
  - *like an open book*
  - *like a fish out of water*

## 2.3. Noun Phrases

Some neutral character idioms are structured as noun phrases:

- *middle-aged spread*
- *plain Jane*
- *dark horse*
- *bookworm*
- *rolling stone*
- *old hand*

## 2.4. Participial Constructions

Another common pattern involves present or past participles:

- *clean-cut*
- *level-headed*
- *even-tempered*
- *well-traveled*

The structural diversity of neutral character idioms in English reflects the language's analytical nature and preference for verb-based expressions. The prominence of prepositional phrases and comparative structures is particularly notable, as these allow for nuanced descriptions of character traits without imposing evaluative judgments.

### 3. Cultural Aspects of English Neutral Character Idioms

Despite their evaluative neutrality, English neutral character idioms reflect important cultural values and conceptual frameworks:

#### 3.1. Individualism and Self-reliance

Many English neutral character idioms reflect the cultural emphasis on individualism and self-reliance:

*march to the beat of one's own drum* – emphasizes individual autonomy

*be a self-made man/woman* – reflects the value placed on individual achievement

*cut one's own path* – highlights independent decision-making

*play one's cards close to one's chest* – values self-reliance and strategic thinking

These idioms reflect the Anglo-American cultural emphasis on individual autonomy, personal achievement, and self-determination. While they do not explicitly praise these traits, their prevalence indicates their cultural significance.

#### 3.2. Practicality and Experience

English neutral character idioms often emphasize practical experience and pragmatic thinking:

*old hand* – recognizes the value of experience

*been around the block* – acknowledges the importance of life experience

*Jack of all trades* – reflects the value of versatility and practical skills

*take things as they come* – emphasizes adaptability and pragmatism

These idioms reflect the cultural emphasis on practical knowledge, adaptability, and experience-based learning, characteristic of Anglo-American pragmatism.

### 3.3. Visual Metaphors and Natural Imagery

English neutral character idioms frequently employ visual metaphors and natural imagery:

*as thin as a rake* – uses a gardening tool as a visual reference

*all skin and bones* – employs bodily imagery

*like a fish out of water* – uses animal imagery

*rolling stone* – employs natural imagery

The prevalence of visual and natural metaphors in English neutral character idioms reflects the empirical and observation-based cultural approach to understanding human character.

## CONCLUSION

This study of neutral character idioms in English has revealed several significant patterns and features:

**Semantic Diversity:** English neutral character idioms cover a wide range of character aspects, including appearance, behavior, thinking style, and life experience. They provide a rich linguistic resource for describing human character objectively. **Structural Patterns:** The structural analysis revealed a predominance of verb-based constructions (particularly with "be" and "have"), comparative structures, and participial phrases. These patterns reflect the analytical nature of English and provide flexibility in character description. **Cultural Embeddedness:** Despite their evaluative neutrality, these idioms reflect important cultural values, particularly individualism, self-reliance, practicality, and empirical observation. They serve as windows into Anglo-American cultural conceptualizations of character. **Pragmatic Versatility:** Neutral character idioms serve multiple pragmatic functions, including objective description, indirect evaluation, social distancing, and cultural framing. Their contextual flexibility makes them valuable resources in various communicative situations.

The study of neutral character idioms offers valuable insights into how language encodes character traits without explicit evaluation. These idioms represent an important linguistic resource for objective character description while simultaneously reflecting deep cultural patterns of human understanding.

Future research could productively explore cross-linguistic comparisons of neutral character idioms, investigate their historical development, or examine their usage patterns in different discourse contexts. Such studies would further enhance our understanding of how languages conceptualize human character in evaluatively neutral terms.

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